



## Media Fellowships

### Media Fellow Report 2009

**Dr Griet Scheldeman, Social Anthropologist, Lancaster Environment Centre,  
Lancaster University**

**BBC News Online, Science and Environment  
BBC radio Science Unit**

#### Placements

**Dates:** 27<sup>th</sup> July – 11<sup>th</sup> September 2009

*'Can I be absolutely brutal?' - Martin Redfern, senior producer at BBC Radio Science Unit, hands back my first attempt at writing a billing (the program synopsis on the website and in the Radio Times) for the next episode of Leading Edge – 'this reads like an academic synopsis.' I screw up my face – while a few weeks ago 'an academic synopsis' would have been exactly what was expected of me, and will be again once I return to my usual job, this week it is not appropriate. Despite my conscious efforts to avoid jargon and dry language, I am obviously still stuck in a certain frame of mind. Hmmm, I must try harder, Beckett's 'Try again. Fail again. Fail better.' comes to mind. Let's say I like the freedom that comes with this absolute failure: the only way is up!*

This episode sums up my six week placement with the BBC: forget what you thought you knew, what works in academia does not work here. You aim for a different end result – a news article, a radio piece - and this demands a different approach. Be ready to deal with the occasional identity crisis this may throw up. Airlifted from one world, and dropped into another. I may have 10 years experience in writing, and teaching students how to write, academic essays, yet here I am a novice.

I am happy to say I learned. What's more, I realized I enjoy this particular way of working, the fast pace. A huge satisfaction comes with producing something 'good enough' in such a short time frame – though compared to my 'real' journalist colleagues I move at snail pace. You feel at the hub of things, knowing about the latest science studies before the rest of the world. You call up researchers across the world and mention 'BBC', the key that opens all doors. Though cringing at first, you settle into the inevitability of asking basic questions. Inevitable, because you do not have background knowledge in each specific field -today you may cover comets, tomorrow freak waves - nor do you have the time to read up on the topic. You may just about manage a quick skim through the scientific paper, read the press release and do some online



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research, before contacting the scientist-authors. Time is pressing as you need to interview them in time to meet the embargo, to ensure your story is out there together with all other science media writers reporting the same piece of research. Old news is no news; the only place for it is the bin.

Apart from trepidation 'will I be able to do this?' I had no idea what to expect. I certainly did not expect to have such a wonderful time while learning a variety of skills. Both placements were in London, so for six weeks I relocated to the capital. I think this was a bonus. It made the placement a 'total' experience, a rite of passage: away from the familiar, totally immersed in the new.

### **BBC News Online – Science and Environment**

In his initial email to arrange the placement Jonathan Amos, 'head' of the science and environment team, wrote 'we'll treat you just like any other journalist. You'll be flung in with the rest of the crocs'. I was and, though I never became fully scaled, I agree this is the only way. So on day 1 I was told: 'this is your desk, we'll set you up, email etc, and today you'll write about orang-utans; here is the research paper and this is the press release.' Gulp. I voiced my slight panic to Jonathan: 'what if by tonight I don't have it?' 'Then you do it by tomorrow, and we'll help you.' And they did. My welcoming colleagues reassured me 'you'll be absolutely fine'. Over the days, I asked and pestered them, feeling guilty about taking their time, trying to offset this (in vain) by bringing in the teas. On the other hand, if I didn't ask, I was stuck, and there were these things called 'deadlines'.

As I couldn't learn how my colleague reporters wrote from watching them tap on keyboards - though I would have loved to be able to see inside their heads how sentences formed- I could listen to them talking on the phone, as they interviewed scientists or solicited expert comments. No need to be inhibited, just pick up the phone. I soon discovered the key questions to elicit all information needed to write a lucid piece. I was struck by the friendliness and ease of these exchanges, both on phone and by email, with scientists. No doubt mentioning 'BBC' opens doors: people are happy to explain. For they know that the clearer they explain, the better their research will be covered and the wider it will be read. In that way journalists are facilitators for scientists, and collaboration benefits both sides.

And so to the writing process. Challenging to say the least, but I loved it. As usual, the difficult moments proved to be the most satisfying, in the 'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger' mode. Wondering whether I'd ever manage to write something according to these unwritten rules which seem obscure at times – how long can you stare at the same 4 sentences, rephrase them, are they saying absolutely all the reader needs to know, are they still correct, rephrase again. Think of a game of Scrabble: which combination gives the highest score? This writing



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craft is what I enjoyed most of my time with the online reporters. Crafting their pieces as the highly skilled wordsmiths they are, they take pleasure and pride in their work. This is far removed from how I had imagined journalists, as some smug know-it-all's who indulge in liquid lunches after dictating some words over the phone (I must have been watching the wrong films). Instead my colleagues were hands on, words on professional storytellers.

Respect! For the online Science team, where every reporter has the space to do their own thing, while working together as a well oiled team to produce a solid online science page, everyday. And for science reporters in general, having seen the circumstances in which they work (noisy, cramped for space, continuous interruption and distraction, time constraints), to produce the clear writing they do is impressive. Back in the academic world, I hope to keep with the two essential insights I gained. First, you can work very well in not ideal circumstances. Second, don't procrastinate; you don't need to know everything about something before you can write about it. In other words: 'Just do it'.

The best thing about this fellowship is the fact it is hands on, you learn by experience. You get the chance to do it, mess up and try again. And you do it for real: I wasn't just fobbed off with 'nice try'. Instead, at the end of the day, I actually saw my scribbling online, for the entire world to see.

*Nick Higham TV/Radio reporter*

While located at BBC Television House, I had the privilege to follow Nick Higham on his 'TV and radio reporter' activities. This showed me a different side to reporting: not written press, not news or science as such, but interesting stories on culture or local events. Nick gave me the tour of the BBC News Room, and I watched how he edited video and audio recordings, whittling down a few hours to a tight 4 minute package. Nick really came to his own though when reporting on location for BBC News, for example on the move of 20 million butterflies at the Natural History Museum. Nick arrives, inspects the scene, chats to the butterfly man, 'what are they doing', 'which specific butterflies can he show that would look good on camera', then, no rehearsal, no 'I'll just go and write my lines now', he goes straight in. Camera rolling, Nick is ready with his lead in commentary, where we are, why we are here, what is happening, and he moves straight in to interview the expert. Change of scene, new theme, and rolling again. The next day we are at the New Darwin centre for a live feed to a succession of BBC TV and radio news bulletins, and always Nick stands and delivers. What do I learn from this? The straight-in approach, no need to over prepare, don't waste time, just focus. Not only does he get the result, but it is also a great cure against boredom or repetition fatigue. Again, I admire the professionalism and ease with which Nick seamlessly in a few words links one film take to another, keeping it clear, entertaining and interesting. Yet another good storyteller. I am also



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impressed by the professionalism of the cameramen (yesterday in Chechnya filming war, today filming stuffed giraffes in a dusty storage room). No dithering just do it there and then and deliver quality: frame the interviewer/-viewed, get the best shot, tweak, and make it look good. Again, I have respect for these skilled craftsmen, working as a team, running against time and with the videotape from the editing car to the satellite van just in time to stream it to the News Room.

### **BBC Radio Science Unit**

Just when I stopped getting lost in BBC Television House I moved to Bush House to start a three week placement with BBC Radio (World Service and Radio 4). Bush House is an even bigger maze, with the added pitfall that most floors share the same floor plan. One day it took me a few confused wanderings to realize that no, they had not moved the entire unit and its neighbour 'BBC Macedonia' overnight; I was just on the wrong floor. The Radio Science Unit was an entirely different experience. For a start, they do different things. They produce radio programs such as Material World, Science in Action, Health Check, Digital Planet and Leading Edge. To produce radio programs you need researchers, producers, assistant producers and presenters. While some writing needs to be done (the billing, the radio scripts, possible questions and answers in interviews, intros and links between different program items) most effort goes into setting up the program, which means finding topics, finding scientists to talk and thinking of questions to ask. Thus working in a radio team, and doing a placement there, offers yet another side to science reporting.

Again this comes with a different way of working, and a different approach to science and scientists. In online written reporting, you can cover the main elements in the first paragraph, after that, readers can choose to read on and cope with the finer detail. Radio however is for a broader public, which demands a certain entertainment value, and abhors boredom. Hence in the Radio Unit, scientists are often referred to as 'are they any good?' and 'will they deliver?' referring to their voice and ability to be clear if possible even funny. Whereas a writing reporter can 'translate' scientist speak, a radio journalist depends on their subjects. Which may explain why some scientists make it to radio interviews and keep being asked again, and others never do.

Rather than spread myself across different programs and getting lost in between, I adopted Martin Redfern, senior producer of Leading Edge, and threw myself in the billing of two episodes. Part of my motivation for this fellowship had been to 'give a voice to anthropology'. There was no place for that in online Science reporting, as social anthropology is not about exciting scientific discoveries. Studying cultures and peoples' practices, it is analytic, descriptive and reflexive, which makes that reporting on it in the media requires some time and quite a few



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words. 'Leading Edge' appeared to be the perfect place. This program, as the billing says 'explores the world of science and the people, passions and policies behind it'. Bingo. I could think of exactly the right person who could talk about his 'science' (anthropology) and passion behind it. I 'pitched' a senior anthropologist to Martin for the program, and must have been convincing. I even found a news tag: the week of the broadcast coincided with a workshop the professor was involved in. Even better. Then it was suggested we needed a 'reportage' from the workshop, to add colour and different voices to what otherwise could be a monotonous interview. And the best person, since there was no one else, and I was free (in both ways) would be me. Having always wanted to do a radio package, I grabbed this chance. Travelling with my little radio recorder to the workshop in Glasgow, I was on a mission: I had to come away from those four hours spent at the workshop with good enough quotes and sound recordings to make up a 5 minute package. Back in London Martin guided me through the editing process (how to cut two hours of recording to 5 minutes) and patiently helped me record my intro and linking lines, which I had to repeat to infinity as my Belgian intonation sounded flat, while -here it is again- it was as if I was telling a story: so I now say 'into the gaaarden' (start high with 'gar', then go down at 'den'). I still think it does not sound like me and there must be more ways than one to do radio, but it was all part of the experience.

### What next?

Seeing your article up there on the worldwide web after only a few hours work makes you think. How does this compare with a PhD you dedicated a few years hard work to, only to be read by perhaps 10 people? What's more, it makes it awkward to go back to that academic world of writing: spending months on a paper which will only be read by a minor few.

If at the start of the fellowship the only way is up, at the end of it, inevitably, there is the need to come down. Leave that exciting 'centre of news' and go back to a less frenetic pace. On the one hand I was happy to return to my research, to the world where I knew what I was doing, and would again have time to look at things in more detail, go in-depth and reflect. I do however hope to retain some of the 'just do it' approach to writing, and to keep talking to a wider readership by publishing non-academic pieces.

My project manager and colleagues were so generous to let me go away from our current research project, for a long 7 weeks. I like to think they recognized the benefits associated with the fellowship, not only for me and my further career, but also for our research project. I will give a seminar to my wider workgroup at the Lancaster Environment Centre, to build up the centre's public profile as environmental experts. I am also involved in a media workshop for anthropologists with an interest in public engagement, organized by Aberdeen University.



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### What journalists want

Going behind the scene taught me what journalists want from academics. What they want they often don't get, which is why the academics then don't get the journalists' attention, and thus no media coverage. So what do they want? Stories. I thought news was 'hard' and 'facts' and science', but the word I heard most frequently in the 6 weeks with BBC science is 'story'. 'What's the story?' 'Then I realized there's no story here (so no point in covering it)' 'How do you want to tell the story?' Journalists want fun, interesting, relevant, earth shocking, entertaining, sweet or sad stories. If scientists can tell the stories on their own research, that's even better. It means they are fun to interview, provide great copy, and are a pleasure to stage on radio or TV.

Far from selling out to the media, I am convinced stories are what bind us, as they are fundamental to both journalists and scientists. So scientists, and other academics, dig in your souls, find your inner child, or your grandmother, unearth what enthuses you about your field and research, and share this with the rest of us. Talk about your research in a way that makes it come alive. And people will listen. If those people are reporters, then you will reach their reading, listening and watching audiences.

### Thanks

To the BBC Online Science team: for being so welcoming, for helping, explaining, encouraging, and sharp editing (Paul!). In short, for being such an amazing and creative team, working in a vibrant atmosphere. So thanks Paul, Vic, Mark, Judith, Beccy and Richard. Thank you Jonathan for organizing this and allowing a baby shark in your pond, making sure it swam.

To Nick Higham, for letting me be a participant observer (more the latter than the former) and charming BBC guide.

To the BBC Radio Science Team, Deborah, Martin, Geoff, and Liz, for taking me on. Thanks Anna for giving me a crash course in radio package making. Thank you Martin for letting me adopt you and Leading Edge and teaching me tricks of the trade. Above all for having the confidence to let me have a go.

Thank you Nigel of the British Science Association, a friendly voice at the other end of the phone, for organizing the placements, informing us, guiding us through, finding a nice flat in London for us to stay during our placements. Mark and Simon, fellow Media Fellows and flatmates, for sharing and encouraging.

For this 'summer of media 2009', thank you all for making it happen.



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### Appendix

#### BBC News Online:

Orangutans swing for their dinner

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8171142.stm>

Bald songbird discovered in Laos

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8174975.stm>

Comets 'not cause of extinctions'

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8179895.stm>

Orangutan ruse misleads predators

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8184015.stm>

Freak Wave 'hotspots' identified

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8188550.stm>

Early toolmakers were 'engineers'

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8195664.stm>

#### BBC Radio Science Unit:

I worked on two episodes of BBC Radio 4's **Leading Edge**.

I researched and helped produce, and wrote the program billing. I also made a 5 minute package for each program.

10/09/09

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00mgyr1>

At the British Science Festival in Guildford (Sept 2009) I interviewed young scientists participating in the British Science Association 'Perspectives' poster competition.

17/09/09

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00ml2r5>

At the 'Designing Environments for Life' workshop at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Glasgow, I interviewed participating anthropologists, designers and artists.

#### Program billing

<http://www.britishtscienceassociation.org/MediaFellows>



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### Leading Edge 17/09/09

Geoff Watts talks to anthropologist Prof Tim Ingold, who has lived with reindeer herders in Lapland, and is now working with artists and designers to discover how to live truly sustainable lives.

According to Ingold, design can change our relationship with our environment. Central to understanding that relationship, he says, is anthropology.

He lived for several years with reindeer herders in Lapland, studying their relationship with animals and nature. Fascinated by how people make their place in their environment, he then worked with artists, architects and even hillwalkers to study how they learned through their daily activities, improvising along the way. This led to his rather curious latest passion, lines - the lines we draw, the paths we walk, the threads we weave, and even the storylines we tell.

Ingold has just launched a new project in Glasgow called Designing Environments for Life. This brings together anthropologists, architects, artists and designers to bridge the gap between our familiar everyday environments and the abstract 'environment' of government-speak and global warming messages. If they can convince us that they are one and the same, we might manage a more sustainable life.

### Program transcripts

### Leading Edge 10/09/09

Hello. This year it was Guildford where the pilgrims were congregating. Not at the Cathedral, though, but at Surrey University next door: pilgrims, young and old, thirsting not for religion but for science. Guildford, in short, has been the venue for the 2009 British Science Festival. The organisation behind the meeting has been rebranded. It's cast aside the fusty connotations of the its 19<sup>th</sup> Century title, the British Association for the Advancement of Science. But the mixture on tap at the meeting was much as usual: a compendium of the topical and the timeless; the worthy and the weird; the supremely intelligent and the sometimes slightly inane.

And don't get the idea that these meetings are solely for science groupies. As you'll hear during the next 30 minutes, the arts and the humanities also made a good showing – as, it seems, they always have. So says Martin Willis who studies the delectable combination of science history and English literature:



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INSERT: WILLIS

IN: "Many literary and artistic figures...

OUT: ...a grotesque carnival."

DUR: 3'38"

Dr Martin Willis of the University of Glamorgan illustrating the Dickensian talent to abuse!

A more analytical approach to the relationship between art and science turned up in a session on "Our creative brains". Providing the starting point for the discussion, the raw material you might say, were Shelley James - an artist whose work ranges from printmaking to sculptures in glass - and Suba Subramaniam, a dancer and choreographer. Contributing the analysis was Oxford cognitive neuroscientist Professor Morten Kringlebach.

First to Suba; when choreographing a new work, where does she begin?

INSERT: SUBRAMANIAM/KRINGELBACH/JAMES

IN: "I usually start with a concept...

OUT: ...getting that balance right."

DUR: 7'12"

Morten Kringlebach – who takes the science of pleasure so seriously he's written a book on it: *The Pleasure centre*. You also heard from artist Shelley James and, before her, dancer Suba Subramaniam.

The poster session is a familiar part of most scientific meetings; researchers use it to present summaries of their latest findings. But many of the posters on show at the Guildford Festival relied to an unusual extent on visual imagery - as Griet Scheldeman discovered:

INSERT: PERSPECTIVES



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IN: "This crowded exhibition space...

OUT: ...some of that back with me."

DUR: 4'00

Griet Scheldeman with the young scientific poster people.

Now, back even further down the age range: to schoolchildren. The issue: should controversial issues in science be tackled in school science lessons? A bit of recent history is in order here: an incident sparked by last year's Festival of Science. Among the speakers then - indeed this year too - was Michael Reiss, an Anglican priest, professor of science education at London's Institute of Education and also, at that time, director of science education at the Royal Society. But no longer. It's a post he was soon obliged to give up. Why?

INSERT: REISS

IN: "I had a debate at...

OUT: ...might have helped."

DUR: 6'41"

Professor Michael Reiss.

Another academic with an interest in controversy is psychologist Professor Bruce Hood, author of a book called *Super sense: the brain science of belief*. His argument is that our brains are predisposed to be receptive not only to creationist explanations of the world, but to all sorts of supernatural ideas. But why? One possible explanation has to be that in the past, if not now, such a predisposition was in some way beneficial:

INSERT: HOOD

IN: "It could be the case that supernatural beliefs...

OUT: ...should accept willy-nilly."

DUR: 3'02"



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Professor Bruce Hood of the University of Bristol Department of Experimental Psychology winding up this review of some of the ideas discussed at the Festival of Science.

Next week in *Leading Edge*: an anthropologist who began his academic career with the reindeer herders of Lapland, and is now aiming to find out how we can all live more satisfying lives...though not necessarily by herding reindeer.

### **Leading Edge 17/09/09**

Hello. Reasons to be cheerful, this week. A fortnight ago we heard Lord May, ex-president of the Royal Society, mournfully agreeing that some of the world's most pressing problems were the unintended consequences of science and technology. This week, by contrast, I'm talking to a couple of people - one an anthropologist, the other a psychologist - who believe that science has something to offer in helping us live better lives in a better environment.

Well, yes, but a bit vague that, you may be thinking...a bit soft and fluffy? Let's find out. And let's set the scene with a sound which is neither soft nor fluffy:

CD: YOIKING

The traditional folk singing (it's called "yoiking") of the reindeer-herding Sami people of Northern Finland, the Laplanders. It's a sound that would be familiar to Tim Ingold, nowadays professor of social anthropology at the University of Aberdeen. He began his career, as many anthropologists have done, by making a study of one group of people with a very particular way of life. In his case, the Sami. Now, several decades on, his interests are quite different. But as I've been finding out, he does see them as a development of ideas which began to germinate in the 1970s: a period that left him with a fascination for animals as well as humans:

INSERT: INGOLD 1

IN: "When you work with reindeer...."

OUT: "...study of art or architecture."

DUR:



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In our everyday lives, says Tim Ingold, we all play a part in designing our environment. Think of footpaths in a park. The “official” designers lay them out, mark them and tarmac them. But if other routes are more useful to us, they’ll soon emerge. Muddier and less tidy than the planned paths they may be – but also more widely used. Most of us don’t think about our surroundings in such terms. Tim Ingold would like us to do so, and to relish our own input.

The first step, of course, is simply to get people thinking about these matters. Hence a workshop on designing environments for life organised by Tim Ingold and his colleagues. It was held last weekend in Glasgow, and our reporter Griet Scheldemen went along to meet some of those taking part:

INSERT: SCHELDEMAN

IN: “This workshop brings together...

OUT: ...as an anthropologist.”

DUR:

Griet Scheldemen reporting on new ways of thinking about our environment. Back to Tim Ingold:

INSERT: INGOLD 2

IN: “The critical point about this...

OUT: ...what scientists actually do.”

DUR:

Professor Tim Ingold.

Although still an anthropologist at heart, Tim Ingold has expanded the boundaries of his interest to incorporate other aspects of the world he wants to understand and change. Something similar could be said of Professor Gloria Laycock, director of the Jill Dando Institute of Crime Science at University College, London. A psychologist by training who worked for more



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than 30 years in the Home Office, psychology is now only one of many branches of science, including the social sciences, that she's chosen to bring within her wide-ranging bailiwick.

The Jill Dando Institute was, as I'm sure you know, named in memory of the immensely popular BBC TV presenter whose murder in 1999 attracted widespread news coverage. It became the first such institute to be devoted specifically to "crime science". Gloria Laycock joins me in the studio – and I have to begin by asking you about this term. You make a distinction between crime science and more traditional criminology. What is the difference?

[criminology after the event

crime science prevents rather than responds...

*What does crime science mean in practice? What can you actually do?*

examples?

*You're very wide-ranging in the links you try to establish. They include many other activities such as architecture, engineering, geography, medicine, psychology, statistics, town planning – fair bit of overlap with Tim Ingold. How are some of these involved?*

*You talk of "designing out" crime...*

*What evidence do you have this scientific approach is effective?*

*You believe that a lot of crime is "opportunistic" – by which you mean...*

[Are there more opportunities now than there used to be?



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*All in all you think that scientific approach to crime is more likely to be effective than an ideological or a political one...*

Gloria Laycock, thank you. Professor Gloria Laycock, director of the Jill Dando Institute of Crime Science.

Next week in *Leading Edge*, science in a more soothing context: our enjoyment of music, and the brain science that underpins it.