

Zeeya Merali – Nature

Like most scientists, before the fellowship began, I regarded Nature primarily as a scientific journal. Although I was aware of the magazine's news section and the on-line news site, I thought of Nature as a publisher of research – making science news by choosing which manuscripts are important enough to be included in the journal – rather than as a reporter of news that happens elsewhere. I soon found out just how seriously the journal takes the science news-gathering business.

One of my first lessons was to learn the difference between science news and news for scientists. The online site concentrates on the former – the newest research developments that have been press released – while the news and features section of the magazine deals with the latter, which includes issues about international science policy, funding changes and things that affect the working conditions of the scientific community. I was lucky to have the chance to write for both the magazine, aimed at scientists, and the web, with its more general audience.

I spent most of my fellowship working with the on-line team. At first glance it seems as though the news@nature web team is ideally placed to cover the big science stories – after all, most other news outlets fill a significant proportion of their science output with research published in Nature. However, news@nature had to tread a careful line between avoiding bias towards stories generated in-house, and giving too much free publicity to their arch-rival, Science. They are always, therefore, searching for new avenues for story ideas. Given my background in astronomy, I was asked to scout around for physics news stories that had not been press-released. As a physicist, I usually look at pre-prints, available on the web, to keep abreast of the latest research developments. However, as these stories have not yet been peer-reviewed, the ideas that I pitched from this source provoked some concern. The editors, quite understandably, tend to avoid hard science stories taken from the pre-print pool, but they are open to quirky stories that emerge from there.

My first story, assigned on the day that I arrived, was about extra-solar planets. Although it was on a topic that I was familiar with, I was still daunted at the prospect of producing an article ready for upload the next day for such a large audience, knowing that any mistake I might make would be recorded forever in the electronic archives. As my fellowship progressed, I chose to cover subjects that lay further from my area of expertise. This was extremely rewarding because I had the chance to learn new things. I felt that my relationship to non-physics material was similar to that of the audience that I was writing for – I came at the topics as an interested non-expert – and for this reason, it was easier to gauge the level at which to write. I also discovered that the difficulty of writing is inversely proportional to the length of the piece to be written. It is harder to squeeze a story

into a 100-word news brief for the magazine than it is to produce a 400-word piece for the web.

I was able to put what I had learned in the newsroom, about sniffing out, pitching, researching and writing up stories, into practise when I was dispatched to the BA Festival of Science a few days after the start of my fellowship. I found almost all the stories presented at the daily press conferences compelling – they all featured novel research and I wanted to hear more about each of them. However, news@nature has strict guidelines on what makes a suitable news piece and potential stories had to be checked against a list of questions: (1) Is the research really new or has it been announced elsewhere already? (2) Are the results too technical for a wide audience? (3) Are the conclusions too speculative? ...And so on.

The best way to develop a nose for news was not by reference to a set checklist, however, it was by watching the other journalists. Each day, articles that had appeared in print and on the internet, covering the festival, were displayed in the press room. These examples revealed how writers were able to see different stories in the same raw material, and I often found myself thinking “oh, if only I had pitched that piece from that angle, yesterday, I’m sure that it would have been picked up by news@nature.”

Watching the professionals at work was the highlight of the festival. I was astonished by the speed at which they cut to the heart of the story with just a handful of probing questions after each press conference. The level of camaraderie in the press room – the willingness to share information, interview notes and quotes with people on rival publications – was also a pleasant surprise. I had a stereotype in my mind of journalists as an essentially competitive breed in search of a scoop, who could be very aggressive with their interviewees – I had obviously been watching too much Jeremy Paxman – but that was soon dispelled. I began to understand that science journalists are competitive, but not amongst themselves. They are united with each other and with scientists in their commitment to increase the space given to science in the media. This was an inspiring and unexpected thing to learn.

Finally, I would like to thank Peter Aldhous, Jo Marchant and Jim Giles for taking the time to teach me about science reporting at Nature.

Examples of work

Neptune-sized planets spied around distant stars

<http://www.nature.com/news/2004/040830/full/040830-7.html>

Who discovered the Americas?

<http://www.nature.com/news/2004/040906/full/040906-5.html>

Earth's mantle can generate methane

<http://www.nature.com/news/2004/040913/full/040913-5.html>

Genetic map pinpoints elephant poachers

<http://www.nature.com/news/2004/040927/full/040927-1.html>

Feathered ancestor of T. Rex unearthed

<http://www.nature.com/news/2004/041004/full/041004-11.html>