

Media Fellow Report 2005

Helen Czerski, Physicist, University of Cambridge – Times Higher Education Supplement

My placement was hosted by the news editor and deputy news editor of the THES, Lee Elliot-Major and Alan Thomson. The main people that I had day-to-day contact with were Phil Baty and Anna Fazackerley, and all the staff in the office were welcoming and willing to help. I was very impressed with the friendliness of everyone there.

After the news meeting on my first morning I was given a small story to research but by the afternoon, I was involved in helping with the front page story for that week. The story involved some statistical analysis and a large table of data and I felt that I could be really useful. After manipulating data initially, I was directly involved with how the story developed and spent a fair amount of time phoning people over the next two days to get comments. Although no-one would have planned my first day like that, I think that it was an excellent introduction to how investigative stories are written and how the information is presented in the article. That story kept me busy until the week's paper had gone to press, and by the time it was over I felt very comfortable in the office.

In the following weeks, I helped a variety of people with stories and ideas. I was involved in one more big story involving statistics and data manipulation and a few smaller ones. I was surprised at the amount of responsibility I was given and I appreciate the trust shown in me. In my final week, I volunteered to write an opinion piece and this was duly published. This was probably the task that I enjoyed doing most, but it's the sort of thing I've done before and know I like.

My placement with the THES started a couple of weeks after the BA Festival of Science and my hosts were not present in Dublin, so I had a lot of independence there. I've been to the festival before, but I've usually been so busy demonstrating that I've never had a chance to look at it in a wider context. I could see the work that the other media fellows were doing and I took advantage of being in the press office to interview all the Award lecturers during the week and to talk to lots of the journalists there. However, I also had the chance to get out and talk to the people attending the festival and see what they thought of it. I've always wondered who actually attends this event and why. And I loved the opportunity to discuss science communication, how it is valued and where it is going in the future with such a variety of people. So I benefited hugely from the freedom to investigate the issues that I was interested in, and I am very impressed at

how easy a press badge makes it to find out what's really going on. I probably wasn't directly very useful to the THES during that time, but I would say that you can still get lots out of the festival even before the placement has started, if you're prepared to use the opportunity.

I've been on the other side of the phone or microphone frequently, and having to write pieces that I had researched myself gave me a very useful insight into specifically what a journalist is looking for. Most of the people I spoke to on the phone were used to dealing with the press and were good communicators. In the few cases when I spoke to someone who didn't do a good job, they weren't scientists, they were university press officers. Maybe that just suggests that some universities don't take their press offices seriously enough, and that's something important that I'll be more aware of in the future.

The major difference between my PhD work and the placement was the open-plan office and it was fascinating to see how that affected the way that people worked and communicated. The difference here is not so much an issue of what the media is like, but more what science is like. I sometimes forget that it's possible to be so aware and involved in what everyone else is doing, but it's probably perfectly normal outside the average physics lab. An open-plan office is more like a whole organism than the swarm of free-floating bacteria that might represent the scientists.

I didn't deal with any specifically scientific stories, mostly because the THES is more interested in the policy behind the scenes than the science itself. I did speak to many scientists on the phone and I thought that they all did a very good job of telling their story, although most seemed experienced at talking to the media. One of the big lessons was how much you can learn "off the record". It seems that being a journalist is an excellent way of finding out what's really going on, whether you publish it or not. I was also made much more aware of how easy it is to communicate with almost anyone you want to talk to. I'll make better use of my phone directory in the future.

I learned almost as much outside the placement as during it, because it was a reason to discuss the media with the scientists that I work with, my peers from many subjects and others in society generally. I had the opportunity to see what they thought of what I had to tell, and I was genuinely surprised at the amount of suspicion and cynicism aired by some (the scientists) and the importance attached to anything involving the mass media (everyone else). My work colleagues at the Cavendish were politely interested, but didn't ask too many questions. This doesn't necessarily represent apathy on their part, but I think that they weren't really aware of how many different aspects there were to the placement, and how much there is for us all to learn about the media.

Even before the placement, I was thinking about how the best way to share some of my experiences with other researchers in my department. When

I'm back in the UK in December and have time to address this, I want to organise an event which will attract as wide a range of researchers as possible. My current idea is a session with a short description of my time at the THES and the BA Festival of Science followed by a chance for the audience to ask questions and initiate discussion with a panel made up of myself and others in the department who are used to dealing with the media. I hope that this will torch a few demons and set a positive example. Hopefully it will also make everyone look a little bit more closely at what they read in the papers and online news outlets and how it's presented. The most important point that I have to make is that before anyone criticises anything they should suffer a bit of self-examination. How do they read a paper, how quickly they make a decision about which bits they read, and how often they actually get to the end of a piece?

I gained a huge amount from the placement, mostly in small nuggets of background information that are too numerous to list and are probably common to all the media fellows. I am now far more aware of the presentation of news, and sometimes I still spend as much time examining the presentation of it as reading the content. There are many lessons about human nature in there! Since the THES does not follow the daily news, they are not writing the types of stories that make some scientists go purple in the face. Although I did not have to watch reporters defending their stories in an editorial potter's wheel, this was more than compensated for by the existence of quiet days when the staff had time to talk to me, help me and provide invaluable advice about what they were doing and what I was trying to do. It would be fantastic if more scientists had the opportunity to understand exactly what motivates the media and how it achieves its aims, and I'm very lucky to have had that experience.

Appendix: Published pieces

The first five pieces below were written by reporters, but I did either a significant part or all of the research.

1. The Times Higher Education Supplement, Friday October 14, 2005
Millions wasted on tribunals (545 words)
2. The Times Higher Education Supplement, Friday October 14, 2005
V-c slams tribunal 'Catch-22' (908 words)
3. The Times Higher Education Supplement, Friday September 30, 2005
A dash of polish for would-be professors (120 words)
4. The Times Higher Education Supplement, Friday September 30, 2005
'Deplorable' pay inequity persists (932 words)
5. The Times Higher Education Supplement, Friday September 09, 2005
Scientists want time to talk (635 words)

I wrote the following two pieces myself:

Why I ...believe scientists should be less ashamed of their passion

Helen Czerski

Published: 21 October 2005

I'm a physicist; the nerd of the PhD student pack, if you believe the stereotype. But I haven't got a beard and I don't own a pair of sandals (the thought of sandals with socks gives me the screaming heebie-jeebies).

I have many non-scientific interests and I will bounce with Tigger-like enthusiasm about pretty much anything.

Oh, and I'm female. All this means that I'm allowed out of the scientific cage for the public eye to inspect.

In fact, I'm positively encouraged to hop past the chicken wire and perform my tricks to amuse all the non-scientists out there. I do a huge amount of science communication, and I really enjoy sharing my love of science with other people, young and old. But sometimes I wonder exactly what the longer term aim is.

Science communication, which is now firmly established as a Good Thing, attracts oodles of funding, but I get the impression that it has been offered in the hope that someone else will have the good idea.

Showering money around, hand-waving about initiatives and puffing ourselves up with importance about fulfilling this essential but unappreciated role... all these things will get us to the wedding, but after the honeymoon period of excitement is over, what are we really trying to do?

To improve the uptake of science at A level and university, you need a change that lasts, not a temporary glut of money to be withdrawn when fashion moves on. Communicating science should not take place only through scientific interpreters - all scientists should take a role in informing the public about what we do.

We shouldn't need interpreters. Scientists should be less ashamed of science. So many of my PhD peers when asked what they do cough and mumble something into their sleeve about biosciences or electron microscopy, thus ending the conversation.

But other than the mass media, friends and family are most people's major source of information about society. A public lecture is not the only way of saying our piece as scientists, and it's not necessarily the best way, either.

Pondering this recently, I worried about how evangelistic science communication can seem. I disapprove of religious missionaries because I think that telling other people how to live their lives is a bit arrogant, to say the least. But I tell non-scientists how interesting and wonderful science is, implying that I know better. How am I different?

The answer is that I'm not giving them the answers. The whole point of science is that it's a tool, not a doctrine. The truth is only what we've found out so far. There's always room for improvement, and we accept that.

We need to show people how interesting the current answers are and demonstrate that we are critical of them and are looking for ways to improve. The more of us who participate in this process and interact with society, the easier it will be to get our message across.

And the easier it will be on people such as me. I have had to turn schools away because I simply do not have the time to travel to Kent or Surrey to talk to a group of primary school children about science. Is there no one local, I ask the desperate teacher on the other end of the phone? The answer is invariably 'no'.

Communicating should be an important part of any scientist's job, and being a good communicator should mean that I'm taken more seriously by my colleagues - not less seriously, as is so often the case. I would like to invite my fellow scientists to follow me through the chicken wire...

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'With Avian flu, you need to recognise symptoms early and map out patterns'

Helen Czerski

Published: 21 October 2005

A UK epidemiologist aims to forge new links with China and Vietnam to fight emerging infectious diseases

Anne Johnson will travel to China and Vietnam this week as part of a Medical Research Council delegation studying emerging and infectious diseases - in particular avian influenza.

Professor Johnson, an expert in infectious disease epidemiology, wants to establish new collaborations with Chinese and Vietnamese scientists to help fight potential future epidemics. The MRC trip had been planned for months, but it comes just as avian influenza is again in the headlines.

She said that although many individual UK scientists working on infectious diseases collaborate with colleagues in Southeast Asia, there are no formal national links. "We recognise the excellence of Chinese and Vietnamese science and the way that they're investing in it," said Professor Johnson, the head of the primary care and population sciences department at University College London.

"China has developed its science base over many years, and as things open up economically, we can start the scientific and educational exchange. In the same way that we're building economic links, we need scientific links."

Most of Professor Johnson's experience is in behavioural epidemiology, focusing on HIV and sexually transmitted diseases. She was principal investigator on the first national surveys of sexual behaviour.

She said that there were important areas of investigation that applied to avian flu and to STDs. "Flu raises a lot of basic epidemiological questions about transmission. The crucial thing is good information. You need to be able to recognise the symptoms early and map out patterns of disease."