

## Media Fellow Report 2007

**Leonora Weil, Medical Student, The Royal Free and University College  
London Medical School  
The Times**

*'It is inexcusable for scientists to torture animals, let them make their experiments on journalists'. Henrik Ibsen*

When evolutionists investigate a species, they often use communication or language as a yardstick for the advancement of its intelligence. Yet even very clever scientists hardly use words. These primitive creatures use diagrams and data to communicate.

So it was with great trepidation that I began my five-week BA Media Fellowship, leaving behind the lowest rungs of the evolutionary language ladder: the sterile hospital where I had been proudly prodding patients, and packed off to the upper echelons of the Times newspaper offices and told to: 'Write'.

Walking into the Times newsroom for an introductory day with my mentor, the science editor Mark Henderson, was an experience in itself. There were televisions and newspapers and computers everywhere and journalists tapping furiously at their keyboards, shouting on the phone, or buzzing about the latest breaking stories. I was totally overwhelmed and even more so as I was introduced to all the journalists; as we moved around the room and Mark reeled off all the names that I had read in the bylines, it felt like reading a book and then seeing the film with all the characters looking rather different from how you might have expected.

So, equipped with all my new celebrity friends, a whistle-stop tour of the Times newsroom I launched proudly into my first story within an hour of entering the office; a story about the predilection of flies to fizzy drinks, particularly beer.

By the end of the placement I was writing quite a few articles a day. The opening paragraph always took the longest to write. Lewis Smith, the environmental reporter, told me that the first sentence has to be something catchy that people down the pub might end up talking about at the end of a day. As a scientist I found that difficult. For me, the intricacies of genomics or biochemistry, sell themselves and I enjoyed speaking to the various scientists over the phone about the finer details of their work. Apparently that's not what sells a national newspaper! Over the duration of the placement I became more experienced at digging out the popular aspect in a story. I often found that I would speak at length to a scientist excited about their latest findings. They were thrilled to be interviewed by a journalist from a national paper. However, by accident, in their excitement they might then say one or two small, but sensational things, unrelated to the story they were trying to sell. I could easily imagine their frustration in seeing their off the cuff remarks become the real news.

What did surprise me was how bad scientists can be at presenting their work to the media; from the aspect of their work that they presented as 'news', to the quality of their presentations, often filled with jargon. It was also interesting to compare some

of their presentations to those by 'celebrity scientists' who clearly knew exactly how to target their material and audience. I have learnt much more how I would present my own work, which I suppose was the whole point of the experience.

In contrast, I was quite surprised at the vast scientific knowledge of the journalists. I came to the scheme thinking that I would have the advantage over the journalists having had a great deal of scientific training. In fact the journalists were so on the ball as to the latest science findings and theories that at times I felt quite sorry for the presenting scientists at conferences hounded by grilling questions from the story-hungry herd.

I also discovered that science journalists generally get presented with stories rather than actively hunting them out. Journalists don't have the time to find out the latest scientific research, and they don't always know what brilliant ground breaking discoveries are going on in the laboratory at the bottom of your garden. It's up to the scientists to bring it to their attention. Furthermore, journalists have to write several stories everyday, so its up to the scientist to let them know how their discovery is relevant to the public and to present it quickly and effectively. I was also surprised at the number of scientists who would send out a press release and be non-contactable on the day of its release. Journalists have deadlines, they need the information quickly.

Some of the highlights of the BA Media Fellowship included a press conference at the Google offices, which was an experience just to see the creative environment that that they work in (there were so many colourful objects hanging from the ceilings and emerging from the floor that it felt like a children's fairground) and a visit to the Heart exhibition at the Wellcome Collection where I had the chance to meet and interview a 23-year-old heart transplant student who came face to face for the first time with her own heart. I also was invited to see the Natural History Museum's private research collection for an article that I was writing. The collection includes a 12-foot whale skull and a group of ten elegant, peering giraffe heads on elongated necks that the curator said that he uses as an audience to practice his speeches on. The collection was remarkable and again was something that I wouldn't have been allowed to see as a member of the public. I did also enjoy practicing my rather shoddy GCSE French to communicate long distance with a scientist from France for one story, much to the amusement of the journalists sitting around me. Despite my dubious vowels and pronunciation, it got me my story.

And the best parts? Hannah Devlin who completed a BA Media Fellowship at The Times the year before me, described how she enjoyed talking to any scientist or organisation in a capacity most scientists simply can't. Indeed, being able to say 'Leonora Weil from The Times newspaper' was brilliant. It opened doors. I've found it very hard to let that phrase go! The best experience of all was getting articles published under my name. When my first story was printed I was so excited on the tube on the way to work that I nearly pounced on anyone reading a copy of the paper to show them my article.

There were also some lows; mainly not getting a story in that you've spent hours on. You never know for sure if a story has not made it into the newspaper until the next day. It was disappointing to open the paper early in the mornings and scan the pages several times over to find nothing. Lewis Smith made me feel a little better by telling me that despite his many years working as a journalist that the feeling never really goes away. However, unlike in the science world, where journals take months to process an article, you have no time to dwell on your lost stories as new ones are needed for a new day. I was also rather sad to learn that the headlines of a story are not written by the journalists themselves, that's done by the sub editors, so the accomplished alliteration and pun practising before I started my placement was perhaps a waste of time.

At the end of my placement all the Fellows and all the science journalists from the major newspapers convened at the annual BA Festival of Science, held this year in York. It ended up being one of the highlights of the summer. What I particularly enjoyed was that I had spent the last few weeks being introduced to a number of the journalists and seeing the Fellows attached to them at different conferences or press releases so it was good to finally get to know everyone properly.

We spent each morning at a run of press releases, and the afternoons writing them up. The talks were fascinating, from new research on non-stick chewing gum to the latest counter terrorist research. Journalists work in packs so after a conference they all decide together whether a story will be written and what angle they will all take, I found this rather surprising until one journalist pointed out that they are not working against each other, but rather against the political or the arts correspondent for space in their own papers. I sat with Mark and Lewis who were located in the middle of all the action so got a really good feel for the experience. It was occasionally quite stressful getting the stories in on time but also the more exciting for the final deadline.

In the evening I learnt what being a journalist was really about, parties every night at interesting locations and far more spoilt than medical students or the average doctor gets to be, and I quite enjoyed it. We spent most of our evenings as a pack of Media Fellows, and it was really good to finally meet up and swap stories. Every experience seemed to be completely different, from internet, to TV to print reporting. Even within the print genre the style or focus tended to be vastly different. For example, at the Festival, the launch of a new million-dollar science prize featured as a small paragraph in The Times, but as a huge story for Nature, where the readers are all scientists.

For the rest of the time, it was just fun to relax and learn about the Media Fellows' real professional lives back at home. Although we were all scientists our studies and work background were all so different. I've learnt about areas of science I didn't know existed and I don't know if it was the BA's selection criteria but I've honestly not met a more brilliant and entertaining group of people in one room. Thank you!

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Another Media Fellow described that during her Fellowship she felt like she was on the TV show 'Faking it', faking-it as a journalist, and that's exactly how I felt throughout my journey; an undercover scientist. But on the day that I left, I gathered all my stories together to take home and I was amazed not only at the amount that I had written over five weeks, but also the vast improvement from my first stories to my final pieces.

So overall, this scheme was unique, and one of the most exciting things that I have done in my professional career. Few scientists get the opportunity to 'fake-it' as journalist and I've been privileged in having the chance to do so.

So am I going to continue writing? Since the Fellowship, I have already written a feature article for the Body and Soul supplement of the Times about how different personality types deal with different disaster situations. Although it was not an area I am very familiar with I really enjoyed working on the piece and for the first time felt like a real journalist. Before the scheme I had never considered science communication as a career in itself, but I now think that it is vital to incorporate it into one's scientific profession and whether through research or hospital work I am certain it will play an important role in my medical career. Medicine as we know it is changing. Patients no longer rely on what doctors have told them, but increasingly, they rely on the media; whether that means listening to the latest news reports, watching the latest documentary, or researching on the Internet. That means I need to get more involved both in knowing what's out there that my patients may have read, but also making sure that what's out there is correct.

As a scientist and now as a real journalist I can recognise that there are intrinsic differences between the agendas of both professions. Journalists publish quickly whereas scientists are methodical; checking their thesis slowly and carefully. A journalist may not focus on the element of the story that scientists want them to; the media must balance the facts with what is interesting, relevant or newsworthy for the public, and that may not always be a scientist's agenda. That doesn't mean that they should be opposed, it just means that there needs to be a little more communication and understanding between them.

Words may not be the mother tongue of the scientist but its time we all evolved a new language, one that will allow us to communicate more eloquently with the rest of the world. My greater understanding of how the press works will mean that I will now be able to pitch my own research in a more accessible way to journalists, in a manner that will ensure the journalist gets the article that they want, and most importantly of all, will get me the article that I want.

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So in all, a huge thank you to Nigel Eady and everyone at the BA for giving me this fantastic opportunity, and to Mark Henderson, Lewis Smith, Nigel Hawkes, David Rose, Michael Herman and Kate Wighton at The Times, for coaching, teaching, and encouraging me. Mark and Lewis were an especially excellent source of information, answering my hundreds of questions with patience, good humour and sound advice. I'm very grateful for the time spent reworking some of my earlier, less eloquent

stories. Finally of course a big thanks to all the other Media Fellows for the fun chats and fantastic York adventures. See you all at the BA Festival of Science next year.

## Articles

This one's a tiddler: sperm whale skull joins museum's outsize collection

01 September 2007

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/science/article2364322.ece>

That's lucky: Earth camera outdoes it's stellar rival with sharpest pictures

04 September 2007

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article2381537.ece>

Heart-to-heart for transplant patient

05 September 2007

[http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/visual\\_arts/article2388302.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/visual_arts/article2388302.ece)

Avocados offer fresh hopes of preventing mouth cancer

06 September 2007

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/health/article2396493.ece>

From Aristotle to Dickens, every bump told a story

10 September 2007

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/science/article2419138.ece>

\$1m prize for 'heroes'

11 September 2007

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/science/article2426432.ece>

Asthma risks 'double' during menopause

17 September 2007

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/health/article2469254.ece>

New laws give shareholders more power to sue directors for negligence

24 September 2007

[http://business.timesonline.co.uk/tol/business/industry\\_sectors/banking\\_and\\_finance/article2518032.ece](http://business.timesonline.co.uk/tol/business/industry_sectors/banking_and_finance/article2518032.ece)