

Peter Wood – BBC Radio, Science Unit / BBC News Interactive

This report covers my motivation, experiences and conclusions drawn from a four week BA Media Fellowship at the BBC World Service and BBC Online undertaken between 16-Aug and 10-Sep 2004.

Through participating in the BA media fellowship I wanted to gain some idea of how the media works. How this rather broad objective would be achieved was something I was a lot less clear about. I was unclear what processes lay behind the creation of media pieces, how news was identified, information gathered or ideas created for new programs. These and many other questions were all answered through my placement at the BBC.

My fellowship was split between the BBC World Service Science Unit and the Science & Technology Desks at BBC Online. The Science Unit produces most of the science programs for World Service and Radio 4 and also the science news for both stations. Online produces all the science & technology material for the news website, Ceefax and the new digital terrestrial TV text services

The World Service Science Unit is based in Bush House, central London and consists of approximately 25 people totally dedicated to radio production. My tasks included researching for future programs via a combination of web searches, telephoning and personal contacts. One learns quickly that saying 'your from the BBC' opens doors and that talking to people is the fastest way to learn about a subject. I was also involved in the production of live radio programs, answered the phones at a telephone call-in show and engaged in other generally tasks.

My favourite task at the Science Unit was to write a 250 word piece for the World Service Somali Unit on 'what to do with plastic bags' as the country is suffering from bags blighting the environment. This was the ideal combination of research into biodegradable bags, practical application and international flavour. Its worth remembering the World Service reaches nearly 150 million people spread across the entire world, so it's a serious media player.

At Online the science & technology desks consist of eight people who research, gather and prepare news stories. I was struck by the silent busyness of the desks; each journalist had their own television (with earphones) with access to what appeared to be nearly every TV & radio channel in the world. Add to this access to Internet news wires and regular incoming email press releases and it was clear the journalists were the ultimate knowledge workers. Each journalist kept track of a particular area of news and produced a variety of articles, from instant news pieces, to follow-ups of articles appearing in science journals. Additionally 'specials' were investigated over a few weeks to cover subjects which deserved in-depth coverage.

Having had a short but very informative tour of TV centre I was immediately put to work writing a short piece on 'tool usage' in birds. This was a typical assignment; Nature, like many other journals, issues an 'embargoed' release four days before publication summarising the forthcoming articles. This gives time for journalists to research the interesting articles and write a story, which can be issued once the journal is published; hence the embargo. This not only gives a journalist time to write a story but it also reinforces the news piece, as it coordinates the simultaneous release via a number of media outlets.

My final week of the Fellowship was spent at the BA Festival of Science in Exeter. Here I worked alongside my BBC colleague Paul Rincon attending press conferences then writing stories for Online. There were typically six half hour press conferences per day where scientists presented their latest work. Our task was to discriminate between old news and real news then to use our notes, recording of the press conference and the accompanying press release to form typically a 250 word piece.

Sitting in the press office surrounded by journalists from all the leading UK media organisations and many from around the world was a great experience. In the afternoon once the press conferences were finished you could really feel the energy in the air as journalists rushed to file their pieces before their deadlines.

Having arrived back at work in Syria (NB I am a British expatriate currently based in Damascus) I was greeted with a wall of questions from my colleagues. Everyone thought working for the BBC was very interesting, even if it was part of my summer holiday! My Syrian colleagues were particularly interested to see the end results of my work on the Internet whilst my expatriate colleagues wanted to know if I was thinking of changing career.

Shell, my employer, has been very supportive in this endeavour recognising both the civic and personal development value of the Fellowship. Whilst in London I was able to meet the head of Shell's external affairs department. Being an ex BBC man himself, he was very interested in learning about my experiences. This link might develop into a short-term assignment in Shell's headquarters in London working in media relations.

This was a unique opportunity to see how both BBC Radio and Online go about producing their content. Whilst on the fellowship I saw how news emerges, be it via a press release, journal entry or wire story then how it proceeds to cascade through the various media channels to reach the general public. Clearly understanding this process will improve my ability to both launch news stories into the media and to evaluate what emerges from the media.

Thanks

- The British Association for the Advancement of Science, initiation, organisation and sponsorship.
- BBC: Numerous people including Deborah Cohen, Richard Black, Jonathan Amos & Paul Rincon
- Royal Dutch/Shell Group of Companies: Support amounting to 1 weeks paid leave and 1 return air fare from Damascus to London.

Work Produced

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/3617006.stm>

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/3640788.stm>

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/3665870.stm>

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/3634080.stm>

Feedback

1. Advertise the fellowship more. If you want more commercial people then contact the Media Offices of large companies and get them to advertise internally.
2. Allow more time between the decision on who goes where to when the briefing day is, its currently a bit rushed.
3. Contrary to what others said I found the accommodation perfectly satisfactory.
4. BBC news journalists complained that the BA science festival didn't have enough real news

Tools I Learnt About

1. Google News search, a brilliant tool to keep track of specific matters, its quick and easy to use, see: <http://news.google.com/>
2. If you're more serious about tracking news considering setting up a 'Really Simple Syndication' (RSS) account. This allows you to receive news from wire services like Reuters covering the latest breaking news. For more details see: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/help/3223484.stm?rss=http://news.bbc.co.uk/rss/newsonline_world_edition/front_page/rss091.xml
You can set-up an RSS account at <http://www.bloglines.com> in 10 minutes.