Media Fellow Report 2005

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Climbing on the roof of Hampton Court Palace, sailing under Tower Bridge, patrolling the Norfolk Broads in a police boat and fishing for eels in Ireland were just some of things I found myself doing this summer. This was a far cry from my life as a geologist at Edinburgh University but formed part of the eight week placement I undertook at the BBC as part of my BA media fellowship.

Many scientists are unhappy at the way science is reported in the press or have themselves had bad experiences with journalists and as a result many will avoid contact with the media. I felt the BA media fellowship was an excellent way to build links between the media and scientists. As a scientist I hoped to acquire a better understanding of the way in which science is reported to the public and I feel that the media fellowship gave me an opportunity to achieve this.

At the beginning of July I set off to BBC Birmingham not quite sure what to expect. I was to spend the next eight weeks working on Countryfile, the BBC One rural and environmental affairs programme on Sunday mornings hosted by John Craven. Every show takes a similar format; John Craven introduces the show from a chosen location every week where a feature story is based. The rest of the show involves a news piece, a video diary, an extended link from the location and a weather report for the week ahead. After a couple of days watching edits and sitting in on the dubs, I was soon thrown in at the deep end and given my own story to work on.

I joined the team as a researcher on the feature stories and after pitching an idea to the producer, I began the initial stage of the research on my first story. The first part of the process involves internet and archive research followed by a number of phone calls to verify the story. The next stage is to approach potential contributors who are usually happy to be involved and interviewed. This is not always the case however depending on the nature of the story, in one particular story I received several threatening phone calls warning us not to go ahead with filming or else..... Thankfully this was an unusual situation but highlighted a general mistrust of the media industry. Setting up a shoot takes about a week and with contributors and crew set up and location organised, the filming takes place the following Monday or Tuesday. Transferring the film to the BBC system, followed by the edits and the dub take up most of the remaining few days of the second week. The whole show is put together on Friday afternoon and couriered down to London on Saturday morning ready for broadcast on Sunday morning. I was amazed to learn that almost two weeks of work went into approximately five minutes piece of television.

The last week of my media fellowship was spent in Dublin at the BA Festival with all the other media fellows. I found it fascinating meeting all the major science

correspondents from the broadsheet papers and realised it was another different world that I quickly needed to learn about in order to get the most out of the week. Reporting on the science being unveiled during the week was at times quite stressful and it took me a while to realise I had no time for extra research on stories; I just needed get the words together.

For me this week was one (of the many!) highlights of the scheme. Sitting in press conferences I learnt so much about how science can make it into the media. Every day the journalists had about thirty press releases to get through and the ones that did not spell out clearly what the work was, what was new and why they should report it were immediately ditched. The fate of those remaining depended largely on the press conference and how the scientist portrayed his or her work. Inevitably large innovations such as a soundless aeroplane being developed by Cambridge University were reported, but often the other science stories that made the news were those that were made accessible to the journalists and could be related to everyday life or simplified into processes understood in every day life. Over the week this began to trouble me as not all science can be related clearly to every day life. This can lead to an oversimplification of news story resulting in the loss or distortion of the actual science behind the story and a general biasing of reporting away from subjects covering difficult concepts. Working with journalists so closely made me think about how scientific research and future directions of science are being influenced by the media and I began to wonder if there is much of science that is compatible with the fast pace world of news journalism.

It is essential that science is reported but often the public is left without the whole story. Initially I felt the media was failing science. An alternate viewpoint expressed by the well-respected scientist Lord Winston, laid the blame on scientists who were not communicating their work effectively. After working alongside science correspondents, press officers and scientists it would seem that the issues are more complex than a simple blame game. The journalists are giving the public what is demanded, short and simple sound bites of what is happening in the science world, and the scientists are giving the journalists what they want in an effort to get their work reported. If things are really to change the very culture of scientific engagement with the public may need to develop, with the aim being to create an understanding of what science is and the processes involved is scientific advances.

The BA scheme certainly gave me a much clearer understanding of the media world and the demands placed on journalists. The shift from an academic world into the media world was quite a large one but one that I thoroughly enjoyed. My participation in the scheme also raised awareness and interest in science communication in my department. Since returning I have been asked to write press releases and articles for colleagues in my department using my new skills and contacts. The scheme opened up my eyes to another world and forced me to look beyond what I knew. The BA media fellowships are one way in which scientists and journalists can work together and begin to tackle some of the problems surrounding the communication of science and I have certainly seen the success of this scheme first hand.