

Aoife o'Mongain – BBC Radio, Science Unit / BBC News Interactive

I was excited and relieved when I got the BBC placement, it was ideal for me because it involved both broadcast and print journalism. Being a Media Fellow was challenging, nerve wrecking at times, rewarding and overall a great experience.

The most daunting part of the whole experience was the BA briefing day. While I realise that it was held to give us an idea of what was to come I found myself wondering what on earth I had let myself in for. It was a 'hands on' day with a simulated press conference. The pressure was on: we had to write an article on the spot. I felt that I couldn't think straight but everybody else seemed to take up the challenge easily.

The next day I went to the BBC Science Radio Unit at Bush House to meet the people I would be working with there. It was fascinating watching radio programmes being made and I was instantly made to feel at home, and asked for ideas. It seemed that the people there were very keen to have a 'real scientist' (that's what I was called on a number of occasions) working with them so that was very reassuring.

My 6 week placement started late in the summer of 2004, the week before the Festival of Science. Peter Wood, another of this year's Media Fellows, had been at the Science Radio Unit for a couple of weeks and showed me the ropes on my first morning. However, I felt a little unsure of what I should be doing in my first week mostly because I thought I would be 'assigned' to someone but I wasn't. A few producers asked me for ideas for programmes so I spent some of my time that week thinking and researching some initial ideas and talking to the producers about which programme my suggestions would be best suited for. In addition, Ania Lichtarowicz, World Service Science Correspondent, took me under her wing and brought me with her to do an interview. I helped her scan the papers in the morning for science stories that would be of interest to the World Service and went along to a daily World Service News meeting. It involved a room full of journalists reporting what was new in their region of the world and deciding what was the big story of the day.

It was unclear what I would be doing for the BBC at the BA Festival of Science. On the Friday before the festival I met Julian Siddle, a Science Radio Producer, who was also going to the festival. He let me know what he thought would be interesting stories to cover, and suggested I come and find him and Pallab Ghosh (Science Correspondent, BBC News) on the Monday morning.

On the first morning, Pallab and Julian promptly gave me a microphone and minidisk recorder and asked me to attend the next press conference and get an interview afterwards with one of the scientists. I was absolutely terrified and had no idea how to even use the recorder! After a quick lesson from Jo (a

science communications student who was doing a placement at BBC) I headed to the press conference. I found it quite difficult trying to take it all in, and to think of penetrating questions to ask afterwards about a subject I knew little about. However, it all worked out fine and the more I did the easier it got. After listening to some of my interviews I learnt not to mutter sounds of encouragement to the interviewee during the interview but to nod in appreciation instead. Pallab and Julian suggested that when interviewing I should firstly try to ask a general question, like 'what is it all about?' Then perhaps a more provocative question and round off by asking about the benefits/applications of the science. I think knowing this line of questioning will be helpful to me when I am on the other side of the microphone too.

The Festival of Science week was extremely busy with press conferences every half hour in the mornings, and editing and chasing more interviewees in the afternoons. I thoroughly enjoyed been thrown in at the deep end and even though I was apprehensive at the start of the week it was rewarding when my audio clips were used for programmes such as the 1800 news on Radio 4.

On return from the Festival of Science, producer Andrew Luck-Baker said he was interested in running one of my ideas for the next weeks Science in Action programme for the World Service. He asked if I could make a 5-6 minute 'package' for the programme. Julian, who I had worked with at the festival, would be producing the programme. I wasn't sure where to start so I listened to a few programmes to get more of an idea of the format. I set up interviews with three people, one at Bush House and the others at BBC studios in Reading and Edinburgh which we linked to from a Bush House studio. I think my way of doing things wasn't the norm because I set out all the questions I wanted to ask my interviewees and went through them methodically. Normally it would be a lot more off the cuff but I wasn't practiced enough for that. It was probably the scientist in me that needed a set plan and a list of things to do.

After the interviews I wrote a script and Julian showed me how to use 'Sadie', the BBC editing software, to edit the audio files. The editing was interesting because it was similar to what I do every day as a seismologist i.e. looking at squiggly lines (waveforms). It was very satisfying being able to edit my interviewees 'mmms' and 'ahhs' and select the most interesting segments. I then went down to a studio with Julian to record the links between the interviewees, I had to narrate it myself so that was amusing. I collected some appropriate sounds to tie the whole piece together and Julian did the final editing. I was delighted with the final result and to hear that little was changed from my original script. It was very satisfying being in the studio when it was broadcast into the 'live' World Service feed.

Jon Amos asked me to come to BBC News Interactive to write my Science in Action story as a news article so I went there on the Monday of week 5. My story was published online with a link to the related Science in Action radio programme. Jon showed me around Television Centre which was very impressive. It was weird sitting in a room where every so often a live business review is broadcast for News24 and I was one of the people working hard in the background of the shot! Jon guided me through the processes involved in

getting a story published, it doesn't just go on the Internet but also to Ceefax, Digital TV text, and to PDA's.

I spent week 5 at BBC News Interactive and also researching another idea of mine, this time for the Material World programme for Radio 4. This programme is now scheduled to be run in March next year and I hope to be able to help out with it.

The Mount St Helens volcano started erupting during my last two weeks at BBC and I wrote articles documenting its activity for BBC News Interactive and watching the live feeds covering the press conferences held at the Cascades Volcano Observatory. I spent almost all of my last week at Television Centre writing articles and editing others. It was a totally different environment to work in and there was a real buzz when you hear of a story and it has to be written and published immediately. Once your story is written and checked by the editor it goes out to millions of readers in an instant.

I learnt so much working at the BBC and experienced a real range of activities from interviewing techniques to finding out what makes a good press release, covering press briefings, making radio programmes, learning the appropriate format for writing online articles etc. I learnt that to make science more interesting to a wider audience scientists must think carefully about how they should communicate it. It is important to simplify the science and use analogies that the general public will understand. The journalists I worked with have an amazing ability to take a scientific story and explain it so that more people get to hear of exciting discoveries.

Acknowledgements:

Thanks to everyone in the Science Radio Unit in particular to Deborah Cohen who instigated the placement. Thanks to Julian Siddle and Pallab Ghosh for keeping me very busy and entertaining me at the Festival of Science. Also, thanks to everyone at the Science and Technology News Interactive team, particularly Jon, for guidance and introducing me to pick and mix Fridays! Lastly, thank you to the BA for organising the fellowships.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/3687700.stm>

Link to radio programme from above page

Other examples of my online articles

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/3753162.stm>

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/3704148.stm>

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/3708278.stm>