

Interview with Anjana Ahuja – science columnist for *The Times*

My journalistic career

What sort of compromises do you as a scientist have to make to ensure clarity and understanding for the majority of your readers who are non-scientists?

The real challenge is writing for both a lay audience and an academic one, because researchers often read the press coverage in their area. The trick is not to talk down or patronize readers: *The Times* is fortunate to have an exceptionally intelligent and curious readership that can be guided willingly through tricky science. And you'd be surprised at how little jargon adds to understanding: it can be stripped out quite easily. Space is probably the biggest limitation: it's hard to explain string theory in 60 words and I probably wouldn't attempt it. But I've done it in 200 words! You can't use equations, but analogies go a long way. And you should never file a story that you don't understand.

How tough does your editor make life, e.g. hot topics that you would prefer not to cover, but your editor is keen on?

I have very accommodating editors who allow me to write about what I want. I am employed for my scientific expertise, and am the only person in the features department with a science background, so it is my duty to say if I think a story isn't worth covering or is a storm in a teacup. Two notable examples are the MMR vaccine and climate change. *The Times* was one of the few papers to support the vaccine; we have also been monitoring the climate change denial lobby very closely. But my colleagues will sometimes bring a fresh eye to stories that, while familiar to me, are less so to a layperson. These have triggered some very good round-up features on scientific subjects such as bird flu. I'm currently working on one about whatever happened to the hygiene hypothesis, inspired by an office discussion on how often people should shower or bathe.

Which of your strengths do you recognize as being the one that enables you to pick 'public interest' topics; you cover a very wide and sometimes unusual range?

I am a naturally curious, interested — some might say nosy — person. I have always been an avid reader: I read journals (it's truer to say I skim them), other newspapers, magazines like *The Economist*, *Newsweek*, *The New Yorker*, celebrity and fashion mags, and blogs. I even read *Viz*. There's a lot of science in those sources. For example, think of the scientific claims made for skincare products in the glossies; I've squeezed some decent pieces out of those. Basically, I apply the 'pub' test: if I have read about something and would tell my friends about it down the pub, it's worthy of consideration for a story.

I'll also run stuff past my husband (he's a physicist turned entrepreneur). The next step is to pitch it to my editors, and, fortunately, they're usually interested too. My only real strategy is to write stuff that interests me; arrogantly, I assume that if I can get fired up about something, readers will share my enthusiasm. Remember, as well as being a journalist, I am also a mother, a wife, a taxpayer and a consumer; just like anyone else, I want to read about stories relevant to those aspects of my life.

How helpful and responsive do you find UK academics (in comparison with those in the USA who understand about public profile for their science)?

There used to be a marked difference between the approachability of British and American academics. I think media involvement used to be regarded as quite tacky or self-serving; now, the media are positively courted. I am inundated with prospective stories; if anything, university departments seem desperate for coverage. Early on in my career, it was not unknown for academics to put the phone down on me once I said I was a reporter. Now, researchers realize that public support is very important, and you can't attract that without telling people what you do and why it is important to their lives. Climate change, vaccines, infectious diseases, new nuclear reactors, GM crops...it is hard to think of a major research field that does not affect the public directly.

How, from a PhD in physics, did you get into writing?

I always loved writing, even as a little girl. Once I'd read every book in my primary school's library, my teachers used to excuse me from English classes so I could write my own stories. I decided to study science at A-levels, was quite upset I couldn't do A-level



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English too, and tried to keep my hand in by starting a college magazine. I wrote occasionally for *Felix*, the Imperial College magazine (where Pallab Ghosh, the BBC science correspondent, also started) and then, during the PhD, was a runner up in *The Daily Telegraph* science writing competition. I saw my chance, and started offering space science stories to the *Telegraph* and *The Guardian*. Once I finished writing up my thesis, I decided I'd take the plunge and see if I could make a go of science journalism. I got on to a newspaper journalism course at City University, sponsored by *The Guardian*, which had some valuable work placements at the *Manchester Evening News* and *The Guardian*. I applied for trainee journalist posts at the BBC and *The Times*, and was very fortunate to be offered both. Print journalism is my first love, so *The Times* won, hands down. I have no regrets. I still keep in touch with my PhD supervisor, who was very supportive of my career change, and take great pride in the fact that my thesis is still regarded in my department as a model of good writing (if not good science!).

How financially rewarding is your career?

I am very lucky to be paid for doing my hobby, really. Once you reach a national newspaper, the pay is very good (although local newspaper salaries are close to the poverty-line). Within a few years of joining *The Times*, I was earning more than a professor, and my part-time salary (I have a daughter at school) still allows me to lead a comfortable life in London. The best newspaper columnists can command six-figure salaries (seven-figure if you're a celebrity). It really is a free market: there are no set pay scales, and rival newspapers are often prepared to give you a hefty rise to switch allegiance. Having said that, it is not the stablest of professions; the media industry is a competitive, expensive industry in which people can be sacked at whim. I feel lucky to still be here 14 years after joining. Many journalists can double or triple their salary by going into marketing or PR. It's not something that currently appeals.

But the rewards are not only financial. There are other perks of the job: my family has been on some fabulous free holidays that I've written up for the travel pages (including

one on a private island), and working for *The Times* gives you access to people and places that would normally be impossible to reach.

What do you do in response to criticism from the purists who disagree with your translation from scientific language to everyday?

I get surprisingly little criticism, which means either that I'm doing okay or nobody is reading me. Actually, researchers whose work I've covered are often grateful for the translation; one researcher I interviewed told me that he would use my article to finally explain to his mum what he did all day! But I enjoy sparring with readers. All our articles are posted online, and readers are invited to leave their comments. I try to do them the courtesy of replying. Readers sometimes ask me to justify what I've written, point out interesting papers or tell me something I haven't thought of, for which I'm always grateful. Sometimes you just get sheer abuse — whenever I write pieces supporting vaccination, for example, it brings out the naysayers — but you have to take it all in your stride and realize that some people adopt a more faith-based, as opposed to evidence-based, approach to science. In those cases, you have to agree to differ.

Who, if you had one, was your role model or influenced you?

I didn't have a role model in terms of my journalistic career, although reading *The Double Helix* by James Watson, aged 16, was a seminal moment. It inspired me to pursue both science and science writing. I didn't know any journalists when I was growing up — my dad was a teacher and my mother a nurse — but I knew I wanted to get to Fleet Street. There are scientists, writers and philosophers whose work I respect and admire, such as Peter Singer, Steven Pinker and *Times* columnist William Rees-Mogg and *FT* columnist Lucy Kellaway, creator of the very funny Martin Lukes column. You never get dud pieces in *The New Yorker*, either. I often read these people and think I wish I could have written that.

What music do you have in your iPod/car cd player?

I'm not even going to try to be cool here. If I had an iPod — I won one in a caption-writing competition, but gave it to my husband — it would be full of Radio 4 downloads, like *Start the Week*, *Thinking Allowed*, *All in the Mind* and *Last Word*. In the car at the moment, I listen to XFM, Virgin and Radio 4, Kate Bush, Foo Fighters and Turin Brakes. I sometimes like a bit of eighties dance music. I'm a big fan of the NME Essential Bands CD compilations, which allow me to kid myself that I'm still young and popstastic. ■

Anjana Ahuja joined The Times in 1994 as a graduate trainee. She holds a PhD in space physics from Imperial College London and analysed data from the Ulysses mission to the Sun's magnetic poles. In her Science Notebook she writes about science, medicine and technology, and their impact on society.