

Media Fellow Report 2006

Lucy Heady, Biophysicist, Cavendish Laboratory, University of Cambridge – Nature

What's in a Story?

I turned up at Nature on my first day with no idea of how to find a news story or even what a news story was. I spent my first day scanning through the press releases on Eurekalert and Alphagalileo marvelling at how everyone around me seemed to know exactly what was news and what wasn't. I couldn't for the life of me work out why a new insight into how cancer spreads wasn't news but how noise effects toad behaviour was.

Working at Nature is a very privileged position for a science journalist. Being one of the leading science journals, a lot of the big breakthroughs are published here so reporters get the inside story well ahead of time. The other side to this is that a story has to be really big to make it into the news. That I found something interesting or exciting wasn't enough, a discovery has to change the way a whole field of research is seen, be controversial or effect our lives to be worth a write-up.

As well as scientific discoveries Nature also covers news on changes in science policy such as budget cuts in NASA and decisions to fund big science projects. Everyone on the news team has their contacts in various parts of the policy world and tries to stay as connected as possible so that they get to the big stories first. I arrived during the "is Pluto a planet?" debate and found it very interesting to watch how the news in the office was always one step ahead of what was being reported elsewhere as the debate turned first in favour of Pluto's planetary status until its final relegation to the lesser category of "dwarf planet".

Because Nature is a weekly publication only the very biggest stories make it into print. Any new and exciting science that has been published that week but hasn't made it into the news pages gets a 100-word summary in the Research Highlights section. The news team also has an online service which has scope for more general stories, short amusing pieces and big stories that break suddenly.

Getting Down to the Job

The most enjoyable part of faking it as a journalist was ringing people up and discussing their cutting-edge research with them. As a scientist myself I could understand the excitement of having someone from Nature ring you up to talk about your paper. Most of the time the people I spoke to were incredibly friendly and helpful and gave their time generously to explain their work in a way that a non-specialist could understand.

The funniest people I spoke to were for a piece I wrote for the Moon special to mark the smack-down of the Smart-1 probe onto the surface of the Moon. My piece was about how to own a piece of Moon rock. Although most Moon rock is from asteroids that land on Earth, some of the material brought back from the Apollo missions has managed, illegally, to get into the public domain. Tracing the path of these rogue pieces of the Moon led to me interviewing people from Sotheby's, NASA and even the FBI!

The Moon rock story taught me a very important lesson about journalism – most of what you do will not go into the article. Despite having spent days chasing down leads and writing it up in different ways, it eventually got cut down to a box of just a couple of hundred words. I found I didn't mind this as much as I thought I would as it's pretty similar to the process of scientific research. In the course of normal research you eventually find out that a lot of what you have done is wrong. The great thing about journalism is that you're rarely throwing away

more than a couple of days' work whereas in research you can have been doing the wrong thing for months!

An Educational Experience

The most rewarding thing about being a BA Media Fellow was that I was learning all the time. And it wasn't just writing and reporting skills that I was learning, it was a great opportunity to learn all about areas of science I hadn't thought about since I was sixteen or, indeed, ever. When else am I likely to take the time to learn about population genetics, how we taste or general relativity?

The fellowship was a fascinating insight into the world of science media. Simply understanding where science journalists get their stories from and what they look for in a story has helped me to better appreciate the science stories that are covered and has given me a few ideas of how to get a story reported if there is a breakthrough in my field.

Doing the fellowship at Nature is very different from doing it at one of the daily newspapers intended for a wider audience. The bar for what is a news story is much higher but also the angle on the story is very different. So even though I learned an enormous amount during my time at Nature, going to the BA Festival of Science was another kind of education entirely.

I hadn't really gone to any press conferences while at Nature but at the festival I was going to three or four every day. It was fascinating to watch how the focus of a story would appear out of nowhere as the various journalists asked their questions and then one would hit on a point that everyone would start chasing after as well. I often felt sorry for the scientists who would generally look like they'd been run over by a herd of buffalo by the end of the questions.

Back in the Office

My colleagues were just as ignorant as me as to the workings of the science media and I have spent a lot of time discussing my experiences with them. They have been particularly interested in why various stories are reported over others and hopefully the whole group will become a bit more clever about getting the media interested in our work.

I'm now thinking much more about how to present my work in an engaging and accessible way. By thinking about what you write for a news story you make your work much easier to follow. By identifying the most important thing that needs to be communicated and putting this right at the top it is much more likely that your audience will go away remembering what you wanted them to.

Unforgettable

Already the time I spent at Nature feels like a million years ago but it was without a doubt one of the most eye-opening and fun experiences I've ever had. The people on the news team worked hard to make me feel welcome and make sure I got the most out of my time there. They were generous with their time despite the constant pressure of deadlines, teaching me the basics of journalism and giving me advice on my writing. I would like to thank Jenny Hogan and Nicola Jones in particular for all the help they gave me.

Examples of work:

<http://www.nature.com/news/2006/060828/full/060828-15.html>

<http://www.nature.com/news/2006/060904/full/060904-14.html>

<http://www.nature.com/news/2006/060904/full/060904-8.html>

<http://www.nature.com/news/2006/060904/full/060904-6.html>

<http://www.nature.com/news/2006/060821/full/060821-9.html>

<http://www.nature.com/news/2006/060911/full/060911-9.html>