

Media Fellow Report 2006

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Becoming a Countryfiler

On a blissful June afternoon, whilst sitting in a park in Bristol, I received a telephone call from Alice Taylor-Gee of the BA. I was told I was to be a 2006 BA Media Fellow and I would be spending seven glorious weeks in Birmingham with BBC Countryfile. I was of course, ecstatic as I had spent the past month secretly hoping that I would be chosen as a BBC Countryfiler and get the chance to meet the messiah himself, John Craven.

The first port of call was the briefing day in London. Here I met the nine other fellows who would be joining me in my adventure into the world of the media. It was a very relaxed affair, where we had the chance to introduce ourselves and ask questions to gain insight into what was expected of a BA Media Fellow. We also took part in a simulated press conference. This was really informative and I left with a great impression of what was expected of a journalist in this type of environment. This experience would prove useful during the BA Festival of Science. It was a really stimulating day and our friendships were finally cemented with a few glasses of the finest wine in the evening. So, fully informed I was ready to book my transportation to a northern destination.

As I arrived in Birmingham, I still had no idea of what really to expect, I will admit I was a little nervous, but with an abundance of Irish charm, great wit and über intelligence, I was sure everything would be fine. However, a taxi ride which should have taken approximately 20 minutes became an hour long journey, during which time the “new” driver had on two occasions thumped his non-working satellite-navigation system on the gear stick. My new house host, Adrian Holloway was a little bemused at the length of time it had taken me to get here, but I was too much in shock to go into any details. The young chap made me a cup of tea, I sat down and got the low-down on Countryfile and thought, welcome to Birmingham!

The arrival of the first morning and as I sat in the mailroom, I thought this is going to be great. After a short time, I was greeted with a very warm welcome from the producer of the show, Teresa Bogan and I was escorted into the hub of Countryfile. I was seated at the computer of the legend that is “JC” and watched the Sunday transmission of Countryfile, which I had missed. I was then ready for the Monday morning production meeting. In this regular meeting, the previous Sunday programme is discussed. Coverage includes everything from the programme content to the ability of presenters. This was also a chance to formally introduce myself and meet some of the team. That first initial meeting was, I have to say, one of the most fun meetings as a “newbie” that I have ever experienced. Right from 11 am on that first day, the team made me feel at home. After the meeting, I had a tour of the open plan BBC central and discussed what I wanted to gain from this placement and of course why I was chosen. So with my head slightly inflated, I rolled back and into the ground of Countryfile, fully fuelled for the challenges ahead.

Located in the Countryfile area is a giant whiteboard containing the programme schedule for the months ahead. While enjoying my stay in the chair of JC, I noticed a September entry for a location piece on Strangford Lough. Growing up in Northern Ireland and having friends living on the banks of the Lough, I asked if I could be involved in this. This was only my first day but you have no time to be shy in this game! Research had not yet begun on this particular piece, so it was all mine. This was my first story.

The location piece is the longest in duration, thus needs to contain four very strong stories and potentially a fifth in reserve. The Lough, being one of the first Marine Nature Reserves in the UK, meant that finding great items to be included wasn't going to be a problem. The

internet becomes the first tool of choice, so with contacts noted and certain story angles chosen, you then make numerous phone calls. This was a far cry from science, where often, one must spend days searching the internet and libraries for journals and then spend days again reading them, with the added possibility of never phoning anyone.

After approximately one week, I arrived at the first meeting, much to the amusement of the other members with a small portion of the Brazilian rainforest of paper, detailing every avenue of thought, every fact and figure. The other researcher arrived with about two file pages, containing almost everything I had found. A lesson learned I would say! This first meeting was an experience and the depth of knowledge of the team (non-scientific) was astounding. I never really appreciated the amount of research that actually goes into a single item, because simply I have never had to. Information has to be quite accurate and succinct for each of the 3-4 minute items that make up the location.

Much of the responsibility of the researcher is to organise the logistics of the shoot, *i.e.*, finalising the filming schedule, liaising with production on the organisation of car hire and hotels, re-organising contributor appearances and of course making sure the camera and sound men have all the details they need. It is also important to find suitable locations for GVs (General Views). These are generally performed a week in advance of the filming when a "recce" takes place. If this cannot occur, then we have to use our creativity and imagination when we arrive at a shoot. The Director then writes a treatment. This describes the final running order of the piece, an array of possible shots and information to be included by both presenter and contributors. I informed the Strangford Lough contributors of the proposed "recce" and passed all of the intimate details to the other researcher and directors. I would not be going to Belfast. Instead I would be going to Kent, with another director, to shoot a lead story and to immerse myself in the dry arid countryside that is being caused by climate change. In my spare time, in the office, with a tea in hand, I was allowed to choose photographs for this year's weather themed competition. I have to say, some people in the UK are very confused as to what constitutes a photograph of the weather!

This story was a very technical shoot indeed as we were filming various forms of horticultural practices, *i.e.*, strawberry and potato farming and those practices that involved animals, *i.e.*, beef farming. When one watches a TV programme, we enjoy the viewing and think nothing of the work that goes on behind to produce that 30 minute piece. When filming one section of a lead story that will only amount to approximately 8 -12 minutes, I couldn't believe how much camera work is actually involved and how many re-takes is needed to get the information just right. Close-ups, wide angle shots, reversed interview technique with the camera, moving shots and stills, there was so much involved in one 3 minute piece and time is definitely of the essence. As the researcher, we are there to cover the director, and make sure all the relevant questions are asked, but at times I was just dumbfounded at what goes on and feeling very special to be in the middle of it. I had many questions to ask the technical team and the director and of course I did. I was eager to learn and learned so much about camera work from this particular camera man.

Back to Countryfile on the Wednesday and it was to the editing and dubbing, where the real technical work takes place and you see your work take shape. This was my first experience in the lower levels of the BBC building. I was in the presence of complete geniuses. Here, creation takes place and all the out takes are brought together, almost like "copy, cutting and pasting" but with virtuosity. Music is overlaid, and we see the piece for the first time in full length, ready for the dubbing where the VO (Voice Over) takes place. At the end of the day, nothing is more satisfying than watching your own idea blossom into a vision for the rest of the world to view. I really enjoyed being in editing and dubbing and when anyone was preparing something I would often ask to join them, as it was fascinating to watch how different directors approached their work, how script style differed, how presenters varied in style and sound for each particular piece and of course the various tastes in music chosen

from the array of directors! It was very obvious after hearing and meeting the presenters why certain individuals were chosen for the role. I have to admit one of my favourite pieces was "Brecon Beacon horse riding" and of course, all of the Strangford Lough location item.

One has to remember, that during all of the editing and dubbing, a researcher is always working on a new piece or trying to find worthy stories for future reference, which are then placed in a file and then allocated accordingly. I pitched a couple of ideas to Teresa. One on eco-friendly clothing was deemed worthy, so I began research on this. I was also looking for stories with marine angles and Teresa approached me with an idea that a freelance director had talked to her about; deep water coral destruction by trawlers. This was my opportunity to shine as I knew a great deal on the subject and was already an Ocean Defender as part of the NGO, Greenpeace. So I made a first point of contact with Richard Sadler and proceeded to delve into deep territory. I now felt quite confident in my ability to choose interviewees and lessons learned from the Strangford Lough piece, I realised that scientific details have to be conveyed quite simplistically, but accurately.

With the project taking shape and the continual search for other stories, I was called on again to accompany a researcher who was scheduled to film two video diaries in the Lake District. This was a much more relaxed and informal affair. I was to be the sound person on this trip. The first individual was Jos Naylor, a 70 year old man who was to complete his 100th attempt of a particular fell. This man has been fell running since his early twenties, I was in the presence of the fittest and lithe man I have ever met, he put my fitness to the test, as we accompanied him on this, his 100th attempt. We were also accompanied by his three dogs. It was quite an easy shoot as it mostly involved a one to one with the camera, some GVs of the fells and footage of Jos running up and down the fell. However, a lot of shots were taken, as we had to maintain continuity and this factor is always important in whatever piece you may be shooting. In the video diaries, it is much like a diary of a normal working/living day, so we have to keep the participants as relaxed as possible. For this shoot, though, I think the researcher and I were more ill at ease at the thought of being attacked by ticks! We had the rest of the day free, so as the researcher looked through the day's rushes, I armed myself with tour guides' magazines and tried to search for other potential stories. It proved worthwhile as we found an alpaca centre in the middle of the fells?! And we also visited Bassenthwaite Lake to view a nesting pair of ospreys, the giant pencil making factory fortunately did not make it into this years interesting story category!

The second diary was filming a new dimension in compost production. Here we were to film a sheep farmer who had diversified with the aid of age-old compost making skills; the use of ubiquitous braken and sheep's wool. This proved quite a technical video diary. We had to film how the braken is cut with the aid of farm machinery and the mixing of sheep's wool, to the bagging process and finally its experimental stage, where a local gardener was testing it on selected plants. Time again was of the essence, and continuity was so important, but this diary was hard work, I have to admit. But I have to say, the researcher in charge was great fun to work with, gave me some great advice and because it was only a video diary I had more time to learn how the camera worked, another skill to be added. Video diaries are very personal and one has to build up great rapport with the participants very quickly and make them feel confident on camera. I had a lot of time to talk to the participants and was even giving advice on more than one occasion.

After, a long drive back to Birmingham, it was an early start the next morning to make a long telephone call to the freelancer involved in the deep water story. He had already begun researching the topic and had made contact with scientists involved and so as to not repeat calls and look unprofessional we had to allocate individuals. I have to say it was quite a challenge organising such a big shoot over the telephone, I had been used to very much face to face discussion, but it was enjoyable nonetheless. This was a lead story and it was quite controversial, and in the media game, controversy is adored! A lot of time was spent with

NGOs, Government Agencies and of course some of my own species, marine scientists. I had quite a good grip on the subject and made contacts through contacts very easily. I have to say that my experience of a Government press office will stay with me forever, in a negative sense. I learned one thing, never overstep a Government press officer, they are the middle man and you will feel their wrath if you try to cut them out, unintentionally I may add. The end result was the refusal of any SFPA vehicles and help, even though operations had told me we could use their modes of transport to film. In this type of environment, we don't have time to dwell on lost issues like these, we always have more ideas on the horizon.

This shoot had to be so tight on schedule that any delay would result in its downfall. We had only one golden opportunity to film a live French trawler and it took three to four phone calls and a little *tête-à-tête* with a French businessman to persuade him to allow a film crew on board. There was so much detail to this story that it really needed to be condensed and contributors had to be chosen very carefully and we had to tread very cautiously in order to be successful with the final footage.

The BA Festival of Science

Week 5 approached and I was whisked off to become a member of a press pack at the BA Festival of Science. There was a definite buzz of anticipation as the fellows joined for dinner after a long time apart, discussing placements both good and bad, and ideas on how we would further our experience. This side of the media world, one that involved attending press conferences, public lectures, debates and writing journalistic articles was relatively new to me. I was the only one in a television and broadcasting placement, hence for me it was even more of a challenge. I was used to being a class A Countryfiler, defender of all things rural and running around the countryside. From my experience with Countryfile, I knew how fast paced this environment can be and my instinct told me that I wouldn't expect any less from the BA Festival of Science. My instinct was right. As I wasn't allocated a representative from Countryfile, I had an almost free reign over the stories I could cover. We could pre-prepare with press releases the previous day, attend the conference on the day and then complete an article for a certain deadline. Sometimes we had only one or two hours to write an interesting, succinct, professional piece, one which had to be of the highest calibre in order to be placed on the BA website. It was interesting also to see so few "journos" in the lectures or debates. They mostly congregated in the press conferences getting all they needed for the newspapers the next day. If a story wasn't worthwhile, they exited the press conference. They also practised a ritual of "press huddling", where they would group together to discuss which respective newspaper would take what angle in a headline story. I was learning fast and at the end of the week, I had four stories published on the BA website and the festival diary under my belt. Of course the BA press badge also had certain other advantages in the form of free wine receptions and many parties. This festival restored my faith in science and my trust in my chosen career and opened up a whole new world of media contacts. I also had the chance to meet a past Countryfiler, Barnaby Smith, who is now, after his BA Media Fellowship, the press officer at The Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, maybe this is an example for me?

The Final Shoot

So after the frenetic world of the BA Festival of Science, I was back to the task at hand, deep sea trawling and the destruction of deep water corals. Luckily, the freelance director who was in charge of my marine story attended the BA Festival of Science, so it was good to discuss, in person, the project itself and any final preparations and concerns surrounding our journey to Scotland. This was my BIG project as I was right there from its conception, putting together the research brief, to the shooting of the story in Scotland. The arrival of Monday morning and I was back at Countryfile HQ. Miriam O'Reilly was to be the presenter on the show, having not ever worked with her, I was looking forward to it as I had sat in with

her on a few dubs and being a fellow Irish compadre, I was sure that we would get along pretty fine. So Sunday arrived and it was an early start to the airport, destination Inverness. The car was found successfully, the music kicked in, and with a lady at the wheel, the director and I set off on our westerly road trip. We had a long journey ahead, but I have to say it was one of the most stunning landscapes I have ever seen and feel blessed that I had the chance to experience that. So, after arrival at the port of Ullapool, was a quick meeting with our foxy technical men, food and a swift beer then off to bed to get some sleep.

Waking up at 2.30 am in the morning is probably not quite a joy to most, but I, being from the marine realm, have never seen deep sea fish and have never boarded a foreign trawler, hence I was like a small child on Christmas Eve. Being able to converse in French also helped, I guess one could say I was in part in charge as they could not speak English, so they had to be directed in their native tongue. This felt good indeed! The crew were very friendly and carried out the processes we needed to be able to film with great dexterity. I also had the chance to interview the captain and gather all the facts we needed to make it as newsworthy as possible, getting facts and figures from this fisherman was an integral part of the story. Without this footage, this whole piece would not have been worthwhile and because I had to use all of my persuasive Irish charm with the fisheries boss in order to have permission to film on board his trawler, this had to be better than good. It was sad for me as a marine biologist though at some points. They had captured approximately 43 tonnes of deep seas fish in just 3 weeks at sea. Some of these fish, were not even supposed to be caught, so I really had to compose myself at times and try not to slap them on their faces with some of their illegally caught deep water sharks! But being a professional and in TV we have to portray a balanced report for the viewers and not antagonise the contributors. Also I was very much out-numbered by very large French fishermen carrying a belt of knife-like tools! The day progressed with another contributor and then it was back on our road trip to Oban, where we would meet up with our presenter.

It was a joy to arrive at the hotel and find that I had been placed in the honeymoon suite, the extra £20 I slipped to the receptionist had worked once again! We were then *en route* to The Scottish Association of Marine Science. Here, I was in a laboratory and scientific research vessel once again, feeling very much at home, interviewing scientists. Consequently, in fact, I helped direct the interview of one of my friends and also had my first cameo role, albeit very small on TV. Yes, I always knew it, Countryfile today, Hollywood tomorrow! We had to pretend we were out at sea, filming corals live in their natural environment, so it was interesting and impressive to watch how each shot was organised in order to give this impression. I have to say that Miriam was a joy to work with and I was so impressed with the manner of how she picked up scientific terms very quickly and I have to say, even made the scientist feel slightly nervous. The final contributor was a Scottish fisherman who was actually in favour of what scientists were campaigning for, but being a fisherman he still had to answer some questions on the issue of overfishing. He felt very uncomfortable answering these questions, simply because he was representing a very large group and they were having talks about this particular subject in the coming weeks. But Miriam very quickly put him at ease and slowly teased out the answers to the questions that we needed. A researcher and director can compile a research brief, but I didn't know the extent of the involvement of the presenter in the actual script. Without a good calibre of presenter, one that can understand the director, be patient with the director and mould the script and make it come alive, any programme is not worth watching and I was able to view this live. Having worked on numerous shoots now, it was interesting also to see how different technical teams worked. As this was my final shoot, I understood a little bit more of the kind of shots needed and was able to comment and have more input on this one.

So, we said our goodbyes, it was indeed a tremendous shoot, with the most engaging contributors and presenter and fantastic scenery that made finding high quality GVs an easy task. So, after an entertaining and somewhat talkative journey back to Glasgow, Miriam and

I arrived at the airport and were handed free food and drinks vouchers for the business lounge. Suffice to say, after a few glasses of fine red wine, we stayed true to the Irish stereotype and almost missed our plane, having to be escorted to the gate by the hostess and were the last two remaining passengers to board the 7pm flight back to Birmingham. A great end to an amazing journey, as sadly I could not attend dubbing and VO as Plymouth beckoned for me to return once again to science.....

I have to say, my time at Countryfile will be for me, one of the highlights in my career so far. One of the most asked questions, when I tell people what I did during the summer, is of course, "Did you meet John Craven? The answer is "yes" and I did sit in his chair and share a lunch or two with him, without sounding too much like a stalker. The team at Countryfile are amazing and their operation, slick and awesome! Being a specialist scientist, we always think that we know more about our subject than anyone else, however, my fellow Countryfilers changed my views on that. Sometimes I was only needed to comment on the accuracy of certain scientific terms, facts and figures that they sought to incorporate into a story. I was exposed to so many different issues, from agricultural to marine to human and at every level. I was impressed with their sharp ideas, the speed at which high quality stories were put together and their determination to stay true to the science, without oversimplification.

I had no experience of TV and broadcasting before I went there. The team constantly answered my sometimes naïve questions, guided me, allowed me great freedom in my ideas and trusted in them. I have now come back to Plymouth with a renewed sense of confidence in my scientific ability and a growing confidence in my ability to strengthen bonds between science and the media in my working groups. I have a better idea of how the media functions and my department, I think, has a lot to learn. The placement has made me "think much more outside the box" and as scientists we have a duty to convey our message to a far greater general public, but we need the power of the media to make this successful. It is schemes like the BA Media Fellowship that will fuel a new breed of scientists. Yes for me and for others like me who will get this chance, it is a very exciting time.

Examples of work:

Whilst at Countryfile, I worked on a number of stories. I was given credit as a researcher on two, "Deep sea trawling and the destruction of deep water corals" and "Strangford Lough" (location piece). I will hopefully be given credit when the story, "Environmentally friendly clothing" is produced and broadcast.

For the details of these programmes visit,
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/sn/tvradio/programmes/countryfile/>

BA Festival of Science work

Festival Diary: http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/ScienceinSociety/Schemes_and_awards/MediaFellowships/MFwebdiary.htm
follow the links from here for each consecutive day

Close Encounters with Birds of Prey
<http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/FestivalNews/Closeencounterswithbirdsofprey.htm>

Marine Defenders invade the BA Festival
http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/FestivalNews/Marine_defenders_invalidate_the_BA_Festival_of_Science.htm

It's all a bit fishy
http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/FestivalNews/Its_all_a_bit_fishy.htm

Five a day
<http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/festivalnews/Fiveaday.htm>