

Media Fellow Report 2006

Helen O'Brien, Space Instrumentation Engineer, Imperial College London – The Guardian

“Science and the media can mix” said a science researcher today.

Helen O'Brien, a space instrumentation engineer from Imperial College in London was speaking after her 4 week assignment as a BA Media Fellow with the Guardian newspaper. “I had always maintained a fairly healthy scepticism of science stories in the news, but I was very pleasantly surprised with the level of knowledge and commitment I found at the Guardian”

An email came round at work explaining how the BA had a scheme to give research scientists and engineers the chance to experience science journalism with the national press and broadcast media. That caught my eye – here was a chance to find out how a national newspaper works and to look at new science from a journalist's point of view.

Science at the Guardian

My first brush with the Guardian science team came a few weeks before my placement. Ian Sample suggested I come over to meet him, James Randerson and Alok Jha for lunch. Me and three science journalists for lunch - I couldn't help feeling it might turn into a rather daunting interview type affair. I was assured by colleagues that it was bound to be one of the boozy media lunches, and that they wouldn't expect me back any time soon. However, very real deadlines meant there was a distinct lack of alcohol and happily no time or inclination for interrogation. They seemed like a relaxed bunch, all science graduates (two with PhD's) who were interested in the science I do, and the impression I have about science journalism.

A month later I arrived at The Guardian's imposing building on Farringdon Road to try out journalism for real. I was curious to discover how the real world would compare to the “Writing for Journalists” book a friend had given me when he heard about my placement. I was surprised to discover that the Guardian has a large complement of science-based reporters; three correspondents cover science, two deal with the environment, two more look at health and one reports on technology. The large open plan office space is arranged into different sections, with international and national news teams, financial and G2 teams, sub-editors and section editors. TV screens are tuned to the 24hour news channels, and all the day's papers are available for comparing how the other broadsheets and red tops have covered yesterday's stories.

Science reporting in the Guardian left a weekly supplement just under a year ago, to fight it out in the main section of the paper – with nominal coverage involving a science page in the national news section. Although science is rarely confined only to the science page; stories are often moved further forward in the paper, or end up in the international section depending on the context.

How the paper takes shape

Each morning, the national news team meets to discuss the section content and ideas for the front page. Then the duty editor holds the morning conference, going through the day's paper, highlighting articles and layouts he particularly likes. The section editors outline what they are planning to put in the next day's paper. The discussion is then thrown out to the floor. I arrived at the Guardian in the middle of the Israeli/Lebanese war, and so on day one, the discussion soon centred on calls for Hezbollah to disarm.

Finding a story

It was all fascinating stuff, but it was now time to get stuck into the job I was here to do: investigating not the political situation of the Middle East but new science. I was assigned a workspace on the open plan news floor. So with a phone, an old Mac and a reporter's notebook, I was ready to start my life as a journalist. The first task was to find a story. I turned to my trusted friend Google, and set out trying to sniff one out. Having come up with a list I went through them with James Randerson, who very politely crossed most of them off until I was left with two which warranted further investigation. These stories were in the background for my whole time at the Guardian, waiting for a "peg" to come along to provide an answer to the "why publish now?" question.

In the meantime, I found myself writing up a story about a new species of sea urchin which was being sold on the web auction site eBay before it even had an official name. I conducted my first phone interview with the scientist at the Natural History Museum who had been asked to identify the sea urchin. After a bit of editing from Alok Jha, the story made it onto the Guardian website – I was thrilled, and more importantly had the chance to advertise the success by emailing the link to all my friends.

The road to publication

James then gave me a bit of a heads up on a new story which was embargoed for a few days – so I could phone the scientist involved in the USA and flesh the story out without the pressure of a looming deadline. The story was about new research showing evidence of the birth of new cells in the brains of stroke victims – the first time they had been observed in humans.

This story gave me my first taste of the rocky road from filing to publication. The original request was for a 400 word story. Then I was asked shrink it down, and James was on hand to advise on what to cut and how to re-word it so that the main message of the story would still come across. However the story still had to make its way through the editing process. Due to late changes of page layout (changes that happened long after I had left for the evening), the story that ended up in the paper was only 220 words. The scientists' hope that stimulating the production of new cells could *possibly* replace *some* of the lost brain function had, through the course of the editing process, become scientists hope it will be possible to *completely* replace damaged cells. This kind of change is just the sort of thing that would irritate me as a scientist reading news stories about my research. I was quite embarrassed that my name was at the top of the story – I had the feeling that if any of the scientists I spoke to read the story, they would think I was over selling the research. The quotes from the scientists making more realistic points about how much research must be done to evaluate if and how much of an effect this discovery could play in the treatment of strokes, were still there, but people would have had to make it through the whole article to have read them.

A longer story

Towards the end of my time at the Guardian, a "peg" came along for one of my original story ideas. The new school term gave context to my plan to write about the new Science GCSE curriculum. The Education supplement wanted 1200 words, and the deadline was only 40 hours away. There is nothing like a deadline to concentrate the mind, and this was by far the most challenging piece I wrote. Structuring a 1200 word story is quite different from the shorter snappier pieces I had written up until that point. James was, as always, extremely helpful and gave great advice on how to build up a longer story. It was a very proud day when I saw my name at the top of the story in the Education Guardian.

The world of podcasts

In addition to writing pieces for the paper, the Guardian science team produces a weekly podcast – a 25 minute program, downloadable from the Guardian website or iTunes. The

podcasts provide both a round up of the top science stories of the week and more in depth discussions of some of the more controversial or interesting topics. They are recorded in the Guardian studio, and I really enjoyed participating.

The BA Festival of Science

The BA Festival of Science is an action packed week with most of the journalists confined to the press briefings and press room. James and Alok were both covering the festival, and so I had the luxury of being able to attend talks as well as press conferences. This gave me the chance to explore some of the stories in more depth for the podcast and actually get out and about and talk to the people attending the festival.

Back to the day job

The list of things I learned during the 4 weeks I spent with the Guardian science team is long and varied. The most valuable lesson though is the process of writing for the media: how to look at science from the point of view of the journalist. I went to some really good press conferences but also some pretty terrible press conferences. It was fascinating to compare how the journalists from different media outlets wrote up the same stories. I have a much better idea now of the pressures the press work under and what they are looking for from the scientists at a press briefing.

A big thank you to Ian, James and Alok at the Guardian for making me feel so welcome and being so generous with their time and expertise (and for introducing me to the world of podcasts).

Examples of work:

Published Articles for the Guardian

New urchin leaves eBayers all at sea, Guardian Unlimited, Thursday August 17, 2006

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/story/0,,1852233,00.html>

Truth about ecstasy's unlikely trip from lab to dance floor (Timeline for the story), The Guardian, Friday August 18, 2006

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/drugs/Story/0,,1852855,00.html>

Researchers raise hopes for stroke patients, The Guardian, Tuesday August 22, 2006

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/medicine/story/0,,1855503,00.html>

Extinction of 31 bird species has been prevented through efforts of conservators, research shows, The Guardian, Friday August 25, 2006

<http://environment.guardian.co.uk/conservation/story/0,,1858129,00.html>

Brave new world, Education Guardian, Tuesday September 5, 2006

<http://education.guardian.co.uk/egweekly/story/0,,1864496,00.html>

Podcasts

Contributions to the podcasts for August 21, August 29, September 4 and September 11

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/podcasts>