Communicating Science in the Media

2015 AAAS MASS MEDIA FELLOWSHIP

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The Lede

What?
- I spent 10 weeks as a science journalist at a newspaper in Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Why?
- I want to go into science communication professionally and this is a great way to do that

How?
- I applied to AAAS for one of 20 slots based on my experience and writing samples

$$$
- I was paid for by ASPB; it’s a fully-funded internship
Science Communication Careers

- Journalist
- Exhibit designer at science center or museum
- University press officer
- Industry media relations and communications
- Copy/technical/science writer for scientific society, NGO, or think tank
- Science policy
Mass Media Fellowship

- Trains young scientists in science journalism
- Goal: Improve communication of science in the media and train scientists in communication
- 41st year
- 655 fellows
- 43% of alumni are journalists or communicators
- 82% write professionally in some capacity
AAAS MMF Alumni

- NPR: Joe Palca, Richard Harris, David Kestenbaum
- Eric Lander, co-chair of President Obama’s Council of Advisors on Science on Technology
- Edward Weiler, former director of Goddard Space Flight Center
- Neal Baer, executive producer of L&O: SVU
- Rush Holt, CEO of AAAS
- Julie Thole, PMB alum, asst. professor at SLU
How it Works

- Organized by AAAS
- Funded by outside sponsors
- Matchmaking process between sponsors and news organizations
- Fully-funded 11 week internship (10 on site)
- Open to students or recent graduates in STEM fields
- NOT open to journalism or science writing students
Sponsors

- American Association for the Advancement of Science
- Howard Hughes Medical Institute
- American Society of Plant Biologists
- American Chemical Society
- American Geophysical Union
- American Physical Society
- American Mathematical Society
- American Physiological Society
- Buoroughs Wellcome Fund
- Noyce Foundation
- ...

[293x472]Sponsors

—

[41x398]American Association for the Advancement of Science
—

[20x362]Howard Hughes Medical Institute
—

[41x327]American Society of Plant Biologists
—

[20x291]American Chemical Society
—

[41x255]American Geophysical Union
—

[41x220]American Physical Society
—

[41x184]American Mathematical Society
—

[41x148]American Physiological Society
—

[20x113]Buoroughs
—

[115x113]Wellcome
—

[20x77]Fund
—

[20x42]Noyce
—

[115x42]Foundation
—

[20x42]…
### News Sites

- NPR
- Wired
- Slate
- National Geographic
- Discover Magazine
- Scientific American
- PBS News Hour
- NOVA
- Univision
- CNN en español

- Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
- Sacramento Bee
- Philadelphia Inquirer
- The Oregonian
- Los Angeles Times
- Raleigh News & Observer
- *Science* News
- Voice of America
- KQED
Orientation in Washington, D.C.

- Meet the other MMF fellows
- Learn about university communications
- Cover interviewing techniques
- Journalism ethics
- Practice writing leads
- How to find stories
- Social media and journalism
- Happy hours, networking, tour NPR!
Sit down with Joe Palca and Richard Harris for a Q&A at NPR headquarters
- 2011 Pulitzer Prize in explanatory reporting
  - The use of genetic sequencing to save a 4-year-old from a mysterious illness and likely death
- Finalist for 2006 Pulitzer Prize with 2011 prize-winner Mark Johnson and MMF alum Kawanza Newson
  - Experimental rabies treatment
  - Story featured on Radiolab
• The result of the merger of the evening *Journal* and the morning *Sentinel* in 1995

• In the last year:
  ○ Merger with Scripps to become Journal Media Group
  ○ Buyouts

• Science editor left and was not replaced

• 3-5 health & science reporters on staff
Stories

- Universities; other reporter tips; DNR; editors
- Twitter
- Original feature ideas
  - Chemistry of fireworks
  - Physics of baseball
  - Light pollution and the Perseids
- Pitching 85%, assigned 15%
- 50% news, 50% “evergreen”
- Working on 2-5 stories at once
How to write a news story

- Science: General background -> specific background -> what was done -> what was discovered -> what’s next
- News: inverted pyramid
- What’s **new** -> why it’s important to know -> critical information -> less critical information -> most general background -> kicker
Daily Life

- Emailing to set up interviews
- Online research and reading
- 0-5 interviews a day, mostly by phone
- Sketching out stories
- Writing
- Editing
- Coordinating photos and graphics
- Searching for new stories
From Twitter to Printing Press

- Find an interesting story—Animal Enrichment Day at Zoo—from tweet about the event
- Read quickly about animal enrichment online, look for old coverage
- Ask zoo to attend event with photographer, and to do an in-person interview with zookeeper
- Get approval of editor
- Talk to photo team to get assigned a photographer
- Call AZA and ask for expert comment on enrichment
From Twitter to Printing Press

- Call AZA and ask for expert comment on enrichment
- Interview AZA expert
- Write up a few paragraphs before the event
- Prepare questions for zookeeper and interview on site
- Run around with photographer and interview visitors about their experience
- Back to the office to finish writing
- Some back and forth from editor to clarify points, improve writing
From Twitter to Printing Press

- Some back and forth from editor to clarify points, improve writing
- Finalized story, sent to copy desk
- Copy checks for errors and style, cuts for space if needed
- Slotted into page design, photos added
- Printed off site and distributed
- Arrives on your doorstep, page 3A
Wrapup in D.C.

- Poster session with sponsors and news sites
- Freelance journalist panel
- Talk with Marcia McNutt, editor-in-chief of Science
- Additional career panels
- Sharing experiences with other fellows

- 475 stories produced by the MMF and Minority Science Writers interns
  - ~400 unique stories
Wrapup in D.C.
Sound Interesting?

Write, as much as possible

- Assess your own interest
- Written record of interest in science communication
- Will help you get better
- Potential clips and ideas for more formal writing
- Yes, I mean write a **blog**
Sound Interesting?

Writing opportunities:
- Personal blog or public blogs like Medium
- WUSTL communications office press releases
- Freelancing for science news outlets
- Lab, journal, or other science organization blogs

Other opportunities:
- YSP
- Prosper
- Science center
- Outreach around St. Louis
The MMF

- Plan out when you want to apply
  - Have up to 1 year after completing degree
- Talk to your PI and committee for planning around research
- Application due in mid-January
Application

- Letters of reference
- CV
- Short responses on motivation, experience and goals
- Sample news story on recent journal article, 750 words
- 2-3 page writing sample on any topic
Tips if you speak with a journalist

- “Can I read a draft?”
  - No
  - “Can you send me the technical lines where the science is described? I’d love to help make sure it’s accurate.”

- You can ask (or stalk) them about their background—you don’t have to talk to someone you think will mess up a story

- You can ask them for what their questions are likely to be about ahead of time

- You’re on the same team, really
Tips if you want to speak with a journalist

- Summarize new or ongoing research in a short, vernacular paragraph and share
- Speak to the WUSTL public affairs office about issuing a press release
- Be active on Twitter and interact with people likely to be interested in your work
- Write blog posts about your work and share widely
- Have photos of your work to share
- Invite journalists into your lab