

Science and the Media

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Say it [short] and say it loud

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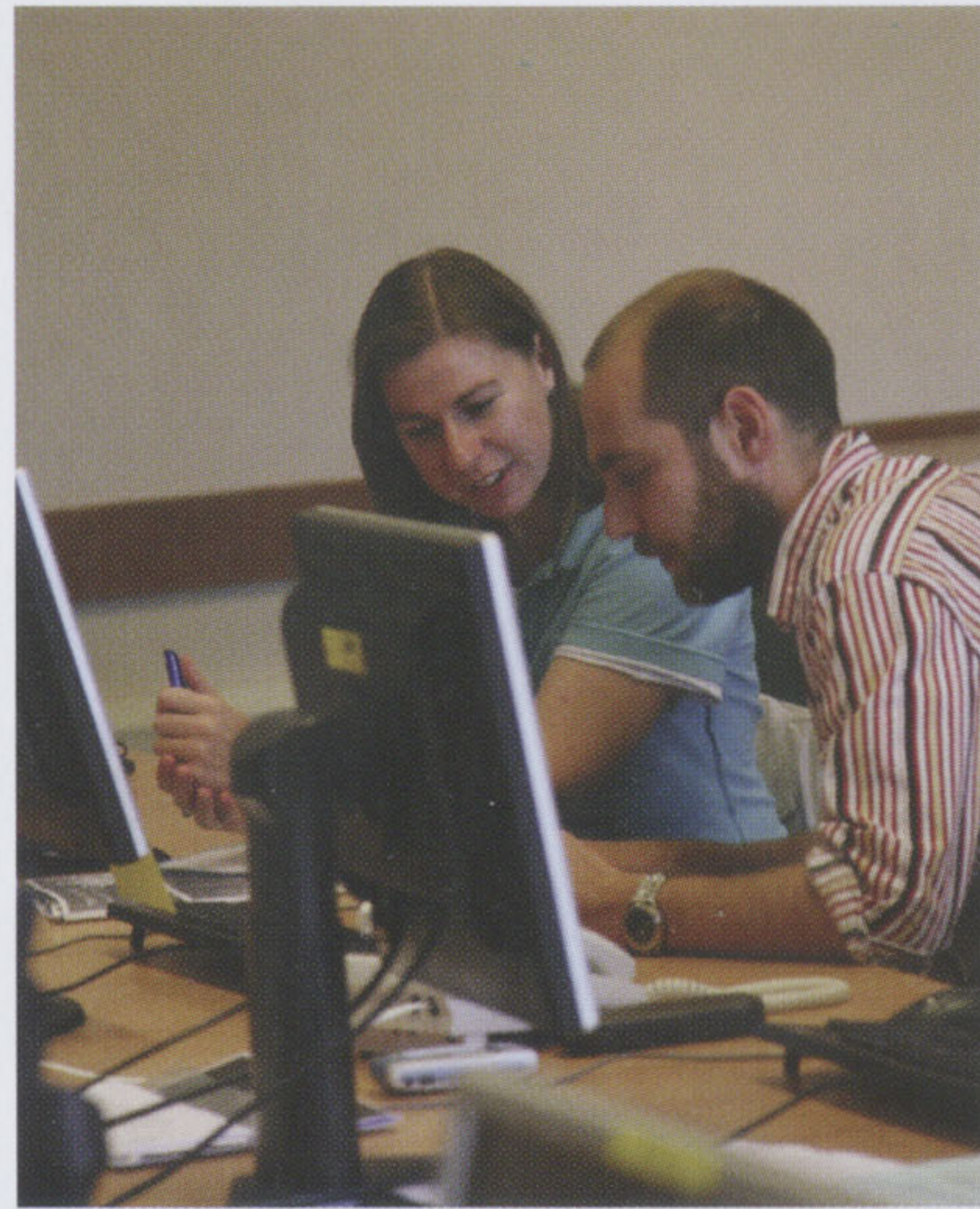
I sat down at my new desk the first morning, a pile of research papers sitting ready to be devoured, the task ahead: to turn the dense, jargoned language of a scientific research paper into something simpler and more accessible to the public. Starting this job, as a science writer for the BBC, I was struck with a familiar thought, one that I had had during the first days of my PhD: why is a scientific paper so difficult to read?

Few people have the opportunity to experience both science journalism and research science first hand, except the lucky few that receive a BA Media Fellowship.

The scheme gives practising scientists, clinicians and engineers the opportunity to work with a national press, broadcast or internet journalist for between three and eight weeks over the summer. The Fellowships are intended to create a greater awareness and understanding of the workings of the media among scientists.

This year, I received a Fellowship to work at the BBC's science and nature desk, writing online science news, a far cry from my day job experimenting with fruit flies at the University of Edinburgh. And yet, aside from the differences in working environment, pace of work and length of deadlines, I was surprised by how similar a day's work turned out to be. Much of my time was spent reading papers, judging the reliability of new findings and determining whether these findings are a substantial enough break-through to make them worthy of sharing with others, be that with other scientists or with the public.

And whether writing online news or preparing for a lab meeting, my greatest struggle in both jobs is grappling with scientific papers. I have often wished that the author(s) of a paper would use the abstract to tell the story of their research in plain language. And I have frequently wondered why scientists are so bad at condensing and simplifying their work. Could it be that scientists rarely think about their audience as they write a paper?



2007 Media Fellow Liz Seward talking to James Randerson of the Guardian

During my Fellowship at the BBC I was struck with how often I was encouraged to do just that, to remember my audience, to imagine I was 'telling my grandmother' about a new study. In doing so, the journalist relates what is already known and what is new about a study, and does so without jargon in the quickest way possible. And it is this lesson that I hope to take from my seven weeks at the BBC. When I return to the bench to write scientific papers, I want to write short, uncluttered explanations of the key findings of the paper. And above all I want to keep my audience in mind, in the hope that the reader (journalist or scientist) finds it an effortless read.

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Members of the British Ecological Society are encouraged to apply for the BA Media Fellowship scheme. If you are a practising researcher, with more than two years postgraduate experience in your field, and with an interest in science communication, then you are eligible to take part.

For application information, to read reports by previous Fellows and to sign up for email alerts, visit www.the-ba.net/mediafellows

Application deadline for 2009: 3 March

The BA (British Association for the Advancement of Science) exists to create a positive social climate in which science, and the organisations dependent on it, advances with public consent and with the involvement and active support of non-scientists.