

## Media Fellow Report 2006

### **Elli Leadbeater, Behavioural Biologist, Queen Mary University of London – BBC News Interactive and BBC Radio**

My experience as a BA Media Fellow began when the BA phoned to say I'd been placed at the BBC for six weeks over the summer. I rushed to get everything done, and then set off for six weeks of looking at science from an utterly different perspective.

I had applied to the scheme because I think it's important that the public get to hear about the research that their taxes pay for, and I hoped that the fellowship would help me learn to interact better with the media. But, of course, my reasons weren't entirely selfless – I also very much wanted to find out what it's like to do an exciting job in a high-profile, fast-moving organization. In the end, my time at the BBC did not disappoint on either count.

Just before the briefing day, I emailed Jonathan Amos (my host at News Online) and was surprised to be immediately invited over to TV Centre to have a chat. Jon showed me around the TV studios, introduced me to everyone and gave me my first go at finding the way to the Science & Nature cluster (for some reason, stranded amid Working Lunch). I left with a feeling of anxious anticipation – the kind where you're looking forward to something, but since you're a bit nervous about it, you're also quite glad it's not starting tomorrow.

My first day of work at the Radio Science Unit, which makes programmes for Radio 4 and the World Service, got off to a rather unnerving start when I was given a computer and told "off you go". Feeling a bit unsure about what to do, I was very pleased to be rescued an hour later by Fiona Roberts, producer of the World Service's weekly science news programme, who asked me to find material to fill a slot for her. This was easy, since by a helpful twist of fate, my lab had a paper in Nature that week. In no time at all, Jon Stewart and I were headed down to Queen Mary to interview my supervisor.

During the next three weeks, I was very lucky in that I was allowed to organize the content for a full episode of Science in Action (and even got a mention as co-producer in the credits). This involved reading press releases from Science, Nature, Current Biology and PNAS to find interesting material, and then phoning up the authors to pre-interview them. I also accompanied Jon on trips to labs around London to record "out and about" pieces.

When I finally watched the show being recorded in the studio, it was a strange feeling to see days of intense preparation chiseled down into a half-hour recording. Science in Action is recorded as live, so there's no chance to change something if it's not quite right, but nobody seemed troubled by the pressure. For me, as a scientist, the idea of not being able to comb over something for months, until you're absolutely satisfied, was completely foreign – which made it one of the most valuable skills that I took away from my placement.

After two and a half weeks in Bush house, I moved across London to TV Centre, to spend two and a half weeks at BBC News Online. At the radio unit, I had been one of several non-journalists, since there were interns and work experience people to keep me company. At News Online, however, there were just five of us, and two were on holiday for a good while. On arrival, I was looked after by Paul Rincon and Mark Kinver, who I'm exceedingly grateful to because they were so kind to me throughout, treating me as a colleague. They were always willing to give me topics to write about, no matter how high-profile it was, and unflinchingly said that whatever I had done was great (even while changing around huge chunks of it!). Jon Amos was also great, and if he edited anything that I wrote he always made an effort to explain why, in the hope that I might actually improve.

The process of researching a story was very similar to at the radio unit, but this time it also involved producing the final piece. It was such a novelty to write something, stop halfway through and at the press of the button see it arranged into the familiar BBC News website format- I did this far more often than necessary. My first piece, about a baleen whale fossil with a vicious set of teeth, took me a whole day to write but it was a real thrill to see it go live that evening. A great thing about my particular placement was that space is less limited in online news, so every article I wrote appeared on the website.

It was immediately apparent at News Online that being (or aspiring to be) an expert in one area of science was no help for grasping research in other fields. In contrast to Paul and Mark, who seemed to have an in-depth understanding of everything from astrophysics to paleontology, I would have to spend hours working out the background to a story. When phoning up authors, they would both sound professional and confident, whereas I would find myself fishing for the right words and forgetting the name of whatever volcano or rocket I was supposed to be discussing. This was particularly embarrassing since everyone in the office could hear me on the phone. However, I certainly learnt more about areas of science outside my own in six weeks at the BBC than I have in the last five years of actually working in a university.

The final week of my placement was spent at the BA Festival of Science in Norwich. I had been warned about the intense schedule of the festival, and it certainly lived up to its fearsome reputation. Press conferences started between 8 and 9am, and rolled on back-to-back all morning, followed by an afternoon of writing two stories every day. After working within a small team, it was a shock to be plunged into a frenetic press centre, surrounded by journalists from everywhere, the Daily Mail to the Financial Times. It was fascinating to hear them on the phone, selling their angle on a story to their Newsdesk, and I was especially impressed by a journalist from the Press Association who would write eight stories a day.

Watching scientists present their work to a press conference was also invaluable. I learnt what a mistake it is to prepare a "taster" of your work, in the (incorrect) expectation that a journalist will go to your talk. I saw several scientists break years of complicated, highly technical hard work into clear, easy-to-follow stories, but disappointingly I also saw some who seized the opportunity to make claims about their work which would never hold up if they were presenting to a specialist audience. In this respect, I was surprised that journalists who would dismiss a presentation as being scientifically unsound would nonetheless later write about it without a hint of criticism.

So much happened during my placement. I can't list it all here. Being a BA Media Fellow at the BBC was certainly one of the most valuable experiences of my scientific career. It is rare to be given the opportunity to immerse yourself in a totally different job, right at the top level, and I would wholeheartedly recommend the scheme to anyone. The main thing I learned is that if a scientist wants to get something into the media, all they have to do is try. Beforehand, I would never have known how to generate press interest in a piece of work, and I don't think many of my colleagues do either. Now, I would know exactly what to do.

Since returning to my PhD, I've found that I can write more quickly and with more confidence - I've written this in just a couple of hours when beforehand it would have taken a week. I've also written freelance articles and pitched an idea for a feature to Radio 4's Leading Edge, which was broadcast a few weeks ago. However, I have to admit that despite all the positive, career-enhancing things that have come out of my fellowship, the biggest buzz has to be the fact that I'm now the envy of all my colleagues because I got an invite to the BBC Christmas party.

*Many thanks to Martin Redfern, Deborah Cohen, Fiona Roberts and Jon Stewart for looking after me at the Radio Science Unit, and to Jon Amos, Paul Rincon, Mark Kinver and Richard Black at BBC News Interactive – I really enjoyed working with such a fantastic group of people. Also, not forgetting Alice Taylor-Gee at the BA, whose enthusiastic help and support was invaluable. And last but not least, to all the other BA Media Fellows, for making the week in Norwich so much fun.*

**Examples of work:**

Links to all articles can be found at:

<http://search.bbc.co.uk/cgi-bin/search/results.pl?q=elli+leadbeater&tab=all&recipe=all&scope=all&start=1>

BBC News [12th September 2006: Why men at war will pull together](#)

BBC News [12th September 2006: Scientists walk on tech pavement](#)

BBC News [11th September 2006: Public "needs to drive science"](#)

BBC News [8th September 2006: Seeing the teenager in the brain](#)

BBC News [6th September 2006: Strange ducks shape brain science](#)

BBC News [5th September 2006: Nanodoodling shows pipette power](#)

BBC News [5th September 2006: Why politicians cannot tell fibs](#)

BBC News [4th September 2006: Woolly ruse incites irrationality](#)

BBC News [3rd September 2006: "Chatty Georgy" talks himself up](#)

BBC News [3rd September 2006: Cash reward "would revive maths"](#)

BBC News [31st August 2006: Shark-finning measures "too weak"](#)

BBC News [30th August 2006: Melting ice dilute Northern seas](#)

BBC News [27th August 2006: Thera eruption was bigger still](#)

BBC News [23rd August 2006: Flood threat puts Britain at risk](#)

BBC News [21st August 2006: Ferocious ants bite like a bullet](#)

BBC News [17th August 2006: Hubble glimpses faintest stars](#)

BBC News [16th August 2006: Whale fossil sports fierce teeth](#)