

Julian Trick – BBC Radio Science Unit

Getting something you really want in life often turns out to be a disappointment. In my case, a media fellowship placement at the BBC Radio Science Unit exceeded all my expectations, and then some. I received the news of my placement with equal amounts of fear, excitement and guilt (six weeks away in London would be hard on my young family) but was determined to make the most of a golden opportunity.

By the end of the briefing day most of the fear had gone, as had significant amounts of wine before the train home, and I was ready to see if I could 'fake it' as a broadcast journalist. A visit to Unit's headquarters at Bush House further allayed any fears and the countdown began.

Day one, and Ania Lichtarowicz, an experienced broadcast journalist, had me scanning the papers for interesting science stories. I tended to avoid this task after a while as I lingered too long on the sports pages and didn't have much to contribute at the morning meeting where the day's news output was discussed. The World Service science news desk broadcast daily bulletins on all that is current in the world of science to 150 million listeners. Deadlines are measured in hours, not like the months or years that I am used to, and if you miss a deadline, there can be no 'extension to contract' - it's simply too late and not used. This is fast-paced, exhilarating work and you have to be able to switch between complex scientific disciplines without missing a beat. Because of this, everyone in the unit has an incredibly broad range of scientific knowledge and it's easy to see why. The skill is to read, understand and distil often complex and turgid scientific papers into a concise, understandable and relevant news item (aimed at an audience whose first language often isn't English) and then record it in your best 'BBC voice'.

Week two was Festival week. Normally you would attend at the end of your placement and use your newfound skills alongside every other science journalist in the country, but project deadlines meant that I had a late start and was still a complete novice. The press conferences come thick and fast but virtually each one was covered; there is no time to attend the talks and if you want answers, now is the time to get them. Sitting alongside experienced science writers is slightly daunting when it comes to question time; what if you haven't understood what's been said, and ask a really stupid question? But if you don't ask it, you'll never know, so get stuck in - it's now or never.

Towards the end of the week, Fiona Roberts, producer of 'Science in Action', a weekly science magazine on the World Service, asked me to put together a package for the following week's programme. A package lasts around four minutes and has interviews (two or more), sound effects and narration. This was to be a relatively light piece as it involved children learning about the science of sound. Although it was easy to get interesting background noises and the interviewees were used to talking about what they do, they soon saw through my 'Julian Trick Ace BBC Reporter' guise, especially when I managed to solicit nothing from a class of seven year olds who clamed up and stared dumbly at the microphone I was waving in front of them.

Back in London and it was time to edit the tapes and write the script. I still had little hope of it being used but it was good experience and editing is great fun, especially when you can chop out all the stupid questions you asked before anyone else hears them. Two days on and the piece was coming together nicely. Surely I wouldn't be recording the links? Next day I found myself in the studio with Helen Sewell, the programme presenter and now voice coach, who had me grinning inanely as I tried to achieve the right tone of 'BBC voice' and waving my arms around like Magnus Pike. They told me later that the studios were monitored by video camera's and that my performance would surely feature at the Christmas party. This would presumably be accompanied by a replay of a woeful interview I gave to the programme, which got me into this whole experience in the first place!

After a number of takes Helen was happy and we took the recording upstairs to be vetted only to find out that it had been recorded in mono and would have to be redone. The next day was much better; I had practiced in the pub the night before, much to the amusement of the other drinkers, and had it off pat - well sort of. I couldn't disguise my elation when they said it would be used - what a buzz - I started phoning, texting and e-mailing everyone I knew, even people I haven't spoken to for years. The only problem was that its very difficult to listen to the World Service in this country, particularly in Nottingham, and although I had a good signal at the start of the programme, when it came to my piece all we heard was distortion which persisted for the four minutes and 15 seconds duration of my piece, before giving way to a clear signal again! It's possible to listen to 'Science in Action' on the internet for a whole week after the broadcast; its gone now, but I have a tape if anyone would like to hear it.....

Week four, and I was asked to help out the producer of Radio 4's 'Material World', a half hour science discussion broadcast live every Thursday afternoon. Sarah Empey needed a topic and two participants for a forthcoming programme and I knew just the people. I managed to arrange for an ex-colleague and a former murder squad detective, now forensic archaeologist, to come in and discuss the relatively new science of forensic geology. I had to write the questions and probable answers as guidance notes for the presenter. The programme doesn't run to a script but is based around the information provided, so you have to get your facts right or there will be hell to pay. Organising people to be at a particular place at a particular time in central London can be stressful; one of the guests was stuck on a train and only arrived minutes before the programme went live. Luckily for me I was in Liverpool recording my second package for Science in Action (I have a tape of that too if anyone's interested).

By now I was a seasoned broadcast journalist and ready to be the new voice of the BBC. My next task was to answer the phones for 'Check Up', a health matters phone in on Radio 4. The first week's topic was itchy skin and the phones were ringing non-stop. By the end of the programme, I was an expert on virtually every skin complaint known to man. My speciality was eczema (although I still have trouble spelling it) and its various remedies, so much so that I found myself giving advice to callers who didn't make it onto the show. I hope nobody sues the BBC.

My final week arrived in no time at all and I was off to Television Centre to see how the world's biggest and best on-line news was put together. The system at the BBC is designed to be fast and efficient. Once you have written your piece, loaded it into

the software, chosen your illustrations and sorted out the links, one click on the mouse and its there for all the world to see. I wrote a piece on low frequency sound waves that you can find in the archives on BBC.co.uk if you're interested!

As is evident, I hope, from this report, I loved every minute of my time at the BBC and have learnt many things about journalism and the power of the media. Scientists are often reluctant to talk to journalists, fearing they will trivialise or sensationalise their work. That just doesn't happen from my experience; science journalists are professional communicators able to convey complex ideas to mass audiences, and that takes a lot of skill. So come on scientists, stick your neck out and write something in plain English, you never know you might even get on the radio!