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BBC Radio and Science & Environment News Online

The Media Fellowship

One of the most nerve wracking moments was in my very first week, when I was working with the BBC Science Radio folk on a couple of productions, one going out on the BBC World Service and one on UK domestic BBC Radio 4. The latter was the very last edition of “Material World”. It went out live and being involved in live radio, even as a minor researcher for only part of the programme, was fascinating. The topic of “my” bit of the show was communicating scientific uncertainty and my contribution amounted to telephoning potential guest interviewees and getting them to agree to sitting in front of a microphone. When faced with attempting to write a script for how I believed the discussion would proceed, I had to rely on the answers that they had given during my phone conversations with them earlier in the week. I waited on tenterhooks during their part of the programme, terrified that the interviewees would go wildly off message and sink the whole discussion. But they did an excellent job of discussing a difficult concept. The presenter, Gareth Mitchell, was fantastic, and it was a highlight watching him guide the show so professionally and calmly.

Working with the Science and Environment page of BBC News Online was also very rewarding. Seeing your words transformed from hastily scribbled reports of the latest research papers, into slick pieces on the BBC News Site was great fun every time. I ended up covering topics as diverse as dark matter, neutron stars, four billion year old resurrected proteins, bears in Yellowstone and new remedies to fight MRSA or anthrax. Sometimes I had the luxury of writing about something I actually knew a little bit about, which included a fun story about how sand dunes were engulfing the star wars set in Tunisia.

It was a little tricky balancing two jobs at once, but so much of what we do is via the internet these days, during my media fellowship I was able to keep most of my research work ticking over while doing a daily commute to London. My research students in Cambridge certainly saw less of me than is probably ideal, but I did pop into the Department in the evening on my way home from the train station a few times during the BBC placement, just to keep that going.

After the days at the beeb came a week at the British Science Festival in Newcastle, and my first experience of working alongside journalists from other outfits, as well as the other Media Fellows of course. Together with Suzi Gage, my partner in crime at the BBC, we reported on stories that were mostly fed to us via press conferences. It was a different style of news gathering compared to how things tended to happen in London. Stories at the Festival were more immediate. They often came from a talk given that day. You could interview the dramatis personae face to face, straight away. It was fantastic to spend some time with the other fellows and find out how their placements had gone. I felt privileged to have been part of the BBC enterprise, and learned quite a bit from being in a “live” environment. So much so that I have since gone on to carry on reporting from conferences that I am attending as a scientist, when I can.

Impacts

On returning to a new academic year many of my colleagues and students were keen to hear what I had been up to. I recounted much of it at a talk to the student geological society, and have bored my colleagues to death with media tales over the coffee table.

I have also kept it going by reporting on large scientific meetings and since the BBC placement I’ve been writing in TheConversation and through that had pieces in ArsTechnica, PopSci, The Hindu, and even on to the web site of The Guardian and The Daily Mirror.

All in all, for me it’s a small part of my overall job, that maybe could develop further. **I have learned how to present my own results to a general audience**, so that I managed to describe some of our groups latest results on a radio show broadcast in Australia on ABC, and had the same material covered in Scientific American. I have **learned the importance of answering the phone to a journalist**, and being available at the crucial moments if you are putting a press release out – waiting for e-mail replies is a luxury that most news desks don’t have. The pace of publishing in news is so so different, ephemeral and instant, compared with the long slow build-up that characterises scientific publishing. It’s a refreshing contrast.

I have ended up recommending the Media Fellowship scheme to many that have wanted to learn more. In an age when, as scientists, we are scrutinised over our efforts in make an impact, it provides an active researcher with the tools and links that enable those efforts to really do what they should. I have just finished working on a large grant proposal. **For the first time, the “pathways to impact” section was something of a breeze to compose!**

My Fellowship Experience

“Working with the BBC for six weeks has been transforming. The people I have worked alongside were welcoming, encouraging, and introduced me to a different way of thinking about why I do the science I do. Communicating the “wow” factor of science has been great fun. Of course, science in action is typically hard graft punctuated by a few “eureka” moments, at best, and the media skim the cream of those moments from the community. But when the next one happens to me, I shall be equipped to relay more effectively, and will remain on the look out for how best to convey the highlights in my field.”