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Shutdown University: Comparing Video Content Performance Against Non-video in Digital Crisis Communications at Institutions of Higher Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science

in Social Media and Digital Content Strategy

At

Lindenwood University

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ABSTRACT

This thesis project examines best practices in crisis communications at institutions of higher learning during the beginning stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. With a large amount of literature stating the importance of video content in the digital realm, video communications were closely examined and compared with non-video communications in terms of efficacy and successful engagement on social media platforms. The final deliverable for the project is a website where communications professionals can access resources, data, and research on these crisis communications, all delivered through accessible blogs and videos.

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INTRODUCTION

The project consists of a website that houses original content and research relating to the COVID-19 pandemic and how institutions of higher learning used digital content and communications to reach their audiences and inform their students. The research looked at how marketing and communications can be effective during times of unprecedented crisis and societal near-shutdown. The main idea was that video content was integral to any sustained communications plan, and the prediction was that video content would outperform non-video content in terms of comments, shares, and reactions (such as "likes") earned per post.

To these ends, the data was collected thusly: 40 schools were chosen for case studies and to represent a wide swath of institutions of higher learning in the United States. The schools were chosen to represent different aspects of higher learning and its respective audiences throughout the country. The schools represented different reputations (Harvard having high esteem, Lewis & Clark Community College having little renown), geography (everything from Hawaii to the American Northeast), school size (community colleges and large state schools), and audience (secular schools, religious schools, and even a military academy).

For each school, the likes, reactions, shares, retweets, comments, and views were counted from the following social media platforms: Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn. Tallies were only taken from posts that related to COVID-19 from the beginning of the year through the end of March. The number of comments, likes, and shares were not counted from posts that did not relate to pandemic

communications. The chosen timeframe represented the time frame from first understanding of the possibility of the virus spreading stateside through the shutdown of in-person classes and cancellation of all events.

For the comparison of video content and non-video content, only Facebook and Twitter were observed because they had the most posts to compare, while YouTube consists only of video content. Each category of engagement was added and then divided by the total number of posts to find the average. The averages of non-video posts were then compared to video posts. The goal was to find which type of content earned more engagement from each school's audience.

All of this was documented on blog posts and video blogs posted to the website. The website is intended as a resource for communicators to have a quick reference on what are the best practices in digital communications during potential campus crises. The resources include a comparison list of terms and phrases to use in digital communications and the terms and phrases from which professionals should refrain. The site also includes video comparisons and walkthroughs to help create effective videos, based on research of the universities and colleges observed.

Informing this research project are qualitative research, anecdotal studies, and first-hand professional experience, all while harkening back to past events, like Hurricane Katrina. The project combines professional articles about the pandemic, educational texts on communications, and first-hand knowledge to create innovative content. Based on academic and news articles, plus personal experience, video content seems like the best route to communicating with an audience during a crisis.

This research project is important because the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting devastation has hit higher education hard in ways that are unique to the industry. This could result in massive changes in the industry, including widespread changes in educational delivery, with more schools using online learning as a major tool. When everything is delivered online, using video to create a personal connection will become paramount, as many students will only know school officials and faculty through Internet videos.

For AMC 60000, the class-finale milestone was the website ready to go with one piece of original content posted, which was a blog. Milestone 1 consisted of two more pieces of researched, original content for the Wix site, tripling the amount of content for the site. Milestone 2 doubled the total content with six pieces of content available for the site. Milestone 3 finished with a total of 10 pieces of researched, original content on the Wix site. Lastly, Milestone 4 involves the final project and Project Report submitted with applied feedback from the committee, which will hear the oral defense.

In an effort to complete this project on time, a work calendar was created, which required that one case study be completed per weekday with two case studies being completed each day of the weekend. This set a clear path to be finished by early November, but the pace proved to be too great. On Oct. 13, the researcher started a new job, which diverted much of his time and brainpower away from the project. Research was also affected by computer difficulties which forced a switch to a new workstation.

Moreover, the initial research, which looked at the efficacy of communications during the pandemic, proved difficult to quantify or qualify. There was no clear way to

show if these digital communications created loyalty amongst students, retained any students, or drove away any students from a given university. In fact, one of the schools receiving the most heat during the initial stages of the shutdown, Liberty University, also announced record enrollment for this fall semester. All this was chronicled in a blog post, "Do Bad Decisions Really Hurt?"

With no way to prove the initial thesis idea, the project pivoted to the quantifiable comparison of video content and non-video content. This comparison would show how important video content would be during a crisis situation like the COVID-19 pandemic. This was a way to use the collected data to show a genuine outcome not open to interpretation. It also eliminated the problem of outside variables affecting the data on communications efficacy. Before, there was no good way to show that poor communications resulted in any slip in enrollment from a particular institution of higher learning. Even if a parallel could be drawn, it would be impossible to prove that the digital communications themselves yielded the drop in enrollment. This approach would also require difficult-to-acquire enrollment data, which is not public information for any non-state schools.

Initial posts from the project followed the original route, looking at what colleges should be communicating with their audiences. These topics included the higher failure rates for online students, which was made pertinent by the switch to online-only learning without input from students, and other best practices for colleges and universities moving forward. These posts were initially built upon ideas from recent research and news articles; however, the posts become solely about the proprietary research from the project and how the research was being accomplished.

Before the focus became more about video against non-video content, the study of higher-education digital communications centered on the idea that universities must find ways to engage audiences even when content is difficult to create They must find the right messaging for current students and prospective students when events like the 2020 coronavirus pandemic create great uncertainty. Video can help in this regard because it looks attractive on social media feeds and offers a way to communicate that is more entertaining than simple text. It's also a more passive - therefore less difficult - method of acquiring information, as students can have a video play passively while they perform other tasks.

In the future, all successful businesses will need to find a way to acquire, inform, and service a consumer base who never leave their homes. This is not to say that the 2020 coronavirus pandemic will last forever and people will never again meet in public, but the pandemic has accelerated the move to digital solutions, and most industries – higher education included – must find ways to adapt.

In order to be beneficial to the most colleges, the wide swath of schools was chosen. With the following list, schools looking at the research could find some school that related to their position in some way, though more research is needed and each school should study its individual content to get the clearest picture of its audience and their behaviors. The list was also heavily influenced by the researcher's then-position with a private university in the Midwest, which could benefit from more proprietary data to use in communicating with students, thus many schools competitive with the researcher's school were used for comparison: University of Missouri - St. Louis, Liberty University, Washington University (in St. Louis), University of Missouri, University of

Illinois, Harvard University, College of William & Mary, Bradley University, Maryville University, Lindenwood University, St. Charles Community College, Cornell University, Florida State University, Stanford University, University of Kansas, University of Wisconsin, Eastern Illinois University, Oregon State University, Boise State University, The Ohio State University, Michigan University, Tulane University, Virginia Tech University, Slippery Rock University, Southern New Hampshire University, Texas A&M University, University of Florida, University of Hawaii at Manoa, United States Army Academy at West Point, Western Wyoming Community College, Mesa Community College, Santa Barbara City College, Eastern Kentucky University, Bowie State University, Wichita State University, Columbia University, University of Nebraska, University of Phoenix, University of North Carolina, and the University of Iowa.

Somehow, marketing and communications professionals must help inform and enroll students remotely, selling a brand that may never be touched. This requires authenticity and great web content, which I think are typified by video content. Putting a human face out there will help with authenticity, and nothing shows people better than video. Brands in higher education that seem to want to create positive change will be held in high regard by consumers, and brands that seem phony will be derided and digitally chastised until they can pay a proper penance for their misdeeds. The brands that seem to want positive change and the brands that ultimately are derided could very well have the same intentions, but one successfully communicates how sincere they are while the other comes off as fake. Higher education web content must compel and inform (Tellis).

American universities and colleges are facing economic challenges and changing demographics (Grawe). Clear plans on how to engage an audience and enroll more students will save some schools from extinction. Knowing which content is most effective -- especially when communicating at crucial times -- could enhance the school's standing as a trusted institution or tarnish that image, leading to more students and prospective students straying from higher education in search of other opportunities.

As hard data about the pandemic's effect on people's feelings is hard to come by, combining new data with research from other sources would be the most innovative method for researching the thesis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the literature from experts use anecdotal evidence in their articles. Two of the foundational articles used for this project feature consumer psychologists analyzing advertising messages from big brands during the worst of the coronavirus pandemic. One warns that brands must be careful not to exploit the situation. Another claims it is foolish to pretend nothing has changed, but ads and messages showing how much the organization cares and is doing so much flooded the market (Braiker). As the consumer psychologist points out – you can't make it about you (Neff). Philanthropy does well, especially if the communications are more about getting others involved in the mission, because action speaks louder than words (or logos) (Schultz). Another

article points out how people's perceptions are changing again with old brands offering resilience and comfort in uncertain times. People also had to become more used to doing things themselves with so many services closed down, just as they have become more comfortable than ever with digital delivery of information and services.

Flexible work arrangements have also trended (and become necessary), so students will want to attend class in a similar manner, and older students who are part of the workforce may have more opportunities to do online coursework because of differing schedules and less time spent at work (Pasquarelli). This all relates to the current state of affairs in America, and it translates to the current situation in higher education: fewer people are going out, more people are relying on the Internet and digital delivery methods. This makes digital communications more essential than ever; no one is on campus to talk to, and no one is allowed on campus to begin any conversations. All correspondence is digital, which means students, parents, and others are getting information only from one official source -- the school. Colleges and universities must keep students and families from finding information from other, more dubious sources, which could have ulterior motives (Bergengruen).

Communications should also look at the effects to international students and the switch to online learning, which could lead to permanent changes in education (Fischer) (Bluemenstyk). This seems to make video more pertinent because it works so well online. Hoover writes about changes specific to college admissions. In short, digital technology is the way to stay connected during stay-at-home orders, and colleges and universities must connect with students, employees, families of students, prospective students, and other people within the community. Online learning keeps trending up, so

schools must tap into that market while still selling the traditional on-campus college experience. Or if a school wants to think far outside the box, it can try to adapt traditional college experiences to the online format. Barring such a novel approach, more video announcements and messages may be a way to connect to large portions of an audience without alienating anyone through technology.

Also looking at the literature, an article from *Advertising Age* opines that, based on communications in past eras of crisis, flippant messages will be heavily scrutinized (Braiker). The idea was that only hard facts would be important to an audience during uncertain, hectic times. Studying more about another time of crisis, Hurricane Katrina, it is true that simpler communications that offered pertinent information and only that to the audience went over well. However, no parallels could be drawn from schools that communicated well and kept their students and those who communicated less and did not lose students (American Association of University Professors). As the hurricane ravaged the New Orleans area, schools' future successes were based more on how quickly the campus could recover from physical damage and what programs were offered at what prices. Trade schools could find success, as they offered quicker and cheaper degrees offering hard skills the students could use to rebuild the area (Cowen).

Video consumption among young people has risen even before the coronavirus pandemic (Overland) (Spiegel). The pandemic accelerated the video consumption and overall use of online content (Wolfe), especially since the start of stay-at-home orders in March (Stanley). With over 2 billion watched video hours from February 2020 to April 2020, the pandemic created a boom in digital viewership during the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic (Shanely). In future times of international crisis, and likely in

times of non-crisis, digital and video content will attract larger and larger audiences. Colleges and universities must tap into this resource to reach these audiences where they are, so conventional forms of advertising – magazines, television, radio – must make way for compelling online content that tells the brand's story.

There are also changes in college demographics to consider. *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education* looks at various factors and quantitative data to predict future circumstances and efforts of colleges in North America (Grawe). The book is still relevant because while the coronavirus pandemic undoubtedly altered the higher education landscape and forecast, the research does not really change. Birth rates are still lower, and various other factors are still at play. Without knowledge of exactly how the pandemic has changed things, research into the subject must reference the prior state of affairs and prior outlook within the industry. This is the starting point from which pandemic research can be applied to plan for the next major event and the future of higher education marketing and communications.

Finally, research also shows that "emotion-laced" content -- such as drama, babies, surprise, or suspense -- lead to positive emotions, such as amusement or excitement (Tellis). Adding these "drama elements" to content is just as good as – if not better than – assembling content based on facts, pricing, or brand prominence. In fact, emotion- or drama-based content is the preferred method to get people to share it, as it easily outpaces information-based content, especially on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. This is useful to the thesis because it shows that people react to content that is not strictly informational. The early stages of the thesis would have seen this as counter to the initial thesis question, but when comparing video and non-video

content, it can be more useful. Video content was often used to play on feelings of an audience rather than submit new information to the public. If it is true that emotion-based content leads to more engagement and more shares, video content that appeals to the feelings of the audience should outperform regular, text-based posts that offer only information on the crisis.

The world has always had disruptive pandemics, but COVID-19 is different because it spread faster than the others, and humanity has different communications technologies to address it (St. Amant). Our digital communications are so much greater and our Internet connections so much faster than anything before that all manner of information may spread swiftly and efficiently. As the word spreads quickly and the pandemic news becomes inescapable, it affects nearly every person on the planet.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

With all this in mind, the content creation began in earnest by looking hardest at the initial communications offered by these colleges and universities. With the criteria already devised and being compiled on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, while making special notes of the frequency of posts and the overall tenor of the comments (positive vs. negative), the blogs and vlogs were ready for production. With the website created and hosted via Wix.com in the first semester of the thesis course, the goal was to flesh out the research with more content.

The early content focused more on communication efficacy, talking about how schools should communicate and what topics they should cover, like online failure rates, which are higher than those of on-ground classes. Before narrowing the focus to video against non-video content, web content like this was more of the focus. The website content started showing examples of schools from my case studies, starting with the University of Missouri - St. Louis. Located in a major metro area, but also located in the Midwest, it is worth noting that UMSL was distant from the initial wave of coronavirus cases in the United States. However, servicing a large city and metropolitan area also heightens the university's risk of a major outbreak on campus.

UMSL's initial communications were featured on the university website on March 12. The school also posted on Facebook, directing students and community members to the special webpage with updates and information on the situation. That Facebook post received 81 likes and 93 shares, helping spread the information. Based on user demographics, Facebook would be the most likely place to reach the parents of college students, so many of these shares could be parents sharing with their sons and daughters.

However, UMSL did not tweet anything regarding the switch to remote learning until the following day, which would have reached another portion of the larger UMSL community. The school never announced the move on Instagram, LinkedIn, or YouTube, possibly missing more of their audience.

Again, this content looked more at timeliness and content of the posts more than use of media. Luckily, the case studies provided the material for the video vs. non-video

content debate, so this early work amounted to a brief diversion. The raw numbers still factored into the most important part of the original research.

For the following posts, the project looked at more case studies, and Liberty's case study really began the switch away from looking at which schools "performed" the best to what type of media performed better. Liberty, being a high-profile evangelical school with an outspoken president, is a target for many people. This was reflected in comments across the social media platforms with a great deal of negativity and insults being hurled at the school. However, enrollment was not harmed by this bad publicity. How come?

Unlike its contemporaries, the Lynchburg, Virginia-based school held off making an announcement on the move to online learning until March 16, despite calls to close from local officials and even the commonwealth's governor. The announcement was also shared on Facebook on March 23, the same day Liberty posted dog pictures to celebrate National Puppy Day. The comments were ruthless, as many people attacked the school for remaining open despite the opinions of professionals and the dangers posed to students and faculty.

"Close your school," said one commenter on a puppy post.

"You are holding in person classes? This is not ok. Are you going to quarantine the whole campus if someone gets sick?" said another.

"Move your classes online, don't be idiots."

Some of the vitriol directed at Liberty likely comes from its evangelical foundation and its political affiliations. As an evangelical school, Liberty has been closely tied to the Republican party, thanks in no small part to Liberty president Jerry Falwell Jr., who has

openly supported President Donald Trump. This makes the school a target for people who do not attend the university. The school is also high-profile enough to appear in news stories nationwide and draw more ire from non-audience members. Anything that could be construed as "anti-science" by the university would surely bring out the haters who would pepper the social media pages with negative comments. This would presumably be a bad look for potential students and their families, likely sending more prospective students looking for degrees elsewhere. But these comments do not seem to have such an effect.

So, as a school making an unpopular decision -- one to keep campus open during the early stages of the pandemic in the United States -- and a school already unpopular amongst a significant portion of the population, how does an institution attacked on so many fronts continue to stand?

According to US News & World Report, Liberty's 2019 enrollment was over 85,000. In July, Liberty claimed over 120,000 total enrollment heading into the 2020-2021 academic year with trends moving upward. In Liberty's article about enrollment, the school focused on online enrollment, which accounted for the majority of students. Liberty says their online programs "reach" over 100,000 students. The industry was already trending in more of an online education model, and Liberty has long been successful in that area. The COVID-19 pandemic has made online shopping and services even more popular, so it makes sense to see big gains in online enrollment. But why Liberty?

Part of the reason for the school's success may lie in its ability to spread propaganda and to create an "us vs. them" environment, imagining the entire Liberty

community as warriors or rebels against a secular world out to destroy them. This is evidenced in many of the web-news headlines on the school's website. On March 25, Liberty University posted a clip of President Jerry Falwell Jr. defending the schools actions on CNN. When the Virginia governor criticized the university for remaining open, Liberty posted a "news" article on its website titled "Liberty University refutes Gov. Northram's false accusations." Another article claimed the school's library (named after Falwell's deceased father, Jerry Falwell Jr.) was "(coming) to students' aid" during the pandemic, as if a building could act to rescue anyone. Then there is perhaps their ultimate "us vs. them" headline: "Liberty's response to COVID-19 puts us in pretty good company, despite what you might conclude from media accounts."

The propagandistic qualities of these communications are debatable, but they seem to be succeeding in their desired purpose. In any case, the combination of Liberty's successful fall 2020 enrollment and difficulties in proving the digital communications could verifiably harm or help a college or university necessitated a switch in thesis to a more evidence-based model. The Liberty case, along with difficulties in proving communications efficacy from a school's entire campaign, necessitated the switch to a different research method.

PRODUCTION AND ANALYSIS

During the research into college digital communications during the COVID-19 pandemic, the social media post patterns became evident. This led to more content, showing what most content looks like and the general timeframe by which it is deployed.

This initial shutdown posts on Facebook, Twitter, and even LinkedIn understandably soaked up the most attention. These posts affected the most people and generated the most confusion and therefore the most questions (i.e. comments). This news sent students and their parents scrambling for ways to clear out dorm rooms, travel safely, and still attend courses remotely. It also had alumni commenting, often based on their personal feelings about the virus. The initial posts consistently produced some of the highest engagement numbers from the study, often skewing the overall averages of the non-video content, which was much more numerous than the video content.

More video content appeared for most higher-education social media accounts toward the end of March. Colleges and universities posted mostly inspirational messages and videos regarding life post-shutdown. These seemed to be a way to ease back into normal social media life while acknowledging the major news: the end of traditional courses because of a viral pandemic. Schools also clearly had more time to ponder their moves and produce more polished content, as more schools posted videos in the later part of the month or in the first week of April.

These videos, despite being far removed from the pandemic-info epicenter, could perform quite well, showing that video content is effective in communications for any purpose. This will be the topic of my next web post.

While some of the most popular (in terms of engagement) content from schools during the coronavirus pandemic was video content, it cannot definitively be said that video content outperformed all other posts and tweets.

The study compared video content on Twitter and Facebook by adding three categories individually and dividing that sum by the number of COVID-related posts to get the average. The content was then checked to see which earned higher averages. The posted example on the Wix site involved Boise State University's Facebook, which had four COVID-related non-video posts. Those posts earned 44, 106, 58, and 105 reactions respectively, giving them an average of 78. This was then cross-checked with the averages for each video post from the school's account.

As for the results, they did not show any proof that video outperformed regular posts during the early stages of the pandemic. Some schools did better with video than others. On the University of Wisconsin's Facebook page, video averaged higher reactions (783 to 316) and comments (94 to 52), but with fewer shares, (264 to 203). On Twitter, Wisconsin's regular tweets actually edged the video content in average comments and retweets, though the videos performed much better in likes (243 to 107).

Forty percent of the schools in the study had video content outperform regular content based on the model. Meanwhile, 20 percent of colleges and universities had non-video content outperform video. The remaining cases either had mixed results or splits on Facebook vs. Twitter content. The study was simply inconclusive, with the results turned into more content for the Wix site.

A lot more work needs to be done in this research, partially because of the many variables. Some schools use Facebook more than Twitter and vice versa. There are variations in content, as initial "classes moving online" posts commanded a great deal of attention due to their importance to students and families. This could greatly skew the numbers. Wisconsin, for example, had its initial announcement that classes would move

to a virtual format, which earned 919 reactions, 253 comments, and 1100 shares, much higher than the average engagement from posts at that time: 316 reactions, 52 comments, 264 shares.

Variations in video content can make the data more difficult to interpret as well, with some schools posting presidential announcements in video form early on, and others posting presidential videos to simply offer positive messages. Some schools posted content about how to keep safe. Some of this content aligned with similar messaging in other forms, but often with other schools. A school that posted a video about social distancing was unlikely to also make another post that covered that sole topic. Some content was sillier than others, ignoring the anti-flippancy warnings of Braiker.

CONCLUSIONS

The study in no way suggested video is not a strong performer. YouTube engagement was not included as it could not be fairly compared to other platforms. Instagram was also not checked because so few schools used it to promote video messages, and many schools seem to prefer the platform as a photo warehouse more than a social media tool. The study merely suggested that video content may not outperform other types during crisis situations like the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the results of the study were inconclusive, the final bit of content for the Wix site involved recommendations for higher-education crisis content moving into the future. With video performing well in general, it is recommended that schools still use

video liberally and work to cultivate a YouTube audience, where a single video can earn tens of thousands of views (or in one extreme case, about half a million views). This is an audience that should not be ignored.

Also, comments on video posts tended to be more positive. Posts without video received more angry to antagonistic comments from the audience, while videos tended to see more constructive words and heaping helpings of praise for leadership, possibly because the leaders were more visible and seemed more available to students by appearing in the videos. YouTube comments were predominantly positive as well.

Video's strong performance and its ability to elicit positive reactions suggests video content should be used alongside normal posts during crisis communications. With this in mind, the remaining content on the Wix site consisted of resources for communications professionals at institutions of higher learning. Based on suggested changes from the project committee, these resources were created and posted to the Wix site as the main tools in the final deliverable. The topics of the resources were also suggested and developed by the committee in concert with the researcher. These final resources improved the project by making it more practical and useful for professionals in the field: they could now use an actual educational tool that is based on research and easily shared and consumed. The resources are meant to be quick references for crafting messages and video products for digital release.

One such resource is a list of terms and phrases to use in crisis communications juxtaposed with words and phrases to avoid. The terms are listed in a comparison model, beginning with the desirable terms and phrases and continuing with the other

side of the coin - the similar words and phrases to not use in similar instances. The list is designed as such to pair the similar terms to fit specific situations.

The other resources take the "desired words" idea and develop it into video products. One video follows the same comparison model, offering a quality video to use as a model for future crisis announcement videos, then switching to show a video of less quality and impact. It is explained in the video how and why one video is successful while the other could do better. The other video resource on the Wix site is a sort of meta-descriptive video. It is a constructed and composed video of the researcher talking about how the video is constructed. The key points of video constructed are explained and exemplified to offer both spoken education on video construction for crisis communications and to show the aspects of the video itself. It acts as both a sample video to copy while explaining important aspects of making a similar video. The ultimate goal of the website is to offer more such resources, growing into other topics like how to produce a video with as little equipment and money as possible, how to prepare a subject for an interview, and how to make a basic template for future videos in crisis communications at a college or university.

Some of the challenges faced by schools come from video production itself. While some schools successfully produced quick, cheap cell-phone videos, others were able to produce videos with better quality. Both methods can be effective, though more polished videos tended to perform a little bit better on social media.

In summation, the research outlined in this report and delivered via blog and vlog forms on the Wix website needs more data and more case studies, but it could show that video content is the most important means of communication moving into the

future. It could also show, as it suggests with the inconclusive results, that the many articles written about how video content is the future of Internet content are jumping the gun and simple text content still has a place in social media of the 2020s and beyond.

https://brianpvorce.wixsite.com/brianpvorce

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