

Media Fellow Report 2005

Alison Ross, Geneticist, University College London – BBC Science Radio & News Online

This report details my experiences on a five-week placement at the BBC, which gave me a unique opportunity to discover how a major scientific news provider operates from “the other side.”

Briefing day

Here, the ten BA media fellows met and shared our rather negative experiences of the media. Our hopes were that the placements would change our “them and us” attitude, and help us to communicate our work more broadly, whilst remaining accurate to the facts.

We met journalists, had a mock press conference, and wrote an article on the spot. I went away feeling excited about my forthcoming assignment, yet also nervous.

BBC Radio

At the Science Radio Unit at Bush House I met a friendly, dedicated group who make the science programmes broadcast on BBC radio– mainly Radio 4 and the World Service.

I researched diverse topics and invited scientists for interviews. My main task was to design a programme about diabetes epidemiology for “Building a Healthier Britain,” to be broadcast on Radio 4. My only frustration was not being there long enough to see it through to the end-product.

Some fun things were watching live Radio 4 broadcasts of “The Material World,” a weekly science programme, and to answer the phones to callers with questions for “Check-up,” a health programme.

Overall, I left the unit after the two weeks feeling extremely positive – my impression was that they chose important topics and made them entertaining and also accurate.

Dublin festival

The Friday before the BA festival of Science, Martin Redfern, a producer with 30 years of experience, gave me a recorder complete with microphone and headset. I was now truly a “roving scientific newshound!”

Each day was a hectic succession of press conferences followed by watching the “press pack” frantically struggle to write up the best of the day’s stories. It was fascinating watching how items were “pounced upon” – the journalists working together as a group, each filing near-identical pieces. How the science was presented was vital – done badly and potential newsworthy topics were simply discarded. Journalists are busy people – a well-written press release with a good “hook” is essential.

As a radio journalist, my stories were dictated by the best speakers. Despite some initial issues with finding the courage to recruit interviewees, it got easier with practice. It was very satisfying when some of my clips were used for news bulletins broadcast on BBC World Service.

I also went to an educational attraction for school children – the “Biobubble,” a giant inflatable cell in which actors carry out a play called “Snog.” I did some interviews which, to my amazement, Martin liked. He edited a two-minute piece for “Science in Action,” broadcast on the World Service that Friday. My voice even made it into the programme advert, and I was proud!

The festival was an incredible experience – and a great chance to bond and swap tales with the other media fellows over a pint (or two) of Guinness.

BBC online

The following Monday I started at BBC TV Centre, working with the Science & Nature website team, headed by Jonathan Amos. He gave me a tour around the newsrooms, where I spotted familiar newsreaders – and even walked behind the windows of the live broadcast of News 24.

My first piece was a feature about extracting DNA from ancient bones. It was difficult to stop myself from lapsing into jargon, being a geneticist by trade! During telephone interviews I lied about what I knew, so the language stayed simple. It was a great buzz to see my name on the by-line.

I quickly discovered that speaking to people was the easiest way to get information – most scientists are keen to talk to the BBC – they are trusted to deliver balanced, non-sensationalist pieces. What particularly impressed me about the website is that care is taken to correct any discrepancies pointed out.

Over the three weeks, I wrote pieces on topics as diverse as “Milky seas” and “21st century beer mats.” Some even made it to Ceefax – read daily by over two million people!

Scientists generally feel uncomfortable talking outside of their direct expertise. Journalists, on the other hand, cover broad-ranging topics they may know little about every day. I became highly efficient at extracting key

points and writing a story – quickly. I enjoying the instant “result” of the finished product – very different to science, where the end-product takes years, not hours!

My “real” research

On my final day at the Radio unit, I summoned the courage to pitch the science I do in my “real” life. Adrian Washbourne was convinced to make a 30 minute “Frontiers” for Radio 4. He brought presenter, Geoff Watts, to my laboratory and carried out interviews with me and my colleagues – I’m looking forward to hearing the final product.

I also wrote an embargoed press release about a forthcoming paper – almost falling off my tube seat when it made it into “Metro” - it was also written up accurately by the Daily Mail, Evening Standard, and the Scotsman. It was weird to think that several thousands of people read these articles!

After these achievements I received much more positive feedback from my colleagues about the scheme - beforehand I think everyone thought I was just away from the laboratory on a holiday!

Final waffle

What did I learn? It has certainly improved my perception of the media. The science journalists I met have an incredible breadth of knowledge and a talent at communicating interesting, accurate stories. There’s no underlying conspiracy to find “shock” stories, or portray science in a negative way.

However, I did see problems with the way the newspapers/print journals operate – the system of editing and headline writing, which are not carried out by the primary journalist but instead by sub-editors - is probably why stories sometimes become misleading and sensationalist.

By actually being a journalist I saw how stories are chosen – understanding this system has already helped me to publicise my own work - accurately. Also, my confidence, communication skills, and ability to work to deadlines have improved.

One day, maybe I’ll even get over my new desire to break up text with white space and bold subtitles - a hard habit to break!

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Published on the BBC News website:

'Better' DNA out of fossil bones

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/4260334.stm>

'Whale riders' reveal evolution

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/4260498.stm>

Rare stone-curlews in 'recovery'

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/4269418.stm>

Devilish ants control the garden

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/4269544.stm>

'Milky seas' detected from space

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/3760124.stm>

Hi-tech beer mats for 21st century

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4298344.stm>

New breed of 'fish-bot' unveiled

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/4313266.stm>