Case study

Innovative concepts to communicate science

DURING COVID-19

Contributor
Agencia Bori

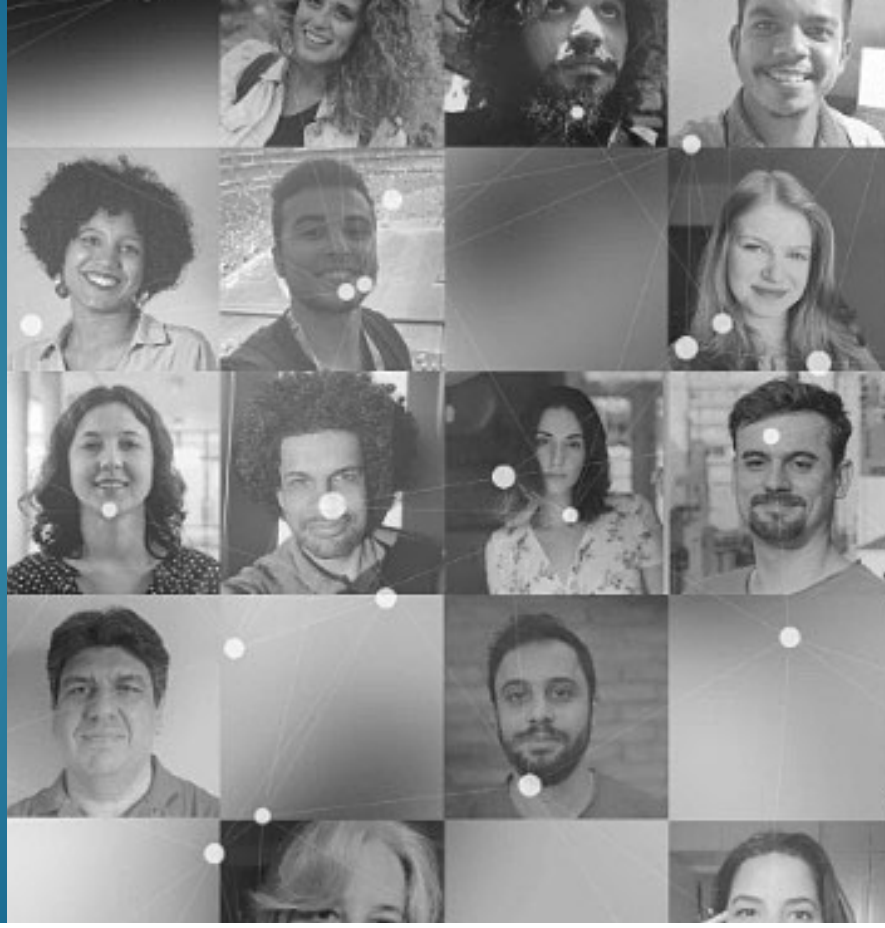
Country of implementation
Brazil

Start date of the initiative
February 2020

Track
Science and the media

Target audience
Journalists

Website
https://abori.com.br/grandes-temas/covid-19/?wdt_search=covid-19



Agencia Bori: Bridging the gap between science and journalism in Brazil

Summary of the initiative

Agencia Bori is a non-profit media-oriented initiative, founded by science journalists in February 2020. It supports journalistic coverage based on scientific evidence. Since the first cases of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Brazil, the initiative has worked to:

- facilitate contacts with scientists across the country who are qualified and available to speak to journalists about scientific aspects of COVID-19;
- give access to, and explain to be published scientific studies to journalists to enable the translation of research into editorial products targeted at the public;
- offer courses and workshops for Brazilian journalists on how to report on COVID-19-related news; and
- organize media training for scientists and researchers.

Journalists can register through the project website for free. Once registered, they have access to a collection of new national and international peer-reviewed studies to be published in journals or scientific repositories. They also receive an explanatory text in plain language along with the studies, and the contact details of the corresponding author. Additionally, the journalists are regularly supplied with relevant scientific content to deepen their understanding on various topics related to COVID-19, and the opportunity to speak directly to the researchers who conducted the studies.

Context and relevance of the project

The initiative to support journalists covering the COVID-19 pandemic began with the emergence of the first cases in Brazil. At that time, scientific and health-related information was becoming the first lead in newspapers and the media, requiring also non-specialized journalists to cover the stories. The project aimed to address the rising need for high-quality science journalism. *(Continued on next page)*

Photo above: Snapshot of journalists across Brazil participating in Agencia Bori's InfoVacina mentorship program. Credit: Diego Meneghetti.

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The project team initially started a movement to connect journalists with scientists, drawing its existing list of nearly 500 Brazilian scientists from specializations such as epidemiology, immunology, economy, health and education. Experts contacted were willing and qualified to respond to the journalists' questions.

The team then directed its strategy to monitor and disseminate to be published research on COVID-19 from several Brazilian universities and institutions to the journalists.

Further, in November 2020, a workshop supported by Sabin Vaccine Institute was organized for 50 journalists to clarify misconceptions and questions about clinical trials studying COVID-19 vaccines. Participants from different regions of the country and media organizations of varying scales were able to improve their coverage on COVID-19 after the workshop.

In October 2021, a four-month mentorship program, supported by Sabin Vaccine Institute and Serrapilheira Institute, InfoVacina, was introduced. This was aimed at training 25 Brazilian journalists on narrating vaccination stories by health and data scientists.

Summary of the analysis

Innovation factors

This project is the first initiative in Brazil to support generalized journalists in covering COVID-19 information. With the start of the pandemic, journalists from all over the country were eager to report on COVID-19 in an accurate and understandable manner. Scientific information was rapidly evolving, making reliable media reporting indispensable to ensure public trust and provide audiences with the latest evidence on risk factors, protective measures and potential consequences of an infection. The project supported this science translation goal by offering journalists curated and contextualized scientific information.

The project served as a bridge between science and journalism by building capacity and trusted relationships that will also be valuable during future health emergencies and other contexts. Interaction between science and the media increased and the latest evidence was made easily accessible for timely use in journalistic content.

To date, the matching of scientists and journalists as well as the capacity-building of both stakeholder groups is unique in Brazil. The strategy to provide media training to scientists and research training to journalists fosters mutual understanding and facilitates collaboration at an equal level.

The project further brings science closer to the public by facilitating the translation of research into journalistic content for a wider audience.

Accuracy of scientific information

The project makes peer-reviewed, to-be published scientific studies of Brazilian institutes and universities accessible to journalists.

The team applies a detailed process to ensure the quality of the research it shares with journalists. The team appraises a research paper on the following five criteria:[i]

1) material that is anticipated to be published;
2) diversity of the topic and the contributor;
3) originality of the results;
4) impact it may have on people's lives; and
5) public perception of the topic.

The criteria were chosen based on journalistic relevance. The team interviewed science journalists to understand which criteria were important when selecting research material for news stories. The content manager of Agencia Bori is responsible for the appraisal of the studies.

The team monitors and assesses primarily national work, before reaching out to international resources for topics of interest. Information is also drawn from scientists and health entities such as the World Health Organization, the Brazilian Society of Immunology, the Sabin Vaccine Institute, and Brazilian universities.

Snapshot of journalists across Brazil participating in Agencia Bori's InfoVacina mentorship program. Credit: Diego Meneghetti.

Impact on knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of the target audience

The project team is conducting a survey with its communities of journalists and scientists to evaluate how well the initiative fits their demands.

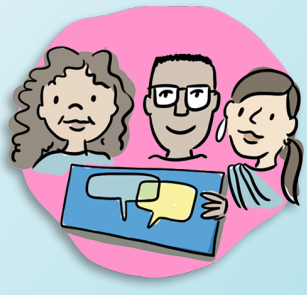
Another evaluation survey is being conducted on the InfoVacina to better understand the needs of the journalists. Preliminary results show that journalists are actively using information obtained through the program to write their news stories.

Some indications on the usefulness and influence of the project, as of November 2021, are as follows:

- over 1700 registered journalists countrywide are using the project website daily;
- one scientific paper with plain language explanation is shared with the journalists every two days;
- the project website has an average of 30 555 monthly views;
- the project's Twitter account has nearly 10 205 followers, including renowned Brazilian journalists;
- the 50 trained journalists noticed an improvement in the quality of their COVID-19 news after the first workshop on vaccination; and
- scientists from small universities with no prior experience on media relations have become trusted sources for Brazilian news outlets owing to the contact list of scientists supplied by the project.

Furthermore, the disseminated studies about the impact of the pandemic on health workers and the economy were mentioned by news outlets from all over the country. Some have even influenced public policies by local governments.

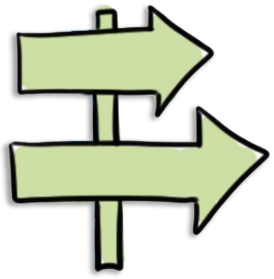
Gender equality, equity and human rights considerations



The project team considered gender equality and regional representation in the study selection and scientist–journalist matching process. These considerations also guided the selection of the 50 journalists who attended the first science journalism workshop as well as the four-month mentorship program.

Ethnic diversity is also one of the criteria for selecting workshop participants.

The project is committed to giving visibility to scientists in Brazilian regions that are not traditionally represented, as well as to female scientists. For instance, in 2020, 51% of the scientific work disseminated by the agency had been contributed by women.



Looking forward

The project team plans to scale up the initiative by:

1) increasing the quality and quantity of studies being shared with registered journalists by involving a science committee to support the scientific appraisal of the studies;

2) raising awareness about the project and thereby increasing the number of registered journalists;

3) introducing more trainings and workshops for journalists who report on scientific topics such as COVID-19;

4) increasing media training opportunities for scientists to help them better communicate with the media; and

5) planning other forms of engagement such as press conferences with the community of scientists and journalists.

References

i. Agencia Bori. Learn about Bori's five study selection criteria for dissemination (*https://abori.com.br/blog/os-cinco-criterios-de-curadoria-da-bori/*).

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