

“I’m Not a Researcher Anymore, I’ll Be a Scientist Forever”



Elodie Chabrol



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Abstract In our interview with Elodie Chabrol, she tells us how she went from neuroscientist to science communicator. Elodie discusses her journey from PhD research on a new cellular pathway for epilepsy, through several postdoc positions, to her current multifaceted roles which include Director of the International Pint of Science festival and a freelance science communicator. She provides insights into her transitions from academia, the importance of network and experience, and the freedom and challenges of her current roles. Elodie also discusses her perspectives on the transferability of skills and experience from her PhD to her present position, the value of trials in career exploration, and the significance of passion in one’s work. Elodie provides valuable guidance and inspiration for those contemplating a similar transition from academia to science communication or freelancing.

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Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?

Elodie: I'm Elodie, a French scientist that left research in 2017. I now have several positions: France and International Director of the Pint of Science festival and a freelance science communicator. As a freelancer I work for different clients in various areas, for example, training scientists in science communication, project management, hosting or moderating events, and podcasting. Teaching science communication is by far my favorite activity.

What was the focus of your PhD?

I did my PhD in Paris (2006–2009) in what is now the Paris Brain institute with Stéphanie Baulac and Eric Leguern investigating new types of cellular pathways in epilepsy. <https://institutduncerveau-icm.org/fr/team/equipe-genetique-et-phisiopathologie-epilepsie/>

I started by looking for gene mutations in patients and to identify new genes. I then looked at the effect of these mutations in cells and ended with a mouse model lacking my gene of interest. As you can imagine, it was a very full PhD! I loved this subject because it was a great story to tell: from finding mutations in DNA and then zooming out to developing an animal model.

As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career plans?

After my PhD in Paris, I wanted to do a postdoc, have great papers, and come back to Paris to get a permanent research position. It didn’t really go like that – my first postdoc (2.5 years) at University College London (UCL) was not very fulfilling, the lab was directed by people close to retirement with only one interest: getting some last answers to their questions. They were not interested in the big picture and kept on asking me to switch the focus of my project once they had the beginning of an answer... I didn’t get papers and I was thinking of leaving research. However, I got offered the postdoc position of my dreams at UCL (again), I’m a geneticist, and I was dreaming of doing some gene therapy work. I decided to give academia and research another go.

I wanted to stay in research, but at the same time I started my second postdoc, I started working on Pint of Science. I coordinated some events in the first year when it started and then went on to create and become founder of the French branch of it. After four- and-a-half years of juggling with a demanding postdoc and directing Pint of Science France and being involved a lot in science communication, I made the big decision to leave research to be a full-time science communicator.

I left my second postdoc after having enough data to submit a patent and a paper so I feel like my research time was useful and productive, and it was a good time to switch careers. After 4.5 years of working in research and doing Pint of Science, which was like having two jobs, except I sometimes had to take holidays to do the second one... I needed a more “normal” rhythm and routine.

How have your career plans changed as you’ve continued on to your current position?

Since I’m a science communicator, I don’t really have plans and the things I do keep changing depending on the opportunities, the mood, and the trends (and also COVID). My only plan is to enjoy my work, create opportunities, and try new things. I had a plan when I was a researcher, and it didn’t really go according to it, so now I decided to just go where I feel happy and enjoy the ride.

I started freelancing to be the International Director for Pint of Science, and after a few months, we realized that we didn’t have enough money for me to do that full time. Luckily people began to contact me to ask me to work on a range of different projects. For example, I worked with the publisher Hindawi to create a science communication guide for scientists: <https://tinyurl.com/guidescicomm>.

I do a lot of training in science communication for scientists (around 200 hours per year since 2019). When COVID hit in 2020, you can imagine how stressful it was not being able to run Pint of Science – events in bars and cafes around the world. We had to support countries to run online festivals or just cancel; it was a lot

of stress. As a “therapy,” I needed to create my own content – I had my mind on podcasts for a while so I decided to start the podcasts, “sous la blouse” in French and “under the lab coat” in English, the idea being that it’s a place for scientists to share their life with me: their research, personal journeys, stories, and hobbies. After starting podcasting, I found that I really enjoyed it and I now do a few professional podcasts too.

As you can see I’m doing a lot of different things depending on what I want to do and am willing to try. It’s an amazing freedom and I love it. It’s actually not very different from the lab; I will come up with an idea or direction, read around the subject, ask people how they do it, and then try it myself, much like when I was developing new experiments!

What do you think was important for you to do in the transitions from academia to freelancing?

For me, two things were really important: firstly, I got a lot of experience before I jumped into the life of a freelancer, almost 5 years of Pint of Science, on a national and international scale. All the things I learned while working on Pint of Science was what enabled me to set up and work as a freelancer. Having a range of experience allows you to work out things you like to do and don’t like to do. For example, I love oral science communication: talks, podcasts, etc., but I hate writing, it’s a good thing I tried because I always thought I would enjoy it... and I really don’t!

At the time I started, I was working on my pure passion and I didn’t think (or dared to dream) it would be my job 1 day.

Secondly, networking allowed me to transition to freelancing; people would come to me with jobs and tasks because when I started I went to a lot of events and met lots of people and gave my work visibility on social media. Meeting people is important when you are working independently and for yourself because they are a source of help and inspiration. When you’re in academia and you think about leaving it, networking helps you meet people and know more about other jobs and vocations that exist. Don’t be afraid to ask people what the job involves practically, what is a typical day for them? Some jobs appear amazing from the outside, but the everyday aspect of it wouldn’t suit you!

Can you tell us a bit about what day-to-day life is like in your current position?

My day-to-day life is different depending on the job or task I am working on. Some days I work on multiple projects at the same time; some days I’m dedicated to one project only.

I could either be at my laptop with my cat editing a podcast or making visuals for Pint of Science, or in meetings organizing the festival and its communication or creating training programs for scientists to then deliver and teach online.

Some days I may be traveling to either teach in-person, host and organize meetings, or give talks about my experience. I could also be going around with my podcast microphone recording episodes.

It can really go from me in my pajamas working in bed with the cat (yes my cat is my work mate!) to being with lots of people all day. The only thing that is ALWAYS happening is me being on Twitter first thing in the morning and as much as I can during the day.

My hours are very flexible and I've learned to appreciate having lighter days or days off after big events or missions to compensate and get a rest for my brain. It took a while for me to feel at peace not working while others may typically be working (during weekdays), but I realized that I don't have typical work hours and I often work weekends and evenings and I shouldn't feel bad for taking time off when others are working!

My activity depends on the time of year; during March, April, and May, I work mostly on Pint of Science and you can even find me in a garage packing big boxes to send merchandise to the local teams around France!

What do you like most about your work?

The freedom to work where I want and when I want on the projects that I like. It's chaotic but I love it! Yes I sometimes need to open my laptop in the middle of the street to send something urgent, but I also have the possibility to go to a lot of events that inspire me (that I might not be able to attend if I was working in a company maybe).

I worked in an office doing 9-to-5 for 2 months and I found it really difficult. I like being able to wake up late and work late in the evenings or weekends if I need to. I also love that I can choose projects where I feel I add real value – but that has only come after many years of trying to establish myself.

I love the part of my job where I get to read around different areas (rather than one if I had stayed in academia) and continue learning; it can go from weird animal facts to astrophysics. I was scared I would miss science, but I still keep reading science papers. I meet scientists almost every week, I'm really close to research but I don't have to actually do it, and it's the best of both worlds.

And what do you like least about your work?

The admin part, it can take a big chunk of your days sometimes. I like doing the work but making quotes and invoices can be really boring... but you need to do it to be paid!

The insecurity was also a bit of a negative side of my job at the beginning. I was really stressed not to have enough projects, but now it's much better. I even have the luxury to say no to some jobs and to do some unpaid events/talks for causes I like (like a lot of career/science communication talks for PhD students).

I left a paid contract with paid annual leave for freelancing work where I don't get paid if I don't work. It can be stressful and also tempting to work all the time, and at the beginning, I worked more than I needed to. I was feeling bad when I wasn't working, because I could make money instead of resting or being out with friends or my partner. Now I'm able to enjoy taking a day or half day during the week, because this is why I'm a freelancer, and as soon as the work is complete, I can enjoy a nice break.

How do you think having a PhD has helped you succeed in your current position?

I have a PhD and 8 years experience of being a postdoc. When I left academia I thought, and people told me as well, "all of that for nothing" or that I was stupid. However, if I had to do it again I would do exactly the same, my time in research helped me in many ways and I couldn't be a science communicator without it.

Firstly, my time in academia has given me resilience and I am resistant to pressure and stress. It's also made me very well organized, and I can manage, juggle, and handle many projects simultaneously. This was a skill I learned that transferred to my freelance work.

Having been a biological researcher, I was used to failure and not afraid of it. I think it's a huge skill as it allows you to try things and not get paralyzed by the fear of failure. You design the idea and spend time on preparing it, but eventually you jump in. I see so many people with great ideas that don't do anything because they are scared of the stress of failing. It might fail, but so what? Does that mean you never do anything ever in case it doesn't work? Or you try and you learn from the failures and you improve it and yourself for the next time!

The other reason I love my experience in research is that I'm often in front of PhDs and postdocs and usually they trust me more when they know I've been through that and I know research. Some Principal Investigators (PIs) were reluctant to learn science communication with me, saying I'm the communication person that doesn't know anything about how research is carried out, but once I say I've got a PhD and 8 years worth of postdoc experience, they usually relax and trust me. I have learned a lot about how research is carried out.

On a personal note, I left research after a paper and a patent so it also feels like a chapter has been completed. I didn't leave suddenly or in a haste.

If someone currently finishing their PhD was considering a position similar to yours, how might they decide if it would be a good fit?

My biggest advice is to try. If you want to do science communication, you should try and find what kind you like to do either by volunteering or doing an internship. The field is so large and varied and so be sure you understand what you are getting into and if it’s something that uses skills that you like using.

A few people think they want to have the same job as me because I look happy doing it and it appears to be a great lifestyle or they have helped me on some tasks and enjoyed it. However, it’s not the same as doing it as a job full time and just because someone else looks happy doing it doesn’t mean you will. Do your research, ask people about their daily work lives, and talk to people in positions you think you’d like if you can’t try it yourself.

To be a freelancer you have to be motivated, be comfortable with uncertainty, enjoy the chaos and predictability, and be used to working alone for most of the time. If that sounds ok for you, then freelancing can be an option!

My situation can appear misleading because it looks like I jumped from academia to freelancing, which is true; however, I was already doing science communication work for nearly 5 years on top of a full-time job before leaving research – which is a long time and a lot of experience.

If someone was interested in pursuing a similar career path, what would you suggest they do to better prepare themselves?

Get a lot of experience, have different examples on your resume, and know what you like. Meet lots of people to get to know their job roles better and to grow your network. You don’t have to wait for results in your project or be in a senior position to do science communication. Try as early as possible! There are a lot of people that consider this career option after a PhD and experience or even trying is definitely something that can make you stand out from the crowd.

A lot of people like academia because they feel it gives them an opportunity to work on a topic that they deeply care about. Do you think this is also true in your current position?

Yes totally. My topic may not be a scientific one, but I deeply care about helping scientists to share their knowledge, improve their communication, and gain public trust. For me it’s not “just a job” it’s a real passion. I loved research but sometimes

I felt trapped in a very small topic, and the more I discovered science communication and listening to different talks or any type of scientific content, it made it more accessible and my world expanded. Usually when you have a PhD, you are a passionate and committed person and your work motivates you. That's why if you plan to leave academia, you have to find something that will have the same effect. For the 4.5 years I was a postdoc and working on Pint of Science, I didn't realize how much work it was, because for me it was almost a hobby to develop and direct Pint of Science France. I know I'm very lucky to have found a job that is my passion and makes me so happy.

Another reason many like academia is that they feel it provides them with more freedom than they think they would get in other positions. How much freedom do you feel you have to work on what you think is interesting?

As a freelancer I have total freedom, probably more than in academia. After a PhD on the genetics of epilepsy, I really wanted to move on to genetics of addictions or something else. However, it was really difficult to find a postdoc and I had to go back to the epilepsy topic. Now as a freelancer I can work on different subjects but also different types of media, for example, I do podcasts but also host shows, and it's up to me to decide how much of it I do. It wasn't always like that, at the beginning I was usually going for all projects that were offered to me, but now after 5 years of freelancing I can choose to say no to projects that I won't enjoy or I might not be good at. Not all science communications positions allow you that freedom though, freelancing is special.

Have you thought about returning to academia?

I left in 2017 and I have never thought of going back. I think I really closed that chapter of my career and I stayed long enough to make sure when I left that it was a forever goodbye. It was hard at the beginning because I felt like I lost my identity, I even found it difficult to refer to myself as a scientist. However, I realized that even though I'm not a researcher anymore, I'll be a scientist forever.

It's been 6 years now since I left the lab, and in biology that long without a paper (and by the additional time it would require to work before getting one if I was going back to the lab), I wouldn't be successful anyway. When I left, it was one way in my mind and I never regretted it!

Based on your journey, what advice or suggestions do you want to pass on to someone who’s currently finishing their PhD?

I know the PhD is a busy time, but it’s important to start thinking about the after PhD and be proactive. Even if you want to stay in academia, it’s always good to think about a plan B because researcher positions can be uncommon.

If you love science communication and you want to maybe work in this field, here are my two tips:

- Try it! There are several ways to do science communication and many more types of communicating, if you can try some by volunteering it will help you decide if you want that as a job or not!
- Grow your network (virtual and in real life). Meet people that do the jobs you might be interested in; ask them questions about their path and their everyday jobs. It will help you know what’s out there and maybe find out about opportunities!

Is there anything else you’d like to tell someone reading this interview?

When I left academia, I had struggled with my identity – am I still a scientist or not? I also had some people say that it was “all that work for nothing.” However, in science communication I’m always in contact with PhD students and researchers, and it would be impossible to do my job without my previous research experience. Most importantly, when you do a PhD you acquire many transferable skills that are very useful in other jobs: you’re very good at learning new things, working under pressure, dealing with failure and bouncing back, finding solutions to problems, adapting...to name but a few. The list is long, but take time out to think about your skills and you realize you can do much more than you thought possible.

Leaving academia was the best thing I did and I’m flourishing now. I feel I’ve found my calling, and helping scientists share their work to the public is a bigger contribution to science than I could have made had I stayed in the lab!

Thank you for your advice, Elodie!