

An Interview with Ric Anderson

Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leadership and Learning in Nevada

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Principal Researchers:

Magdalena Martinez, Ph.D. and Kelliann Beavers, Ph.D.

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Each interviewee had the opportunity to review their transcript. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the interviewee. This interview features Ric Anderson, The Las Vegas Sun Editor and was conducted on 5/25/22 by Kelliann Beavers. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

Interview with Ric Anderson

27:34

SPEAKERS

Kelliann Beavers, Ric Anderson

Kelliann Beavers 00:00

Right. Okay, so we are starting the interview with Ric Anderson. And just to confirm again, that at this point, it's okay with you if we directly quote you, and you're comfortable with the recording since it's recorded now.

Ric Anderson 00:15

That's fine. Okay,

Kelliann Beavers 00:17

Great. And I know that these questions that I sent, and that we're going to go through, are very general. So if we do realize we want to tailor some of them more toward exactly what you do in your role, we definitely can do that. But just to introduce the information, can you describe your role, during the height of the pandemic, with your organization and your position during that time as well?

Ric Anderson 00:43

Right, so I am the editorial page editor for The Las Vegas Sun. And in that role, I oversee the opinion functions of the news organizations. So for instance, I draft our staff editorials, which reflect the opinion of our newspaper as an institution. I edit letters to the editor, guest columns, syndicated columns, anything that has to do with opinion kind of lands under my tent.

Kelliann Beavers 01:19

And then the next question is, how do you personally see your role and the role of your organization during the pandemic?

Ric Anderson 01:33

So I'm going to start on kind of a broad scale, maybe, and then work down to how this affects me. But as a news organization, I mean, obviously, our primary role during the pandemic was to provide accurate, reliable information. And that's information across the board. So, you know, whether it was updates, developments, scenes, or, you know, information about where to get a vaccine, or information on best practices, for precautions, updates on all of the above, providing information about numbers, you know, about the trends in illnesses, providing accurate information about hospital capacity, just, you know, whatever information was available, reliable, productive information.

You know, that was what we were wanting to focus on. And on the other hand, we were also trying to counter the misinformation and disinformation that was disseminating about, you know, the vaccines, about mask efficiency, about the precautions, safety precautions, the effectiveness of those, just any kind of misinformation that bubbled up, we wanted to be aware of it. And if possible, we wanted to counter it with scientifically proven reliable information.

And as for the editorial functions, you know, I think that what we tried to do was to accentuate good information to encourage individuals to, you know, adopt these, to follow these safety precautions, to get vaccinated, and to protect the public health in the most scientifically proven and responsible ways. And also to call out misinformation when we saw it. And there was a lot, obviously. So, you know, we on I think several occasions had editorials that said, "don't believe what you're hearing from people who, you know, have all kinds of crazy conspiracy theories about the vaccines or about mask usage, and so on and so forth."

Kelliann Beavers 04:10

Right. And it's definitely a time in which discernment was needed. I know that, even remembering back toward the earlier part of the pandemic, it was just so challenging for anyone to know what was true. So, I'm grateful that you guys were doing what you're doing. And so that takes us to the third question, which is - can you describe the biggest challenges in your line of work? And/or the people you represent or serve that the recession and the pandemic as a whole posed?

Ric Anderson 04:44

Um, well, obviously, you just mentioned one of the challenges which was to discern good, reliable information from disinformation and to get the kind of access that we needed to make those determinations. So, you know, it made it more difficult for us to do our work because we weren't out in the field, you know, knocking on doors or having face to face interviews with people. And so that and that alone made it a little bit of a challenge. And I think...

Kelliann Beavers 05:25

I didn't even think about that aspect, because we have become so adjusted now to interfacing virtually that it didn't occur to me how early on that was so out of step with, in general, what your reality is like in terms of interfacing with people in the flesh and speaking to them.

Ric Anderson 05:42

Yeah, exactly. And, you know, meanwhile, we were all working from home, we didn't have the same kind of face to face interactions that we are used to in a newsroom, it's generally just a big, wide open space. And, you know, you're constantly having conversations with your colleagues about this that or the other. You know, how do we go about this? Who should I call about this? You know, how should we, how should we angle this story? How should we present this story and so forth?

Kelliann Beavers 06:15

Sure. So even internally lacking that capacity to connect makes a huge difference for the type of work you're in?

Ric Anderson 06:21

Like everybody else, we were kind of trying to figure out how to do virtual journalism, which is something we've never done before. So yeah, so there were those kind of technical and structure challenges that we faced. And then again, you know, just dealing with probably the amount of disinformation that was out there, dealing with the division that arose about masking issues, about the shutdowns, about vaccination, safety, and so forth.

You know, I think that there was an inner dialogue among us about okay, "how do we most responsibly address all that?" The typical way of doing objective journalism would be to, you know, kind of address each side of that issue. But, I think that there was a dialogue that we bring internally about, well, you know, if we report on some of the misinformation coming from the other side, do we run the risk of making it worse?

Ric Anderson 07:49

Sorry, somebody was looking in...

Ric Anderson 07:53

...of giving it credence. And so, you know, that was a challenge as well. Thankfully, we didn't face a challenge, however, in getting access to, I think, officials and getting access to good information. And generally, I think, during the entire pandemic, I at least found government officials, community leaders and so forth, pretty accessible to the media, and seemed like they genuinely wanted to get good information into the public realm.

Kelliann Beavers 08:35

That's good to hear and relate it to one of the questions that's deeper in the list. I'm really glad to hear that specific aspect. Okay, well, thank you for that. And the next question is, how you perceived what groups you felt like were the hardest hit by the recession from your perspective.

Ric Anderson 08:55

Right. So, you know, I think that this has been reported elsewhere. I don't think I'm breaking new ground here, but obviously, elder communities, communities with comorbidities, you know, individuals with comorbidities. And then, communities that were transportation insecure, healthcare insecure.

And, you know, I think that was especially the case in Las Vegas where, you know, the public transportation system especially, is not as robust as it is in some other communities. But yeah, on a on a

larger scale, just the, the kind of communities or online information silos or whatever you would like to call them that were susceptible to disinformation and conspiracy theories.

Kelliann Beavers 09:56

Yeah, I feel like early on there was so much fear at, I mean, it's a bit different now. But early on, there was so much fear. And it was easy to sort of hesitate to be hyper corrective to people, because people were afraid. And it was kind of understandable that people would be inventing, you know, ways to understand things that might or might not be correct. So I imagine that was really complicated.

Ric Anderson 10:19

Yeah. And obviously, one group that I left out was frontline workers. And so in that, you know, you saw, I think we saw that, especially in Las Vegas, where coming out of the shutdowns, you know, you had strip workers, and people in the resort industry, you know, really being on the front line of that, and being exposed to the pandemic in ways that others of us, you know, were able to avoid.

Kelliann Beavers 10:55

Yeah. Right. In many ways, I feel like that's an aspect of the pandemic experience that I just had no, you know, personal familiarity with, it was really tough. I'm grateful to say that, but okay, I'm wondering if the A and B of this question, and these may be a little bit different from the ones I sent you, I'm not sure they should be relatively similar, but is asking whether these may or may not be relevant to your group. So you can say yea, or nay...whether your organization's goals changed to accommodate those groups is the first part.

Ric Anderson 11:33

Yeah. And I thought that was a good question. And the way I would answer it is that our goals, I don't think change. But our focus definitely did, you know, to trying to address those issues that those communities were experiencing, to acknowledge that those communities were more at risk.

And then to devote, you know, more resources to the issue of protecting public health, addressing, you know, trying to provide accurate, reliable, scientifically proven information to these communities, encouraging the public to protect each other to get vaccinated and so forth. So, did our goal change? No, I think our goal is always to provide the community with the best information we can. But definitely the focus did and we devoted a lot more attention and resources to providing good information about the pandemic.

Kelliann Beavers 12:38

Gotcha. Thanks for that. The next part of this question, I think you could answer either with your organization as in collaboratively with your organization or just your observation because you were

exposed to so much of the community's experience, and it's whether you observed collaborative efforts across nongovernmental organizations, so just the nonprofit community generally.

Ric Anderson 13:04

Yeah, you know, I saw that question and I can't give you any specific examples. I did get the general sense that there was partnership in this, because I think everybody recognized the the cross-community need to address the issue. And, you know, with Las Vegas, especially being one of the hardest hit areas in the country. You know, I think that here's maybe an example.

Yeah, early on, when the Asian American community here was being especially hard hit our Chinatown area basically ground to a halt. Because of vastly overblown fears, and to put it bluntly racist fears that were associated with the Asian American community here. I think we saw other other chambers of commerce, yes. All other business organizations trying to help. And that would just be one example. But I do get the feeling that there was that I could probably come up with more time to do something.

Ric Anderson 14:19

Sure. No, that's great example. It's just interesting to see like, what stayed with people, in their recollection of the events. Yeah. Thank you for that.

Ric Anderson 14:29

Yeah. And I do recall the Small Business Administration, the Federal Small Business Administration, working really early on, in advocating very strongly for the Asian American community, the business community, so you know, that's a government organization obviously partnering with that community, but then you had like the Asian American Chamber of Commerce here taking a lead role in that and working with federal government and other chambers. So yeah, I got the feeling that this wasn't a time for people to, you know, to wall themselves off. It was a time to reach out and address community-wide needs.

Kelliann Beavers 15:18

Definitely. Okay, so the next question is, if there's anything that you felt like you wish the different levels of government would or could have done differently during the recession?

Ric Anderson 15:31

Yeah, and I'm going to be a little bit vague on this. But, you know, I wish that there would have been more of an attempt to be nimble and really proactive in getting information to the public. And, you know, for instance, I didn't see that many real partnerships between organizations and the media, any formal partnerships anyway.

In general, what I feel is that, you know, we went about covering it in a way similar that we would cover any other, you know, in any other event, when something happens, and then we reach out to get information about what just happened.

Kelliann Beavers 16:15

Right, and it does make absolute sense that there should have been a different directional line there, or some type of more collaborative central resource. I understand what you're saying.

Ric Anderson 16:26

Yeah, definitely. And I think if there had been, you know, more of a proactive effort, then maybe...you know, you're never going to be able to beat back this disinformation, you know, especially in the social media age where by the time you even know it's out there it's already circulated among people.

But you know, being really proactive, trying to jump on that disinformation or even misperceptions. Even when people had, you know, confusion about the messaging, you know, I think there could have been a more nimble and proactive way, perhaps to address those things.

Kelliann Beavers 17:13

Okay, thanks for that one. And the next question you did speak to a bit, but if there's anything else that comes to mind, it's were there groups in the community or otherwise that you successfully engaged with that you want to speak about?

Ric Anderson 17:27

Yeah, I, I honestly, can't think of a group that, you know, we reached out to that really didn't engage with us. So you know, when we were approaching people, from the aspect of "we need good information; we want to dispel rumors; we want to provide the community overall, with the best, most accurate information," in my experience, we unfailingly got a good response.

Because, to go back to the example I used earlier, we did work with the Asian Chamber of Commerce, to give one example, early on, when, you know, that business community was being especially hard hit, and we got complete and total cooperation from them and know that remained through the rest of the pandemic. And it would be across the board, you know, I think I don't recall ever reaching out to a community organization and them saying, "oh, I don't really want to address this."

Kelliann Beavers 18:40

Right. But that's interesting. It's not exactly I wouldn't have necessarily known that. Because there was a lot of many people not knowing what to do, and maybe not knowing how to talk about what they were going through. So that's really good to hear that you were open.

Ric Anderson 18:55

Can you give me an example of that or can you expand on that a little bit because maybe I'm not understanding the question as clearly.

Kelliann Beavers 19:03

No, no. I think you are. And I just meant, like, really ambiguously that I know that early on this was such an unprecedented experience for everyone, that many people were sort of scrambling to comprehend, like, even what their right next step was people who had the best, you know, intentions, were still sort of unclear on how they approached things.

So you know, that can go one of two ways to where people sort of corralled themselves off until they figure out what in the heck to do versus being in clear communication and being open about what you know, they might need help with or being transparent about where they're feeling stressed.

Ric Anderson 19:49

You make a good point there and I don't oversee our news gathering staff. That's by design because we want to not create a perception that, you know, our opinions or what we're into, our coverage, or our objective coverage of news. So, you know, our staff, our news gathering staff's experience might have been much different than mine.

Kelliann Beavers 20:16

That makes sense. I'm glad for you to kind of clarify that because it I mean, both things make sense. It's just interesting to see how it unfolded.

Ric Anderson 20:24

Yeah. Agreed. And, you know, what triggered that was you saying that, especially early on, when, you know, the information was a little bit murky, and we didn't know exactly what was going on. It's entirely possible that we were reaching out to people at that point and they were saying...they were being reluctant to discuss it.

Kelliann Beavers 20:45

Yeah, it's amazing to me even how mentally we've adjusted. This is so much of the norm now. I have to work really hard to even remember what it was like when it began. And sometimes I'll remember specific aspects and be like, "man, it is unbelievable to even remember the way that felt like. It just seems like it was ages ago. Okay, so I think I've got just two questions, at least on this list.

Kelliann Beavers 21:11

One is whether as compared to the Great Recession, you felt like there were any more effective programs or policies in place, the COVID recession versus the great recession? And if that was related to the state or private sector, or any way, really, that you observed kind of a difference between these two moments?

Ric Anderson 21:32

Yeah, I mean, I think that...so I came here in 2011. So I wasn't here in the immediate aftermath of the recession so I can't compare fully, but my general sense is that there was just such a more community wide and coordinated response to this than there was after the recession.

So, you know, I don't think for instance, that after the recession, you would have seen the kind of nutritional response that we had here, where, or, you know, food security response, where there were community organizations giving away meals, and I specifically remember, early in the pandemic. I'm a runner, and I was in my neighborhood and I saw this line of cars. And I thought, "what the heck are these doing here? And I followed the line of cars, and I followed it and followed it and followed it, followed it. And then I discovered it's, "Oh, it's, it's because they're lining up for food."

Kelliann Beavers 22:38

Oh, my goodness. Yeah.

Ric Anderson 22:39

Yeah. So being given away in a school parking lot. So I may be wrong. There may have been that level of response after the recession. And that's just one example. So you know, the fact that there was pandemic relief funding from the government; several rounds of it. I'm not sure you saw that so much during the great recession. But just a more mobilized, I guess, and extensive response to the pandemic recession than the Great Recession.

Kelliann Beavers 23:23

Right, it sounds like a little more compassion. The last thing is, if you want to highlight three or four moments, pivotal things, since the onset of the pandemic that have happened, either in your role or in your organization.

Ric Anderson 23:47

Pivotal moments...

Kelliann Beavers 23:50

Big things.

Ric Anderson 23:53

Yeah, big things. I suppose that one thing relates to something we discussed earlier, which is, it really changed the way we approach...we kind of had to develop a new model for how we go about our business, just like a lot of other people did, and learn to do it more virtually.

And we learned that yeah, there are limitations. But, you know, there are also some benefits from that so, you know, we're not necessarily as tied to an office, and we are maybe a little more mobile and a little more nimble than we used to be. So, you know, that would be one way. I would have to think about other ways. But yeah, I'm just drawing a blank right now.

Kelliann Beavers 24:45

No worries. That one's great. I think that's really meaningful and interesting to hear because, whereas earlier, you were kind of talking about the necessity to make that change, I think it is accurate that in many cases, that was necessitated, and then now that we've come so far, we recognize like how much was learned and gained from that need to change that way. Well, those are the questions I have, unless you have any other things you would like to share or questions that you have for me.

I appreciate so much your time and you sharing your experience. I just, I think the role that you are in must have been so fascinating, really the entire time, but particularly during a time like this when opinion was the subject of the day every day.

Ric Anderson 25:33

Right, exactly. You know, it was difficult, but it was a rewarding time as well. You know, we did a lot of work that specifically addressed needs at a very kind of kitchen table level. So, you know, the fact that we were able to provide information about where to get vaccinated, where to get tested, you know, best practices, when we were coming out of the lockdowns, you know, that sort of thing.

It was...it felt like we were participating in a cause, you know, versus maybe just informing the public. And in that respect, you know, newspapers are community institutions. And in that respect, we, you know, we really felt that public mission. And that was kind of rewarding even though it was difficult to get our arms around, and we were having to deal with, you know, disinformation along the way, we felt that that part of our mission, which is to you know, protect the community was, it was it was valuable during that time. And it was, it was hard work, but it was rewarding.

Kelliann Beavers 26:55

Yeah, well, thank you for doing it. I know it means a lot to us and to so many people throughout the community that you all were there and poised to provide that information, because where to find it was unknown for a lot of a lot of time.

Ric Anderson 27:08

I appreciate that. Thank you.

Kelliann Beavers 27:10

Sure, and thanks again for your time. And like I said, as we progress through the research and things become more formulated, I'll reach out again and share anything with you if you'd like to take a look.

Ric Anderson 27:23

Sounds great. All right. Well, good luck with the project, Kelliann. Appreciate your time.

Kelliann Beavers 27:27

Thanks so much. You too.

Ric Anderson 27:28

Alright, take care.

Kelliann Beavers 27:29

Bye.

Ric Anderson 27:30

Bye.

End of audio