



National
Co-ordinating
Centre for
Public Engagement

How to... ...work in TV

Introduction

Our TV screens are filled with documentaries and factual programming which simply couldn't happen without the help of experts just like you. Perhaps you see yourself as the new David Attenborough, or the Simon Schama of the new millennium. If you think you have a screen presence, and are prepared for a lot of hard work, this guide will help you get started. But, be prepared for slamming doors – TV is tough to break into!

Getting started

Don't expect to become a rising star overnight. If you want to work in television, you will need to do a lot of leg work before you get your foot through the door. Also, don't forget there are lots of other interesting ways to engage with the public that might be more relevant to your work.

What do you want to do?

Think about the subject matter, the audience you want to engage and which channel would be best suited to your ideas. Make sure you do your research before you approach anybody with a pitch.

Do your research

What programmes are currently being commissioned? You don't want to repeat an idea that's just been run, but at the same time – looking at the schedules will give you an idea of the type of programmes channels are likely to pick up on. Is there a wave of interest in your subject area at the moment? They might want to build on a success story. Be aware that there is a lag between commissioning and airing – the programmes you are watching now were likely commissioned two years ago.

Find out if a channel has chosen a theme of coverage which you could tap into. (Be aware that you will have to get in early, as scheduling happens well in advance). If you know of a theme nationally which is likely to result in related programming in the next couple of years, this might give you a chance to get in quick e.g. The Olympics; The International Year of Chemistry, etc.

Choosing a channel

Think about the channel you want to target. Different channels have different core audiences and varied types of programming. There are a number of things to think about:

- Who are the audience? Why would they be interested in your research? What level of understanding do they have? How could you engage them?
- At what times and on which days would you envisage your programme being aired? You won't have any control over the scheduling but you should show that you are aware of its importance – timings make a definite difference to the audience reached and the content expected

- If you are pitching to contribute to a stand-alone documentary (i.e. for Horizon, Panorama, Dispatches), make sure that you understand the overall goal of that current 'strand' of programmes, so that you can illustrate that you sit comfortably within that strand. (The channel will be interested in retaining the audience from the previous programme). Get to know the 'house style' – in order to illustrate that you would fit comfortably alongside other programming for that channel, you need to be aware of its values, preferred formats and show that you can mimic the language used

Start small

Before you take on your own documentary, you might want to consider exploring other, less intensive opportunities to gain experience of working in television.

- Explore children's television. There are many science themed programmes generated for children, (such as, 'Robot Wars', 'The Gadget Show', 'Scrappy Races' etc) which will require expertise either in the form of regular presenters or, often in the form of guest experts for one off episodes. You will need to demonstrate a different set of skills, different content and a different presentation style for this. Remember that this audience will expect an upbeat style and will look for experiments with an element of surprise and wonder at the possibilities of science. Lots of whizzes and bright lights are often the order of the day here
- Go online. If you want to get experience of the process without dealing with the bureaucracy of a television studio, try making your own videos which can be shared online. You could host it on your own website or share it via other websites such as YouTube or Planet Scicast. But don't forget to think about your audience – you still need to think about how to get potential viewers to watch your video and how to make it appeal to them

Pitching your ideas

First thing's first. If you are ready to propose your ideas, you must also be ready to face rejection. But, if you get knocked back, don't be downhearted. Television executives receive hundreds of proposals and even the most creative and charismatic of television personalities have heard their fair share of no's.

Putting a proposal together

Be creative. What is new or different about your idea? How might it appeal to the target audience? Why is it important?

Think big. Not just 'big ideas' but 'big' in terms of subject matter. As a researcher, you are used to highly specialised detail. But television programming is usually far more broad. For example, rather than 'Metaplasticity in the Medial Prefrontal Cortex', think 'The Brain'

Think entertainment. Even factual programming is a form of entertainment in the way that it is delivered. Television is a highly visual medium. You need to think carefully about the format and how it could be presented. Performing a piece to camera, about your latest academic publication, simply will not do

Get the language right. You need to show that you can explain things clearly and can capture the imagination of the target audience

Talking to the right people

- Find out who you should be pitching to – some channels will handle programming in-house but others will rely heavily on independent production companies. Make sure you find out who you should address your proposal to and what their usual proposal procedures are. Check their websites for guidance, or give them a call.
- Find opportunities for networking. If you can gain in-house support, i.e. from an Executive Producer, that's half the battle won already. You will also be able to gain an idea about how your ideas are received and how best to refine them. Opportunities for networking with members of the media include: festivals, major conferences and specialist media-focused events e.g. 'Scientists Meet the Media'
- Some of the research councils are keen to support you in developing ideas for broadcast. For example, the Wellcome Trust have a fund to help people develop ideas
- Universities often have relationships with local and national broadcasters. Make sure you find out whether there are people at your institution who could help. For example Ideas Lab at the University of Birmingham exists to support researchers getting their research on television

Top tips

PROFESSOR JIM AL-KHALILI, PROFESSOR OF PHYSICS AND CHAIR IN THE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT OF SCIENCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SURREY, AUTHOR AND BROADCASTER

- The type and style of programme proposal can vary widely depending on the enthusiasm, science background and personality of the powers that make the decisions: commissioning editors and channel controllers. And what they are looking for in a programme proposal is not necessarily what you think is most important (a great idea) but often it depends on what has come before, what is planned for future, whether they think audiences will 'get it' and most importantly whether there is sufficient story to tell televisually
- Programme ideas for, say BBC2 and BBC4 are very different in level and style because they are made for different audiences
- Putting proposals forward to radio (ostensibly Radio 4 or BBC World Service) is much easier in terms of effort than for television
- Commissioning editors receive hundreds of programme ideas so success rate is low
- Commissioned programmes are often formulaic in that a series that has worked in the past means they may want to use same presenter or programme format again
- Programmes that are commissioned by the BBC are either made by their in-house science unit or by independent production companies (roughly 50/50). I believe that Channel 4 are entirely reliant on indies
- It is almost crucial these days to get an exec producer interested first. This is equivalent to a literary agent for books. The exec producers, whether working in-house in BBC Science Unit

say, or for independent production companies, know how to put programme proposals together in a way that will 'work' on television. Having a good programme idea is not enough. But if an exec can be convinced that there is a good programme to make, they are the ones who know what buttons to push to convince commissioning editors

- Networking with these people is a good idea. Be proactive in seeking them out to discuss your ideas. They are always on the look out
- You will notice that the programmes that get commissioned are not narrow specialist areas but grand all-encompassing ones (Atom, Genetics, Solar System, Chemistry, History of Science etc). They are seldom interested in the sort of thing that science researchers are, namely your specialist field
- Don't be disappointed if your programme idea gets rejected out of hand, then a year or two later it pops up presented by Richard Hammond; it's a tough world and this doesn't necessarily mean a commissioning editor has stolen your idea but more likely that it was one of dozens of seeds of ideas planted in their heads that then resonates when someone else suggests something along similar lines



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