Media Fellow Report 2007

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BBC Horizon

Background

I applied for a BA Media Fellowship primarily to give me an inside view of how the media approach presenting science to the public. In particular, I wanted to see how the media decide on which areas of science to present, how the underlying science is researched, and how some of the practical issues (including researching of information and translation into familiar language) are addressed. I was pleased to have been short-listed in the first round and even more delighted to be subsequently made an offer of a 4-week placement at BBC *Horizon*. Although applications are made to the BA Media Fellowship scheme without a preference for a type of media or specific host, secretly, I was hoping for a placement in TV, and the opportunity to spend time away from an office and a PC.

Placement Activities

Over the course of my 4 weeks with the BBC, I observed/took part in just about every component of science documentary-making from conception to completion and, overall, this experience was interesting and informative. I got to spend time researching topics by reading newspapers, on-line resources, phoning and e-mailing experts in their fields (not my own!) and discussing the outcomes of these with the more permanent BBC researchers and producers. I say permanent, but I was surprised at the rapid turnover of staff, with many moving on to other areas within the BBC or elsewhere in TV once one or two programs had been made.

At the outset, the research process is principally involved with establishing a scientific story and determining whether it is sufficiently novel and expansive to warrant making a 50-minute documentary suitable for the *Horizon* audience. This is not a trivial task and most ideas never progress beyond the first meeting. In fact, the Series Editor rejected all suggestions from the entire team during my 4 weeks! Clearly, the key to a successful idea is not algorithmic and, in addition to basic hard work in gaining the primary research 'facts' underpinning a story, a high degree of creativity or 'luck' is required. In my more familiar university environment, I am afforded the relative luxury of tapping into those 'Eureka!' moments during discussions over coffee or a pint after work. With tight deadlines and heavy schedules, such luxuries seemed not to exist for the *Horizon* team.

For those ideas that do pass the first level of evaluation, the more detailed research process is conducted by a partnership of a researcher and producer, and this pairing continue to play pivotal roles in the subsequent filming and editing. The team have to follow a tight schedule of approximately 5 months to produce the finished article. Thus, it is not feasible for a Media Fellow to see the process through from start to finish for a given documentary. The research element continues right up until the final production phases, where last minute fact finding is the order of the day. It was interesting to witness how recent cases of misrepresentation of factual information in the media were driving the need for accuracy to the extreme. In my experience,

securing the cooperation of scientific experts was never a problem, since most welcomed the opportunity for media coverage of their work, especially through such an established organisation as the BBC. One or two became a little more reserved when I revealed my true 'identity'.

Getting hold of scientists in August, however, can be a problem and August also proved to be a relatively quiet time for filming activities with *Horizon*. I was invited to some interviews on location in London for a documentary investigating health issues surrounding supplements in foods, and was treated to both breakfast (filmed) and Fish and Chips with accompanying champagne for good measure. One or two other opportunities for filming went by the wayside but, with some frantic phoning round, my mentor also arranged for me to spend a couple of days out with a team making the next series of 'Perfection' with the chef Heston Blumenthal in his 'laboratory' close to his restaurant. Lunch, needless to say, was excellent.

The remainder of my time with the *Horizon* team was spent sitting in on various components of the editing process, from cutting and grading to commentary. Since there are always several documentaries being produced at any one time, all at different stages, I was able to observe not only the various stages to the editing, but for different programs, which added to the variety. Quite a lot of the editing processes involve collaboration with external consultants, many of whom started their careers with the BBC before going freelance, so I got to spend further time travelling between various other locations within London. The intricacies of seeing how an Editor first selects usable film, typically working with a 50:1 film:broadcast ratio, then dovetailing this in with audio of various formats (interviews, dubbed background, music, etc) was extremely impressive and highlighted the value of experience when it comes to producing a quality product with a range of presentation formats. It was also during these editing sessions that I obtained a much clearer view of how the style of presenting documentaries has changed in recent years as audience expectations have shifted. There is currently much greater pressure on Editors and Producers to create programs that do not necessarily require viewers to commit to an hour of their time in order to learn something new about an exciting area of science. Instead, the structure of programs consists of re-visiting themes, which can give the impression of recycling material, rather than a continuously evolving story. The longer term impact of my time spent in the editing suites is that I now watch TV programs (of all types) with a much more critical eye and with a much greater understanding of how the final broadcast has been arrived at.

The second component of the Fellowship involved participation in the BA Festival of Science at the University of York. As a York graduate, I was able to combine visiting old haunts and friends, with focussing on the job in-hand, namely reporting on scientific events at the meeting. Without a representative of my Fellowship hosts in tow, I enjoyed the freedom of not only attending the morning press conferences, but was able to take advantage of listening to the pick (as I viewed them) of the scientific presentations. In doing so, I was able to cherry-pick my way through topics ranging from Quantum Mechanics to Mediaeval Archaeology, and interviewed a series of young scientists who had produced posters on their research work. As

output, I wrote short articles for the BA website which, given the tight deadlines, really provided a focus. It was also great to meet up with the other BA Media Fellows and share experiences over some fine York ales.

The third component of my Fellowship was a 3-day placement with The Royal Society, one of the sponsors of the BA Media Fellowships scheme. Under the watchful eye of Bill Hartnett, Head of the Press Office, I was able to gain first hand experience in writing press releases for stories that illustrated the various roles and contributions that the Royal Society makes to UK science. It was a valuable lesson in being taught the 'rules', and an even better illustration of how this doesn't necessarily equate to having learnt them. I was made to feel very welcome by the whole team and was privileged to receive behind the scenes visits to all of the Royal Society's departments and facilities.

Fellowship Logistics

Prior to my arrival at the BBC, I met the producer who should ordinarily have been my mentor, but, as it turned out, would have to be away during my visit. I was assured a replacement. Upon arrival at the *Horizon* offices on the first Monday of my placement, I was informed that the situation had changed again and that someone would be arriving later that week. In the meantime, I was briefly introduced to some of the *Horizon* team, and I set about taking the on-line health and safety course, a compulsory requirement for all BBC staff intending on conducting filming on location.

My mentor arrived on Wednesday and was immediately busy with her own new agenda as coordinator of production activities within the team. This was only going to be a temporary role for her, before moving on to further production work in a different department. As such, although my mentor frequently tried to find things for me to do, the philosophy of the placement, the liaison with the BA, my background, and how my visit might have fostered some two-way benefit, were all rather diluted. Most of my activities were arranged piecemeal which, fortuitously, resulted in some interesting experiences by the end of my 4 weeks, though there were quite a few days of inactivity. I'm not convinced that the *Horizon* team derived any benefit from my expertise, either my subject knowledge or my wider experiences as a researcher. I was clearly not well-known to the team from the outset (e.g. from my application) which surprised me. For the future, I would recommend that the hosts, as resident experts in science media, invest more time considering what they can offer a Fellow, who may have relatively little or no prior knowledge of broadcasting, rather than providing a service to a Fellow's wish-list. If the perceived benefit of this type of placement is for the Fellow to experience the various components of science documentary production, as turned out to be the case for me, then a 2-week placement with more structure would represent an improvement. Alternatively, a 4-week placement may better suit a Fellow who wishes to focus on the research aspects of a specific program (or two). Perhaps more challenging, but most rewarding of all, would be to offer the opportunity to contribute to all aspects of the making of a single documentary, though this would likely be restricted to someone with a flexible working schedule and based in London.

Beyond The Fellowship

Since completing the main part of the Fellowship, I have been further involved in the media as a result of some Arctic-based research - my 'normal' work. I've been interviewed for BBC TV News (National and Local), BBC Radio and for 'Dan Rather Reports' – a *Panorama*-style documentary program, currently on release in North America. My experience at BBC *Horizon* gave me an instant appreciation for how the researchers and camera/sound crews went about their daily business and, with some knowledge of how the editing process works, was able to engineer some valuable coverage of our research into the final broadcasts.

Articles

At the BA Festival of Science:

Public perspectives on research
http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/AboutFOS/HistoryoftheFestival/2007FestivalofScience/_2007FestivalNews/_Perspectives.htm
Watery secrets
http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/AboutFOS/HistoryoftheFestival/2007FestivalofScience/_2007FestivalNews/_WaterySecrets.htm
Nano stores the planet
http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/AboutFOS/HistoryoftheFestival/2007FestivalofScience/_2007FestivalNews/_NanoStoresThePlanet.htm

At the Royal Society:

Spare a thought for the history of your hangover cure
http://royalsociety.org/news.asp?id=7330

Post Fellowship – trip to the Arctic (includes links to short video clips):

Northwest Passage: your questions answered (by David Shukman)
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7045255.stm
Arctic muds reveal sea ice record (by David Shukman)
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7044808.stm

A crack in the ice (broadcast in the US and Canada November – December 2007)
The Dan Rather Reports
http://www.hd.net/drr238.html

Meltdown – Plymouth Herald
http://www.thisisplymouth.co.uk/displayNode.jsp?nodeId=133464&command=displayContent&sourceNode=133158&contentPK=19222778&folderPk=78031&pNodeId=133174