

## **Media Fellow Report 2007**

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My 'proper' job is working for EADS Astrium, a European Space company. I work in the future programmes group in the UK, planning and designing future space science missions.

Although I was first a scientist, then now engineer, I have always enjoyed talking to people about my job and company. For the past year I have had a part-time role, working with our Communications Department to publicise the work in my division by finding science and earth observation stories.

With no 'media training' of any kind, I was aware that there was much I did not know and when our Director of Communications commented, only half in jest, that "it's obvious you've never worked in the media", I set about looking for relevant courses. During my trawl of the web I found the BA Media Fellowship scheme, and realised that it was exactly what I needed. Not only a way of learning about the press, but an opportunity to become one of them, even if just for a few weeks.

I was offered a BA Media Fellowship by the BBC, having met Jon Amos, the head of BBC News Interactive Science & Nature, when he visited Astrium for an interview.

The BBC split their BA Media Fellowship between two departments, so I had three weeks at BBC News Interactive, which covers the internet, Ceefax, interactive news and mobile content, and three weeks with the BBC Radio Science Unit. The middle week of the Fellowship was at the BA Festival of Science which all Fellows attend.

### **BBC News Interactive**

BBC News Interactive is based in Television Centre, White City. My first visit was a few weeks before my placement to get my ID badge sorted. Jon gave me a guided tour of the famous building with the white dots. It's a curved building with seven floors, so by the time we reached the office that the Science & Technology team shared with Working Lunch, I had no idea how to find my way around.

The Science and Nature team that I worked with were Jon, Paul Rincon, Mark Kinver, Richard Black and Rebecca Morelle.

For my first story, Paul gave me an embargoed press release on dinosaurs, where a scientist had modelled dinosaur skeletons and muscle to see how they ran. Although this had been done before, this was the first model that only used data from dinosaur fossils, rather than extrapolating from modern animals.

I rang the scientist involved, borrowing a recorder that linked to the phone so I could record and replay the interview to find good quotes. The team had also produced

some animations that they sent and our AV department turned them into suitable files.

My first version of the story missed the hook entirely. Although not the focus of the press release, there was a comment that a T-Rex would out run a footballer at top speed. Jon picked up on this, and I rewrote the beginning of the article.

Writing an article for the web is more complicated than I had imagined. BBC News Online and Ceefax are linked, and use a comment content management system, so every BBC Story has to fit a precise format. The first four paragraphs of a story appear on Ceefax, so there are strict rules on their length and content. You have to tell the whole story in them, and list the story's source, like 'published in Nature'. This is very much an art, one that I improved at over the weeks, but never reached the skill level of the experts.

Another BBC requirement is that the story title is between 30 and 33 characters in length. You can have a brilliant idea for a headline, but if you can't make it fit – it isn't any good.

Although I didn't have access to the content management system, Jon had a template to fit the first four paragraphs in, and I could write the story with the correct coding in so it was easy to copy into CPS. I could also edit pictures, which all had to have a border and picture credit in the correct format. Many of the extras on a page, like pop-up boxes for big pictures, are created using an online tool which I had access too.

On day three, my dinosaur story was online. Reading the papers on the way to work, they had all covered the story, and I found myself comparing them to how I'd written it. They were all very polished and highlighted how much I had to learn!

My next stories were on great ape fossils that had been found in Africa, something else I knew nothing about, and tracking down the scientists was a little harder as they were in Japan and USA.

I did get to do some space stories though. The first was on Uranus' rings where some amazing photos showing Uranus' rings edge on. The press release was very piecemeal with scientific details on the rings and the moons, and it took some time to work out what the story should say. When Jon reviewed my finished version, he tightened up a lot of my paragraphs, and cut off the last 1/3 of the story as it was too long. It was very interesting, if a little painful, to watch, and again pointed out I was definitely a novice at this.

My second space story was on Jupiter, and how it affects comets in the Solar System. I worked on keeping sentences short, taking out filler bits that weren't needed. This time when Jon reviewed it, it didn't need too many changes, but the story was published by New Scientist first, who had reported it differently, so we had to add a little to back up our approach.

The first lesson I learnt was – try and be first, but if you can't be first, make sure you have the same story as everyone else. If a story is missed, or reported differently to the rest of the press, the news desk wants to know why.

I also learnt what makes a good press release. It needs to be clear, with little technical jargon. It also needs to provide a hook – a reason that this story is interesting, timely and newsworthy. Quotes in a press release are useful, but most journalists won't use them as they like to get a unique quote so their story is different to everyone else's. Giving contact information for people to talk to is important, and making sure they are available on the day the press release is published.

One of the best bits was ringing up scientists and introducing myself as 'Liz Seward, from the BBC'. Most people were flattered to be contacted by the BBC, although one person did quiz me on which part of the BBC I was working for, as they weren't impressed by researchers for local radio stations. Apparently BBC News Online was important enough for them to talk to me!

My first press conference was at the Science Media Centre, and I met two other Media Fellows there, on placements with Nature and The Times. It was organised by the British Computer Society, to celebrate their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and they had invited three scientists to talk about their vision of the future 50 years from now. Although some of the comments were interesting, much of it was speculation with no research to back it up, so it was hard to see what we could write a story on. I was with Jonathan Fildes, from the technology desk, who suggested I write about one of the comments, rather than produce a vague summary of them all. The result was a story that in 50 years there could be a million sensors or recording devices per person in the UK.

The next day I was on my own at a press conference organised by Nature. This one was about plant transpiration reaction to high CO<sub>2</sub> levels not being accounted for in climate change models. After the briefing, Pallab Ghosh was doing an interview for the radio, so I sat in with my little recording device to get a few more quotes. My version of the story ended up being redone by Jon to focus on the issue of flooding.

In my last week, Jon gave me a feature story to write. He had read about a World Digital Magnetic Anomaly Map, and looking online there were some good pictures we could use. With no press release for this one, I had to start from scratch and do my research on who to talk to. I tracked down a firm in Leeds who had been involved in the process, to get the British angle. With no deadline, there were no time pressures with this story, and it meant I could work on it from home when a tube strike made getting to work almost impossible. The final story was published after I'd finished my BA Media Fellowship, and it was cool to see a story appear with my name on it when I was back in my real job.

At the end of my last week with News Interactive, the BA held a press conference for some of the scientists who would be at the BA Festival of Science, this year based in York. I met up with Rebecca Morelle, who was also covering the Festival for the

Science Desk, and we split the stories with me taking one on eye movements during reading and Rebecca writing one on 3-D face scans that can spot genetic syndromes in children. The stories were embargoed until the Monday of the Festival, but the advance details meant we could write them up on the Friday and have something ready to go on day one.

Embargoed stories are relaxing to write, especially if the deadline is several days away. There is time to talk to all the people involved to get an interesting quote or different angle, you can find good pictures, and for this one, I had a diagram created by the AV department to illustrate one of the concepts.

### **BA Festival of Science**

The week of the Festival was fantastic. It was based at the University of York, where there was a press centre manned by BA staff and a press room full of computers for the journalists. Monday morning started with a press conference at 8:30am, then Becky and I split up, with Becky covering the later press conferences whilst I sat in with Pallab Ghosh (at the Festival for Radio 4) who was interviewing someone giving a public talk on yawning.

I had found an old mp3 player at home that had a voice recorder function, and this was invaluable during the week. When talking to people or during press conferences I could put it on the desk and then not have to worry about writing at super speed to get quotes down. It also made me feel more like a real journalist!

On the first afternoon I wrote up the yawning story, which was about research that showed that contagious yawning is a sign of empathy. By the end of the day I had a story, found some pictures, and had also spent the entire afternoon yawning.

Neither Becky nor I had access to the CPS system in York, so we wrote our stories in Word, but added in as much of the coding as possible to make it easier for those back in the office to upload.

The rest of the week followed a similar pattern. There were 5-6 press conferences each morning, then Becky and I would pick the interesting stories and split them between us. The afternoon would be spent writing them up, before sending them to the office at the end of the day.

Journalists from all the major UK papers, radio outlets, TV and, of course, online attended the conference. It was an interesting experience, seeing how the 'press pack' works. After the majority of the press conferences, especially those where the story was vague, all the journalists came together to form a little huddle to discuss the importance of the story and, in some cases, decide on what the story was.

By the end of the week, I was included in the huddle whilst we discussed an embargo on one story, because the scientists in question had already published the data on their website. The big papers were worried a freelance might find the story and beat them to publication.

The networking events were great fun, with something organised every evening. It was great to spend time with all the other Fellows and find out what they had done on their placements, and also to meet other professional science journalists.

### **BBC Radio Science Unit**

The last part of my BA Media Fellowship was spent with the BBC Radio Science Unit, based in Bush House on the Strand, a very impressive building. Becky was also spending two weeks there to learn about radio broadcasting.

We met Fiona Roberts, a producer of Science in Action, a BBC World Service programme. Fiona had a list of press releases that might provide interesting stories for the programme that week, which is recorded on Thursday afternoons.

I was given water on Mars to research, as Nature were publishing a series of papers that week that showed there is less water on Mars than previously hypothesised. After reading all the papers, and decoding the technical language, I chose the best stories and rang the scientists to set up interviews.

As a researcher, I had to talk through possible questions and summarise them for the programme presenter as well as set a time on Wednesday for a recorded interview. The BBC has access to recording studios throughout the world, so the interview can be done somewhere convenient to the scientist. Later in the week I sat in on the interviews, carried out by Sue Broom, this week's presenter.

Another skill was learning how to edit interviews, using the software SADIE. Fiona had a recording from the Festival, of two scientists talking about chocolate, which was about 20 mins long. I had to cut it down to 3-4 mins whilst keeping the important points and also a logical flow to the interview. We also get to clear up how people speak, removing most of the 'umms' or breathy pauses. My finished version of the chocolate interview was approved by Fiona, but because there were enough interesting stories, it was held as a standby segment for a week when they need an extra piece.

Another science programme being recorded that week was Material World for Radio 4. This is a live programme on Thursday afternoons where the host Quentin Cooper has a discussion with scientists on two different topics. I met the week's panel and saw the setting up before watching the live show being broadcast.

Friday was a very relaxed day when the radio team normally deal with their other projects so I had a chance to write an article for Astrium's in-house newsletter.

The Monday planning for Science in Action, or SinA, had a few stories on or relating to DNA. In each programme is a segment called the 'fact file'. I was given the job of writing the script, which had to explain how DNA and RNA work in 15 one-line sound bites. The fact file is pre-recorded and also packaged separately for syndication. On the Thursday I watched SinA being recorded and had a producer credit on the programme – very exciting.

I was also given the task of creating a package, a self-contained piece of radio. As 4 October was the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sputnik, a space theme seemed appropriate. I decided to talk about the difference between Sputnik and today's satellites. I had some archive footage of Sputnik and Telstar and put this together with an interview with Marcus Vilaça from Inmarsat, talking about the size and power of the Inmarsat 4 satellite. Unfortunately I only had 4-5 minutes so couldn't fit Astrium in as well. Because SinA is for the world service, it has to appeal to an international audience, so cannot use the 'built in the UK' angle.

I learnt how to use the portable recording equipment to go and get my interview, then edited all the footage and created a script so I could be recorded reading the linking sections. It took a few attempts before I had the right level of chirpiness in my voice to make it sound interesting and listening to the finished package, I improve through the segment and sound okay by the end!

I really enjoyed the whole process of creating something for the radio, and got to listen to it during the programme recording process. It's slightly weird, hearing yourself being played on the radio, but very cool too.

I learnt a great deal during my placement, and it has already been useful at work. My article in Astrium's magazine went down well, with lots of people asking about my time at the BBC, and the editor of the magazine has asked if I would write articles for other editions.

I'd like to thank everyone who looked after me. At BBC News Interactive: Jon Amos, Paul Rincon, Mark Kinver, Richard Black and Rebecca Morelle. At the Radio Science Unit: Fiona Roberts, Alex, Martin Redfern. At the BA: Nigel Eady. Although I was occasionally thrown in at the deep end, I was never left to drown.

## Articles online

T. rex 'would outrun footballer'

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/6956867.stm>

Fossils belong to new great ape

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/6958313.stm>

Jupiter shield's mixed blessing

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/6962508.stm>

Sensor rise powers life recorders

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/6968591.stm>

Pig DNA reveals farming history

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/6978203.stm>

Hidden method of reading revealed

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/6983176.stm>

Contagious yawn 'sign of empathy'

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/6988155.stm>

Tendons play key role in running

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/6990319.stm>

'Super-scope' to see hidden texts

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/6991893.stm>

'Virtually non-stick' gum created

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/6993719.stm>

Scientists warn of 'vocal terror'

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/6994595.stm>

Dark matter clues in oldest stars

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/6993870.stm>

Digital magnetic map goes global

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/6982485.stm>

Uncredited:

Planet Uranus rings the changes

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/6961087.stm>

## Radio

Research for BBC World Service programme – Science in Action: Fact file on DNA (broadcast on 27<sup>th</sup> Sept 2007)

Radio Package for BBC World Service programme – Science in Action: Sputnik (broadcast on 4<sup>th</sup> October 2007)

Research for BBC Radio 3 programme – Material World: Space Traffic Management (broadcast on 4<sup>th</sup> October 2007)

Package editing for BBC World Service programme – Science in Action: Chocolate (for future broadcast)