# Media Fellowships

## Media Fellow Report 2009

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### Times Higher Education

#### Placement

I spent approximately three weeks working for the Times Higher Education (THE), a weekly magazine for university academics and researchers. This was mainly based at a desk in the large open plan offices off Lion Square in Holborn, London, which they share with the Times Education Supplement. Most of my articles were based around telephone interviews instigated by press releases and followed up with research on the web, but I also attended a press briefing at the Science Media Centre and a Government policy launch.

I wrote a number of NIBS (News in Brief - usually around 100 words) and short news items (300-400 words), but mainly concentrated on two regular features of the magazine, namely the *Research Intelligence* column (approximately 770 words) and a weekly profile piece (approximately 450 words).

In addition to the placement I attended the week long British Science Festival[5] at the University of Surrey[6] and spent two days with the Royal Society[7] press office in London.

#### Expectations

Like many fellows, I think, my interest in the scheme was in part born from a dissatisfaction with the media coverage science receives. Having said that, I was familiar with THE (although I will admit to reading it more regularly in the run up to my placement that previously!) and had been impressed by their reporting, so my expectations were quite high.

I assumed that the time pressures on reporters at a weekly magazine was not quite the same as that on daily papers or other media outlets, and was unsure how important breaking news was for a specialist magazine. I didn't really know what to expect of the working environment, but did wonder how journalists managed to combine the demands of attending significant events while simultaneously submitting numerous stories.

#### Impressions

I was made very welcome and was pleased by how quickly I was set to work. The small size of the team of reporters surprised me and made me appreciate why national journalism is so competitive to get into and why reporters all seem to know each other. My initial sense of a team keen to provide accurate information and give fair representation has remained with me, irrespective of any doubts I may have about the process of science reporting and the modern media as a whole.

Everyone seemed very busy all of the time, and I was impressed how reporters juggled numerous stories at the same time, switching from one to the other as phone calls came in or deadlines approached. As a result they did not leave the office as I much as I expected, but did interact closely with the editorial staff.

I was disconcerted by the power given to the "subs"[8], and amazed by how little input the people writing the stories had on the pictures and graphics that accompanied them.

## Experiences

I am sure there is no better way of learning about journalism than spending time immersed in a news organisation, but I was glad I had attended previous media awareness courses. I was quickly reminded of the need for a “hook” or “peg” – what makes a story “news” – and the importance of engaging the reader with the opening sentence. Ideas such as “choosing a line” for a story, however, became far clearer when I was faced with writing an article myself.

It was interesting to observe how a weekly magazine is put together: starting from the back! The news pages were compiled at the last minute, in order to be up to date, while features and regular columns were assembled at the start of the week. In the office you could see the process happening in real time, with miniature printouts of each page stuck up on a white board as it was completed or revised. In fact, the whole office seemed to be laid out to naturally accommodate the process, with journalist sat adjacent to the news editors, who were next to the subs and beyond them the graphics team. I also attended the weekly news meetings, where the editors and reports discussed stories and decided what was worth pursuing in time for the publication deadline.

It is my impression that subs have quite a lot of influence, and assume this must be even more so in news outlets where there is a very quick turn around and journalists never get to see their edited article. Sub-editors are responsible for ensuring the tone and layout of the final articles matches the organisations house style, but I felt that sometimes they also changed the line of the story. I am sure it is a fine line between adjusting the focus of an article to suit their readership, and changing the emphasis of a story, but do wonder whether this process isn’t fraught with danger when the journalist who originally wrote the story – accumulating background knowledge and interviewing protagonists in the process – is not involved in the process.

I was disappointed by the complete lack of involvement in determining the photos or graphics that accompanied my stories. Perhaps this is different for news items, where journalists supply pictures, but for the magazine I was discouraged from trying to interfere with the work of the graphics department. I appreciate that they are they experts but surely input from the person who best understands the story should be welcome, not deemed a threat.

Talking to various journalists during the placement, I was reminded that this is a competitive profession and that people often enter it with very different motivations to those that drive scientists. Just as lecturers are judged more by their research than their teaching, so journalists gain kudos from breaking stories rather than by educating the public. Thus even the most important finding usually stops being news if the journal embargo has passed or someone else has covered it the day before. It was suggested to me that perhaps much of science is more suited to features – where context can be provided and the most important aspects of a topic discussed even if they are not the most recent – as opposed to the news pages.

Being on the other side of the phone also made me realise how difficult we academics sometimes make the job of journalists. Media outlets are always keen for a “second voice”

in a piece, in the interests of balance and perhaps to give a response to some new revelation. Sometimes "balance" seems to require a polarity of views, with issues painted as black and white and, in the absence of good journalism, opposing arguments given equal credence irrespective of their validity. The science journalists I met, however, seemed genuinely keen to speak to the most suitable people who could offer the best insights, only resorting to the publicity seeking academics willing to comment on anything (variously referred to as "rent-a-quotes" or "media-whores") in the absence of anyone else as a deadline approached. Because journalists work to a tight schedule, it does mean scientists who want to contribute need to be available at short notice; this is especially true for anyone making a press release or publishing a paper. My experience was that journalists are generally not trying to trap people in to saying anything explosive or embarrassing, but hoping to get a new insight or have something expressed clearly. I think it is true that some journalists decide the line of their story quite early on, but the best way to change their focus is to take time to explain to them from your expert view what you consider the key factors are.

If you are contacted by a journalist and think you could make a valuable contribution – and it is perhaps worth not being too modest about whether your comment is worthy of publication, given that the journalist will definitely find someone willing to be quoted by the end of the day! – then it is perfectly acceptable to take some time to prepare yourself. I suggest you ask them to call back in half an hour, during which time you can inform your press office if necessary, and get together any information you think you might need (or even files or pictures you might send). It is also perfectly acceptable to ask them to call or email you after the interview to check facts and approve any quotes they intend to use, although don't expect to be allowed to edit them just so you sound more eloquent and be prepared to respond quickly.

As part of my fellowship I also spent a couple of days with the public affairs section of the Royal Society. In addition to getting a look round the impressive building I had time to talk with various staff including those working in policy, science communication and journals. I also wrote a brief piece for the society's web-site, covering one of the articles highlighted in the society's weekly journals press release.

### British Science Festival

I think I had more freedom at the festival that most other fellows because THE, my host, is focussed on academic news and research policy rather than research output per se. Because I was not expected to write up most of the news items I had more time to attend the actual events, rather than just the press briefings, and perhaps see more of the festival.

The experience of working in a press centre and seeing science journalists discussing stories and deciding what was news worthy was very enlightening. It was particularly interesting to see the different approaches taken by different organisations, including which stories were of interest to their readers or suitable for the media format, and whether they had a specific agenda at the outset.

One important lesion I learned early on was to always check with the editorial team about whether they are interested in a story before writing it, especially when out of the office. I submitted a piece on an event which was of interest to the magazine, but which another reporter was already covering.

## Impact

Following my fellowship I am very keen to encourage my colleagues to positively engage with the media – starting with a seminar – although I appreciate that it may take some time to overcome their cynicism. I also intend to support our external relations office in its work. I will certainly try to communicate my work with increased enthusiasm where appropriate, but I am aware that my current research is only occasionally going to be of interest to the general public.

As someone keen to see more accurate science reporting in the media, it seems sensible that I try and contribute. I would like to do some freelance work, while staying a full time research scientist, and will probably start by submitting pieces on any press releases issued by our institute, since I have direct access to those involved. More broadly, I think it would be beneficial if practicing scientist occasionally wrote articles for newspapers and magazines: time and again attending various events during my fellowship the apparent paradox of the UK boasting some of the best science journalists in the world while having the reputation for publishing some of the worst sensationalist science journalism was put down to stories being written by journalists who were not science specialists.

## Proposition

It strikes me that many of the criticism levelled at some science reporting could be overcome if journalists provided their readers with clearer information on their sources and easier access to further information. Why don't more publications includes references at the end of articles, as the New Internationalist[9] does, for example? Why aren't on-line stories full of web-links to the papers, articles and sources they mention, as included in most science blogs[10]? From my limited experience of how stories are drawn together, I think this is something that could easily be done as part of the news writing process.

As a magazine for academics THE would seem to be the obvious candidate to trail, or at least trial, this. The main objection I can see from the print media is lack of space, but it is now possible to produce shorthand web addresses or references using websites such as tinyurl[11]. Perhaps the British Science Association and/or the Science Media Centre[12] could set up such a site dedicated to generating mini-links suitable for inclusion in newspapers and magazines. Even without this, inclusion in online articles would be a big step forward - since many outlets now have an internet readership that exceeds their print circulation - and one which could be implemented immediately.

1. tinyurl.com/cfqyjq
2. tinyurl.com/ko4jkg
3. tinyurl.com/bkffov
4. tinyurl.com/48uulo
5. tinyurl.com/nl7n2f
6. tinyurl.com/ybxlsgj
7. tinyurl.com/5w6xgv
8. tinyurl.com/yeyvp5j
9. tinyurl.com/kxuxl
10. e.g. tinyurl.com/fbnzg
11. tinyurl.com/
12. tinyurl.com/yafrof4

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## Appendix

## Published articles

**Times Higher Education 1,905 (16th July 2009)**
BBSRC: Unveils bio-strategy (News in brief)
http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=407379&c=1
Let's fly the greener skies (Research intelligence)
http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=407362&c=1
She's worth it (People profile)
http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=407364&c=2

**Times Higher Education 1,906 (23rd July 2009)**
Society for Biology: Checks for work-worthy degrees (News in brief)
http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=407497&c=1
British Academy: Standing by to help with advice (News in brief)
http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=407497&c=1
Big Pitch: are you in or out? (Research intelligence)
http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=407469&c=1
Building trust (People profile)
http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=407473&c=2

**Times Higher Education 1,907 (30th July 2009)**
We're going to need back-up (Research intelligence)
http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=407547&c=1

**Times Higher Education 1,909 (13th August 2009)**
Danger danger (People profile)
http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=407741
Keep an eye on everything (Research intelligence)
http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=407703

**Times Higher Education online (9th September 2009)**
Peer reviewers satisfied with system (News)
http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=408108

**Times Higher Education 1,914 (17th September)**
Mighty Wind (campus round-up)
(print only)

**Royal Society online (30th September)**
Female orangutans stay in charge of reproduction even though males control mating
http://royalsociety.org/news.asp?id=8796

**Times Higher Education 1,916 (1st October)**
Uncertainty Principle (Research intelligence)
http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=408447&c=1


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