

## Media Fellow Report 2006

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#### *Why consider a BA Media Fellowship?*

Anyone who researches developmental disorders such as autism, dyslexia and language disorder is well aware of the media minefield that surrounds these conditions. Having seen colleagues quoted out of context and read newspaper stories of fundamentally flawed research reported as gospel truth, I was a confirmed media sceptic. Clearly only charlatans parading as scientists would actually want to invite media coverage of their research. Everyone else avoids the media and gets on with the job, right?

How sad if this were true. The more “bad science” that enters the public arena, the more imperative it is to redress the balance. So last year I agreed to give an interview to a local radio station as part of National Autism Day. Armed with accurate facts and figures and ready to wow the public with my amazing experimental approach, I waited for the interviewer to ring. Much to my surprise, she didn’t ask the carefully prepared questions on my mind. Instead, I found myself stumbling through questions about educational policy and my views on Dustin Hoffman’s performance in *Rain Man*. The messages I most wanted to convey didn’t get any air time.

Disappointed by this experience, I vowed to fight back. Perhaps by learning more about how the media works, I could better prepare myself to communicate with them. This was the goal in mind as I boarded the plane to Dublin for a two-week stint at The Irish Times.

#### *A fortnight in the life of a science journalist*

Needless to say, I entered the newsroom with some trepidation. Fortunately, Dick Ahlstrom, the science editor, put me right at ease. He is passionate about science and a journalist of great integrity. He publishes a science page every Thursday that showcases the best of Irish scientific research. Although I found the Irish angle quite a challenge at first, the science page provided a fantastic opportunity to talk with a variety of talented scientists about all aspects of their work. And this is what I loved most about Dick and his approach; science is not just about eureka moments. It’s about people working on tough, but interesting questions, sometimes for a very long time. The process is just as newsworthy as the final product.

I had only two weeks to prepare for the BA Festival of Science, so Dick and I hit the ground running. He took me to the morning news conference where decisions are made about what stories will make up the day’s paper and where they will appear. This was my first lesson in media studies: how information is organised by the press to maximise reader’s attention to certain stories. They do this by making the headline of larger type, placing it in the centre near the top of the page or using a big photograph.

Then it was time to start my first piece. Dick eased me in gently by encouraging me to write something close to my area of expertise. Fortunately, I knew a scientist in Cork, Dr Catherine Pettigrew, who used electroencephalography (EEG) to study language impairment in adults with stroke and she was willing to help me out. Unfortunately, she was at a meeting in the USA, making it difficult to find a mutually convenient time. Still we did the interview and I wrote a rough draft of the story on my first day.

Next morning, Dick reviewed the piece with me and provided the second media lesson: how to write “the hook”. I often find in writing scientific papers that the first sentence is the hardest to write, but “the hook” is even more challenging. The first sentence has to convey the essence of the story, but be exciting enough to persuade the reader to keep reading. As a

scientist, my inclination is to be very guarded, but as a journalist, I had to let my hair down. One strategy for coping with “the hook” was to consider how the research could affect the reader. While I might be very interested in the experimental minutiae, the public is really only interested in the bigger picture. In the case of Dr Catherine Pettigrew, few people will experience EEG, but almost everyone will know someone who has had a stroke, so that was the angle to take.

The third media lesson was that the picture sells the story. As soon as I had “pitched” the story to Dick, he was immediately thinking about how to get a “sexy” EEG image. Catherine, her colleagues and even the company that manufactures the EEG equipment emailed us photos, but Dick rejected all of them. With the Wednesday deadline looming, a 10<sup>th</sup> email to Catherine and a six hour time lag, I was beginning to despair of my first big story. Fortunately, Catherine was as determined as I was to get it right, and on the last attempt I knew we had the right picture.

Seeing that first story in print, with a beautiful colour photo of Catherine in an EEG cap, was easily as exciting as getting my first research paper published.

But there was no resting on my laurels. Dick wanted me to move out of my comfort zone and write about the great unknowns: cell biology, chemistry and physics. Here I learned perhaps the most important media lesson: the press release is the scientist’s best friend. In a press release, the scientist and the University press officer write a short synopsis of the work, describing the experimental details, explaining unfamiliar terms and highlighting the implications of the work. This saved me; from these humble beginnings I could formulate sensible questions to flesh out the piece. How I wish I had known about this when I was interviewed for the radio – it is possible to tell the journalist in advance what you want to talk about!

At first I was terrified of talking to someone about something I knew nothing about, computational models of enzyme action being a case in point. But soon I found that I was really enjoying myself and learning about so many fascinating things. I never would have believed that I would utter the words “I want to know more about particle physics,” but some scientists just had an enthusiasm for their work that was completely seductive. I did encounter a few media wary types, but such is the popularity of Dick’s science page that most were very patient and keen to explain complex concepts in everyday terms and think of creative ways to depict their research in photographic form.

#### *It wasn't always smooth sailing*

The two weeks in Dublin went much too quickly, but it was excellent preparation for the BA Festival of Science in Norwich. Here, science journalists and BA Media Fellows come together for a week of scientific indulgence. We had a brief opportunity to scan the press releases. Then scientists gave short press conferences in the morning and we wrote up the stories in the afternoon. These pieces were destined for the main section of the paper though, so in addition to being interesting, they also had to be newsworthy.

The BA Festival of Science was a fascinating insight not just into the media, but into how other scientists present themselves. As a psychologist, I spent the first few days feeling quite alarmed by how psychology was presented to the media and the public at large: innate beliefs in the supernatural, what body language reveals about political psyches, and telephone telepathy? Things improved as the week went on, but I was frustrated by the different journalistic attitudes to “psychologists” versus “cognitive neuroscientists”; don’t they know these are often one and the same?

The real frustration came in deciding which stories to publish. A scientist specialising in gut bacteria described an unpublished study about the use of pro-biotic drinks to treat autism.

Although he described difficulties with the study, said half of the participants withdrew and stated that the results were inconclusive, he nevertheless maintained that harmful bacteria caused autism and that pro-biotic drinks, in his view, had beneficial effects on children with autism. There was absolutely no way I was going to write this unfinished, unpublished, unchecked story for publication, knowing the effect it could have on families of children with autism. Yet it was clear that all of the other papers were going to run a piece on it. In the end, Dick said we had to do it otherwise it would look like we had missed an important story. I had to write the piece, placing all claims in direct quotes and being as clear as possible about the limitations of the study. I was cheered up a bit the next day when I viewed coverage of the story. For the most part, it formed a small paragraph tucked away in the margins of the papers (remember media lesson one?), though other papers splashed a big headline with photographs of Yakult!

This experience led to some interesting discussions with the journalists and the other BA Media Fellows about science reporting. One view was to report what the scientist says and the facts of the study and let the reader decide. It is not the journalist's job to decide what should and should not be reported. But in fact, they decide all the time. There were numerous studies presented that day that did not get written up or published. Often the journalists are at the mercy of the news editor and, rightly or wrongly, autism sells. In these cases, the onus is on the scientist to think carefully about what they are saying, particularly if the study is inconclusive and unpublished.

#### *Back to my day job*

My experience as a BA Media Fellow was invaluable. I know that I have much greater confidence in speaking to the media and I now know how to prepare an advance statement that will be provocative, but not misleading. I've also learned how important it is to challenge inaccuracies and bad science by writing to the paper or the journalists involved. Most of them are hugely respectable and grateful for an insider's view. I also learned that I can write about 600 words in an hour if need be, which has been a great asset to my scientific writing.

Of course the demands of my daily working life mean I haven't had much of an opportunity to pursue science journalism, though Dick has encouraged me to send stories into the paper if possible. I have encouraged colleagues to become involved in media training and was delighted when one of them went on a course and asked my advice on how to write up her research in a media friendly way. This is the only way to ensure that the public gets a more balanced view of science and will help the media to learn more about what real psychologists do.

And finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the BA for making this experience possible, Dick Ahlstrom and everyone at The Irish Times for their warm welcome, and the Nuffield Foundation for supporting my application and funding my day job. I wouldn't trade it!

### Examples of work:

- *A measure for meaning*. August 24<sup>th</sup>, Science Page
- *Cheetah finds "match-maker"*. August 31<sup>st</sup>, Science Page
- *US team identify gene cure for cancer*. September 2<sup>nd</sup>, main section
- *"Almost human" avatar better than the real thing*. September 4<sup>th</sup>, main section (festival)
- *Solving the mysteries of our ancient woodlands*. September 5<sup>th</sup>, main section (festival)
- *Study shows probiotics may be beneficial in fight against autism*. September 5<sup>th</sup>, main section (festival)
- *Sounding the alarm about using the car radio*. September 6<sup>th</sup>, Motoring Supplement
- *Public have vital role to play in the management of sex offenders*. September 6<sup>th</sup>, main section (festival)
- *Small lifestyle changes can add 12 years to life expectancy*. September 6<sup>th</sup>, main section (festival)
- *Word has it semantic dementia can change your world*. September 7<sup>th</sup>, main section (festival)
- *Enzymes' white, bright future*. September 7<sup>th</sup>, Science Page
- *Mind your brain*. September 7<sup>th</sup>, Science Page
- *Self-centred teens? It's their brains, stupid*. September 8<sup>th</sup>, main section (festival)
- *Scientists debate value of personalised diets*. September 8<sup>th</sup>, main section (festival)
- *Social fabric a factor in overcoming poverty*. September 9<sup>th</sup>, main section (festival)
- *War a consequence of male psychology*, September 9<sup>th</sup>, main section (festival)
- *Probing the body's response to DNA damage*. September 14<sup>th</sup>, Science Page (festival)