



Media Fellowships

Media Fellow Report 2009

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The Times

Placement

My discipline – public health – is all about communication with the public. So what could be more interesting than a placement with the most powerful public communicator of all: the mass media.

Application

My application to the British Science Association Media Fellowship scheme was quite a chance occurrence. A circuitous email route led to a noncommittal click which led to a sudden surge of interest. Here, for once, was a media training worth doing.

Public health is quite keen on media training. After all, you never know when you'll be the person standing in front of the microphones explaining the unfortunate accident with the swine flu vaccines or your region's rocketing MRSA figures.

Yet the couple of media training courses I had been on before this seemed far removed from the reality of reporting. Holed up for a day in a Holiday Inn with nine other non-journalists writing press releases for fictional events certainly didn't give me much insight into the media mentality.

This, on the other hand, was a scheme which brought you right into the thick of things, as part of the journalist team. I spent a few late nights on the application, and sent it off with crossed fingers. However, thinking that the competition was probably dominated by highly erudite scientists who had done English as a "fun" A-level to balance their other seven, I wasn't that hopeful of success.

Yet a few months later, I had a welcome email from Nigel Eady, informing me that I had won a place. Even better – it was at a newspaper with an outstanding science reputation and a highly respected science editor, Mark Henderson.

Before the placement

Of course, now that I had the placement, all manner of anxious thoughts crowded in. I previously had written only a few random reflections on hospital life for medical magazines - hardly the same as writing for a national newspaper. And although I was interested in science, I wouldn't say that I was up to date with current scientific affairs – the British Medical Journal was my regular reading rather than Nature or Science.



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Terrified that I would be caught out on my appalling lack of knowledge on string theory, I met up with Mark for a coffee to discuss the placement.

We went through the logistics of the visits and he described what events would be coming up during my visit. Unluckily, my placement would be during a period of annual leave for the other science journalists, leaving Mark quite pushed for time. However, it would also coincide with the launch of new science supplement Eureka, for which I would be able to help with a few features. It was great to meet Mark before the placement began and I left feeling very reassured. The only sticking point was right at the end when he asked if I would consider myself a fast writer. Images of myself spending long nights at the computer battling over a single sentence popped into my head, but I decided to settle on “medium” as a reply.

Another great source of advice was a previous fellow at The Times, Leonora Weil. It was really helpful to talk to her in person and pick up some tips for preparing for the Fellowship. She still spoke of the fellowship with excitement even two years later, and that made me anticipate it all the more.

The first few days

Walking into The Times newsroom is a fantastic experience. Although it is superficially just another open-plan office cluttered with monitors and people, it is a completely different environment.

It has quite a lively and buzzy atmosphere, and everyone is very friendly. I had visions of editors bearing down on juniors and berating them for substandard articles, but nothing could be further from the truth. The Times seems to host quite a few students on work experience, so they are used to having new faces on the floor.

I would highly recommend attending the daily news conferences. There is usually one in the morning and one in the late afternoon, with a separate one for the editor and senior journalists to discuss the editorials and leading articles. These meetings really opened my eyes to the process of choosing news items for the paper. News is not news just because it's newsworthy – it has to be selected by several layers of editors before it reaches you or me in the public domain.

I would also try to write your first article as soon as possible. It doesn't need to be long or good, but it's a huge confidence boost to know that you can do it under time pressure and on an alien subject.

During the placement

It was a slow start to my publishing career, and it was a few days before I got my first article in print. When I did, however, it was a fantastic feeling – and entailed a few minutes of frantic texting to all family and friends to buy a copy.



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I was lucky enough to be able to split my team between daily news and working on the inaugural edition of the monthly science magazine Eureka. This allowed me to experience the feature-writing world, which is yet another different environment. The team atmosphere was great, and I learnt to confidently pitch my ideas to whichever editor was listening at the time!

Although it could be busy juggling research for Eureka along with stories for the paper with a tight deadline, it never became unmanageable. I also made it to a couple of press conferences at the Science Media Centre, which was very interesting and definitely worthwhile.

The timing of my placement was difficult, as there were a lot of external commitments I needed to make during it for the "day job". Unfortunately, this meant that I couldn't make it to my last week, but we plan to reschedule this for later in the year.

British Science Festival

The British Science Festival in Guildford was a fantastic experience, although we slightly disappointed with having missed out on a previous Festival held in Dublin.

My days were spent attending press conferences and writing up articles, and my evenings were spent having dinner and swapping stories with the other Media Fellows.

I was pleased to get a couple of blog posts accepted for The Times Online, which meant that I had written in a variety of formats by the end of the placement: newspaper, online, magazine features, and also blogs. As they each have different styles, I felt more confident in my writing abilities and repertoire.

There was also a very useful seminar on freelancing, organised by the British Science Association. This is well worth attending, as it gives you an insight into how to maintain your output after the end of the placement.

The science journalists are quite a small group, and these science festivals are a good opportunity for them to catch up and socialise together. This can make it difficult to integrate yourself as an outsider, and your time will probably be spent mostly with the other Media Fellows. However, as Media Fellows are invariably interesting and lively characters, this should be no burden. This year's group certainly were – and I had a wonderful time. We are already planning a reunion for next year!

Lessons learned

I leave deeply impressed with the state of science journalism in the UK. My host, Mark Henderson, was not only incredibly industrious but also very conscientious. We discussed several stories where he was determined not to overstate the findings of a scientific paper, although under pressure to do so from editors. He also pushed several scientists for clarity



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on methodological rigour, rather than simply accepting their purported results. Although general news journalists may not always write science stories well, I have great confidence in the abilities of specialist science journalists.

I am also conscious of the need to convince scientists to engage with the media more in order to communicate their findings to the public. It is not acceptable to remain in ivory towers and deride journalists for poor communication, without attempting to meet those journalists halfway. After all, public money is funding the majority of scientific research – shouldn't the public therefore have a right to hear about the results?

Downsides

It was very disheartening to work for ages on an article, only for it not to be published. Although as scientists we may get papers rejected, at least we still have something tangible in the research which has gone into that paper. We can also try another journal – unfortunately not an option for current news stories.

In addition, as quite junior newcomers, we may need some championing from our host journalist for our articles to make the final cut. Therefore, it's worth letting your host know early on in the day what articles you're planning to get in the evening's edition, so they can sell them to the news editor.

The power of the subeditors is also quite eye-opening. For someone to be able to change copy that will come out under your byline, without referring it back to you for approval, is very disconcerting. As scientists, we are used to going through revision after revision before submission to exclude any errors. However, the sub-editing process means that errors or opinions can be introduced and attributed to you - without you having written them. Unfortunately, one of my interviewees complained about her final article as factual errors had crept in during sub-editing. The copy that I had approved was true to the interview, but this had been changed afterwards – a difficult experience for fastidious scientists!

The future

Firstly, I will be recommending the scheme to my colleagues.

I am also writing up the experience for a public health magazine, which will be distributed to trainees and consultants.

I am planning a seminar on media skills for fellow academic doctors, and a science communication day in the new year at the Royal Society of Medicine.

Do's and Don't for future Media Fellows

1. Do speak to a previous Media Fellow at your placement if you can.
2. Do read the newspapers regularly in the months before your placement. Don't restrict yourself just to your publication – read across the spectrum.



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3. Do try to clear as many other commitments as you can before the placement – it's tricky keeping up with the "day job" during the actual placement.
4. Do go, at least initially, to the news conferences at your placement to give you an overview of constructing the whole newspaper.
5. Do take a laptop to Science Festival – you'll feel much more part of the team.
6. Do consider buying/borrowing a digital recorder for press conferences – there's sure to be a quote you wish you had on tape when writing up.
7. Do try to write a variety of articles – newspaper, online, blogs, features – in order to stretch your writing style.
8. Do try to meet all the science journalists during the Festival – you never know when those contacts will come in useful!
9. Don't let your writing stop with your placement – try to follow up with freelance articles afterwards.



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Appendix

Newspaper articles:

Without help I'd soon sink, says recently qualified doctor

2/9/2009

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/science/medicine/article6817826.ece>

Online articles:

Andromeda has absorbed stellar debris from other galaxies

3/9/09

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/science/space/article6819190.ece>

Blogs:

Should scientists declare conflicts of interests when talking to the public?

9/09/2009

<http://timesonline.typepad.com/science/2009/09/should-scientists-declare-conflicts-of-interests-when-talking-to-the-public.html>

Who were the stars of the British Science Festival?

11/09/2009

<http://timesonline.typepad.com/science/2009/09/who-were-the-stars-of-the-british-science-festival.html>

Eureka articles:

<http://extras.timesonline.co.uk/flash/eureka/>

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