

Louise Cross – BBC Countryfile

I was in a bit of a dilemma about whether to accept the placement I was offered. Firstly I was convinced that I hadn't got through as I only heard a few days before the training day that I had been accepted, going to Birmingham was a bit daunting, and I was trying to finish writing up my PhD. To top it all I had just over 3 months to plan my wedding! However, I was really excited and felt that it was an opportunity I couldn't turn down.

In June I joined the other 2003 Media Fellows for the briefing day. This was a really interesting day and really fired me up to get going on my placement. The training we were given through attending a simulated press conference and then writing a newspaper article within fifteen minutes was really eye opening, and taught us a lot about the pressure some journalist work under. I came away feeling fortunate not to be working in newspapers! I think this sort of training/introduction to the media should be something offered more widely to scientists, as it was a very valuable and informative experience.

My placement took place over the summer at the BBC in Birmingham where I was placed in the Countryfile team.

The first thing that struck me about working in the media (or television in particular) was the hours that they kept. Work started at around about 10 o'clock and finished at about 5pm. This was a bit of a shock after working from 7:30am-late in a lab! It was like having a weekend lie in every day!

The first day (and first Monday of each week) started with a team meeting where they discussed the programme from the week before and generally gave themselves a pat on the back and agreed that they had done a very good job! It took a while to get used to the lingo, such as wondering what JC meant- until I figured out it's the pet office name for John Craven.

I was quite impressed that even after working on the programme all week all members of the team spent their day off critically watching the programme!

My first week was taken up with watching the 10 hours of very thorough BBC safety video, which was quite interesting and amusing at times. It was like watching a twisted version of Aunties Bloomers but the clips were a lot more dangerous, such as Anthea Turner getting blown up by a misfiring canon! It was also interesting to see the safety side of things that I wouldn't be working on during my placement, such as filming with audiences, animals and firearms!

Every day started with checking through all the newspapers for potential stories of an environmental/rural nature, however during my placement I was unable to successfully follow up any leads. Often a whole day would be spent on the phone trying to follow up a story but the people needed for questioning were away on holiday.

As a botanist I was told that the team wanted to use my knowledge and experience and so I started researching a story which was broadly based around the topic of my PhD research, invasive species. The Countryfile team had wanted to produce a story on Japanese Knotweed, and so I took this as my story.

Researching the story was a bit similar to the process of scientific research, but actually involved speaking to the people in question which was a bit daunting! Working in a lab and researching from journals and periodicals, you tend not to question authors directly, so it was quite intimidating at first and interesting to talk to people whose work I had been studying for my own PhD research. Of course, saying you were calling from the BBC immediately got lots of people interested in taking part in the programme!

It was impressive to see how easily the researchers on the programme were able to grasp stories and talk to experts with such confidence and understanding of the issues. I was also fortunate to find that the scientists I interviewed were all very able to adapt their knowledge to the viewers, and were keen to communicate their research to a wider audience.

I think I was quite lucky that my story came together very quickly, but for a lot of my time at the Countryfile Office I was struggling for things to do, other than read the newspapers, or browse the internet. The timing of my placement was unfortunate as many of the office were away on holiday, the summer being a very quiet time for them. I was allotted about 3 weeks to research the story, but found that at most one and a half weeks was more than enough time to figure out what angle people were going to take and what they were going to say.

After a story is set up, a schedule is produced for every shoot, which summarises who is going to say what, which angle it will take, filming requirements, travel arrangements and contact details. It was all very well organised. From this the director writes a treatment which summarises the story and running order and is used to write up the programme for the programmes web page.

John Craven was set up to present the piece and with the director went down to Cornwall to film the first piece. Unfortunately I was unable to accompany them on this trip, but met up with them in Ascot, Berks to film an interview with the scientist involved in the story.

I also got to film the "links" which involved driving round till we found some nice background scenery relevant to the programme and filming a short 30 second piece which would later be used to link the programme, for example, "...and now for the weather report..."

It was interesting to be filming a scientist and I was very impressed with the professionalism of the presenter and the way he was able to get a hold of the issues involved in the story so quickly. I was quite amazed to see how much effort and time goes in to filming an interview which will be cut down for the final version. About 3 hours filming was eventually cut down to about 2 minutes.

I was able to spend a day in the edit suite putting my story together, which was by far the most interesting part of the placement. About 6 hours of filming were cut and spliced in minute detail, millisecond by millisecond. It was interesting (and worrying!) to see how two different sentences that basically say the same thing can be spliced seamlessly together to make a new sentence without the fumbles. The finished result is that the interviewee speaks much more eloquently and precisely but the words didn't come out of their mouth in that order.

The voiceovers for the pieces when the presenter is not on camera were also interesting to watch. It was impressive that the presenters can cut down a script so that it perfectly fits the allotted time, which is often just a few seconds to get a lot of information into.

I think this has helped me to see how it is possible to cut information down for a non scientific audience, and the importance of taking a step back from the details of the story has helped me to put my research into perspective.

During my last week, after being reminded throughout my placement that I was there so that I could be a "plant science expert" for the team, I was quite surprised to see that two stories directly related to plants were being researched. I would have loved to have been allowed to help out on these stories too, but made do with giving the researcher a crash course science lesson in photosynthesis!

I think that this experience was very worthwhile, and I realised that the media can be a very positive influence. It was also great to see how it is possible to raise the profile of ones work through the media, and to understand how to get media attention.

As a PhD student, my department were very supportive but didn't really feel that what I learnt would benefit them directly. However, they were all very excited that I had met John Craven and Michaela Stachan!

The team at the Countryfile office were lovely and made me feel really welcome. I think my advice for next year would be to maybe shorten then length of the placement if during the summer, or place it so that it happens at a time when the office is busier! (Also, on a technical side, I would try and place next years fellow in accommodation nearer to the BBC centre, as it would often take an hour and a half to get to and from work by public transport, but was a distance of only a few miles).

I'd like to thank the BA for giving me this experience however, and would recommend it to any other aspiring science communicators!