

Media Fellow Report 2006

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Despite being told in advance that journalists don't generally start work until a little later than the average academic researcher, I turned up for my first day at the THES around 9am, and sure enough, found myself in an almost empty office.

Fortunately a few minutes later, my host, Lee Elliot-Major, arrived. Almost immediately, he pointed me to a free desk and mentioned a few stories he thought I could work on. He then brought me into the regular Monday morning news meeting where potential stories for that week's paper are discussed, during which he mentioned a story that I might be covering. The first few hours of the fellowship had turned out to be more of a baptism of fire than I had anticipated!

This first story followed from the findings of a survey of potential postgraduates and their concerns about debt. I had some headline figures from the survey, some background information and list of people to contact. My first instinct as an academic researcher was to get hold of the original survey and go through it with a fine-toothed comb, to see if the data were robust enough to support the statements being made by the authors. Unfortunately, it took me a short while to realise that behaving like a peer reviewer rather than a journalist contributes nothing useful to a newspaper story. So I turned to my list of contacts and started phoning people for interviews...

Interviewing people for stories was one aspect of the job I found really quite difficult. It's quite a skill to be able to have a conversation with a stranger over the phone, ask them relevant questions and note down their answers, without telling them to slow down or repeat themselves. It's something that I never became totally comfortable with, but I managed to muddle through and get the quotes I needed by being selective about what I wrote and scribbling down "juicy" sounding quotes as fast as I could scrawl them.

By the time I'd written a few stories, I started to get a feel for the kinds of information I'd want from an interview. It was generally most helpful when interviewees gave very clear, direct comments that addressed the issue at hand. But in some cases, people would either digress at length about something interesting but not related to the story, or simply try to publicize their research/organisation/themselves. I think this taught me a valuable lesson about how to respond to phone calls from journalists in relation to my own research.

Another skill that is shared by journalists, but can seem like some kind of mysterious art to the uninitiated, is the ability to "spot" a story. In the first week of my placement, I was sent to a two-day conference in Birmingham. I spent the whole two days writing down everything I saw and heard in my notebook, in the hope that some of it might be considered newsworthy. When I reported back to the THES, the editors weren't particularly interested in what I had thought would be the best story, but instead decided to run with something that I had considered to be a slightly amusing aside. In fact, to my astonishment, this ended up becoming the "splash" (front page story).

The relatively short deadlines involved meant that there was very little time to procrastinate when writing a story. In fact, I found having to produce a piece of writing of a predetermined length in a short amount of time quite exhilarating. I learned that writing in a more spontaneous way didn't necessarily mean that the quality of the writing itself suffered (so long as I returned to edit the results). This is just one small practical lesson that I hope to apply in my regular work, where, in the past, I would meticulously plan a journal article in advance to such an extent that I'd be paralysed into writing nothing!

Working on different stories from week-to-week or even day-to-day meant having to learn about and understand a range of unfamiliar issues in a relatively short amount of time. For example, one of the stories I wrote was about the current state of geography as an academic discipline; after spending an afternoon interviewing various eminent geographers, I felt I'd learned more about the subject than I ever had at school. This provided an interesting contrast to academic research, which can involve spending months or years of working in a very specific area.

Being a BA Media Fellow at the THES actually exceeded my expectations. Before starting, I had worried that being an inexperienced visitor to a busy newspaper might mean that I might be seen as more hindrance than help and treated accordingly. However, I was (pleasantly) surprised by the amount of responsibility I was given, and was made to feel welcome and comfortable by everyone I worked with. Everyone was extremely patient and tolerant of my frequent questions, and if it wasn't for that, I doubt if I would have achieved nearly as much as I felt I did.

Although several of the stories I worked on were about issues affecting science, the THES doesn't typically cover stories on the findings of scientific research in the same way that the daily papers do. As a result, I probably had a slightly different experience at the BA Festival of Science than some of the other fellows. Although I did attend several of the press briefings, I was instructed to look for stories that were less likely to be covered by the dailies. This, and the fact that I had offered to do some additional reporting for the BA Festival of Science website, meant that I attended quite a few sessions away from the press centre. This was quite an interesting challenge, since it was often more difficult to find an angle for a "news" story in some of these sessions, where the presenter perhaps hadn't tailored their message quite so much for the press (and without a room full of journalists teasing out a story from them).

Not long after I returned to my regular work, I was asked to give a presentation about my experiences on the fellowship. This was very well attended and my colleagues appeared to be genuinely interested. My experience as a BA Media Fellow has had a huge impact on how I think about communicating my own research and has given me insights that I'm sure will be useful to myself and to my colleagues.

I think the BA Media Fellowship scheme is a laudable and worthwhile means of developing understanding of the media among working scientists and I feel privileged to have taken part in it.

Examples of work:

THES:

<http://www.box.net/public/9fn94ep3rl>

<http://www.box.net/public/3h5ivy2o7g>

<http://www.box.net/public/fy26h9yfy1>

<http://www.box.net/public/voiu4o59z7>

<http://www.box.net/public/njourn5135o>

<http://www.box.net/public/j2v817fst4>

<http://www.box.net/public/qn2h3qvgmx>

<http://www.box.net/public/prio1ihore>

BA Festival of Science:

http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/FestivalNews/_Problemsolving.htm

http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/FestivalNews/_Is_there_an_anti-cancer_diet.htm

http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/FestivalNews/_Its_bad_to_talk.htm