

Media Fellow Report 2005

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'Splashes', 'spikes' and 'side-bars'... just a handful of the terms that entered my lexicon during my BA Media Fellowship. But more about them later.

Like many academics, despite my best intentions and training, several previous forays into the media had been less than successful: mis-quotes and missed opportunities felt like the norm, not the exception. I had therefore become accustomed to going into hiding whenever a big story broke – which is quite often in medical ethics. So when a colleague forwarded me an email about the Fellowship programme, I thought it would be a great opportunity to counter these previous experiences and build confidence in handling press queries. I was very pleased to gain a placement at *The Times*, working with Mark Henderson.

On my first day, I walked into a vast, open-plan newsroom humming with ringing phones and TV sets tuned to news channels. Well over a hundred people sit in this space (in clusters arranged by specialty); very different to the relative solitude of my university department.

Science-related news feeds in throughout the day from wires, specialist science press sites and targeted news releases. Each news journalist also spends time building relationships with scientists in their particular area of interest, which can lead to exclusive stories. Copy is filed using dedicated in-house software, and stories are accessible to anyone as soon as they are submitted. The 'Sked' (schedule) of potential stories for the next day's paper is also available, and it is interesting to watch as literally hundreds of potential stories are whittled down throughout the day.

My working day followed a similar pattern throughout my Fellowship. Everyone would arrive between 9.30 and 10.00am, and browse the other papers to see what angles other journalists had taken. After checking the wires, and press release sites, each specialist correspondent then briefed the news desk between 10.00 and 10.30am with their potential stories, in time for the morning news conference at 11.00am. I briefed the desk on my own a few times, and my main advice from this experience is to be very prepared! It's vital to read the press release carefully several times and be ready to 'sell' your story in a few snappy sentences. Being drilled on the spot about something you have only just read is quite daunting and I often floundered under heavy questioning.

Once the go-ahead is given for a piece, time is spent researching and conducting further interviews. The piece should have started to take shape in time for the afternoon news conference (where the order of stories and the possible front-page are discussed), with the final deadline usually around 6.00pm. Some journalists stay

until around 7.00, so they can answer sub-editor's queries. Mark filed as many as four stories each day – the most I ever managed was two.

Being a natural procrastinator, I surprised myself by enjoying the process of writing to very tight deadlines. The first piece I wrote was about the ethics of paternity testing, a topic I have researched before. Normally, writing 500 words on this issue would take me some time (days?) as I would do lots of research and reading. But here I just had to write it, after a couple of Google searches and one phone call. The next day, the impact that news has become apparent, as I spent the day further explaining my views on three live television broadcasts and two radio shows – which gave me no choice but to overcome my fear of becoming tongue-tied whilst the nation watched. This piece was the first of three opinion pieces on medical ethics I was able to contribute during my fellowship; very fortunate given that the fellowship is not generally geared towards Fellows' usual work and how quiet the newsroom is during August.

In addition to my 'Medical Ethicist' pieces, I also filed stories spanning a broad cross-section of scientific research: from the moons of Saturn to third nipples... Often, these necessitated attending press conferences or interviewing scientists. Mark was unendingly helpful in 'getting me started', often giving me my first line which I still find difficult. News stories, in comparison to scientific papers, are written 'back-to-front'. The essence of any story needs to go into the first three paragraphs, after which the reader will decide whether to keep reading. After I had got these initial sentences out of the way, I really enjoyed putting pieces together, remembering to answer the five 'W's': what?, when?, where?, who? and why? – and remembering to avoid technical terms and write in the active tense.

I wrote several pieces from press releases, which are generally helpful as you already have a key message to work from. I did, however, come to realise that not all press releases are of the same quality. A well-written media release can make such a difference when deciding whether to run a story. Trying to use a quote containing a sentence more than 60 words long, or which is full of qualifications or long-winded justifications is nigh impossible. I now realize that if you can't cut to the chase when making a statement, it's not worth saying it at all.

And what about those strange terms? There are indeed quite a few in the world of newspapers. At *The Times*, the 'splash' is the front-page story. The 'compact' size of *The Times* means that there is room for only one story on page one. Whoever writes that story has 'got the splash' that day. Something is 'spiked' when it doesn't make it into print – this comes from the old practice of putting paper copy onto a spike once it's no longer needed. I feel quite fortunate that not many of my pieces ended up in this electronic waste-paper basket, as the rejection after toiling so hard is still hard to take. But, at least it's an immediate rejection and you can move quickly on to the next idea, unlike academia. A 'sidebar' is a short piece related to the main story on the page. My medical ethics commentaries all appeared as sidebars to other news pieces, such as the Government's announcement of a review into reproduction and fertility laws.

When applying for the Fellowship programme, in addition to boosting my confidence I wanted to gain an insider's appreciation for what makes something 'newsworthy'. I also wanted to learn how to communicate difficult concepts in a succinct and jargon-free way. These aims were certainly met and I learned a lot more along the way. The fellowship has "de-mystified" the media for me and allowed me to see what journalists need from us to do their job properly. Namely, that the art of the crisp sound-bite should not be under-estimated!

In particular, I gained a much better appreciation for the role of expert forays into the media. A media appearance doesn't have to break new academic ground. Our role is to offer a perspective on an issue which a person reading the paper on the train or over their breakfast in the morning may not have come up with, but will understand and appreciate hearing about. The main thing to remember when talking to a journalist is that 'you are their research' – make your point simply and remember that all the nuances and general background to your area of expertise are not going to make it into the story.

Several observations stick in my mind. The first is that news is a huge juggling act, in which compromises have to be made and sometimes (unfortunately, in an environment of limited space such as a newspaper) the worthy hard-toiled science gives way to the "sexy story". Second, journalists display incredible skill in quickly coming to terms with complex issues and distinguishing core facts. Further, not only do they have to do this themselves, they have to convince their editor about it too. Third, I am still struck by how immediate and transient the media is, but also how pervasive. I am still receiving correspondence about some of the pieces three months after they were published. The requirement to let go of ideas and "empty my head" each evening was also exhausting, as I am so accustomed to building up pieces of research over time.

My experiences during five-week immersion into the press world are already proving useful. After pitching what seemed like endless numbers of ideas for feature articles during my Fellowship, I had a piece on genetics and nicotine addiction commissioned; this has now been published. I've also handled a few media queries and feel I understand the journalist's needs and perspective much better, which improves how I respond to them. I'm also involved in a radio documentary for broadcast next year and feel much more confident about this process than I would have had I not done the Fellowship. Colleagues responded to my placement with genuine interest, and some plan to apply in future.

I would like to conclude by extending a big 'thank-you' to Mark Henderson and his colleagues at *The Times*, for opening their doors to the Fellowship scheme for the first time. It would also not have been possible for me to undertake the fellowship without the support of Richard Ashcroft, my line manager and Amy Hunter from the London IDEAS Genetics Knowledge Park who encouraged me to apply. Alice Taylor-Gee at the BA was a terrific source of advice and support before, during and after my placement. Finally, the links I have forged with my 'fellow-Fellows' are invaluable – thanks to all of you for the fun, gossip and friendship.

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Often it is not worth all the heartache (commentary on paternity testing), The Times, 11 August 2005

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<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,11069-1735286,00.html>

Q&A: fertility laws shake-up, The Times, 16 August 2005

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2-1737933,00.html>

Sex selection raises more questions than it can answer, The Times, 17 August 2005

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2-1738553,00.html>

Growing foetus cells could start treatment, The Times, 18 August 2005

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(This article was syndicated in *The Australian* on 1 September 2005)

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<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/printFriendly/0,,1-2-1765082,00.html>

Soil cancels out UK's efforts to reduce CO₂, 7 September 2005

<http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/FestivalNews/ Soils.htm>

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<http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/FestivalNews/ Bingo.htm>

Grumpy Teenagers, 8 September 2005

<http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/FestivalNews/ GrumpyTeenagers.htm>

Tracking the smoking gene, The Times, 19 November 2005

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