

Chrissie Davies – The Financial Times

“Go on an 8-week field trip to discover Britain’s science media in its own habitat.” – That is what the advert said. I thought I had no chance, so immediately applied. Call me an armchair risk-taker, but what can you lose from filling in a 2-page form. Three months and a telephone interview later, I was on safari.

Opportunities for expanding one’s career portfolio, particularly with new learning, often shrink with age. So I was delighted when Clive Cookson, Science Editor at the *Financial Times*, phoned me four weeks after I had sent in my application– and also surprised, as I had not before associated the *FT* with science coverage. Needless to say, I had no time to speak to him, but as he said, “I would be suspicious if you did.” Things became apparent later: the *BA Media Fellows* scheme, is aimed at mid-career scientists, not new graduates or intended escapees trying to dig a tunnel into a new career. This suited me fine.

The *Financial Times* is a newspaper aimed at the international business community, with a daily circulation of close to half a million, and a readership in excess of 1.6 million. It also has an on-line outlet. It covers finance, industry and commerce, as well as politics, technology and the arts. Its policy is to be authoritative, accurate and analytical, and to report in an objective and impartial way. It sponsors a *BA Media Fellow* every other year.

I phoned Clive back at the end of the working day. My first ever telephone interview - and during its course, Clive said, “Oh, we’ll take you then”. I wish I could remember what I had said to prompt this response for future use. He warned me that because of a downturn in advertising, they had less pages to fill, and even *FT* journalists were finding it hard to get their work into the paper; and “As long as I didn’t mind that....” As my interest was in the learning curve and in the experience itself, this did not dampen my enthusiasm. He also mentioned that things got a bit quiet in August – a point that I also dismissed. I was keen to get started quickly. The run-up to the launch of the European Commission’s sixth Framework Programme was still some way off, and a window of opportunity had opened up. It would be manic later in the year.

I heard nothing more for a month, when Nick Hillier, Science Communication Officer at the BA, phoned to confirm the *FT*’s interest in my application, and to ask if I was still interested. After biting off his arm, I immediately phoned Clive Cookson to arrange a provisional start date. I had a very positive response from my colleagues with, “That’s great”, “The *FT*. Wow!” and “How did you manage that?” I was fortunate that my line manager, Steve Parry, saw the fellowship as “good training”. A close colleague said he would do a *BA Fellowship* providing it was with *NME* - because he really wanted to rock, and then pointed me in the direction of

another colleague who had been a participant in the *BBC Tomorrow's World* presenters competition. Science communicators were coming out of the woodwork.

A briefing day for the media fellows was arranged for the following week. This gave all the new fellows an opportunity to meet each other. We were a mixed bunch - ranging from scientists working in fisheries, food labelling and butterfly conservation, to a psychologist (apparently, by definition, working on *sex, food and fighting*) and a geologist, working on ground water that passes through cemeteries.

It was an opportunity to get an introduction to the print, broadcast and on-line media, with guest speakers from each. A simulated press conference was arranged, where we role-played as journalists. This was tremendous fun and whetted my appetite though, as I was to find later, it turned out not to be an exact facsimile of real life. We also received feedback on a 250-300 word news story we had each written from a media release we had been sent at short notice before the briefing day. The day was rounded off with a presentation by three former media fellows, telling us of their experiences. I was encouraged to hear that in the past, the *FT* was the sponsor that the others were jealous of, as their fellow had had "stacks" of things published. But I would wait and see.

The week before I was due to arrive at the *FT*, profits dropped 78% due to the slump in advertising sales. I expected to arrive to find everyone depressed – wrong. They were not depressed – they were on holiday. And as I was to find, the whole business community disappears in August. As a result, finding the *right* person to interview was sometimes a bit of a challenge. Clive was right. I ought to have heeded his words. Avoid August. This did not spoil the experience, but it did make some of the research more difficult than it needed to be.

My first assignment on Day 1, was to write a 750-word feature on space science and the prospect that we might not be alone. On Day 2, I was advised that it would "do me good to start writing it". I had by now only got as far as Jupiter's second moon and was still some days from leaving the solar system. It was illustrative of how scientists and journalists use resource differently. Journalists have a broad knowledge and write from information already in their heads and from going directly to *information nodes*, ie experts who have already have an accumulation of knowledge. I was starting from a different base – a pathetically narrow knowledge, a paucity of contacts and a desire to have a smattering of understanding so I could at least ask the right questions on picking up the telephone. I quickly realised that journalists use each other, as a short-cut to accessing experts – something that has evolved as a result of the pressure of deadlines. They have the tools to enable this via an electronic messaging system, making the time of response to a request for information almost instant. Journalists are resourceful animals – and I hope I have taken a bit of that away with me. For those journalists who work on the more *news* stories, their success is surely directly related to the quality and quantity of

their contacts, *and those of their colleagues*. It pays to be in a good quality, well-managed newspaper.

By the end of my first week, I had my first news story in print, though it did not make an impact on me until I had seen that the Royal Society's online *Science in the News*, had picked it up. This is the usual way I access science news – a lunchtime ritual. I also attended my first press conference, agreed some long term features and received training in the use of a soon-to-be replaced, windows application called *Coyote*, used by the writers and editors so that all news stories can be viewed whilst in progress. I was impressed with the transparency of the operation. I also attended an editorial meeting, which occurs at the start of the working day (about 11am), when the editors gather to decide what will go in the next days' edition. I was told to expect a bloodbath. It turned out to be a calm, jovial affair. But at least it revealed to me, why on some mornings an apparition appeared amongst the Science and Technology journalists, demanding to be *splashed*. (I was tempted). It also explained why sometimes the same figure appeared an hour or so later demanding a story on GMO / BSE / MMR or whatever was about to hit the headlines. What really impressed me, was that if the journalist said he or she was too busy, the apparition disappeared. Magic. I was beginning to like this culture.

The process within the *FT* was now beginning to come clear. I could also see how the newspaper fitted into the bigger picture of public communication and the role of press officers and PR representatives was now obvious. The good ones had a sixth sense and knew what I was looking for, understood about deadlines, often doing a lot of the legwork for me. The bad ones were a source of frustration. This was something the real journalists identified with and it seems to me to be a bit of a problem.

I was learning about where news comes from, how it is selected, and how it is *translated* to get good copy - and in what timeframe this occurs. Using *Coyote*, I was able to see what happened to my stories after they had left my desktop – how pieces were edited and how white-space was managed. Terms like *strap* and *third leg* were dropping back into my vocabulary and there was not a cricket ball in sight. I was encouraged to sell my ideas directly to the newsdesk in the interest of time and always got a direct and rapid response. I was hunting for press releases, conducting telephone interviews and researching stories in science, technology and engineering, and of course, writing to a word-count and a deadline. Soon I would have my own by-line: *Chrissie Davies on Science*, and would be covering the *Technology Worth Watching* column. I was even left to select the stories to be used. Power at last. I would also learn how dangerous it is to print one's e-mail address in a readily available newspaper. PR agents and Government departments appear to be very adept at spotting e-mail addresses and are not shy at sending out more potential stories. Not a bad thing. But I felt I was close to getting to the stage where it would be difficult to leave – the pipeline was filling. I was not surprised to hear that one of my new colleagues, on returning from a two week holiday, had

found 1600 new e-mail messages waiting for him. He had obviously made the same mistake as I had.

But then I was saved -by the *BA Festival of Science*, an annual event, on this occasion held at the University of Leicester. This was definitely the climax of the fellowship. Eight or so press conferences a day, starting at 8.30am (early for a journalist), each with three or four scientists lined up for us, talking on separate but related topics. A chance to ask questions and corner the speakers afterwards; a chance to work with journalists from other newspapers and news outlets and see how they operate; a chance to sharpen up on my *60-second sell* to the *FT* editors back in London, and then write everything up for an early deadline.

The range of science and technology topics covered by the conference was immense. The interaction with other journalists – sat shoulder to shoulder in the pressroom – was a joy. Access to scientists with something to say about their work was something to be envied. The space given over to science coverage in the *FT* that week was excellent. The *BA Festival* clearly works - and the *FT* played its part in facilitating science communication, at least to the business community. A nice touch was that the engineers thanked me for getting a couple of their stories into the newspaper.

By now my time at the *FT* was drawing to a close. I still had a big feature to research and write, but despite the difficulties the *FT* was going through, I had had “stacks” of things published.

I learnt a tremendous amount. As well as gaining an insight and understanding of how the media works, and its role in communicating science to the public, I learnt more about myself – my strengths, and weaknesses. I received invaluable feedback. My writing style improved. Now I can tell the difference between singular and plural noun. I'm learning to spill. And. My sentences. Are shorter. My facilities for writing quickly and conveying technical information for a non-technical audience have improved. As an unexpected bonus, I've been turned on to technology. Before tackling the *Technology Worth Watching* column, I would have turned tail at the mention of silicon chips. I have not got over that psychological hurdle, and actually find it interesting. I am aware of what journalists are looking for and what they are up against and have a good idea of how *not* to write a press release. Whilst I did not have clear expectations at the outset, I got out of it far more than I could have imagined.

In the short term, I would welcome the occasional opportunity to write science features and articles and would like to spend one or two weeks in a press office to see things from a PR reps' perspective. In the longer term, whilst I am not an escape artist looking for a way out of science, I am a believer in the axiom, “You become where you have been.” I hope that my fellowship has helped shape me towards becoming a better science communicator, which I think is an important part of my role as a scientist.

Finally, I would like to thank Clive Cookson, his colleagues and the *Financial Times* for this invaluable experience, the BA and its sponsors for organising and funding my fellowship, and Steve Parry and Unilever for releasing me from my usual responsibilities and making it possible.

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