

Esther Ingram – The Times Higher Education Supplement

Albert Einstein once said: 'The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious.' And so it was that inspired by this thought, I ventured out from the cosy world of Neuroscience to take part in the BA's Media Fellowship scheme. Intended to create a greater awareness and understanding of the media among scientists and engineers, the fellowships place participants with a national media organisation.

When Nick Hillier from The BA got in touch to say that I had a place on the scheme I was initially really happy. When he continued to say that The Times Higher Education Supplement had selected me I felt a bit disappointed. I had been hoping to get one of the TV or radio placements, and, moreover, had never read the THES. Having attended a BA briefing day that included visits from journalists and a simulated press conference, I was also eyeing my placement with more than a little trepidation. What would the people in scary media world expect from me, and, more importantly, could I deliver? However, a quick visit to meet the deputy editor Gerard Kelly soon put paid to many of my fears and the atmosphere at the paper appeared to be quite informal and friendly.

On my first day at the THES I was assigned to the News team and (gently) thrown in at the deep end. My brief: to write an article on cloning. Despite my first contact with a scientist beginning with "You'd better give me a damned good reason why you're interested in the real science, or quite frankly you can bu**er off", I found that on the whole people were generally happy that the media was enthusiastic about their work. After much research, in the end my article didn't appear in the paper. The News editor told me that the piece had been more of a training exercise to get me into the swing of things, but to me it felt like failure. Disappointed, I drew a parallel with my scientific life, where having a paper rejected leaves you feeling that all your hard work was for nothing. I had no time to wallow in self-pity though, with another small piece being needed at the last minute. Doing the research and conducting the interview and then seeing my work on the page, all in such a short time frame, gave me an immense buzz.

As the five weeks hurtled by, I was struck by the break-neck speed at which news emerges, starkly contrasting with the slow burn of scientific discovery. Sometimes I felt frustrated that there wasn't enough time to deeply explore the issues – I had to become a one-day expert before moving onto the next story. Interviewing all sorts of people, from government ministers to world-class athletes to scientists, sometimes the conversations were so interesting that I had to remember that I needed to focus the story angle, rather than just gather information. "Decide what the story is, then ask the appropriate questions" I was advised. Sometimes on talking to people I would discover that the story we had in mind wasn't the most interesting thing to speak about, and a new story would emerge. I felt totally privileged to have access to such a wide range of

people, virtually all of whom seemed more than willing to chat to me when I said from where I was calling. On top of this, I had the rapid emotional reward of seeing my work in print and knowing that many people would read it. In sharp contrast I could count the number of people that have read my PhD thesis on one hand.

I think that the THES was a really good place to start for a scientist like me. Because it's a weekly publication the pressure of delivery wasn't so great as at, for instance, a daily. This also meant that people had a bit more time to chat to me about what they did and how I might go about writing stories, although I learned to approach people with caution in the two days preceding going to press. I found that as time went on, it became easier to make the deadlines, even with people furiously typing and talking all around me. In fact it even came to the point where I was dabbling in a spot of brinkmanship, thriving on leaving the writing to the last minute just to get the adrenaline rush. I really didn't know I had that work approach in me, as usually if I haven't organised work in the lab in advance I can get quite stressed. Maybe I'm born to live on the edge after all!

As part of the placement you go to The BA Festival of Science, to cover the event on behalf of your organisation. Based in the media centre, you go to press conferences and cover the emerging news. Seeing how the journalists worked together to decide which were the newsworthy stories, and how the hierarchy of the science writers operated was an interesting experience. However, I couldn't really write much from the briefings for the THES because by the time they went to press the dailies would already have covered the major stories. Instead I went to some of the science symposia and spoke to the presenting scientists one-to-one which I found much more satisfying and revealing.

In conjunction with my placement I was invited to spend a week at the Royal Society in London. As I walked through the doors of the bastion of British science, I once again felt more than a little nervous. But instead of entering the world of dusty corridors, old bufties (I think they were upstairs – I never saw them) and Masonic handshakes I had imagined, I found a spacious, modern environment with a largely youthful workforce (and a great canteen).

Half of the week was spent working with the Science in Society team, which engages the public in scientific discussion. I was surprised to learn that the RS hosted symposia such as 'Science and the Creative Image', which addressed issues of creativity in science, and brought scientists and artists together. The most fascinating part of my time involved attending a meeting at the DTI in which the RS was in dialogue with the Office of Science and Technology, over a number of technology issues.

I completed my week in the Press and Public Relations department. Creating and monitoring press releases, coordinating the Society's news magazine and publicising events are just a part of what the section covered. The biggest challenge seemed to be reaching out to the public, while maintaining the scientific integrity and status of the institution and pacifying the 'traditionalists'.

So from all these experiences, what had I gained? Well for starters, an insight into how the media machine works and what it wants from scientists: that is clear information that engages and enthuses, mixed with critical commentary. Secondly, I realised that I enjoyed writing much more than I had anticipated, and was ultimately glad that I had got placement at a paper. Since I've returned to the lab I've approached my work with more focus and try to view my objectives with greater clarity. Yet I have also learnt the value of standing back to observe how my research fits in with the rest of the world. And, perhaps most crucially, I would now feel fairly comfortable in communicating science through the media, although I would go into Interviews with a very fixed game plan of exactly what I would and would not be prepared to say!