

## Lucy Rogers - The Guardian

Standing on the shoulders of giants, I have begun to see the world from a new perspective. I have been elevated above my normal platform by the British Association's (BA's) media fellowship with the Guardian. The four-week placement took me out of my comfort zone of engineering and computers and thrust me into a new and hectic environment with a very steep learning curve.

But there were some similarities I could cling on to. The media machine works in the same way as any other factory. There are meetings, departments, reviews and even audit trails to show who wrote what, when. There are staff and consultants – also known as freelance journalists. There are bottlenecks and timescales. But the newspapers are a high volume, short run time product. Their schedules are daily, or sometimes weekly. And the material changes with every new batch.

My mentor at the Guardian was Tim Radford, science editor. I had received an email a week before the start of my placement: "Don't repeat do not come to the Guardian on Monday" – my heart dropped - I thought, it had all been cancelled. But the email continued, "meet me instead at this event underneath at or just after 11am." Curiouser and curiouser. The event was a press conference about the European Space Agency's first ever mission to the moon, due to be launched later that month. I was excited. I am a keen amateur astronomer, and couldn't wait to hear what it was all about.

I arrived early and played with the moon rocks and marveled at the lump of metal, the size of a washing machine, which was going to the moon. I met Tim and was told all I had to do was sit and listen and watch the hacks at work. So I did. I saw how the journalists all copied down the same quotes, which were full of visual imagery, and how they all put their pens down when a speaker went into too much jargon. I heard the questions that were asked and noted that the same group of speakers were quizzed whilst some were not asked anything. I also noted the voice recorders, used by those journalists without shorthand, to ensure an accurate quote.

We then went to the Guardian's offices. I was introduced as the resident scientist. This was great, if not daunting. I wasn't expected to know anything about writing, and everyone was willing to help me. I was treated like a professional, not a work-experience school leaver. However, with the glamour came some responsibility. I was asked all sorts of questions, such as "what does fluoride look like?" - by someone writing an article on the fluoridation of water. I had to dredge my memory back to my school days. I knew I knew the answer, I just had not thought about such things for 15 years.

I was set to work straight away. The new Life supplement, which comes out every Thursday, has a section called 'This week – the science behind the news'.

Readers send in questions relating to something that has been reported in the news during the previous week, and the science correspondents on the Life team answer them. So I was given a question, a list of possible contacts and told to write about 300 words about 'How bad could the blackout in the US have got?'. Just like that. No fifty-fifty, no ask the audience. So I phoned a friend – an ex-colleague. Fortunately I used to work in an industrial power company, which designed and made electrical switchgear – huge fuses for the national grid. Even though he could not shed much light on the blackout, he tuned my mind back into the world of electricity generation and supply.

I then phoned the president of the Institution of Electrical Engineers (IEE). He was on holiday, but I was amazed at how keen the IEE's press office were at trying to contact him and get back to me. The same was true of all the other contacts. I just had to say I was from 'The Guardian' – which was not something that slipped out easily at first – and they talked to me quite happily for ten minutes or so. I got all my information and quotes, and wrote the article. Tim read it, changed a few sentences, gave me a few guidelines and sent it to the Life editor. Who accepted it. It was available with a picture for proof reading on Tuesday and I saw the printed article on the Wednesday. My whole family was instructed to buy the Guardian when it came out on Thursday, and they all learnt why the blackout could not have got much worse. There was my name in print, being read by thousands people. How strange. Probably only three people have ever read my PhD thesis. And that was because they had to.

And so I did the same the next week. The variety of subjects covered was amazing. One day I was looking at Mars, the next at the scientific methods used to date historic artefact. Another day I was investigating why footballers bury their heads in their hands when they miss a goal. Then it was on to how could someone survive when they have had an accident and a drill has gone through their head. There were a sprinkling of press conferences and visits, but just as I was getting into a routine, we moved up to Salford for the BA's festival of science.

I had thought the pace was fast in London. The festival of science was up another gear altogether. There were press conferences every half hour from 8 am until 2 - without a break. On the Monday I attended all of them. I then wrote an article on the use of trees to soundproof motorways and train lines. To my amazement it was in the newspaper the next day. I probably wrote two articles a day for the rest of the festival, but none of them made it in. Tim said "Writing is never wasted, if it is not picked up this time, you can use it in your next article". My first thought was "what next article?", but I seem to have an itch in my fingers and have been looking at my local engineering lectures with a renewed vigour....

### Acknowledgements

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