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Communicating Science

On 23 June a major newspaper carried a front-page story about RU 486, the so-called abortion pill. According to the reporter who wrote the story, it was “. . . a great example of a situation where being a scientist was a definite plus if not a necessity. My medical background allowed me to catch several inconsistencies . . . which would have been horribly misleading to the public.”

But wait a minute. A reporter who is actually a scientist with medical training? What's the story behind the story?

The reporter in this case is a third-year medical student who is spending her summer as a working reporter, thanks to a AAAS program known as Mass Media Fellows. Typically, fellows are outstanding graduate students or postdocs who also have a strong interest in journalism. They are selected in a national competition by a committee including experienced news professionals, scientists, and AAAS staff. The competition is keen—only 15 to 20 fellows, or 10% of applicants, are selected.

Following an orientation at AAAS, fellows work for 10 weeks during the summer in a variety of news organizations across the country. This year the organizations include Cable News Network, *Newsweek*, the *Washington Post*, and radio station KUNC in Greeley, Colorado. During the program's 16 years, 262 fellows have been placed with 25 different newspapers, 4 weekly news magazines, 17 radio stations, and 32 television stations across the country. The program is supported by AAAS and donations from a number of private companies, societies, host organizations, and the National Science Foundation.

What is the experience like? Here are some comments from the class of 1990, after only a couple of weeks on the job:

- “In the newsroom, life is great, though very hectic. My editor . . . can write like the devil . . . it's a talent I'm desperately trying to learn.”

- “There are some major advantages to writing for science: the editors see science as . . . important and of interest to the public so they usually print all the science stories they get; it's technical stuff so they don't like to ‘futz’ with it, therefore your work remains untouched; and a lot of it does get to the front page.”

- “Last week was so hectic. I did research, writing, scheduled shoots, scheduled interviews, organized the props, was asked to serve as an ‘extra’ for one piece, and accompanied the ABC crew on a shoot. What a fantastic experience! I've been given so much responsibility. I'm thoroughly enjoying it all!”

The host organizations are equally positive. David Perlman of the *San Francisco Chronicle* said, “The site hosts gain insights into the nature of science and the scientific method; we give the fellows a chance to experience newspaper reporting and editing in its real-life, raw, brutal, sensational, and time-harried daily hysteria.”

Neal Best, program director at KUNC Colorado commented, “We put our AAAS fellows in the newsroom and begin educating them to the ways of radio journalism the first day. The result is marvelous—they each produce between 15 and 20 feature stories during the summer. Especially noteworthy is the fact that more than half our fellows over the past decade have received statewide recognition for their work at KUNC.”

Why does AAAS sponsor this activity? Because communicating science has been one of the principal aims of the association since its founding. And surely there has never been a time when better communication is as important as it is today.

The cumulative effect of the program is significant. Historically about 40% of the fellows have been so influenced by their experience that they actually have switched careers to science journalism. Many of these former fellows now hold responsible positions with organizations like the *New York Times*, ABC-TV's Good Morning America, National Public Radio, and *Science*.

It is to AAAS's credit that it started the program and has had the commitment to sustain it for so many years. The only criticism might be that there are too few fellows each year.—RICHARD S. NICHOLSON

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Richard S. Nicholson

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