



Media Fellowships

Media Fellow Report 2009

Dr Fiona E Tomkinson, PhD, Mathematician, University of Surrey

Nature / Nature Online News

Placements

The Fellowship scheme is a wonderful opportunity to peer over the fence to see how science journalists discover stories, follow up leads and decide on what is newsworthy. These hardworking people provide a vital conduit for researchers, giving them the opportunity to get their voice heard by the general public.

From my very first day at Nature News, it became apparent that getting noticed isn't just a case of uploading research details to personal web pages. Journalists at Nature trawl through press releases, new journal papers and reliable web blogs as well as newspapers online and in print. They do this every morning, before 10:15 am, for their daily Online News meeting.

In the meeting, the Online Editor works around the table, querying pitches. This interaction sets the team up for the day. It is necessary for the timeframes journalists work within.

News for scientists or science news

This fifteen minute meeting opened my eyes to what Nature reports on. It wasn't just science news they also did a thorough coverage of news for scientists. There is a stark difference between the two. They manage to balance both.

Science news reports on new discoveries and coverage of research. However, news for scientists is about the politics behind the science. While the former promotes and educates, the latter informs and probes.

A break from the ordinary

On my first day, I was assigned a Blog Post on cats urgently meowing for food. It sounded like a 'fluff' piece; something unexpected from a serious journal like Nature. Although this story sounded cute, it was backed up with published research.

The cat story was already covered by other online news sites. However, the blog section belonging to Nature, called 'The Great Beyond', specifically focuses on rounding up science news from all corners of the web. These news updates are more relaxed.

In contrast, the breaking news is presented as formal Online News articles. By the time I had finished lunch, I was also given such an assignment. This was real news; it was 'new'.

The well-oiled machine



Media Fellowships

My first day was a Tuesday, a busy day for those at Nature. Busy because the print cycle kicks into gear. The journal Nature is not just a highly-coveted place for research to get published. It is a weekly magazine brimming with science and science-related stories. The stories come in many guises, such as News, News Features and Research Highlights.

Every week there's a Print News meeting – a conference call at 3pm with all Nature News parties present. This worldwide gathering discusses the print stories for the next issue of Nature. It was another round-the-table affair; more formal than the morning meeting. From it, I gained an idea of how many people were recruited by Nature just to handle the news.

Copyright and embargoes

The cat blog required a picture. This meant a careful check of copyright and restrictions on images freely available on the web. It was a surprise to find out that journalists were the ones expected to find the images. The advent of the web has altered the role of the reporter.

As the evening approached, I started to read around for my online news assignment. The Online and Print editors wanted me to do a piece on a research paper. It was about a new discovery on the formation and distribution of rain showers.

It was an 'embargoed' paper. This meant that no one could release a news article on it until the paper reached its publication date, scheduled for a week's time. Now it made sense why there's such homogeneity of coverage by competing news establishments.

French connection

Just as I was about to complete my first day, a telephone call came through from the States. The Highlights Editor wanted me to do a short piece for the print edition. It would be for the rain paper. This meant I would need to produce a condensed version of the paper in around 100 words. It also meant I would need to check additional details with the lead author. The telephone interview now would have more riding on it.

The following morning, I was given an introduction on how to do a telephone interview. Minutes later, I was making a call to France. Simple questions, and good note-taking, helped greatly.

Additionally, I needed outside views on the paper. This meant finding and emailing a list of candidates. The article needed to be well-rounded, and the best way to do this was to encourage others to speak out, giving their expert opinion.

Scattered showers



Media Fellowships

My third and fourth days were spent writing the Research Highlight as well as drafting and redrafting my online article about rain. It also involved chasing up researchers who had given statements on the rain paper and getting them to verify quotes.

Batting the Research Highlight between London and New York to the Highlights Editor via email was straightforward. The highlight was tweaked until all superfluous parts were sucked out. However, the online article was much longer and the structure more complex.

After finishing, the article was passed onto the Online Editor. Editors are there to check the story runs well and the intended audience is catered for appropriately. The batting between author and editor is part of the polishing process.

Edits on Sunday and Monday led to a final polish by subeditors. These people check on fluidity of sentences and flag up specific details for a writer to verify – names, dates, places, quotes and finer details. These extra pairs of eyes help to make the copy accurate.

A single week of work resulted in four written pieces. It was a very rewarding placement.

How I convinced my colleagues that interacting with journalists is a good idea

During June and July, I had a number of email conversations with researchers at the University of Surrey and colleagues elsewhere. This was to encourage sharing their work with the public, sending out press releases and explaining how journalists scour for stories.

Additionally, I have encouraged an ex-Surrey PhD student to consider applying for a British Science Association Media Fellowship next year. He will be starting a postdoctoral position at the University of Dundee in September.

Appreciation

Thanks go to the news team at Nature. In particular, to Geoff Brumfiel, Mark Peplow, Ananyo Bhattacharya, Katherine Sanderson, Richard Van Noorden, Natasha Gilbert, Brendan Maher and Alicia Newton.

Thanks also go to Nigel Eady of the British Science Association and Prof. Mark Roberts, Head of the Mathematics Department at the University of Surrey.



Media Fellowships

Appendix

Published Work

Articles completed during a one-week placement at Nature:

- Cats tap into human nurture to get their saucer of milk, The Great Beyond, Blog News Post July 14, 2009.
http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2009/07/cats_tap_into_human_nurture_to.html
- Falsified research goes unnoticed for over eight years, The Great Beyond, Blog News Post July 15, 2009.
http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2009/07/falsified_research_goes_unnoticed.html
- How raindrops fall, Online News, Nature News, July 20, 2009.
<http://www.nature.com/news/2009/090720/full/news.2009.705.html>
- Scattered showers, Research Highlight, Nature 460, 23 July 2009, 438 (2009).