

David Awwad

Behind the Mask

December 28, 2020

Barr: Good morning. Today is December 28, 2020. My name is Gabrielle Barr. I am the archivist at the Office of NIH History and Stetten Museum. I have the pleasure of speaking with David Awwad. Mr. Awwad is the customer service I.T. (information technology) field manager at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID). For nearly a year he has been the person who has been in charge of helping Dr. [Anthony] Fauci prepare for his many, many appearances. Thank you very much for taking time to speak with me.

Getting right to it, what does the preparatory work entail on your end before we all see Dr. Fauci on TV or on the computer?

Awwad: Well, there is a bunch of things that have to happen first before it gets to me. They submit a request, it goes to public inquiries, then gets either approved or goes to the White House for approval. Then once that gets approved it comes to me. I work with the other teams, media department, communications, to see what type of platform they are going to use; is it going to be Zoom, vMix, Stage TEN, varieties of different programs that they use. Most of them are web-based.

In the beginning, we were using a smaller room that is right behind me actually and that got too small. We had to move to the larger conference room in Building 31. It was basically a conference room that we converted into a kind of studio. I got some lights, a webcam, and a laptop. Once I get the link, organizing by day because there are so many media requests, as you know; organizing it, knowing who is working with what person the day, the platform. There is a lot that is involved. In the beginning, they wanted to do tests to make sure the connection was right. I mean everyone switched to virtual, not only just NIH, but partly though all of the states. It was a lot of testing in the beginning and figuring out sound, video quality, and bandwidth, and so forth. There was a lot that goes on in the background in the beginning. Now that I have more experience and kind of know the lingo and what they want and want to see in the headshots it's pretty much going back-to-back. I don't need a break anymore to set up for the next event; I just have everything on standby on another computer either at his office or using the same computer in the conference room.

Barr: Is it usually standard what a lot of places are looking for, or it really varies in terms of the sound and lighting, angle?

Awwad: Well, there's podcast and there's live video. For instance, CNN uses Webex. Eighty percent of the other platforms are either Zoom or Skype, not Skype for Business, but just regular Skype. Then you

get into more of the production where they use another website called SteamYard or vMix where your video gets uploaded to a production studio, and then they edit it the way they want live into their feed. Most of them are Zoom or Skype. But then you have a problem where I have to record locally. It's not just live videos that you see online. Most of those are recorded because of timing. So not only is there news hits, but there's also talks for like Harvard, Yale, GW. Then you have podcasts where we record on an iPhone using voice memo as well as day of doing the recording. There is a bunch of backups that we usually do. I will do a Quick Time recording just in case their feed goes down. I have a local recording of just Dr. Fauci. It is better quality because it is not going over the internet.

Barr: Has that happened?

Awwad: Yes, which I didn't know at the time until an article was written. The person from the Daily Show wrote an article, or actually he was being interviewed because they got an Emmy for interviewing Dr. Fauci. Actually Dr. Fauci had sent me the link saying, "Hey, you saved their butts." And it turned out that was in the beginning where I was just learning. I mean obviously I knew how to do Skype and Teams and Zoom and all that other stuff, but working with their end and getting the angle, the sound quality. I had recorded on an iPhone. Luckily though it wasn't at the right angle, I ended up recording as their Skype went down. So they lost the audio. I ended up sending them what I had, which saved them, and they were able to piece it together. There was an interview with the producer who got the Emmy; he wrote about the whole interaction with us. I can send it to you.

Barr: That would be wonderful.

Awwad: There were times where we have back-to-back interviews. Somebody gets 20 minutes and the recording stops on their end or whatever— they were using at the time 40-minute Zooms and their session was stopped. So I would still have the recording on my part. There were a couple times where the recordings on our side really saved their butts.

Barr: That's great.

Awwad: Actually, the one for the fire department, the one that got sent out last week, our last for Dr. Fauci's birthday –

Barr: Yeah, I saw that.

Awwad: I took that video. It almost got like 10 million hits.

Barr: It's a wonderful video.

Awwad: There's a lot. There's stuff that happened in the conference room and then there's stuff that happened in his office, where it is not just media. There are meetings that go along with the Zooms as well because everyone is remote. Dr. Fauci has to communicate with pharmaceuticals, NIH folks, just general people from outside that have media requests. A lot of things go on, not just in that one room.

Barr: Okay. That leads to my second question. What considerations do you make in order to do your job; you were saying the type of platform, security, timing. Can you talk a little bit more about that, and do you ever make suggestions to the requesting entity based on things that you know now?

Awwad: Yes, for the request about the view in the shot of Dr. Fauci. A lot of times you will see kind of a blue background, and then some people want to make it a different kind of background, for instance like the Sesame Street for CNN. I offered to do it in his room where he has the flag. You get kind of a different feel, a more personal feel, of him in his office and so forth. There's stuff like that, and also sometimes they'll ask me to use a platform and I'll send them my Zoom link. I'll record it, I'll edit, and send them the finished product. It is sometimes just quicker that way because some people don't have that background, and they want to do an interview with Dr. Fauci. Sometimes it is like that. But working with other people and giving them my experience of how Dr. Fauci is going to interview or his headshot because my height is different. They are, "Oh, can you set—", and I say, "No, this is the height for Dr. Fauci's face." Using different equipment and different platforms when you plug in different hardware give you different outputs. Just kind of knowing and say, "Hey, this mic is going to work better" or "This camera or this angle is going to work better for them." But in terms of changing what they request, those are the biggest ones because they [the interviews] are 20 minutes, 15 minutes and on to the next one. I mean there are some days where we do 18 in a row, 13 in a row, no breaks.

Barr: Are there certain platform you have to used that you have come to prefer?

Awwad: Not really. They have all worked really well. I haven't had any issues with any of the platforms. Actually Skype is getting a lot better than before. MSNBC uses Skype and those ones come out really well. The Zoom ones come out really well having the link. But then again there is not just media; there are talks, Power Point talks. Those are the ones that are a little bit more difficult because you have to elevate the privileges, make me a panelist to share my screen, Dr. Fauci's advancing his own slides. They are going in from Zoom and then feeding off into Facebook or YouTube.

There are a lot of things that happen on the back end that I have no control over. When it's my Zoom, it goes well, but when it's other folks at Zoom or their links to other platforms, I have no control. We had one, I believe the Washington Post or Wall Street Journal, where they were in an auditorium and only

one person in there. They dropped sound. I couldn't do anything for that, so they put it on standby and kind of just loop it. Sometimes there is a delay that we can edit in, but I mean in terms of the platform they have all worked really, really well from SteamYard to vMix, Stage TEN—which is what NIH uses with Dr. Collins—to the ones I mentioned before. I haven't had any issues. They are all similar in some way, but some of them produce better quality. It also depends on your bandwidth. I am hardwired into the NIH network. There are also some that you see at Dr. Fauci's home with the bookcase behind him. Those are done at the house, and those take an extra step of me bringing the equipment in, breaking down, setting up, wiping everything down, and kind of being on standby just to make sure everything runs smoothly.

Barr: How long did it take you to develop a process about doing this both at NIH and at his home?

Awwad: The home was a little bit easier because I made it simpler. He is hardwired into the house. There is a laptop stand so that laptop doesn't shake, and the camera doesn't shake. It took me some time, to be honest, only because I am using a laptop and a webcam. I don't have professional—people like documentarians will say, "Hey do you have a camera?" and I'm like, "A webcam." And sometimes they want the better shot.

I mean to this day I'm making changes. I actually just figured out something last week to do. In the beginning I had to figure out the lighting. We have this big window in [Building] 31 and I just had two lights. In some of the earlier videos of Dr. Fauci, it was kind of orange or yellow. I figured that all out, so I no longer need the lights. I can adjust that through the webcam settings, through all auto white balance, you know, change some of the contrast, the brightness. It's some stuff that I did before, but I was using a different app. Once I switched to a newer app that controls the webcam, all those issues went away and actually we don't need the lights anymore. I just use a regular light. Now the quality is so much better just with the same webcam.

Barr: That's wonderful. Can you talk a little bit about the editing process that you do, and what is involved? What kind of programs do you use?

Awwad: I mean, obviously, I had to learn. We were doing many talks. The first editing was more video. What I mean by that is Dr. Fauci would do a bunch of "thank yous" to the nurses, to the frontline workers, to the fire department. To just say, "My name is Dr Fauci, thank you for all what you are doing." A lot of people just ask for a couple of encouraging words to their community, to their business, to their group or function or whatever. We would basically have a teleprompter, or he will just go off the cuff, ad-lib what he would say. I would edit out the beginning and the end using QuickTime or iMovie. I had to change the color because the color wasn't right for his face. For some of those I would use either QuickTime or iMovie.

Then we got into where we are doing so many talks, he was doing the same talks. Before he had surgery, he was just losing his voice completely. We would do some talks, and I would have him do the intro and then use the same talk and refurbish the same talk for another school. I mean there really wasn't any change in his talk for the medical students or for the universities. I would edit those pieces. Sometimes I will edit a mess-up in the middle and basically merge them together; do a voice recording just in case I did mess up on the Zoom recording. I would record his face and the slides that share the screen. I would do an audio recording just to be safe in case the Zoom didn't record properly, so he does not have to redo it. I have his voice and I can just play the recording and just flip the slides myself and get what I needed. I did that one time where I just had the audio, had the slides, played the audio, and just advanced every time he spoke where I thought it was the next slide. I mean the built-in stuff with the Mac with the iMovie and QuickTime, those are the two biggest ones that I've done.

Barr: How long does it take you to edit an average podcast or talk that he may do?

Awwad: To be honest, I was doing six or seven edits a day. I mean it is really quick. Once I figured out how to do it, it is really simple. It would basically take me no more than 10 minutes for one. It's really simple. The programs do all the work, it's just a matter of knowing what you are doing. It's just replicating what I was fixing with one thing, doing with the other and I just kept it the same way. Now I have been editing for people and instead of sending them the unedited version of the recording, I will just edit it for them and send it to them because they want to get it out quickly.

Barr: Can I ask a little bit about a really tight time schedule with Dr. Fauci and with the media. What has it been like to deal with that kind of time constraints for you?

Awwad: It was difficult in the beginning because I was doing my regular job too, don't forget. I've always used my phone for everything, responding quickly for my regular job. But when I got into media in back-to-back, it is just making sure that you are ready for the next one right after. What I did is we have a calendar. I have the links in my separate folders for the dates and just being prepared for the next and also communicating with the next people. Most of these people want to get in 10 minutes before their initiation time, so they get 20 minutes or 30 minutes. They want you to connect 20 or 30 minutes before to test, but we do not have the luxury of doing that. Most of the times when the scheduling happens, I do get a break, a 5- or 10-minute break. Sometimes there was no break, it was just back-to-back. With the technology, I am confident because I usually come in early in the morning and make sure all the laptops are rebooted, Skype or Zoom is up to date, any updates that need to be done are already done, and just keep it going. I do that every morning.

Barr: What are sometimes when you have had to improvise?

Awwad: A lot of times where Dr. Fauci might be in a media thing and they'll ask him about a mask, and I'll have a couple masks right next to him, and then just hand them over for him to demonstrate how to wear a mask and stuff like that. Those are some of the things. But in terms of the technology, again, always doing that second recording, voice memo. Just keeping people on time is another big thing. So, I will use the Chat feature. I will text them; I will send them an email; I will even have to stop them as they are talking with Dr. Fauci during the interview, obviously if it is not live. Most of them I have recorded so when's time's up, I say, "Dr. Fauci has another media invite." I just have to cut them off.

Barr: You have talked a little bit about how your operation has evolved since January. Can you just give further examples of how far you have come?

Awwad: Sure, we started off in the smaller room that is behind me, using the one that was posted in the NIH Record. You saw that I was using paper rings to elevate the laptop. I had some kind of lighting on a table that was close to Dr. Fauci. I can send you a pic of what it is now. But now I actually have an elevated stand that is adjustable, a Brio webcam, I have some microphones—a Yeti Blue mic that I use for sound. Also the platforms have also evolved, not just changing from my side, but from the companies. They are enhancing the video, enhancing the sound. I'm making sure everything is plugged in, keeping the iPhone next to Dr. Fauci. Also, I do not know if you have seen where we did the Steph Curry talk where they wanted different angle shots, so I will have an extra tripod, some extra lighting, a stool. I will add a plant just giving different backgrounds. Before you saw the gold background that said, "National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease" at a wide angle. Then we got a step-and-repeat which is kind of the backdrop that has the blue NIH and NIAID logo. That is one of the changes that we added; the chair obviously to elevate because the table is higher, just a bunch of other things. There is a notepad on the desk so Dr Fauci can make his notes. There are headphones just in case some folks for podcasts want better sound where it is coming not coming from the computer, but from the headset. They want it from the headset. I mean there is just a bunch of little, small things.

Barr: How did you learn, mostly by trial and error, but also did you look for others for inspiration or online when you did not know things?

Awwad: Actually, one of the biggest things I did, I watched everything I do. Either it is live, and I watch it on my phone, and I make adjustments as we are going. For instance, let us say Dr. Fauci is on MSNBC. I'll go to my app and watch MSNBC and adjust the lighting if I need to—this was before—or fix the sound, move the mic a little closer. I would definitely make some changes either live and or during the event or even after watching it. Maybe I see a shadow move here or there, bring down the blinds in the room or bring the chair up a little. I definitely watch my own stuff, but I also did some YouTube and watched some stuff on how to do some things as well. But again, it's hard because when I watch stuff, they don't have the same equipment as I do. It is stuff that I already know. But figuring out the light issue was probably the biggest challenge for me.

Barr: Really. Why?

Awwad: Because of the color; I just hated the way he looked on TV. In the beginning it would be so different during the day and during the night. The quality of his face wasn't the same throughout the day. That blue background kind of messed everything up. When there's no background, it's clear, but when I use the blue background it changes the color.

Barr: Very interesting. In addition to your work helping make Dr. Fauci's appearances possible, you are also doing your other IT job at NIAID. Can you talk a little bit about how you are managing both roles?

Awwad: Sure. One of the biggest things that helps and got me through this is Teams, actually, what we are using right now. We have a group chat, they have any questions, making sure my staff was okay coming in during this. We had one person from each building coming in and rotating. Obviously as we are the infectious disease institution, the scientists were still doing their work. We had to make sure that we had the right folks coming in and out, being safe, having masks, being socially distant, making sure that they had the proper information as I got it from above, checking my email, making sure that they get the information using the chat for them to ask questions. This went on for a good 9 or 10 months, which really helped out and people learned.

Also, we lost a couple people during this time. Training was another thing. The new people came in, trained with every person, kind of rotating. We support the scientific instruments, Mac, PC environment, but mostly working with vendors, making sure the scientific equipment is running properly and big telework. We had a big telework rush—making sure everyone was able to telework, not just the staff but people grabbing their PCs, their laptops or Macs, pulling laptops out of their cabinets, because if you think about it scientists don't telework. They have to come in to do their work. That was a big change for us. At one point there were about 80 or 90% of our Institute was teleworking. I think we are at 60 or 70% returned at least on campus. We just had a big change for us in getting everybody VPN, Citrix access, making sure the machines are up to date, making sure that their email was working. They had their share drives. There was a lot involved in that, installing the scientific programs that they wanted and needed. There was a lot during those times, but everyone kind of pulled together. We have buildings, and we had different teams. Now it is more of one team. We have Building 40, 50, 4, 33, Gaithersburg, Building 10. For my teams you know making sure they had the right proper information.

There were some cases early on in Building 29 where we had to make sure that no one was in that building from my staff because they will come in, and they'll lock down and we'll move them over to another building, Building 40. That was kind of challenging in the beginning. Scheduling appointments, again, because we were not able to fix remotely, we would have to re-image a machine or update or install something or have them even login their card, if their cards were locked out. It was just a bunch of stuff. Now we do have a ticketing system where I can see the work. I think we closed 5,000 tickets that one month.

Barr: Oh, my goodness.

Awwad: I mean right now it is about 3,000 to 3,500, just on campus for a typical average. Training was involved, but teams liked sharing information among the different teams, being one team now. And now I do have help in terms of managing the team. That is one of the things that has been helpful.

Barr: What was it like for you being on campus, especially in the early months?

Awwad: I've been through this before, through Ebola, and Zika, but not this long of a period. I do remember working 16–18-hour days just for one or two days, just being available, maybe not so much for media but just being available for Dr. Fauci. During those days, there was a ghost town. Most of the people that were here were construction workers in the visitors' lot. Our floors were completely empty. It was practically just two of us or three of us here. People were coming in and out and grabbing their equipment. Once COVID hit hard and everything was shut down, we were still coming. I was working six, seven days a week, coming in on the weekends and recording because we could fit only so much during the week.

Barr: Can you talk a little bit about what has been some personal opportunities and challenges for you during this time?

Awwad: Opportunities? I have learned a lot. I met a bunch of people either through the media, even famous people.

Barr: Who are some of the people you have met, and what are some of the things you have learned?

Awwad: I mean just the kind of video piece, and I guess the acronyms and the shots. We've had a bunch of people from Time Magazine, just different media: print, video, and just learning podcasts; just a bunch of different stuff. Different people with different subscribers or people that listen to their channel. It's just all out there. I did not know before that the media is different in a lot of the channels and who their people are. Meeting people? I mean I do not get star-struck or anything like that. I just set up and, "Dr. Fauci will be with you shortly," because we are going from one room to the next. But I mean some of the people from The Daily Show to Sanjay Gupta to Little Wayne to Fat Joe to Desus & Mero from Showtime to Katie Couric, I mean there is just a lot of people. I can just keep going on and on—sport athletes, Steph Curry. There's been so many actors and actresses.

Barr: What has it been like to learn from some of the other media people and talk to them?



Awwad: Good, because when they first talk to me, they don't think I know what I am doing because obviously we've never done this before. But then when I start speaking like, "Hey, this is okay. I have it. This is the length. This is what I am gonna do." They are, "Oh my god, you are a savior." I have people writing letters to Dr. Fauci, "You know David was great to work with." I make sure that everything is covered because everyone pretty much wants the same thing and I go above and beyond with that local recording that I send them. It has been a pleasure working with a lot of people. I have met so many people and there's always repeats too, don't forget, so I have worked with these people one time, I am gonna work with them again, especially with the producers. There are so many different producers on one show. You work with one producer from CNN; that's for one show, then you work with other producers on another show, but it is the same company.

Barr: Do people have different styles?

Awwad: I would not say styles. More people kind of panic; not panic, just kind of overthink it. They think I am new to this but now when they see it, "Like hey, same setup as last time?" I'm like, "Yep, got it."

Barr: One of the last questions is what are you most looking forward to in 2021?

Awwad: I am not sure. I mean obviously for everyone to get over this COVID fatigue that we are going through and get back to some type of normalcy. I like what I do. I have been at NIAID for 16 years. I have been with Dr. Fauci since 2007. I have always liked what I have done here.

Barr: Did you do remote? Did you do appearances before 2020?

Awwad: Yes. My original role with Dr. Fauci was, back when I was just a technician, was to do off-hour coverage for Dr. Fauci. What does that mean? He would get support after hours, weekends, and nights. That was my kind of role with Dr. Fauci in the beginning. That was my main thing. We actually have technicians in [Building] 31 that we kind of support. My goal with him was just to support him when he goes on travel, replacing his computers or anything that kind of the day-to-day that they couldn't fix, I would handle. But mostly for him, weekend support and off-hour coverage. Anything after 6 p.m. till midnight and weekends from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. That was my role, and I have always known what he did setting up his home computer, making sure he has his phone. I mean all that stuff, I have always done that for him.

Barr: Do you support other NIAID scientists who have been on air as well or just Dr. Fauci?

Awwad: There's been a couple of them, not as many as helping [Dr. Fauci], but at the VRC with Drs. [Barney] Graham and Kizzmekia Corbett. I have done a couple with them, but I could only because I knew the producers. They would say, "Can you help us out with this?" Like CNN, I helped him one time and there was a documentary, but not so much. Again, my days are pretty packed. The ABC one that I did I had to get somebody from my team, show them how to do it. I actually showed them even how to edit video because a lot of people can't travel to the other talks, the scientists, so I showed them how to record it in Zoom, edit it out, piece it together so that it all looks really well. It goes really well.

Barr: I will just ask you two more small questions. One is how many appearances have you helped Dr. Fauci with since COVID began do you estimate?

Awwad: If you are going to include the talks in the recordings and regular over maybe five thousand.

Barr: Oh, my goodness.

Awwad: I think that's what they calculated: five thousand. Because remember we have regular meetings that I just set up and leave. Everything he does is media. Rarely do we do phone anymore. Even with print we will start a Zoom, they'll turn on the video and they will just use the audio from there because Zoom will do a transcript and can get the audio. But they also need permission to record. Some of these things they are not allowed to record. So, a lot of things are involved. I am sure I am missing a lot of things, but it is fun and it's challenging at the same time.

Barr: That is really great. The last thing is there anything else that you would want to share as somebody who has been at NIH for a very long time and as somebody who is living through the pandemic?

Awwad: Mostly I probably want to share is a lot of times when I'm doing the live media hits and looking at the comments there are these wild remarks from everywhere about the vaccine, Dr. Fauci, Bill Gates. I just kind of see it firsthand. Even when Dr. Fauci got a shot people were, "Oh, he got it on the wrong hand." It's just very difficult when you do your job, and then you see the good stuff like the frontline workers and everyone taking his advice. You know what we're doing is for the good, but again there's the other side as well. Also, the security stuff with Dr. Fauci. That was challenging too. But I mean now it's just the norm here. I mean they're just down the hall. He's been through a lot. I don't know how he does it working that many hours. I mean it's just wild.

Barr: Thank you very much for all the work that you do. I wish you and your family the best and a wonderful year.

Awwad: Thank you so much. Take care.