Saving Lives from a Laptop: How to Produce a Live Virtual Media Briefing That Will Inform, Educate, and Protect Communities in Crisis

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Abstract : Introduction: WASHINGTON state in the Pacific Northwest of the United States is internationally known for its technology industry, fisheries, agriculture, and vistas. On January 21, 2020, Washington state also became known as the first state with a confirmed COVID-19 case in the United States, thrusting the state into the international spotlight as the world came to grips with the global threat of this disease presented. Tourism is Washington state's fourth-largest industry. Tourism to the state generates over 1.8 billion dollars (USD) in local and state tax revenue and employs over 180,000 people. Communicating with residents, stakeholders, and visitors on the status of disease activity, prevention measures, and response updates was vital to stopping the pandemic and increasing compliance and awareness. Significance: In order to communicate vital public health updates, guidance implementation, and safety measures to the public, the Washington State Department of Health established routine live virtual media briefings to reach audiences via social media, internet television, and broadcast television. Through close partnership with regional broadcast news stations and the state public affairs news network, the Washington State Department of Health hosted 95 media briefings from January 2020 through September 2022 and continues to regularly host live virtual media briefings to accommodate the needs of the public and media. Methods: Our methods quickly evolved from hosting briefings in the cement closet of a military base to being able to produce and stream the briefings live from any home-office location. The content was tailored to the hot topic of the day and to the reporter's questions and needs. Virtual media briefings hosted through inexpensive or free platforms online are extremely cost-effective: the only mandatory components are WiFi, a laptop, and a monitor. There is no longer a need for a fancy studio or expensive production software to achieve the goal of communicating credible, reliable information promptly. With minimal investment and a small learning curve, facilitators and panelists are able to host highly produced and engaging media availabilities from their living rooms. Results: The briefings quickly developed a reputation as the best source for local and national journalists to get the latest and most factually accurate information about the pandemic. In the height of the COVID-19 response, 135 unique media outlets logged on to participate in the briefing. The briefings typically featured 4-5 panelists, with as many as 9 experts in attendance to provide information and respond to media questions. Preparation was always a priority: Public Affairs staff for the Washington State Department of Health produced over 170 presenter remarks, including guidance on talking points for 63 expert guest panelists. Implication For Practice: Information is today's most valuable currency. The ability to disseminate correct information urgently and on a wide scale is the most effective tool in crisis communication. Due to our role as the first state with a confirmed COVID-19 case, we were forced to develop the most accurate and effective way to get life-saving information to the public. The cost-effective, web-based methods we developed can be applied in any crisis to educate and protect communities under threat, ultimately saving lives from a laptop.

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