

Media Fellow Report 2007

Louise Sutton, Sport and Exercise Nutritionist, Leeds Metropolitan University The Times Higher Education Supplement

My BA Media Fellowship host was the Times Higher Education Supplement (THEs), a weekly publication for the Higher Education market that is more policy than science focussed. On first hearing that I was to be placed with the THEs I was a little unsure as to how the remit of the BA (British Association for the Advancement of Science) would be met through a host publication that did not have a science section.

On application to the scheme I was hoping to learn about the process of writing for the media, what to look for in a science story, and more about the new technologies applied to media broadcasting such as 'podcasting' and the transferability of these skills and technologies to the academic environment. On hearing that I was to be placed with the THEs I readjusted my expectations and wondered what they might expect from me, especially as my employer had received mixed media coverage from my host in recent times.

The briefing day held at the BA provided a useful opportunity to meet with the other Media Fellows, past and present, and undertake a crash course in journalism. Enough to arm me with some basic skills to hit the ground running from day one, although these were not actually required on day one as my first day coincided with the annual office outing, this year to a blustery Brighton where a stroll along the pier after a hearty seafood lunch required some care.

I was with the THEs for 5 weeks, spending 4 weeks based at the paper's offices in London and the final week acting as a reporter at the BA Festival of Science in York. Day two saw me instructed towards a vacant desk with a number of potential news items to pursue. My first task was to follow up on items for the paper's people section following those in Higher Education on the up or move. After a day in the office my first piece to make it to print reported on a lecturer in war studies from King's College London who had been appointed official historian of the Joint Intelligence Committee. Clearly a link to the growth in the study of intelligence as an academic subject and the current situation in Iraq provided some colour to the piece. I followed this up with another people piece on another academic from King's College London who had taken on the role as chief scientific advisor to the Royal Pharmaceutical Society. Whilst undertaking the interview for this second piece I discovered the Professor's husband had previously undertaken a Media Fellowship with the THEs and found the application of learning back to the workplace to be useful and rewarding. These short news items helped to build confidence.

I had not anticipated working in a large open plan office which took some getting used. I first found this a distraction, but it then became a useful learning ground through observation particularly in terms of the techniques and approaches used by the different journalists in securing information for a story. This was definitely good practice for the busy press centre at the BA Festival of Science. The atmosphere was

informal and friendly even if staff were preoccupied with an imminent change in format for the paper and an office move. I found interviewing over the phone difficult, but essential, and I learnt to pass copy on before I was happy with it because someone else was likely to edit it anyway.

I followed up with a number of 'nibs' (news in brief's) that focussed on the links being made between academic institutions and sport. I also worked with a freelance journalist to cover the British Education Research Association Conference having the opportunity to follow this up by attending the conference. This provided the opportunity to learn to deal with unfamiliar issues in relatively short time frames, which can be stressful for fear of misreporting or misinterpreting information. Whilst nothing more made it to print from the conference attendance it was useful preparation for attending the BA Festival of Science.

The rest of my time in the office was spent following up on story leads for the Festival itself. The News Editor had highlighted potential news items. I attended the Festival unsupported and was instructed not to waste too much time attending press briefings as the stories therein would likely be covered by the dailies and therefore not be news once the THeS hit its readership on a Friday. My task for the Festival was to report on two stories that were themes of the Festival: Science and Secularisation and Green Chemistry, both of which presented a huge challenge to one whose formal training is in the study of nutrition and dietetics and current practice in the sphere of sport. Whilst other Media Fellows and the 'proper' journalists reported on the health benefits of chocolate I struggled with the serious issues of science and secularisation hoping not to misrepresent or offend. A few weeks after returning to my 'proper' job a colleague recalled reading the piece with surprise, but favourable comment.

Once my deadlines for press day at the Festival had been achieved I took the opportunity to follow up on stories a little more akin to my field of work and attended a press conference on technology in sport. This culminated in a piece for the BA website on achieving gold with engineering.

In general colleagues have been supportive and interested in the BA Media Fellowship. I will be sharing the experience and insights of 'working with the media' with colleagues at our next annual staff development festival. The BA Media Fellowship has provided confidence to be proactive in working with the media, rather than reactive. Appreciating the background to how requests for information might be conceived and managed on the road to publication provides useful insight in respect of future engagement with the media. At the Festival I learnt a great deal from the experiences of the other Media Fellows and the different media hosts and media formats they were involved with. It was a privilege to have had the opportunity to undertake a BA Media Fellowship and I would have no hesitation in recommending the experience to others.

Articles

August 24

The study of intelligence as an academic subject is a growing area

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=310208>

August 31

The profession is diversifying and the society needs to change

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=310311>

September 7

Access initiatives miss mark

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=310352>