

Media Fellow Report 2005

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Writing science for newspapers is the dark side of writing science for journal publication. Science news is about writing swiftly, handling four or five areas of science a day, and rapid turnover. Certainly the allure of daily publication cannot to be denied.

I think of my placement as starting off with the phone conversation with Roger Highfield, Science Editor for the Daily Telegraph. Ever so casually, he asked what I thought of the latest studies on metabolism at rest. Luckily, I had recently read an article on the very subject, and simply had to calm myself enough to dredge this up from memory. I was to find myself in this situation many times over the coming weeks.

The placement consisted of three weeks writing for the Science section of the *Daily Telegraph*, and one week at the BA Festival of Science. The first day started off with an introduction to the Science and Health section of the Daily Telegraph, an island of desks in a sea of news desks occupying one of the highest floors in the glistening Canary Wharf Tower. After a short wander round the news floor, gawping at the London skyline, I was bestowed with my own Telegraph coffee cup and computer, and felt set for some serious science journalism.

The pace of the writing day at the Telegraph was astonishing. Everyone else round the desk was off to a flying start and was rapidly sourcing news and writing pieces. Although I had done some science writing for a general scientific audience before, it usually takes me a few days to gather my background material, write it out, re-read, re-write and polish. The journalists at the science desk were filing at least five pieces a day, while I initially struggled with the concept of an end of day deadline, beyond which stories were old news.

I spent the first two days writing 'factoids', little fact boxes to accompany the main news article. Although this had no 'By line' (name on piece), it was still a thrill and certainly whet my appetite to try a story of my own. After observing the writing process from the fringes, I was keen to put the process into practice, so on the third day Roger kindly agreed I should try writing a 'trial piece.'

The writing day starts off by scanning the usual suspects (conferences, press releases, and 'the wires') for the best science news stories, which are then allocated. Unless a particularly promising press conference is on, most writing and researching is done at the desk. I blithely chose a piece about the effects of UV light on the structure of DNA, and slipped straight back to my usual approach of reading the original journal paper to back up the piece. Soon enough, it became clear that this was not what interesting reporting was about, and I would have to work a little harder to shed the 'boffin' approach to writing.

This was my first taste of the pressures and constraints that news writers work under. One of the great strengths of the Media Fellowship is the thrusting of scientists into the sharp reality of the timelines and pressures that science journalists face. There is no better way to learn to present science to the media, and therefore to the public, with most impact. The science must be truly novel and cutting edge to be classified as news. The impact of a finding has to be well and clearly explained, as it must shine out from a score of other science items released on the day. The science item will compete for space with the earthquakes, politics and scandal that make up the everyday news. Furthermore, a science news piece must be of appeal to the general reader typical of the paper you are writing for, so it is useful to have a rough idea of the interests of your audience.

One of the most essential things about writing a piece for public consumption is the all-important opening line, or hook. If the news editor does not think this gripping or leading enough, the piece is unlikely to be printed, however newsworthy the subject. This emphasis on 'findings first' violated my rules of scientific writing, where evidence for a hypothesis is presented first, leading up to the final conclusion. Soon enough I learnt to write from above down, with all salient information in the first paragraph, unpacking more and more information as the piece progressed.

Though reading an original paper may be useful, direct quotes are crucial in providing emphasis and interest to news. I was often exhorted to 'Get on the phone,' and speak to the principal researcher, as a first line of call. This strategy not only ensured I got my facts straight, but hopefully also gathered some interesting insights and juicy quotes. Indeed, the sooner I called up distinguished scientists with a list of basic questions, the quicker and better the piece was written. Asking the right questions that add up to a good story during a phone interview is a distinct art. I must admit to having learnt much from following Roger's calls to scientists, and being on the 'opposite side' of the journalist's desk.

After a couple of pieces that were not quite right, the knack for choosing the right sort of story, getting the right sort of quotes, and putting it together in the

right way seemed less distant. Roger was fantastic in taking me through my pieces and showing me how a point could be moved or reworded to be punchier, though it took some time to shed my inhibitions about making that opening line catchy enough.

The first day I knew a piece of mine was to be published, I rushed out of the house early to buy the paper and see my name in print. By the time I arrived at the Telegraph offices, and opened another version of the paper, I could not believe my eyes – the piece was gone! After searching the paper page by page it became clear that my piece had only made it to the earlier editions– a newly solved murder in the early hours had displaced my report on proteins promoting long life in mice and man.

Writing a feature article is closer to writing a scientific paper, and was my most rewarding writing experience. It did not take too long to come up with some ideas for a feature piece (I must admit to having been brooding awhile about what I would like to write up) to tie in with the Festival of Science. As always the best and quickest way to gather information is directly to speak to people involved, and Roger was an invaluable source of the best people to contact for some leads. A feature is usually longer than news snippets, so there is more space for opinion and impressions. I also had about four days in which to write this (ages and ages in news time) and best of all, meant that I had more chance to phone people over a couple of days, which drastically increases the possibility of catching those with very busy schedules.

The Media Fellowship was a truly unique opportunity to experience how best to communicate science to a general audience. I have come away with a great respect for the range of scientific knowledge of the experienced journalists, who can highlight the human interest of a scientific piece, while keeping the facts straight. I can appreciate how essential it is that scientists speak about their own work, be it to media or public directly. A press release is of so much more value if backed up by a scientist ready to discuss their enthusiasm for the work, and explain it in an interesting way. I also feel more confident about discussing my research and findings, as I understand that reporting is more likely to be accurate if a clear message is put across in an exciting way and information is pertinent but not over technical.

My thanks to the BA for setting up the Fellowship, to my colleagues who were extremely supportive and interested throughout the process, and particularly to Roger Highfield on the *Daily Telegraph*. He managed to create enough time in a very hectic schedule and space in a very busy paper to improve both my science writing and my enjoyment of the process.

Appendix: Examples of Work:

Articles written:

- Antioxidant properties of coffee
- Anti-inflammation and gut parasites
- UV light and DNA
- Earth's core spins faster than its' crust
- Ballooning spiders
- Gene predicts severity of breast cancer
- Stem cell therapy is far from ready cure disease

Articles published in the Telegraph:

- Is the spirit of Piltdown man alive and well? (Science page feature)
<http://www.arts.telegraph.co.uk/connected/main.jhtml?xml=/connected/2005/09/07/ecfpilt07.xml&sSheet=/connected/2005/09/07/ixconnrite.html>
- Why GPs have a vital role in the fight against fat
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2005/09/10/nba110.xml>
- Lasker Awards 2005
- Protein may slow ageing 'in mice and men'
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2005/08/26/wmice26.xml>

Articles published in the BA Festival of Science News:

- Celebrity diets - do they work?
- Window on the Mind
- Design A Virus
- Meteorites and the Origin of the Planets