

## Media Fellow Report 2008

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### *Expectations:*

I was thrilled to get a phone call from the science editor at the Financial Times, offering me a placement. Almost immediately the nerves set in. How would I switch from writing worthy-but-dull journal articles to writing something that people would choose to read for pleasure?

Clive Cookson, the Financial Times' science editor, invited me to visit the paper's headquarters before the placement started. I accepted with relief. Over coffee on the top floor of the FT building we discussed possible features I might write, and the way the placement would work.

The support from the BA also helped prepare me for the big leap into the unknown. At the briefing day Clive and the BBC's Jonathon Amos gave us the benefit of their distilled knowledge. The BA team explained how the placements would work and previous Fellows shared their experience. Most reassuring of all, a mock press conference gave us the chance to test our mettle writing a piece to a deadline.

UCL's media relations department also let me shadow them before I began the placement, so I could see the process of getting a science story in print from the other end of the production line. I was looked after by Jenny Gimpel who, coincidentally, had been one of Clive's Fellows some years previously. I also practiced by reading the science wires on AlphaGalileo and EurekAlert over breakfast and trying to predict which stories would be in the papers that day.

### *The placement:*

Clive gave me plenty of guidance but also free reign in looking for leads, writing stories and pitching them to the news desks. Each day I would start by checking the wires or attending briefings. I would then have until mid-afternoon to write and file a story. My hosts at the FT were extremely generous with their time and support. I was able to get advice on anything from making a sentence full of indigestible statistics more palatable, through to pitching feature articles to other editors.

During my time at the FT I managed to write a variety of pieces, from short 200 to 300 word news pieces to longer special features at around 1,000 words. Clive had warned me that he expected me to write a lot, but nothing could have prepared me for the experience of chasing leads, conducting interviews and seeing the final result in print.

The busiest and most rewarding week by far was the time spent at the BA Festival of Science. Not only did I have the opportunity to attend a wide range of briefings from scientists, I also had the chance to interview a few of the Festival delegates one-to-one. Having someone spend half an hour or so explaining their work in such detail, one-to-one, is a rare privilege.

I also enjoyed meeting the journalists from almost all of the UK's national newspapers. It was an eye opening experience to see how they developed their stories, from the questions in the briefing, to the conversations in the press room, to the finished item in press.

*Support:*

The supervisor who wrote my letter of support couldn't have been more supportive. Trish Greenhalgh is a practicing GP and a professor of primary care and she is one of those (sadly too rare) academics that wants to demystify what we do. Whilst I only had a handful of months of funding to work for Trish, she felt that spending one of those months on the placement was a worthwhile investment.

A change of job and institution followed, though. In my new workplace the Fellowship wasn't well understood and the general consensus was that I was bunking off to "play journalist." As the articles started to appear the impression changed slightly. I am still working to spread the message to my colleagues that science communication through the media is an important way of communicating with the world at large, and that it doesn't have to be the "pact with the devil" that many of my colleagues still fear it to be.

*After the placement:*

Most directly, the experience has given me the ability and, more importantly, the confidence to talk about science to a wider range of audiences. It has also given me the desire to talk to my fellow scientists about communicating with a wider audience via the media.

During my placement I saw a few examples of communication between the media and scientists breaking down. Most of the time this was due to the scientists not understanding the constraints under which the media operate and expecting the nuances and complexities of their work to be conveyed in a 300 word newspaper article or 30 second radio slot. This would have been exactly the type of mistake I would have made before the placement. I have arranged several talks, at Middlesex (my current institution), UCL (my previous institution) and at the Diamond Light Source facility to talk about the BA Media Fellowship and the lessons I learnt, in the hopes of sharing this experience.

Finally, I gained a deeper respect for the science reporters and editors that are able to understand, condense and explain complex and novel science, often several times a day.

I left the placement much more optimistic about the future of science as part of universal cultural life. As John Brockman said, in his 1991 essay *The Third Culture*: "The role of the intellectual includes communicating. Intellectuals are not just people who know things but people who shape the thoughts of their generation. An intellectual is a synthesizer, a publicist, a communicator." The role of the BA Media Fellowship seems to be twofold: not only to train scientists to be synthesisers, publicists and communicators, but also to support those same scientists in propagating the third culture in their own institutions.

## Appendix

My published articles

<http://search.ft.com/search?queryText=%22emma+byrne%22>

CO<sub>2</sub> emissions rise by 33%

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/dfda8b06-8b62-11dd-b634-0000779fd18c.html>

Advance in protein research

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/cc5cc614-8b64-11dd-b634-0000779fd18c.html>

Science Briefing: Overbid linked to fear of loss

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/7ee1aa08-8b64-11dd-b634-0000779fd18c,s01=1.html>

Science Briefing: overbidding link to fear of losing:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/a3bf8464-8b5d-11dd-b634-0000779fd18c.html>

Investors weigh risks of not fighting climate change:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/181e160e-883e-11dd-b114-0000779fd18c.html>

GM cotton helps nearby plants:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/e8490a9a-85e2-11dd-a1ac-0000779fd18c.html>

Bespoke cancer treatment nearer:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/cb1e5c6c-85e3-11dd-a1ac-0000779fd18c.html>

Tradeable quotas boost fish stocks:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/80de831c-85e2-11dd-a1ac-0000779fd18c.html>

Hydrogen: Wonder gas receives a lift:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/1bb6703e-82d2-11dd-a019-000077b07658,s01=1.html>

New drug for parasitic diseases developed:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/abbd364e-7ff9-11dd-8eeb-000077b07658.html>

Breakthrough on tropical diseases

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/518d06d0-8063-11dd-99a9-000077b07658.html>

Scientists work on artificial touch sensors:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/74266c2a-79d5-11dd-bb93-000077b07658.html>

Super microscope helps land clean-up:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/161131b6-7f42-11dd-a3da-000077b07658.html>

Project seeks magic touch

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/d569fd08-7f98-11dd-a3da-000077b07658.html>

Suicide bombers may not really be loners:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/d900f62c-7e78-11dd-b1af-000077b07658.html>

New method may reduce credit card fraud:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/a8803ee0-7e78-11dd-b1af-000077b07658.html>

Science briefing: spider monkeys use greetings to ease conflict:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/9ed2e498-7d91-11dd-bdbd-000077b07658.html>

Paying by cash cuts amount spent:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/dbb423ae-7d3c-11dd-8d59-000077b07658.html>

'Face blindness' link to dyslexia probed:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/c2aab462-7db0-11dd-bdbd-000077b07658.html>

Forensic breakthrough on text messages:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/fdbfce16-7a9f-11dd-adbe-000077b07658.html>

Organ opt-out plan in question:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/6f64d270-7bac-11dd-b839-000077b07658.html>

Science briefing: advance on deadly cancers:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/882ab762-7ad4-11dd-adbe-000077b07658.html>

Remembering The Simpsons

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/bcd14bd6-7ae1-11dd-adbe-000077b07658.html>

Bird duets are not all harmony

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/48a0b9d6-7ae1-11dd-adbe-000077b07658.html>

Medieval sound brought to life:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/e70dbf14-7a1a-11dd-bb93-000077b07658.html>

Parental template for partners:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/5e239b90-794f-11dd-9d0c-000077b07658.html>