



Media Fellowships

Media Fellow Report 2009

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The Scotsman Newspaper, Edinburgh

My Background

I am an evolutionary ecologist based at the University of Glasgow. My career to date has been entirely in the academic environment, with the usual mixture of research, teaching and administration. Prior to my placement, I had some (limited) experience with the media from both sides (e.g. having written some popular science articles, taken part in radio/television interviews and had my work reported in the press). My view of the media was mixed and rather guarded. As a working scientist, it is of course nice to have people interested in what you are doing, but pretty ghastly when it is misrepresented.

Expectations

I wanted to find out how decisions about whether and when to run a science story are made, the difference between a good and bad press release, how much 'spin' is put on science stories, how tight the deadlines are, and of course how to write things in a way that is interesting and informative for the general public.

Placement

My placement was with the Scotsman in Edinburgh. This suited me very well, since I particularly wanted experience of science writing in a newspaper. Also, given how difficult it was for me to find time to do this, the Edinburgh location made life easier, since I could pick up on my normal work in the evenings.

The Scotsman does not have a dedicated science correspondent. The newspaper does have an excellent environment correspondent, Jenny Haworth (now Fyall), and it was Jenny that I worked under. My placement was on the Newsdesk.

How it went

Overall, from my point of view at least, it went extremely well. Jenny spent some time at the beginning explaining the difference between writing 'news' (focussed on a recent finding) and 'features' (a broader perspective, with more interpretation and opinion), what made an item news worthy, the need to get to the point in the first few sentences and the importance of not letting your own views get in the way of the story too much. I found it hard not to make critical comments and give my own opinions; for news stories, any such comment is generally obtained via quotes from



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other sources. It was also hard not to read around the topic too much, and writing to such tight deadlines (a few hours at most) was a bit of a challenge. I came to appreciate the great advantages of embargoed press releases, which give the journalists time to think things over and make a case to the editors for the item being newsworthy. I also found it odd to write 'backwards', that is, to give conclusions in the first few lines followed then by the background and interpretation. However, with Jenny's help, I began to get the hang of writing 'news' stories. In total, eight pieces that I wrote appeared in print, including a couple in a more 'feature' style for the Saturday edition.

Some of the pieces that I wrote were based on topics that I suggested; others came from press releases or from things that had been sent directly to Jenny. Clearly, it is important to build up a suite of contacts and to develop relationships based on mutual understanding and trust – not easy to do. I found trawling through press releases both interesting and irritating – the latter often because of the way in which the press releases were written; sensationalism, I realised, often comes from the scientists themselves. I quickly appreciated the difference between good and bad press releases. The bad ones were either full of unintelligible jargon with no clear message or were trying too hard to make the obvious sound surprising. Finding that the 'contacts' named in a press release were, in fact, uncontactable, was a great source of irritation.

Jenny was a great help in simplifying my sometimes overblown prose. When I followed her guidelines, the final versions of the pieces that I wrote were not altered much by the sub editors. I did find it surprising that the headline to a piece is not written by the author. While headline writing may well be a skill in itself, this explains why headlines do not always match the content or tone of the piece. Headline writers have a different agenda I suppose.

I particularly enjoyed seeing how the newspaper functioned. I found that people worked extremely hard, taking very few breaks and keeping a close eye on the 'wires' for breaking news. The office was open plan, and the atmosphere was pretty much as I expected – people typing furiously, people on the phone, people talking, people walking about. Occasionally leaning back and listening to the backdrop of simultaneous conversations about Afghanistan, Gordon Brown, Edinburgh trams, Michael Jackson, was surprisingly exciting. I expect one gets used to that in the end. I also found it very interesting to see how pictures were chosen, and to have a look with the picture editor at the extent of the picture archive that the Scotsman holds, clearly an enormously valuable resource.

Having a placement in a smaller newspaper like the Scotsman meant that it was easier to be in the thick of things than I expect would be the case with UK national papers. A couple of times I sat in on the morning editors' conference, and again in the afternoon conference when the shape of the paper for the next day was finalised. For the most part, I was extremely impressed by the breadth of knowledge of most of the editors, who seemed able to make informed comment on a very wide



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range of topics. The overall and laudable emphasis with news stories seemed to be on getting the story factually correct.

Attending the BA meeting in Surrey was a different experience. I was surprised by the fact that, while there was a fairly large number of science journalists present, they generally did not go to the sessions, relying instead on the press briefings and conferences. Shortage of manpower and time I suppose. I found the quality of the press conferences that I attended to be extremely variable, and was impressed both by the rigorous questioning of speakers by the science journalists and by the latter's ability to produce a coherent and informed story within a very short period of time from what, sometimes, seemed an incoherent stream of results.

The future

In general, my colleagues were very interested in the idea of spending time in a media environment, and several said they too would like this kind of experience. Certainly, I now know much more about how to 'pitch' a press release, about the pressures journalists work under, and the mistakes we scientists can make when dealing with the press.