

Joanne Baker – Nature Science Update

Placement

My BA Media Fellowship placement was taken up at the London offices of the science journal Nature. I spent six weeks, from 11 August to 19 September 2003, working with Editor Sara Abdulla at Nature Science Update (NSU), the on-line news arm of Nature.

Sara and her team dropped me in at the deep end, and had me writing short news pieces for the Nature web site from my first day. Over the course of the placement, I was able to write three to four news articles a week, and also contributed short summaries of science papers to Nature magazine. Beginning with somewhat-familiar astronomy topics (Mars and satellites were big news at the time), I branched out into unfamiliar terrain, writing about national parks, baboons and psychology.

Sara encouraged me to gain experience of all aspects of Nature's production, and I attended all the major meetings in the London office, including teleconferences involving international staff, and talked with people working in a range of areas, from manuscript editing to final production. In NSU group meetings I was treated like one of the team, and was expected to pitch ideas for news stories and to critique other writers' work. Having my own stories pulled apart was incredibly valuable. Familiar with having interns in the office, Nature's staff members were fun to work with, helpful and accommodating throughout my stay.

Attending the BA Festival of Science in the fifth week was the highlight of my placement. Although I had gained some experience of interviewing scientists over the telephone and had attended some press meetings in London, I was unprepared for the cut and thrust of the press room at the Salford conference. The energy was infectious. Helen Pilcher, a journalist at NSU, accompanied me for one day, but for the remainder of the meeting I was left on my own to find, pitch and write stories suitable for NSU. I managed one a day – good work for NSU but still much less than the five a day churned out by professional newspaper journalists! I found the whole experience exhilarating.

Experience gained

There is no comparison between being thrown into the hurly burly of science journalism and just being told the theory of popularising science. Practical experience leaves indelible marks.

The first thing I learned was how broad science journalists' thinking and experience is. They are constantly tuned in to the buzz of potential news, sifting vast quantities of information to spot that exciting new story. In comparison, I

was surprised at how narrow my own scientific knowledge was, even though I had a lot of facts at my fingertips.

The pace of news means journalists must get to the nub of the issue in as few questions as possible. They don't have time to look up all the science themselves, so a trusted scientist that understands the media and can tell them what they want to know is like a vein of gold. This explains why some scientists always appear in stories even when they may not be the main expert in that field. But also, I am impressed at how much information a science journalist can glean in a short time, and how few mistakes are made.

At Nature, I also saw how the manuscript selection and editing process worked for the main journal. The subject editors were much more specialised than the NSU team, and were used as in-house experts. It was enlightening to see how political and human it was – spotting a key result is not straightforward, even using external referees. But, knowing the system did make me more likely to consider publishing a scientific paper there.

Because of the breadth and pace involved, writing short, snappy news pieces is something best learned intensively. Having your articles edited by a professional was incredibly valuable, and my writing (and range of vocabulary) improved greatly over the six weeks.

Learning the tricks of journalism – such as interviewing technique - is something that takes more time, but I felt I gained insight in the time available.

Finally, I gained contacts in the media. Putting faces to names makes me much more likely to write and pitch articles in future. Also, knowing the editorial process better means I am more likely to know what kind of article they want written and how to sell it.

Expectations

My expectations were more than met. I found popular science writing harder and the pace faster than I expected, and telephone interviewing was challenging. The people at Nature were more dynamic, multi-dimensional, open and supportive than I expected and I had a lot of fun working there. They made me feel that my ideas were interesting and relevant to the public understanding of science in its broadest sense. Most importantly I found the whole experience much more exciting and fun than I had envisioned, and that has not only kick started my desire to write more but also rekindled my love of science across all its boundaries.

Future

My BA Fellowship has literally opened a door. I can now see how I can contribute to the discourse between science and society, through the media. Before this experience, I had assumed that this was not a route open to a relatively junior scientist, but now I see there are outlets for many ideas. I definitely will pursue writing, and plan to contribute articles to science magazines in future. Since

leaving, I have kept strong links with the Nature team, and am in discussions with them about writing a feature article, and maybe further collaborations after that.

Attitude of my department

Taking up the BA Media Fellowship was strongly supported by the Chair of my department, Prof. Joe Silk, who is a prolific author himself and encourages young scientists to work with the media and across interdisciplinary boundaries. He hoped I would get a lot from it, personally, and that it might create opportunities to work more with the media on astronomy projects further down the line. Another Professor, Roger Davies, saw the benefits of developing media contacts for the department and was also encouraging. Most other collaborators and staff members thought it was a useful development exercise. The DPhil. students were all very interested in my experience and had seen my articles. Most post-docs were less vocal - perhaps as it was outside the perceived norms of a scientific career.

Concluding comments

I would like to thank the British Association and Nature, and especially Sara Abdulla and her NSU team, for giving me the opportunity to experience science journalism first hand. This has increased my respect for the profession, my proficiency in science writing and my desire to participate in the process of science communication.