

Programme researcher, broadcasting/film/video

Job Description

A programme researcher provides support to the producer and production team. Researchers contribute ideas for programmes, source contacts and contributors and collect, verify and prepare information for film, television and radio productions. A researcher can work on a wide variety of programmes or within one subject area.

The work involves organising, planning and researching everything that will happen during the programme: who will be interviewed; location; will the film crew fit; does the budget stretch? The researcher has a responsibility for fact checking, writing briefs for presenters and ensuring that there is adherence to appropriate legislation relating to the production.

The job can be seen as an apprenticeship for the producer role and a chance for ambitious recruits to show their potential.

Typical Work Activities

The variety of the work carried out by researchers depends on individual producers and the companies that employ them. Depending on the size and type of employer, researchers may carry out specific research-based tasks or their job might expand into more production-based activities.

In radio, broadcasters will do elements of their own programme research, assisted by the producers and researchers. Researchers in radio will contribute to the development of websites that enhance programme delivery. In television and film, researchers may be involved in a wide variety of activities and the role may be roughly divided into two: factual research (checking all the information used in making a film, e.g. period costume and architecture), and picture research (examining archives for film, video and photographic material to be used in documentaries).

Typical work activities are, therefore, varied but may include:

- meeting with producers, directors, presenters and writers to discuss the research needs of a programme;
- generating and developing new programme ideas;
- conveying findings accurately to others in report form and briefings;
- sourcing and researching facts, figures and information using the internet, film and tape archives, specialist collections, picture libraries, museums and government departments;
- assessing contributors' suitability for the programme, researching and booking appropriate people and locations;
- booking resources, facilities and freelance staff and negotiating fees;
- providing administrative support, such as typing, answering the phone and dealing with contracts;
- briefing scriptwriters and presenters on topics, updating scripts and editing news reports;
- sourcing copyright for literary and music sources and gaining clearance for any materials used;
- negotiating broadcasting rights and producing information and fact sheets for websites;
- providing research to production staff in a clear, concise format and tracking down film, archive and video tapes;
- finding interviewees to conduct initial interviews with and getting vox pop responses to current events from members of the public;
- directing a small shoot and carrying out straightforward editing.

Work Conditions

- A typical starting salary for researchers with little experience would be £22,000 in London, or £18,500 outside the capital, rising to approximately £24,500 in London with a couple of years' experience (salary data collected April 08). A researcher may well have to work for minimal payment or for free before getting a fully paid job.
- Experienced researchers may earn up to £32,500 in London, or £29,000 outside London.
- Salaries vary depending on employers, location, experience and the responsibilities of the job. Freelance rates vary widely and are calculated at a daily rate between £150 and £400 (salary data collected April 08).
- Employment is generally precarious. Staff jobs are extremely hard to come by and researchers are generally taken on for specific projects or programmes (often lasting no more than two or three months). In order to secure regular employment, freelancers need to build up a reputation. Large corporations, such as the BBC (www.bbc.co.uk), employ some researchers on permanent contracts.
- Unsocial working hours are a common feature and researchers may work up to seven days a week for long periods. Work on live programmes is more predictable.
- Researchers' work takes place in a variety of settings, ranging from typing in an office to interviewing people in the street. Documentary researchers may sometimes work undercover.
- The Skillset Employment Census (www.skillset.org/research/census) (2006) reveals that employment levels in the television industry have undergone significant changes, with a growth in the cable and satellite sector and a decrease in the terrestrial TV workforce. The demographic profile of the audiovisual industries shows that women make up 38% of the workforce; ethnic minorities make up 7.4% and disabled people make up 1.0%.
- Jobs are mostly restricted to London, however, there are other regional clusters with broadcasting bases, such as Manchester.
- The work is stressful and demanding and requires a very high level of commitment. The work culture is generally informal but you may feel pressured with tight deadlines to meet.
- Travel is common and may be overseas depending on the research project.

Entry Requirements

This area of work is open to all graduates, as work experience and contacts may sometimes count for more than your degree subject. Nevertheless, a degree in one of the following subjects may increase your chances:

- broadcasting and media;
- journalism;
- public relations;
- English;
- politics and history.

Graduates tend to be preferred but relevant work experience, personal qualities, confidence and evidence of skills may compensate. Specialist knowledge and research experience may be required for specific subject areas or documentaries. For general areas, a knowledge of current affairs and the media is useful, plus evidence of lateral thinking.

A pre-entry postgraduate qualification is not essential, although a practical journalism or media course may help.

Many graduate researchers have previously worked in newspapers or radio (mainly as journalists) or gained experience in entry-level jobs in television, often unpaid or in the role of a runner. Therefore, pre-entry experience is seen to be vital, especially as competition for all advertised vacancies is so fierce. Opportunities for work experience do exist but places may be limited so you will need to be determined to succeed. The BBC offers work experience nationally in a variety of roles, see BBC Work Experience (www.bbc.co.uk/workexperience) and many broadcasting recruitment agencies advertise short-term contracts. Be prepared to network and perhaps try to get summer work experience in a research role with the local or regional press, community radio or student union publications. If trying to get into freelance work, the Broadcast Freelancer (www.broadcastfreelancer.com) is a useful resource.

Candidates will need to show evidence of the following:

- the ability to generate new ideas, be resourceful and motivated;
- excellent written communication and interpersonal and organisational skills;
- the ability to think visually and be adaptable;
- the capability to work well in a team and under pressure;
- excellent IT and research skills;
- an instinct for a good story;
- confidence and patience;
- a knowledge of legal and ethical principles in relation to the media and copyright.

To be successful in securing freelance work, researchers also need to be skilled in self-management and self-promotion.

Joining communities with an interest in film, television and radio such as the British Film Institute (BFI) (www.bfi.org.uk), the Documentary Filmmakers Group (www.dfgdocs.com), the Stellar Network (www.stellarnetwork.com), the Royal Television Society (www.rts.org.uk) and Women in Film and Television (WFTV) (www.wftv.org.uk), will help provide useful links and keep you up to date on current affairs within the industry. Build a portfolio of everything you have contributed to, from newspaper articles to television programmes, to demonstrate your experience when approaching potential employers.

It is illegal for employers to discriminate against candidates on the grounds of age, gender, race, disability, sexual orientation or religious faith. For more information on equality and diversity in the job market see Handling Discrimination (www.prospects.ac.uk/links/discrimination). The broadcasting sector has a history of initiatives to promote careers in the industry to under-represented groups, particularly ethnic minorities. The BBC has published a set of core values, including diversity, which covers all aspects of its business, including recruitment.

Training

A lot of training is on the job although there are short training courses available in-house or externally. The BBC, for example, runs a number of training schemes including weekly modules which are advertised on BBC Training and Development (www.bbctraining.com). Training opportunities within broadcasting companies are usually linked to operational needs.

Skillset (Sector Skills Council for the Audio Visual Industries) (www.skillset.org) has information on a range of training available for researchers and along with the British Film Institute (BFI) (www.bfi.org.uk) they run a database to help those in the industry identify appropriate courses. The Indie Training Fund (ITF) (www.indietrainingfund.com/) offers short courses and in-house training for members, while the Top TV Academy (www.toptvacademy.co.uk) runs a variety of focused training courses aimed at researchers to help develop skills. Mandy's International Film and TV Production Resources (www.mandy.com) holds information on workshops and training in this field.

In Scotland, Scottish Screen (www.scottishscreen.com) provides training for the Scottish broadcast and film industry, including a new entrants' scheme and The Research Centre (www.researchcentre.co.uk) in Glasgow and Manchester delivers training and runs a researcher development programme.

City & Guilds (www.city-and-guilds.co.uk) also offer the Certificate for Audio Visual Industries Induction, a level two qualification designed for new entrants, which provides an overview of the requirements of working in the audiovisual industries. The certificate focuses on providing realistic information which will prepare learners for the realities of the industry and make them more employable. It may therefore be a useful overview to anyone who has just secured a job as a researcher.

Career Development

There is no fixed career ladder, but the nature of the job makes it an excellent starting point for an ambitious entrant. Career progression is achieved by working on a variety of programmes, films and stations. Researchers in local radio may move into the national network, while those in television may go on to work on high-profile current events programmes or specialise in a particular area, such as music research or stills research. On a larger production there may be opportunities for experienced researchers to supervise a team of researchers, maintaining a high level of contact with the producer and director and so in effect moving into a senior researcher role. Being a researcher is a great way to get a good view of what other roles exist within the industry.

Researchers are being employed less in some broadcasting companies, due to the introduction of assistant producers. However, it has been recognised in some areas that a researcher's skills still have an important role to play and this may mean that researchers will grow to be more specialised in future. Currently, researchers are becoming more hands-on, involved in shooting, sound recording and even directing, alongside traditional research and increasing responsibility in programme making. Some move into other media roles, such as journalism or other areas of production. Competition is fierce for all promotional positions.

To progress in this rapidly changing industry, you need to be pro-active and willing to learn new skills, meet new people, make new contacts and, above all, work hard to show a firm commitment to your job. It is a small industry so maintaining good relationships within the sector is very important. See Skillset Careers (www.skillset.org/careers) for information on careers in the audiovisual industry.

Typical Employers

The majority of researchers work for either television, independent production companies, radio, or satellite and cable companies, on news and current affairs programmes.

The UK's largest broadcaster is the BBC (www.bbc.co.uk). The majority of its programmes are produced in-house but it has a statutory obligation to ensure that 25% of its commissioned programme hours are made by independent producers.

Independent Television (ITV) (www.itv.com) produces about half its programmes outside London and comprises 15 regional licensees and the GMTV national breakfast station. The major players are Carlton and Granada. Channel 4 Television (www.channel4.com) broadcasts throughout the UK, except parts of Wales. It does not make programmes but commissions them from independent production companies. Sianel Pedwar Cymru (S4C) (www.s4c.co.uk), the Welsh fourth channel, offers programmes in both Welsh and English. BBC Alba (www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/alba) in Scotland broadcasts some Gaelic programmes and is also responsible for the Gaelic Digital Service channel. Five TV (www.five.tv) broadcasts across the UK by aerial, cable, satellite or digital equipment, and makes a small number of programmes.

Independent production companies include HIT Entertainment, The Television Corporation, Tiger Aspect, Endemol UK and TWI (UK), plus over 1,400 smaller independent companies, based mainly in London, which mostly recruit freelancers.

Commercial radio companies include Chrysalis Group (Galaxy and Heart 106.2), Capital Radio, GWR (Classic FM), SMG (Virgin Radio and Wireless Group), and EMAP Group (stations in London and Kerrang! in the West Midlands).

There are numerous satellite, cable and digital broadcasters, including BSkyB and NTL, and researchers are also employed by a small number of production companies in the film industry.

For full employer listings, consult a directory such as the Guardian Media 08, published annually. Resources such as Kemps Film, TV, Commercials Handbook (www.kftv.com) and PACT Directory of Independent Producers (www.pact.co.uk) are useful for providing contacts for speculative applications, particularly for freelancers.

Sources of Vacancies

- BBC Jobs (<https://jobs.bbc.co.uk>) (all BBC paid and unpaid vacancies are advertised centrally online);
- BBC Work Experience (www.bbc.co.uk/workexperience) (allow at least three months for your application to be processed);
- Media Week (www.brandrepublic.com/mediaweek);
- Production Base (www.productionbase.co.uk);
- Mandy's International Film and TV Production Resources (www.mandy.com);
- Grapevine Jobs (www.grapevinejobs.com);
- Broadcast Now (www.broadcastnow.co.uk);
- Broadcast Freelancer (www.broadcastfreelancer.com);
- Start in TV (www.startintv.com);
- local press.

Related Occupations

- Newspaper journalist
- Radio producer
- Runner, broadcasting/film/video
- Television/film/video producer
- Television production assistant

Information Sources

Bibliography

AGCAS and Graduate Prospects products are available from higher education careers services.

AGCAS Publications

[Media Sector](#), AGCAS Sector Briefing
[Handling Discrimination](#), AGCAS Information Booklet
[Options with English](#), AGCAS Options Series
[Options with History](#), AGCAS Options Series
[Options with Media/Communication Studies](#), AGCAS Options Series

Other Publications

A Career Handbook for TV, Radio, Film, Video and Interactive Media, [A & C Black](#), 2004
Guardian Media 08, [Guardian Books](#), Annual
The Knowledge, Hollis Publishing Ltd, Annual in June
Media Week, Haymarket Media Group, Weekly
PACT Directory of Independent Producers, Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television (PACT), Annual (Jan)
Radio Magazine, Goldcrest Broadcasting Limited, Weekly
The White Book, Ocean Media Group, Annual

Websites

BBC Alba, www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/alba
BBC Jobs, <https://jobs.bbc.co.uk>
BBC Training and Development, www.bbctraining.com
BBC Work Experience, www.bbc.co.uk/workexperience
Broadcast Freelancer, www.broadcastfreelancer.com
Broadcast Now, www.broadcastnow.co.uk
Channel 4 Television, www.channel4.com
Documentary Filmmakers Group, www.dfgdocs.com
Film Bang, www.filmbang.com
Five TV, www.five.tv
Grapevine Jobs, www.grapevinejobs.com
Indie Training Fund (ITF), www.indietrainingfund.com/
Independent Television (ITV), www.itv.com
Kays Media, www.kays.co.uk
Kemps Film, TV, Commercials Handbook, www.kftv.com
Mandy's International Film and TV Production Resources, www.mandy.com
Production Base, www.productionbase.co.uk
Sianel Pedwar Cymru (S4C), www.s4c.co.uk
Skillset Careers, www.skillset.org/careers
Skillset Employment Census, www.skillset.org/research/census
Start in TV, www.startintv.com
Stellar Network, www.stellarnetwork.com
Student Radio Association (SRA), www.studentradio.org.uk
Top TV Academy, www.toptvacademy.co.uk
Women in Film and Television (WFTV), www.wftv.org.uk

Addresses

BBC, Television Centre W12 7RJ Tel: 020 8752 5942 URL: www.bbc.co.uk
British Film Institute (BFI), 21 Stephen Street, London W1T 1LN Tel: 020 7255 1444 URL: www.bfi.org.uk
Broadcasting Entertainment Cinematographic and Theatre Union (BECTU), 373-377 Clapham Road, London SW9 9BT
Tel: 020 7346 0900 URL: www.bectu.org.uk
City & Guilds, 1 Giltspur Street, London EC1A 9DD Tel: 020 7294 2800 URL: www.city-and-guilds.co.uk
The Radio Academy, 5 Market Place, London W1W 8AE Tel: 020 7927 9920 URL: www.radioacademy.org
The Research Centre, 4th Floor, 227 West George Street, Glasgow G2 2ND Tel: 0141 568 7113 URL:
www.researchcentre.co.uk
Royal Television Society, 5th Floor, Kildare House, 3 Dorset Rise, London EC4Y 8EN Tel: 020 7822 2810 URL:
www.rts.org.uk
Scottish Screen, 249 West George Street, Glasgow G2 4QE Tel: 0845 300 7300 URL: www.scottishscreen.com
Skillset (Sector Skills Council for the Audio Visual Industries), Focus Point, 21 Caledonian Road, London N1 9GB
Tel: 020 7713 9800 URL: www.skillset.org