



Media Fellow Report 2009

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BBC Countryfile

The portrayal of science in the media and the attitudes of scientists towards communicating their work have always fascinated me, and I had been considering applying for a Media Fellowship for several years. In 2009, a break between post-doctoral contracts gave me the ideal opportunity to take the plunge. My application was successful and I undertook a placement with the BBC rural affairs programme Countryfile. I also spent three days at the press office of the Royal Society and, along with the other Media fellows, attended the British Science Association Festival of Science.

Countryfile

On my first day at Countryfile, I was met at the BBC Birmingham studios by producer Andrea Buffery. Andrea introduced me to the team and found me a 'hot-desk' space in the bustling open plan office. Around me was a hubbub of telephone calls, impromptu meetings about possible stories, chat about recent shoots and a continual to and fro of people between their desks and mysterious editing and dubbing suites. The show has recently moved from Sunday morning to the prime time 6 pm slot and the staff work hard to produce an endless stream of content worthy of this honour. Each feature takes a few weeks to develop from initial idea to broadcast and the programme is aired 48 weeks a year, so the pace is fast and relentless.

A different kind of research

My main role at Countryfile was to help the programme researchers develop story ideas and set up shoots. This involved scouring the Internet for relevant facts, sounding out potential contributors on the phone and raiding the BBC archives for supplementary footage. I worked on a wide range of topics; the piece I had most input on concerned horse chestnut tree diseases and the World conker championships - it was nearly Halloween after all!

It is rare to meet contributors before the day of a shoot, so an essential skill for a researcher is identifying who will come across well on camera and who will not, without ever meeting in person. Television makers are desperate for "good talkers" who are engaging and communicate their message clearly and succinctly. Unsurprisingly, these people will get more airtime.

It was interesting to find out how journalists find and select the stories that make it onto our screens. Newspapers are pored through for ideas that could become a feature and local institutions quizzed for forthcoming events of interest. Sometimes the media feeds from itself, and small local news items are picked up on and amplified. For example, in chasing up what was reported in the national press as a

“record year for pumpkins”, I found the basis of this sweeping statement was an interview with a single farmer.

Pitching my own ideas

Although I work in environmental science, my own research (chemical oceanography) does not really fit the Countryfile remit, so I asked an ecologist friend if I could suggest a piece about her work on salt marshes. Preparing a pitch for this potential story helped focus my mind on what makes good television: as well as an attention grabbing story there needs to be action, attractive visuals and an accessible location. As one of the researchers explained, you can't just have “two men in a field”. Unfortunately, I feel some interesting science is unlikely to be covered simply because it doesn't make good TV.

Making the cut

One of my most interesting days at the Countryfile studio was spent in the edit suite, watching the footage from the horse chestnut tree shoot being spliced into a seamless, coherent piece. I saw the story emerge as interviews I had helped arrange were cut down and interspersed with sections to be dubbed. It was also my chance to make my own, albeit tiny, contribution to the final script by suggesting a small wording change.

In the edit suite, the importance of getting your message across in a few words was clear - too much scientific waffle and you won't make the final cut! In terms of how scientists can better communicate their work, watching the editing was probably the most helpful part of my placement.

Safety first

Before I was allowed out of the office and into the field (literally) I was obliged to watch a series of interactive health and safety videos. After years of working in chemistry labs, I'm very familiar with risk assessment, but I had never considered it from the perspective of making television before. Watching the videos I realised that filming on location can be a potentially risky business. Presenters and crew may be involved in activities they have not done before, with unfamiliar hazards, limited time and minimal training. A crucial behind the scenes job is ensuring shoots are as safe as possible, while still making exciting television.

On Location

The highlight of my time at Countryfile was going to film on location in Dartmoor for the strand 'Adam's Farm'. The presenter, Adam Henson, was collecting sixteen rare White-faced Dartmoor sheep from a local farmer with a sideline in poetry. As a spare pair of hands, I helped out where I could and even got roped into some shepherding. The trip was a great opportunity to see what filming on location is like in practice and how an item comes together. I saw how apparently trivial details such as the position of a coffee cup become important are when ensuring continuity. The trip was also a chance to chat to the directors informally and find out more about what working in television is really like.

Festival of Science

In September, I made my way to the University of Surrey at Guildford for the annual British Science Association Festival of Science. The Festival aims to engage the public with cutting edge science through a diverse week of lectures, exhibitions and

interactive events aimed at people of all ages. I had worked as a press centre assistant at the Festival a few years ago, so I knew what to expect, but this time I was there as a journalist with my very own press pass.

Each morning the press centre hosted press conferences on a selection of the day's events. Watching the science journalists in action as they quizzed the speakers was inspiring. The science described in the accompanying press releases was not usually the freshest new research, but the journalists were still able to draw out a timely and newsworthy story. During the festival I wrote news stories for the festival webpages. My writing skills were a little rusty but I still enjoyed the challenge of writing to the tight deadlines of the newsroom. I also came across a story about bumblebees that was suitable for Countryfile, so I dug a little deeper into it and pitched it to the producers when I returned to Birmingham.

The best thing about the festival was getting to know the other Media Fellows of 2009. Despite coming from wildly differing areas of science, we share a passion for science communication and enjoyed plenty of interesting discussions and debates on the topic.

Royal Society Press Office

As part of my Media Fellowship I spent three days in the press office of the Royal Society. Although it was only a short placement, my host Bill Hartnett had organised it very well so I was able to learn a lot from my visit. I arrived to frantic activity, as a press conference about the launch of a new report on Science and the sustainable intensification of agriculture kicked off. It was very interesting to see how some members of the audience doggedly pursued one of the more controversial aspects of the report (GM) and how the speakers responded to this. Comparing how the next day's papers covered the story was also revealing. The Royal Society has a long history of communicating science both to the public and to policy makers and while I was there I had several very informative meetings with people working in these areas. I also had another stab at writing a short science news story and helped with some background research for an exciting addition to the Royal Society webpages.

Reflections on my Media Fellowship

My experience at Countryfile was rather different to those of the other Media Fellows and not what I had anticipated when I applied. There was less focus on reporting new scientific research and I did little writing. However, I was privileged to get a behind the scenes look at the making of a different and hugely influential medium. My visit to the Royal Society press office, where academia and the press converge, complemented the Countryfile placement very well. The festival of Science was a lot of fun and an excellent opportunity to make some useful contacts. Overall, I enjoyed my Media Fellowship and think I have a better understanding of the relationship between scientists and the media as a result of it. I would thoroughly recommend the scheme to any scientists thinking of applying.

Thanks

I would like to thank the Andrea Buffery and Countryfile team and Bill Hartnett and all those I met at the Royal Society for welcoming me to their worlds and taking the time to make my placements worthwhile. I'd also like to thank Nigel Eady for all his hard work organising the fellowships and the other fellows of 2009 for being a great bunch.

Articles available online

<http://royalsociety.org/Tiny-dinosaur-species-discovered/>

http://www.britishtscienceassociation.org/web/News/FestivalNews/_FoodForThought.htm

http://www.britishtscienceassociation.org/web/News/FestivalNews/_MakeNoBones.htm

http://www.britishtscienceassociation.org/web/News/FestivalNews/_TowardsTailoredTreatmentsForCancer.htm

http://www.britishtscienceassociation.org/web/News/FestivalNews/_CarbonCapture.htm

http://www.britishtscienceassociation.org/web/News/FestivalNews/_unravellingPlant.htm