

Speaker 1 ([00:00](#)):

Welcome to Sabin's Community Conversations on Vaccines, presented by Immunization Advocates. This season, we're spotlighting the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic is posing for health workers and immunization professionals and journalists covering their work. Today, we visit Brazil, where journalists are rising to the challenge of reporting on the rapidly changing pandemic. In this episode, we speak with Nathalia Flores, a science journalist and researcher and the content manager at Agência Bori, an organization supporting health and science journalists in Brazil. Natália is joined by Dr. Denise Garrett, Vice President of Applied Epidemiology at Sabin and a native of Brazil. Natália and Denise discuss the challenges that journalists have faced while reporting on vaccines during the pandemic and the need for public health transparency to increase vaccine acceptance and demand.

Francesca Montalto ([00:57](#)):

I'm Francesca Montalto.

Vince Blaser ([00:59](#)):

And I'm Vince Blaser. We're really excited for today's episode. We're zeroing in on what it's like to support journalists covering vaccines and immunization during the pandemic and Brazil, which has experienced some really difficult social, political and structural challenges. Starting as a journalist of myself and later working as a press officer trying to boil down the extreme complexity of the human immune system and how vaccines and immunizations work, it was a really major challenge even before COVID. But during this pandemic, hundreds upon hundreds of journalists are newly covering vaccines and for their communities. And, you know, that poses a major opportunity for science, journalism trainers and public health professionals to broaden knowledge of vaccines. But, it also poses some major challenges in really communicating those complexities and amid a really rapidly changing pandemic with with rookie reporter.

Francesca Montalto ([02:01](#)):

Yes, and, you know, today we're excited to be joined by two guests who can help us examine how these issues are playing out in Brazil. Natália Flores, a science journalist and researcher and the content manager at Agência Bori and our very own Dr. Denise Garrett, Vice President of Applied Epidemiology at the Sabin Vaccine Institute.

Vince Blaser ([02:21](#)):

Natália and Denise - welcome to the show.

Natália Flores ([02:23](#)):

Thank you.

Dr. Denise Garrett ([02:23](#)):

It's a pleasure to be here.

Francesca Montalto ([02:28](#)):

Now starting with you Natália - you're a former journalist and working at a science journalism organization. Can you tell us just a bit about Agência Bori and what you do there?

Natália Flores ([02:39](#)):

Of course. Agência Bori is a new agency in Brazil that helps support journalists in covering a lot of topics with scientific evidence. And it was created when the pandemic started in 2020. By coincidence, we created the Agência Bori two weeks before the pandemic started, and we are helping journalists to deal with COVID-19 coverage along this one year and a half. And actually right now we have 1,400 journalists receiving our materials. We work with embargoed studies that we anticipate for journalists, and we also promote workshops and trainings for journalists to support them in this coverage. We have worked with vaccine training in November 2020 to help journalists deal with the basics of vaccines and immunization. And now we're actually launching a new program of training that will follow journalists. We'll support them during four months on COVID-19 and immunization, on vaccines and this kind of stuff.

Vince Blaser ([04:20](#)):

Thanks, Natália. And Denise - Natália mentioned this workshop in Brazil on vaccines immunization last year. I know you, you've been a leader for decades at the U.S. CDC and for us at Sabin on vaccines and immunization. And I know as COVID-19 vaccines were nearing emergency-use authorizations last fall, you and Natália and others became really concerned that journalists in Brazil, weren't getting the type of information they needed both on vaccines on how vaccines work and on the COVID-19 vaccine development in particular. Tell us a little bit about that and what you've seen in Brazil as the pandemic has continued and vaccines have started to roll out.

Dr. Denise Garrett ([05:12](#)):

Thanks for the question, Vince. Yes, and I'll start by saying, I truly believe that journalists, they have one of the hardest jobs during this pandemic because the public, they turn to them, they turn to reporters for information. And they have this very challenging task to inform the public, of course, with accurate information to keep them informed. And in addition to that, they have the hard task to fight what we call the infodemic, right? The misinformation, disinformation, the rumors that spread so quickly, and they have to do it all and really capture the severity of the pandemic without panicking the population, minimizing the panics. So I think they have a great responsibility during this pandemic, and yes it was really hard for them to cover some of the aspects of this because it's not only, you know, an infectious disease. There was the whole aspects of vaccines. That's a very specialized field. It's a very technical field. There are concepts in vaccines that even specialists working the areas, sometimes they get it confused, like efficacy and effectiveness. So there are different things. And I think, yes, in the beginning there was some difficulty in Brazil among the journalists to understand all these technical terms. And, I don't believe that this was like unique to Brazil. There was, you know, I believe it was unique to all the other countries, as well. But I do think that they've come a long way, and for most of the press in Brazil, I would say that they have done a terrific job with it.

Vince Blaser ([07:21](#)):

We've heard from multiple journalists - Sabin's Immunization Advocates program works with journalists from all over the world. And like you say, a lot of the what we hear is very similar across many contexts that despite a lot of, a lot of great information and a lot more information coming out during this pandemic, they're not necessarily confident in reporting on the issue primarily because of the volume of news and data coming their way, but also the misinformation also coming their way. So, I know Natália, how do you think that public health leaders and vaccine experts could improve journalists' confidence in reporting on the issue? And, interested to hear, Denise, your views on that, too.

Natália Flores ([08:07](#)):

Here in Brazil, I think it's something that we can see in many countries. But here in Brazil, we also have science education a very low very deficient science education in schools, in elementary school and in high school. And after journalists go to journalism schools and are not properly prepared to deal with science information, to know they can make coverage with science evidence. So they come to work in media outlets without this background on science. And what is very difficult when you get a specific issue as vaccine immunization. So our effort this year was to give them some basics, some background, and I think vaccine experts as Denise and others that are talking to journalists in the daily basis and giving them information about vaccine play an important role in this kind of, to make journalism better, to make them able to do this difficult task that is informing people about vaccines, about immunization.

Natália Flores ([09:42](#)):

I think when the pandemic started, I think we had a lack of this basic information on immunization, on how our immune system works. Even this basic question was a little difficult for journalists as it is for the population in general. And now I think we have access to a great amount of studies. I think the role of experts is of indicating with which studies and which data that are coming out from studies every day is relevant to pay attention as journalists. And, in this sense, I think science experts, experts in vaccines have a important role to play talking to journalists and giving them directions on how to report which data they need to pay attention in reporting which studies are more accurate in terms of science evidence and this kind of and this kind of issues.

Vince Blaser ([10:55](#)):

Yeah. Denise, I know we've talked before about even very seasoned public health professionals who have talked to the media for years have had a particular challenge in communicating with journalists and with the public during this pandemic just with the way that things are constantly changing and trying to impart messages that people will take in and understand and utilize. So yeah - curious your thoughts on this?

Dr. Denise Garrett ([11:30](#)):

Yes, that's a great question Vince, And Natália addressed it well, in terms of, you know, it was a huge learning curve for the journalists, of course. There was a lot of, there was a lot of reading. There was a lot of learning. There was a lot, I'm sure there was a lot of talking with experienced science journalists, like mentoring the new ones or the ones that were pulled from other areas to cover the pandemic. But I also think, and I agree with Natália there has the need of a lot of help from the specialists, and, I mean, not only like they organize the official trainings, like what we have done, but even help in basics, in really talking about the basics. I always, when I talk to a journalist, I always think he's going to write this piece or this article a lot better if he understands the basics of, Natália mentioned like the basics of the immune system, the basic stuff, like what is it is a clinical trial. So he cannot talk about efficacy without understanding what is two randomized, what is a controlled trial. So, I think they help this type of assistance from specialists. And I don't mean like to give like a quote for the article. I mean, to really hold hands and walk together with the journalist in terms of sharing that basic knowledge, hearing that knowledge that will make his article better.

Francesca Montalto ([13:16](#)):

And now, Natália, in addition to, you know, understanding the science behind vaccines and the pandemic, what personal challenges have journalists shared with you in covering vaccines during the

pandemic? You know, this could be something as simple as, you know, covering issues via Zoom, which a lot of us have had to deal with you know, virtual meetings and stuff like that.

Natália Flores ([13:41](#)):

I think the personal challenges that came to us were in the sense of simple concepts. They didn't know about immunization in the first, in the beginning. And now I think it is, they have still personal challenges to access information, local information. I think some journalists from locals from newspapers, local newspapers of small cities have difficulty accessing the information about the immunization rollout in their cities, how the immunization is rolling out and on how the rates of transmission in the cities, as well. I think that is a great gap in Brazil because Brazil is a continental country, and we have different realities in terms of how the pandemic was rolling out in different cities. And I think this is the main difficulty in reporting the COVID-19 in Brazil. This access to data.

Natália Flores ([15:04](#)):

And also local journalists have told us that it's a little bit difficult to access some sources, some experts because we have a great amount of journalists after these experts. And some experts tend to prioritize, to talk to journalists of big newspapers than of small newspapers. And some journalists have told us this kind of challenge to get access to this experts. What we tell to experts is that talking to local journalists is so important, as important as talking to journalists reporting in big journals big newspapers because local journalists have a task to inform a population, some populations that don't have access to information of big newspapers

Francesca Montalto ([16:11](#)):

And so you encourage public health professionals and experts to talk to, you know, local media outlets. How else do you, or Agência Bori approach supporting, you know, the wide array of outlets in Brazil?

Natália Flores ([16:26](#)):

When the beginning, when the pandemic started in 2020, we made a bank of contacts of experts. We reached to experts from all over Brazil telling them if they were able to talk to journalists about specific topics of the COVID-19. And we made this contact list in Bori. And we gave them to journalists that were registered to our agency. So journalists would have the cell phone and the email the direct email of specialists, of experts in vaccines and other topics of COVID-19. I think this helped in the sense that it made the access to experts more democratic, that journalists could access experts and develop a kind of relationship to experts. They would not have access in another way. In another sense, if this contact list didn't exist, and in a sense also that we had concern to put in this list experts from all over Brazil.

Natália Flores ([17:54](#)):

Also with this sense that science is made, that there are experts in other small universities in small institutions that maybe don't have the visibility of experts from big universities in Brazil. And we thought it was important to tell journalists that it's necessary also to give visibility to experts from other parts of Brazil, to bring other experts to media visibility. And I think it helped a lot because some, as Denise told us some journalists were basically lost in the pandemic, in the beginning of the pandemic. They didn't know who they would access to learn more about immunization and vaccines. So in this contact list, we also made a brief texts telling journalists, what was the specialty of that experts and how they could help them in covering COVID-19. And I think it was a great help in the beginning. And we have updated this list in a constant way. And after we made the course and we created some spaces for journalists to

ask specialists and experts, this kind of content this kind of issues. And it was very nice to see the results of this. I think journalism has grown a lot in this one year and a half in terms of coverage.

Dr. Denise Garrett ([19:55](#)):

Yeah. Now I would like to say that they, Agência Bori, they're doing such a wonderful job in doing this, in really helping and supporting the journalists in their challenge. And Natália, you listed really well the technical challenge that they're having and how, you know, how you guys, what you're doing to support this. But I feel like I must mention another challenge and at the personal level, really at the personal level. And I've been talking to reporters from the beginning of the pandemic and they are simply exhausted. It's a no stopping in news. The news don't stop. So there is no time to stop. And I'm bringing this up here because unlike the healthcare workers, for instance, that also are burned out, are exhausted and need the break. The healthcare workers get some recognition by the patients, by the family members, by the community.

Dr. Denise Garrett ([21:12](#)):

And I don't see much of that for the journalists. Actually it's the opposite. The journalists, they get angry, you know, haters, emails. And, I feel like - and low payment, I would add to that. So I think that's the personal challenge, and I see more and more of this when I, when talking to the journalists, how they feeling sometimes that they're not valued and they are feeling really burned out. And I think as a public health community, that's another way we can be responding to assist them you know, really by spending the time or at least validating this type of feeling among them. And that's why I wanted to bring this out today. It's that.

Vince Blaser ([22:06](#)):

Yeah. Can you say a little bit more Denise about how, you mentioned it before, about how you, the ... Getting quality reporting is often a lengthy engagement, and I think some times public health professionals see as like, okay, they come on a press conference and give information and that's their duty. But, obviously with how complex this and changing this pandemic is, and the political and cultural aspects of it, it's tough. And public health professionals are also feeling strain as well. And so just, just wondering if you could share a little more about how you approach that, that relationship, and if you felt like, what you felt has been most helpful in engaging with media.

Dr. Denise Garrett ([22:59](#)):

That's an excellent question. And if I had to describe to define with one word, my relationship with the journalist, I would use the words, synergy. I look at the journalist as my partner because he's the person that's going to help me to disseminate the public health message, to disseminate what the public needs to do. So I think it's a very synergetic relationship. It's a combined effort. So journalism when I talk to them, they're very thankful, they're very like as if I'm doing them a favor. I don't think doing them a favor and you know, we are together, we're literally together in this, so that's the way I look at it. And that's why I devote part of my time to really be coaching them, to really be listening what are the questions. And it doesn't need, even, you know, it's not a matter of being quoted in the article, not. This is not the important thing. The important thing is that the article contains accurate information and important information that the public needs to needs to know.

Vince Blaser ([24:25](#)):

And Natália talk about how the relationship has played out during, specifically during, in Brazil, during the pandemic. Brazil, like in many other countries, the public health, which I know public health professionals see their work as apolitical, but obviously everything with the pandemic has been caught up in politics and culture and including on vaccines and immunization. So how do you try to balance you know, that reality with what you're trying to do in supporting journalists to report on the science?

Natália Flores ([25:09](#)):

Great question and very difficult to answer because we are living dystopia here in Brazil. We don't know - the polarization that we came in this scenario, that came with the way government has dealt with the pandemic is really a challenge to journalists and to experts in terms of how they position themselves, what image they construct in media. I think experts, we have cases of experts that made, that conducted some studies in Brazil that were chased after in social media because of the results of some studies that weren't according to the main narrative constructed by the government, for instance. And the toll. Denise had mentioned this kind of challenge journalists face that are of becoming of being attacked just by simply talking about vaccines and talking about immunization. So it's very difficult to deal with this kind of stuff when science and when journalism are in the, are trying to do their job and trying to inform society about issues that are important and that can save lives. And that there is a great amount of people working in the opposite side, in bringing confusion, bringing disinformation.

Dr. Denise Garrett ([27:12](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. Unfortunately, I mean, the politicization of the vaccines has been really a very unfortunate thing because we know, there are no questions, vaccines save millions of lives every year, right? They are the safest and most effective way to public health intervention, to prevent infectious disease. So I always, one thing that I strongly believe is that adherence and trust to vaccine, one of the most important elements to increase the trust in a vaccine is transparency. I've always advocated for being transparent. The problem is with all the politicization in this situation, it becomes really difficult. This transparency that's needed to increase trust, it becomes a lot harder. It makes transparency very difficult. And I'll give like a practical example, like in transparency, when we are talking about vaccine, we talk about the benefits of that vaccine. And we also talk about their adverse events, the possible adverse events with that vaccine. We need to be transparent with the public, and they need to be well-informed to make their decision.

Dr. Denise Garrett ([28:50](#)):

But with the politicization like, you have to be so careful with the words you use, because any words, any wrong, any words that's not quite like perfect in that sentence when you're talking about the vaccines, for instance, can be used politically against it. You know, we follow the ideology, all the politicization. And in Brazil, we have a very, very clear example about this. We have a president that makes anti-vaccine comments. We have one governor, that's the opposition, you know, two of the presidents that really defends one specific vaccine that was implemented in his state. And, to talk about death vaccine, you know, when being transparent in talking about, yes, it's not a hundred percent efficacious if there is no way.

Dr. Denise Garrett ([29:54](#)):

Yes there, you know so while there's issues, there were politicized so much that it became really, really difficult to really, I think it undermines trust when even the scientists, they, because of politics sometimes they are not totally transparent. And so I'll this times of polarization and politicization of

vaccines. Any comments you make can be taken as political. So this is a very difficult thing in it. I think it puts the journalists in a very, very difficult place in terms of reporting with, and building trust in the community.

Francesca Montalto ([30:50](#)):

Yeah. And that's so important. So I guess as we wrap up the episode, can, you know, Denise and Natália, can you leave us with some parting thoughts on how we in the public health field can build trust? Long-Term, you know, both in the regulatory process to approve the vaccines and in rollout of immunizations?

Natália Flores ([31:11](#)):

I think this trust needs to be built by transparency as Denise said. And I'm assuming that we have an important role that all journalists and public health experts have an important role in indicating, in orientating society. And I think this sense of duty has to be more, assumed by more people, I think. The basic is that we are in a scenario where we need to take some positions. We need to choose some side, and it's better to choose evidence and science side than to be carried up with disinformation. And I think journalists and public health experts need to deal with this kind of situation as well, and be transparent,

Francesca Montalto ([32:31](#)):

Denise, any parting thoughts?

Dr. Denise Garrett ([32:34](#)):

Well I guess for me, it's not enough to emphasize, and Natália mentioned it, Natália did, that. But we're just going to get the trust of the communities if we are as transparent and science-based as possible. We, when we left and that has happened in Brazil, specifically in vaccine announcements, for instance, when the politics spoke louder than the science in some of the announcements because they wanted to make the vaccine look better than what it actually was. What was a shame because it was a very decent and good vaccine. But because of that episode it's eroded trust. And I would say again, you build, you don't build trust without transparency, integrity, and science-base.

Vince Blaser ([33:38](#)):

Denise Garrett and Natália Flores. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Speaker 1 ([33:42](#)):

Thanks for listening to Sabin's Community Conversations on Vaccines, brought to you by Immunization Advocates. Check out the next episode as we head to Nigeria to explore how the Ministry of Health is working to integrate immunization with other health services. We also discuss the need for global communities of health workers. For more information, visit [immunizationadvocates.org](http://immunizationadvocates.org).