

Media Fellow Report 2006

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ResearchResearch report on science policy, primarily in the UK and Europe. They publish a daily email bulletin, *Research Day*, and two alternating fortnightly, *Research Fortnight* (UK) and *Research Europe*. These include extensive listings of jobs and funding opportunities, which is their principal appeal to subscribers, but RR also take themselves very seriously as a news media organisation.

Working on Research Day involved skimming 70+ websites at the beginning of each morning (Research Councils, Government departments, Hansard, &c), identifying press releases or parliamentary questions with science policy content, and writing up three or four stories, 100 - 300 words each, with varying amounts of supplementary research and interpretation - all by 2:00pm at the latest. My drafts went first to a sub-editor and then to the Head of News: what appeared in "print" at first bore no resemblance to what I had written, but by the end of three weeks was usually at least faintly recognisable.

Academics are not complete strangers to deadlines (I prefer not to remember the number of times I have sent off a conference paper or grant proposal with minutes to spare), but this was different - mastering several unfamiliar topics, well enough to convey them clearly and concisely, in an hour or maybe two each, morning after morning. I now sympathise with the journalists who occasionally phone my department asking for a quote on some current topic within 15 minutes: they're probably working to a 30-minute copy deadline!

The construction of a news story is useful to understand: all the important content is in the first sentence, completely unlike an academic paper, where the conclusion often comes at the end. Learning the finer details of RR "house style" (such as when to expand acronyms) was useful only as an illustrative example of how idiosyncratic and seemingly arbitrary house styles can be.

For anyone considering applying for a BA Media Fellowship, be aware that it is an "immersive" experience - that's a euphemism for "being thrown in at the deep end and struggling not to drown". For someone who learns best by structure and argumentation, it is unnatural and can be uncomfortable. (My case was not helped by working in a central London office without air conditioning through a vicious heat wave: the learning curve would have been easier if the physical working conditions had been less debilitating.)

The staff at RR seemed a bit unclear as to what I was doing there: I was given clear tasks to do, and supported in doing them, but there was little sense that they thought of having a science academic working with them as a more useful resource than any other temporary placement. Socially, they were warmly hospitable, and I enjoyed their company.

As RR were not interested in the BA Festival of Science - except in the unlikely event of breaking news on science policy - I was free to cover the festival for the BA website. The brief was to cover activities which were not getting national media coverage. I bagged *Science in the City*, and spent a fascinating five days running around the city of Norwich, reviewing talks and tours and exhibits, in the Cathedral, the Museum, a coffee bar etc., back to the Press Centre each afternoon to knock out one or two 400-word stories by 4:00pm, something I could not have done at the start of the fellowship. At this point I realised that I really had learned new skills in that wretched four weeks in the heat in London.

Since going back to my day job, little has changed day to day. My science colleagues have said nothing. I have had promising discussions with the Department's External Affairs Manager and the Faculty's newly appointed Press Officer, but the promise is as yet unrealised. Time will tell.

Examples of work:

ResearchResearch:

<http://www.researchresearch.com/news.cfm?pagename=newsStory&type=default&elementID=65081>

The BA website:

- Science at the Cathedral
<http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/FestivalNews/ ScienceattheCathedral.htm>
- Perspectives
<http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/FestivalNews/ perspectives.htm>
- Behind the scenes with the curator of Natural History
http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/FestivalNews/ Behind_the_scenes_with_the_curator_of_Natural_History.htm
- The BA Open Forum
<http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/FestivalNews/ TheBAOpenForum.htm>
- Brits on the moon
<http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/FestivalNews/ Britsonthemoon.htm>
- Making Space for Water
<http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/FestivalNews/ Makingspaceforwater.htm>
- Science and coffee
<http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/FestivalNews/ Scienceandcoffee.htm>
- Things behaving badly: the ergonomics of transport
<http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/FestivalNews/ Thingsbehavingbadly.htm>