

Media Fellow Report 2005

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ResearchResearch**

Why I applied for the Fellowship

I have always been fascinated by the media ever since my first research study received international media interest. This experience was educational but instilled a cynicism in me about the relationship between the media and science. I had always wanted to explore this relationship further and the media fellowship offered that possibility. I was also attracted by the opportunity to reflect more deeply on how science should be represented to the public.

My placement

ResearchResearch offers two major services. First, they publish Research Fortnight and Research Europe on alternating weeks (edited by William Bown and Linda Norling). Second, they offer a complete funding opportunities alert service for researchers. I was fortunate enough to be allowed experience of both these endeavours. I was very impressed at the diligence with which the staff sought out stories of interest to researchers and highlighted funding opportunities. It was most useful to me to learn how the staff obtained the crucial information. There is no doubt that I have become more effective in identifying funding opportunities through learning how the information is collated. I also found that discovering the policies driving funding initiatives was of immeasurable benefit.

What I gained from the Fellowship

The BA media fellowship was an absolutely wonderful experience and one of the highlights of my academic career. I was delighted to receive the fellowship and it exceeded my highest hopes. The experience was both intrinsically pleasurable and rewarding but also of long term benefit to my research career. I felt incredibly privileged to spend time with the staff of ResearchResearch and learned an immense amount from them. I was impressed at the sheer breadth of knowledge that they possessed regarding the major policy issues facing universities and researchers within the UK and worldwide.

I gained insights into three crucial areas through the fellowship: (i) science policy; (ii) journalistic writing skills; (iii) the interaction between scientists and the media.

My experience

It was perhaps the minor details that I found most unusual. I am used to having my own office where I can write in complete isolation. I found it most strange to be working in an open-plan office and this feeling was most profound when interviewing people on the telephone. I think that it was probably good for me to be moved from my comfort zone and it has helped me empathise with more junior staff who sometimes struggle to obtain solitude to pursue their writing.

The need to collect information quickly was a major shock to me. The process has certainly encouraged me to learn shorthand. William gave me a great piece of advice when I started- ask an irrelevant question after a relevant one so that you gain more time to write down crucial information. I ended up asking a lot of irrelevant questions! I also found the presence of deadlines to be stressful. I simply am not used to that way of working and I found it quite disorienting. Once more, I think that it was good for me to experience this different approach to work.

Ironically, the fellowship made me realise that I am not well suited to journalism and made me feel very content with my role as a scientist. On the other hand, I think that I will be a more effective scientist following my experience. I also hope that I can make some contributions to writing about science and policy.

One of the areas I enjoyed most was interviewing individuals about science policy. I found this to be an almost liberating experience. I discovered that the guise of reporter allowed me to ask far more searching questions than I would have dared ask as a scientist. I think that this approach to obtaining information will stand me in good stead in future years!

Future plans

I have been in close contact with the University of Aberdeen head press officer since the fellowship. She is arranging for me to write an article for the staff magazine to highlight the fellowship and to share the lessons that I have learned with regard to the media.

I have already found that my colleagues are asking me for advice about the best way of presenting their work or dealing with the media (most of them having ignored any interaction previously). I have enjoyed helping people to interact effectively and I hope that I can continue to play this role.

William Bown has kindly offered to make a trip to Aberdeen to talk about research policy and the media. I floated this idea to the College of Medicine and Life Sciences and it was received with great enthusiasm as indicated by the response below:

I am happy to inform you that the Staff Development Group has awarded you the cost of the proposed seminar. I have been asked by the Group to let you know that there was strong support for your application and that the seminar should be widely advertised within the College and also to central office like Research and Innovation.

My research group has made some major advances over this last year. There is no doubt that some of these advances are very 'media-friendly'. For example, we have robots that can help children with movement problems improve their handwriting abilities. I am in the process of writing press releases explaining the benefits and limitations of this work. Understanding how the media operates has made me far happier at disseminating our work and made me feel more in control of how the work is presented.

Finally, I hope that once I get my research group back on schedule (should be by Christmas 2005) that I can write some pieces for ResearchResearch and the Scotsman. I hope that the lessons I have learned will allow me to communicate science and the working of researchers effectively.

Suggestions

- It was interesting for me to experience life in London. Nevertheless, I found it to be a very large culture shock and I felt a long way from home. It would be great if a Scottish newspaper or media organisation could act as a host for Scottish Media Fellows in future years. I gained a great deal from spending time with Ian Johnston and would thoroughly recommend involving Ian within the scheme.
- I don't think that ResearchResearch could have done anything more to make my visit more enjoyable or fruitful. Nevertheless, there was an initial hiatus whilst we tried to work out the best way to make the Fellowship optimally productive. I would suggest that it would be worthwhile drawing up a list of goals for the media fellow prior to their arrival.
- It would be best if the BA told media fellows as early as possible that ResearchResearch are closed during August. I had originally scheduled this time period for the Fellowship and it caused major disruption to my research group when I ended up moving the dates (in fact, we are still recovering from this disruption as it set back our 2005 schedule).

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my deep gratitude to William Bown, Linda Norling, Bill O'Neill and all of the staff of ResearchResearch. I appreciate greatly their hospitality and the time they gave up to teach me about scientific communication. I am also grateful to Ian Johnston, Science Reporter with the Scotsman for discussing many issues about science reporting with me. Finally, I

am most grateful to Alice Taylor-Gee for being so supportive and incredibly efficient.

Appendix

Winston hits at NHS shame on research cash, The Scotsman, 10 September 2005

Professor or Lord?, Research Fortnight, 14 September 2005