



Bringing science to life – what’s it like to work as a scientific documentary researcher?



Interview with Haider Al-Shybani, Documentary Researcher, Nutopia by Caroline Wood,

Communications Officer, Nuffield Department of Population Health, University of Oxford.

Scientific documentaries play a key role in helping the public to understand complicated and topical scientific issues. Have you ever wondered what it is like to work in the industry? Haider Al-Shybani takes us behind the scenes and explains how COVID-19 has impacted health reporting.

Nutopia is a UK and USA based documentary production company, known for creating award-winning, factual series on a global scale. They specialise in a new genre of television, the “mega-doc,” which combines epic cinematography and action-driven drama with high-end documentary and A-list talent. So, let’s take a look at the key role Haider has in documentary production.

Tell us about yourself and why you chose a STEM related career.

At a young age, I was keen on building things (I loved Lego and wood kits) and had a great curiosity that drove me to solve problems. I also had some fun science teachers who engaged me, particularly for biology, chemistry and physics. They made it interesting and relevant.

What did you want to be when you were younger?

I wanted to be various things, an astronaut, detective, even a painter. But in my teens, I read Che Guevara’s ‘The Motorcycle Diaries’ and was impressed by his drive to help people through combining practical medical skills with political activism. It influenced my decision to apply to medical school.

Why did you decide not to have a long-term career in medicine?

My first years as a qualified doctor were intense. I’ve always had a strong creative side but working as a doctor was so busy and tiring that I found my creativity shutting down. I enjoyed some parts: the

adrenalin rush and working in a team to solve the mystery of what's wrong with each patient. But my real interest is in telling people's stories. As a doctor, there wasn't any time for that - I was surviving but not thriving.

I didn't really have a plan; I just decided to step back and explore other options. I did various jobs, from teaching science in Sri Lanka to running music events. I gradually realised that my interests and skills really aligned to documentary production. But studying medicine certainly wasn't a waste of time. Besides being enjoyable, it sharpened the critical thinking skills which I still use every day.

What does your current job involve?

My most recent position was as a researcher for a NUTOPIA series called Extra Life: *A Short History of Living Longer*. I got this position because I'm interested in storytelling and NUTOPIA liked that I was keen to bring my medical and scientific background to this particular production. My role involves researching the topics to include in the series and helping assemble everything the producers and presenters need to tell an accurate and compelling story.



^ Behind the scenes – Patrick Acum. Copyright: Nutopia

What do your day-to-day duties involve?

Our challenge is to take a documentary's basic ideas and turn these into a narrative and something visual we can film. I spend a lot of time digging into a subject, reading scientific papers and speaking with experts. As a team, we discuss all the information we gather and work out the parts that are most relevant. Then we look for suitable people to interview (for instance scientists, policy makers or activists), and organise the shoots. Post-production, I help fact-check the script, and make sure we balance telling a good story with being accurate and not misleading.

Tell us about the most exciting thing you did with Nutopia?

For the Extra Life series, I was involved on shoots at Edward Jenner's House and one of the stately homes where Florence Nightingale spent time. I helped set up props and historical items to recreate the settings in which they made their great contributions to science and health. It was fun trying to figure out how the rooms would have looked from old paintings and trying to replicate that.

Why were you keen to produce a feature on the RECOVERY trial

One theme we touch on a lot in Extra Life is how the pace of medical advances has really speeded up. It used to take such a long time to develop new drug treatments, from their discovery to convincing people to produce them at scale. Penicillin, for instance, took over a decade to develop. This makes the idea of repurposing existing pharmaceuticals attractive: it means we don't have to go through years of trials to prove their safety.

The RECOVERY Trial illustrated this perfectly by discovering within just three months that an existing steroid treatment, dexamethasone, reduced deaths by up to a third in hospitalised COVID-19 patients. There was also the fact that the trial itself was designed, approved, and recruited patients in the space of nine days. To me, it was a perfect illustration of how the process of fighting back against disease has really accelerated.



< Inside Markfield Beam Engine & Museum behind the scenes with crew – Patrick Acum and Mike Williams. Copyright: Nutopia

How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your work?

In the short-term, it has made things much more challenging. You are always relying on things coming together at the right moment, and now it is even more of a juggling act. The restrictions make things more difficult on a practical level, for instance limiting the number of people we can have on a shoot and having to thoroughly clean things constantly. It's also hard to be spontaneous, and to meet up in person to discuss ideas.

What has been your biggest career challenge to date?

I would say finding my own voice and figuring out where to take it, particularly as the path out of medicine isn't well trodden and there is no single obvious way into the documentary industry. I was fortunate enough to secure an entry-level position at Caledonia TV through a traineeship from PACT. I was thrown in the deep end, but I learnt so much on the job and picked up things from those around me.

Who is the most inspiring person you have met or would like to meet?

The documentary maker Werner Herzog because he often brings 'culture' and 'science' together. For example, *'Encounters at the end of the World'* explores what motivates scientists to study Antarctica. I like science. But I also like to ask - why do we practice it? Herzog does this incredibly well.

How does your work impact the world around us?

A good scientific documentary should break down complex issues into something digestible and entertaining, so the audience feels able to discuss them without having to spend months researching them. We use a storytelling approach to take the viewer on a journey of discovery, so they develop a curiosity that extends into their daily lives. On a personal level, as an Iraqi Scot, I am also particularly dedicated to championing diverse voices on screen.



^ Picture of camera taking shot of material in drawer.
Copyright: Nutopia

Where do you see yourself in five years' time?

A Freelance documentary researcher tends to move between several different companies. I'd like to become a producer director with real creative control in my work - a chance to use my own imagination to frame stories. I'm also looking to have my own ideas developed into documentaries. I feel that with my professional background and life experiences, I can offer a different perspective. I'm keen to start conversations about really important issues, and to produce features that don't just inform people but change them somehow too.

Do you have any top tips for young people looking to work in a role similar to yours?

Documentary work tends to be short-term and varied, so you have to be adaptable and open to learning new things. Each role may have a totally different team and way of working. You have to have the attitude that it's not about IF you can do something, it's about HOW.

There is no clear roadmap for a career in documentary production, and people come from all backgrounds including journalism and digital technologies. Non-TV related life experience is really valued because documentaries are about capturing the real world, so don't be put off exploring the wider things that interest you.

Glossary

Director - Manages the creative aspect of a documentary or film. Directors visualise the script and guide the actors and technical crew to achieve this. Usually there is only one for each production.

PACT - The Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television (PACT) is the UK trade association for independent content producers in feature film, television, animation, children's, and digital media.

Producer - Manages the business aspects of a production. These include raising money and budgeting, hiring cast/crew and organising the schedule for shoots. There can be several producers involved in a single production.

Producer Director - Does the job of both a producer and director, managing both the business and creative aspects of a production. Depending on the production, there may be one producer director for the entire program, or several.

Find out more

NUTOPIA website: www.nutopia.com

Extra Life: *A Short History of Living Longer*, BBC documentary: www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episodes/m000w6s7/extra-life-a-short-history-of-living-longer

PACT website: www.pact.co.uk

Dream job 1: Documentary producer: New Scientist Article, October 2009. www.newscientist.com/article/mg20427312-600-dream-job-1-documentary-producer/