



LSHTM Viral
S1E12: Communicating COVID-19: behind the scenes with LSHTM's press office
March 2, 2020

0:04 [Naomi Stewart, interviewer]

Hello and welcome back to LSHTM viral. I'm Naomi Stewart and today we're going to reflect on how COVID-19 has been communicated in the media and discuss the work that the LSHTM press team have been handling for the past few weeks. I'm here with James Barr, the media manager at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Welcome, James.

You and your team have been handling a huge amount of press inquiries over the past few weeks. What's it been like in the office for you?

0:30 [James Barr, interviewee]

I'd say it's been fairly crazy from myself and my small team. We've received more than 600 inquiries about the coronavirus alone just over the last five weeks, which is an exceptionally high number. And I'm sure colleagues in other institutions around the UK and around the world are experiencing a similar rise in inquiries. And I think that amount of inquiries really goes to show two things. One is the media interest in this outbreak. is obviously absolutely huge. The outrage just ticks. Every news hook that a journalist is after, and also is understandably a huge concern in the public around this outbreak. So for us as a team, it's been incredibly important to be able to work very closely with our academics who are giving who have given up huge amounts of time to be able to convey accurate and responsible messages to the media. And journalists are incredibly busy too. So I really see it as a partnership.

1:30 [Naomi Stewart, interviewer]

So compared to a normal workday, what is a day during coronavirus in the press office look like for you.

1:35 [James Barr, interviewee]

The first thing my team and I do in the morning is we have a catch up on the overnight news. We have a look at social media to see what's happening and will produce a media briefing for our senior management team about the outbreak so they're fully informed. We'll then go to the 7-10 experts we have that we know are really great at engaging with the media who are proper experts in the field. We'll ask them their availability for interviews throughout the day. And we've set up spreadsheets with a triage system where we register all the interview requests that come in - our experts can't conduct all media interviews. So for us, what's really, really key is to ensure that although we're getting huge amounts of inquiries, we understand where journalists are coming from, we understand that deadlines, and we understand that they need honesty from PR professionals. So it's ensuring that we're getting back to journalists, or we've been up front and saying, sorry, we'd really like to help you. But in this instance, we just can't do that today. So that will help their time planning and their pieces.

2:45 [Naomi Stewart, interviewer]

And that was something we spoke about in the last episode to Heidi Larson about is the significance of good communication during an outbreak. So what does your team have to do to ensure the media is actually getting accurate information?

2:58 [James Barr, interviewee]

We need to ensure that the academic colleagues we are putting up for interview and scientists are experts in that in their field. And that's absolutely crucial. Fortunately, at LSHTM, we have several very strong experts in infectious disease, who are really, really strong at media engagement. So it does make it a little bit easier for us. But I think what's crucial is for PR professionals, press offices, is to offer those colleagues maximum support. When we approach colleagues to engage with the media. They fully understand the opportunity involved. So it's up to

PR professionals to provide a complete briefing on the opportunity and then help them prepare for it such as the key measures they might want to develop questions they might wish to stay away from being able to handle potentially difficult questions from journalists. I think that's all part of good PR.

3:51 [Naomi Stewart, interviewer]

You mentioned a bit earlier the risks of miscommunication with the public. Have you seen any incidences where there has been information that has been communicated incorrectly and what did that look like?

4:03 [James Barr, interviewee]

Given an outbreak like this, and given the media frenzy about this outbreak, it's inevitable that some messages will be perhaps not quite accurately reported. But most journalists that I work with are fantastic. And there's no maliciousness involved. It's purely, they're incredibly busy. This is a really fast, evolving outbreak. And they're under a lot of pressure. I think it's imperative that we send journalists, responsible communication and that responsible communications means knowing who we're talking to which journalists, we're talking to ensuring they're receiving the right messages for their story, and making sure those messages are accessible, clear and responsible.

4:43 [Naomi Stewart, interviewer]

What would happen if we didn't have a press office at the university or other institute's and journalists spoke directly to experts with no support?

4:52 [James Barr, interviewee]

Well, I think one of the first things that would happen is academics and scientists, they wouldn't have time to do their actual work because they were just getting phone calls and emails constantly from journalists requesting comment and interview. So I think we have a very important role in just being able to receive those inquiries on their behalf and then triage them. We're able to support academics and scientists, in their responses to the media, ensure they're fully briefed, all the opportunities that come their way, work with them on key messages, meet up with them to conduct mock interviews. And really, we want to make sure they're as comfortable as possible in the opportunities that arise. And of course, there are other things like logistics, which probably aren't as sexy as the other stuff, but actually really, really important.

5:39 [Naomi Stewart, interviewer]

With COVID-19, there's a unique scenario happening where research is being done much more rapidly than it would normally be done. How is the press office managing that sort of scenario?

5:49 [James Barr, interviewee]

I think each press office in this scenario is probably handling it in their own way and perhaps there's no right or wrong way. For us, LSHTM has mathematical modellers who are providing estimates on how the virus will spread and the most effective control measures. And this data is being fed back to policymakers in the UK and abroad. Obviously, this is speedy science. But it is important that this data gets into the public domain. And so it can be shared and sharing information during this outbreak is absolutely crucial. So we've taken the decision not to issue press releases about this preliminary work; what we're doing is developing short stories, and maybe three, four paragraphs with a quote from the researcher involved. And making sure that we're really clear about the parameters of this work.

6:41 [Naomi Stewart, interviewer]

So in terms of other media outlets worldwide and other press offices, how do you think the overall reporting communications around COVID-19 have been so far?

6:50 [James Barr, interviewee]

I think for the most part, it's been excellent. And that's due to amazing journalists that work around the world, amazing PR professionals, and of course, the scientific community. And I just

like to say thanks to colleagues here at LSHTM who have been giving so much of their time to respond to media inquiries, and also to academics and scientists around the world who are doing such a great job. And organisations like the Science Media Centre here in London are absolutely crucial.

7:14 [Naomi Stewart, interviewer]

So just before you go, if I could ask if you had one piece of advice for somebody that's going to do immediate interview a scientist or academic about COVID-19, or other outbreaks, what would your advice be?

7:27 [James Barr, interviewee]

preparation, preparation is absolutely key to any interview. lack of preparation is the number one reason people have a bad experience with the media. So be prepared, including on who you're speaking to key messages, and also use your press office.

7:44 [Naomi Stewart, interviewer]

Thanks very much for that sage piece of advice. James, thanks for coming in.

We want to say another massive thank you to all of you for your questions and comments about the podcast. It's been so good to hear what topics you're interested in and how we can help. We've had so many questions that we've decided to bring you in special LSHTM Viral live Q&A session where you can chat to us in real time. More details are coming soon.

So follow us on social media through LSHTM's Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to get the updates. And some more exciting news, LSHTM is holding our first ever online virtual open day on Wednesday, the fourth of March. All you have to do is sign up with your email address, and you'll be able to tune in and watch videos, chat to programme directors speak to students and find out more about studying LSHTM. We'll put the link to more information in the description box of this episode. Thanks again for listening and have a great day.