

ScienceWorld— From medicine to media

Tune in to *ScienceWorld* this Sunday from 6.00–7.00 pm for a look at this week's discoveries, breakthroughs and inventions from the realms of science and technology, some top tunes and a chance to win a meal for two at Garfunkels Restaurant.

With Chris Smith, Shibley Rahman and Catherine Hawkins

Don't You Dare Miss it!

TOP RIGHT:
The *ScienceWorld* team prepare for a show. From left to right: Catherine Hawkins, Guest, Shibley Rahman and Chris Smith.

BELOW:
Chris Smith in the 'The Eagle' studio in Cambridge.

PHOTOS COURTESY CHRIS SMITH

We usually get to the station at about 5.30 pm every Sunday, in theory giving us half an hour to organize the material and select music for the show, before we go live on air at 6.00 pm. In practice, somebody is usually late, the photocopier is usually out of paper and nobody knows the weather forecast.

If you'd asked me at the beginning of 1999 what I saw myself doing in the forthcoming new millennium, probably the last thing I'd have said would have been presenting a science show on local radio every Sunday evening. Like most of these things the show began as a series of lucky coincidences. A couple of us who had been involved with presentations during National Science Week were invited along to a local radio station to talk about science for an hour or so. It had been intended to be a one-off appearance, but the show went so well that we left with an invitation to appear weekly, as guests on a weekday evening show. We worked our way through every single interesting biomedical topic that we could think of. We tackled brain disorders, gene therapy, the microbial world, and even sexually transmitted infections and contraception. The show on contraception was extremely popular, but almost got us into trouble. By that time, as an experiment, we were also being broadcast live on cable television, as well as radio, and we had filled the studio with every conceivable kind of contraceptive (kindly supplied by Addenbrooke's Hospital genito-urinary medicine clinic). Interestingly, viewer and listener surveys revealed that for that show our most substantial TV audience was in Harlow, Essex (a phenomenon that remains unexplained, but is open to interpretation!), and more shockingly, that a staggering 55,000 people were tuning in to the show each week.

At about this time it occurred to me that, since the show had been very popular and there was an obvious niche for a product like it in Cambridge, it might be possible to obtain some sponsorship so we could set ourselves up with our own dedicated science show, giving us the freedom to improve and develop the concept without the constraints of having to fit in as guests on someone else's show.

As luck would have it, the Biotechnology and Biological Science Research Council (BBSRC) launched a new grant scheme to fund ventures into public understanding of science and were inviting applicants to apply for awards of up to £10,000 to help put their ideas into action. I put the idea to the radio station and after endless meetings and phone calls we eventually had a deal. They promised us an hour-long Sunday evening slot, at a very reasonable rate, subject to us raising the necessary sponsorship. We then wrote the world's fastest grant application, submitted it to the research council, and went home for Christmas.



In January 2000 we received news that we had been awarded a grant of £7,000. The radio station were pretty shocked – I don't think they really believed we would get the money, but on Sunday 27th February the *ScienceWorld* show was launched.

We begin each show with a news round up of the weeks' discoveries, publications, innovations and inventions. We play popular chart music between items, run a competition and phone-in throughout the show and feature a special live guest interview, including recently James Watson, Sir Alec Jeffreys and Richard Dawkins. The material, which we write ourselves, is gleaned from journals, newspapers, periodicals (including *Microbiology Today!*) and the internet.

The success of the show stems from the fact that we keep the science simple and humorous, and intersperse the talking with popular chart music, generating an accessible broadcast that appeals to a broad spectrum of listeners. Also, as far as we know, *ScienceWorld* is the only dedicated science show to be broadcast on a commercial radio station in the UK.

In a short space of time we have had to make the transition from medical and PhD students to DJs which has involved learning how to run all the gadgetry required to 'drive' the show and make it sound good. It's not easy to talk intelligently whilst you are watching the clock, cueing the next song, adjusting the mic levels and monitoring the backing music, but if the listener figures are anything to go by, we're definitely getting there. The skills we have learned have also proved surprisingly useful in the lab, providing the perfect training in giving talks and presentations, working under pressure and in good time-keeping! Doing the show live is an enormous buzz, mainly because you know that when you push up the microphone slider, thousands of people will hear you make a mistake if you say the wrong thing (a bit like speaking at a conference really) – it's a pretty strong incentive to get it right.

● **Chris Smith, Medical and PhD student, Division of Virology, Department of Pathology, University of Cambridge.**

'ScienceWorld' is written, produced and presented by Chris Smith, Shibley Rahman and Catherine Hawkins, sponsored by the BBSRC, and broadcast live on 107.9 (FM) The Eagle, (Cambridge) every Sunday evening from 6.00–7.00 pm.