

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

BIPOC JOURNALISTS ON COVERING COVID AND RACISM

LAURA FLANDERS: Black, indigenous, and people of color-led media do work that other media simply don't do. Helping undocumented New Yorkers, get vaccinated in Queens, reporting on Haiti's low death toll from COVID-19, those are just two examples, and that's just a taste. This week on "The Laura Flanders Show," we kick off a new monthly feature we're calling "Meet the BIPOC Press." In the hosting chairs, Sara Lomax-Reese and Mitra Kalita of URL Media. And stick around to the end for my two cents on buried black history and the revolutionary Memorial Day holiday that might have been.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Hi, I'm Sara Lomax-Reese, co-founder of URL Media, and president and CEO of WURD Radio. We are here as a part of the Laura Flanders family once a month to bring to you information on the URL Media Network. URL stands for uplift, respect, and love. And it's a new media organization where we have a network of BIPOC-owned media organizations that have come together to share stories and to just bring a different perspective on news and information. And today, we are going to be celebrating Memorial Day, but from a very different perspective. Memorial Day's origins date back to 1865 when a group of formerly enslaved Africans in Charleston, South Carolina gathered less than a month after the Confederacy surrendered to mark the end of the Civil War. We're going to be looking at two wars that have impacted the whole world and disproportionately affected communities of color. And those wars are the coronavirus and police brutality and systemic oppression. And so we are going to be talking with two of our URL Media Network partners, The Haitian Times and Sahan Journal, to talk about these twin pandemics, these twin issues, these twin wars. And very excited to be co-moderating and co-hosting this with my co-founder Mitra Kalita.

S. MITRA KALITA: Thank you Sara, for setting us up, and that history lesson that has a direct line to the present day. Memorial Day is also the psychological start of summer, and certainly in the US it feels like we are ready for summer. Mask policies have been changed. People are back eating indoors in restaurants. Offices are opening up. So there's this weird normalcy that's been resuming. And I think Memorial Day weekend will only hasten that. And yet for some of us, this has been punctuated with our mobile phones teetering with friends who want to brunch or get back together here in the US, and WhatsApp messages perhaps from our families thousands of miles away overseas reporting on friends, family, relatives in places like India, Brazil, and Peru. Reports of COVID, desperate pleas for oxygen. In my case, certainly, the number of family members with COVID has crossed into the dozens. So COVID is still very much a threat in one part of my life, even as this other part of my life, which is the day-to-day here in America, is very much focused on the reopening. Mukhtar, I'm hoping we can start with you. Sahan Journal was founded to cover immigrant communities and people of color in Minnesota. I just wondered

if you could take us a little bit through your founding story, and then we'll come to the present day.

MUKHTAR M. IBRAHIM: As you know, Minnesota has a large population of immigrants, and refugees, and people of color from different parts of the world. And now they make up about 20% of the total state population. But if you pick up the newspaper or tune into the radio, you get the sense that Minnesota is predominantly white, almost 100%. So we really wanted to change that. We had the killing of George Floyd almost exactly a year ago, and then we have to pivot and change our coverage into really bringing all the issues surrounding police brutality, civil rights, and how the communities are responding to what happened at the time. And we have seen now a conclusion of really young people from diverse backgrounds from the traditional African-Americans and the new African-Americans who are also really kind of joined hands and went out to really protest about things that were affecting their daily lives. Our audience has grown significantly since we have been hiring and covering those issues.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Mukhtar, you said something that really was interesting to me when you said there are African-Americans and new African-Americans, speaking of the Liberians and Somalis. And I'm curious if black immigrants from Africa and other places see themselves as African-American.

MUKHTAR M. IBRAHIM: I use that term because I think the more the community establishes its roots in Minnesota, the more I think they identify with the challenges and struggles that the black African-American community really feel. And we have seen also young Somali men being killed by the police. The case of Dolal Idd, just a couple of months after George Floyd was killed, happened. And we have seen how everyone came out to really support the family and protest against the killing.

S. MITRA KALITA: So, Garry I wanna bring you in here because Mukhtar mentioned that we've been seeing this for years, and you are the veteran, I believe, among us, because The Haitian Times has been around for two decades if I'm not mistaken. Can you talk a little bit about police brutality as you've been covering it? I know as a journalist in New York, what I remember looking to The Haitian Times for a unique coverage on were the death of Patrick Dorismond and then of course the brutality of Abner Louima. And I wonder how much of what Mukhtar just laid out is familiar to you, and whether there was a similar evolution of the community that you've seen.

GARRY PIERRE-PIERRE: So I wanna first talk about his use of new African-Americans, because ultimately you become that. Like my children are black. They are Haitian, but they are not separating themselves from who they are, because people, society would not give them any choice, and they embrace it rather eagerly. You saw that from the Harlem Renaissance through

today. Whoever is the new group that comes in, first you're separate and then you look at the African-American and say, "Well, they are like me." The other thing that's familiar is the spate of police brutality or consistency of murdering. The story that shocked the world before George Floyd was Abner Louima. He was sodomized inside of a police precinct in Brooklyn. Really was left for dead. The NYPD has been under federal oversight before because of these patterns.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: What Mukhtar and Garry have been talking about are the police brutality and the opposite side of that is police reform. And so, we just had a very, very contentious DAs race. And for black Philadelphians, it felt like a repeat of the presidential election. It was that important. We had this very progressive incumbent DA named Larry Krasner, who has been a real thorn in the Fraternal Order of Police's side. He has gone against the establishment. He has really advocated for progressive policies. It really came down to the black community came out. Philadelphia has a black population of almost 44%. He won handily. He won 65% to 35%. The electorate was smart and savvy enough to kind of see through the narratives that were being advanced by stakeholders like the FOP. It really felt very racialized as well.

S. MITRA KALITA: It's a similar story here in New York where kind of how much police reform feels like it's on the ballot. And one of our leading candidates is Eric Adams who is an African-American cop, which makes things very complicated. Garry, I just wondered if you have thoughts on that, because I believe it was The Haitian Times. You recently did a story on how Haitians who are in the NYPD are also being elevated as precinct captains as they're trying to diversify not just the ranks of police officers, but also its leadership. Where does the Haitian community stand on this?

GARRY PIERRE-PIERRE: We've had a very complicated relationship with the NYPD, because we've had three fellow countrymen victim of the NYPD. And some of the biggest protests over police brutality in the city have been organized by Haitians. And now, whenever you see a protest in New York, you see plenty of Haitian flags everywhere. But at the same time, I think, by and large, there's still an element of respect in the police, especially from our elders, from people, my parent's definition, you don't talk back to the police. Whatever the police said, you did. And so, now we've transitioned into a place where we've taken a more critical look at the police, at the same time, respecting policing, because we understand that. As a society, we meant what it is. Policing has a place in our society, but it has to be done not to the detriment of the community. It has to be done with respect. And Adam is trying to thread that same needle.

ERIC ADAMS: I became a police officer to fix a system from within. I was recruited by elders to speak truth to injustice.

GARRY PIERRE-PIERRE: I mean he fancy himself. And he was, to his credit, a very vocal critic of the NYPD from inside when he was a cop. I covered him when I was at The New York Times. So I think that's what he's trying to do right now, and we'll see whether or not that's successful.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: I wanted to see if we could kinda pivot to that other war that we've all been dealing with, which is COVID-19. And each of you, including you, Mitra, have direct ties to countries and communities that are really still in the throes of COVID-19, and I'm actually gonna start with you, Mitra, because Epicenter, your newsletter, has done amazing work around vaccine outreach and COVID-19 awareness and education. And you're also... Your family, you have direct family in India. So talk to us about what you're still navigating here in Queens, but also what you're hearing and experiencing with your family in India.

S. MITRA KALITA: Thank you, Sara. Well, I do think it's related because there is this... There are systems that are setup against our communities. And in so many ways, what we've just heard are our news outlets are picking up the baton of literally defending our communities. And so, COVID-19 in many ways... Epicenter's very founding here in Jackson Heights, Queens were the epicenter of the Epicenter as it's known, really is the result of looking around and asking the question, does anybody know how bad this is? Will anybody come? And just communities trying to help each other. And in more recent months, our community came to us, came to Epicenter. We have been working with a lot of small businesses and spotlighting their problems and their successes. And they said, "Well restaurant workers qualify to get vaccinated - can you help us navigate this? We don't know how to book vaccines." Because in the kind of infinite wisdom of the vaccine rollout, everything was online. And so Epicenter began an effort, and it was really by word of mouth with these restaurant workers, which then led to taxi drivers, which then led to elderly who might not have access to, like I said, the internet. And as of yesterday, we've helped book 5,037 vaccine appointments, and this really just started out as neighbors helping neighbors, and it grew, and grew, and grew. That brings us to the present moment, and what I sort of alluded to earlier, of the schism of that many of us are feeling where it's no longer as hard to get a vaccine appointment or even vaccines as it once was, and yet our families overseas don't have access, and in many cases are dealing with second, even third surges. This is really worrisome to me, because it feels like it underscores so much of the systemic inequalities that we've been talking about. It's not like we can't do something about it. So President Biden has supported sharing the patents and technology transfer with other countries as a result of the situation that India is in right now. It's kind of saving its vaccines for its own people, but India is also the largest vaccine provider to the rest of the developing world. So we have this terrible domino effect where until Indians are vaccinated, does that mean that the rest of the world has to wait? And so, if it sounds complicated, it really is, but it also means that we're not acting like we're one world. We're acting as though, oh, the US is gonna be okay, and therefore these variants and this

threat is not gonna come here. I could tell you first hand from here in the epicenter that that is absolutely not true.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Mukhtar, you just recently came back from Kenya. You have family there and you spent a few weeks there. Can you tell us what your experience was and what's happening on the continent, especially in Kenya?

MUKHTAR M. IBRAHIM: I went there a couple of weeks after I took my Pfizer shot. So I was grateful to have that vaccine. But when I landed in Nairobi, the situation was completely different than what I have seen before. As you can tell, Nairobi is one of the most populous capital cities in the world, 4.2 million people. And the shocking part was the lack of social distancing when you're going to the market or visiting people. I have seen a lot of deaths happening in Nairobi since I was there. My uncle passed away. And when we went to the cemetery, you can see a lot of other burials happening around. So the situation there was really bad and they were in the surge of the third wave of the coronavirus, and there have been lockdowns especially at night. By 8:00 PM, you won't see anyone outside. Things were improving after I left, and they extended the curfew until 10:00 PM at night.

S. MITRA KALITA: Mukhtar, I'm so sorry to hear that, and it just invokes a situation we have this week where my uncle had been in the ICU with COVID, and it was a really rough week, because he's one of my closest uncles, my father's closest brother. He was released and I was kind of breathing easier, and then I got a WhatsApp message from Gujarat, where my husband's family lives, that his cousin had passed. And then within minutes of that, you really can't make this up, I got a message from another family group saying my aunt had just been taken to the hospital. And so, I do feel like it's been quite relentless, and it's been months of this now. And so to not have access to the vaccines, it's a glaring inequity. I just am surprised more people are not talking about it.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: I'm gonna just turn to you, Garry. Because as you listen to Mitra and Mukhtar, and I'm sure you are dealing with similar things with what's happening in Haiti and the communities that you're covering. I'm wondering, how does this change how you cover this issue?

GARRY PIERRE-PIERRE: Haiti, for once, gave us a break. COVID hasn't done much damage to Haiti. And now the question is why. There's a lot of speculation, a lot of scientists, experts who are heading down to try to figure out what happened there, although there's a little bit of uptick in the numbers lately. As far as New York, going back to your question about how we reported on it, well, at first, we tried to honor everyone who passed. And then quickly we realized there was a stigma attached having died of COVID, which shocked us at the newspaper, because we never really at one moment felt there was any stigma attached to it. But because

when the AIDS epidemic came about, they said that by the virtue of being Haitian, you are an AIDS carrier, and that really haunted a generation of young people in the schools having to deal with that. So, people were very hesitant about identifying as being dead of COVID-related illness.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: I wanted to just see as we get ready to wrap up, final thoughts from everyone, and if there are any big stories that you guys are following as your news rooms are looking at the landscape.

MUKHTAR M. IBRAHIM: Yeah, we are gearing up for the one year anniversary of the killing of George Floyd on Tuesday. So as a newsroom, we always center the voices of the community. So we are trying to do something really unique in terms of identifying community members who can tell us how that impacted or changed their lives. On the coronavirus, we are doing multimedia production around the COVID-19 vaccine in multiple languages, in Somali, Hmong and Spanish. The idea is to really reach older folks who cannot read or write in English. And we are also covering issues happening from other countries and trying to make the global local. One of our latest stories is how the Indian community is fundraising and providing supplemental oxygen for their families back home. So I think the two topics that we talk about is something that we cover daily, the coronavirus and issues around police brutality and racial justice.

GARRY PIERRE-PIERRE: Well, for us, we are doing an eight-part series on the George Floyd anniversary. One of them is that we're looking at the racial reckoning, working underway inside our community in our own community. In Haitian community, there are issues with colorism, and we wanna hold up a mirror to ourself and see where we are. We have an essay on immigrant pride. And the way that people are saying essential workers are essential. Well, then, now they're not doing us a favor anymore. We matter, we're essential, we're important. So we wanna take a look at that. We wanna look at how the policing is happening. In fact, we started it today with our story about this African burial ground on Church Avenue and Bedford Avenue, and the history that's there. And we wanna look how the way policing is being done in the community. How are they profiling folks now? Because we know it's still happening. It's been very exciting, very tiring, but hey, this is why we went into this business for.

S. MITRA KALITA: As New York opens up, our labor market and small businesses are being upended like never before. This year has been a year. So we're really looking at what it takes to get a job right now. Just underemployment in the communities continues to be an issue. We just did a profile of a street vendor who used to be a pharmacist, lost his job in his home country, has been here, couldn't make ends meet, and is now doing some street vending work as — he's selling masks. And then we'll continue to do outreach on vaccines. The obstacles remain great to get a vaccine in New York, especially if you're undocumented. So we've just been trying to let

people know it's free. You don't need your immigration papers, and it is plentiful. So we'll continue to get that message out there.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Yeah, and WURD, we are... May 31st through June 1 is the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Riot. And so we are going to be covering that and really connecting it with the other major government-sanctioned bombing of an American city which was the MOVE Bombing in West Philadelphia in 1985. I just wanna really celebrate this overall conversation because it really points to what we at URL Media and these BIPOC media organizations are doing, covering different stories differently than the mainstream media. And I think it's really important for our stories to kind of be heard and get some visibility. And so I wanna thank everyone for the conversation. Garry Pierre-Pierre from The Haitian Times, Mukhtar Ibrahim from Sahan Journal, and my co-host and co-founder, Mitra Kalita with Epicenter and URL Media. And I'm Sara Lomax-Reese, co-founder of URL Media and president CEO of WURD.

LAURA FLANDERS: Different stories told differently make a difference. Just consider that story about Memorial Day. It was 1865 in May, in Charleston, South Carolina that it had its roots. A full week before President Lincoln declared an end to the Civil War, black people in Charleston were already celebrating the defeat of Robert E. Lee. On May 1st, 1865, they paraded up to a new Union Cemetery where black troops who had been buried in a mass grave had been reburied by black workmen properly. On May 1st, 10,000 black troops with children singing at their front and women with arms full of flowers, and reeds, and crosses to decorate the graves went up to the new cemetery and performed a solemn dedication. After decorating the graves, they picnicked and partied and watched their troops, their victorious troops parade. It was as David Blight, the Yale historian who found the original records and wrote them up in a book in 2001, wrote, "As if the blacks were really marking an independence day for the second American Revolution, a revolution from the idea of a superior white race." And just think about it, since 1865, we could have been celebrating that holiday, and celebrating our independence from that idea. Instead, white media, starting in the south and Reconstruction, rewrote the story in their newspapers and everywhere, and we've been basically fighting the civil war ever since. Now, a pandemic is reminding us that no race is immune from a virus. This is one world, and we better start acting like it. Maybe we could start with this Memorial Day. Thanks for joining our special, Meet the BIPOC Press Edition of "The Laura Flanders Show." Till the next time. Stay kind, stay curious. I'm Laura Flanders.

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