



## Media Fellowships

### Media Fellow Report 2009

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#### **The Guardian**

#### **Placement**

I was first attracted to the Media Fellowship because it provided the opportunity to work in an area which had always interested me. I maintain an avid personal interest in the way science is portrayed within the media and I consider the chance to be directly involved as invaluable.

A proportion of the work within our research group concerns public engagement. I recognise that a good understanding and relationship with the media is an essential part of promoting scientific acceptance and understanding. My time working with the Guardian has given me valuable time on the 'front-line' and enhanced my understanding of the relationship between scientific research and popular dissemination through the national press.

Prior to my placement I tried to make myself more aware of science stories reported in the Guardian and the journalists involved. I spoke to my contact before arriving and discussed what kind of things I wanted to achieve from my time in London. One particular gift was given to me as a sports engineer; the 100 m final of the world championships was on the evening before I started my placement. I had a strong inkling that Usain Bolt would smash the world record and thought of how I might treat such a story from a scientific perspective. This preparation meant I was able to get stuck into a story on my first day, a great introductory task as I was familiar with the material. While it was a pleasant experience writing about things I already had a firm hold of, I was eager to broaden my scope in terms of subject area.

My activities varied between attending press briefings, conducting interviews and writing stories for the website. As is inevitable in a multi-media driven culture, the Guardian is no longer solely a bastion of the printed word. Their new premises include a modern studio used to record the many podcasts on the Guardian's flagship website. It was an interesting experience being able to sit in on the recording process and witness the changing face of modern newspaper reporting.

Everyone I worked with at the Guardian was polite and very helpful, despite being busy, no-one resented giving me help and guidance. Due to my background, I was introduced to the sports team who run a weekly 'how and why' feature exploring the questions of sport. After suggesting an idea, I worked with a journalist and illustrator to put the piece together. Working with people with very different areas of expertise was a new experience for me. I'm used to an academic environment of discussion and intellectual foofaraw, to have the illustrator believe every word I said was exciting but disconcerting at the same time. It was entirely up to me to get the facts straight and I became swiftly aware of the pressures and responsibility that



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journalists are faced with. These pressures become focused when combined with the very short period of turn around. Not only does the information have to be distilled, accessible and factually air-tight but it has to be produced and checked within a few hours. It didn't take long for my admiration of the profession to increase. The numerous press conferences I was lucky enough to attend put me into contact with science journalists from a number of different publications. Their ability to find an angle of interest and sniff out any shaky scientific foundations was formidable.

A large proportion of my work at the Guardian was with the environmental team. This was enjoyable work, I sifted through figures and statistics in order to write 'data blogs' which aimed to inform the public on certain environmental issues. This work tickled an area of significant personal interest for me, the environmental movement. Reading a lot of the media's environmental output it struck me how dogmatically the global warming theory is now presented. Proponents of environmental activism point out that it is now scientific consensus. Einstein's theory of relativity has been proven experimentally many times, yet it remains a 'theory'. However, an awareness of the malleable nature of space time does not suggest any significant changes to society and individual liberties. The greatest problems in climate change, if solved will probably be sorted out through sociology and economics as much as any scientific understanding. It is interesting that although many of the environmental stories remain in the domain of 'science reporting' the emotive content is far higher in many cases.

My final week in the Fellowship was in attendance at the British Science Festival. It was a great experience to feel like an integral part of the festival as a member of the press team. I did find that the journalist's opinion of the festival was quite low. The main criticism was the timeliness of the science rather than the quality. Many of the stories picked for press release had been seen at least a year before. This is a problem for the popular media side of the festival. As the festival needs to be organised well in advance, any submissions from academics have to come many months before launch, limiting the 'freshness' of the science on offer. If an academic has genuinely new and exciting findings then I question the likelihood that they will choose the British Science Festival as the venue for this release. This is not to question the quality and value of the festival itself. It is a fantastic event for bringing science to a wider audience and does so very well.

The Festival was an excellent opportunity to catch up with the other Media Fellows. I would classify discussing our individual experiences with each other almost as important as having the experience in the first place. Different organisations operate in varying ways, and discussing these differences is very important. The Fellowship's aim is to give a rounded experience of working in the media, this can't be achieved through a singular personal experience.

Working at the science festival was very different from the day to day journalism I experienced in London. All of the reporting and writing is done in one location with many other journalists present, reporting on the same stories. It's a much more intense, accelerated experience.



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I remain fascinated by the role of the media and science. They are a powerful force in swaying public opinion in either direction. My opinion a science journalist having a 'moral obligation' to faithfully report science has changed since my Fellowship. I no longer believe that the relationship between the makers and messengers of science is as absolutely defined as some would purport.

Journalists have a desire to see their stories put into print, academics want to see their work reach a large number of people while also seeking validity. This essentially symbiotic relationship can result in a skewed role of science in the national press.

What role does the national press have in science reporting? In a fiercely competitive market a story must contribute to the marketability of the paper and therefore be perceived as 'newsworthy'. Quite often a science story can be of interest but no significance or of significance but not particularly interesting.

In my time at the Guardian I witnessed several incidences of academics seeking media attention through making unsubstantiated statements regarding their work, or exaggerating the significance of their findings in order to garner interest. In all cases the journalists present saw through this pretence and asked incisive and well judged questions. However, both stories were covered widely in the press.

If a science journalist were to stay strict to the absolute terms of reporting suggested by some, then there are still multiple layers of editorial filtering before a story reaches the paper. It is likely that a journalist gets an 'eye' for a story through years of exposure and experience of what type of work is accepted for print.

To round off this small philosophical interlude, I'm probably more confused about the issue now than I was before I began the Fellowship. This isn't to say I don't feel more informed. There is a large, intangible societal effect on the perception of science within the population at large. I used to think that the media could have an influence on the ebb and flow of this public feeling. I am now more inclined to think that the media floats supinely on this sea of sentiment.

As an individual interested in the promotion of science to the general public, how do we begin to tackle the inherent paradox in its reporting? I believe that every scientist has an important role in delivering their work to others. They should not be cowed by the thought that the media will dismiss them unless their work has snap crackle and pop. I'm a strong believer in the inherent value and interest of science, it doesn't need to shine and sparkle like a Hollywood celebrity, it has inherent beauty.

After returning from my Fellowship I've met with my colleagues to discuss my experience and how we can use them to enhance our relationship with the media. We'd like to become involved with the British Science Festival as part of our work in public engagement. I have also proposed the idea of a blog discussing engineering in sport and its implications. This is to serve a number of purposes; increase our online presence, give us more experience at popular writing and



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giving us an outlet to the press. I hope to continue my relationship with the Guardian in some capacity and hopefully a well maintained blog will prevent my writing from regressing too much.

Finally, if you're considering applying for a Fellowship but remain confused as to how the writer of this document remains ignorant of how to apply even the simplest rules of the English language, do not be deterred! The Media Fellowship is a fantastic opportunity and very worthwhile experience.

Simon Choppin  
<http://EngineeringSport.co.uk>



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### Appendix

#### Published Articles

Title	Date/Subject	Published
<a href="#">How to outrun Usain Bolt: Superhuman technologies for sprinters</a>	19/8/2009 – Sport and Science	Online
How and Why – Sprint Track Technology	21/8/2009 – Sport technology	Paper
<a href="#">Emissions by transport type</a>	2/9/2009 – Environment data blog	Online
<a href="#">European solar energy production</a>	2/9/2009 – Environment data blog	Online
<a href="#">Atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration</a>	2/9/2009 – Environment data blog	Online
<a href="#">Global oil reserves and fossil fuel consumption</a>	2/9/2009 – Environment data blog	Online
<a href="#">Energy use around the world</a>	2/9/2009 – Environment data blog	Online
<a href="#">The size of the hole in the ozone layer</a>	2/9/2009 – Environment data blog	Online
<a href="#">World population growth</a>	2/9/2009 – Environment data blog	Online
<a href="#">Endangered species by country</a>	2/9/2009 – Environment data blog	Online
<a href="#">10:10: the blogosphere and Twitter reaction</a>	7/9/2009 – Environment review blog	Online
<a href="#">The house that twitters</a>	9/9/2009 – Science, British Science Festival Report	Online
<a href="#">Solar sails set for voyages in the ocean of space</a>	10/9/2009 – Science, British Science Festival Report	Online
<a href="#">Vitamin junkies are flushing their money down the toilet, says nutritionist</a>	10/9/2009 – Science, British Science Festival Report	Online perhaps Paper
Science Weekly Podcasts	Weekly audio interviews	From First week September 2009