

Media Fellow Report 2008

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The Placements.

The first placement was at BBC News Online science and technology desk where I covered daily science news. This involved keeping abreast of the weekly science stories from the top science journals, reporting on breaking science stories and attending London-based press conferences.

The second placement was at the BBC Science Radio Unit where I worked on projects for the programmes 'Material World' and 'Science in Action'. This involved interviewing scientists to assess whether they would be good guests for the show and writing scripts. I also conducted my own interview both in studio and in the field.

The Reality...

Working at the BBC was much like working in an academic institution, except the BBC heat their buildings. On an average day working for the BBC News science desk, I read a couple of scientific papers, discussed the validity of the science with my colleagues and drank several cups of tea - not far from how I spend my time as a scientist, minus the lab work. The key difference between jobs, other than the subsidised tea, is the speed with which I was required to complete a task. As a reporter I read a scientific paper, called an expert to flesh out the story and get a few helpful quotes to liven the piece, and had 600 words down on paper by home time. This is pretty different from the weeks of slogging over writing a single scientific paper, and required a drastic readjustment to how I dealt with deadlines. A deadline went from something that I dreaded, to something that I dealt with daily and so in being less anticipated, became easier to work toward.

With the speed of turn around and range of subjects that science journalists cover, you might assume the journalists absorb little. But you would assume wrong! I went into this Fellowship with my own set of misconceptions, and within the first few days had them shattered. I met journalists who had been following fields of research for years, who were able to reel off the top names and major breakthroughs in a field. I was surprised by how often journalists were put in a position where they had to make a judgement about whether a new finding is a significant enough breakthrough to be considered worth reporting. And I realised that so much of the skill of being a science writer is judging a story.

My second misconception was that journalists report and only report. Although the reporting remained opinion free, the moral and ethical decisions about whether to expose or unveil a new scientific finding were often discussed extensively. While working at the BBC's Radio Science Unit, I frequently heard journalists discussing whether they were feeding yet another story to an already confused public. Questioning whether we need another story about what we should and shouldn't eat, or unveiling another new and worrying side effect of a vaccination, without considering the full consequences of an un-immunised population. Considering the ultimate outcome of exposing a new science story seemed to play on the minds of journalists. And it made me wonder whether scientists shouldn't also be engaging

with these questions.

My greatest struggle.

Whether writing online news or preparing for a lab meeting, my greatest struggle in both jobs was to grapple with a scientific paper. 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?

During my Fellowship 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: to write short, uncluttered explanations of the key findings of the paper, and above all keep my audience in mind, in the hope that the reader (be they a journalist or a scientist) finds it an effortless read.

On returning to the bench.

On returning to the world of research I found that some of my colleagues were a little dismissive of the placement and it was made quite clear to me that they saw it as a waste of my time, and that it would be better spent focused on my academic work. However, generally my colleagues were very excited to hear about my experiences and I have since been asked, by a handful of them, how to pitch a story to the media.

My Thanks.

My thanks to the BA and especially Nigel Eady for making it happen, for my lab mates for encouraging me to apply, the other Media Fellows for being such a fun and interesting bunch of scientists, and the teams at both BBC News Interactive and BBC Radio Science Unit, especially Jon Amos and Martin Redfern for their ongoing encouragement.

Appendix:

Articles Written for BBC News Online during the Fellowship:

Bees join hunt for serial killers

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7530666.stm>

Stroking reveals pleasure nerve

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7610383.stm>

Beatles' tunes aid memory recall

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7603286.stm>

Fusion power seeks super steels

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7607473.stm>

Foods 'should label up eco-costs'

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7604996.stm>

Magic 'boosts pupils' confidence'

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7612210.stm>

Ocean mission delivers first maps

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7533921.stm>

Geological mapping gets joined up

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7535379.stm>

Hungry seals 'steer by the stars'

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7532867.stm>

World's smallest snake discovered

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7537932.stm>

Elastic electronics see better

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7543987.stm>

Ancient shark had colossal bite

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7540835.stm>

Pet dogs can 'catch' human yawns

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7541633.stm>

Sub to make deep Caribbean dive

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7547695.stm>

Arsenic-munching bacteria found

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7558448.stm>

Southern seals sample salty seas

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7550199.stm>

For links to articles see: <http://jennycarpenter.com/Journalism.html>

Packages made for BBC Radio Science Unit during the Fellowship:

I researched, wrote scripts and helped edit and produce the following programmes:

BBC Radio Four's Material World. Episode: A Musical Memory Tour.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/science/thematerialworld_20080911.shtml

BBC Radio Four's Material World. Episode: Facial Recognition.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/science/thematerialworld_20081002.shtml

BBC World Service's 'Science in Action' on how sounds are masked, and how the human brain has evolved to cope in a noisy world.

For links to articles see: <http://jennycarpenter.com/Radio.html>