



Media Fellowships

Media Fellow Report 2009

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BBC News & BBC Radio Science

Placement

Is it science or just entertainment?

A major report says that science is just entertainment.

Leading author, Sudeep Chand, said that science reporting should be judged by its "kicks".

He explained that science stories were more than labcoats and saving lives. As entertainment, they should compete against celebrity gossip and sport.

The controversial comments come from a series of reports from scientists who have gone undercover in major media outlets across the country.

Lessons

Did you notice the error these opening lines? I failed to mention the British Science Association. Although on this occasion perhaps their press office are happy to be left out!

Yes, this is one of the first lessons of journalism; declare your sources up front.

Other lessons from journalism:

- Sell a headline
- Use the topline to tell the reader why they should read the rest
- If you can't summarise your story in four or five sentences, don't bother

Getting online

These glorious insights come from my first day at BBC News online.

The wonderful thing about this format as long as you follow the basic rules you can do so much more.



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Interviews, graphics, audio and video are all up to the journalist. Your piece is then “subbed” and hey presto – your name and the honorary title of science reporter! Without getting ahead of myself, there are over 2000 people who have at one point written for BBC News

Correspondent

After a few weeks, armed with the tools of the trade, I was sent packing to Guildford, for the British Science Festival. It was great to finally be part of the press pack.

I was impressed by the skill and speed of my fellow journalists until...

A story about bone therapies made the pages of most of the papers. The radio teams were keen on it too. But perhaps because it was my industry, I was uncomfortable.

I ended up reporting the story, but was proud that we were the only media outlet to report conflicts of interest. The passionate doctor who made the claims, was also in the pay of the pharmaceutical company who was selling the ‘restricted’ bone therapies.

It made a strong impression on me that sometimes science and the media can be a murky world.

Still, I had a great time with the other fellows and the festival was a highlight of the fellowship.

Radio

After the highs of ‘print’ journalism, radio came as a culture shock. I was no longer my own man, but an appropriately junior researcher for several BBC shows.

Health Check, Case Notes and Leading Edge all provided little insights into the world of researching, producing and editing programmes for BBC Radio 4 and World Service.

Running round London with a BBC microphone was much like being a clinician asking people awkward, personal questions. Pitching ideas was another challenge which I failed on several occasions. However, I did manage to put forward a cheesy name for a future Radio 4 show!

One thing seems true. Radio gives scientists the chance to talk in more depth. It means the shows can be inspirational and at other times feel irrelevant or obscure.

TV



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One soundbite, one point and one picture in fifteen seconds. Throw in a couple of these, a piece to camera and a voice-over and you've barely got time to make a cup of tea, yet alone analyse science.

The TV newsroom is a hive of activity. Decisions are made frenetically. Stories come and go. Even the presenters become heavily involved in how stories are portrayed. Oh and correspondents get stuck in traffic, a lot!

As for the technology, it is mind-boggling. Did you know the cameras are all robots?

It seems as the day speeds along, the more analysis you can "get away with". One o'clock is bits and pieces; six o'clock is mums at home; ten o'clock is the hard stuff. Even with this knowledge, journalism is only a third of the task; the rest is how you captivate the audience visually.

Highlights included interviewing an inspiring inventor in his workshop. And when the newsroom boss asked my opinion on how they could do better!

What happened to science?

Science and health are reported by a variety of news teams, specialists and generalists. As well as the different media formats, different programmes place different emphasis on aspects of the story. Is it political, is it personal, is it water cooler gossip? Can the story be told in pictures, sound or text? Is it local or international?

Why is it a story? Well it is often about excitement and emotion. Fear, love, sex, money and death are universal themes in how science stories are reported. In this respect, they compete with other news items for attention.

I decided to do a little study looking at the number of hits that each of my stories got. Over the course of a few weeks I tracked the success of my stories using BBC Live Stats. This nifty piece of software tracks the number of readers and blogs, domestic and international, by hour and by day.

I was chuffed to see two of my stories become the top international news items on their day.

'We're all mutants' and 'Giant red hats' were the headlines that attracted millions of internet surfers. Throw in pictures of metallic blue babies and menacing red statues and their success is perhaps not so surprising.

Maybe the science of genetics and archaeology is a little better known as a result. However their entertainment value cannot be underemphasised. I am still not sure how I feel about earthquakes in Indonesia and prime ministerial denials about Libyan terrorists getting less attention.



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Controversies

I am a scientist but I am also a public official. Given the day job, there were a number of editorial positions that were enlightening.

I was surprised at the editorial integrity and sensitivity displayed on a number of issues that had social or democratic implications.

However, editors rely on their individual take on stories. Some of the programmes are designed to “bash”. Others miss big picture social issues, with an apparent black hole between gossip politics and novel science.

Many of the journalists and correspondents I worked with agonised over this. It meant they often had preferred programme editors to pitch or discuss angles.

They also said that their ability to influence editorial decisions appeared to be diminishing. Non-specialists reporting science is a result. Specialist jobs were being lost and science and medicine were obvious targets. “Janet and John” pieces and “churnalism” were some of the phrases that I picked up.

Suffice to say, you’ll have to do the fellowship yourself to get the inside take!

Coming back to earth

I now find myself back at a government department working and advocating for global health. My colleagues have been very excited by my experience and it has been useful to compare notes with those that are also scientists or clinicians.

One thing I will say, is that we should be proud of the BBC. For all the debate how science and health is reported in the media, the BBC remains a respected source of information. It strives hard to maintain this.

However I’m also reminded of the responsibility of science journalism. Ben Goldacre has spoken vociferously on this issue, borrowing this quote from John Martin:

“The British media are on a par with Bankers when it comes to science: overselling, over hyping and setting it up to fail.”

I beg to differ. I feel we must support those specialist journalists who still exist rather than overtly criticise them.

Alas science must be news. If only to get funding – it’s called democracy. To be news it must be entertainment. Novel, scary, life saving... you decide.

Big thanks



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A large number of BBC colleagues went out their way to offer advice and cups of tea. Like an oscar speech, here is a list of the great and the good:

Jonathan Amos, Richard Black, Judith Burns, Deborah Cohen, Alexandra Feachem, Palab Ghosh, Victoria Gill, Claudia Hammond, Nick Higham, Mark Kinver, Alex Mansfield, Matt McGrath, Rebecca Morelle, Martin Redfern, Jason Palmer, Paul Rincon, Richard Warry, Geoff Watts



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Appendix

Articles

www.journalisted.com/sudeepchand

Monkeys booze because of genes

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8206151.stm>

Runway found for flying reptiles

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8209505.stm>

Snorkel rice could feed millions

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8208411.stm>

Stopwatch found for Solar System

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8212301.stm>

Broken hearts mend with 'patch'

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8218077.stm>

UN warns over swine flu in birds

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8224923.stm>

Sunspots linked to Pacific rain

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8224543.stm>

We're all mutants, say scientists

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8227442.stm>

Eating late at night adds weight

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/8234386.stm>

Contraception myths 'widespread'

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/8238789.stm>

Giant statues give up hat mystery

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8236349.stm>

Women judge, but do they convict?

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8242870.stm>

Row over access to bone therapies

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/8243563.stm>

Killer genes cause potato famine

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8246944.stm>



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UK climate scepticism more common

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8249668.stm>

Countdown to a UK space agency

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8249694.stm>

Recordings

BBC R4Case notes (22/09/09) - research and vox pops on health and the internet

BBC WS Health Check (5/10/09) - research on the genetics of sexual behaviour

BBC WS Health Check (tbc) - research on weather and health