**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

Hello everyone. And welcome to...

**Alyssa Favreau:**

Hello! Sorry. [Laughs.] Wow. I really threw you.

[Music]

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

Hello everyone.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

Hello!

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

Welcome to the kickoff of Audio Distancing, a new Broad Science minisode about communicating inclusive science in the time of COVID-19.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

We are your hosts. I'm Alyssa Favreau.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

And I'm now a runner and a baker. Hello. It's Rackeb Tesfaye, your favourite.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

You are my favourite Rackeb Tesfaye.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

Thank you. I'm definitely the only one that you know, and the only one that most people know.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

I mean, winning by default is still winning.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

Most popular name in 1991.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

So Rackeb. The only Rackeb. The most important Rackeb. How are you?

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

Sorry to the one in Boston. Yeah, it's a loaded question these days, right? I'm feeling incredibly fortunate. I must say, I'm working on my PhD from home. I'm zooming a ridiculous amount, you know so, and my family's safe and at home in Toronto. But I'm also just feeling really concerned for our world. And for, you know, the folks that I know on the front line and the folks that I don't know on the front line and like everyone else has been a lot to process. But I think just feeling really fortunate. How about you?

**Alyssa Favreau:**

Yeah, same. I mean feeling so, so lucky that I get to stay home, that my loved ones get to stay home. But it is a weird time and it is not something that I ever thought I'd have to cope with and I'm not sure I know how to, I'm doing a lot of kitchen projects to distract myself. I'm trying to do as much work from home, but really that ends up being like a lot of video games.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

It's nice to hear your voice even if it's at a distance.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

Yeah you too.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

And maybe we can talk a little bit now about why you and I are here, Alyssa.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

Yes. So starting today we're putting out short, weekly episodes, interviewing someone working at the intersection of science and communication during this pandemic.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

Now there is a lot of content out there. So Alyssa and I thought long and hard about whether we wanted to add to that information overload that I know many of you are feeling.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

I'm definitely feeling it. I have to take a media break every few days or else it's just too much.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

Yeah. And I've definitely set times for myself as to when I can go online. But science communication is one of the most crucial disciplines, interdisciplinary disciplines right now. The situation changes minute by minute and there's a lot we still don't know about the virus and its impact. And there's also a lot of misinformation that science communicators have to contend with.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

And all of that creates a situation where people working in science communication, whether they're in academia or they're working as journalists or they're sharing information with their communities in other ways, those people have to find new and inventive ways of getting information, the right information, the right information for that moment, out to the public.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

No pressure, right?

**Alyssa Favreau:**

Yeah. Easy.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

We want to also highlight the disproportionate impact that the science and its communication at this current time is having on underrepresented or marginalized communities to amplify voices doing that work and talk through the particular issues they're facing and how they're taking control of their narratives and their safety.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

So those are the stories we're going to be looking at with these minisodes over the next few weeks. And they will be airing Mondays at 11:00 AM on CKUT 90.3 FM, and on our podcast.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

And to start us off today we're speaking with one of Canada's top health and public policy reporters, André Picard. He is an acclaimed health columnist at the globe and mail, who actually just celebrated his 33rd anniversary at the newspaper.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

Yeah, the very day we interviewed him was his anniversary, which is wild.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

I know we had no cake. Sorry André.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

But congratulations.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

André has been one of the most turned to journalists during this pandemic in Canada. We managed to catch him for a quick chat about what it's like to be a science journalist right now and how Canada is really doing in terms of communicating about COVID-19, and what we need to be doing better.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

So let's listen.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

Thank you so much Andre, for joining us today. We wanted to know a little bit about what your day to day looks like covering this pandemic as a health reporter.

**André Picard:**

I guess my day to day is lots of reading. So I start, I'm up early, go out for a run, and then I get on Twitter and the internet and start leafing through my papers. I used to do it with a stack of papers on my desk. Now I do it electronically, so I read a lot. Then we have a story meeting midmorning to decide what everyone on our health team is doing. And then depending on what I'm writing or not, I start writing, I start researching and then it's another day,

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

Another long day.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

When the first case was announced in Wuhan in November, it was very much framed as international news. But you've covered other pandemics before. Was there a moment when you thought, we're really going to have to cover this more in Canada?

**André Picard:**

Somebody was asking me that recently, so I was looking back. So I wrote my first story about a coronavirus in about mid-January. So I'd say that's around the time we started paying attention that, "Ooh, this might not stay just in China." When there started to be indications that was going, you know, nearby, Singapore, et cetera, that's when we started paying attention, especially it starts to look so much like SARS.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

And usually what's communicated with the public in regards to science is the final product of science, so to speak. But here what's needed is to keep the public informed about the process, the trial and error of science, which hasn't really been emphasized as much before. What is your current experience with disseminating this information when there's so much uncertainty on the level we haven't really seen before? And how has the public's reception been? Do you find that maintaining trust with your readership has been difficult?

**André Picard:**

Well, I think the job of health journalists like me is to do translations. We're always doing sort of the translation of the science, try and make it comprehensible to the public. And here there's just, you know, it's almost like a fire hose that you were drinking out of. So you have to drink more selectively. So I think that's the big key element is try to boil down information for people. It's a pandemic like none ever before, because it's sort of the first pandemic of the internet age. So you have all this constant feedback and rumours, et cetera, you know, outright lies. So there's a whole other level of stuff that's never occurred in the past that we're I think trying to learn how to deal with. But I don't think we've quite figured it out.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

And kind of as an example of the story shifting very quickly, you recently experienced backlash for a piece you wrote titled "If you can get your relatives out of seniors' homes, try to do so as fast as you can." The piece kind of outlined the risk of seniors' homes a few days before news broke about the 31 deaths in a longterm care facility West of Montreal. Can you talk maybe a bit more about the life cycle of an article like that and how quickly perceptions can change?

**André Picard:**

Yeah, I think, you know, these days you essentially get backlash on whatever you write. So you have to pick your topics and have a thick skin about it. Something like that is an example of, I try to see where not just what's happening today. I leave that to the news reporters, but as a columnist, like what, where are things going? What do we have to really look out for? And we have long discussions about that in our meetings in the morning. And we really saw, you know, I had covered the BC outbreak, which they handled pretty well, in Lynn Valley. But when that was first announced, everybody, people like me who've covered epidemics before said, "Uh oh, this is the nightmare scenario," right? If it gets in a nursing home, everybody's going to die. Now Lynn Valley had a number of deaths, 20 something, but they managed to contain it. So I think from then on we started paying more attention. And to me, Ontario and Quebec, were at such a point where they, I think there were 600 nursing home outbreaks at the time where I think someone had to say, "listen, if you can get your relatives out of there, get them out." Now a lot of people cannot, obviously, I thought that was more obvious than my readers, but I got a lot of backlash for that saying, "Oh, we can't get our loved ones out." And I never thought I suggested that, but I think somebody had to sort of raise that alarm.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

And did the tides kind of change once it became, there were more stories out there about the risks of nursing homes?

**André Picard:**

Yeah. I think within a couple of days when more data was published, when we had some huge death figures published, people kind of said, "Oh, I see why you were saying that." And, and to be fair, I was quoting quite a well known geriatrician who was the one who alerted me to this. And they said, "Oh yeah, I guess you weren't exaggerating." But a lot of people continue to insist, "I can't get my loved ones out. You're just making me feel guilty." But you're going to make people unhappy when you write about this stuff. So you have to live with that.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

And ultimately it is the truth that needs to be reported on.

**André Picard:**

Well, ultimately it's my truth or my opinion and that's what the column is. So there's very few right or wrong answers in this because we're learning on the fly.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

And how does international reporting, or specifically I guess US reporting about COVID-19 affected your thinking and your reporting on the virus in a Canadian context?

**André Picard:**

Yeah, well it's the elephant next door, right? So we have to pay a lot of attention to it. There's lots of travel over the border, or there will be eventually. So you have to pay a lot attention to the US. As with all these stories, once it's a big deal in the US that kind of overwhelms everything. So I make a point, I try and read a lot of European papers, the Japanese papers in translation, because I think you have to keep your eye on the global situation, not just the US one. So that's always a danger we have in Canada is we're so overwhelmed by us news that we have to not get too, too caught up in.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

And then, particularly in the Canadian context have you noticed any gaps in coverage that perhaps are failing to be filled?

**André Picard:**

Well I think we can always do better. You know, when you look back at these things after they're over, you kind of go, "Oh, why didn't we cover this a month earlier," or whatever. I think the biggest gap is actually just that the news media is in big trouble. There's far fewer reporters than before, there are fewer resources. So especially in smaller towns where they've lost a lot of their local media, where do they get their coverage from? It's all newswires, it's all American stuff. So I think it's a really unfortunate for people in small-town Canada to not get news as well as they could have even a few years back. So there's a real dependence on the CBC, on big papers like the Globe, but we don't do a good job of covering outside the big cities either.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

And a predominant conversation that is happening again, particularly in the US is the inclusion of reporting race when it comes to coronavirus cases. Here in Canada, provinces have not been including this data. And we know that Indigenous communities and ethnic minorities will potentially be the worst hit. Can you maybe talk a little bit about covering social inequalities when it comes to pandemics and viruses such as coronavirus?

**André Picard:**

Yeah. So something like race data, I've been writing about this for many years, how it's essential to get a sense of who gets sick in general, heart disease, chronic illnesses. And now with an epidemic, it's even more important in short term. So there's been good coverage of the US of social determinants and the impact on the epidemic. And I think in Canada, again, we have such terrible data, there's such a reluctance to collect stuff and to publish it. We're very prudish about this stuff and it doesn't serve us well. But you know, we knew all along that the homeless were going to be at risk, that the elderly who were institutionalized would be at risk, that people, you know, women who live in situations of violence in their homes will be at higher risk. So we know all these things, but we kind of are reluctant to actually measure them. And that's, we always make that mistake and I don't know why we don't fix that.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

You've also been pretty vocal about the coverage that public officials have received as they're responding to COVID-19. I'm thinking in particular Dr. Theresa Tam, who's received what seems like the brunt of racist and misogynistic bullying. What responsibility do science journalists or health journalists have to report on issues that aren't maybe exactly public health focused, but are in this way very much offshoots of the pandemic?

**André Picard:**

I think we absolutely have to cover them. When someone like Theresa Tam has become this lightning rod for, as you said, for misogynists, for racists, for people who want to blame someone. And it's totally unfair and I think we can't just report it as a he said she said, these awful criticisms of her. I think we have to at some point take a stand and say, no, this is not right. And especially with public health officials, it's really easy to criticize people who actually don't have a lot of power, what they are, they can give recommendations to government, but they don't really have the power under our legislation to do stuff. And then to criticize them for not acting is totally unjust and unfair. And then when you add the racism element, the sexism element, it just makes it ten times worse.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

I wouldn't say "at the end of all of this" because it will never truly end, but when the worst of it is over for the time being, how would you reflect on the state of science communication and science journalism, and what needs to change, and what that might look like going forward in the future?

**André Picard:**

I think generally before this I was saying that we live in a time where we have kind of the best science journalism ever. We have some really superb stuff going on, and then we have some of the worst. And I think that's true of the epidemic coverage as well. I think to get a sense of how good or bad our coverage was, I think it's probably a little too soon. We're still in the thick of it. I don't think we'll know until this plays out a little longer where we failed, where we should have paid more attention. But certainly I think we probably should have paid more attention to the data coming out of China. We know that now with a little bit of hindsight that [they were] probably not as truthful as they made themselves out to be. A lot of us like me, praised China at the outset, you know, saying they are much better than during the SARS era. And they were, but they're still not good enough. So I think things like that we're going to learn over time. I think there's going to be a reckoning in journalism in general about the coverage of Trump and the epidemic coverage is even worse than in general. You know, how we just regurgitate all this nonsense and lies. I don't think that's going to look good on journalism in historical terms.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

Maybe it's too early to call it, but if you had to give a letter grade to Canada in terms of COVID reporting, what would it be?

**André Picard:**

I think in general, Canada has quite good media, quite good science journalism and health journalism. Our papers were pretty early to make stuff available without a paywall. And I'm not just talking about my own paper, but all large papers in Canada, and I think that's great. We, I think, have done well overall. Probably—I don't like to mark papers say a B or a B plus at this point, but again, we'll have to see how that bears out.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

That's pretty good.

**André Picard:**

The test is going to be in the long term though, right? Are we going to keep this up? Are we going to, I think the backlash is going to come very soon, backlash in these things is inevitable. We're going to have all these, "Oh, we overreacted." You know, "We didn't need to do this. We've destroyed the economy." All those things are predictable, but all of those things are going to be tinged with a lot of hindsight.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

I've just been hearing people say on and off that if everything goes according to plan, it will seem like we overreacted. That's the best case scenario and it's something that I need to remind myself every so often.

**André Picard:**

Yeah. And I said that early on when people said I was overstating this and overreacting, I said there's nothing I'd love more than in two months for people to tell me I was wrong. That would be great. I'd be happy if nobody died. But that's not going to be the case unfortunately.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

And taking into account all the information that you have right now, what advice would you have for other science communicators? And conversely, what advice would you have for those consuming media right now?

**André Picard:**

Well, I think I've said to news consumers all along, I think don't get so caught up in the numbers. You know, we in the media really obsess about how many cases today in each province, and in the grand scheme of things, those are all individual tragedies, but the numbers are not that important. What's important is what does the curve look like overall rather than the exact numbers? So I think we need to take a bigger picture view. We kind of get caught up in the day to day or even the hour to hour. And we're especially bad about that in the media. We watch this stuff hour for hour and I often think I wouldn't want to be a historian writing about this because of the way the media coverage has changed now. You used to, you know, even five years ago there would be a big daily story summarizing what happened yesterday, and we don't have that anymore because the news is just sort of minute by minute. So figuring out in retrospect what was important on any given day, I don't think that's going to be easy at all.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

No, sifting through all that information, I'm definitely with you on that. I would not want to be a historian. Alyssa, do you have any other questions?

**Alyssa Favreau:**

Not particularly. Is there anything else you'd like to add André?

**André Picard:**

No, I could ramble on forever, but I won't punish you in that way.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

Alright. Well thank you so much for speaking with us today,\ for taking time out of what I assume is a very, very busy schedule.

**André Picard:**

Well, it's always a pleasure to talk to good science communicators, so keep it up.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

Thanks again to our guest, André Picard, whose column can be found in The Globe and Mail and who is on Twitter at @picardonhealth.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

Great Twitter. So please do follow him. You can also follow us on Twitter at @science\_broads and our website broadscience.org. Pretty much anywhere that isn't Instagram. Our podcasts can be listened to on iTunes, SoundCloud, Spotify, Stitcher, anywhere podcasts can be found really.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

And you know, if you can like, subscribe, review rate, whatever you feel is best. We love that.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

Yeah, we're not telling you five stars, but I mean, thank you.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

Follow your heart on that one.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

This episode was edited and mixed by the brilliant Ryan MacFarlane, in partnership as always with CKUT 90.3 FM.

**Alyssa Favreau:**

See you next week.

**Rackeb Tesfaye:**

Bye.