

Media Fellow Report 2008

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A summer as a BA Media Fellow was an introduction to a whole new world. In my normal life, I am an engineer working in public health research at the University of Surrey. But, for a brief moment in time, I was a reporter at Nature Online News. The thrill of chasing and developing a story was fantastic; the writing experience was unique; seeing my work published, and published in Nature was amazing. But the best bit was discovering, after having developed a new confidence in my communication skills, the whole new world of public engagement of science through the BA Festival of Science.

Before I started at my four week placement with Nature News I had time to ponder what it was going to be like. I imagined old academics, smoking jackets with patched elbows, bowties and pipes, people who knew every aspect of science. I expected to start slowly, tailing reporters, learning the craft, before maybe getting published after a few weeks.

I was wrong about the team. They were young, not a pipe among them, but they did each have an amazingly broad knowledge of science and science news. And very quickly I started developing a similarly broad knowledge, a result of reading the news everyday, and interviewing scientists from a range of disciplines.

I was also wrong about starting slowly. I published on the blog on day one, by day three I was contributing to the news meeting and doing interviews. By the end of the week I was juggling several stories.

Life of a story

Science journalism is all dinosaurs, space and new species, or at least that is what it felt like some days. I knew better than to expect stories on my research area, the field of sewage and drinking water is hard to sell, but I had hoped for more on environmental research.

One of my best writing experiences was with an article on green (vegetated) roofs. It came from a press release during a routine trawl of press releases, news and new journal papers between finishing my work of an afternoon and the morning news meeting.

I read the journal paper in preparation for pitching. I could pitch it to the online section editor and the other reporters at the morning news meeting, where we congregated with cups of coffee and discussed science stories in the news, new journal papers coming out, or other stories about new science. Or I could pitch to the print editor and the international reporting team at the weekly print edition conference call; these stories were more often about policy issues and investigative journalism – news for scientists – and could take much longer than the couple of days to research and write than online stories took. I pitched at the online news meeting.

This time I got lucky. When I pitched my story the editor quizzed me, quickly finding the holes in my brief research, and he decided it might be a story if I researched a specific angle.

Different pieces called for different types of research. For the blog, it was reading the news, and the paper and press releases, and any other comments about it online such as in science blogs. For news-in-brief items (NIBs) it might be interviews, reading news or papers. For research highlights, it would be reading the paper and interviewing the author. For this story it was the internet and interviews.

A quick internet search found the key people who I called, asking leading questions to find my story. Three days and about fifteen, mostly international, phone calls later I had my 'peg' – poor design meant baby birds in Switzerland were dying from starvation because the roofs weren't supporting the full ecology of a similar ground ecosystem.

So then I wrote, which was generally simple enough, but trying to whittle down all my research to 500 words, and structuring it around quotes was quite hard. Within hours it was done, uploaded to the website and submitted, and with a bit of editing it was published.

Experiences like researching and writing that story, and other stories, blogs and NIBs, taught me so much more than I expected. I had applied for the Fellowship hoping to put the skills they teach at 'dealing with the media' workshops into practise, to learn how to write for that audience and to find and communicate the story in my own research. While I am still working on the latter, I got the writing experience I wanted, learning to be more conscious of my audience. I learnt how to create an interesting science story in 120 words, a skill destined to be used repeatedly in grant applications. I learnt about other aspects of science, not just from interviews and researching stories, but from being able to spend hours each day reading newspapers and journals.

I learnt why interviews are important as a writer. My first story was on electronics, which I knew very little about. Interviewing the author and other experts let me learn very quickly what the paper was about and why it was groundbreaking.

Back to the lab

Before I knew it I was back at work, but only for two weeks, then it was off to Liverpool for the BA Festival of Science. Going back to the lab had been incredibly boring after the daily deadlines of journalism, but it was also then a huge shock to go to the Festival as a Nature blogger in the field, completely overwhelming, to be thrown back into the writing and short deadlines while trying to find stories at press conferences and sessions, and write them without running the ideas past anyone. But amid all the stress, I did manage to see some of the Festival, and it was inspiring.



Some of the Festival coverage, put up by the BA in the press centre

Writing at Nature was amazing, but it was a chance seeing how the other half lives. I love science, and I loved writing about it, but I prefer being the scientist. So it was amazing at the Festival to see so many other forms of science communication and public engagement that I can be involved in as an academic. I am already using all the skills I learnt during the Fellowship in preparing for the next Festival, and working with my professional organisation to get kids excited by science and engineering.

I was also lucky to spend three days with the Royal Society press office, during which time I learnt about the work they do turning science into policy and helping scientists in their public engagement. This made me even more excited about getting involved in communicating science.

The reaction of my colleagues to the placement has been wonderful, from my boss supporting my application, to the dean encouraging me to continue working with public engagement. The best relationship I have developed has been with my university press office, who gave me pointers when I was applying, and who are helping to keep up the writing and continue working in public engagement.

Being a Media Fellow taught me more about science journalism than I expected, and more about science, which I never expected. The greatest thing I will take away with me is knowing how to communicate science and using that to encourage others to get involved in science.

It was an amazing time and I'd like to thank everybody for giving me the opportunity and all their help along the way: Nigel Eady & the BA, Bill Hartnett & everyone at the Royal Society, and all the team at Nature - Geoff Brumfiel, Mark Peplow, Daniel Cressey, Katherine Sanderson, Anna Petherick, Oliver Morton and Gaia Vince.

Appendix

Published work from placement at Nature

Date	Title and address	Type
28 July	America frets over 'radioactive kitchens' http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/07/america_frets_over_radioactive_1.html	Blog
29 July	Kipunji: the last of the honk-bark http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/07/kipunji_the_last_of_the_honkba.html	Blog
30 July	What bees have in common with serial killers http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/07/what_bees_have_in_common_with.html	Blog
31 July	UFO-obsessed hacker loses extradition battle http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/07/will_the_hacker_fry.html	Blog
31 July	Mother Earth gets undressed http://www.nature.com/news/2008/080731/full/news.2008.1001.html	News, Print
4 Aug	Jurassic shark smackdown - August 04, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/jurassic_shark_smackdown.html	Blog
4 Aug	Is naming a snake after your wife really a compliment? http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/is_naming_a_snake_after_your_w.html	Blog
6 Aug	How to cook a tortoise - August 06, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/how_to_cook_a_tortoise.html	Blog
6 Aug	Dino-of-the-day: grow-fast-o-saurus - August 06, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/dinooftheday_growfastosaurus.html	Blog
6 Aug	Ecology: Turf wars http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v454/n7205/full/454670a.html	RH
7 Aug	Giving hybrids a voice - August 07, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/giving_hybrids_a_voice.html	Blog
11 Aug	Scaredy-cat gene will make you scream - August 11, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/scaredycat_gene_will_make_you.html	Blog
11 Aug	How pollution influences the weekend weather http://www.nature.com/news/2008/080811/full/news.2008.1017.html	News
12 Aug	What's in a name? - August 12, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/whats_in_a_name.html	Blog
12 Aug	The whale, saved - August 12, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/the_whale_saved.html	Blog
12 Aug	Polar bear smackdown - August 12, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/polar_bear_smackdown.html	Blog
12 Aug	Is faith the enemy of science? - August 12, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/is_faith_the_enemy_of_science.html	Blog
13 Aug	Mavis and Olga, a tale of two bipedal hexapuses - August 13, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/mavis_and_olga_a_tale_of_two_b.html	Blog
14 Aug	Climatology: Winter sun http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v454/n7206/full/454806d.html	RH
14 Aug	Comparative biology: Animal models http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v454/n7206/full/454806b.html	RH
14 Aug	Bird flu hits UK newspapers - August 14, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/british_scientist_does_good_1.html	Blog
14 Aug	Exhibit A: Religion does get in the way of teaching science - August 14, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/exhibit_a_religion_does_get_in.html	Blog
14 Aug	Farewell to the John N. Cobb - August 14, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/post_9.html	Blog

15 Aug	Bird flu (news) strikes again - August 15, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/bird_flu_news_strikes_again.html	Blog
15 Aug	Sat-nav for flappers - August 15, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/satnav_for_flappers.html	Blog
15 Aug	Link between skin cancer and moisturisers in hairless mice - August 15, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/link_between_skin_cancer_and_m.html	Blog
18 Aug	Bird # 753 for Gabon - August 18, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/bird_753_for_gabon.html	Blog
18 Aug	Prozac and driving: bolster or barrier? - August 18, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/prozac_and_driving_bolster_or.html	Blog
19 Aug	Does language determine thought? - August 19, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/does_language_determine_though.html	Blog
19 Aug	Bird brained? - August 19, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/bird_brained.html	Blog
19 Aug	How green is your roof? http://www.nature.com/news/2008/080819/full/news.2008.1048.html	News
20 Aug	Fruit juice keeps journalists busy - August 20, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/fruit_juice_keeps_journalists.html	Blog
20 Aug	Snapshot: A picture of climate change in the Himalayas http://www.nature.com/news/2008/080820/full/news.2008.1055.html	News
20 Aug	Blood farm to satiate vampires, accountant - August 20, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/blood_farm_to_satiate_vampires_1.html	Blog
20 Aug	New species of robin found in Gabon http://www.nature.com/news/2008/080820/full/454929f.html	NIB
21 Aug	Electronic nose to sniff out cancer - August 21, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/electronic_nose_to_sniff_out_c.html	Blog
21 Aug	Italian immigrant lives in marble - August 21, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/italian_immigrant_lives_in_mar.html	Blog
21 Aug	The buzz: Australian all weather bee flight facility opened http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/the_buzz_australian_all_weathe.html	Blog
22 Aug	Greenland's glaciers are cracking up - August 22, 2008 http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/08/greenlands_glaciers_are_cracki.html	Blog
28 Aug	Nuclear group to rule on Indian trade http://www.nature.com/news/2008/080827/full/4541041b.html	NIB
28 Aug	Evolution: Serotonin for mothers http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v454/n7208/full/4541032f.html	RH

Published work from Festival of Science

Date	Title and address	Type
6 Sept	Greetings from the BA Festival of Science http://blogs.nature.com/news/blog/2008/09/the_ba_festival_of_science_sto.html	Blog
8 Sept	BA Festival of Science: Climate shift changed the rainforests of Illinois http://blogs.nature.com/news/blog/2008/09/the_ba_festival_of_science_cli.html	Blog
9 Sept	The BA Festival of Science: "Science in science fiction films is a bit silly" http://blogs.nature.com/news/blog/2008/09/the_ba_festival_of_science_sci.html	Blog
9 Sept	The BA Festival of Science: Science in the Islamic world http://blogs.nature.com/news/blog/2008/09/the_ba_festival_of_science_isl.html	Blog
9 Sept	The BA Festival of Science: Cell wall nanostructure in marine algae may be photosynthesis master plan http://blogs.nature.com/news/blog/2008/09/the_ba_festival_of_science_cel.html	Blog

10 Sept	The BA Festival of Science: Happy Birthday to the t-test http://blogs.nature.com/news/blog/2008/09/the_ba_festival_of_science_hap.html	Blog
10 Sept	The BA Festival of Science: Unintended consequence of LHC? http://blogs.nature.com/news/blog/2008/09/the_ba_festival_of_science_uni_1.html	Blog
11 Sept	The BA Festival of Science: We need to discuss creationism in school science. Trust me, I was a biology teacher. http://blogs.nature.com/news/blog/2008/09/the_ba_festival_of_science_we.html	Blog
11 Sept	The BA Festival of Science: Death by bladder stone http://blogs.nature.com/news/blog/2008/09/the_ba_festival_of_science_dea_1.html	Blog
11 Sept	The BA Festival of Science: Wrap-up (or Indulge me a minute) http://blogs.nature.com/news/blog/2008/09/the_ba_festival_of_science_wra_1.html	Blog