

Media Fellow Report 2007

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I joined the Countryfile team in BBC Birmingham at an interesting time. The BBC had just come under fire for misrepresenting the Queen in a programme trailer and for the rigging of phone votes. In my first weeks, I attended a staff briefing about the importance of honesty and audience trust and the ten-point plan that the head of the BBC was putting into place to ensure that these events weren't repeated. During my placement this idea of being honest with the viewer was often raised, but it also became clear to me what a difficult job it can be to entirely adhere to this due to the nature of TV and journalism. For example, with only one camera it is very difficult to film both the faces of the interviewer asking the question and the interviewee answering it at the same time, so shots need to be repeated and spliced together to make better representation of the interview for the viewer. Equally, interviews for any media outlet (TV, newspaper etc) are always much longer than portrayed and have to be cut down to fit, with the journalist extracting the most interesting and relevant quotes and the bits that they think will help progress their story.

This demonstrates the most important lesson I learnt from the BA Media Fellowship scheme: scientists need to be very clear what their point is and provide short and snappy summaries. Journalists are after statement of fact and the bottom-line and are not interested in the uncertainty involved in results. This can be difficult for scientists who are used to having to discuss the errors involved in their work, but the worst thing for a journalist is a statement of the type "X probably could cause Y under the right circumstances". Concise and authoritative statements of fact using non-technical language are what are required. This message came out loud and clear during my placement both at the briefing day in London and from all the journalists and researchers I worked with at the BBC.

During my time at Countryfile I worked on and followed through stories including the animal disease Bluetongue and the forthcoming Marine Bill, and researched locations in Suffolk from which a future show could come from. I quickly learnt that a researcher's most valuable tools are the internet and the telephone. Researching the various stories I was involved in meant that I got to speak to a huge range of people that I would never have otherwise considered trying to contact by telephone. In general, I found that people were very helpful and open to answering questions. I'm sure that using the name of a well-known media outlet, i.e. the BBC, and saying that I was from Countryfile greatly facilitated this. It is interesting to consider that although the BBC was undergoing audience trust issues at this time, people's helpfulness and willingness to contribute must have been due to a general trust of and respect for the BBC and the programme.

My background from the Met Office meant that I already had some knowledge of Bluetongue disease and was able to tap into experts in this area so I was asked to research this for a lead story for the programme. What I learnt from talking to the other researchers and following through the process myself is that before talking to a

scientist the researcher will normally have read a press release or other article about the subject and in the case of Countryfile searched for additional information on the web. This means that they will already have an idea of what the story is that they want to convey. People are obviously always keen to promote their own work and areas of responsibility (particularly in the case of regions which might be used for location pieces) and it is the journalist's job to ensure that a balanced picture is presented. Consequently conflicting opinions and alternative viewpoints are often looked for. This isn't necessarily to discredit one person, but to demonstrate the wider picture to the audience.

Having spoken to a variety of contacts, the researcher will then gather together all the information that they have obtained and write a detailed document. They will then write more specific briefs and fact sheets summarising the most important details. This means that many pieces of information will be lost if they have not been identified as essential and highlights the need for scientists and interviewees to be very selective and brief with the information they impart. Because researchers talk to many people whilst putting together the details of a story, it is likely that the views of some people they speak to will not be represented in the final piece. Similarly researchers may ask many people if they're prepared to appear or contribute, but then not require everyone.

In addition to researching the stories that had been assigned to me, I also pitched some story ideas to the production team. This required doing background research to ensure that they were viable stories and writing a story 'top-line' for each one. The most useful advice I received on how to do the top-line came from one of the show's presenters Juliet Morris who said that "for any story think of how you would describe it for a Radio Times description". I think this really sums up the way a story should be presented to the public and as scientists we are often very bad at approaching things in this way.

Whilst with the Countryfile team I was able to take part in or observe every part of the programme making process, from the discussion of future lead story ideas to seeing Sunday's show being put together complete with the credits in the compilation edit. A huge number of people are involved in each show and watching the editors and sound dubbers at work in their studios showed what a real skill it is to put a programme together. Even whilst sitting in the same room watching them at work it still felt like there was a degree of TV magic going on.

One of the highlights of my time at Countryfile was going on the Marine Bill film shoot to Lyme Bay and being able to follow the programme process through all the way to seeing it on the TV that weekend. I thoroughly enjoyed the film shoot and learnt a lot from everyone involved, both about the process of filming and how interviews are conducted. I also helped with obtaining some film of the sea-bed from a local diver. This involved probably the first use by Countryfile of ftp transfer of digital film clips to BBC Birmingham, which allowed the footage to go straight into the edit studio/suite. This saved the money and time that would have been required to digitise the clip from a DVD onto video and into the edit system. Also due to the short time available the clips may have otherwise not been obtained by post in time.

Scientists use file transfer techniques like ftp very frequently to move data between different national and international groups and so this I hope was an example of how the media can also benefit from scientific knowledge.

Charlotte Smith filming a link for the Marine Bill story on the Cobb at Lyme Regis.



A second highlight was designing and scripting the midge 'forecast' for the Bluetongue story. This required liaising with the BBC Weather Centre and working out what they could add to their everyday weather forecast graphics for the midge story. Seeing this forecast being presented on the programme by a proper BBC forecaster felt like a real achievement. Other stand-out moments included having my location idea accepted for a forthcoming show and singing happy birthday to John Craven, the show's main presenter, in a Birmingham restaurant.

Having been immersed in the world of TV media at the BBC for six weeks, I then attended the BA Festival of Science in York with the rest of the Media Fellows. This was a very different experience and extremely valuable. At the Festival I joined the team that was writing stories for the BA website. This was an entirely different form of journalism and involved attending press conferences at the Festival in the morning and then writing up 300-500 word articles by the middle of the afternoon for submission to the website editor. It was an exhilarating week and the tight deadlines meant that the days flew by. Attending press conferences and sitting in the press room surrounded by journalists from all the major UK papers gave a real insight into this part of the media and showed how knowledgeable they are about all aspects of science. It was really enlightening to see how the journalists discussed the press conferences afterwards and picked out what they thought the story was. An example that really stuck with me was how similar a story I had written for the website was to one that was published in one of the broadsheets on the same day. Clearly I had also quickly become part of this process. It was also very apparent during this week how easy it is for the real science story to get lost if it is not well presented either in a press release or at the press conference.

The contrasting environments of the Festival and Countryfile showed up some real differences between weekly TV and other journalism. Most obvious is the time available for the journalists to do things. A weekly programme has a much slower

turn around than a daily paper and this means that they have a very structured planning and programme schedule and are always looking for stories in advance. For a daily newspaper something that was announced last week and didn't get in the paper that day is very old news, but for a weekly programme it may still be of interest in the following weeks or months. It does mean that it is harder for a programme like Countryfile to react to sudden news stories or developments, but the team's response to the foot and mouth outbreak, which came to light on a Friday evening, shows that it is still possible with a dedicated team. Given that the final programme had been compiled by that time, with stories cut down in time to fit to the second, the team rightly deserved the praise they got for then including a foot and mouth story in that Sunday morning's show.



The press room at the 2007 BA Festival of Science in York.

Another key difference is that for a TV programme researchers do all the background work. These researchers may be trained journalists, but not necessarily. They will often conduct fairly lengthy interviews with potential contributors over the phone to get an idea of what the contributor will say, but then the person that asks the questions in a filmed interview will most likely be an entirely different presenter. This presenter will probably only have been briefed with the key facts of the story, whereas in the print media the journalist will follow the story all the way through. Also for TV, a story needs to be much more visual than one that is included in a newspaper.

So what do I think the key things are that I and other scientists can learn? Firstly, if scientists don't make known the fact that they are doing interesting things then no one will know. The main way that this can be achieved is by press releases. Press releases have to grab the attention and give the main story and facts straight away in the first paragraph. A waffly press release or one that doesn't have a clear or real story behind it will probably be ignored. Direct contact with local media and TV programmes is also a good way to promote interesting stories, particularly those with a local emphasis.

Secondly, during any communication with the media, scientists need to be succinct and clear and avoid using specialist language. If you assume that the person you are talking to has no prior knowledge of your subject then you will often put across your story in a much simpler and better way. If the journalist then wants more detail they will ask.

Thirdly, a researcher or journalist's sources of information are predominantly the internet and other media outlets. It is important that contact details, résumés and websites are kept up to date, because researchers will often look people up on the internet before contacting them. If you put out a press release it is equally important that you are available to speak to the media on that day.

Since taking part in the Fellowship I have found that I am reading my writing and scientific articles published by others in a new light. I am now far more aware of trying to make sure I am putting the key finding or point across in a clear way. I am passing this idea on to my colleagues and hopefully our communication not only with the media, but also with the public and other scientists will improve as a result.

Articles

I was given a Researcher credit on the 16 September 2007 edition of Countryfile for the Bluetongue story.

During the BA Festival of Science I wrote articles with the following headlines:

- Grid computing: the future of the internet?
- How dark matter switched on the light
- 5,000 year old horse milk
- Neanderthals not killed by cold
- Chemistry proves Egyptian cats were top dog
- The landscape of biofuel Britain

These are all available on the BA Festival of Science website:

<http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/AboutFOS/HistoryoftheFestival/2007FestivalofScience/2007FestivalNews/>