

Media Fellow Report 2005

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The Nature of science writing

My first day was definitely my most quiet. I arrived, got acquainted with my computer and signed up to Eurekalert, browsing all the press releases. At first glance, they all jumped out at me, all seemed catchy and newsworthy.

My most valuable lesson at Nature was learning exactly that. What is newsworthy. I used to think that a study published in the last six months was current and definitely new.

But new in science journalism is really new. That is something published today or in a week's time. And even better if it's controversial. Can you really use brain imaging to detect a terrorist? And what about the world's most popular happy pill, does it cause suicide? Research that can answer these immediate questions - that is newsworthy.

As a psychologist and a researcher, I make discoveries that have direct relevance to how people lead their everyday lives. I hoped that my placement at Nature would teach me how to communicate science findings clearly, to do so quickly, and to learn how the questions a journalist asks differ to that of a researcher. It did exactly that.

I worked with both the online and the print team. Nature has about fifteen pages of news in their journal and they also have a website which runs daily news stories in science.

The online news is less controversial and has more scope for a full range of science findings – like the benefits of exercise on the ageing brain and how a new chemical solution can save old ink.

The print news is more controversial with experts often strongly disagreeing. It covers a tighter range of science findings as well as relevant policy changes like the recent EU law that protects children's rights to safe medicines.

The print version also has something called Research Highlights. These are 100 word blurbs that summarise complex, exciting findings in genetics, cell biology, geology and so forth.

The first piece I wrote at Nature was a 100 word summary of a study looking at a type of protein in mice that scientists had previously found makes yeast and flies live longer. My background in psychology was suddenly useless. I

didn't understand any of it. I had a few hours to condense the study, interview the researcher and write the blurb.

Time-savers

Google was my most helpful tool. I googled most words in the studies that I didn't understand.

But that was hard work, trying to figure out what a complex study was saying and to simplify it in limited time. So I honed my interview skills to get scientists to tell me what their study was about.

My most frequent question when interviewing was... "Can you please tell me exactly what you did as if you're explaining your study to a five year old?" That worked sometimes, but other times, it was still difficult piercing through the jargon. And I'm sure my editors had frustrating moments when it slipped into my final copy.

Dividing time

After my first day, my time was divided between the print and online team. Generally my mornings began surfing the major news sites like the BBC and CNN. I also checked out the press releases on Eurekalert and the e-mailed ones from the major universities.

From the press releases, I put together a few ideas and at our morning online meeting pitched them to the online editor. Once or twice a week, I pitched ideas to the print editor. The time in between, I spent madly researching, interviewing and writing to meet the inevitable last minute deadlines.

Pitching ideas helped me to learn how to do that. I learned what editors look for in a potential news story. It is definitely not the fluffy "this is going to help people" kind of findings that psychology is used to.

Editors like something different to what has gone before. So for example, if some studies found that playing videogames makes kids more aggressive and others have found it does no harm, but a meta-analysis pulls all the findings together and comes up with more concrete conclusions...then that is newsworthy. It moves the field forward.

How has this study solved previous pitfalls in the field? What is novel about this research? How is it going to change what is done now? What are the team's next steps?

These are some of the questions a journalist asks that differ to a researcher. They help to cut through the pages and pages of technical detail and get to the point.

I also learned there were three points to an interview: to gain some fleeting knowledge about the research, to have scientists explain their work to save time, and to get some lively quotes that could ignite the most dull subject.

My favourite interview was with a scientist who was passionate about dirt. He said "People don't think soil is very sexy. They think it's boring old dirt." That brought to life my piece on climate change and the serious problem of carbon evaporating from soil into the atmosphere.

Top notch

My time at Nature definitely surpassed my expectations. The team was friendly, skilled, down-to-earth and professional. I was still learning on my last day there. I am even now, in fact, as I put forward ideas for freelance work.

I really appreciate the editors I worked with – Jo Marchant, Nicola Jones, and Jenny Hogan. They were patient, accessible and friendly despite the vast amount of stress they're under with the daily deadlines.

I also learned heaps from the writers there who gave clear cut advice - Jim Giles in particular and also Mike Hopkins and Mark Peplow. It is a valuable skill turning a science finding, like how the yeast genome works, into a snappy few words that most people would understand. I valued learning how other writers did this and the process of simplifying science myself.

Moving forward

I am applying what I've learned at Nature to my work in psychology. I write my reports, lectures, seminars, workshops and manuscripts much faster, right down to my clinical letters for patients. I think they are even easier to follow.

Seeing how the media works and being a part of it makes me think differently when I'm at a conference or at a research seminar, when I hear new findings and when I give talks. I often think now about how to convey a message in a fun and light way.

I've also joined the press team at the British Psychological Society and am writing a few press releases for a variety of new studies.

And I'm keeping in touch with Nature through freelance work. I recently wrote a piece about using brain imaging to diagnose schizophrenia for the print team. My ears are always open for what is new, controversial and an exciting science finding.

But the biggest impact of the fellowship with Nature is knowing how news comes to be news, how the most newsworthy aspect of a story is not usually the same as the scientist's main message, how not to be attached to my writing, how to write quickly and let it go to the editor. And move on to the next piece – whether that's the next interview, the next study or the next

idea. Journalism is about communicating, not dwelling, and there is always a tangible end product. I love that.

Examples of work:

Brain imaging ready to detect terrorists

<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v437/n7058/full/437457a.html>

Adult suicides linked to popular antidepressant

<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v436/n7054/full/4361073a.html>

Earthy bacteria faced with climate rap

<http://www.nature.com/news/2005/050905/full/050905-8.html>

Fit body for a fit mind

<http://www.nature.com/news/2005/050905/full/050905-13.html>

Organic bath saves paper from decay

<http://www.nature.com/news/2005/050905/full/050905-7.html>