

## Nicola Lower – BBC Countryfile

The advertisement for the British Association's Media Fellowship scheme was included in an 'opportunities alert' bulletin which is circulated to staff at CEFAS on a monthly basis. The advert immediately caught my attention with its aims to teach Fellows about the workings of the media, and to become better equipped to communicate their expertise. I had had some limited experience with the media due to the commercial nature of some of my research. This had mainly involved the production of promotional films, but also a few television, newspaper and magazine interviews. Seeing my work presented in glossy pictures and words was very exciting, and it was satisfying to know that all the hard work that had gone on behind the scenes was of interest and relevance to the general public. I therefore knew that I wanted to gain more experience in the science media.

My line manager and employers were very supportive of my application, and agreed to me taking an eight-week secondment. Fortunately my application was successful and I was extremely pleased when I got a phone call from the BA saying that BBC Countryfile had offered me a placement. Although I would have been happy with a placement from any of the other hosts, I was really hoping that I would be placed in the television media, and top of my list was Countryfile.

Soon after the phone call I joined the rest of the Media Fellows for a briefing day in London. This proved to be a very interesting and informative day. It was great to meet the other applicants, and to get a chance to hear from some of the previous years' Fellows. It was also good idea to have a simulated press conference and then have to write a newspaper article within fifteen minutes. This gave some impression of the pressure journalists have to work under, and I learnt much about journalistic style from this exercise. Overall I came away from the briefing day feeling very excited about the scheme and was really looking forward to starting my placement.

Waiting in the reception of BBC Birmingham two months later however, I felt more apprehension than excitement. As I am now settled into my science job, I had forgotten all about first-day nerves. Not only was it a new place, new people, but also work which I had absolutely no experience with. But as I walked down the corridor, past photos of John Craven and Michaela Strachan, I reminded myself that this was a great opportunity and one not available to many people.

Of course everyone in the Countryfile team turned out to very nice and friendly, and on that first morning I watched Sunday's programme on videotape. This was in preparation for the weekly production meeting. These meetings are an opportunity for the team to discuss the programme, such as the content of the individual films, any problems encountered by the director, stories for the following week, as well as the presenter's clothing! Generally these meetings

turned out to be quite congratulatory affairs, which contributed to an overall pleasant working environment.

The rest of the week was spent completing the BBC's marathon safety course and getting used to the very different office environment. As a scientist you become used to health and safety regulations for work in and out of the laboratory, but I was not expecting the BBC to have such strict regulations. But as I learnt, filming can involve a lot of people and a lot of equipment. Filming can also take place in hazardous locations so it is important that everyone is aware of the risks. The interactive course took ten hours to complete and was impressively thorough, and although guess work was involved in a large proportion of my answers, I passed and was then free to go out on shoots.

As a scientist, you also tend to be used to relatively quiet working environments. The Countryfile office however, was different. It is quite a large open-plan room with about fourteen people, all of whom spend a lot of time on the telephone, or watching tapes, so it made for quite a busy, noisy office. To start with I didn't think that I'd ever be able to concentrate with so much else going on around me, but of course, after a while you get used to it and are able to get on with your own work. Making telephone calls within earshot of so many people took a long time to get used to though. Especially when everyone else sounded so confident, and at ease with whatever subjects they were discussing.

The second week of my placement was spent at the BA Festival of Science at Leicester University. All Fellows went as Members of the Press and this was a really fantastic way to see how the science media worked. To be able to attend press conferences alongside well-known journalists and see how they worked was a real eye-opener. It was amazing to see how hard they all worked, under tight deadlines, to produce accurate stories. It was a great insight to be able to listen to the questions asked by these journalists as they gathered enough information for the story, or to try and pick-up the 'line' or angle that the journalists would take. Having sat in these fifteen minute press conferences, it was amazing to see that one aspect of the discussion was then headline news the next day.

As Countryfile do not report directly from the conference I had the chance to attend both a wide variety of talks and press conferences (as well as many free parties, which was a great perk to having a press pass). It was interesting to attend talks on subjects that I had no knowledge of and by the end of the week I did find that my thought patterns had changed. I found myself trying to look out for the line that would make the story newsworthy, rather than just listening to what was being presented. I tried to pick out stories that would be of interest and relevance to the Countryfile audience, and found myself becoming quite focused on this aim so that otherwise interesting research was rejected if it was not relevant. I could then see how journalists could tell very quickly if a story was newsworthy or not, and once they had their line, what additional information they needed. This also explained why very few journalists went to any of the lectures. Most of the information they needed could be conveyed very quickly and concisely in a press conference, although of course tight deadlines also contributed to this.

Being able to listen to a variety of scientists present research at the Festival also really reinforced the point that how you communicate your science makes a great deal of difference to whether a story is reported on. Communicating the key points clearly and concisely is a vital skill, as is having some idea of the line, or the relevance to a wider audience. I was also lucky enough to see arguably one of the greatest science communicators give a press conference, Sir David Attenborough. It was interesting to see even the brashest journalist listen in silence. Having this opportunity to meet David Attenborough (and have my photograph taken with him!) was a highlight of the Fellowship.

After the hectic Festival week it was back to the Countryfile office to get into the job of a TV researcher. Typically a day would begin by checking through two or three of the daily newspapers. Any interesting and relevant stories were entered onto a shared file and stored for future reference. I found it impressive that the researchers were so aware of current affairs, and had knowledge of a wide range of issues. It made me realise that you can become too engrossed in your own particular expertise, and that it's always useful to have some idea of what else is going on.

My first task was to carry out some research into genetically-modified fish, which then expanded to GM agricultural animals in use worldwide. This was for a future joint production between Countryfile and Radio 4. The research aim was therefore pretty wide and I was glad that at least some of the subject was at the edge of my knowledge. Plucking up the courage to phone experts was the hardest barrier to overcome. However, I found that once you said you were calling from the BBC the majority of people were very nice! It was difficult to sometimes keep up with the information that was given to you over the phone, and to also ask relevant questions. Again, I was very impressed with the researchers who did this every day, on vastly different subjects, and who had no science background. It did help in some of my conversations that I had some knowledge of the subject, but the information still had to be conveyed to the producers, and subsequently to the audience, in a simplistic way. It was also important to be able to gauge who would be suitable for communicating the story on television, and of course, if they would be willing. Although you may be speaking to the leading expert in that field, if they can't convey the information in an effective way, they may not be the best person to interview.

I found the process of researching a story similar in parts to the science research work that I carry out. The thought process seemed to me to be very logical and scientific in style. You start off with an aim, or story idea and then have to gather any background information. The story then has to be told, or illustrated by the interviewees who each put across their viewpoint, in a similar way that experiments will illustrate by proving or disproving a point. The major difference is the timescale involved. Results in science are very long-term and I found it very satisfying that you could see the end result in television within a week or two.

I was also surprised at how much effort went into the research stage. Every effort was taken to ensure that the information was accurate. This is something

that continued throughout the production process as well. Last minute phone calls were often made to check that a fact or figure was correct. It is perhaps not surprising that Countryfile make such an effort to present factually-correct items -reputation is important to them. But it does say something about the impression I had of the media before I began the placement, and I am glad to say that this bears no resemblance to the impression I now have.

I enjoyed learning about other people's work, and being able to look at it from a non-science perspective has taught me that it is important to sometimes take a step back from your own work. This is something that I have definitely taken on board and I now find it much easier not to get bogged down with the details. Of course this is not always possible in science, but in communicating science it is a vital skill. This point was brought home to me when I presented a possible story idea to the producers based on my own research. I was really pleased when they accepted it as I could see how it could be an interesting and relevant film. However, when I began to do more research on it I did find that I was perhaps too closely involved with the subject to present an objective view. Once I discussed the story with the director and the producer however, I was able to see the points in a logical way again.

It was a really fantastic opportunity to be involved in this story, from start to finish. I had to put together the research brief that detailed all of the background information that the director and presenter would need. I then had to look into possible interviewees who would present a balanced discussion on the research. This information is then summarised on a Schedule, which in addition details all of the filming logistics, such as contact numbers, travel details, accommodation, meeting places, timings and interviewees. This can be one of the hardest parts of the process, and requires good organisational skills. Finding a photogenic location for the filming was also a challenge, as well as to try and determine possible locations for things like GVs (general views). From this information the director then writes a treatment, which details the running order of the final piece, information to be included by the interviewees and the presenter, as well as possible shots.

I was lucky enough to be able to go out on the shoot, which was on Loch Fyne. It was great to see how the story took shape. I was also really impressed with the presenter Charlotte Smith, who understood the story very quickly and was able to write some great pieces to camera that conveyed the information in a very concise and effective way. Before my placement I did not know that some of the presenters had so much input into the script. Filming was a lot of fun and it was interesting to see how the technical side worked, and how interviewees would be asked to repeat one or two key phrases that the director knew would be important to the finished piece. It is amazing how little time the interviewees actually have on screen, and I learnt that you really need to be able to point your camera across as succinctly as possible.

The final piece really took shape in the edit suite though, which is a time-consuming process. I found it fascinating to watch as the interviews were edited, the pictures and music added, and the pieces to camera put in order so that a clear, balanced story was presented. Adding the voiceover also made a

real difference to the final piece and it was interesting to see how each word counted. Timing is vital in the whole process, and there is no space for irrelevant points.

I was really pleased with the finished film and felt very proud seeing it broadcast on BBC 1. As the story was an exclusive report the series producer had put together a press release on the item. My name and number was given as contact on this and it was a new experience having BBC News 24 and Five Live phone me and ask for interviews as I drove back from Birmingham. I did arrange for a colleague to give interviews over the weekend and by the Monday the story had had quite a lot of media coverage, both in the television and the newspapers. I wrote a press release for our own website, and found it amazing the way the publicity escalated. The next week Rick Stein came to give a talk at our lab. In the course of this he mentioned that he had been watching BBC News 24 in his hotel room in Istanbul and had seen an interesting new development in fish pheromones. Of course this turned out to be an edited version of the Countryfile item, but I couldn't believe how the story had travelled.

I think that this experience taught me (and I hope my colleagues) that it is possible to get positive media attention and to raise the profile of your work. I really believe this is an important point. I think the science that we carry out is interesting and that we really do have an obligation to communicate the results to the wider audience. Colleagues that were aware of my media fellowship thought that it was a great idea, although everyone that I told about my placement to Countryfile, without exception, asked one question. 'Did you meet John Craven?' For the record, I did. And he's very nice.

I learnt so much during my time at Countryfile and could have written about many more experiences. I am really grateful to the whole team who made me feel welcome and took the time and trouble to explain things to me, especially the director who took me out on shoots and allowed me to get involved in all stages. I do miss the buzz of working at the BBC and seeing people like Tom O'Connor in the canteen! But, I am glad to be back working in my science job although I do now know that I really want to become more involved with communicating science. So, from my point of view the Media Fellowship scheme has been a great success.