The Story of Coronavirus: Using animation to help audiences understand COVID-19 transmission

Summary of the initiative

Throughout the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, information on how the virus is spreading and which public health and social measures are being implemented has rapidly evolved. This led to high levels of uncertainty and confusion among the general public. To help them to understand how easily the virus is transmitted and what protective actions to take, Global Health Media developed an animation video called “The Story of Coronavirus”. The animation makes the invisible coronavirus visible by giving it a structure and colour. It uses simple visuals to educate people to adopt prevention practices to protect themselves and others at home and in their community.

Context and relevance of the project

Global Health Media, a non-profit organization based in the United States of America, supports the improvement of health care and health outcomes in low-resource settings through the production of educational videos, e.g. on Ebola, childbirth and nutrition. The team started to produce animations on pathogen transmission during the Cholera outbreak in Haiti in 2010; team members were looking for an easily comprehensible and visually engaging way to educate the public about transmission pathways and protective measures. Based on the positive international uptake of the first transmission animation, Global Health Media Project produced another film to fight the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2015. Hence, the team could draw on this experience when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, creating a global need to illustrate key scientific and public health messages about the virus.
Summary of the analysis

Innovation factors

Health literacy is the degree to which individuals can gain, process and comprehend the basic health information that is required to make appropriate health decisions. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted that poor health literacy is a major public health problem worldwide as it impedes adherence to evidence-based health recommendations. This project aims to enable people with lower health literacy to understand how severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) is transmitted and which evidence-based protective measures can be applied.

The animation illustrates the otherwise invisible transmission pathways of the virus and showcases the mechanisms of preventive actions, hence translating the science behind public health guidance and recommendations into illustrations that resonate with the viewer. The video further describes the consequences of people's choices to adhere to public health and social measures, making outcomes that usually lie in the future and are hard to imagine, more tangible and relevant.

The team has designed the visuals to make the virus stand out and look powerful by keeping the background dull and giving the virus a bright orange colour. Focusing on visual elements allows audiences at all levels of (health) literacy to engage with the scientific content. As the video covers aspects of COVID-19 that are of immediate relevance to the public, it distils the key messages of public health science, avoiding overwhelming the audience with less important messages.

Accuracy of scientific information

The responsible team used guidance stemming from the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) to develop the content. Furthermore, the developed video was reviewed by experts from CDC, IFRC and UNICEF prior to its publication.

Impact on knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of the target audience

No formal evaluation has been conducted to date. However, the animation has been viewed over 20 million times since its launch. Appreciation was expressed by the target audience as indicated by 2200 comments on the YouTube channel. Besides the project website, the animation has also been widely shared on Facebook and Twitter to amplify the number of views and shares.

The video has won 39 awards since its launch, including:

- Tagore International Film Festival 2021, India;
- American Public Health Association Film Festival 2021, USA; and
- International Quarantine Film Festival 2021, Canada.
Gender equality, equity and human rights considerations

The animation uses simple language and focuses on visuals to make it suitable for people with no background knowledge in health or epidemiology.

The responsible team has displayed male and female characters in similar roles, ensuring equal representation of gender and responsibilities. Assigning the role of the nurse and caregiver at home to females may, however, feed into existing stereotypes.

To overcome language barriers, the animation was made available in 45 different languages, including three regional dialects, Shuwa Arabic, Nigerian Pidgin and Indian English. The characters in the video were chosen with representation of different religions, races and ethnicities in mind.

The project has also considered special needs for populations with hearing difficulties by providing captions for the animation.

Limitations

As information related to the virus is continuously evolving, it has been a struggle for the team to produce content that is always up-to-date. There is a need for further videos on related topics such as how vaccines work, and the latest public health and social measures as the pandemic evolves.

A more formal evaluation of the impact of the video on knowledge and intention to take up protective behaviours would be desirable. Such an assessment could also provide valuable insights for the development of future videos.
Looking forward

Based on the positive feedback received from the target audience, the team plans to continue to narrate the video into additional languages to help reach more people and increase global distribution.

References


iii. Global Health Media Project YouTube account (https://www.youtube.com/user/globalhealthmediaorg).


Illustrations by Sam Bradd

Disclaimers

The World Health Organization (WHO) has invited individuals, institutions, governments, non-governmental organizations or other entities to submit case studies of good practices and innovative solutions in the area of communicating public health science during the COVID-19 pandemic through a public call for submission. WHO has selected a few cases based on a pre-defined rating system and makes such publications publicly available on the WHO website (the “Website”).

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World Health Organization
20 Avenue Appia CH 1211,
Geneva 27
Switzerland

epi-win@who.int

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