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BBC Countryfile, 2008

COUNTRYFILE, Sundays, BBC One, 11am

Experiences of BA Media Fellowship

Summary

I had the tremendous opportunity of working in the medium of TV, with Countryfile, BBC Birmingham, for my media fellowship. Countryfile is a programme which is information hungry; so one of my main roles was to contribute new ideas by acting as a programme researcher. I was also able to work on location shoots, which was so enlightening.

This experience has taught me much about communications, and in particular to think about what the audience expects and how to compose a story to make it come alive. In TV, it seems that the main things to consider when planning is 'where', 'what', 'who', 'when' and 'so what', coupled with 'where is the action?', and remember the top line!

Main Report

BBC Countryfile

When I arrived, I soon had to get my head around the new ‘language’..... from ‘rushes’(raw tape information) to ‘OOVs’(out of visions); a reminder that to communicate well we must try to use (or learn) the language with which others are familiar.

I was given the task of scanning the daily newspapers and making a list of any items that might be of use to the Countryfile team. I also scanned WWW resources and circulated relevant items around the team. This was really interesting, observing the contrasting slant that different newspapers take on the same story.

Each week the programme contains location stories, lead stories, topical stories, video diaries, strands (a series of related topics) and the feature story. Features are items of general interest, such as a river swimming contest, or a steam fair. Lead stories are the hard news items such as bluetongue or food security. Topical is a current issue that reflects that time and is ‘picture rich’, i.e. harvest or blooming flowers, and the video diary is where an interesting character is filmed by the researcher talking about his/her countryside passion.

There are three main phases to the production of a Countryfile story; research, filming and editing.

In the research phase, the programme researchers compile the background information and a contributor contact list for the news stories. They are constantly phoning, emailing, and generally searching for new stories, as well as sourcing archive material. The main things to consider when planning is ‘where’, ‘what’, ‘who’, ‘when’ and ‘so what’! ...coupled with ‘where is the action?’ to illustrate the story..... after all, it is television, and should be good visual entertainment. It is all about ‘good communication’ and ‘effective engagement’; targeting your material to your audience.....scientists have a lot to learn.



Countryfile planning team viewing Anna’s rushes

There are regular team planning meetings until a decision is reached on which stories to develop, with approximately 50% of ideas not making it to that stage. Researchers write scripts with the directors and then plan the logistics of these shoots with back up from an

administration team. The researchers are a bit like media detectives, exploring first the investigation angles, then evidence gathering for building up an interesting piece.

In the filming phase, the story is handed over to the director (also working with the presenter, the cameraman and the soundman); who use the researchers' script to structure the shoot. This part is usually on 'location', generally changing weekly, for which the team might travel anywhere in Britain.



On location with the filming team at the Dorset steam fair

My tasks were wide ranging; from brushing the hair of contributors, finding names of contributors, to driving a 4 wheel drive vehicle. Adam Henson, the presenter on the Dorset fair location shoot, and also a farmer, had a natural way with the contributors, spending time chatting to them, making them feel a valued part of the programme production. The cameraman, Jon Poynter, and the soundman, Mark Wellman, worked with care and precision, while Stephen Lockwood the director, kept the creative production going with great skill and attention to detail. This illustrated the fantastic team work within Countryfile.

The professionalism of the presenter, producer/director, camera and sound man was evident throughout the whole day; ideas bouncing constantly around the crew. The outcome was a full set of exciting quality 'rushes'. The 'rushes' (pictures and sound shot on location) are then edited together on computer, the music and guide voiceover added, and the items 'locked off' (passed) by the producers for duration and editorial content.

The editing phase takes place back in the warm, windowless and dry editing suite. At this point, the director sits with the editor to ensure that the best quality shots are compiled with the best audio tracks (i.e. voiceovers, music, taped sounds and any archived material with copyright). 'Cutaways' (short, close up shots), 'VOs' (voice over pictures), 'reverse questions' (presenter on camera taken after interview), 'Noddies' (presenter nods to camera), 'GV's' (general views) and more are expertly added in at this stage.



In the cutting room I saw the meticulous precision with which the tapes are taken from the 'first roll' stage through the 'hack' and 'slash' to a compiled

final set of clips. I also observed the brilliant creative skill of the directors in choosing suitable music and clips to tell an entertaining but factual story.

In the editing suite with the Weymouth location tapes

There could be around 80 clip segments in an average 5 minute story; each clip having to be smoothed in and out (i.e. multiple audio and visual tracks). At this stage, archived ancillary material and copyright issues are frantically being followed up by the team.

All sections after digitising and editing are placed in the 'bin'. The director voices over the 'links' (the linking voice over between each item). These are handed over to presenter, who with ultimate professionalism, then transforms the script.

This final phase of production takes place in a dubbing theatre. Working with the rough mix, extra effects, presenter's commentary and sound effects, all are mixed onto a final track. Captions are also added at this stage ('astons'). The producer then reviews the production, having been involved in discussions at all stages. It is now ready to be stored on the BBC computer ready for broadcast to an avid audience every Sunday at 11.00 am on BBC 1.



The editing team working with John Craven and voice overs

For Countryfile stories, external contributors (such as research scientists!) can help streamlining the communication process by being well rehearsed, having material ready and summarising findings in a simplified manner, while keeping the scientific message true. As all the CF stories have 'treatments' (this is a document or script or map to follow when on shoot - to identify which shots and what presenter/contributors are expected to say and do), the interviews should be well rehearsed, and therefore run smoothly, thus saving valuable time.

BA Festival of Science, Liverpool

Acting as a press officer at the Liverpool Science Festival, I covered four news stories, from stable isotope research in archaeology to the world of magic. It was invaluable, being on 'the other side', to focus on the top line, while keeping true to the science. All this within a window of a couple of hours!

The experience at the BA Festival of Science was quite different to that at the BBC. Although there was a tight planning timeline at Countryfile, it was over weeks and days, rather than for

broadcasting on the web news at the festival, which required a turnaround of hours! There were similarities however, the main ones being able to change rapidly from one topic to another and to keep the facts accurate.

On the Wednesday morning I arrived early to a press conference to hear several BA science presenters talk about the application of the Diamond light source to the problem of contaminated land. I interviewed Dr Mark Hodson from Reading University and wrote a story for the BA web site, focusing on the super earthworm and how it might help clean up the heavy metals in our polluted soils.

Later that same day I sat in on another press conference, hearing about several applications of stable isotope technology to research, from the tracking of animal movements in Neolithic time, through cosmic gasses and the origin of the earth, to dating ancient fossils.

I chose to cover the tooth story, where Dr Jane Evans from BGS told us about the isotopic 'fingerprint' set within the tooth enamel, enabling preservation over 1000s of years, giving results leading her to conclude that these animals had been raised in an area of old geology, over 350 million years old, identified as Wales.

I also covered another rather interesting topic: the use of magic training to enhance confidence and social skills in children. It was a special treat to be shown the secrets of how to carry out the 'card in the pack' and the 'cut rope tricks' by Prof. Richard Wiseman, University of Hertfordshire. This again was a new experience, writing about an area unrelated to my own science expertise, which I found to be great fun.

In this exercise of reporting on the festival the most important thing to remember was to record and summarise in a set order; the most interesting/amazing fact right at the top, followed by the name and affiliation of the person delivering the information, plus a quote. It is important to put the most dramatic piece of information at the outset to grab the reader's attention.



The BA media team 2008, at the Liverpool Science Festival

I have only just started on a new journey, as part of the improvement of my science communication skills....a great experience, and one that I would certainly recommend to any scientist.

In conclusion

My expectations were certainly met by the whole experience. The information and knowledge gained throughout this fellowship (and the many friends and contacts made) will benefit myself and the wider community, my workplace colleagues, and my students for along time. I have already been asked to give a paper at a meeting in London in December to talk on 'Communication in Geoscience' where I can encourage and enlighten other scientists about some of what to do (and what not to do!) when communicating with the media. After all, we are in the same business- to inform and educate. The one main difference is that they also set out to entertain, which is one thing that we may also benefit from as a science community.

Appendix

Outputs

BBC

BBC Countryfile, BBC 1, 11.00 am Feature - Dorset Steam Fair, 19th October 2008.

BBC Countryfile, BBC 1, 11.00 am Feature - Secrets of the Soil, 2nd November, 2008.

BBC Countryfile, BBC 1, 11.00 am Location - Fraserburgh, date tbc

In planning - BBC Countryfile, Popularising soil, Fly tipping, Remote view of our countryside, dates tbc

BA articles

http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/News/FestivalNews/_FestivalNews2008/_thesciencebehindthecrime.htm

http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/News/FestivalNews/_FestivalNews2008/_earthwormscleanupmetals.htm

http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/News/FestivalNews/_FestivalNews2008/_isotopesinteethprovideevidenceforbronzetravel.htm

http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/News/FestivalNews/_FestivalNews2008/_magictrickscanconjureupconfidenceandsocialskillinchildren.htm

Popular Press Articles

‘Experiences of print and vision communication through a BA media fellowship’, Dawson LA and Pearce M. Connect, EPSRC magazine, in press.

Blog

<http://www.macaulay.ac.uk/blogs/>