

## Media Fellow Report 2007

### Mary Muers, Molecular Haematologist, University of Oxford Nature

Ask most scientists what the word 'Nature' means to them, and they'll probably think of high profile publications and the prospect of successful grant applications. And so it was for me, a junior post-doctoral researcher, until the summer of 2007.

Ask me now what 'Nature' means and I'll embark on an enthusiastic ramble about high-quality insightful news reporting, dedicated and friendly staff, features, research highlights, websites and blogs.

Such is the transforming experience of being a BA Media Fellow with the Nature news team.

#### *Nature news*

My month-long incarnation as a Nature journalist began with a magical mystery tour through the open plan offices of the Nature 'family' of journals and introductions to more different types of editor than I ever knew existed. The information overload that was to become a feature of my first week continued as I was pointed in the direction of a pile of embargoed press releases and asked to look through to select a few that I thought might be 'newsworthy'. I was pleased that the first one I picked had already been 'pitched' (suggested as a news story) by another journalist, so even though I couldn't write it, at least I was on the right lines.

By the end of that first day I had already started to see a little of the ruthless selection procedure that allows a select handful of publications to make the headlines, and was learning to translate a few key phrases of journo-speak.

And so I started to settle into a routine, beginning each day with a trawl through press releases and news websites, searching for possible stories. This was followed by one of the most fun bits of the day – the news meeting. Chairs were rolled over to the online news editor's desk and each of the journalists (including me!) dropped in what they had found. This is where the impressive general scientific knowledge of the team came into its own, as some ideas were rejected as being old-hat, others not based on solid science, or, mainly, just not exciting enough for a non-specialist.

Through being involved in this informal story selection session every day I was able learn how to spot ideas with potential – either from scientific papers due for publication or science-related events happening around the world. The global aspect of Nature was even more apparent at the weekly full news meeting. This is a multi-way conference call with the entire news team in London, from Editor-in-Chief down to me, and all the

editors and journalists from Nature offices around the world, from a barely awake San Francisco to Tokyo struggling to stay up.

The weekly print edition of Nature carries news features, news in brief and short research highlights, picking up on developments with implications for the international scientific community. Online news stories are posted each day and tend to have a more 'popular appeal' than the print stories, which often focus on science policy decisions or major controversies. In addition, during my placement a news-blog was launched – 'The Great Beyond' – which rounds-up and comments on science stories appearing elsewhere in the press.

### *What's the story?*

As a BA Media Fellow I was mainly working on online stories reporting the findings of scientific publications. This tended to follow a pattern of contacting the author and a couple of other researchers in the field, and researching the background context of the study. Although this type of story can be turned around within a few hours if necessary, they were gentle with me, initially giving me a day or two before the story was needed. In addition I wrote a couple of Research Highlights for print, which are brief summaries of papers appearing in other journals that might interest scientists from other fields.

Being a laboratory scientist I am no stranger to frustrations and obstacles in research, and I soon discovered that there are journalistic equivalents. In the middle of August one of the most frequent of these was the scientists I wanted to talk to being on holiday. With deadlines on a daily basis, someone emailing the following week to say "sorry I was away, but I'm very happy to speak to you now" really isn't much help. Sometimes the trail of interest on a story just went cold after doing some digging and finding out that a 'new' discovery wasn't actually that new, or that the press release had over-hyped the research. But in contrast to lab work, at least as a journalist you find that out after a few hours rather than a few weeks.

The aspect I had been most apprehensive about before starting the placement was phoning up scientists out of the blue to ask for their comments. But after I had overcome the initial nerves and picked up the phone it turned out to be one of the most rewarding experiences. Scientists just love to talk about their work. So much so that it was quite tricky to get them to stop talking so I could ask questions. Dropping the word 'Nature' doesn't do any harm, though tends to trigger rather more technical explanations than one needs for a news story.

### *A Festival of reporting*

After four weeks based at the office in London, I then joined the gang of BA Media Fellows at the BA Festival of Science in York, as the sole representative of Nature.

Being surrounded by the British press-pack and watching a mass of reporters (I'm sure there are some amusing collective nouns....) in action was fascinating, and highlighted some of the major differences between Nature and the daily papers. The national press were revelling in the preponderance of British research being presented, but being British doesn't make news for an international journal. In addition, with their scientific readership in mind, the editorial bar for how novel and groundbreaking the science needs to be to make a Nature story is set much higher. Although this limited the amount of reporting I was required to do at the Festival, it was perhaps more satisfying to my scientific instincts to be discriminating.

### *Back to the bench*

So what have I learnt? It is difficult to sift through the myriad of experiences to summarise, and to separate out my experiences of individual people I met from my experiences of the media as a whole. I was impressed by the integrity and rigor of the journalists and editors. Far from seeking to hype and twist to get a better story, the editors ensured accuracy in facts and quotes. When seeing the national press reporters in action at the BA Festival of Science I realised the speed with which they have to churn out stories, and so they have no time to do extensive background research – but if necessary they'll go for a non-committal statement rather than an incorrect fact.

One of the key differences between operating as a scientist and operating as a journalist is in the questions you have to ask. I had to overcome my instinctive interest in "why?" in favour of "what?", "who?" and "how many?". When reading a manuscript as a journalist you've got to sift just for the story, whereas as a scientist I search the details for how sound the techniques are and what implications there are for my own specific field of research.

Since returning to the lab I have given a presentation about my placement to colleagues and had numerous informal discussions about the media. The key message I have passed on to researchers wanting to get their work into the public domain is to know why it is a story, and then to get a good press release. Journalists generally don't have the time to trawl through the table of contents of some obscure scientific publication, so hand a good story to them on a plate. Then remember, they want good copy, just as you want good science.

## Articles

Nature Online news stories

<http://www.nature.com/news/2007/070820/full/070820-2.html>

<http://www.nature.com/news/2007/070820/full/070820-10.html>

<http://www.nature.com/news/2007/070827/full/070827-1.html>

<http://www.nature.com/news/2007/070827/full/070827-7.html>

<http://www.nature.com/news/2007/070903/full/070903-4.html>

<http://www.nature.com/news/2007/070903/full/070903-14.html>

<http://www.npg.nature.com/news/2007/110907/full/news070910-3.html>

Research highlights

<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v448/n7157/full/448972a.html>

<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v449/n7159/full/449118a.html>