

Jennifer Bond – The Guardian

“There is a single light of science, and to brighten it anywhere is to brighten it everywhere.” -Isaac Asimov

Writing is a powerful way to communicate science. An article can be taken anywhere and read everywhere. Being able to effectively condense a subject to its essence and write about it is a difficult and valuable skill. It is a skill I am learning and keen to build on. Participating in the BA Media Fellowship with the Guardian has allowed me to exchange my natural scientific curiosity for an opportunity to build on my skills as a communicator. Writing has always seemed a chore, from having to write essays and assignments at school and college.

From the time spent at The Guardian, it has given an understanding of how the media works and the opportunity to successfully work within the confines of the media. At University I have spent weeks and sometimes months on a piece of written work that only one, maybe two people will ever read. This is in contrast to work done at the newspaper, where I could spend half an hour on a piece that will appear in the paper the next day, and read by many. With this comes the confines of the media. There is no opportunity for drafting as pressures of deadlines and speed of incoming assignments. These time constraints also means that it is not always possible to read everything on the topic you are reporting. This on occasion left a feeling of unsatisfactory-incompleteness, due to curiosity of wanting to know more about the subject.

At the Guardian I was under the supervision of Tim Radford, science editor. On day one, I was put to work. I had to write three 100 word stories on recent and fascinating science. Every week I had the responsibility of finding and writing these stories for Thursdays' "Science Update" column. This was a fun assignment; it provided me with the flexibility of choosing my own stories- ones that interested me. After finding the stories I had to report them in 100 words. This is actually very difficult as once you have written the names of the researchers with their institutions and where they were presenting the work you are only left with a small number of words to tell the rest of the story.

Tim would also organise outings, where we would go to interview scientists in their natural habitat. I have always considered myself a philistine, and not really interested in art, but this was about to change. Tim had organised an outing to the National Gallery to report on a new exhibit called "Under drawings". This exhibit shows science's role in art. By using light and a special kind of camera you could see the pencil/charcoal sketches by the artist under the painting. In addition to learning and enjoying more than I ever thought was possible about art, this trip had a certain "cool" factor; As we were lead through twisting-turning, narrow

corridors each door were passed through had a series of security procedures that would have challenged Ethan Hunt.

In addition to articles appearing in the printed-paper, some articles were for the online version of the paper. For example, one assignment was to write a supporting piece for a main story with scientific detail, which the reader could follow the link if they wanted to find out more information.

I have been told I write sdrawkcab. First I thought I was having a dyslexic moment, until it was pointed out the style of writing I have been groomed to in academia ends on the important part i.e. the conclusion. In science journalism you must get all the interesting facts out within the first twenty or so words. I use the passive voice by default as a result of being trained for research. The passive voice is helpful in technical writing, where the process and principle being described is of importance. In science communication in a newspaper it is not advisable to write in the passive voice. The use of the active voice gives the written word - pizzazz. Which in addition to content, adds to the reward of reading a piece. I have found that the use of the passive voice can be used by many to be self-protective and to avoid responsibility for actions taken. This is maybe why the public do not trust scientists. It might be time to scientist to start communicating science in the active voice, giving a bit of pizzazz!!!

In addition to gaining communication skills the BA Media Fellowship gave me the opportunity to compare two types of people, the journalist and the scientist. Being a trained as a scientist. I consider myself an acute observer. However, by its very nature of observing you can not help but interact with those you are observing and influence their behaviour, or even your own:

The BA Media Fellowship could be considered similar to joining a cult. First is recruitment which occurs a moment of vulnerability and desperation, e.g. halfway through a PhD. Then you are separated and isolated from your friends and family. This is either achieved by moving to a bed & breakfast or being taken to the BA's Festival of Science 2002 in Leicester. Once you have been removed from your normal surroundings they then proceed to deconstruct you. This done by character assassination making you question your views and preconceptions that you have been acquired during your professional lifetime.

Next comes control. Time and information control are well know practices of cults. Time is controlled by the day being filled with meetings, interviews and work such that you become too busy and tired to think about your involvement. Information control is achieved by being fed vast number of press releases to read and create copy. This is the only information available to assimilate, investigate and produce print.

Once broken down, due to lack of sleep, longing for homemade food and workload, they have begun to re-construct you. Re-construction is slow and not noticeable immediately, and could result in being re-constructed consistent with the cult and

submissive to its leaders. This can manifest itself in the written word by using words like, "stuff" and "bits", and by the way you greet people!

Once entered in a cult you are trapped, by indebtedness and by the fear of destruction if you leave. I was told I would hate returning to research and it would never feel the same. Others before me have tried to return to research but have returned to the darkside of the press office. Enticements are made to keep you in the cult. Leaving a cult the best strategy is to become physically removed. This was inevitable with the BA Media Fellowship. However, I was not prepared for the withdrawal symptoms that would come from going cold-turkey. I admit, I am a journo-junkie. I would fear that the apocalypse would come and I would not pass through to the other-side as I had left the sacred circle and returned to research. As time passed, the threat of being doomed or in danger was alleviated as I became engrossed into my final year of my PhD.

Writing science means being able to switch people on to science, sharing in the fascination of science, and to inform without lecturing. From participating in the BA Media Fellowship I have obtained numerous transferable and practical skills, which I have put to use back at University. I have gained an appreciation of the worth of knowing a little something about other topics away from my bailiwick in science.

To conclude, comparing journalism with scientific research one thing rings true in both professions, work is play!

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all at the Guardian, particularly Tim Radford for his time and patience especially when I started to babble and ramble!

An additional "thank-you" to:

- EPSRC for extending my funding so I could take part in the BA Fellowship
- RAE
- The EPSRC press office for help with and sourcing information for numerous pieces.
- Imperial College for giving me permission to go on secondment
- Finally, the BA for organising such a great scheme.