



Profiles	Science communication
Name	Catherine Birch
Age	26
Job	Senior press officer

I like the fact that I get to cover so many different areas of science, and that it is fast-paced and exciting.

Career path and qualifications so far

I studied Chemistry, Maths and French at A Level at my local comprehensive school. I then went on to do a four year Masters course in Chemistry (MChem) at the University of Oxford. After my degree, I went to work for the newly formed Science Media Centre (SMC) at the Royal Institution of Great Britain. I began as the media relations assistant and moved up first to science press officer and then to my current position as senior press officer. I have now been at the SMC for three years.

What is a senior press officer?

The SMC is a service for news journalists. When science is dominating the headlines, we aim to promote the voices, stories and views of the scientific community to the news media. As a senior press officer, my job is to try to ensure that the public has access to what scientists are saying about the issues that matter.

Day to day activities

My role is incredibly varied – no two days are ever the same at the centre. We cover all areas of science, so in a typical week I could jump from issues like genetically modified foods to tuberculosis, to food scares, to climate change.

When a science story suddenly hits the headlines, we have to drop everything to find the key scientists who work in that particular area, brief them on the story, determine their reaction and then organise news interviews for them.

I am also responsible for organising and running press briefings for the SMC. These briefings cover everything from new areas of research yet to hit the headlines to scientists' opinions on issues affecting research, to newly published papers.

Away from the front line media work, I spend a lot of time talking to scientists about why they should engage with the media. I also organise media days for scientists.

Does your job involve travel or activities outside the office/laboratory?

My job involves some travel – mainly in the UK to meet scientists, but sometimes abroad to attend conferences.

Why did you choose your current job?

After a year spent in the labs working on my degree research project, I realised I was much better at talking about research than doing it. I decided to pursue a career in science communication, not yet knowing exactly what. After finishing university, I spent some time volunteering at the Royal Institution, helping out in various departments. I then discovered that the SMC was about to open and managed to get a job there.

What do you most enjoy about your job?

I like the fact that I get to cover so many different areas of science, and that it is fast-paced and exciting.

What skills do you need, other than your scientific knowledge?

Good communication skills, both written and verbal, and the ability to understand scientific issues quickly. Also, you need to be really organised, as you are always juggling about 15 things at once.

Have you got any advice for people wishing to enter your career area?

See if you can spend a few days volunteering at relevant organisations – it gives you a real insight into how a place works. The experience always looks good on your CV and the people you meet may prove to be useful contacts in the future.

Why is it useful to study a science subject at university?

A science degree was a requirement for my job. Although I rarely use the chemistry I learnt, my degree and the time I spent in the labs has been incredibly useful because it helps me to relate to the scientists I frequently work with and to understand the messages they want to get across. More generally, I think a science degree provides you with a certain logical way of looking at things, the ability to think laterally, and problem solving skills, which are always useful.

Examples of other career opportunities in this area

Some other job opportunities in science communication include: journalist, press officer, web editor, policy officer, education officer (eg within a museum or professional body) and events organiser.

Further information/contacts

STEMPRA – The Science, Engineering and Medicine Public Relations Association

Tel: 07811 44 0918 www.stempra.org.uk

Association of British Science Writers, Wellcome Wolfson Building, 165 Queen's Gate, London SW7 5HE

Tel: 0870 770 3361 www.absw.org.uk

National Union of Journalists, Headland House, 308-312 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8DP

Tel: 020 7278 7916 Email: info@nuj.org.uk

For further information on careers in the chemical sciences contact:

Education Department, Royal Society of Chemistry, Burlington House, Piccadilly, London W1J 0BA

Tel: 020 7440 3344 Fax: 020 7287 9825 Email: education@rsc.org

www.rsc.org www.rsc.org/chemsoc

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