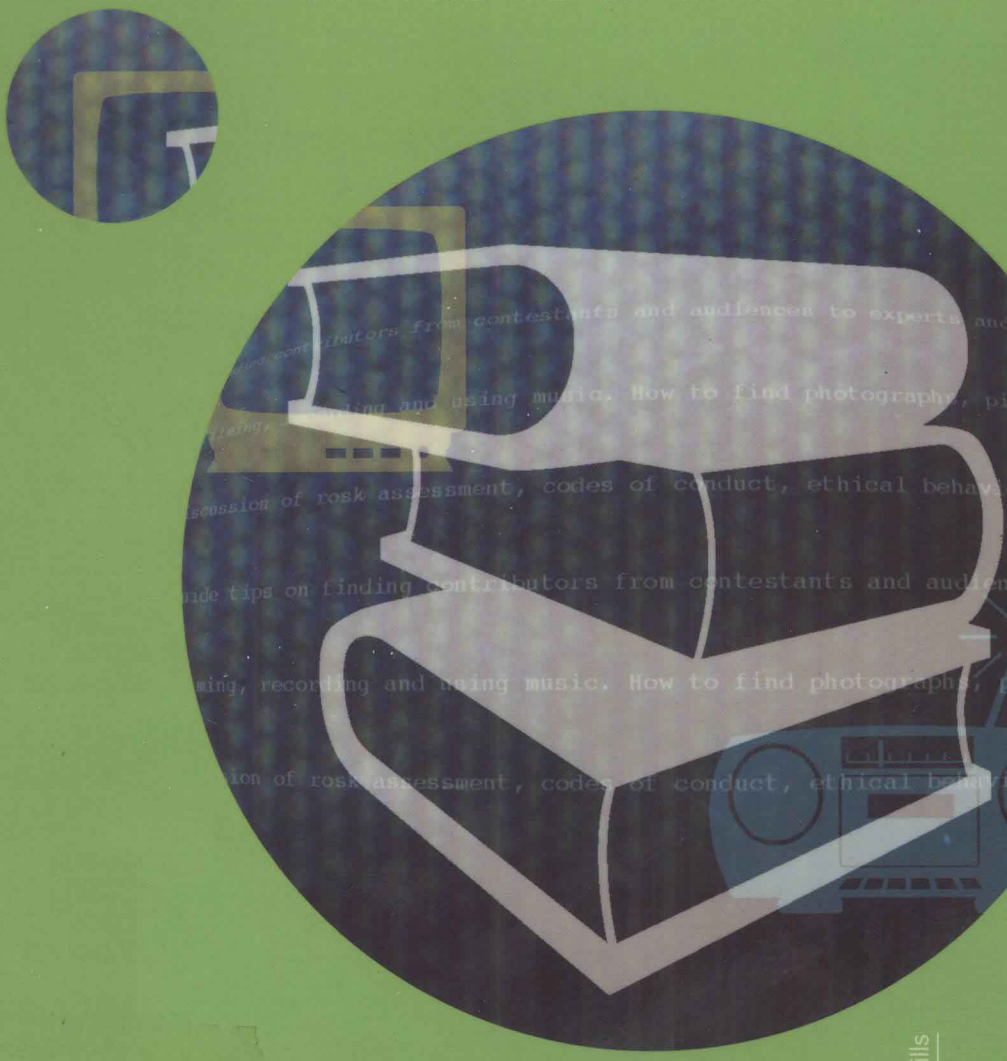
Adèle Emm

researching for television and radio



media skills

Researching for Television and Radio

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Disclaimer

A lot of care has been taken in researching this book but certain issues such as copyright are extremely complicated. Readers should be aware that specialists such as in-house experts or copyright lawyers should be consulted whenever possible. The book is devised to offer advice on a number of issues but the author and publishers cannot accept responsibility for accidents or other health and safety issues.

Introduction

What you do as a researcher depends very much on what you make of the job, the effort you put into it and the programme you work on. It has never been and never will be 9 to 5, and it has never been a doddle. But it can be the most amazing fun and it should be incredibly rewarding.

This book is designed as a handbook to point out potential pitfalls so that the media professional is aware beforehand of anything outrageous – and expensive – that might occur. It is not possible to anticipate all contingencies, but many professionals working in the industry today have read the manuscript and added their own helpful pointers.

The chapter titles speak for themselves. Readers are not expected to begin at the beginning and work through, although the book can be read in this way. The Glossary and List of Abbreviations cover more than is specifically mentioned in this book.

For those working in radio, many of the challenges faced are the same as for their television counterparts and it is common for researchers to migrate across the media. Although Chapter 10 is specifically aimed at the radio researcher, Chapters 2, 3, 4, 11 and 12 are also relevant, as are the Appendices. The use of music is far simpler in radio so a cursory glance at Chapter 7 should suffice.

Enjoy yourself and your job.

Adèle Emm

Contents

1
What is a researcher?

A researcher is the person whose name comes third last in the credits before the director and the producer.

In a sitcom, a researcher is portrayed as an intense, worried-looking young person with a *yah* accent and a clipboard stapled to her trendy chest. And it *is* a her, because the trendy young male researcher has been promoted to the intense, trendy young producer with his feet on the desk barking orders. Recognise the stereotype?

Put it out of your mind. The researcher is the king pin gopher, the bottom rung of the production ladder but a job in its own right. A police constable may never make it to a sergeant and a researcher may never make it further up the production ladder but, because of the very nature of the job, this shouldn't matter.

The experienced media researcher has two mottoes:

- 'Give me a phone and I can find you anything.'
- 'The impossible I can do now, a miracle takes a little longer.'

I shall start by describing the personal attributes of a researcher. This is the job description you won't read in the advertisement.

A researcher is/has:

- well educated and informed with interests in a wide variety of subjects; a whizz at *Trivial Pursuits*;
- curious and with the ability to ask pertinent questions and sound convincing even when they know nothing about the subject. By the end of the project, they are an expert. The get-out-of-jail-free is to admit to Professor Whatnot right at the beginning that they haven't a clue about the politics of Papua New Guinea but he is the expert and . . .;

- a good listener with the ability to précis accurately and take good notes;
- an excellent memory;
- hard working. The hours can be appalling; a 105-hour week non-stop for three weeks including weekends is not unusual. Yes, the European Union Social Chapter limits hours to a 48-hour week but middle management is so far exempt;
- fit, healthy, self-starter, assertive, reliable and responsible;
- excellent organisational and administrative skills;
- able to get on with and like people. All people. Rudyard Kipling's *If* sums it up. If you know to what I am referring and have looked it up, you are well on the way;
- meticulous and gives attention to detail;
- good computer skills, including fast typing;
- a facility with language as they often write voiceovers, links and narration;
- a sense of humour (for all those puns) and the ability to get to the nub of an issue in as few words as possible. Television and radio are verbal media and, depending on the production, scripts should read like something you'd say, not a report you'd hand to your accountant. On the other hand, if you are writing for current affairs and political programmes the script should sound like the voice of authority;
- the essential social skills of drinking late into the night, partying until dawn and being back on location bright eyed and bushy tailed at 7 a.m.

As for what the researcher actually does; that is the million dollar question. Depending on the type of production and the size of the team, it is a pivotal position crossing many demarcation lines.

I'll start by explaining the stages of programme making from pre-production through to transmission, giving a thumbnail description of the main jobs in television (see Chapter 10 for radio) and those which crossover with research. There are plenty of jobs I haven't listed and, for reasons of brevity, this is not an exhaustive job specification for each role.

PRE-PRODUCTION

This is the commissioning, planning and organising of the programme up to the actual shoot. During pre-production, the set is devised and built, the cos-

tumes designed, hired or made, the contestants and actors auditioned, special effects designed and produced and the programme planned in detail bearing in mind that, as good ideas crop up, the production is inevitably changed.

Pre-production takes an inordinate length of time. A feature film or historical drama may be in pre-production for several years. However, the escalating use of accountants results in squeezed budgets and increasingly tight pre-production schedules.

The first person assigned to a production, often because it is his/her idea, is the producer, closely followed by the researcher and director.

Producer: in overall charge; responsible for editorial and budgetary control and can hire-and-fire personnel including . . .

Director: has overall responsibility for the visuals – and more . . .

Researcher: read this book!

Scriptwriter: mainly drama, sitcoms and so on, occasionally employed to write banter for Light Entertainment.

Assistant producer (occasionally Associate Producer): one up from a Senior Researcher, second in command to the Producer and often with responsibility for overseeing the budget. In the BBC, may direct studio.

Associate producer: in ITV is usually a consultant role with skills specific to the programme.

Production/Location manager: organises large productions in regard to hiring crews, organising hotels, catering and transport, hiring equipment. The Production Manager checks the budget on a day-to-day basis.

Production Assistant or PA: (in 99 per cent of cases female) types the scripts, running orders, props lists, pays expenses from a float, times and cues studio, completes copyright return forms and cue sheets. On location, acts as continuity, checking props and action are consistent between scenes.

Assistant director (also known as First Assistant Director or 1st AD – employed on large location productions only): ensures all actors, crewmembers and facilities are on set at the right time. Organises shooting schedules. In feature film shoots acts as 2nd Unit Director (i.e. for battle scenes). In a TV studio, the 1st AD is known as the *floor manager*.

Production manager's, location manager's and assistant director's jobs often overlap depending on the size and requirements of the production.

Design Departments

Set/Production designer: responsible for the design of the set both on location and in studio.

Graphics department: responsible for graphics including titles.

Props buyer, props department, stage crew: *the props buyer* locates, buys or hires props; *the props department* places them on set, *the stage crew* moves sets and large furniture. These are under the jurisdiction of the set designer.

Costume designer: designs, buys, hires the costumes; is in charge of the costume/wardrobe assistants who act as dressers to the actors or contestants.

Makeup designer: designs the makeup including hair; is in charge of the makeup assistants who apply basic and uncomplicated makeup.

All of the above liaise with the director.

PRODUCTION

This is when the programme is recorded on location or in a studio.

Feature films expect to shoot the equivalent of $1\frac{1}{2}$ minutes of screen time a day; in other words a feature film shoot usually lasts ten to sixteen weeks or more depending on the overall length and the budget. Television drama, on the other hand, shoots an hour's drama over eleven days or less if possible. Soaps such as *Coronation Street* record four half-hour episodes a week, more when working towards the Christmas break or for a special.

Ten years ago, one quiz episode was recorded a day but today, up to four are recorded. Why? The same number of studio crew are required in one day to make four shows as are to make one. Simple.

Chat shows and daytime current affairs like *The Time, The Place* and *Kilroy* are usually transmitted live.

Others are recorded *as live*. 'As live' means the programme is taped in real time but pre-recorded a few hours or a day before. There are several reasons for this: a common one being the tx (transmission) time is unsociable (a bank holiday, 3 a.m.) and costs a fortune in wages. The benefit of recording as live is that, although each take is 'for real', should there be any serious faults (technical or editorial) the take can be rewound and re-recorded. There is no editing on an 'as live' programme.

A daily *live* programme such as *This Morning* with Judy Finnigan and Richard Madeley has a separate production team assigned to Monday or Tuesday and throughout the week. Effectively, once the pre-production period is over

(perhaps as little as a month setting up pre-recorded items), the team works a rolling schedule culminating in their day's programme. Programmes such as *The Time, The Place* and *Kilroy* work on the same principle with several teams working on a two- or three-week rota.

Here pre-production merges into production. Imagine being on week 4 of a 16-episode local fashion show. The first three programmes have been transmitted, episode 4 is in editing, episode 5 onwards is being shot but no-one has more than the vaguest idea of the content of programme 12 onwards. This happens. Depending on one's attitude, it's very stressful or the most adrenaline-boosting roller coaster ever.

Pre-production personnel are still involved.

Camera department (in hierarchy order)

Director of photography/cinematographer: (large shoots only) at the pinnacle of his (at the time of writing there are virtually no women at this level) career and able to realise the concept and atmosphere onto the screen via lighting, camera angles and movement.

Lighting cameraman: a day-to-day cameraman who lights small productions; often acts as focus puller or camera operator on larger shoots.

Focus puller: pulls focus on complex cameras for complicated shots.

Camera operator: operates the camera.

Camera assistant: helps carry the equipment, ensures the batteries are fully charged, keeps a record of the camera shots, cable bashes when required (ensures the cables are not trailing on the floor behind the cameraman).

Clapper/Loader: operates the clapper board and keeps it up to date as well as loading the film into the magazines (film mags).

On small shoots, for instance a news item, there may only be a camera operator. The camera assistant and clapper loader is often the same person.

Electrical department

Electricians or sparks: responsible for rigging the lights and power supplies (gaffers and best boys are in charge and second-in-command of this department).

Rigger/Drivers: drive the transport, help carry the equipment and set up tracks for tracking (moving) shots.

Only on the very largest of shoots will all of the above be present.

Sound department

Sound recordist: records and mixes sound on location and in studio. Often specialises in either post-production or production.

Sound assistant: helps fix on microphones and acts as . . .

Boom swinger: holds the boom mic (a mic attached to a long pole to be as near as possible to the speaker with the operator out of shot) in the optimum position for the best sound.

Dubbing mixer: post-production only. Mixes the sounds together for a cohesive sound track.

Studio production

Cameramen, sound recordists, stage, props and sparks as above.

Vision mixer: sits in the studio control room (box or gallery depending on local jargon) and works with the director selecting and mixing the shots in a multi-camera set up.

Floor manager: in charge of the studio floor including health and safety issues.

Technical supervisor (TS): responsible for the technical side of the studio including cameras, sound and recording equipment.

POST-PRODUCTION

Once filming is over, it is technically in post-production. This is when editing takes place (where the shots are put in the correct order and mistakes cut out), special effects added, sound re-recorded and mixed (dubbed) and a master edit produced.

For live programmes, there is no post-production, although the programme will be recorded whilst being transmitted.

Editors: edit the rushes (uncut footage straight from the camera).

Sound editors: a film or video has several 'layers' of sound and sound editors compile and edit the sound tracks.

TX (TRANSMISSION)

This is when the programme goes out on air.

The researcher's role

Researchers work on a variety of programmes, such as:

- documentaries and documentary series/docu-soaps/infotainment;
- light entertainment/quizzes/game shows;
- music;
- sport;
- children's programmes;
- magazine/day time/chat shows;
- news and current affairs (although these prefer to employ journalists);
- drama (but few dramas employ researchers as such).

This is what researchers do:

- suggest ideas;
- suggest new treatments;
- find contributors, audition and interview them and 'mind' them in studio or on location (celebrities, experts, MPs, contestants, documentary subjects);
- supervise and organise the personal props of programme contributors;
- pay expenses to contributors;
- check the spelling of contributors' names;
- check facts;
- find statistics and confirm their accuracy;
- set and verify quiz questions and act as scorekeepers;
- organise hotels, restaurants, travel arrangements for self, contributors and crews;
- book specialist equipment in consultation with film crews;
- find props, prizes and costumes;
- find locations and go on recces (short for 'reconnaissance', see Chapter 8);
- suggest atmospheric music;
- research, direct, shoot and edit short inserts for television;
- supervise editing including devising paper edits (the cutting order or the EDL, edit decision list);

- research, direct, record and edit sound packages for radio and organise ISDN lines;
- act as an on-screen reporter on short items;
- write links, voiceovers, narrations;
- organise photographic shoots;
- find film clips, photographs and pictures and organise their satellite links and transfer from different formats.

Many of these mirror other production roles but the larger and more prestigious the programme and the larger the budget, the less likely the researcher will take on some of the responsibilities of the list above. However, on cable and satellite stations, where the budget is virtually non-existent, the researcher may do everything from research, shoot, edit and dance the polka at the same time. All for £10,000 a year. And why would anyone be mug enough to research, direct, produce, shoot and edit a satellite station's entire output? For the experience. Because they have direct editorial control. Because they are desperate for a job in the industry. Someone else will do it for less and it's a good place to begin a career.

Generally speaking, however, the researcher is responsible for offering ideas, finding contributors and suggesting angles by which a pretty ordinary idea can be recorded in an unusual, novel and interesting way.

In the words of Chris Cowey, the Executive Producer of *Top of the Pops*, a researcher needs the 4 I's:

> Innovation. Imagination. Intelligence. Integrity.

He added that a good researcher is extremely hard to find and harder to keep because, in this day and age where a researcher's job is not regarded as a be all and end all, either they are poached by other programmes or they become a producer.

The beauty of working as a researcher is that no two jobs are ever the same. Researchers may find themselves working for six months on a chat show followed by a music programme and then a year's contract on current affairs where a different subject is tackled each week.

In a nutshell, a researcher is a jack-of-all-trades with opportunities to specialise in their preferred genre depending on their background and interest.

A BRIEF NOTE ABOUT CONTRACTS

Until the 1990 Broadcasting Act, a large number of jobs in radio and television were permanent 'staff' jobs in which an employee worked for the same

company until they retired or found a job elsewhere. Since then, the majority of jobs in film, television and radio are short fixed-term contracts usually of a few months' duration.

Production personnel, including researchers, cannot assume that any fixed-term contract will be renewed and they must expect to work where a job is available. Inevitably, this means moving frequently. The majority of work is in London and many media professionals resent moving south with its exorbitant house prices and the inherent problems of short-term contracts. Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Nottingham, Southampton, Bristol and Glasgow are also large media centres.

Most media newcomers obtain their first job at independent production houses and in cable television. These tend to be based in cities, although cable stations are now setting up in larger towns. Contracts and pay are short and low.

Radio stations are, by their nature, more regional and localised. Competition for jobs is less fierce than for television but fierce enough! On the whole, for most independent radio stations, there are fewer jobs in production and most people work in marketing and promotions.

The downside of short-term contracts is the instability. The upside is that, if you find routine tedious and savour change and new challenges, this is perfect.

A NOTE ON ETHICS

A global and dangerous statement is that a producer often wants what is impossible. The researcher is in the unfortunate position of having to provide something the producer doesn't know they want until they see it. This sounds harsh but is reality and can result in ethically questionable products.

- In December 1998, Carlton Television was fined £2 million by the ITC for setting up drug runners in a *Cutting Edge* documentary on the Columbian drug trade.
- In 1999, Nottingham Council took Channel 4 and October Films to court for paying schoolchildren to sit in doorways and act as prostitutes whilst the cameras rolled.
- *Vanessa* and *Trisha* were discredited for fake guests. The *Vanessa* show was axed in June 1999. *The Jerry Springer Show* from the USA has been revealed for winding up its guests until they 'fight' on set.

As production schedules tighten to save money, the researcher has less time to supply a controversial guest with an outspoken, outrageous viewpoint. If a