

Martyn Bull – The Times Higher Education Supplement

I've had one of the best times of my life being a BA media fellow at the Times Higher Education Supplement. For someone who has largely spent their time in a very few long-term positions in the academic sector, it was wonderful to be despatched into a commercial news organisation as an embedded scientist. Certainly, I have had as thorough a training in journalism as one can hope to get out of 5 weeks.

The job covered the whole range of activities a journalist could expect to cover and some more.

The first day was very challenging. After locating a boat on the Thames heading for Kew, it took me half an hour to locate the news editor and the rest of the THES staff. Fortuitously, I had started work on the day of the annual office outing, which was an excellent way to meet everyone as human beings and learn their names. After a hearty lunch, several games of rounders and an extended drinking session (journalists do drink an awful lot), I staggered home to the tiny ghetto that BA media fellows in London have to put up with. Prison inmates have more comfortable lodgings, but there is no room for choosiness out on the wild frontier of news.

THES is a weekly publication for the higher education market, published on Thursday. This means that the paper goes to press around 6pm Wednesday, which becomes like Friday, and then Thursday is a quiet day rather like Monday, except that Friday is then treated like Friday again (large amounts of drinking). Saturday and Sunday behave normally, Monday is actually Wednesday, Tuesday is getting a bit fraught as some news pages still look a bit sparse, and Wednesday is hard out slog to meet the press deadline. All in all, this really screwed up my sense of time, particularly when thinking about when something should be submitted. After five weeks, I was just about getting the hang of this, and I learnt very rapidly that deadlines are deadlines. If you miss them, then that's it, end of story. At THES it ends up in a queue called spiked, which means that your story has been impaled and left to slowly die on the News desk.

I really did not know what to expect when I started, and I could never have predicted how much I would enjoy the cut and thrust of the news room. Arriving in the open plan office, on my second day, I was given a desk, a phone, a 132 page House of Commons Science and Technology Report and the requirement to produce 650 words on open access archives.

I struggled and struggled, and only succeeded when I abandoned all of those lovely academic habits of collecting all the information together, making sure all the angles had been covered. I was soon drowning in information and getting nowhere. "Talk to people, here are some numbers," said someone. And as if by magic, I started getting somewhere.

Lesson number 1: People can deliver information to you by voice at a far greater density than any other medium. It is up to date, concise, and reactive. From a journalistic point of view, the internet has limited use, except as a giant dictionary and phone book. But also, Lesson Number 2: news stories are a snapshot of the moment. They are transitory and unlike academic writing, do not have to be the last word. Lesson number 3: News stories are all about people. It is so much more interesting if someone can say something, rather than just state it.

Once I had realised this, I was away. I loved the writing, meeting the deadlines, chasing stories, interviewing people, going to press conferences, getting unlimited access to people usually off limits, and seeing my stories in print. I loved it, and it has changed my life!