

Media Fellow Report 2006

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When I found out that I was short listed for a BA Media Fellowship, I was thrilled but also slightly apprehensive. Wow, I might actually have to be a journalist! I'd written lots of academic papers and a thesis, but was still scared witless at the idea of having to write interesting pieces on topics I knew nothing about.

I was surprised when I received a call from Clive Cookson, Science Editor at the Financial Times, asking whether I'd like to work there. I had to admit I hadn't really read the paper, though Clive said that wouldn't be a problem. Inside, I was wondering whether the FT published many science articles, and whether there needed to be a business angle on all stories. Clive assured me that that wasn't the case, but explained that the FT didn't cover as much science as it used to, and I shouldn't expect to publish too many articles, though it would be busy and there would be plenty to do. I decided that working on such a high profile paper would be a great opportunity, and overall, I would be very happy to do it.

I wanted to do the placement for a few reasons – to do something different and to see if I was any good at it were factors, but mainly it was to understand how journalists decide which stories are important, and what they want from a scientist. I participate widely in a range of science communication activities, and speak to many science journalists. I hoped that doing a media placement would help me to understand the needs and priorities of a journalist.

When I found out that I had got the FT placement, I was really pleased, as were my colleagues at QinetiQ. The press office in particular and senior management were happy, though I got the feeling that some of my colleagues and managers didn't understand how it was beneficial for our department, and were unsure as to whether me taking that much time off work was in the interests of the team. In the end it was agreed I would take one week as leave, and they would allow me three weeks of time off work, which I thought was very fair.

During these four weeks, I spent three weeks working in the FT office on Southwark Bridge Road, and then one week at the BA Festival of Science, which was held in Norwich.

I took up my placement on 18th August. I arrived at 11am, and was immediately given a desk and an email address, and was writing my first story by 12! I was amazed at the efficiency. My first task was to write the weekly Science Brief which is published in the paper every Friday. This usually consists of four stories, each of about 200 words. I had to choose my stories from the Eurekalert and AlphaGalileo websites and the hundreds of press releases Clive received each day. At first I found all the stories interesting, and wasn't sure how to differentiate them. But with a bit of guidance from Clive, I started to better understand which stories had the biggest implications and which the public would find most interesting. By the end of my first day, I had written three stories! I was amazed at how productive I was. When you have to write a story in just a few hundred words and in only a couple of hours, it really focuses the mind. I went into a zone of concentration that I rarely get into in my own job. I was pleased with the way the first day went, and was looking forward to the rest of my time there.

Over the next few weeks, I wrote several stories about all sorts of things, ranging from the demotion of Pluto from planet status, obesity levels in Europe, UK flood defences and teenage brains. The other science writers and Clive were really helpful and friendly and helped me frequently. At the end of each day, I'd file a story with a sense of real satisfaction that I'd completed a task. My local news agency must have started to think I was crazy. I would rush in every morning, rifle through the FT, looking for my story. If it was in, I was ecstatic and practically skip out of the shop. If not, or if it had been shunted into the News

Digest section, I would feel absolutely terrible. But either way, after an hour or so at work that day, it would all be forgotten as you got immersed in new science stories.

I attended press conferences (alone) almost every other day which were mainly at the Science Media Centre and there would often be a couple of other BA Media Fellows present which helped. Asking questions was nerve wracking at first, though our briefing day at the BA where we had a practice run helped. And it was a real buzz asking questions starting with an introduction of "Sima Adhya, the Financial Times." The press conferences were the hardest part of my fellowship - trying to work out if information was either newsworthy or interesting and writing it down at the same time (Clive had said that dictaphones weren't generally used at the FT). Then after the press conference, I had to go down to the news desk and tell them what the "story" was to see if they were interested in it for the next day's paper, when I often hadn't worked it out as yet.

The other science writers at the FT were really helpful though, and when I told them about what had been said, they often managed to come up with a really interesting angle on something that I hadn't considered.

Coming from a space background, I was always interested in writing Space stories and managed to write quite a few. These were really fun as I got to use my own knowledge and contacts. There was one point where the Science Media Centre recommended I speak to someone to get a comment on the International Space Station, and he happened to be a lecturer from a Masters course I had attended a few years ago. I said "Hi, it's Sima Adhya, calling from the Financial Times". I don't think he remembered me, but he was very willing to chat and give me lots of information - more helpful than he ever was as my lecturer!

The third week of my placement was spent at the BA Festival of Science in Norwich and was fantastic, though extremely tiring. I had been warned we would be subsisting on wine and canapés and it really was the case. All ten BA Media Fellows were staying in adjacent rooms, and it was a great opportunity to get to know each other, and swap ideas and experiences.

We spent the whole week writing stories crammed into the Press Room with all the other science journalists from other papers, busily filling copy back to our respective offices. Many of the press conferences were very interesting, but without a real news hook, and therefore it was sometimes hard to convince the news desk back at the office that it was worthy of a write up. It was interesting to see how all the journalists worked together, often all writing very similar stories.

Overall it was a very valuable experience, and I got even more out of it than I expected. I have learnt what it's like to be on the other side of an interview, and how I can best represent myself and the work I do to the media. I also hope to keep up science journalism, by writing some freelance articles.

All in all, the BA Media Fellowship was probably the highlight of my 2006, and I am extremely grateful to the BA and the FT for allowing me this opportunity.

Examples of work:

See FT.com website

<http://search.ft.com/searchArticle?sortBy=datearticle&queryText=adhya&y=5&javascriptEnabled=true&id=060915000229&x=12>

<http://search.ft.com/searchArticle?sortBy=datearticle&queryText=adhya&y=5&javascriptEnabled=true&id=060915000299&x=12>

<http://search.ft.com/searchArticle?sortBy=datearticle&queryText=adhya&y=5&javascriptEnabled=true&id=060915000312&x=12>

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