

## Virus briefings are not created equal

Written by Chang Yueh-han 張越漢

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As a Taipei resident, I began in May to watch the Central Epidemic Command Center's (CECC) news briefing every day, and I have also followed the Taipei City Government's news conferences.

In my former career, I worked in media, where I learned that news conferences must have a specific goal. Pandemic briefings must provide timely, adequate information and clearly explain the measures implemented by health officials so that the public can understand the virus, as well as the measures' purpose and details. The briefings should help the public to understand the virus and cooperate with disease prevention measures.

As a result, pandemic briefings naturally take the form of explaining the COVID-19 situation, outlining prevention measures and answering questions. Whether it is the central government or local officials giving the briefings, they generally follow the same format in terms of information presentation, and there is a good reason for that.

However, while the format is largely the same, differences between the CECC's briefings and the Taipei City Government's briefings, as well as some general points about news conferences, could affect the public's understanding of the virus.

The briefings differ in who they address: The CECC briefing opens with: "Friends in the media," while the Taipei briefing starts with: "Taipei residents, friends watching live and people across the nation."

Their perspectives also differ. The CECC briefing is from a third-person perspective: directly addressing and replying to questions from the journalists in the room, who are acting as a check on the government. The Taipei briefing is from a first-person perspective: spoken directly to the public over the heads of journalists, as if they were not in the room and might not be given an opportunity to supervise officials on the public's behalf.

Their styles differ. The CECC briefing is in a style commonly used during the era of traditional media, which is respectful of the role of news media in a democratic society, but the questions can vary in quality. The Taipei briefing is in the style preferred in the era of social media. It is

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more intimate and seeks to win the public's approval, but it could weaken and even override the supervisory role of the news media in a democratic society.

The language used at a briefing makes a difference. The virus is being confronted, not people, but once people become infected, they can infect other people. Even though disease prevention is often equated with fighting a war, to get the public on board, it is best to avoid using words such as "snuff out," "seize," "crush" or "annihilate," which could construe infected people as the "enemy." While employing vivid language does grab the public's attention, it risks "othering" those infected with the virus and painting them as the "enemy." Negative expressions should be avoided.

The way a briefing discusses the virus makes a difference. During a pandemic briefing, while a large portion of time must be devoted to providing information about the virus and explaining preventive measures, officials must also clear up misunderstandings and assuage the public's concerns.

When clarifying something, officials should confine the discussion to the issue at hand. If mistakes led to the confusion, officials should take responsibility for them, rather than attempt to shift the blame to others.

In clearing up false information, officials should indicate which entities or members of the public were responsible. When dispelling rumors, officials should not make the media out to be the enemy, nor should they seek to set the public against the media or use the public as a shield against opposing opinions on how to deal with the virus. Officials who engage in this kind of artifice are only harming the implementation of their own prevention measures.

How information is displayed at a briefing makes a difference. Although there is no shortage of criticism on social media for the elaborate infographics used by health officials, with some saying more time is spent on these than on getting things done, it is better to have over-the-top infographics than none at all.

However, officials should ensure that the cards they hold up for the cameras at the briefings display information in an easily understood format and do not present too much information. The typeface used should be legible, although not everything needs to be in an ultra-bold

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typeface.

The information cards should be secured within the camera frame, rather than handheld and unsteady. Careful thought should be put into the presentation of this information.

Regardless of the motivation for holding a daily news briefing, they are a platform for accumulating political capital. The organizers of the news conferences and those taking part should remember that their primary purpose is disease prevention.

*Chang Yueh-han is an assistant professor in Shih Hsin University's Department of Journalism.*

Translated by Edward Jones

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