

# Media Fellowships: learn how to communicate



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Planetary scientist **Joanna Barstow** explains why she worked on news website *The Conversation* and how it has benefited her work.

Last August I temporarily exchanged research for journalism. Swapping two quiet summer weeks in Oxford for the more intense environment of a newsroom in London was no summer holiday, but that's what I'd signed up for by applying to be a British Science Association Media Fellow. Diving in at the deep end as an assistant science editor, I learned a great deal about the delicate relationship between science and its media presentation, and why clarity of expression is an important skill for scientists.

*The Conversation* is a news website with a difference: all content is contributed by academics, who write about newsworthy issues in their fields of expertise. The editorial team is relatively small, with London staff housed in offices in City University, making for an informal and friendly working environment. My task for two weeks was to scour press releases, the arXiv and other news sites for interesting morsels of science, technology, environment and health news, then to commission and edit the resulting articles.

## BSA goals

The British Science Association has offered Media Fellowships for several years, with the aim of teaching scientists about communicating their work to and through the media. The scheme is one of the ways the BSA works to place science at the heart of culture and society in the UK. Media Fellows are expected to share what they learn with colleagues and students.

What did I learn? I discovered that August is not a good time to ask academics for content. Many of those I contacted were on holiday and unable to contribute within the required turnaround time. *The Conversation* presents slightly more in-depth articles than a newspaper, but they still need to be timely. If a contributor cannot deliver copy soon after publication of the newsworthy result, then the story will be stale. Of course, the editor has the same schedule; during the second week of my placement, when several commissioned articles appeared at once, I suddenly found myself very busy. The constant time pressure of journalism makes it a very different environment to academia.

One thing that was clear from the outset was the need for an angle on any story. As scientists, it's easy to get used to writing for an interested audience, whereas journalism requires a story to be "sold": articles need to make it very clear why the reader should care about the result being reported.

*The Conversation* treads a fine line between news and academic reporting. Contributions by experts ensure the accuracy of the presented material,

## Science writing at NAM

A workshop on science writing for the public will be held at NAM2016 on the afternoon of Wednesday 29 June – details on the NAM2016 website. I will be talking about my experience as a Media Fellow, so if you'd like to know more, come along.

<http://nam2016.org>

but there are pitfalls: the quality and suitability of articles varies. The ability to write well for the public doesn't always come with research skill or experience; a PhD student's work can be so well written and pitched that it requires little editing, while a senior academic may overshoot the target audience's knowledge level by an order of magnitude. The editor works with the author to achieve a factually correct, accessible, interesting article.

My editing style evolved rapidly. I became more ruthless as time went on, especially when articles arrived a long way over the word limit. I also forced myself to edit phrases that I personally liked, but that were too long or elaborate. I found sacrificing elegant

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language for clarity hard, but it made me realize how self-indulgent I can be as a writer. I've resolved to improve!

The editor's need for brevity and the author's desire to convey nuance can clash; it can take a few iterations before

both parties agree. Articles for *The Conversation* are not published until the author is satisfied; writing concisely from the beginning speeds up the process.

## Balancing priorities

I learned a lot about the interplay between journalism and academia – the desire for a good story and the need for accuracy. *The Conversation* balances the two by using expert writers. Academics from PhD level upwards from a contributing institution can sign up. Most pieces are written at the request of editors, but there's also the opportunity to pitch articles.

As well as working for *The Conversation*, I also spent a week as a press officer at the British Science Festival in Bradford. I was writing news pieces and interviews for the BSA blog, which allowed me to practise a different set of media skills. I'm also now part of the BSA Media Fellowship class of 2015, putting me in contact with science communicators in all disciplines. This is an annual scheme and I would encourage anyone interested to apply next January. ●

<http://www.britishsociety.org/media-fellows>  
[theconversation.com/uk](http://theconversation.com/uk)

## AUTHOR

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