

# Creating a Virtual Programming Ecosystem

Putting the “social” back into social media

Written by Loren Hurst • July 2021

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## Summary

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on workplaces, travel, and social interaction should leave little doubt that virtual programming capability is now a core strategic communications asset. The pandemic’s long-term effects are still being tallied; but regardless of what a post-covid “new normal” eventually looks like, it is clear that online interpersonal interaction and the related skill sets are now critical to effective communications programs. In the public diplomacy space, these realities should compel

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practitioners to take a hard look at how to deploy virtual interaction strategically to engage key stakeholders and wider audiences.

Strategic virtual programming is distinct from social media and content-driven communications methods. The nature of the typical webinar or webcast is content production. In fact, many if not the majority of webinar views occur *after* the live session video has been posted. By contrast, the fundamental nature of strategic virtual programming is community-building rooted in interpersonal interaction. This community-building approach is driven by conversation to cultivate relationships and does not scale like social media posts or result in massive viewership metrics. It requires a methodical, patient approach that seeks to build a deeper rapport, familiarity, and ultimately trust with audiences. The proper way to conceive of strategic virtual programming is not as a content production and delivery function, but as a comprehensive approach to reputation management.

The pandemic is in many ways a harbinger of future disruptions; the increasingly plain impact of climate change is exposing risks and vulnerabilities throughout society. Identifying, confronting, and managing these risks demands a fundamental shift in how businesses and governments function internally and interact with citizens. As with all communications disciplines, public diplomacy has had to pivot and adapt to the reality of covid-19. Organizations that pursue a forward-looking, holistic, reputation management-focused virtual programming strategy will leverage the interpersonal aspects of this space to strengthen key relationships and build communities. As a “new normal” emerges, these skill sets will only grow in importance and will separate effective audience engagement programs amongst the din of social media.

## **The Virtual Workforce**

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced many reluctant employers to adopt widespread telework arrangements. Yet despite the sudden upheaval, companies and governments have discovered the benefits of a distributed, virtual workforce in terms of productivity gains, work-life balance, and cost savings on office space. To be sure, a virtual working world has its drawbacks expressed as reduced social interaction and employee burnout.

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Regardless, given the inherent flexibility of remote work, it's a safe bet to assume that the virtual workforce is here to stay. If recent trends of worker preferences and demands for more flexibility are any indication, telework is poised to become a core part of workplace culture. Employers will have little choice but to adapt to attract and retain talent.

Virtual workforces are also a wise adaptation measure to manage risk of future disruptions. The increasing impacts of climate change on public health, infrastructure, and many other areas of society necessitate that companies and governments increase their options across the board to ensure they can keep functioning.

## **Social Media's Unintended Consequences**

Social media was originally heralded as a revolutionary boon for communications, and rightfully so - but it has also brought a slew of unintended consequences. Social media has become, in many ways, a malevolent as much as a positive force. It is ubiquitous, yet capturing and holding the attention of audiences is a struggle given the sheer amount and pace of information. Social media has adverse effects on mental health, and is considered by some researchers to be a core contributor to loneliness and depression. Publics around the globe are growing ever more wary of social media due to privacy concerns and data management practices. In the public diplomacy space, the most immediate concern is the need to combat misinformation that confuses audiences and exacerbates a deteriorating faith in facts. These challenges are bound to get worse with the advent of "deep fake" video content and the continued weaponization of social media. Indeed, a chief irony is that, as a valuable tool intended to bring people together, social media has also driven them apart.

## **Thinking Beyond Content**

The adverse effects of social media have created a new urgency for "misinformation inoculation". Our ultimate goal is to cultivate trust among our audiences - to give us the benefit of the doubt when the trolls inevitably come, spreading misinformation. As the impacts of the pandemic become entrenched and the centrifugal aspects of social media compound, how do we create trust with audiences? Public diplomacy efforts that focus on content are certainly valuable, due to scalability and widespread sharing. But content must

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be underpinned by deeper engagement. Key audiences must be provided a venue where they can focus on messaging for extended time periods, have the opportunity to ask questions and contribute ideas, and form ongoing relationships with public diplomacy representatives. Virtual programming, approached as a reputation management function and designed as a holistic audience engagement ecosystem, provides just such an environment.

## Virtual Programming as Reputation Management

The notion of reputation management has been well-defined by public relations professionals in recent years. For public diplomacy practitioners, it is crucial to define what reputation management success looks like in the virtual programming space. Using virtual programming as a reputation management tool requires a paradigm shift away from a content-driven approach. Despite the robust interactive elements of social media, platforms often serve simply as content repositories, and much of the interaction is driven by reactions to content. Moreover, metrics do not tell the whole story when ascertaining actual impact of messaging efforts; the measure of audiences' willingness to embrace messaging cannot be expressed solely as a data point. The one thing missing is the face-to-face, deeper, and enriching conversations between people of different backgrounds and worldviews. In short, judging the effectiveness of communications efforts must incorporate qualitative at least as much as quantitative measures.

This is where a holistic, stakeholder-driven reputation management approach is instructive. Virtual programming is an ideal context for creating a stakeholder engagement ecosystem with the ultimate objectives of establishing partnerships, win-win relationships, and trust. High-quality interactions in a technology-driven, relationship-focused context can be characterized by the following engagement principles:

- **Interactivity.** Participants interact in real time and have equal opportunity to express their views and opinions, and to ask questions.
- **Inclusiveness.** Interactive contexts recognize the value of diversity and encourage participants to "mash up" program ideas and approaches with the expectation of achieving new and better outcomes.

- **Co-creation.** When designing programs and outreach strategies, members of the stakeholder group, target audience, or constituency are purposefully engaged for that purpose, to encourage buy-in and a sense of ownership.
- **Endurance.** Stakeholder engagement is continuous and proactive, to ensure stakeholders feel supported, valued, and are encouraged to follow-through on commitments.
- **Empowerment.** As stakeholder engagement continues, all participants learn and grow through the interaction process and increase their abilities to contribute.

Each of these principles reinforces the others, much like a healthy, well-functioning ecosystem. Most virtual programming is used in a one-off, tactical fashion typified by webinars; a content-driven format where audience interactions are confined within program boundaries. While this can be valuable in some contexts, interactive technology can serve a more strategic, stakeholder engagement purpose by embracing these principles and clearly defining strategic objectives.

## Strategic Objectives for Virtual Programming Ecosystems

Considering the context within which virtual programming operates, the strategic objectives of a reputation management approach can be defined by answering three basic questions:

1. How do we build relationships with and empower those who share our values and interests?
2. How do we truly achieve understanding of the needs of our audiences, stakeholders, and partners?
3. How do we leverage interactive technology to achieve our goals efficiently, regularly, and in a way that allows us to meet increased demand as needed?

The answers to these questions may be achieved by pursuing four "strategic tracks" by incorporating the aforementioned engagement principles:

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**Move beyond one-off online programs and build sustained virtual community-building efforts around regions and policy areas.**

PD practitioners should leverage the most valuable aspect of virtual programming - the interpersonal and conversational context it provides - to build focused, engaged communities. The objective is to build rapport and relationships, not to simply produce live streamed content.

**Focus on ecosystem and program models that deliver actionable outcomes with key stakeholders and audiences.**

Actionable outcomes are defined as skills learned, strategies developed, and relationships built. These outcomes are best achieved through ecosystem models that are integrated with ongoing initiatives deemed strategically important to public diplomacy objectives. Individual program models should emphasize training, such as workshops, that include audience taskings and participation criteria to achieve specific learning goals.

**Leverage local community engagement to support joint development of program models and productions.**

A crucial part of achieving “misinformation inoculation” is to approach audiences more as partners rather than target markets. This is a long-term, recurring process emphasizing research and feedback gathering from key overseas constituencies. Related activities include regular online summits with partners, smaller scale listening sessions, and best practices sessions aimed at increasing partner capabilities.

**Use resources efficiently and empower practitioners at the audience point of contact.**

Ultimately, virtual programming success depends on empowering public diplomacy staff at the online point of contact with target audiences. In practice, this entails developing the virtual interaction skills enabling practitioners to manage programs, cultivate long-term relationships. Virtual ecosystems should be purposefully designed to scale as much as possible by using standardized program, engagement, and reporting processes.

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## Conclusion

Einstein famously said that we cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them. The impacts of the pandemic and the malign effects of misinformation delivered through social media pose serious challenges in the areas of public health, political discourse, and many other areas. Additional content does little to address these issues and in many cases simply exacerbates the challenge. It is time to think beyond views and metrics - and get back to the interpersonal roots of public diplomacy.

Covid-19 forced many of the interpersonal public diplomacy programs online, as it did with workforces. While we may expect traveling programs to resume at some point in the future, it is clear that virtual programming will remain as a key way to interact with audiences. It is crucial that it does remain so; the current pandemic will abate, but PD managers must be aware of other disruptive risks on the horizon posed by the next pandemic and certainly climate change.

Moreover, a generational shift is underway. The rising generation of PD professionals need no reminders of the importance of digital engagement. As “digital natives”, their technology-driven interaction preferences will shape communications trends in ways unimaginable even a few years ago. To excel in the virtual public diplomacy space, a new generation of “virtual diplomats” will need the media and management skills to outcompete rivals and exercise America’s soft power.

These realities should compel PD practitioners to think beyond webinars when looking at virtual programming. Interpersonal digital engagement as a community-building tool is becoming ever more important. The key question is how do we shift from adding additional content into an ocean of existing information to a context where we focus attention and build deeper relationships with key stakeholders and audiences? Strategic virtual programming ecosystems rooted in a reputation management paradigm provide part of the answer.



### **About the Author**

Loren Hurst is a strategic communications professional with over 25 years experience in public diplomacy, government relations, and digital communications. He specializes in the strategic use of virtual technologies to engage stakeholders, target audiences, and build reputation management solutions. As a practitioner, teacher, and voice performer, he works around the globe and addresses the communication risks associated with misinformation, especially on climate change and other science-related issues. His professional interests focus on the integrated application of strategic virtual communications, media skills, and sustainability.