

Washington March 25, (Net): President Donald Trump has a new daily ritual now that the pandemic has put the kibosh on the signature campaign rallies that helped him get elected four years ago: the coronavirus brief-ing.

Standing on the once-abandoned White House briefing room stage flanked by public health experts, Trump holds court with reporters and directly addresses the American people, providing updates on his administration's efforts to combat the pandemic and trying to demonstrate that he's in charge.

The updates are far more staid than his raucous rallies and lack the adoring crowds and "Lock her up!" chants of the political gatherings. But they include many of the same features as his now-on-ice mass rallies: plenty of self-congratulation and airing of grievances, press bashing, tirades against his critics, and an ample dose of misleading information.

That, combined with measured updates from public health officials, has created a sometimes confusing split screen for Americans watching at home, many under stay-at-home restrictions and anxiously tuning in to cable news for updates.

"I don't want to stand here for two hours and do this," Trump told reporters during Monday's marathon brief-ing, which stretched to nearly two hours. "But I think it's important. ... Give us any question about it because I think it's important for the public to know."

For the first few days of the crisis, the briefings were led by Vice President Mike Pence, who offered but-toned-up updates in a calming, paternal tone. But Trump, who never likes to cede the spotlight, quickly decid-ed to make himself the star of the daily show.

Now, every day of the week, including Tuesday, when he sat down for a separate Fox News town hall in the Rose Garden, Trump emerges from behind closed doors and reads a summary of his administration's latest ef-forts. Then he invites other administration officials to make remarks from the often-crowded stage where social distancing recommendations are flouted.

Then he opens things up for questions, and the discussion can go in many directions.

Trump's disposition varies. On some days, he has struck an urgent tone, calling on Americans to come together to defeat a common enemy. On others, he has angrily defended his administration's handling of the pandemic and lashed out at reporters, including those who have pressed him on the economic impact of mass closures, testing shortfalls and the struggles of doctors and nurses to find basic supplies.

"I think it's a very bad signal that you're putting out to the American people," he told one reporter who had asked what message he had for frightened Americans.

Some around Trump have suggested that less is more — that he only attend the briefings when there is big news to announce.

"You want to keep the air of importance any time he steps into the room," said former Trump communications aide Jason Miller. But Trump has told people that he knows the nation is watching and that he doesn't want to give up the stage to deputies, who in some cases have refuted his commentary in real time on stage.

"I'll see you all tomorrow," he assured as he left the stage Tuesday.

Indeed, the briefings have been racking up ratings.

During five of last week's briefings, more than twice as many people tuned in to the networks than had during corresponding times a year ago, according to the Nielsen viewer tracking company.

And Friday's lunchtime briefing reached 8.28 million viewers on Fox News Channel, CNN and

MSNBC alone — up from 2.82 million viewers during the same slot last year.

It's a dramatic resurgence for a format that had become must-see TV during the early months of Trump's administration. But he effectively killed the White House press briefing in March 2019 and it has now been more than a year since the last briefing by a White House press secretary. The Trump briefings, which often include information that is later clarified or corrected, stand in sharp contrast to those of New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, which have been widely praised. While the Democrat has generally tried to provide an even-keeled, fact-based approach aided by endless PowerPoint slides, he was far more urgent Tuesday as he pleaded with the federal government to do more to help the state as it struggles to cope with a flood of more than 25,000 confirmed coronavirus cases.

"What am I going to do with 400 ventilators?!" Cuomo bellowed in response to the Federal Emergency Management Agency's latest offer. "You pick the 26,000 people who are going to die because you only sent 400 ventilators!"

"Americans want to see their president out front and leading, in command of the effort to keep the country safe," said Trump campaign spokesman Tim Murtaugh. "That's exactly what President Trump is doing."

Yet the press briefings have also raised questions about whether news outlets should be airing them live, without fact-checking, given Trump's penchant for exaggeration and misstatements. Margaret Sullivan, media columnist for The Washington Post, said Monday that the briefings were beginning to sound like substitutes for Trump's campaign rallies and were working against the goal of giving the public critical and truthful information.

"They have become a daily stage for Trump to play his greatest hits to captive audience members," she wrote.

MSNBC star Rachel Maddow went even further.

"All of us should stop broadcasting it, honestly," she said. "It's going to cost lives."