

## Media Fellow Report 2007

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### **Daily Mirror:**

My first placement on this BA Media Fellowship was at the Daily Mirror with Mike Swain the Science editor there. Mike is a hardcore tabloid man. He led me into this new world of tabloid journalism that I had no idea I would come out of; being more in awe and admiration rather than the scepticism I went in with. Mirror style of writing is quite unique and different to what I was used to reading in the broadsheets. I remember my very first attempt where I learnt a crucial thing about tabloid writing. "We don't do chatty here" said Mike. I don't think I really got the essence of that remark until much later. But what began to frustrate me was how long I would take to get a story in 200 to 300 words. The accuracy, the readability, the attention arresting aspects and most importantly getting that connection with the readers' specific to the Mirror was a challenge I battled with throughout. In the process I learnt that we tend to think of science journalism as 'broadsheet stories' but Mike went to the same Press conferences and relied on the same press releases as the other journalists. The big difference was the relatively smaller spaces available in tabloids. The science however was sharper, succinct and catchy (sensational even). This makes me think why is all the science stories directed towards broadsheets when the sheer mass reach of tabloids cannot be touched by a broadsheet. Public engagement in the broadest of ways is possible only when we leave aside these biases.

My days were not all spent in story writing. It was interesting to be in the thick of what I saw as a small world of science journalism. The controversies about breached embargoes, the quick discussion about interesting points after a press conference, the way all journalists consciously and subconsciously worked as a pack. One particular incident that was striking was when there was a press conference on 'global warming' and scientists talked about figures and facts and it was good background information. But then one of the scientists casually mentioned, "Cows belching produces more methane gas than some cars" and there was an instant perkiness in the room full of journalists. They had their story!! For me as an outsider it was almost like switching on fairy lights, when the journalists hear a line they know is going to catch the readers they pounce on it like hungry wolves. And I was not disappointed. Every national newspaper carried the story about belching cows the next day. Even Mike got a few words in! This was another interesting part of my placements which continued throughout all the three places. I tracked the coverage of the stories we worked on the previous days. It was quite an education to see which newspaper covered the story and what angle they applied based on their readership.

The thing that struck me most was the diligence of all science journalists to get the facts right. Not that they got it 100% but I was reassured that they bent over backwards at times to make sure the information was correct and in the process were brave enough to ask questions to eminent scientists that may have seemed too

basic to them. I also saw the other side where a well prepared scientist would get his/her message across smoothly but an unprepared and unsuspecting scientist could get quite a rough ride with these sharp investigators. Lesson well learnt.

The Daily Mirror experience changed my general outlook on tabloids and Mike is a fantastic person to learn from. He has been patient and thorough with me. I learnt a lot from him by osmosis. His news desk experience certainly made him sharper about gauging a good story from the uninteresting ones. I slowly picked up the subtle points in scientific research that could be used first to get some public attention and then through responsible journalism educate the public so that they are aware and get motivated to voice their opinions towards things that really matter and will eventually change their lives. Most people are not active in voicing their opinions only because they are wary of the information they have on a subject. But only when the scientists stop being so worried about their personal images in the media and work towards passing on understandable information without the bias of a 'tabloid' readership will we truly engage with a large proportion of the public.

I may read my broadsheets for in-depth analysis of a story. But it is the Daily Mirror that now sometimes introduces it to me.

#### **Science Media Centre:**

The unique aspect about the Science Media Centre (SMC) is that it functions as a press office but does not have a brand to promote; except 'Science' in general. Housed in the Royal Institution the SMC has good links to the country's major scientists and is a valuable resource to journalists working to tight deadlines. The SMC has a small team with everyone around quite vocal about the on goings of the day and their opinion on events as they unfold. This was a great thing for me as I learnt quite a lot just by listening in to many discussions between Fiona Fox and the entire team. The delicacy in handling tricky situations that concerned public opinion and emotions was highlighted during the week when Andrew Wakefield was on trial and the MMR vaccination debate sprung up again. It made me realise about public scepticism on all matters scientific because the process seems so alien and removed. What is it that the scientific community could do to facilitate the understanding of the nature of scientific language towards an audience who is quite used to a black or white message? The SMC has to work with sensational media headlines and shy, sceptical scientists. The entire team worked towards the scientific messages being resounded by the correct sources. They worked hard towards putting the right scientist commenting on a story so that the public message could be well informed without creating unnecessary hysteria or panic caused by headline grabbers. Another aspect that the SMC works towards is slowly changing the perceptions of scientists towards the media. This could be either by media training or simply ensuring that their messages do not get spinned. The entire office has a hands on approach towards getting the voice of scientists in the media so that the information is well placed. And as Fiona very aptly puts it in her blog entry (18 July 2007) 'Prof. John Henry's final message to the scientists in the room was "if you want the story about your science to be accurate, keep your mobile phone switched on."'

As I worked on gathering information on the SMC's work with the regional media I also helped out in their in house press conferences for the national media on a variety of topics ranging from mobile phone masts and cancer links to the Home Office's release of animal testing numbers. Every day was about today's science story. I learnt quite a few things from attending these press conferences. How a piece of scientific research eventually turns in to a story started at these conferences. The special dynamics of the journalists with the scientists was also quite interesting in that they immediately warmed up to someone who knew how to sell their science accurately and concisely. They understood why the scientists hated to speculate but somehow pushed them towards a tipping point! The SMC added a very unique perspective to my media placements. It helped me see from both the sides of the glass. And each passing day made the glass less foggy.

### **Royal Society:**

The Royal Society (RS) in general was a classic press office handling media enquiries, events and public relations for the RS. Because I was there for only 3 days I had quite a structured time. This helped me cram in a lot of different things but left me craving for a bit more involvement. It was especially exciting sitting in on the media strategy meeting on an upcoming policy document on science and maths education with my host Bill Hartnett. I got a first hand idea of how government policies are educated and influenced and how the RS plays a role in bringing together all the relevant Fellows and other resources to produce these documents.

I worked on creating a press release from the list of the papers published in the RS publications. I also worked on a couple of web news articles in support of the press release. My desk was right in the middle of the entire press team which once again kept me in the heart of discussions and one particular press enquiry from the makers of the television show 'EDWARDIAN SUPERSIZE ME'. The Royal Society was going to host one of the meals. It was quite bizarre to be in the midst of an office scrambling about trying to locate the relevant Fellows.

I also had a chance to chat with various people in the RS from the science communication department to education policy to the library staff. The most interesting extra curricular activity in those three days was handling first editions of Darwin's Origin of Species and Newton's Principia. And the most bizarre was seeing Newton's lock of hair in a box and rulers made from the famous apple tree!

### **BA Festival of Science:**

The Festival was a frenzy of media activity from where I sat. The boundaries between the different hosts became fuzzier as we all participated in the same events and talked about the same stories. Mike and I discussed the Mirror angle on all the stories and judged whether to pursue them or not. All the major national media was in the same room which helped me analyse the wants and needs of different newspapers from the discussions at the big table of laptops! The other aspect was the constant feedback and discussions with the other Fellows which helped us gauge our different roles and similar views in a way only events as concentrated as the Festival could offer.

**Life after the Fellowship:**

I am hoping that like most important things in life I will slowly assimilate the experiences of these placements and the ideas will seep into my work and life over time. However, the biggest take home point to me was that scientists almost have a duty to explain their work to the public and the media is there for the benefit of that process not to damage the message. I have seen them work and work hard on areas that they know nothing about. They are a bunch of professionals who have the same regard for accuracy as the research-active people. The difference however is that they are also in the midst of pragmatism. The choice to give the public a chance to understand science lies equally with both the parties. The reason to blame either side is a choice that needs to be discarded by both the sides.