Interview with Anita Makri

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KENNEALLY: The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted an ongoing and escalating attack on science that is much more than a philosophical debate. It is an attack on scientists, too. Physicians for Human Rights surveyed over 900 Uclinicians in early 2021 and documented a climate of fear in labs and hospitals. Over 60% said they fear reprisal if they spoke out publicly on safety concerns about COVID-19.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

Verbal abuse, violent threats, and even physical attacks on medical staff and scientists reflect a tense relationship between science, media, politics, and the public, reports journalist Anita Makri. When that relationship turns toxic, she notes, public health messages and scientific evidence must battle to be heard. Anita Makri joins me now from London. Welcome to the program, Anita.

MAKRI: Thank you, Chris. Nice to be here.

KENNEALLY: Well, it's a really great opportunity to talk to you about your article for *Nature Medicine* which appeared in April 2021. It was nominated as a Feature of the Year by the UK's Medical Journalists' Association, and it's a really important topic to discuss. You cite examples from the US, Europe, and South America. How common is the problem, and how dangerous is it today for scientists?

MAKRI: You know, part of what was interesting to me when writing that piece is that there is very little information to really get a handle on the problem, especially for scientists, as opposed to health professionals. For health professionals, you have monitoring by the World Health Organization, and you have Physicians for Human Rights, as you mentioned, a US nonprofit doing monitoring, and you have the Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition doing similar work.

For scientists, I really could find very little by way of monitoring data. There's a committee housed within the NAS, the National Academies of Science – it's called the Committee on Human Rights – which as far as I know doesn't do formal monitoring, but they could give me a sense of trends based on their advocacy on behalf of scientists who come under threat globally. Rebecca Everly directs the committee and leads that work.

After that piece, *Nature* did a small survey of about 300 scientists, and they found that 15% had received death threats. Slightly over 20% received threats of physical or sexual violence. And over 40% experienced emotional or psychological distress just for trying to do their job.

I guess what's encouraging a little bit is that since the feature was published, we did see a flurry of follow-up pieces on it in various outlets, including *The Guardian* and *Nature*. So we are seeing more attention on the problem, and that should help. I should say that credit is due to the editors of *Nature Medicine* who approached me and who were alive to the issue early on.

KENNEALLY: Well, those are distressing, discouraging numbers to hear, Anita Makri. What role does social media play to incite people to attack scientists, and who are the targets of abuse that are most vulnerable?

MAKRI: I think it's pretty well established that attacks via social media are common, and not just for scientists. We also know that women and minorities are especially targeted for abuse, and that came through in my reporting for that feature as well. I guess what's less cited is the role that they have in this just by a lack of action. Some of my interviewees said that their complaints to Twitter, for example, vanished into a black hole, and others just simply saw no point in even reporting the abuse to them. So I think that that's another dimension of the role of social media which isn't as widely discussed.

KENNEALLY: Yet you do balance that, I think, rather negative view with the really important point that social media isn't entirely a negative force. Twitter and Facebook are also a kind of double-edged sword, because they're vital for sharing crucial information, especially during crises like the pandemic.

MAKRI: Yeah, that's right. I made a point of making that point, if you will, because we know this from experience, but it also came through from the reporting once again for the story. Some of the interviewees had no interaction with social media. Others used it to communicate science-based information, even after receiving threats, and still saw great power in doing that.

KENNEALLY: And the attacks, unfortunately, aren't only from the public. Employers and governments are also belligerents in the global war on science and scientists. Tell us what happened to a researcher working on the edge of the rainforest in Brazil.

MAKRI: Yes, that came through from some of the monitoring data as well as the experiences I heard. I think you're referring to Marcus Lacerda, a doctor and clinical researcher based in Manaus. His story began when the pandemic was still in its early days, and the health

system was under pressure from COVID in Manaus. That's a city on the edge of the Amazon in northwest Brazil. He heard that chloroquine was being used in China, and basically, just eager to do something, jumped on the idea to test it with a clinical trial.

Now, by the time his results were ready, a preprint was already published in France which claimed that a related drug could clear the coronavirus from a patient within five days. Remember, those were the early days, where no treatments were available at all. So people around the world latched onto that, including Trump and including his own president, Bolsonaro.

So when his trial pretty much dashed hopes that chloroquine worked or could be used safely, there was a big backlash. I actually didn't really go into the details of what I heard. He reported involvement from top politicians, death threats on social media, intense scrutiny from other scientists. And to deal with it, he had to get bodyguards, psychotherapy, legal advice. It had a really huge impact on his life and work.

I led the piece with this story partly because the experience of hearing his account was powerful in itself. When we got onto Zoom for the interview, I did my intros as usual, and there was complete silence across the screen. There was this intense stare coming my way. I had no idea what to expect, if he was ready to talk or not. I had a few people refuse an interview up to that point. Then he started talking, and he didn't stop for a long time. After that, I knew I had to lead with this story, and it's actually the first quote in the feature – his first sentence which I heard on Zoom.

KENNEALLY: Well, as you say, that experience unfortunately isn't a singular one. It's happened to scientists and others around the world. Certainly, when the hopes that many placed in hydroxychloroquine were dashed, physicians and others were accused of being responsible for patients' deaths and that they were corrupted by Big Pharma. I think your reporting found that a simplistic view of science is what leads people to look for someone to blame in a crisis like COVID.

MAKRI: Yes, I think that that really sort of emerged through the accounts of the people I spoke to. But I really think it's also what happens when people need answers and clarity that science isn't yet ready to provide urgently in this case, and faster than the usual pace of scientific work. In the early stages of the pandemic, that mismatch left a real vacuum, and there's plenty to fill it. So there's speculation, beliefs, miracle treatments, politics, opinions on social media. I think for me, that's sort of a key part of why those things tend to happen.

KENNEALLY: Where do scientists go to find support when facing assaults on their reputations or worse?

MAKRI: That was another point I found interesting when reporting for this piece. Some were lucky enough to have support from employers and lawyers, but there was also a sense that this wasn't reliable or consistent or even there at all in some cases. Support certainly wasn't there from social media. So for many of them, it actually came from informal professional networks.

And I think there's a real question to be asked here about the role of universities and professional associations. Communication is so encouraged, but what about protection for those scientists who speak up? What's institutions' responsibility on this? I think that that's a point that we still haven't really explored enough.

KENNEALLY: Anita Makri, several scientists you spoke to said they wished they had talked more to the press rather than less, even though they faced attacks as a result. So is more public discussion about science and research, not less, the secret weapon in this war?

MAKRI: Well, I'm not sure there's a secret weapon, really. I would say that it's more about the kind of discussion we have about science, rather than how much of it we're having. I've written before about the habit of viewing it as an authority, expecting science to give definitive answers and give them fast. I think that has created false expectations. The good news is that I think this message is starting to take shape in public discourse, and perhaps a greater willingness of scientists to speak up is part of that. But we're still in a kind of transition stage, I think, when it comes to the role of science in society.

And in terms of attacks specifically, I think it's part of a wider pattern. We're seeing intimidation also growing for journalists, for defenders of human rights and the environment, and there is definitely data there to support that.

So to link it back to the role of science, I think that once you take voices of moderation out of the picture, you're left with extreme views. That's the bottom line here, and it's the bottom line in the piece, too.

KENNEALLY: Anita Makri, thank you so much for speaking with me today.

MAKRI: Thank you, Chris.

KENNEALLY: That's all for now. Our producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You could subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts, and please do follow us on Twitter and on Facebook. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for joining me on Velocity of Content from CCC.

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