

Media Fellow Report 2008

**Frances Harris, Geographer, Kingston University
BBC Radio 4, Birmingham – Costing the Earth & Farming Today**

1. Introduction

This report reflects on a BA Media Fellowship with Farming Today and Costing the Earth, radio programmes hosted by BBC Radio 4 in Birmingham. The Fellowship was arranged with Andrew Thorman and Fran Barnes (editor of Farming Today). The Fellowship encompassed about five and a half weeks, over the summer of 2008.

I have always been interested in public understanding of science, and the role that the media can play in reaching out to the public and informing them about the key scientific debates and developments which will affect their lives. This is particularly true with respect to rapidly changing environmental debates concerning global environmental issues, and farming and rural environment issues. As a university lecturer, I can teach undergraduates and postgraduates about these issues, but formal educational establishments can do little to reach out to those out of education. For many people, they stop studying science at school or university, in their teens or early twenties. However, for the remainder of their lives (easily 50-60 years) new developments in science and technology continue at great pace, and they are left grappling with the issues and complexities without much guidance. The media can play a role here, reaching out to people in their homes through radio, television, newspapers and magazines, to keep the public abreast of new issues. So a BA Media Fellowship was a chance to explore how the media do it. Who interprets the science into understandable, digestible and interesting packages to engage the wider public and make them aware of new developments and issues?

I was thrilled when told my application for a BA Media Fellowship had been successful, especially as the proposed programmes – Farming Today and Costing the Earth, were very much in line with my interests.

2. Diary

Week 1: Day 1 was a shock. BBC Birmingham runs in a massive open plan office, all hotdesking, almost paperless.... Not at all like your typical academic's office (sometimes shared with 1-2 other people) full of papers (mostly gathering dust, I will admit). Farming Today is a news programme, hence it is all very immediate, phone lines ring, and apart from its weekly theme (more later) it's a new start every day. Costing the Earth was quite different. I was fortunate to arrive as they were dreaming up and then preparing a new series. Fortunately, there were two topics I occasionally lecture on, so I felt I might be able to contribute. There was a few weeks' lead in time to make the programmes, and so it felt much more like preparing a lecture. The time scale allowed for more meaningful research, and the length of the programme allowed people to get into more depth. I felt more at home with this.

Farming Today also runs weekly themes, whereby a topic is mentioned each day for the week, and then for the Saturday programme, Farming Today this week (Saturday morning), the topic items are gathered together, and supplementary material added, to make a more

focussed programme on the theme. I was asked whether I would do some research on GM as a weekly theme, to be run at some time in the future. GM is an enormous topic, and the brief “where is the science at, what is going on?” was quite broad.

Week 2: I felt a bit more confident. I knew what I was heading for, and it wouldn't be so new. There was a meeting with the producer who had taken on responsibility for the Ecotowns programme (Costing the Earth). I learned a lot about adding “colour” (i.e. background noise, interesting location description, choosing people who speak interestingly, variation in tempo and voices) to ensure listeners stay engaged. I also learned about the practicalities of making a programme. I also had a chance to go out recording with Farming Today to interview “Fergus the Forager” in Canterbury, Kent.

By the end of week 2 I had worked out that the way to get the most out of this would be to ask loads of questions, to get people to explain to me why they do what they do. I must have been tiresome to some people, but I did learn a lot.

Week 3: The highlight of week 3 was a trip to Liverpool to record some visits to urban renewal sites in Liverpool, for the Ecotowns programme. It was interesting to meet the presenter (Miriam O'Reilly), hear about her work generally, and see how the relationship between producer and presenter panned out.

Week 4: It was suggested I could help someone else preparing a programme about Food Security issues in Ethiopia. The producer had started, but was now busy on other programmes, and needed help planning things before going to Ethiopia to record interviews. Aah – now I was in my former stomping ground, having done work in Africa on farming in the past. It was a chance to ring the big development research institutes, follow up names I knew and see where they had got to. At the end, when I told people where I had got to at a meeting, the series producer said, “You are an angel sent from heaven!” I felt I had finally got something right!

I also had a fun time out with another person taping “Vox Pop” – the view on the street of British farmers. This included a woman who said she didn't know many farmers, but she liked it when they took their tops off for the tug of war!

Week 5: I had an opportunity to tape an interview on location. So far, I felt I hadn't got the measure of what Farming Today really wanted. But when I suggested a knowledgeable agronomist from Savills, who could discuss how the harvest was going (topical, given the weather etc), they agreed. I was given a recorder, headset and microphone, taught how to use them and off I went. It was harder than I thought. By the time I made it back to Birmingham there was little time to edit and file the piece. I was new to editing, and in the end, in the face of a time constraint, had to admit defeat and let the producer do it. The final piece was much shorter than I had taped, and left me saying just one sentence!

Week 6: GM week. Day one sounded great. They had done a fantastic job. There didn't actually seem to be much for me to do. The groundwork had been done, it was time to handover. GM week ran for the full 5 days, and ended with the Saturday programme.

3. Reflections

a. The BBC working culture

The BBC seemed a very interesting place to work. It was startlingly different from universities where I have worked. Firstly, a large open plan office housed hundreds of employees. In addition to the open-plan nature of the office, there was a hotdesking mentality. Although individuals had their favourite desks, no-one really had their own desk. And because of this, there were no bookshelves, piles of papers, etc. In fact, it was an almost paperless set up. A system of 3 month attachments, or 3 week “hot shoes”, allowed people from one area of the BBC to try out working in another area. This could be a preamble to moving from one programme to another, or a chance just to build up breadth of experience on a CV. This is wonderful for those moving around, and I think is a brilliant idea for employers to follow. However it meant that people were moving from features on violence against women for the Asian network, to Ecotowns for Costing the Earth, five live to Farming Today, On the Ropes to Countryfile. It must be a nightmare to run a decent programme when people are moving to and fro, and coming in without a relevant background.

b. Academics vs Radio programmes

Academics are trained to pursue rigorous research, which involves being critical thinkers, querying sources of information, and being wary of bias. They start by reviewing what work has been done in the past, searching for seminal papers, identifying key theories, and assessing the current debates in their area. The media, however, is more forward thinking. They work in the present, preparing programmes on fairly short timeframes. Presentation is also over a shorter time period – there is no time to present the background theories, and build up to the final point. Rather, they want to make the point, and perhaps discuss its implications. This was refreshing, but did take a change of approach.

Academics all write up their work in research reports and papers, and generally (in my area at least) write conclusions which they suggest should be taken up by policy makers. Policy makers rarely read all these reports, so the gap between research results and policy makers finding, reading and acting upon the recommendations remains large. In contrast, staff at the BBC can ring key policy makers and speak to them regularly.

An interesting challenge was the way in which knowledge could be transmitted. Academics write papers, and their own voice is apparent in the paper. In radio, presenters present, but the messages and key points are made by invited guests who are interviewed. The producer is relying on the interviewees to make the points and put the message across.

4. The BA Festival of Science

My experience at the Festival was quite different than my time at the BBC. I wasn't reporting for the BBC, and therefore offered to report for the BA website. This was interesting, and allowed me to feel some kinship with the “press” which we were affiliated with. It was interesting to try to write news, rather than work in radio. I would have enjoyed more opportunities to hone writing skills, as academics tend to work more in written words, than sound bites.

5. Conclusions

I have yet to work out what, if anything, will change in my job at Kingston University as a result of the Fellowship. Colleagues are intrigued, but I do have to stress that I was helping as a researcher, so behind the news, rather than in the news. This contrasts with colleagues who have reported on Sky News 24, as the “expert” in front of the news cameras.

From my point of view, I wanted to find out how science gets reported in the media. I have learned a lot about what makes a programme, I have yet to work out why some suggestions are taken on, and others not. Farming Today seems to cover very in depth issues, such as sheep tagging of live veal exports to Holland, but then suggestions of mine concerning costing of wheat for next year were considered too “farmey”. I have yet to work out what is news-worthy and what isn’t.

I really enjoyed the opportunity to work in a completely different industry, effectively “try out” a new job, and see what it was like, without having to risk giving up my own career. The move certainly changed the way I think about many things, from paper in my office to how science should be portrayed to the public.

The Fellowship has sparked various thoughts about further research in the area, but it may be some time before that could come to fruition. Currently there are lots of ideas, which need to be developed.

Some Fellows continue to contribute to their media partners. I do not think it feasible to help on a day-to-day basis with Farming Today, however if the opportunity arose to help with Costing the Earth, or other programmes with a longer production time frame, I would find it interesting. I certainly feel I know a lot more about how the media works, and how programmes are commissioned and made.

Appendix – Outputs

Radio

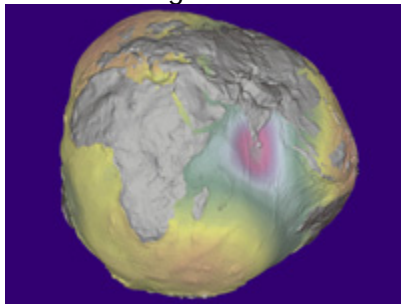
Aug 25 – Farming Today – Interview with Peter Bennett
September 1-5 – Farming Today – preparation for GM themes
September 6 – Farming Today this week – preparation for GM theme
September 11 – Costing the Earth – assistance with preparation of programme
September 18 – Costing the Earth – assistance with Food Security Issues and identification of researchers

Internet

1. <http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/News/FestivalNews/FestivalNews2008/newmapofgravitationalfieldoftheearth.htm>

New map of gravitational field of the Earth

Scientists hope that a new map of the earth's lumpy gravitational field will refine models of climate change.



2. <http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/News/FestivalNews/FestivalNews2008/newrecipeforfoodpolicy.htm>

New recipe for food policy

"Values for money", rather than value for money, should be the new focus of food policy in the UK, Professor Tim Lang told the BA Festival of Science today.



3. In the field. The *Nature* reporters' blog from conferences and events. Report on the BA Festival of Science. September 2008.

http://blogs.nature.com/news/blog/2008/09/the_ba_festival_of_science_wra_1.html