

Orla Kennedy – The Telegraph

Well it's just over two months since I got back from the BA media fellowship, but unlike the time at the Daily Telegraph, which flew, the last two months have been pure hell. I have been writing up my PhD thesis, and by the time you all read this I will be Dr Orla Kennedy.

How did I hear about the BA and the fellowship? It all came about last Easter, as like the sad sap that I am, I was tackling a stats program (boffin jargon for statistics) trying to make some sense of my doctoral results. Three and a half years and the results still didn't make any sense..heaven help me. So when Professor Sean Strain, head of the Northern Ireland Centre for Diet and Health and director of the Centre for Molecular Biosciences at the University of Ulster, met me on the corridor and suggested that I apply for the fellowship. I jumped at the chance - what a saviour, no more stats for a while, at least while I filled out the form. So I did, and off I sent it.

Why did the fellowship appeal to me? I wanted to do this media fellowship so as I could find out more about the inner working of the media. Scientists often complain that that the media sensationalise and belittle their work, by running with the maximum headlines and minimum facts. I wanted to see if this claim was justified. I wanted to find out more about the amount of research that goes into stories, if any! What decisions are made in deciding which stories to run with? How stories are edited and by whom? I also wanted to find out more about science writing. How did the writers get into this field? What were their backgrounds? What were the prospects for future science writers?

Two months later and still struggling with stats (PhD groundhog day), I got a call from the BA to say that I had been offered a fellowship at the Daily Telegraph. So eagerly I went to tell my colleagues who were overjoyed. So too was I, but full of mixed emotions. I had to hand in, I had just been offered a three month contract, I had got this, what was I going to do? Once I had time to compose myself and think rationally about which would be best for my future career sunbathing on that desert island, I decided that the fellowship was too good an opportunity to miss!

The next week I was off to London to meet with the other media fellows. But before I got to meet the rest of the guys, I went to meet Roger Highfield, Science Editor of the Daily Telegraph, to discuss terms and conditions of the fellowship. Such an insightful meeting, I found out a few home truths, mainly Roger's opinion on the fellowship, but instead of putting me off, it was a delight to meet a like minded cynic. I realised that whatever the fellowship would entail, that it certainly would be different and a challenge.

Two months later after a few tears and found farewells (I know I was only going for five weeks, but tears and tissues are my middle names) I was off to London.

After settling in to my new abode, it was time to set off for the Daily Telegraph's offices in Canary Wharf. God, I couldn't believe it, emerging from those huge shiny escalators to the brightness and soaring towers of Canary Wharf. I nearly had to pinch myself, was I really here and what were the next four weeks going to entail?

On day one, I was asked to come up with five ideas for a feature based around the BA Festival of Science programme of events. After much deliberation and angst on my behalf, my first ideas were ready to be pitched, only to be shot down as not sexy enough, not controversial enough or that they had recently been covered. It was back to the drawing board. On the second day, I went to a press conference in the Science Media Centre on Diet Fads with David Derbyshire, Science and Medical Correspondent. It was so interesting, not so much in what the speakers said in the press conference being reported, but rather, the way the journalists asked questions based on whatever angle they planned their story to take. It was a really good lesson to begin with. Following the press conference, I went with David and the Daily Mail's health editor, to an exclusive restaurant for a glass of bubbly, just as I would normally do on a Tuesday morning. God, I was beginning to think that this always happened. David assured me that the Daily Telegraph's expense account did not allow such extravagance's - damn - now why didn't I get to work on the Daily Mail?

By day three, the go-ahead for my feature article was given, so it was time to make the relevant contacts and get the piece of research which the feature would be based on underway. By the end of week one the 'expert' was on board and the survey designed.

Week two and disaster struck. Just as the survey was about to be sent out, the computers came a-crashing down for three days. This was followed by a bank holiday weekend. This delayed distribution even more, although some at the science desk thought that the survey should take a different slant - namely that of how many boffins were not at their desks as indicated by auto out of office replies. However the untimely computer crash allowed me to spend a day with the guys at the Science Media Centre at the Royal Institution, find out what their work involved and compare it to the lads at the Daily Telegraph.

By week three, results from the research were rolling in, so it was time to collate all the information, see what interesting angle could be taken and get the feature underway. By week four my feature was written, re-written and re-written again and the 'experts' commentaries were in, edited, re-edited and re-edited again, the whole thing was set to appear as a feature in the following Wednesday's Science Page. Whilst at the BA festival of Science my feature appeared hot off the press- at last - it had been extremely hard work to get it that far, but so rewarding to see my name in black and white in the Daily Telegraph.

My feature article made it to press, but this was not all I had written. Every day I was encouraged to find interesting news stories, interview those involved and get some interesting and juicy quotes. With each piece I wrote I was given amazing feedback. Roger once told me something I had written had been too

'americano', but since I had always fancied myself as Carrie Bradshaw I took it as a complement even though I am sure it wasn't. A re-write of the same piece was deemed too boffin like and another re-write too straight, finally it did turn into something he liked, or rather something which was in the Daily Telegraph style. David gave me advice on how to make the best impact with stories and getting the readers interested whilst Celia Hall, Medical Editor, always emphasised the human dimension. Two of my pieces went into the news desk queue, but since they didn't appear in the paper they must have ended up on the cutting room floor.

Whilst at the BA festival of Science, I had the opportunity to attend a myriad of press conferences, and again observe how the expert science writers always managed to find interesting and new angles on what the expert scientists were presenting. I managed to write a few pieces, and also worked alongside the group SciZmic, whose remit was engaging secondary school children in science. Emma Napper (Irish Times Media fellow 2002) and I acted as the press experts at the SciZmic events and shared our new if limited, experience of the media and different format with the kids, encouraging them to write news and feature articles. I was also involved in making a radio programme with Chris, Anton and the BA media fellows team, and arranged for vox-pop sessions at the SciZmic events, which added another dimension to the kids' experience of the media and my own.

The rest of the week at the BA was spent setting up other radio interviews and finding scientists who not only had interesting stories but would also sound good on radio. This was a whole different ballgame from the print media, where the emphasis was on getting good and interesting quotes and stories. Here, the actual oral communication skills of the scientists were of paramount importance if the story was going to get on air.

All my colleagues here at the University of Ulster were extremely supportive and encouraging of this endeavour and on my return, I spend much time filling them in on my time in the media, what I had learnt and how it will enhance our own department's communication with the media.

Overall my expectations of the fellowship were exceeded. It was an excellent experience to work alongside such eminent science writers and to meet their peers in the field. Reading the daily newspapers takes on a whole different meaning these days, not only have I met the writers, but I can see that the way in which stories are structured are exactly the way they taught me. The lessons I have learnt will be invaluable in my future career, which may be as a columnist rather than a news writer. I would urge all other scientists to grab this opportunity with both hands and to enjoy.

Some things I picked up on were:

Boffins – scientists who refuse too, or unable to talk to the media

Media W*o*es – scientists who talk too much to the media

By line – extremely important, to be checked for every day
Cuttings book – a homage to journalists' by lines
Tomorrow – no good, need the quote today
Unsolicited and badly written press releases – the bin
Press conferences – only go to if journalists from rival nationals are
Pictures – the sexier the better
Sexy – everything
Asteroids – Ho Hum not another one – that's three stories this year so far.
Atkins – again! but the public love it

Articles written

Atkins – a massive uncontrolled experiment, Aug 12, 2003
Asprin and Pregnancy, Aug 13, 2003
Seances, Aug 14, 2003
Smart-1 launch research, Aug 15, 2003
West Nile Virus Alert, Aug 19, 2003
Breast Tissue grown on a pig, Aug 21, 2003

Articles published

Ten Complementary and Alternative Treatments Explained, Daily Telegraph,
Sept 12, 2003
Hands-on healing or a con? Daily Telegraph, Sept 12, 2003