

Media Fellow Report 2005

Olivia Johnson, Astrophysicist, The Royal Observatory Edinburgh – BBC Radio & Online

I applied for a BA Media Fellowship because communicating science to the public is an important and satisfying part of my work as a research astronomer and, while I enjoyed speaking directly to lay audiences, I found myself wary of working with the media. I hoped working alongside journalists would make me familiar enough with the news-making process to take part in it confidently. Specifically, I wanted to learn how journalists translate new research into compelling stories, how they balance the need for a good 'news hook' with the responsibility to avoid sensationalism, and what scientists can do to help. The prospect of taking six weeks off my real job to fake it as a journalist was also, frankly, pretty appealing.

The first two weeks of my placement were spent on the science desk at BBC News Interactive, where I was put to work producing stories for the news website under the kind tutelage of Paul Rincon and Richard Black. In practice, this involved scanning press releases for news-worthy items, getting to grips with the science involved, contacting experts to gather quotes, writing the story, choosing accompanying graphics, and getting the words and pictures into the correct format to be posted on the website and on Ceefax. The real journalists, who work what are to me absolutely astounding hours, are able to produce several stories each day; as a faker, I was very pleased to manage one.

I have to admit that seeing my first story - on man-eating Tanzanian lions - appear on the BBC News website felt a bit like learning there is no Santa Claus. For years I, like many of my colleagues, have gotten most of my news and a large part of my work-time distraction from the BBC News website. Seeing my own words and the picture I'd selected in that familiar, authoritative format, my first thought was "What? You can't put that *there!*" I had walked off the street that morning not knowing much about journalism or lions; several hours later, albeit with a lot of helpful coaching from Paul and Richard, I'd written the news. The demythologization the media for me had begun.

I don't mean to imply that what science journalists do is easy. Over the next few weeks I grew to have tremendous respect for the breadth of knowledge and professionalism of the journalists I worked with. I was chagrined to find that on the whole they knew far more about the state-of-the-art of many fields of astronomy than I did. I envied their ability to quickly take in new information, understand its relevance, and frame it in accurate, engaging prose. I struggled to emulate their confidence ringing up world experts to ask questions about science I had only grade-school knowledge of. I

admired their tireless interest in the science they covered and their genuine commitment to getting the story right.

After two weeks working on the website, I flew to Chile to conduct astronomical observations which could not be rescheduled. One top piece of advice from a past Media Fellow at the very helpful BA briefing day had been “don’t break up your fellowship” and, on the whole, I agree. Though I travelled to Chile with two assignments – a photo journal of the trip and a report on the status of one aspect of the telescopes – poor observing conditions required I devote most of my time to astronomy and the pieces went unwritten. However, I was granted access to parts of the observatory in my role as a journalist that I’d never have been able to see as an astronomer, and I had the unusual experience of looking on my own work and colleagues as material for a news article.

I returned from Chile to attend the BA Festival of Science in Dublin with Jonathan Amos, head of the BBC Online science desk. Throughout the Festival, the journalists and Media Fellows spent virtually all day in the press centre, where a full programme of press conferences ran from 9:00 to 15:00 each day. I attended the conferences, interviewed scientists, and wrote up stories for most of the week. Only on the last day did I have a chance to go to a public lecture, get a sense of the excitement of thousands of interested members of the public attending science-related events, and really appreciate the scale and the impact of the Festival itself.

Writing from the press centre was a particularly valuable part of my Fellowship, however, as it was essentially an intensive five-day course in effective promotion of science results to the media. Watching the scientists speak about their work with a mind to what I could be writing in half an hour’s time, I began to realize the significant power scientists themselves have over what science makes the news and how it is covered. Those who came prepared with graphics, a ready-made ‘news hook’, and a clear, concise, engaging presentation to a large extent wrote their own stories; those who used jargon or didn’t consider the news value of their work saw their research go unreported or reported with undue emphasis.

Another fascinating aspect of the Festival was the chance to watch the press from all the major UK media outlets working in the same room. Following each press conference, the reporters returned to the press office and discussed the potential stories, usually reaching a consensus on the science presented extremely quickly. Being privy to such frank discussion of what was and wasn’t considered news was both informative and entertaining, and coming to understand the science writers’ need to present a united front was one of the most illuminating aspects of my fellowship. I saw how the actions of the press gang could easily become less responsible than those of its constituent members. One harried journalist trying to understand a jargon-filled press conference exclaimed, “It doesn’t matter if we get it right, so long as we all say the same thing!” Others struggled to file a responsible story on science they believed was

overblown because they knew their colleagues were covering it. While my respect for individual journalists remained unshaken, I began to realize the enormous pressure they work under, both from their editors and from their peers, and to understand how this could degrade the quality of science coverage.

On returning to London, I spent three weeks at the BBC Radio Science Unit, which produces news items and weekly programmes for the World Service and Radio 4. Arriving for my first day, I was immediately snapped up by Geraldine Fitzgerald who was beginning research for a 4 part series on the science of violence for the Discovery programme which aired on the World Service in November. My work for the programme involved doing background research on the topic, meeting with Geraldine and our presenter to discuss the shape of the series, speaking with experts in the field both to understand their science and to get a sense if they were good speakers, and arranging, preparing presenter's briefs for, and attending recorded interviews.

The team at the Radio Science Unit was outstanding in terms of involving me in their work, allowing me to observe and aid in production of a brief news item for the World Service, longer 'packages' for inclusion in a weekly programme, and in recording of full programmes themselves. I was asked to sit in on department meetings where new ideas for programmes were discussed, and I was encouraged to try my hand at using sound-editing software to clean up an interview we had recorded. I was also, somewhat reluctantly, sent out onto the streets of London with a microphone to conduct impromptu interviews with passers-by, once about flourinated water and once about Sudoku. Collecting these 'vox pops' is apparently a common ring of fire for cub radio reporters and was simultaneously humiliating and hilarious.

Though I'd known very little about radio production prior to starting at the Radio Unit, I genuinely enjoyed the experience. The work required the same basic skills of recognizing a story, researching it, and obtaining quotes which I'd learned at the website, but the longer format of many programmes as well as the medium of radio itself allowed for significantly more creativity and variety. In addition to ringing up experts in the science of violence around the world, I spoke with people around London trying to arrange recording sessions at an animal shelter, a testosterone clinic, and a cage-fighting club. Unfortunately, the first week of recording for the series was my last week at the Radio Unit; given an extra week, I would have had the pleasure of seeing my programme through from the research stage to completion, and I was very tempted to stay on. Listening to the series when it was broadcast on the World Service this month, I was satisfied to hear interviews I'd arranged and themes I'd researched make their way into the finished programmes.

My time with the BBC was both challenging and fascinating. Working as a Media Fellow has increased my appreciation of the work of the science media and my sense of how I can take an active role in it as a scientist. I've gained a much better understanding of some of the pitfalls that lead to bad science reporting and of the considerable influence

scientists themselves have over how their work is portrayed in the media. I believe my experience will allow me to be more comfortable and more skillful at working with the media and presenting science to the public throughout my career. I've also become reasonably adept at cold-calling world-famous scientists to chat about things I know nothing about, which is bound to come in handy at some point.

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APPENDIX A: Work completed during the Fellowship

BBC News Online

"Lion attacks on rise in Tanzania" - 17/8/05
<http://212.58.226.40/2/hi/science/nature/4160676.stm>

"Climate change marks dawn of man" - 19/8/05
<http://newswww.bbc.net.uk/2/hi/science/nature/4164022.stm>

"Bones reveal first shoe-wearers" - 24/8/05
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/4173838.stm>

"Black holes start with many bangs" - 31/8/05
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/4180678.stm>

"Martian dunes hold water secret" – 5/9/05
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/4217528.stm>

"Alzheimer's clue in animal words" – 6/9/05
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/4209084.stm>

"Keeping aging brains on top form" – 7/9/05
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/4224084.stm>

BBC Radio Science Unit

"*The Science of Aggression*" - World Service 4 part series (Discovery)
http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/specials/1416_violence/page8.shtml