STS Careers Podcast – Dr Jean-Baptiste Gouyon speaks to TV Researcher, and former MSc Science, Technology and Society student, Brian Kantor.

Brian graduated from the MSc Science, Technology and Society course in 2016. Since then, he has gone on to work for Nova, a TV documentary series broadcast by PBS.

JBG OK, hello Brian

BK Hello Jean-Baptiste

JBG Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for our Alumni interview programme. So you're just back from your graduation ceremony?

BK I am.

JBG How does that feel?

BK It's great to be back! I've been looking forward to being back in London and back at UCL!

JBG What did you enjoy about being in London, as a student?

BK Just generally speaking, I think London is a really interesting place to be as a student, because it has an intellectual culture that seems unique to me. There's a blend of – with the BBC you have the politics of the UK, you have an international hub of manufacturing, of industry. So, all of those things put together, you know, media, politics, science, technology – make this a really exciting place to be, and an exciting place to study.

JBG So you took the Masters degree in 2015-16. Can you tell us what your current job is?

BK So I'm associate researcher at Nova, which is a science documentary TV programme produced by WGBH in Massachusetts, a public television station, and broadcast by PBS.

JBG So it's in the US?

BK Yes, WGBH and Nova are based out of Boston.

JBG And what does your job consist of?

BK So as associate researcher one of my tasks is… I'm situated between the digital and the broadcast departments at Nova. I have one foot in the process of preparing full length hour-long broadcast programmes. That means, as the programmes are produced, nearing final cut picture lock, I'm double checking all of the annotations, making sure that all of the science in the programme is accurate, making sure that everything is buttoned up and correct – but also I'm working with the digital side, so working on short-form videos for facebook and for youtube, that are oftentimes related to the broadcast episodes, but obviously much shorter. Sometimes they're direct responses to something in the news, something in the political world or the tech world. So my role lets me be involved in the longer programmes and the shorter programmes.

JBG Before coming to the degree, you already had experience as a film-maker, a video maker. What would you say that the Masters degree added to your expertise, which helped you in your current job?

BK So, as you say I had some experience with photography and video, visual multimedia communication. I also had academic experience in science and humanities-related fields – anthropology and environmental science. STS allowed me to bring those two together, both academically, intellectually, and also pragmatically in an internship/job kind of way. So through coursework I worked towards emphasising looking into the history and sociology of science in the media. I moved closer towards that with the dissertation, interviewing people at the BBC with Horizon. Ended up interning there, and all of that gave me a good foundation,

and building upon a foundation to pursue work in that field. So my position at Nova is a direct development from my experience at UCL with STS, and subsequently my internship at the BBC.

JBG Do you think you would do your job differently if you hadn't done the degree?

BK Yeah, I daresay I probably wouldn't be in the position I am now had I not done the STS programme. So I think my studies at UCL with the STS department gave me good training in how to ask nuanced, complex questions about how we think about science, and how we talk about science. For Nova in the US, we're one of the most recognisable science programmes on TV, that people have been watching through their childhood. So knowing how to ask questions about the stories we tell about science, and how to think critically about the messages that we're telling and conveying, that's really important, and I think the STS department gave me the skills to ask those sorts of questions.

JBG Can you give us a concrete example of something you're done in your job recently in which what you learned from the degree helped you?

BK One of the features of science that we learn at UCL, which is crucial to the culture of what scientists do, is process. A lot of the programmes that talk about science just look at the results, and look at the answer that scientists discovered. Oftentimes publications don't look at the details of how those discoveries occurred, you know, what historical changes led to those discoveries. The programmes that we're working on now, we just released an episode on TV about the solar eclipse that crossed the US. While we were in the final stages of that programme, I encouraged us to incorporate elements into the programme that look into the history of those discoveries, and look at the history of the scientists, and how those developments led to our knowledge of the eclipse. I'm not the producer of the programme but there are ways where I've encouraged us to incorporate elements, or keep elements in the programme that do emphasise that process.

JBG And how are those suggestions received by the people that you work with?

BK It's tricky, because in an hour long programme you don't have a ton of time to go into subtlety and nuance. I think that's one of the tensions of communicating science – it's maintaining an audience and telling an interesting story, but at the same time doing so accurately in a nuanced and subtle way, that does reflect how things actually occur. There's a tension there, but you can look at it in a productive way and try and continue to find ways to express that nuance of how science works, how the culture of science and technology occurs. It's tricky because an hour only affords you so much time to go into that, and sometimes it's not concrete enough or it's a little too intellectual for a programme that needs to be fundamentally visual. TV is a visual medium, so if the topics that you're discussing are a little too intellectual or a little too abstract, it can be really hard to put that to a picture. That's the challenge – how do you convey these , maybe more philosophical or sociological reflections on the institution of science, without losing your visual content?

JBG Is there anything that really surprised you in your current job which you think the degree didn't prepare you for?

BK Writing for a programme like Horizon at the BBC, or Nova in the US, is very different from the writing you do as a student, as an academic. In a lot of ways you're writing story, as opposed to writing… you know, a journal article is structured very differently than a TV programme or even a short story of fiction. I think in a lot of ways, the way we write programmes for TV leans more towards the story end, rather than the academic article kind of writing. You want to build drama, you want to build tension, you want to keep the viewer there and not give all the answers at the beginning. That is a skill that I look forward to learning more, I look forward to practicing with these short-form videos that I might be producing with Nova. Producing those would be a good opportunity to practice that writing. But at UCL, the more practically leaning courses in the STS department, writing news articles or feature articles, that's good practice, and that shares a lot more with the way we write for Nova than a traditional academic article. That's why I think a programme like STS, where you do draw, you do build upon History, sociology, philosophy and communication of science, it's really important

because you're practicing the more classic academic writing style, but also the journalistic side as well.

JBG So what's the best thing about your current job?

BK The best thing about my current job is having access to scientists – very well-recognised and respected scientists, leaders in the field that they work in. Nova, like Horizon, has a good reputation in the US, and so experts are generally willing to speak with us and contribute to our films. So being able to interact with them and learn about their work is a lot of fun, and it's a privilege, so I enjoy that.

JBG What's your best memory of STS?

BK My best memory of STS is probably the dissertation. Writing the dissertation was a lot of fun. In my case, the dissertation built a lot on the coursework I'd done in the previous modules in the first and second term. In the first term I realised I was really interested in Science, Media and Culture, and that was one of the modules I took. In that course, I realised that was what I wanted to explore for the rest of the year. So in the spring I was looking at science communication courses and history of science courses that allowed me to look at science in the public domain, and so when the dissertation came around I had that coursework that I could build upon, and I knew exactly where I wanted to go with that summer dissertation writing process. I found the summer really rewarding because I was building upon all of that reading, and then got to do the research at the BBC – interviewing the series editor and the producers and directors of some of the Horizon programmes was a thrill, especially coming at it as a scholar, as a student doing historical, sociological research at the BBC. That was one of my best memories of the programme.

JBG So it wasn't that difficult to move from the academic context to the more professional one?

BK No, in my case I was surprised by how smoothly it happened. I think a lot of that came about through the fact that I was looking at science communication which, as most people think, is associated with the practice of writing science articles, or science films or even science PR. With a background in science communication it wasn't a big step to have productive conversations with people at the BBC, or with Nova for example, because science communication and STS generally speaking is contiguous with those more practical fields and journalism of science.

JBG So could you give us some ideas of specific skills that you acquired – practical skills that you acquired on the course, and which you've been able to apply to your current job?

BK First and foremost it was communicating with people. At base, you're reaching out to people at the BBC to do interviews, or reaching out to leaders in other fields to write science news articles. That was a new step for me. Doing archival research for a module I took at the science museum. Looking through archives, and also preparing proposals and writing a fully formed journal article.

JBG And how do you apply these skills to your current job in a concrete way?

BK For my job at Nova I have to reach out to producers of programmes, I have to reach out to other researchers, directors and producers, and I have to ask good questions. I have to ask good questions of how they're doing their work for the programmes, or ask the scientists what they're doing. I have to ask good questions for the programme, so my training at the STS department helped me to ask good questions of these experts, to know how to ask questions that are productive for these programmes and lead to good articles, and good films.

JBG What is a good question?

BK For science film making, a good question to ask is 'what excites you about these worlds, and what can we learn from them?'. The thing is, a lot of the questions that are productive for TV are different from the questions that you would ask as a sociologist or a historian. It's an interesting process for me to learn how to ask slightly different questions. You come out of school and you are thinking in a certain way – maybe not asking 'what excites you about the programme', but 'how do you see yourself as a scientist'?. Jumping into the industry of

science communication requires that I learn how to ask slightly different questions. So, for example, if you're going to make a programme about addiction – one way to approach that is to look at addiction as a biological phenomenon, a biological reality. But you can also look at addiction as a socially generated concept, and when the definition of addiction changes in the diagnostic manuals, in the medical industry, you can ask questions about why that definition is changing. Definition is ultimately socially defined, so a change in definition has some social process leading to it. You can ask questions such as 'why is our definition of addiction changing, and what does the new definition imply about our society? What is acceptable, and what isn't acceptable? What is important about changing that definition? Who is most interested in those definitions and why is that?

JBG So in your job as an associate researcher at Nova, you're interacting with people who have been doing that job for a number of years. You are quite new to that professional milieu. What do you think – having taken the Masters degree in Science, Technology and Society at STS – enables you to see, or what kind of questions does that enable you to formulate, that people who have been in that business for quite a number of years don't see, or can't think of?

BK So programmes like Nova and Horizon, they look at science as a body of knowledge in a lot of ways. While they do incorporate historical elements into their programmes, they don't generally look at science as a sociologist would, and I come to Nova with an interest in Sociology of Science, and an interest in bringing the kinds of question a sociologist would ask, to science. So, for example looking at addiction not only as a biological phenomenon, but also as a culturally defined concept. You can start to unpack the black box of addition – what is the definition of addiction and why do we define it that way? What leads to our reconsidering that current definition, why would we change that definition, who would benefit from it, what is the need for it? That's the kind of question that I want to ask, that's the kind of question I learned to ask with STS.

JBG And how does it go down with the people you're working with?

BK Those kinds of questions are sometimes hard to address on TV, because the answers, in some ways, aren't as visual. Also, the audience of these programmes… there's a certain demographic to our audience, and the audience aren't necessarily interested in listening to those stories, so it's a challenge to know where to include that material and when to leave it out. I'm newer to the programme, and they've been doing programmes in a certain way for years. It isn't necessarily going to change, but it's always worth bringing those questions into the development stage of these programmes. A more sociological leaning inquiry into, say, the history of addiction medicine, isn't necessarily going to make it into the final programme. In a lot of cases, the viewers of programmes like Nova and Horizon are looking for the science, the methods of the science. The viewers oftentimes aren't as interested in those topics as they would be in hard physics or astronomy, or other programmes or other topics.

JBG But do you think that if you bring them, often enough, something will stick at the end?

BK In a TV programme, oftentimes the more STS-leaning questions or topics lie at the beginning and the end of the programme. It's when you ask questions about why, and how. Why a topic is interesting culturally or politically. The meat of the programme will be in the content of the science. What the studies are, what the leading research is telling us – but the more abstract general reflection on that industry and its place within contemporary culture isn't necessarily at the heart of the programme, so we'll put those at the end…you know, Bookend it, put it at the beginning and at the end.

JBG So, moving away from your job proper, would you have thought of applying for that kind of position if you hadn't taken the degree? Or, formulated in another way, has the degree changed your life?

BK Before STS I would have definitely been interested in the programme, I would definitely have been interested in the job like the one I have now, but I don't think I would have felt myself trained enough to do so. Having the academic, as well as practical training at UCL, and at the BBC, enabled me to pursue this job confidently. I wouldn't have felt prepared to pursue this kind of job without the STS programme.

JBG I think something interesting in your answer is that you don't separate between your academic experience at UCL and your work experience at the BBC which you did at the end of your degree.

BK Right. I did interviews at the BBC as part of my dissertation, and then I did an internship there. My having done interviews there enabled me to hit the ground running when I started at the BBC as an intern. The transition was seamless, so for my work at the BBC as an intern, I'd already developed relationships interviewing people at the BBC as a graduate student writing my dissertation, so that when I started that internship I hit the ground running.

JBG Where do you see yourself in five years?

BK So in five years I see two possibilities. I could either be at Nova, or I could be studying again. I'm considering a PhD in the history or sociology of science in the media. I'm also considering continuing in the industry of science film making. So in five years I may be doing a PhD, or I may be producing more science films.

JBG OK, thank you.

BK Thank you.
