

Module 4: Covering COVID vaccines: The instructors speak

[00:00:10] **Maryn McKenna** Hello, welcome back to our course, Covering the COVID-19 Vaccines: What Journalists Need to Know. I'm Maryn McKenna, I'm your chief instructor, and in this segment you get to meet the assistant instructors whom you've been engaging with in the discussion forums for your various languages. Federico Kukso, Yves Sciama and André Biernath.

[00:00:30] **Maryn McKenna** We're going to talk about the challenges of covering this moment in the pandemic, and try to extract some lessons for all the rest of you about what you should be doing next. So, we're going to start by having everybody introduce themselves and talk a little bit about what they have been covering at this moment in the pandemic. Federico, should we start with you?

[00:00:53] **Federico Kukso** Yes, I'm Federico Kukso, I'm an independent science journalist from Argentina. I'm also the board member of the World Federation of Science Journalists and all of us have been covering the pandemic since the beginning. I'm not so interested in breaking news, but mostly in-depth stories about the pandemic from a scientific perspective, a cultural perspective and a geopolitical perspective.

[00:01:22] **Maryn McKenna** André, you're on the same continent.

[00:01:25] **André Biernath** Hi Maryn, it's a pleasure to be here with you. My name is André Biernath, I'm a science and health journalist based in São Paulo. I'm writing and doing content about the pandemic since January of 2020. I started in a magazine writing pieces for this magazine as a staff reporter. And since October, I moved to the Brazilian service of BBC, where I still work mainly with the pandemic and mainly with the vaccination topics and the new variants, not doing breaking news, but giving meaning about the new discoveries of science can mean for our everyday life.

[00:02:16] **Maryn McKenna** And Yves, how about you?

[00:02:19] **Yves Sciama** Hi everyone, I'm Yves Sciama, I'm a French freelancer working for magazines and dailies. I've been covering COVID since the beginning, but amongst other topics. So I've been both following vaccination issues, but the other original COVID issues also. I'm the vice president of the French Association of Science Journalists, so I try to keep an eye on the coverage at the national level. And I'm also on the board of the European Federation for Journalism, so I feel kind of European as well.

[00:02:59] **Maryn McKenna** So here's my first question, Yves let's stick with you to start with. Where you are, I guess you get to speak for the EU -- what has been the biggest challenge for the vaccination campaign?

[00:03:13] **Yves Sciama** Well, as in many places, I think the logistics have been pretty messy. People registered, then got canceled, then we're unable to get an appointment again. All this has been sort of very nerve wracking, so people are often annoyed and angry.

[00:03:34] **Yves Sciama** But I will say on the whole, the EU is not doing so badly considering the amount of doses it has received because these doses have not stayed in fridges. Of course, we've received much less than the US or the U.K., which are the countries that we compare to. But if we compare it to southern countries and developing

countries, we've actually received a lot, like we have about 10% of our population that's presently been vaccinated.

[00:04:07] **Yves Sciama** So all that means that, in my view, we have not been doing too badly. And one of the things that's noticeable is that the EU has managed to stay coherent and not really leave parts behind. I checked the figures and I saw that, for example, Romania is more or less on the same level as France and Germany, which is, you know, pretty remarkable as Europe is not homogeneous at all. So at least this has been sort of properly conducted.

[00:04:39] **Maryn McKenna** So, Federico and André, you two are in the global south. What are the challenges to vaccination where you are? André, do you want to start?

[00:04:49] **André Biernath** Yes, here in Brazil I think we have two major challenges. The first one is the shortage of doses. So we have some days and weeks that the campaign in some cities or states of Brazil need to stop because there's no doses available. So, we have like a promise of 500 million doses until the end of 2021. But these are only promises, we don't have it right now. So the campaign is really slow and moving slower than we thought that it would be possible.

[00:05:26] **André Biernath** And I think the second challenge, at least here in Brazil, is a communication challenge, because during 2020, we received a lot of mixed messages about the efficacy of the vaccines and how they are going to work or who we will buy the vaccines for the Brazilian population. So this mix of mass messages was really troublesome, a real problem here in Brazil.

[00:05:54] **André Biernath** And now, we have almost more than two months of vaccination campaign against COVID-19. And we shouldn't have a mass communication -- people in a national level don't know who should get, when they will get the vaccine. So this mix of messages are very worrisome here in Brazil, and it's another ingredient in this problem of doing the mass vaccination campaign.

[00:06:28] **Maryn McKenna** Federico, how about you?

[00:06:29] **Federico Kukso** I think it's the same picture in the rest of South America. One of the biggest problems, as you may know, that the western big pharma company have turned their backs on the region. We don't have any vaccines from Pfizer or Moderna, not even from that.

[00:06:47] **Federico Kukso** I think another problem besides the acquisition of doses is that there is no such thing about cooperation between the countries. There are no things like, there's no UE -- I mean, there's no European Union here, there's Mercosur. Mercosur is not working as as a whole.

[00:07:05] **Federico Kukso** So you have different countries like Chile that have a really good campaign of vaccination, but you can't accelerate a campaign if you don't have vaccines, right? So that's our problem, we have many vaccines from Russia or from China, but there is no communication and cooperation between countries.

[00:07:24] **Maryn McKenna** Hmm. So that really, that goes to the next question I wanted to ask all of you, which is, is there anything that's going on now in the vaccination

campaigns that people should have predicted, that the country should have been prepared for?

[00:07:40] **Federico Kukso** I think there are many problems of logistics that, perhaps, if these distribution plans were [thought out] before the beginning of vaccination would have been different.

[00:07:50] **Federico Kukso** I mean, the distribution plans began with with the first doses. I mean, in August no one thought to start planning how to reach these regions that are so distant from the main cities. That's one of the biggest problems. So I think that's the problem, is everything is up to date today? What are we going to do tonight, today or tomorrow?

[00:08:17] **Maryn McKenna** André, is that true for Brazil as well?

[00:08:20] **André Biernath** Yeah, Brazil has a problem with the logistics and also with the purchase of vaccines. For instance, Pfizer and the BioNTech, they contacted the Brazilian government to offer 70 million doses of vaccines in August and September of 2020. Of course, the vaccines are still under tests, under studies. But they tried to make a deal with the Brazilian government and they didn't receive any response of that offer.

[00:08:54] **André Biernath** So, and the Brazilian government just signed the contract to buy, I think, 100 million doses of Pfizer and BioNTech last week. So we took almost nine months to finish this purchase. So I think that the problem here is the planning and preparing and diversifying the sources of vaccines. So for this two months, we are dependent of the CoronaVac from Sinovac that are being produced here by Instituto Butantan in Sao Paulo and of course, with the AstraZeneca Oxford University vaccine that are being produced here by the Carlos Slim Foundation. So, there are only two sources when we should have more sources for our campaign.

[00:09:50] **Maryn McKenna** So Yves, what you're hearing, does this resonate with you? Are there things that should have been put in place or problems that should have been anticipated that turned out to be a problem?

[00:10:02] **Yves Sciama** So one thing that we're not doing at all, but that in some way I think we should worry about is regionalization, because what we're seeing is that the pandemic is behaving very differently in different parts of the continent and actually even in different parts of the country. But that has not been taken into account at all in the way the doses are sent out.

[00:10:26] **Yves Sciama** So, you know, Poland has five times more cases than Portugal. I mean, per million, but they will still get the same number of doses per inhabitant. And, even in France it's interesting because the pandemic is concentrated around the Paris region and it's one of the regions where the vaccination has been the weakest. So we're really struggling to match these things and we're not sending the ammunition to the active fronts. We're just sending it out without differentiating.

[00:11:06] **Maryn McKenna** So, does it feel as though the things that have been challenges to this point, is it going to be the same challenge for the next 12 months or however long this takes? Or do you see other things coming on the horizon that that are also going to be challenges for this campaign?

[00:11:26] **Yves Sciama** Well, if I can start, I'd like to say that one thing we've not been good at, at least in this region, is learning from each other and learning from what other countries have experienced. Everyone has been sort of busy covering its own government and its own challenges. And in fact, there's been lots of interesting things going on elsewhere. People have not had the same criteria for vaccinating, they started with other groups of population. The attitude towards health care workers, teachers, older people, nursing homes has not been the same everywhere. And we just don't seem from the coverage that I see. We just don't seem to compare these things as much as we should, because this is lots of stuff that could be learned from that.

[00:12:22] **Maryn McKenna** Hmm. André, what do you think about that as you look forward to the next 12 months or so? Are that the past challenges going to be the future challenges?

[00:12:32] **André Biernath** Yes, and I think we will add more challenges to that. For instance, Brazil, next week we will start the vaccination campaign against influenza because we are entering into the winter here. So it will be a big, big challenge of communication to say when you get your shot for COVID-19, when you get your shots for influenza, the publics are totally different.

[00:13:03] **André Biernath** So that influenza campaign, the first groups will be children, pregnant, health workers. And now in COVID-19, we are vaccinating the elderly and the they have to wait, like, I think 14 days between the two vaccines, the flu vaccine, the COVID-19 vaccine. I think we have beyond the challenge I present, we'll have other challenges, including this one that could be a huge one.

[00:13:35] **Maryn McKenna** I hadn't even thought of the start of flu season, to have another potential pandemic bearing down on us. Federico, what do you think about, sort of, looking forward to the next year or so? What are the the challenges that you see and are they different than what you've seen so far?

[00:13:49] **Federico Kukso** I'm interested in that now, not only in Latin America, but in all the world, there are two new kinds of citizens. There are those who have already been vaccinated and those who have not been vaccinated. So I'm interested to see how the people who have already been vaccinated, how they will behave? And with all these vaccination passports, now that all this discussion that's been going on.

[00:14:14] **Federico Kukso** So, this is one of the things that we, in the region, are seeing - the relaxation, how people are tired of the pandemic. So what's going on? As André said, we are entering the fall season, the winter season, and in the north you are getting out of this season. So what about the new waves, the new variants? I mean, without doses of vaccines, there are many problems, the development of new variants of the coronavirus. So now those are the things I'm interested in seeing.

[00:14:45] **Maryn McKenna** So, with the vaccination campaign so far, what have you all most struggled with journalistically? What's been the hardest thing or the biggest challenge or hurdle? Federico, do you want to go?

[00:15:02] **Federico Kukso** In my case, I've been trying to to be different, to differentiate my coverage from the rest. As we all know, everyone is covering the pandemic, right? Not only science journalism. So I think one of the biggest challenges -- I mean, my advice for every journalist is to be different, have a different perspective.

[00:15:21] **Federico Kukso** Trying to find new perspectives, not only new themes, but, kind of, how to tell stories from a different point of view. Not to be the same as everyone else.

[00:15:34] **Maryn McKenna** André, what's been hard for you?

[00:15:37] **André Biernath** I think the hardest part for me was having like a plan that worked. So this week I'm going to write a story about how vaccines work or what the new results, the new of the studies. But during this process, we have to stop what we are doing the to explain the scientific aspects to debunk misinformation and disinformation.

[00:16:05] **André Biernath** So we have to stop and try to to explain some fake news that are being shared on social media or WhatsApp groups. So I have these constant pauses of my work to explain the vaccination process or the vaccine development process, to explain why some information that are hugely popular are also false. These pauses oses are very problematic.

[00:16:34] **Maryn McKenna** Yves, what have your journalistic challenges been, has there been anything that's been particularly difficult for you?

[00:16:42] **Yves Sciama** Well, it's not especially original, but I find that the electricity that's constantly in every discussion is pretty hard to deal with. For example, when this blood clotting with the AstraZeneca vaccine has appeared.

[00:17:02] **Yves Sciama** It was very difficult to discuss this rationally and say, OK, we're seeing this, but we're waiting for more data. Everybody would sort of jump in the debate and say, "I told you these vaccines had not been tested enough." And the others would say, "Come on, we know this vaccine is perfect. It's been given to so many million people and nothing bad has happened."

[00:17:31] **Yves Sciama** So every every time there's something new happening, these debates really flare up and our bosses really immediately want some strong answers, and it's difficult to keep a balanced and smart coverage in a context like this.

[00:17:56] **Maryn McKenna** So last question, all of us, I think, know that we're going to be covering this for quite a while longer and certainly that's true for all of the course participants as well. So, we can do this either of two ways. I'd like to hear either is there a story that you're actually looking forward to doing over the next couple of months, or is there a story idea that you'd recommend to the course participants that they pursue wherever they are?

[00:18:22] **Maryn McKenna** Andre, I'll start with you.

[00:18:27] **André Biernath** I think I'm particularly interested in trying to explain the main doubts of people. I think all doubts are legitimate, and we should respect and try to address this in our articles, in our pieces. So I think this is one of the greatest things that we may be doing for the next weeks and months. And of course, another thing that I want to see here in Brazil is the acceleration of the campaign.

[00:18:59] **André Biernath** So we are a country with a very wide and a very good program, a national program of immunization. So when we will start to vaccinate like one

million, two million people every day because we have this capability. And of course, a big curiosity that I have and about the revaccination, when we'll have to revaccinate people, and how this will be done and pursued for the next months or years.

[00:19:35] **Maryn McKenna** Thanks. Federico, how about you? Anything you particularly want to write or any story ideas you'd recommend?

[00:19:42] **Federico Kukso** I'm interested to see if, because of the pandemic, there will be a change regarding mostly from the politicians about the role of science in society. Because in Latin America, science have been historically marginalized. There hasn't been enough of funding for science.

[00:20:04] **Federico Kukso** Another aspect, I'm really interested to see -- the scars of the pandemic in culture, in literature, in movies. I mean, I want to see if they're going to be novels about the pandemic or are people are going to be so tired about the pandemic that no one wants to read that book about the pandemic, not only nonfiction, but fictional. So that those are my main concerns.

[00:20:29] **Maryn McKenna** That's a really fascinating idea. Yves, I'll let you have the last word. What are you looking forward to writing or what would you recommend that our participants take a look at?

[00:20:39] **Yves Sciama** Yeah, I like Federico's idea, too. I would say that we follow the science a lot, but maybe we should also, at some point, go back to following the money, which is an old journalistic tradition.

[00:20:54] **André Biernath** Yeah.

[00:20:54] **Yves Sciama** Because there's been a lot going on in this aspect. For example, there's been the story about waiving property rights, I mean, intellectual property rights over the vaccines. And we should explore what that would have changed and how it could have been a different world had we done that.

[00:21:19] **Yves Sciama** And, you know, drug pricing and profit rates of pharmaceutical companies have always been interesting issues. But with this huge worldwide pandemic, there's going to be some great stories to right around this subject. Big Pharma is sort of the heroes of the day right now, but maybe we should question that a little and dig into these issues.

[00:21:47] **Yves Sciama** And one of the things that fascinates me is that, you know, public health is sort of divided between private companies that do drugs and a health system that is basically public. And this health system has been really, really tried by the last year. People are exhausted, some are dropping out. And at the same time, we see that Big Pharma is really profiting a lot from what has taken place.

[00:22:18] **Yves Sciama** So shouldn't we ask whether it would be possible to operate transfers to maybe see how some of that money could be used to rebuild the health systems that we need, or should we just let things go their natural way, which would just sort of amplify this divide? So I think here there's a space where science journalists should really investigate.

[00:22:51] **Maryn McKenna** These are such great ideas. I hope that the participants benefit from them, so thank you all the three of you, for coming in from your various time zones. I really appreciate it. And thank you, class participants, for listening. This, again, is one of the segments in module four, our last module of the course. We appreciate your attention and we'll see you online.