

Media Fellow Report 2008

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It seems a long time since I was filling out my application form and I'm not sure if I knew exactly what to expect on the Fellowship. But I do know that I wanted to find out how science journalists come across research, decide whether or not it is newsworthy and then go about writing a story, hopefully becoming a better science communicator myself along the way.

Before I started at the Guardian, I read the report of their previous Media Fellow, by way of preparation. On his recommendation, I bought the paper routinely for a few weeks and scanned the pages for science news but it soon became clear to me that very little science actually makes it into the newspaper. Most days there weren't any science stories at all. But once I got started, I soon discovered that the life of a science journalist involves much more than writing articles for the paper. A single week might include writing blogs, replying to comments, going to press conferences, writing articles, meeting scientists, recording interviews and making podcasts.

On my first day at the Guardian, I wrote a short piece and saw it posted on the science blog, which was satisfying. Less satisfying was having another article rejected - or spiked - the very same day. But this is very much part of the business. I spoke to one science correspondent who reckoned that only about a fifth of the articles he wrote made it into the paper. That first day also involved getting thoroughly lost in the mass of press releases on Eurekalert and sitting in on the recording of the weekly science podcast. All of which provided a fairly representative introduction to the life of a science journalist and taught me a few things: my first efforts were, I was gently informed, a little too serious, somewhat wordy and missing a top line to really grab the reader's attention.

After a few days of desk-hopping, I finally settled in the chair of the Guardian's (absent) religious affairs correspondent who, somewhat bizarrely, occupies the space between the environment and science desks (or pods as they are now called).

One of my first questions was how science reporters come across scientific research in the first place. In fact, these days, the problem is not so much finding it as spotting the really newsworthy research amongst the daily barrage of press releases, emails and phone calls. My main sources of press releases were the websites Eurekalert and Alpha Galileo which provide a treasure trove of potential stories but I was surprised to find how quickly science can become yesterday's news. It might have taken months or years to bring a piece of research to the point of publication in a journal but if you don't get your story in the paper the day the journal is published, you've missed the boat. Journalists have access to embargoed pre-releases of press papers and articles so they can write their articles on time.

The most regular part of the job is so-called diary journalism, which involves checking the embargoed press releases of several big weekly journals for stories the day before they are published: Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences is a Monday-for-Tuesday, Nature a Wednesday-for-Thursday and so on. There are also press conferences - I went to one at the Science Media Centre - which give the journalists an opportunity to ask the

scientists questions. Academic conferences can also be a good source of stories, and I think all the journalists on the science desk went off to at least one conference during my stint.

In the midst of all that, most of the science reporters are trying to get on with what I heard someone call proper journalism: following their own interests, doing some more involved investigation, getting opinions from a range of scientists, and writing longer and more investigative pieces, rather than responding to a press release that pops up in their inbox ("science by press release" as Ben Goldacre puts it). One day, I also witnessed a chance encounter between a reporter and a scientist - Bob Watson, chief scientific adviser to DEFRA - that ended up leading to a front page splash on UK targets for carbon emissions.

Another question was how journalists decide if research is newsworthy. I still don't have a concrete answer to that one and I guess it's something you learn after years of seeing which stories the news desk buy and which they don't. Ben Goldacre would have you believe that it usually comes down to the content of the press release (wacky stories, scare stories or breakthrough stories) rather than actual scientific significance. I'm sure there's something in that but in my experience the reporters do try to take a critical stance on the research and its significance, before writing their story. They'll try to get hold of the actual article, read it, and speak to the authors and other researchers in the field (which can be difficult if they wake up in California about the same time as a 4pm deadline). I certainly spent a lot of time and effort researching stories that never got written after actually reading the paper or speaking to the scientists.

Most of the time, I was writing blogs, which was a great way of learning to write about science in a more informal, inquisitive and chatty way, although I found it pretty hard after years of writing in a formal, academic style. I even got a few comments, which was fun. Podcasting was also a great learning experience, from interviewing scientists (in person and on the phone) to contributing to the newsgam and discussions. In my last week, I helped put together a podcast special on music and the brain (my own field) which gave me an opportunity to get involved in the script writing and production as well.

Along with the other Media Fellows, I spent the final week of the Fellowship at the BA Festival of Science in Liverpool helping the Guardian reporter and producer. In comparison with my time back in London, this involved a lot more press conferences and interviews for the podcast. My first interviews tended to be long rambling affairs (to the dismay of my producer) but with a bit of practice, I think I got better at deciding what I wanted to get from the interview and coaxing the interviewee into concisely expressing the interesting bits of their work.

I also learnt a lot from seeing first hand so many scientists present their research to the media, comparing their different approaches and seeing how the science journalists responded to each one. Seeing the press pack asking questions in conferences and discussing stories afterwards in the press room gave a really good feel for what a reporter needs from a scientist to write up a story that will make it past the news desk.

Back at work, I've already had several opportunities to practise applying the things I've learnt when presenting my research (both in person and in print). I think I've got better at identifying what aspects of a topic will interest an audience (and whether they are the same things that interest me) and targeting those interests by presenting my work in a clear and

engaging way at an appropriate level and using appropriate language. I've also become much more aware of the wider context of scientific research, from the importance of public understanding and engagement to its role in governmental policy. In particular, I've come to understand better the role the media plays in presenting scientific research back to the public who ultimately fund much of it. Hopefully, all this will prove useful in the future.

My colleagues have been curious to hear about the Fellowship but are generally distrustful of the media. Through chatting with them about my experiences, I hope I've been able to pass on some of the things I've learnt, allay their fears and inspire them to use the science media to their advantage.

Appendix

Articles:

Study finds way to keep steel solid

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2008/sep/09/soft.iron>

Forensics: Bullets tagged with pollen could help solve gun crimes

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2008/aug/06/gun.crime>

Blogs:

The vision thing: Art and illusion

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/blog/2008/sep/22/british.association>

Poll: UK losing 60,000 scientists a year

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/blog/2008/sep/09/kids.poll>

Cassini sends images from Saturn moon

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/blog/2008/aug/12/cassinisendsimagesfromsatu>

Nasa insists perchlorate doesn't rule out life on Mars

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/blog/2008/aug/06/nasainsistsperchloratedoesn>

Geology: Rocking all over the world

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/blog/2008/aug/01/geologyrockingalloverthewe>

Are you getting enough sleep, grandad?

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/blog/2008/jul/25/areyougettingenoughsleepg>

Pulling a rabbit out of your brain

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/blog/2008/jul/25/pullingarabbitoutofyourb>

The Darwin Diet

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/blog/2008/jul/18/eatlikedarwin>

Podcasts:

Science Weekly: BA Festival of Science 2008

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/audio/2008/sep/15/science.weekly.podcast>

Science Weekly: Music and the brain

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/audio/2008/aug/18/science.weekly.podcast>

Science Weekly: Emergency on Planet Earth

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/audio/2008/aug/11/science.weekly.podcast>

Science Weekly: Magic, the brain, and doping at the Olympics

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/audio/2008/aug/04/science.weekly.podcast>