

## Lisa Wright – Financial Times

"Experience science journalism first hand," said the advertisement. This was an invitation to experience the media from the other side of the fence. "Three to eight weeks working as a journalist," sounded like a fantastic opportunity, but could I afford the time and would my department release me. I concluded that the answer was 'yes' to both of these questions and so began my application. Two or three attempts at the online form and a decision to just send the application by email, and then I had to wait. I received an email confirming that I had made it to the last 25 applicants and so warned my employers that the small chance that I would be missing during the summer had now increased to quite a high probability. A few weeks later Nick Hillier phoned me to say that I had been selected by the Financial Times to be their media fellow and should expect a phone call from Clive Cookson the science editor.

Like many media fellows I was both glad to have been selected and a little disappointed that I wasn't going to become the next 'Alan Hart-Davis' for the BBC. I had hoped that I would be selected by one of television or radio media hosts. However, it is writing that I find the most difficult and therefore this would be an excellent way of improving.

A second question that occurred to me was, 'the Financial Times, do they do science?' (a question that I was asked many, many times when mentioning to colleagues where I was to do my fellowship). Naturally the easy way to answer this question was to immediately go and buy the Financial Times and begin my preparation.

After a brief telephone call with Clive Cookson I had arranged the times of my placement (slightly complicated by my wedding half-way through, but that's another report) and a day visit where I could meet the people I would be working with. I was also asked to start thinking about a subject for my first feature article. This was when I began to realise that this wasn't work experience, or work shadowing but was exactly what the BA describe in their publicity, "Experience science journalism first hand."

The realisation that I was going to be a journalist for about five weeks was a little daunting. I had been on a number of science communication courses but never actually written 'for real'. The BA however, helped to put many of my insecurities to rest by organising a briefing day for all of the fellows.

During this briefing day fellows are introduced to journalists from various different media. For our day the people involved were from BBC radio, Nature and Clive Cookson from the Financial Times. This provided a good opportunity to meet Clive and have a chat about our expectations and visits.

Very shortly before the briefing day we were all set the task of writing a 250 word story from a press release, and part of the day was put aside to give us

feedback on our articles and to experience a simulated press conference. We were then given a 20 minute slot to write the conference up as a short news story. The briefing day provided a clear idea of what we should expect from our fellowships whilst providing us with some simple foundations in journalism. The day was rounded off with a discussion with two previous media fellows. However, it was difficult to find out exactly what the experience was going to be like for me as the Financial Times only takes a fellow every two years.

The summer is a difficult time for science writers and journalists. During this period researchers take sabbaticals, travel to conferences and take holidays, consequently strong science stories can be hard to find. I began my placement on 16<sup>th</sup> August, in the middle of the holiday period, but I had no shortage of published articles.

On my first day I was met by Clive who kindly arranged a space for me at a desk with a computer. He also arranged for someone to teach me their new writing and submission system. I was then presented me with a Royal Society press release, an issue of nature and science and told, "the UK news desk would probably like a 250 word story on this by about 4pm this afternoon, start writing and we'll go and speak to them later." Two things struck me about this request. The first was the timescale of only about 2 hours to write the article (actually pretty long for a journalist) and the length of the article; both were a stark contrast from journal writing as a scientist.

I was somewhat nervous about writing an article that nearly two million people would read, but the editorial process helped to put my mind at rest. The article was first read by Clive, who talked to me about the 'house style' and also the structure of a news story. Once filed, the news story was then edited by the UK news desk and sent on to the 'subs' for publishing.

As science editor for the Financial Times, Clive's inbox is bombarded every day by press releases and emails from company PR people, all keen to get their story published. This bombardment is very often followed up by phone calls from people trying to ensure their press release is read. One press release had caught Clive's eye. The National Science Museum in London was having a press launch for the new premium bond random number generator, ERNIE. This launch was to take place at 8am on the morning of my second day.

The launch gave me an insight into the average day of a journalist, that is, it doesn't begin before 10:30am. Clive thought that it was an interesting story but far too early in the morning, but the release said 'free breakfast and coffee' so I was sold (and it meant an opportunity to meet Johnny Ball, the science communicator of my youth).

8am Tuesday morning I arrived at the science museum amongst journalists from many of the other papers. The early time of the launch meant that none of the famous science journalists, like Tim Radford or Roger Highfield, were there but it was good to be at a real press launch. I was expecting a high pressure questioning session but for this I would have to wait for the Beagle press conference as questioning at this launch was organised individually.

At work I was excited to see if my article based on the Royal Society press release had made it to print; sure enough there it was in the UK news brief. I thought the ERNIE story was quite interesting and so began to write a short article which I would sell to the UK news desk later that day. I was also to begin thinking about writing a feature article, about 750 words on a topic of my choice.

By only the second day I became aware of the authoritative way in which journalists have to write. Furthermore I became aware of the immense breadth of their knowledge. Many of the experienced science writers at the Financial Times not only know the science in amazing detail but also understand the economic and financial background behind any companies involved. On a day to day basis they will talk with politicians, professors, and the general public about scientific issues; this involves a unique ability to talk to people on many different levels.

Wednesday's edition of the FT saw my second article in print, "Ageing Ernie told his number is up," (a title chosen by the news desk I hasten to add). The UK news desk had now become aware that there was a new writer in the science office who might benefit from writing other stories. One of the editors phoned me and asked if I could interview someone and write a case story about middle earners and the property market. This was to be the first of two non-science articles (the second was on bank holiday travel disruption!).

My task was to find a middle earner willing to talk about his or her frustration with their inability to get onto the property ladder. Time to call in my friends, I thought. The article was to be written by 3:30 pm that day along with two other news briefs on brain damage in newborn babies and natural remedies for dementia.

Interviewing your friends is very difficult, especially if you are trying to evoke emotion in them and obtain quotes. The property article was a great learning experience. It was something I knew very little about, I was using a friend as my case study and I had the pressure of a close deadline. However, the article was finished in time and published next day.

For the last couple of days of my first week I wrote stories on a new particle accelerator - my first world news story - and the proposed new 'Eden' project. The Eden story was the only story I wrote not to be published, probably due to the Times Higher Education Supplement's exclusive that had been published that day.

Clive was due to be in Stockholm for a conference for my second week at the FT and so we discussed work for the following week. I had been interested by some of the science releases linked to the Olympics and sport that had been appearing on Eurekalert and Alpha Galileo (two sources of embargoed press releases). Clive suggested that I should write the science briefing for the Friday of my second week and all was set.

The science briefing was difficult to write. So far I had written mainly UK news stories and so I wasn't initially aware that the science brief should be

international. I had planned an Olympic special science brief but later realised that it was very UK oriented. The features editor spotted this immediately and so new science briefs had to be written at short notice and the brief made general once more.

Not only was to have my name in print but also my photograph. Writers of the science briefs have their photograph at the top of the column – something I hadn't anticipated. The briefing covered Olympic research, weight loss, supernovae, and cancer treatments. I was really pleased to see the briefing in print as I had found this exercise particularly challenging.

I had a little break to get married before returning to journalism for the BA Festival of Science in Exeter. Unlike many of the other media fellows I was in the press room every day writing articles for publication. Also unlike the Telegraph and the Guardian, Clive and I were competing against other UK news stories for space in the paper. The Telegraph and the Guardian had dedicated pages especially for the festival. This said however, we had reasonable coverage. I had two 500 word stories published during the week.

The Festival was a good opportunity to catch up with the other fellows and see how they had been getting on with their placements. I certainly appeared that I had been extremely fortunate in my placement, I had published more articles than most and generally been thrown in the deep-end much more than the others.

Post festival I had one further week at the Financial Times to finish off and produce two more feature articles. The first was a result of a press conference held at the science festival and concerned Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. The second was more humorous in nature but rather appropriate - the IgNobel Awards and the communication of science.

The BA Media Fellowship had been an amazing experience and I realised as I left that I really had been a journalist for a month. I was beginning to get emails from PR companies and the new Eden project team had requested a meeting with me to discuss a possible feature on the project.

What did I learn? First and foremost, that timing is of the essence. If a journalist needs a contact, they need it now, not in three days time or next week. From a scientist's perspective you must make yourself available if you want your work to be publicised.

Secondly, long complicated sentences that people find difficult to follow, where you join lots of shorter sentences together, are really unhelpful. The writing style many scientists adopt for publishing papers is unclear and convoluted. I have gained a huge respect for science journalists. Their breadth of knowledge puts most researchers to shame and their ability to explain very difficult concepts to a lay audience is unique.

As I returned to my post as research and science communicator for the Institute of Astronomy in Cambridge I now feel better equipped to do my job. I am aware of how to write a press release that won't be ignored (and I am also aware of

how to write a truly awful release). I feel I can more accurately distinguish topics which are news worthy from those that are just too technical.

I was unsure what to expect from the placement but I certainly didn't expect to publish as many articles as I have. I have no strong desire to become a journalist as a result of my placement, but thanks to the media fellowship experience I now feel very contented and confident with my current position as a science communicator.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere thanks to Clive Cookson and his colleagues at the Financial Times. They made my experience invaluable and enjoyable and I feel very privileged to have had the opportunity to work with them. I would also like to thank the BA, PPARC and its other sponsors for organising and funding my fellowship. Many thanks also to the Institute of Astronomy in Cambridge, for supporting all my efforts to become a better science communicator.

## Financial Times Publications

17 <sup>th</sup> August 2004	UK News Digest	- Royal Society to study ocean threat
18 <sup>th</sup> August 2004	UK News	- Ageing ERNIE told his number is up
20 <sup>th</sup> August 2004	UK News	- Downhearted researcher feels trapped in rental properties
	UK News Digest	- Study finds brain damage in newborns
	UK News Digest	- Dementia treatment trials tree extract
22 <sup>nd</sup> August 2004	World News	- \$6bn particle accelerator project moves step closer
25 <sup>th</sup> August 2004	UK News	- Beagle report calls for European landing gear
27 <sup>th</sup> August 2004	Science Briefing	- Low sugar carbs aid weight loss
		- The complex puzzle of a supernova
		- Compounds use light to kill tumour cells
		- Olympic rowers awe debt to biofeedback
28 <sup>th</sup> /29 <sup>th</sup> August 2004	UK News	- Millions struggle against travel disruption
8 <sup>th</sup> September 2004	UK News	- Scientists raise health fears over looming air quality
9 <sup>th</sup> September 2004	UK News	- Giant batteries will form power plants of future
17 <sup>th</sup> September 2004	Features: Science & Health	- Brain changes help case for a dose of drugs
24 <sup>th</sup> September 2004	Features: Science & Health	- Acid test for the marine web of life
1 <sup>st</sup> October 2004	Features: Science & Health	- Scientific jokes that have a serious purpose.