Speaker: Valerie Byrd Fort

So, hello everyone! I am Valerie Byrd Fort an instructor at the University of South Carolina and part of the Get Ready, Stay Ready Community Action Toolkit team. I am pleased to welcome Thomas Fladung, who is leading us in a series on crisis and reputation management for school and public librarians. Fladung serves as managing partner for Hennes Communications, which is a team of award-winning journalists highly experienced in public relations and reputation enhancement.

The Crisis Communication Training Series will help you and your library team develop strategies for responding to any crisis, big or small, making sure you arrive on the other side with your reputation preserved and even enhanced. All of these sessions have been recorded and they are housed on the Get Ready, Stay Ready web page. You can watch the other two sessions that we've had there.

Now this evening we will have a session titled Telling Your Story to the People Who Matter Most. Communicating to Stakeholders Amid a Crisis. There will be time for questions at the end, and this presentation will be recorded. And now I'll turn it over to our speaker. Thank you so much for being here.

Speaker: Thom Fladung

Thanks, Valerie. I'm just going to do a quick share screen here. All right. So, let's get down to the brass tacks with this one. What's a crisis for you and your library? How do you know when you may be facing a crisis that could imperil your operation or your reputation? Just the definition of a crisis from a gentleman named Jim Lucas Chayefsky, who's a crisis consultant, lecturer and author.

And I like this definition. We define crises as show stopping, people stopping, product stopping, and or reputation defining situations that create victims and or explosive instability. Anything less falls more into the category of a problem or an issue, while disruptive, has far less potential to create explosive and unplanned visibility. So, for example, may face budget cuts that include staff reductions.

That's hard. It's unpleasant, certainly may affect your reputation, but you usually can plan for that, and you may well have dealt with it before. A crisis is different. A crisis happens quickly, unexpectedly, and in many cases, you haven't dealt with it before. Communications done very well will help you survive a crisis and can help you come out the other end with, as Valerie mentioned, your reputation intact or even enhanced.

Unfortunately, communication is often the last thing that an organization or a business or a library thinks about during a crisis. And I get it right. You're trying to handle a crisis, you're trying to fix it. But you have to remember that those communications about what you're doing represent the first thing your staffers, your patrons, your community partners, your taxpayers are going to learn about you during the crisis.

So how do you do communications during a crisis, and how do you do communications when you're not having a crisis? How do you use this time wisely? What are the best practices? I take a deeper dive into a set of steps we talked about in our first webinar on May 1st. You may remember the damage control playbook that included just these five simple concepts.

I want to go through most of them again quickly, and then take a deeper dive into a couple of them. Again, tell the truth. If you attempt to deny the obvious, you motivate anyone to dig for more. If you're caught lying or obfuscating or covering up, you're going to have a much bigger problem than if you had simply told the truth.

Why do you want to tell it first? Because if you don't, someone else will. And that's how you lose control of the message. That's how you lose control of your story. So, we'll counsel clients who know that bad news is about to break, to break the news themselves. If you do this, if you give away your story as much of it as possible, you take the play away from conventional media reporters and from social media commenters.

Now, the story wasn't discovered, it wasn't dug out. And it's not an exclusive. Didn't come from a disgruntled ex-employee or a whistleblower. And your side of the story suddenly has a chance to be front and center as the story tell it all. As we discussed before, it comes with an asterisk. There are legitimate privacy concerns or personnel issues.

HIPAA may come into play. I get that, but there's almost always something you can say and then explain why you can't talk more about it. Tell it fast, or at least be prepared to tell it as fast as you can. This is absolutely key to succeeding in a crisis on social media and in today's world of digital communications.

If you get nothing else from today, I do want you to leave here understanding this. Because of the speed of the internet, communicating now is different. It's very different, especially from media. And it's I'll introduce a concept called iterative reporting, which I think is the most fundamental change I saw in the journalism business in the 33 years I did it.

In a nutshell, and it's an inside baseball term, and you may have heard of it, you may not. In a nutshell, and this is kind of media literacy 101. Forget a crisis. You just need to understand this. If you're a news consumer. In a nutshell, iterative reporting means a reporter, once he or she is convinced that the basic facts are known and that this is a worthy news story, will close the story to their website with a tweet with a link to that story.

Short note no link on that newspaper or TV stations Facebook page. Now, all the reporters I know still try to call in to get a comment or your side of the story. They emphasize the word try because here's the key. Here's the key difference. Up until the last 7 to 10 years or so, a story wasn't ready until a reporter had done their damnedest to get all sides.

Here's how it worked. Back in my day, I would call three main sources, the three main sources in the story and I knew, especially if it was bad news, that they might be dodging me. So, I call them a lot. Half a dozen or more phone calls I tried. I went to their offices to try to reach them and left my business cards.

I might even go to their home and one of my newspapers with particularly sensitive stories. We used to send certified mail requesting a response so we could prove we reached out to those sources, and we held stories to get that information, to get those interviews, including when we knew we might get beat by a competitor. Those rules are gone today.

I call those three people once, and you have about ten minutes to call me back or I'm posting my story now. I'll update as many times as needed. That's the iterative process you build the story piece by piece in iterations, and you can see this happening on your favorite news website, particularly with breaking news stories and with crisis stories.

Here's what iterative journalism has taken off. Readership online is largely driven by search, people searching for specific stories or story topics hardly anyone anymore. Dials in WWW dot, Cleveland dot com or WWW dot the state dot com. I still do and I'm a dinosaur. Most people do it by search and that's primarily Google. Now we don't know how Google search and I don't know how Google search analytics work.

If you know I'll tell you what. Put it in the chat and we'll all drive nicer cars. But we know this Google rewards speed. So, if my story is online, serving your story even by a minute, that can mean thousands of more readers for that story, because Google places it higher in the search results. And the higher in the search results you are, the better.

We used to tell reporters at my last newspaper, the Plain Dealer in Cleveland, you need to be fast enough to be in the first three search results. So, if you're doing a story about a crisis in communications, your story better be in the first three search results. But we're losing a lot of readers. And if your story isn't on the first page of search results, we're dead because nobody goes beyond that.

So now it's an accepted practice in journalism and beyond accepted. It's expected to publish a story before you have spoken to all the key people involved. You still gotta get the basic facts right. You still got to play fair and try to contact those sources once. But I can't wait. Here's why that's important to you. If you're caught up in such a story and you wait to call the reporter back, or you just can't call the reporter back because you're dealing with the crisis, you're in a meeting, you're busy, your voice and your position won't be in the original story.

And it's almost always the original story. That gets many more readers. It's the original story to drive the conversation on social media. It's the original story that sets the tone for other media coverage from other outlets. It's also important to understand what to do if the first version of that story is published online, and your side of the matter isn't reflected in it, so you call me back, I call you, maybe I call you and get you, or you call me back and you say, hey, Thom, our side of the story isn't in your first version of that story.

We want to tell our story. And your idea is to tell the truth and tell me as much of it as you can, etc. and I say, great, let me update my story and you say, no, I'd like you to do a new story. Now you gotta give me enough to justify doing a new story. But that's also not hard these days, when in many, many newsrooms, reporters are measured by how many stories they do each day.

Why a new story? Because it gets a new headline, and that resets the Google search engine and story with your side of the story in. It has a chance to be higher in the search results near and on some occasions even higher than the original story and you want that because you're going to tell the truth and you're going to communicate those things.

Now, why else is this important and why has this happened about 60 to 65%, maybe a little more now of all traffic to all news websites is coming from the East. You ever read news on your smartphone? You know, not a laptop, not a desktop, not an iPad. These. If you ever read news on a smartphone, ask yourself, do you ever read a story and then go back an hour later on your smartphone and search for the same story to see if it got updated?

Almost nobody does that, and we used to call it a cleveland.com. We used to call it the River. It's a river of news that's just flowing. And so, if you're not in that initial story, that river's going to take that initial story way down. And even when your comments are in it, a lot fewer people are going to see it.

So welcome. Any questions about iterative reporting? Again, to me it's kind of media literacy 101. Not enough people understand it. And particularly for people who are subject to possible news coverage, it's important to understand, I think all right, back to this. So, when you're dealing with conventional media, you're dealing with mass media. All kinds of people are watching that newscast, read that website, even read a newspaper.

If you're like me who don't know or care about you, we're most worried about the people who really care about you your key stakeholders, your staff, your patrons, your community partners, your taxpayer. We most want to get your story to them. So, there are lots of ways we tell clients to do that. You know, personal meetings, obviously their phone calls, the old-fashioned letters or email.

But one of the newest and most efficient, of course, is digital communications, particularly your website and social media. The people who care most about you will go to your website in a crisis to see what's going on. They will go to your Facebook page. They will grab your Twitter feed and see what's going on. So, anybody ever wonders why you should care about these places online, where people talk about nonsensical things and what they had for dinner?

You should care because I guarantee at least some of your key stakeholders are there, and they're waiting for you to communicate with them during a crisis. Here's another reason when you communicate directly to your key stakeholders, you go around the filters that naturally come with media coverage. Look, I do a story about you. I'm not going to use every one of your quotes.

I'm not going to use, I probably won't use all your facts. I'm going to pick and choose, and I'm going to talk to other people and use some of their quotes. I'm gonna use some of their facts. Sometimes those facts don't agree with one another. Then the story goes to an editor. More changes can be made than the headline is written.

Ask yourselves how often all you read on a given story is the headline. Then ask yourself how that headline has to sum up in just a couple of words, a potentially complex situation which is how headlines your people say, hey, man, that headline doesn't really match what's in the story. And we've all seen how meaning can change with, just, say, placement of a comma.

There's no, journalism in English, you know, by the way, the same filtering effect more dramatic really happens with electronic media. There are camera angles, lighting, the shots you they choose to use. So, when we're called into a crisis, the first thing we're thinking is how do we get your site out to key audiences without being filtered?

The other thing we find is that when those most important audiences, if they hear from you first about your side of the story, are much more likely to believe you. And in many cases, that's regardless of what they hear later via conventional media or social media. That's one of the reasons for telling your story to the people who matter most is critical.

They're also the source. That also was never more important than when we experience what we experience during the pandemic. I've no doubt that you all worked hard to communicate to those people who mattered most to your libraries. When Covid 19 hit, the pandemic reinforced and gave us some new lessons about effective crisis communications. Let's talk more about that.

You can't overcommunicate during a pandemic or any crisis in advertising. It's called the concept of effective frequency. Marketers say you need to see an ad seven times before you move to action. So, organizations during the pandemic learned they couldn't overcommunicate about the changes they were making. They also learned of regular scheduled updates, including when you don't have news to report, calm people down and give them a little better sense of control.

If I knew my organization was going to send out an update on the state of conditions every Thursday at 1 p.m., guess what? If one little slice of certainty amid all the uncertainty, this also has been a time to truly embrace that popular communications buzzword transparency. Admit to not having all the answers, and promise to share more when you can.

So, if you communicate forthrightly about uncertainty, provide reassurance, but you avoid the pitfalls of over reassuring one of the single most common crisis communication mistakes. And by the way, that we used to advise people, I call it, I call it we got this syndrome and we used to tell people, you need to send out this message if this is under control, that you've got control of this, you've got this and that's fine if you got it.

But as we saw over and over during the pandemic, if you don't got it and you say that people are going to know that and they're not going to react well. So, if leadership shares good news amid a crisis, be careful not to be overly optimistic unless it's truly time to do that. May need to temper that good news with a dose of reality such as this.

And the situation continues to change from day to day. Maybe change our plans. We promise to keep you updated on developments to the greatest degree possible by doing all this, by engaging in an extraordinary level of transparency, even when your library doesn't have all the answers, or even when you make a mistake, you will build trust. And having a reservoir of trust and good well will be one of the most important commodities you can have for when the next crisis arrives.

Along with reinforcing the best practices of crisis communications, the pandemic put a spotlight on the specialized practice of outrage management and how to make it all work in a culture dominated by social media, where every slight disagreement seemingly turns into a battle royale. See if these headlines from news stories from around the country sounded all familiar. Amid outrage, Livingston Parish Council backs push to restrict certain books at public library.

Parent outrage over gender queer pushes library to restrict children from checking it out. Why drag queen story hours at BC libraries are drawing outrage. New York library reverses removal of pride displays from children's sections following outrage over a single book is shutting down this town's library. A lot of outrage to go around out there. It comes to running a library these days.

The outrage seems to happen no matter the decision. This specialized subset of crisis communications that has emerged is commonly referred to as outrage communications or outrage management. A gentleman named Peter Sandman has been one of the leading proponents of this discipline. Peters, a colleague and a friend of Hennes. And here are some steps he's outlined and that we've refined for handling outrage management, because I don't think the outrage is going away.

You cannot debate someone out of being outraged, especially if you're dealing with someone who is hostile or upset. So, ignoring or attempting to rebut their concerns or objections will backfire. They will get angry. Instead, you have to look for ways to validate a person's legit concerns and try to respond in a measured way. And generally, with all crises involving outrage, the responsible party, the person who messed up would like to move on, including responsible parties who want to do the right thing.

This is another fundamental of communications that has changed over the last several years. We used to talk a lot about moving on and when it was time to pivot. You used to hear crisis communications professionals talk about the pivot, and the language was always something like, you know it. It's time to move on from that now. And we're looking forward.

Be careful. The prerogative of deciding when you can put your mistakes behind you belongs to your stakeholders, not to you. The more often if you've messed up, the more often and apologetically you acknowledge the sins of the past, the more quickly others will decide it is time to move on and to build credibility. Acknowledge the problems you're facing before you solve them, and before you know if you will be able to solve them.

That won't make people panic. People panic when they think leadership doesn't know what's going on, or is lying about what's going on. If you had decided to change or improve something because it was pointed out, especially if pressure was applied by employees, activists, critics, whoever put the change in that context have the grace and honesty to say you responded and changed because it was pointed out.

As Sandman has said, attributing your good behavior to your own natural goodness triggers skepticism. So, if you acknowledge that you changed because people raised a valid concern, those people are much more likely to believe you actually did it. The higher the outrage, the less willing people are to leave the control in your hands. You screwed it up. Why should we believe that you're now going to fix?

As painful as it may be. Look for ways to put the control elsewhere. Let others certify and validate that you've worked to fix the problems. So, let's spend a bit of time now before we take questions talking about storytelling and how to tell your stories when you're not in a crisis. Because that ability to tell your stories of achievement and successes and service to your communities, the stories you want to tell can stand you in great stead when a crisis hits.

So, what is a story? Let's get some. Let's go to some of the classic definitions. And I realize this is really conventional. And we will skip number four live falsehood. I want to use an expansive definition of story in terms of the form stories in our current digital age. They are still traditional ink on paper than newspapers or magazines.

They're brochures. They're books. Post your social media sites or a blog your library might have on your website. Their picture galleries, their informational graphics, their videos, especially their videos. Just about any form you can think of that effectively gets across your message. Your story is a potential story form. And what do storytellers at libraries most need? They most need what every storyteller needs.

Story listeners. Because a story without readers or a video without viewers is what it's not much of a story. So, what we're really here to talk about are how to conceive and execute stories that make me stop. And what? That's really a trick, right? Because who has time to read or even to stop and look at that video?

Our senses are assaulted all day long by information. What in the world can you do to break through that and make your information stand out? By the way, if you are serious about improving your writing and you may be familiar with this, I mean any kind of writing from the novel you haven't finished working nails. This is the best book on writing I've ever read.

It's called On Writing Well by William Zinser. The focus is on nonfiction writing, but I guarantee it will make you better in all forms. I've reread it numerous times. I bought updated volumes when I was a city editor at the Detroit Free Press. I bought it for all my assistance editors. I gave it to my daughter. Here's what Zinser says about readers.

The reader is someone with an attention span of about 30s, a person assailed by many forces competing for attention. And Zinser wrote that years ago, before everybody was staring into a smartphone. So, there's your challenge. Fortunately, we know some things about what makes people want to pay attention to a story. Let's start with the authority who is closest to you in helping figure out whether that story about your library is going to be heard or read.

That would be you. What makes you stop and read? What makes you stop and look at a picture? What makes you stop and watch a video? Think about that last story you did read all the way through, or the last video you watched. The End. Why did you do it? And how can you apply that to story ideas you're thinking of telling about your library?

2004 The Northwestern Leadership Institute released the results of a landmark study. It did over five years with more than 150 small and large U.S. newspapers, 12,000 newspaper employees, and 48,000 readers. Now, there are elements of that study that, like my beloved, your book, are dated. They weren't dealing with Facebook or Twitter, much less Snapchat or TikTok. Online videos were just starting to really gain momentum.

I was in newspapers at that time. I participated in that study and I can tell you how true these results ran to me. Then, and how true I believe they still ring. I believe they continue to provide some practical guidelines now for libraries that want to tell their stories. The Readership Institute delved a lot into what they called reader experiences.

What did the reader's experience engage them in that moment and made them want to read more? These were the top three motivators when you're thinking about telling stories about your library. That story gives a person one of these three experiences, or even better, 2 or 3 of the three experiences. Consider these individually. You'll also agree with the Readership Institute's point that these are not revolutionary.

Think about number one. Gives me something to talk about. Anybody here told family or friends recently about something they should go read or a video they should go watch? We love telling people about stuff we found that's cool or interesting, right? Even before the Readership Institute study, Einstein, wretches at newspapers like me knew if we could get people talking about a story, we won.

Hey, did you see that story about this? Just about the best endorsement a story can get. And if a friend or someone you trust, or someone you think is cool tells you about something, you're more likely to check it out. Which brings us to one of those factors that didn't exist in 2004. Technically, Facebook started on February 4th, 2004, but for practical purposes it didn't exist.

Now it would share a story or video on Facebook lately. Basically, what Facebook has done is taken. Hey, did you see that story about and turned it into hey, do you see that story about. Because now I don't tell a friend about it. I put it on Facebook until my 500 or 1000 friends, and they tell their friends, and suddenly your story about your library is being seen by a lot of people.

According to a recent Pew study, 81% of all content shared online in the United States is shared on Facebook. 81%. So, think about this. If you can come up with stories that people want to share. Facebook offers you an easy, free method to get your story out to thousands of potential readers. So those are three measures you can put into that story idea to evaluate.

Let's talk about other key attributes of story ideas. And here we'll talk particularly about story ideas that appeal to media. There are two different buckets you bucket. One is what I'll call the timeless elements the journalists have use in evaluating your story pitches in your press releases. And these still hold true today. What jumps out about this story?

What's unusual or intriguing if you're describing a story to someone? What do you start with? What will grab someone's attention immediately? One of my main questions when I was an editor that I used to ask reporters is, why am I reading this now? Now there is a type of story idea that journalists call evergreens that can mean a couple of things.

One is the story could run any time of the year. There's no real urgency to it. No real reason it has to run right now. That's not good, in my view. It also can mean that this is August. We must be doing back to school stories. Second week in November. Time to do How to make a Turkey story.

You probably sense my enthusiasm, or lack thereof for these, but it's not a lost cause. In fact, media outlets do look for stories there that are oriented to the time of year, especially if there's something unusual going on or an unusual element to that story. But the best bet still is to find a story that has that sense of urgency.

And now people like reading and looking about people, like reading about excuse me and looking at other people and dogs. So, if you've got a story about a librarian, a dog, your golden. Seriously, not too often I saw press releases that didn't have people in them. Those don't lead to stories. Does the story make me smile, laugh, cry?

Shake my head in amazement? Something. And finally, this last one has taken on new life in the last few years. How many of you aware of the various efforts in a lot of local news outlets for what's now become commonly called solution journalism, or what I call stories about stuff that works? For example, the Arizona Daily Star announced last July it had a new beat, a solutions reporter.

In August, the journalism schools at four of the nation's leading universities Arizona State University, Stony Brook University, University of Georgia and Northwestern again announced that they will become inaugural solutions journalism hubs. In their words, the mission is to ensure journalism focused on responses to problems is integrated into the teaching, research and service of leading journalism programs. And I see a theme here.

Anybody out there work for a library that believes it has some solutions? It can talk about stuff that works. So present story ideas to your media outlets in that frame. Every media outlet has a website, and those websites are yawning chasms that need to be filled with constantly changing stories every day, all the time. What's that mean to you means opportunity, including opportunities to have your leaders write pieces that go directly on those websites.

Many websites now have community editorial space. Consider filling it and offering to fill it. Are your libraries doing videos? Do more. First videos are popular. They get clicks. People watch them. Second, people will spend more time on your site on videos. News websites also want videos. They have people looking to shoot videos. What stories do you have that could be told in a video?

You want to increase traffic to your library's website. Increase the time people spend on it. Do more videos. Interactivity, of course, is the coin of the realm online. Reading a newspaper. Watching TV newscast. Listening to the radio. These are one-way conversations. Online is all about two-way conversation, engagement, active reading and listening. So, the power and import of social media as a communications tool.

Almost impossible to overstate. Bottom line here you have stories to tell. Good stories, powerful stories. You just need to identify them. Evaluate them with a hard eye and figure out how to tell them. That's it for today. I welcome your questions. Comments. Anything.

Speaker: Valerie Byrd Fort

Thank you so much. We did have a question already in the chat, so I'll start by asking that one. How would you suggest navigating communication to stakeholders when working in a school district where I often have to work through a tricky hierarchy of administrators in order to okay a message? This both slows reactions and messages down, as well as the potential for the telephone effect, where my message gets tweaked or even changed before being offered to the public.

And then it does go on to ask or state. This could also be complicated by the dynamic between admin and librarian. So, what if the district views you as the problem?

Speaker: Thom Fladung

Well, it's a great question, and none of the facets of this are easy, but I'll take the easier part, which is before. What if the district views you as the problem? So, the first part is you really should try, as you know, organization should try to have a communications process that's efficient and streamlined. And I know that's not easy.

And I know you may not be in a position to push that through, but when the opportunity arises, you need to try to show how being able to get your messages out a in a more urgent fashion and streamline that process. We talked earlier about having a crisis communications plan. Really, you should have a communications plan and then a crisis communications plan built on it.

If your organization doesn't have a communications plan that's worth talking about at retreats, at any and any opportunity you have, and part of that is to have a process where it's not just by editing, it's not just by small cuts. And but you also have to go in there armed with some information to show how effective messaging can bolster your libraries reputation, your school's reputation.

That's not easy, I realize and have the district views use the problem. It's all that much harder and you're going to have to work to overcome it. I don't have a silver bullet for that, but I do think you can make the case for why effective communications can help. Help have them call me or tell them.

Speaker: Valerie Byrd Fort

And then another just follow up in the chat. Another person agreed that they also have to have all communications okayed by the communications department at Central Office, and I'm sure that's pretty common. whether it's a school library situation and a district office and even a public library, you know, a branch having to get an okay from, you know, someone higher up.

Speaker: Thom Fladung

So, you have to try to build alliances, you know, you have to try to you have to try to come through with a communications plan that because it will not only benefit your library, ultimately it will benefit the entire library district, the entire, you know, I'll call it ecosphere of your public libraries. But you have to try it.

You have to figure out ways that you can make that case to that central office in in a manner that will resonate with them. I realize that's not easy, and it's not in your job description, but it will help your communications immensely.

Speaker: Valerie Byrd Fort

That's probably.

Any other questions? If you want to put them in chat, we will take them. If not, I will go ahead and remind you that we have one more session in this series. It will be next Monday. same time. And the recording for this evening and all of the other sessions, is posted and will be posted this one on the Get ready, Stay ready website and the recordings will be there, along with some additional information and the slides, aids and all of that good stuff.

So, thank you all again. I hope to see you all next week. And thank you, Tom.

Speaker: Thom Fladung

Thank you all. Appreciate it. See you next week.