



Media Fellowships

Media Fellow Report 2009

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BBC Wales News and Current Affairs

The Placements

My placement is with BBC Wales, I use the term 'is' as the placement is currently on-going. The placement commenced at the end of October as it was agreed during an earlier meeting with BBC Wales that my placement should coincide with a planned 'Green Season', which would be aired in the run-up to the Copenhagen Climate Conference in December. As an environmental lawyer this was ideal for me. However, it was agreed that in order to acclimatise myself with the newsroom that I should spend some time on Wales Today (television news) and Good Morning Wales (radio) in August.

Green Season

The Green Season is a season of programmes intended to foster a national public conversation in Wales about climate change using the mediums of television, radio and online services in Wales about climate change. The season includes reality programmes, interviews and news broadcasts relating to the Welsh context and what impact, the issues to be discussed at the Copenhagen Conference on Climate Change will have for Wales and its people.

I have been provided with a behind the scenes look at how the BBC organises a season of programmes that will cross all of their media outlets.

I attended a number of preparatory meetings, which included a preliminary meeting with the heads of department within BBC Wales informing them about the season and requesting their involvement. A central issue for discussion was the BBC remaining impartial and it was interesting to witness how the BBC maintains this core aim.

It was also interesting to witness how the BBC as an organisation involves other organisations in its decision making. A stakeholder meeting with all the main Welsh environmental organisations was also held. This had a dual purpose of informing these organisations about the season but also to find out what may be able to offer in terms of expertise and potential stories during the season.



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It was interesting to obtain a glimpse into the multimedia approach used by the BBC to engage the general public and how an individual programme fits into a mosaic of media formats.

BBC News Online

Introduction

At the end of October, I began my fellowship in earnest. My first two weeks were with BBC News Online. This would be my only opportunity to write articles and I was immediately assigned a story to write. A few simple rules are required to follow. The first is that the main message of the story must be able to be told in 4 short paragraphs. The second is that the headline must catch the viewer's interest and must capture the point of the piece. The third is that the article must be written in clear, concise and non-technical language. Finally, the article has to be written without any bias.

It is vital that the website is updated on a regular basis, therefore stories are always needed. As a national site, it meant that stories were also required for all of the regions within Wales. Whilst the timescales and pressures are different from those of television and radio, there are still pressures to ensure that the website is updated regularly. It is often the first place, people look for breaking news stories therefore the turnaround is fast.

Experience

As a legal researcher, I spend most of my research time studying, statutes, judicial decisions and policy documents. In general, I do not spend a lot of time, if any, interviewing people. It was this that I found the most daunting. Calling someone and then conducting an interview. These interviews were not recorded and I have a terrible memory and so it was dependent upon how much I could write down very quickly. I suddenly desperately wished I had at some point in my life learnt shorthand. Possibly worse than this were the different accents, which I sometimes struggled with and realised that if I asked the interviewee to repeat one more time that they would become very annoyed. In the beginning, I was not getting all of the information that I required.

By the end of the first week, I was improving but still not completely comfortable with the experience. I knew that I would have to divide questions into those that required confirmation of the information that I had, those that gave basic information for example dates and those questions that could provide a good quote. These were the questions that I had to think about before calling and these were the questions for which I had to write very quickly to capture the essence of the quote.

Within my first day, I also knew that an ability to write a headline was crucial. I was told this was what would draw in a reader. I have never been able to come up with titles for



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articles so the prospect of coming up with an enticing headline seemed like a nightmare. My first two days were spent agonising over something that could only be 33 characters long. My agonising seemed to pay off as the headline for my second article went by with a 'good headline' comment.

Observations

1. Being on the other side of the fence provided me with a better understanding of the pressures journalist face daily. A story, in general has to be published within that day and depending on the importance of the story a quicker turnaround is often necessary. When, as an academic, we receive calls from the media requesting input immediately, I now know the reason why. I found myself chasing contacts after promised photographs were slow in materialising.

2. The importance of writing in an easy, comprehensible style is vital. With an online news outlet, the audience range is vast; therefore, the writing style must be easily comprehensible, informative, interesting, unbiased and not condescending. It is a challenge and the experience I hope will improve my own ability to communicate my research to a wider audience.

3. As online news requires a constant flow of stories, there is an excellent opportunity for academics to disseminate their research. Online news, like television and radio, relies heavily on press releases. However, there is an enormity of press releases daily. I was informed that press releases from academics are generally impossible to understand as they are written in a technical language and often they are not news worthy. To avoid being deleted instantly, they need to have a title that elicits the interest of the journalist and must in the first paragraph explain what the story is and why it is worthy of press interest.

4. Images are vital for online news. Online has more freedom in how a story is portrayed. They can link to video footage, or to a clip from radio, they can even include a slide show. Sometimes a photograph is all that is required with a few lines of text. Images are key to how a story is presented.

Radio: Good Morning Wales

Introduction

Good Morning Wales runs 6 days a week, Mondays to Fridays 6-9am and Saturdays 7-8.30am. Unlike the other departments, the programme is not restricted to Welsh stories but national and international, which gives the programme a larger scope for sourcing stories.

Like News Online and Wales Today, there are meetings in the morning and in the afternoon to discuss story ideas, progress and schedules.



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Experience

During my first visit to Good Morning Wales, I was asked to pitch a possible story on germline gene therapy and I was asked to prepare a package for the morning show. Preparing the package in essence involves finding someone suitable to discuss the topic and to provide the presenters with background information on the subject, the guest and possible questions to ask during the interview. In essence provide the presenters with enough information for them to question the guest.

A key element of this preparation is assessing whether the guest is confident enough to speak on radio and whether they are confident about the approach to be taken in the interview.

The production elements also need to be considered, access to a studio, transport, booking a studio, available time, time when not available and contact details.

If a major story breaks overnight, the programme schedule is likely to change and stories are cut. In this instance there was a major breaking story and the programme the next morning was altered significantly. Despite this, my small story survived the cut.

My second time with Radio Wales has proven to be an interesting challenge. Unlike my time on News online I am not responsible for the finished article but on planning some of the events and possible news stories during the 'Green Wales' season. However, I am required to call potential interviewees so my time on Online has proven beneficial and I am now much more adept at eliciting the relevant information from the potential guests.

Observations

1. The BBC has a pool of experts from which they call upon to act as guest speakers. I was informed that they always need to add to this pool. Academics are a valuable source of expertise. However, I was also informed that many academics continue to use technical terms or jargon during interviews, thereby often failing to communicate their message to the listening audience. After each programme, a post mortem of the show is carried out, this includes whether a guest was appropriate or not. To continue as an expert guest contributor, we need to learn how to communicate our expertise in a manner which can be understood by those either listening or watching the news programme.

2. How radio tells the news story is very different to both television and online, because images have no place in telling the story. Description through language is the vital component. When I was offered the placement, I had no particular interest in radio. But after having witnessed how the same story was represented on television and on radio, I became more drawn to radio because of the role of language and how the journalist has to create the scene for the listener through predominantly the use of words.



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3. On occasions it can prove very difficult to find a suitable guest, I soon discovered that lateral thinking is a key skill.

Television: Wales Today

Introduction

I first joined the Wales Today team in August. I had heard the expression 'slow news day' before however, I was not aware that there was a "slow news month". This seemed to me to be an anomaly. Did events not go on regardless of the particular month? However, I was informed that August is a slow month and because of that stories that would normally not be covered were considered for broadcast.

The main news programme is broadcast Mondays to Fridays at 6.30; in addition there is a lunch time slot, morning slots and late evening slots as well. Consequently, the team have to ensure that there is sufficient news coverage for all of the time slots throughout the day.

Experience

During my first visit with Wales Today, I was observing and accompanying reporters on news stories. This included a police briefing about a murder case which was going to trial the following week and accompanying a reporter to cover the discovery of a body in a housing estate. The police briefing was very organised and attended by numerous media outlets.

I also spent time in the production suite, whilst the lunch and evening news programmes were broadcast. Everything was timed to the very last second and as live broadcasts ran over, the schedule of the programme was constantly being changed to ensure that the broadcast did not run over even by a second. The language they used also confused me, as someone shouted out OOV, I became fascinated with what was this OOV that everyone was so concerned about. I learned that I was going to have to record all of these strange names because this was how they communicated to one another. An OOV means out of vision whilst a SOVT means sound on vision. I may have been 'Michael Burked' but I still had a long way to go before full initiation.

During my time with Wales Today in November, I was introduced to the editing and writing scripts for some of the broadcasts - a 15 second script, an image, a voice over and the result a news story.

Observations

1. Of the three mediums, this appeared to me to be the most pressurised, this maybe because every second counts. The news programme cannot run over so every story is meticulously timed. When a story comes into the news room, a reporter is assigned and if it



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is for that evening's broadcast, the reporter must film and edit the footage and write and record their commentary before the news bulletin. Some packages, however, are prepared in advance. Television journalism is instant, it happens in the now and sourcing the story is sometimes fast and furious, rush in; get the story; write the story; air the story and it is all over. It is the complete opposite to academic research which is by its very nature slow and deliberate. Whilst I may have been surprised by the formulaic approach, I understand its necessity.

2. As a Welsh news programme, it was also restricted to Welsh news. A story will have no importance if there is no Welsh angle. The programme also knows that it has a specific audience and therefore, there are discussions about the merits of a particular story in terms of its value for its Welsh audience. Consequently, it is often necessary to find the Welsh angle to UK or international stories.

3. It was also important to achieve a balance across the programme. There had to be a balance between hard edged news stories and light entertaining news stories. I had not expected this. I have always assumed that news in general portrays the negative but it was necessary for them to achieve this balance and that surprised me.

Conclusion

I cannot say that I had too many preconceptions before I began my Fellowship. I have worked as a press officer in the past and therefore had a fairly good idea about journalism. I knew that they worked at a far quicker pace than academics and I knew that what may appear to an outsider as a demanding journalist was in fact a journalist with a deadline. However, being aware of this still does not equate with having lived the deadline demands for oneself.

Having had the experience of working with essentially four different departments, news online, radio, television and within the Platform team, I was provided with a unique opportunity to discover that each of these departments has a set of different pressures, different approaches and different methods of presenting the same story.

As the placement is still ongoing, I still have to experience all that a busy newsroom has to offer. However, in the time that I have spent there, I have come to the conclusion that whilst language is supposed to unite us, it in fact has a habit of causing divisions. I was informed that the role of a journalist is to tell a story, a story that can be understood by as many people as possible.

Academics in contrast are often required to write in a specific way, using specific language, which can only be fully appreciated by other academics within that area of expertise.



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Some of the journalists that I have spoken to did admit that in general that they did not report on as many science stories as they should. One of the reasons for this was that they felt that there were too few scientists who presented their expertise in a manner compatible with media requirements.

Even in the short time that I have been in the BBC Wales newsroom, I have learnt a lot. If I and my research colleagues want to raise the impact our research has in terms of media and public outputs we have to learn to tell our story simply.

We have something to offer journalist, as we are a source of news. In a society where 24 hour news is the norm, different sources of stories are vital, which makes academics a valuable commodity.

Thanks

I must thank the British Science Association and especially Nigel Eady for providing this incredible opportunity. I also must thank Cath Allen at BBC Wales who has been generous with her time and guidance. I also must thank all of the people in BBC News online, Wales Today and Radio Wales for their time and assistance.



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Appendix

Articles for BBC Wales News Online

1. Medieval Castle enters solar age

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/8326916.stm>

2. Charity delivers spring of hope –

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/north_west/8330119.stm

3. City venue will rock once again

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/south_east/8334005.stm

3a. Revised version

http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/southeastwales/hi/people_and_places/music/newsid_8342000/8342208.stm

4. Pubs failing alcohol test

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/8338070.stm>

5. Date for plastic bag due

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/8339049.stm>

5a. Revised version Plastic Bag Charges by May 2011

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/8339049.stm>

6. Artists 'fleeces' ancient building

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/mid/8340058.stm>

7. Abertoir Horror Festival opens

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/8340724.stm>

8. History's guardian marks 25 years

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/8344630.stm>

Radio Wales

1. 28 August 2009 – Preparation for interview on Germline Genetics – Good Morning Wales,

2. 28 November 2009 – Assisting with guests and participants for 'Morning of the Match'

3. Currently working on numerous packages to be broadcast during the Copenhagen Conference.