

Feature

SCIENCE AND THE SOUNDBITE

What happens when a Bristol academic gets a call from the broadcast media? Harry Witchel, Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Physiology, gives the low-down on interviews, anxiety, and bringing science to 'that' house.

When I used to watch people being interviewed on television, I never distinguished between a person speaking to an interviewer and someone speaking to camera. But it is completely unnerving trying to speak cogently while staring straight into the lens of a camera; in Psychology departments, speaking directly at a video camera is used to induce anxiety. Now, whenever I see a disembodied person behind the newsreader, with their eyes looking out to the viewers, I feel their strain as they try to formulate a few sentences.

One of my first television interviews was for *BBC News 24*. There was no studio – just a small cubby of a room with a camera, a chair, and a coloured backdrop. There was no door, only a curtain, and I was wearing an earphone to hear what was going on in the main studio. I was so stressed out, I completely lost track of what I was doing, but I kept on answering questions. When I saw the tape, what I said made sense, but my tie was on crooked.

I found it much easier to talk to an interviewer with the camera off to the side. After the Northwick Park Hospital drug trial of TGN 1412, when the volunteers became grotesquely swollen, I was live on *BBC Breakfast TV* news to speak about drug safety. I wanted to convey that this tragedy was incredibly rare, and that drug trials are very carefully regulated and normally quite safe. Bill Turnbull, the interviewer, worked with me to make the expert opinion clear, so I was able to make my point in a matter of seconds. Everything about

the interview was calm, and I had a completely clear head. I ended up with plenty of time to quote facts and figures.

The subjective feeling of time is most apparent when you compare live with pre-recorded appearances. After David Cameron's first appearance as Conservative leader on Prime Minister's Questions, I was interviewed early in the day for a late afternoon transmission on *PM with Eddie Mair* on Radio 4. The question was how Cameron performed, in terms of non-verbal communication. We had so much time, we did the interview twice: the first time ended when the minidisc recorder fell to the floor and erased everything. The final interview was edited down to three minutes and covered everything I could have asked for.

All of this was good training for the day I got a call from the producers of *Big Brother*. They wanted to find out whether there was any scientific evidence for the existence of memes in the *Big Brother* house. (Memes are ideas or behaviours that are transmitted from one person to another like a virus. The classic meme is a rumour, but memes can include songs, hairstyles, and England flags on cars. Even language is a kind of meme.)

This work entailed doing a small research project during the course of a morning. My job on the first day was to come up with three minutes of pre-recorded commentary for the prime-time *Big Brother* show explaining why all the housemates kept saying, 'At the end of the day'. The Assistant Producer was ecstatic about the phrase, and how even Tony Blair was saying it now.

When I arrived at the set, I was a bit starstruck. There it was, the house and the catwalk where each housemate walks out on eviction night to the screaming cheers, and terrible booing, of the crowd. It looks more like a military bunker: tall flat grey walls, razor wire everywhere, and the occasional security man in a black tee-shirt.

From 8.30am, the day passed in a blur. I had to see the footage, come up with *data*, analyse the numbers, write what I was going to say, have everything approved and finish filming by 3pm. I made a lovely pink and blue graph in Excel, and I even showed that 'at the end of the day' passed from one housemate to another; I found a correlation that was statistically significant. There was no time for rehearsing and no autocue, as that would look *unnatural*. So they shot each take over and over, with me talking spontaneously to camera (only it doesn't *feel* spontaneous). My long suit is lecturing, and they had me sitting down, which made me less comfortable. Even then, they told me I moved around too much for television.

Two days later, I watched the final cut at home. I saw myself, prime-time on Channel 4, in front of five million viewers, and the producers chose a take where I was saying sentence after sentence without moving at all – I even forgot to blink. My graph and the data were all cut. From that moment on, my goal became to get a graph on to *Big Brother*. I waited a year before my opportunity materialised.

This year, the format was changed to a 22-minute chat show hosted by Dermot O'Leary: *Big Brother's Big Brain* presented scientific commentary to a young audience not typically Big on the scientific method. The show was filmed with a studio audience and was transmitted live. Once again I looked for memes.

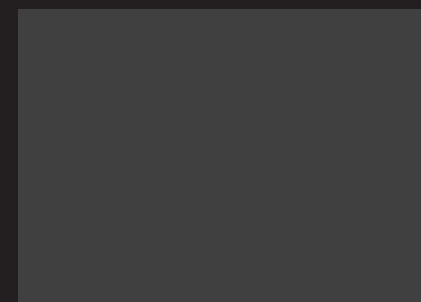
The most consistent group activity in the house was effing and blinding. At its peak, the 12 housemates used the F-word 2,624 times in one day. I wanted to phrase it as 'the F-word', but the series producer insisted I say "f**** and f****ing" live on national television. It was OK, he said, because it was late at night. I didn't feel like it was OK: the studio audience sucked in their breath when I said the words. But I got my graphs – three of them.

It was a fair trade: I said things in a way that he could best use, and he helped me bring science to the people. That's what you have to aim for when the media want you as an expert – a trade-off between science and the soundbite. I may be the expert on the science, but with five million viewers, the *Big Brother* producers are the experts on what works for the audience. ❦

Harry Witchel is running two courses for the University's Centre for Public Engagement this autumn. See www.bristol.ac.uk/cmc/cpe.



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This page: Harry Witchel explains memes (and turns the air blue) on *Big Brother's Big Brain* with Dermot O'Leary