

Editing the Sounds of Science: Science Editors at National Public Radio

Jennifer Ann Hutt

Most science editors work with the written word, communicating science through either print publications or, more recently, electronic media, such as online journals. But science-editing positions come in many shapes and sizes, and for some editors the job includes coordinating narration, dialogue, and sound effects to convey science through radio.

Behind every National Public Radio (NPR) broadcast of health and science news and each edition of NPR's "Science Friday", science editors are hard at work. Four editors staff NPR's science desk. Two of them recently described their experiences to *Science Editor*.

Alison Richards is responsible for NPR's day-to-day coverage of science, technology, and environmental issues. Richards began her work in radio at the British Broadcasting Corporation in London, where she edited science for 7 years. After moving to the United States about 5 years ago, she began doing freelance reporting for NPR on a topic she was familiar with through her work at the BBC—the culture and process of science. While doing this work, Richards decided NPR was where she wanted to be.

"Like many people who eventually get to work at NPR", Richards said, "I stuck around, and stuck around, doing everything that came my way and learning everything I could." She applied for and received a reporting and editing position and has spent the last 4 years working at the NPR science desk.

Nils Bruzelius, formerly an editor of special projects at the NPR science desk, also considered NPR a place to learn.

JENNIFER ANN HUTT, a graduate student in science and technology journalism at Texas A&M University, is doing a fellowship at Science Editor.

Bruzelius recently accepted a position as science editor at *The Washington Post* but not before learning to appreciate the art of radio. As an editor of special projects at the science desk, Bruzelius would spend up to 4 weeks developing in-depth pieces like the two-part series on drug shortages that aired on "Morning Edition" in July 2002. Bruzelius, who joined the NPR team with 28 years of experience in covering science at *The Boston Globe*, said he enjoyed the new challenge of editing for radio after almost 3 decades of working with print. "It's probably not a bad thing when you're in your 50s to learn a whole new skill", Bruzelius said. "It shows that you haven't atrophied."

At NPR, Richards continues to perform the day-to-day tasks of many print editors: developing story ideas, advising reporters, and supervising projects. However, NPR science editors also face distinct challenges in preparing science for radio.

"The fundamental editorial values are the same", Bruzelius said, "but actually putting a piece together, in detail, is very different."

Science editors at NPR eventually read and edit the script intended for broadcast but only after having listened for sound quality and dialogue clarity. Side by side with the reporter, science editors at NPR listen to the recorded sounds and then discuss them. "It's very different from being a print editor who looks at manuscripts and makes notes in the margin", Bruzelius said.

One challenge of working for radio is that the interviews must have high-quality sound, Bruzelius said. Often, this requires doing a preliminary interview, followed by a formal interview on a high-quality telephone or in a recording studio—a step that is unnecessary in writing or editing for print.

Editors listen both for the quality of sound in the recorded interviews and for

the source's ability to explain science in everyday language. "In print, you can talk to someone . . . with a lot of jargon, and if you can't get good quotes, you can paraphrase", Bruzelius said. "In radio you can't do that very much. You have to find someone who will speak clearly."

Clear language is especially important in radio, Richards said, because there are no diagrams or other graphics, and listeners can't reread something they don't understand.

Although editing science for radio can be a challenge, sound also has a lot to offer that one can't get with print, Richards said. "You have the intimacy of conversation—all the power of the human voice with its telling variations in pitch, speed, and vocabulary", she said, "the telling hesitancy, the burst of laughter, the choked-back sob. Yes, even in science broadcasting."

Bruzelius might have spent several weeks working on a special project, but Richards manages daily coverage of ever-emerging science news. "The show lineups sometimes resemble airport departure schedules", she said, "with leads constantly changing and a need to respond minute by minute to the ebb and flow of news."

From the conception of a story idea to the moment the final piece is broadcast over the air, science editors are at work with numerous tasks that help create a high-quality program in science news.

"Thinking about all this", Richards said, "I recognize that in addition to doing what people think editors do, I—like most editors, I guess—play a wide variety of roles in the course of a day, including the good cop, the bad cop, muse, diplomat, therapist, bean counter, salesperson, peace negotiator, advocate, caterer." 