



Natalie Starkey
Postdoctoral Research Associate,
Planetary and Space Sciences,
The Open University

The Guardian

nataliestarkey.com

The Media Fellowship

I was quite scared before starting my placement because I didn't really know what to expect. I haven't had a lot of media science writing experience so I knew that the placement would be a steep learning curve. I was keen to be involved in podcasts because the media experiences I'd had previously were in television and I'd really enjoyed them so I figured that trying out a radio-type show would be fun too.

On day one I discussed with my mentor the kinds of things I was hoping to achieve from my placement. Luckily I got what I wanted because I wrote lots of different news and blog pieces and tried out some podcasting. I got even more podcast experience at the British Science Festival too so I've had lots of practice in interviewing people now. I was expecting more time with the journalists but it turns out they are really busy the whole time – no stopping for lunch or coffee breaks. However, whenever I had questions they were always friendly and willing to help me so I didn't struggle through on my own.

Most of the time the deadlines were very short, a day at most and usually more like half a day so there was generally a lot of focussed work to get done before lunch in order to check I understood the story and had located and contacted some specialists to provide comment.

On some days I was working simultaneously on 2, or even 3, articles that all had different deadlines. This only lead to confusion when I was awaiting to hear back from specialists so when they would call me back it was a challenge to remember what I was meant to be asking them about. I found that keeping a separate page in my notebook with a list of questions for each person meant that I could quickly flick to their name and my mind was focussed straight away.

During the placement I also got to go to some press conferences which I've never done before so it was quite an insight. It was a real insight into how science journalism is done because at the end the journalists asked lots of questions to the scientists, taking care that they had understood the findings correctly and were going to present them correctly. This was really nice to see and gave me a lot of respect for them.

I was also lucky enough to be involved in the Guardian Science Weekly podcasts. The team (Alok Jha and Jason Phipps) were really fun and on day one of reporting with them I was handed a microphone and told to go and interview some people. We were at the Royal Society Summer Exhibition so there were plenty of interesting people around to speak to, it was lots of fun. I also did the science news one week and covered the story that I'd just finished writing an article on.

I had a really great time at the British Science Festival. It was a fantastic week of science which generally started with press conferences in the mornings, followed by the afternoons spent in the press office with the other media fellows and journalists writing stories or arranging and recording podcast interviews. The evenings were filled with talks and events that meant I met lots of new and interesting people. I enjoyed being immersed in this new world that is so different from my day job and I liked the challenge of preparing my interviews when I often knew very little about the subject or the person. I gained lots of confidence in interviewing which will be helpful in the future when I'm next interviewed.

Impacts

I learnt a lot about myself during the placement, for example, **I can meet very tight deadlines even when thrown in at the deep-end** and asked to report on a story I know nothing about. I also learnt that I really enjoyed rapidly picking apart a new story to understand what was important. I was really pleased with this because it meant I was thinking more like a journalist.

I've already had people in my department ask if I can help them to understand what journalists look for in a story so that they can work out how best to present their work. I've been asked to present to various groups in my department about this so that I can share what I've learnt. I was also invited to speak at a Conference to talk about my experiences.

I'm definitely going to put my new writing skills into practice by taking a few risks on my own blog and writing about some different areas of science. I hope that my new writing style will help with paper and fellowship application writing in the future.

My Fellowship Experience

"I'm not joking when I say that the British Science Association Media Fellowship is one of the best things I've ever done. I enjoyed the challenge of doing something that was so different to my normal day job in the lab. I was really thrown in at the deep end but luckily the training we were given prior to our placements really helped me on day one of my placement when it came to writing my first news piece. I learnt a lot about print journalism and I have made new contacts in The Guardian which I hope will be useful in the future when I might want to write some new pieces, or pitch ideas to them for science stories to cover in my field. I'd love to do this placement again next year."