

Working in Parliament

THE advert in *The Psychologist* for the BPS/POST postgraduate award caught my eye as I was waiting for one of many participants to complete my face-recognition experiment. The idea of working in Parliament for three months sounded intriguing. Not only would it get me out of my lab for a while, but I would see how parliamentarians take on board my kind of psychological research.

POST is an office of both Houses of Parliament (Commons and Lords). It provides analysis of science and technology issues relevant to parliamentarians by way of four-page 'POSTnotes' and longer POST reports.

My application considered how face-recognition research could inform government and policing bodies about factors influencing the reliability of identifications from identity parades or CCTV footage. When joining POST we decided that I would focus on CCTV surveillance. This was timely as the Home Office had recently allocated £170 million to fund public area CCTV schemes. Debate had arisen over whether CCTV reduces crime and whether current legislation appropriately regulates its use.

I soon found that the quickest way of gathering information is to talk to experts. Many people (e.g. civil servants, police, academics, and CCTV users) spent time talking to me about their work and ideas regarding CCTV. In between telephone calls and meetings, I experienced

BY CHARITY BROWN

Westminster – wandering about the Houses of Parliament, seeing all the well-known politicians, or frequenting the various restaurants and the sunny House of Commons terrace. POST is an exciting place to work with new topics of interest continually being raised, discussed and investigated. With POST's need to keep on top of current issues there were plenty of opportunities to attend research events. I attended debates and formal evidence



sessions in both the Commons and Lords and had the pleasure of attending seminars at the Royal Opera House and the Savoy.

It was soon time to think about organising my report. To be accessible to MPs and peers POSTnotes must be concise and comprehensible to non-specialists. This is a tall order when faced with pages of scribbled notes from telephone conversations, meetings, and masses of paper collated from internet searches and articles. After all, as I'd discovered, people have written entire books about only a single aspect of CCTV. Colleagues warned me that the end POSTnote was unlikely to resemble my first draft. I had to part with many informative and carefully phrased paragraphs during the rigorous editing sessions to follow. Prior to publication, the POSTnote was reviewed by a number of experts. A challenge was to ensure a balanced analysis of the topic, which at times meant negotiating with several parties about how a particular aspect could be addressed accurately and fairly. The resultant four-page POSTnote can be found via www.parliament.uk/post/report.htm.

I also organised a seminar in Parliament on CCTV (see the report in the July issue, p333). The main issues highlighted by the

POSTnote and seminar were:

- CCTV has received major government funding, but the conditions under which it is effective in reducing crime are poorly understood.
- To avoid misuse and maintain public acceptance of CCTV, measures must be taken to ensure compliance with data protection and privacy legislation. In the light of increasing trends towards linking computerised face-recognition, number-plate and behavioural-recognition software to CCTV systems, some suggest that additional safeguards will be needed to prevent unwarranted tracking of people's movements.
- CCTV can provide valuable information for police and courts, but technical difficulties can arise with collating CCTV evidence. Furthermore, research shows that recognising unfamiliar people from CCTV footage is difficult, even under optimal viewing conditions. Despite this, people tend to be confident in their decisions, even when incorrect. There are cases where prosecutions have been brought against people solely on the basis of their alleged resemblance to someone on CCTV footage. This research indicates that judges and jurors should exercise caution when faced with such evidence. In contrast, people are very accurate when identifying familiar faces, from even poor-quality footage. Circulating images to the public may lead to successful identifications.

Overall, I had a fantastic time at POST. I learnt a lot about the public policy issues upon which face-recognition and other academic research can impact. I also learnt about communicating science to non-specialists. Westminster is a great place to experience!

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Articles, cartoons and other contributions for the 'Students' page are most welcome.

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ASSISTANT WANTED

There is still time to apply for this post (see last month's 'Students' page).

Working as assistant to Daniela Schulze, you would seek out quality writing for this page. Although a voluntary post conducted in your spare time, this is good networking and communication experience.

If you think you are up to the job, contact the Editor (jonsut@bps.org.uk) by **2 September** with a brief CV and your views on how to improve the 'Students' page.