

## Media Fellow Report 2006

### Natasha Tian, Neuroscientist, Genes and Development Group, Edinburgh University – The Scotsman

Current job: 4<sup>th</sup> year PhD student in brain development at the University of Edinburgh.

My glamorous journalistic lifestyle all seems such a distant memory now that I am back in the hubbub of the lab trying to remember what my PhD project is about. When I first heard that I had been accepted as a BA Media Fellow for The Scotsman newspaper in Edinburgh, I had doubts about whether I was up to the challenge. Could I write captivating science articles that people wanted to read? Meeting the other fellows at our briefing day did nothing to alleviate my fears as everybody looked so confident. I was also slightly unnerved by the press conference simulation, after which we had to write a news article in only 20 minutes - apparently a luxurious amount of time! Being a slow writer and someone who has to re-read academic papers a couple of times until the facts sink in, this was no mean feat. I knew I was in for a tough ride.

I remember my first day at The Scotsman as though it were my first day at school. The office was completely open plan, peppered with "greenery" and covered by a glass ceiling that allowed natural light in. The Scotsman shared the building with two other newspapers. I was immediately struck by the "buzz" of the place; telephones constantly ringing like in an episode of *24*, TV screens tuned to news channels and people chatting animatedly to their colleagues about their next story.

After various inductions and a caffeine injection, I was introduced to the science editor Ian, my mentor for the next three weeks. He ushered me to a computer and took me on a whistle-stop tour of the programs I would need, how to check whether similar articles have been published recently, and how to send articles to the news- or features-desk. He also gave me a minidisc and James Bond-like-gadget that I could use for recording telephone conversations. After about 5 minutes, James, the Editor, whisked Ian away, asking him to produce an article about the energy-efficiency of appliances around the home. That was the last I saw of Ian that day. Luckily Ian had contacted me before I started my fellowship, suggesting that I write my first article on my field of research - brain development. So I got stuck in and began interviewing people I work with, which felt strange. I also had to think hard about whether the article's angle and language were appropriate for people who lacked knowledge of the brain or science in general. In academic circles, it is easy to use jargon and lose sight of the bigger picture, such as how a particular molecule or biological process fits in to existing knowledge and why this research is important. Through writing my first article, I gained a deeper appreciation of my PhD than I had ever felt in the past three years of my research.

As the week progressed I continued with my brain article but also looked up potential news stories each day on *Eureka-alert* and *Alphagalileo* - websites that publish press releases for journalists. I kept Ian informed on potential science and technology stories and although some of them received an enthusiastic response by the Editor who asked me to write several articles, all of them were "spiked", meaning they would never make it to print. Apparently, the "spike" was a real object upon which editors would impale stories that did not make the grade. The rejection of my articles was slightly depressing at first but I didn't mind as I enjoyed interviewing the scientists who were generally quite accommodating. Little did they know that I was not a real journalist and I felt bad for the interviewees who wanted to see the final article in print, only for the story to be unceremoniously spiked. However, the news stories provided me with practice in writing to deadlines. Unlike in scientific research, deadlines in journalism for the daily papers are non-negotiable as the paper has to go "off stone" to the printing press by 7pm at the latest. Also, Ian helped immensely by providing me

with a simple “idiots” guide to writing news stories, which I referred to repeatedly. The first sentence has to capture the audience’s attention and provide the essence of a story in simple language. Even after three weeks of practice, my first sentences were always altered.

At the end of my first week I got a real buzz when I saw my name in print for the first time and my brain article gracing a double page spread in the science and technology section. My parents, relatives and friends asked me to buy copies for them, triggering quizzical looks in the local newsagent as I staggered up to the counter laden down with multiple copies of The Scotsman.

During my second week, I was surprised to find that a news story I had written about the anti-cancer properties of the woad plant had been published in Monday’s paper. I also started work on a feature about stem cells that was fuelled by a quote I had recorded from neuroscientist Professor Colin Blakemore while researching my first article. Ian picked up on a phrase in which Prof Blakemore stated that he did not believe that stem cells would be the miracle cure for brain degeneration caused by diseases such as Alzheimer’s. However, he did qualify his statement by saying that stem cells offer potential treatments if the damage is more localized as in Parkinson’s disease. I felt slightly uncomfortable about the summary Ian proposed: “Leading neuroscientist believes stem cells are over-hyped”, especially since journalists have no control over their headlines, which came as a surprise to me. I felt adamant that I had to present the stem cell debate fairly, giving both pros and cons equal weight. Ian suggested that I try to contact other leading neuroscientists to see if they agreed with Blakemore’s view. Luckily I managed to get an interview with Baroness Susan Greenfield who is a person I greatly admire because she is a successful *female* scientist and a brilliant role model for women aspiring to reach the top of a male-dominated profession. However, the interview was to take place on the afternoon when I had to send my article off to the subeditors. Thankfully the quote made it into the article and the interview went well, although it was hard not to let on that I had a science background. The feature appeared on the science page along with another story I had written that week about researchers converting star vibrations into “songs”.

My last week passed quickly as I worked on a feature about IQ as well as writing one news story a day, despite them all being spiked. However, one of my “newsworthy” articles on allergies made it onto the science page instead. It was with a rather heavy heart that I left The Scotsman on my last day. However, I knew that I would return for my final week at the BA Festival of Science in Norwich, where I would join Ian.

### **BA Festival of Science, Norwich**

My experience as a reporter for the festival was very different from the previous three weeks I had spent at The Scotsman. All the BA Media Fellows were based in the press centre along with science correspondents from all the major broadsheets and tabloids, including several freelancers. There were press conferences in the morning each day, which all the reporters and generally all fellows attended. These provided a condensed summary of the major talks on that day so that journalists did not have to attend the actual lectures in order to write their stories. Ian was writing up the most interesting stories, so I decided to make the most of my freedom and sniff out lectures that sounded interesting and that were not covered by the press conferences. The fact that Ian was also at the festival meant that I felt slightly dispensable. However, I soon relished the opportunity to escape from the press centre when I heard that most of the other fellows were stuck inside without the chance to see any festival events.

My endeavours provided me with material for three web articles for the BA including one on women in science and another on the links between maths and the arts. The third article covered one of the festival’s x-changes. These were scheduled every evening and rounded up

the main talks of the day by inviting scientists to answer the public's questions over a pint of beer. These sessions also allowed all of the BA Media Fellows to meet up and share our experiences of the day before heading off to one of the many "drinks and canapé" receptions for journalists that we were lucky enough to attend. Unfortunately, the regular nightly entertainment made it increasingly difficult to drag ourselves out of bed in the mornings for press conferences and by the end of the week, myself and all the other fellows were exhausted but happily so.

### **My experience in a nutshell ...**

Despite my reservations about the whole experience, after three weeks at The Scotsman and as a reporter during the BA Festival of Science, I came away with a real appreciation of the wide knowledge base that journalists have. I am still amazed at the speed with which journalists construct an article from its first inception to identifying the key issues and finally producing a polished, coherent story. Fantastical headlines are not a journalist's fault as they have no say in the matter. I now appreciate that a headline's role is to grab the reader's attention rather than provide an accurate summary.

The most important thing I realized is that topics which scientists find interesting are not necessarily deemed important by the public. Rather, the stories I identified that were well-received by The Scotsman's Editor encompassed issues that affect everybody; such as families, disease, sex and potential health-scares. Of course being a Scottish newspaper, articles that were related to Scotland were also favoured.

The sense of achievement I felt from seeing my articles in print is something that I experience very rarely in my research. Lab-based research usually involves long hours and a lot of effort, with no guarantee of a result at the end of the day, month or even year. Even though lots of articles were spiked, my efforts generally translated into a good output of published articles that exceeded my own expectations. In the future, I hope to use my experience of science journalism by encouraging colleagues to inform the University press officer of exciting research that they are about to publish. In general scientists do not think about disseminating their research findings to a wider audience than specialists in their specific field. However, it is important that the public is included so that they can re-evaluate their preconceptions of the work scientists do. We are not all mad, white-haired, bearded old Professors who are inarticulate and socially inept and who make Frankenstein-like monsters just for fun, although there are always exceptions. And last but by no means least, the art of writing concisely and coherently will be priceless when it comes to writing up my PhD thesis!

And lastly, I would like to say a massive THANK YOU to the BA for awarding me this BA Media Fellowship and to Ian at The Scotsman for providing me with a memorable and truly enjoyable experience.

## Examples of work:

### Articles published in "The Scotsman" where I was sole author:

- "Size isn't everything ...it's all in the mind", science page feature 05/08/06  
<http://thescotsman.scotsman.com/scitech.cfm?id=1134112006>
- "Stem-cell science cannot deliver miracle cure-alls", science page column 12/08/06  
<http://thescotsman.scotsman.com/scitech.cfm?id=1172542006>
- "Experts find new ways of charting the rise of original singing stars", science page column 12/08/06 <http://thescotsman.scotsman.com/scitech.cfm?id=1172202006>
- "Ancient Britons' war paint drafted in to help battle against disease", 14/08/06  
<http://thescotsman.scotsman.com/health.cfm?id=1180862006>
- "It takes brains to understand an IQ's value", science page feature 19/08/06  
<http://thescotsman.scotsman.com/index.cfm?id=1216222006>
- "Having worms can help eat away at allergic diseases", science page column 19/08/06  
<http://thescotsman.scotsman.com/scitech.cfm?id=1216212006>
- "Tackling the real discrimination faced by female scientists", science page column 09/09/06 <http://news.scotsman.com/scitech.cfm?id=1332032006>

Joint article with science correspondent Ian Johnston: -

- "Revealed: why relationship at top is a bit of a stinker", 06/09/06  
<http://election.scotsman.com/topics.cfm?tid=478&id=1314572006>

### Web publications (sole author) during BA Festival of Science in Norwich, Sep 2006:

- "The x-change"  
[http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/FestivalNews/\\_The\\_x-change.htm](http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/FestivalNews/_The_x-change.htm)
- "Women in science: fulfillment or frustration?"  
[http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/FestivalNews/\\_Women\\_in\\_science.htm](http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/FestivalNews/_Women_in_science.htm)
- "The art of maths"  
[http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/FestivalNews/\\_Theartofmaths.htm](http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/FestivalNews/_Theartofmaths.htm)