

Media Fellow Report 2007

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In the lab, I have to devote the better part of a few weeks to write a scientific paper. In the newsroom, the process is telescoped into as little as a couple of hours. That's how long journalists can have to put together a story, and that includes digesting new facts and ideas, interviewing, and of course the writing.

If I learnt anything from my placement at the Guardian over the summer, it has to be that if I have the choice between two words, I should go always with the short one. Clear writing is probably the hardest thing to do. And as a scientist, one only realises this once our jargon, like crutches, is taken away. Big words, long sentences with clauses and sub-clauses and qualifiers are a no-no in news stories. If you must have them, then write an additional sentence instead. One of the very instructive aspects of the Fellowship was learning to communicate science without technical language – or at least with a bare minimum.

Casting my mind back to the time when I was filling in my application for the BA Media Fellowship, I wasn't quite sure what I would be expected to do once on placement. I knew generally that I wanted to find out how science news was put together, what motivated journalists to go for one story over another, and to improve my science communication skills. But the prospect of feeling like a spare wheel in a busy newsroom didn't appeal. So once I knew that I was going to the Guardian, I contacted the BA Media Fellow who had been there previously to find out more. One very useful tip is that it always helps to prepare ahead. That may sound obvious, but it pays to read your host's articles while thinking about the style and structure of their stories, and the kind of subject matter they tend to cover. Then try to come up with lots of ideas for stories that you would like to see in print. So I set about trawling through a couple of week's worth of Guardian science stories with a critical eye, wondering why so many were about health, space or 'unexpected' science? (The answer is coming shortly). And this is true across all other newspapers and media.

The first source of inspiration for stories that I considered was my own field of research, but it is also worthwhile looking elsewhere, or to think of new angles. I suggested an interview with Amnesty International's director, Kate Allen, to talk about Amnesty's campaign for internet freedom, called "irrepressible.info". It was an unusual angle on the internet that was still within the remit of science and technology, which explored a familiar technology from an less familiar perspective. But be equally prepared that most your suggestions will be politely turned down. Very often the reason can be as simple as lack of time or space in the paper, while at other times the story may not be suitable for their readership. My hosts were always extremely helpful in giving constructive feedback, and I probably learnt as much about science journalism by finding out why some ideas were not picked up as when they were.

But here is a rule of thumb. If your story idea can jump through the following hoops, then you might be onto something: “Is your story telling me about something that will make me live longer? Or will I be able to tell my mates in the pub about it? Or will my jaw drop in amazement at our universe even though I am stuck on a packed London tube train?”

Science in all its forms is covered at the Guardian by a small army of specialised journalists. There is the “science desk”, but add to that the environment desk, the health desk, the technology desk. Such thorough coverage is rare and at several other newspapers, the science correspondent will equally write about health, the environment and technology.

I met the Guardian’s science journalists over lunch a few weeks before my placement. Our nice get-to-know you meeting quickly turned into a passionate debate about the role of the press in informing the public about science and about sensationalism in news writing. Call me naïve, but one thing that dawned on me only during my placement is that science journalists, like all other journalists, have to carve out their space on the pages of the newspaper. Every day the journalists file a few stories, but the final decision about what makes it into the news rests with the news editors. If there is “better” news from other desks, then your science story is going on the “spike”, well, mostly online nowadays. And when you’re up against news of battles in the Middle East, or other life changing events like football relegations, you know that you have to make a convincing case. Although the Guardian does reserve a science page nested within the “home news” section, many other newspapers don’t.

In my first week I attended press conferences and trawled through copies of science and engineering magazines for potential stories. Feature magazines often don’t follow up on their own stories, and hacks on daily newspapers can then pick them up. However, the mainstay of journalists is the “news wire”, which pipes breaking news from around the world onto their computer screens. And that includes science news. The content of most scientific journals is available on the news wire a week or two before it becomes public, to give journalists time to prepare their stories to coincide with the journal’s publication. Another important source of news are personal contacts with people with an inside track on research.

It was a bit of a shock when I arrived at the news desk to discover quite how busy newsdesks really are. In fact, they just got even busier. Traditional newsprint is challenged by new formats such as online media, podcast, and now even video. And the Guardian has ploughed significant resources to make sure that it stays at the forefront and that its journalists are well trained to take advantage of it. The speed at which the science desk can make podcasts, write stories, then blog about them, let alone research, interview or go into the field to dig out fresh stories, is as astounding as their encyclopaedic knowledge. They’ll happily talk to you about any branch of science you care to broach.

Over the course of my placement, I very much enjoyed finding myself unexpectedly involved in almost all aspects of science news production. That included podcasting,

blogging, annotating figures on the website, as well as writing the traditional newspaper column, and field reporting. That summer, a protest was organised at Heathrow airport to demonstrate against the construction of a third runway. I was given a handheld recorder and a head set, and sent out into the field to investigate. My brief was to come back with material for the Science Weekly podcast – one of the most popular shows of its kind, after Football Weekly of course. I returned with voxpop interviews of protesters, policemen and officials, not to mention two stop-and-search police warrants in my back pocket. The experience was an eye-opener on how the same event can be reported in as many ways as there are newspapers.

The BA Festival of Science in 2007 took us to the campus university of York. Members of the press were corralled into the university's vast computer cluster that doubled-up as the pressroom for the week. Science journalists from all major newspapers were present and it was the first occasion when BA Media Fellows all came together for an extended period and could compare notes about their experiences. We were given press badges which gave us access to all the lectures and events and press conferences.

I joined my Guardian hosts in the York pressroom where I my main job was to seek out interesting speakers at the Festival. Once again I was equipped with a recorder and a mic, and spent most of the week chatting to very interesting people, blogging about the Festival, and recording interviews for the Science Weekly podcast. Unlike the science correspondents who were tied to their newsdesks in the pressroom, I was much freer to enjoy the events at the Festival.

Back in the lab at the end of my BA Media Fellowship, my colleagues were curious to find out about my summer in the media, which always makes for a lively debate in the coffee area. What's more, I soon had the chance to put my news writing skills to task on a scientific paper. Well, that still took the better part of a few weeks to write, but I do hope that it is a lot clearer for that!

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Some of my articles, blogs and podcasts can be found on the Guardian website:

Written:

http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/science/2007/08/why_free_speech_on_the_web_is.html#cooliris

http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/science/2007/08/these_questions_give_you_a.html#cooliris

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2007/aug/10/conservation.uknews>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2007/aug/17/climatechange.energy>

http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/science/2007/08/biofuels_menace_rainforests.html

http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/science/2007/08/climate_protest_policing.html

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/letters/story/0,,2154174,00.html>

http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,,2157226,00.html

http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/science/2007/09/every_summer_a_university_camp.html

Audio:

<http://download.guardian.co.uk/sys-audio/Guardian/Science/2007/08/20/ScienceWeekly20082007.mp3>

http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/science/2007/08/science_weekly_for_august_20.html

http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/science/2007/09/religion_advances_despite_scie.html

http://download.guardian.co.uk/sys-audio/Guardian/Science/2007/10/02/ScienceExtra_JohnBrooke.mp3

http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/science/2007/09/science_weekly_for_september_2.html

http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/science/2007/09/science_weekly_for_september_2.html

<http://download.guardian.co.uk/sys-audio/Guardian/Science/2007/09/24/ScienceExtraChrisRapley.mp3>

<http://download.guardian.co.uk/sys-audio/Guardian/Science/2007/09/24/ScienceExtraChrisRapley.mp3>

<http://download.guardian.co.uk/sys-audio/Guardian/Science/2007/10/01/ScienceWeekly01102007.mp3>

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