KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Communication under siege: the example of Steven Sotloff

Frank Smyth

Journalist and CEO of GJS, formerly known as Global Journalist Security
Washington D.C. USA

Abstract: The kidnapping and murder of Steven Sotloff is one of the most horrific examples of brutality against a journalist in memory. Sotloff was captured in 2013, ending up in the hands of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. After remaining in captivity for over a year, Sotloff was executed in September 2014 by beheading a month after another captured journalist, James Foley, was also beheaded. Since Steven Sotloff's loss, his parents have supported Hostile Environments and Emergency First Aid Training (HEFAT) for young aspiring journalists not unlike their son. The original presentation of this keynote was enhanced by two videos, one describing the HEFAT training, and the other interviewing a recent GJS/2Lives Memorial Scholarship training graduate explaining how he used the skills he learned to survive an attack by drug traffickers in northern Mexico, including applying first aid to his wounded producer who survived.

Keywords — Digital Safety, Freelance Journalists, Hostile Environments and Emergency First Aid Training (HEFAT), Journalism, Journalist Security, Psychological Security, Resiliency

SUGGESTED CITATION: Smyth, F. (2020). Communication under siege: The example of Steven Sotloff. *Proceedings of the International Crisis and Risk Communication Conference, Volume 3* (pp. 4-6). Orlando FL: Nicholson School of Communication and Media. <https://www.doi.org/10.30658/icrcc.2020.1>

INTRODUCTION

This story tells of the admirable example of Steven Sotloff including. The scholarly steps he took to prepare himself to report on the escalating civil war in Syria. The skills he learned to connect with people that he cultivated in part when he was studying at the University of Central Florida Nicholson School of Communication and Media. The extraordinary example of courage he set during his captivity by refusing to let his captors define him, and by stepping up for other prisoners as needed. The example of how his parents have turned his loss into something positive by setting up a foundation to sponsor Hostile Environments and Emergency First Aid Training for other young journalists aspiring to do frontline reporting like Steven did. Also addressed is the evidence as to whether such training works.

ADDRESSING THREE THINGS

I want to thank Dr. Robert Littlefield and Patrick Smith and the school for inviting us here today, myself, as well as Art Sotloff, the father of the late Steven Sotloff, and Frank Urrutia, his friend, who has been working with him to set up the 2Lives Steven Sotloff Memorial Foundation, which is why we I think we are being honored here today.

I want to thank all of you being here to hear me this morning. I enjoyed meeting a number of you last night, so it is nice to see some of the same faces.

I am going to address three things:

- First, the example of Steven Sotloff, and what that can teach us.
- Second, the response of his parents, the Sotloffs, to his loss. And what their response, too, can teach us.
- And finally, the training itself and what that can teach young aspiring journalists who wish to do the kind of frontline reporting that Steven was doing, and addressing what that is, and whether or not it works.

COVERING BENGHAZI, REFUGEES

I never knew Steven. I did not. I did know that he was an enterprising reporter. I did know that he got into Libya, was in Benghazi, in 2012, before it seems anyone else. And he was to report through different outlets including an interview on CNN that there were no protests outside the CIA annex where Ambassador Christopher Stevens and two contractors were killed. I also know that Steven was one of the first reporters on the then-emerging refugee crisis in Syria, recognizing it as becoming a greater problem, which got him dubbed as “The Voice of the Voiceless” by a number of media outlets, which I think is significant and a credit to him.

THE YOUNG SCHOLAR

I got to know Steven when I visited with Art and Shirley, and they showed me his room in their house. You can imagine a young person, he wasn't that young, somebody who still has a room in their parents' house that kind of reflects different periods in their life, adulthood and childhood. I perused the books in his library. I don't know if you do that, go to somebody's house and look at the books in their bookcase. I tend to do that, and even pull them off the shelves sometime.

I noticed a watershed text on Steven's shelf that I had only seen before in my own collection. This is rare book, a great heavy book, I think about 800 pages. And it's called *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*. Written by a Palestinian Marxist historian, who was trained at Harvard, published in 1978. And what I realized then is that Steven was a scholar. Because he wasn't covering Iraq, he was covering Syria. But he knew that somehow this book would be instructive, which it was. And it's a book, by the way, focused largely on the role of the Iraqi communist party in the country after the establishment of the monarchy and then the overthrow of the monarchy. I paid about \$200 for my copy. I imagine he must have paid about the same. But it showed me how serious Steven was about his reporting. That he was reading everything he could and reading things that went beyond the norm. And he also went and learned Arabic in Yemen, which is really an extraordinary thing. A lot of reporters don't bother to do that, and he did it. And he also immersed himself in Islamic culture and tried to learn as much as he could about the region, about the people, about the customs, and of course about the differences within Islam which are paramount in the region.

CAPTURED IN ALEPPO

He was then captured in Aleppo, a year after the reporting in Benghazi, in Aleppo, Syria in 2013. And he ended up in the hands of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, known by its acronym usually with contempt in the region as Daesh. And Daesh commits the kind of brutality that I think is hard for us to even imagine. To have endured that. Westerners, whether you are Westerners or whether you are from the region—there was a Jordanian air force pilot you may remember who was captured and was burned alive and videotaped. There were Yazidi women who were raped repeatedly by dozens if not hundreds.

And I was a prisoner once of Saddam. But even that does not compare to the kind of brutality that Daesh was putting out against fellow Muslims, even more viscerally than others, as well as against Westerners whom they managed to capture. And I think Steven understood that Daesh was a perversion of Islam. That Daesh did not represent Islam. And I think that's really quite important. And for those of us who are looking at his legacy, and still looking at the region, need to keep that in mind. I have a great many friends, all of whom are appalled by the actions and brutality of Daesh, as they were also appalled by the brutality of al-Qaeda, even though Daesh went quite further.

HANDLING CAPTIVITY

Now we look at Steven's example, a measure of a man or a woman, I think one way is how they handle captivity. And in that regard Steven gets very, very high marks. He managed, as we know from letters that were smuggled out through Europeans, or Europeans who wrote letters to Art and shared their experiences once they were released. And, by the way, Europeans were generally released for ransom, whereas American and British hostages, because both those governments refused to even discuss the possibility of ransom, were generally executed across the board, which is something to think about.

But Steven managed to observe a fast on a Jewish holiday, Yom Kippur, which I think was important. Prisoners were instructed to pray to Mecca when they were being held prisoner by the Daesh. But Steven, as we understand, managed to turn a few degrees to face Jerusalem. Which might be a small step, might be symbolic. But for me what it means is that he was not allowing his captors to define him. And I think that is paramount. Really exemplary. And he didn't stop here. Like James Foley, who was the first journalist beheaded by ISIS in 2014, Steven was the second journalist beheaded a month later. Like Foley, Steven managed to step up and give moral support to other prisoners in the darkest of times. We know that. One reason we know that is because there was one case where a man in the makeshift prison, a European, not to disparage Europeans, he just happened to have been European. When food was brought by Daesh, there was never enough to go around. And this particular prisoner was stealing, taking more of his share of food from the other prisoners.

STANDING UP FOR OTHERS

Now, Steven's a fairly physical guy, not very tall, but quite stocky. He played Rugby and loved the physicality of it. He could have used his strength to get more food for himself. Instead he challenged the food stealer, you can call him. And while they're in captivity in front of other prisoners, they had a fistfight, which is sort of hard to believe. Now that's a big risk on Steven's part because one, he was standing up for other prisoners. And we know that Foley was more severely tortured than other prisoners when he was found to be standing up for other prisoners. So Steven was taking a great risk. But he did it. And he ended up beating the guy, he didn't beat him gratuitously, didn't cause any serious injury. But he beat him enough to be able to announce to the room: There will be no more stealing of food. I grew up in northern New Jersey, so learned a little bit of Yiddish from my Jewish-American friends there. And I think they call that chutzpah, real chutzpah. That is the example of who Steven was, and I think it is part of why we are honoring him today.

TURNING LOSS

Now, I cannot imagine the loss that Steven's father and mother, Art and Shirley, and his sister, Lauren, all felt knowing that he was beheaded, knowing they would never see him again. That is something that is beyond, I think, any of us to imagine. Unless you've lost a child, and even if you have, to lose a child under those circumstances is really superlative. But somehow Art and Shirley managed to turn this into something positive. To turn that negativity into something positive. Now, Steven did all he could to prepare. He read scholarly books, as I said, he learned the language, he immersed himself in the culture. He already knew how to connect with people, something he learned partly through his time studying here. He was an alumnus of UCF and the Nicholson School. So it is one of the skills, one of the gifts that he learned when he was here at this school. But he never happened to have security training. I'm not sure that would have saved him. I wouldn't argue that. But it certainly could have helped him mitigate risk, which is what I think security training can do.

Now, before he died, Steven did manage to smuggle out a letter through one of the Europeans who was released. In that letter, one line really stands out, which is, "Everyone has two lives, and the second one begins when you realize that the first life is over." It's an interesting concept, philosophical (attributed originally to Confucius). And it's that concept of two lives, when you really are facing tough circumstances, knowing you don't have necessarily that much time left, which could be any moment, which for Steven was really quite powerful. That's the name, 2Lives, that Art and Shirley chose to give the foundation for the effort they've created to try and provide security training to other young journalists like Steven. Now the training we provide is called Hostile Environments and Emergency First Aid Training. We didn't invent it. It's been around awhile. It actually started during the 1991 Gulf War, and it really came into its own during the Balkan Wars, when a lot of journalists were doing very difficult reporting, and a bunch of British former special forces personnel realized that they had training that would be applicable.

DISCUSSION

The training we do at GJS builds on that, but it's a little different because it's designed, I'm coming from a journalist background, and I have other people working with me who have journalist or NGO backgrounds. So we build on the military training but we're not defined by it. So we set up scenarios that are designed, how to deal with a checkpoint. How to deal with sexual assault in a variety of forms, something that the military mindset doesn't really quite cover. Digital safety, which is becoming an increasingly important component of security, is now absolutely indispensable. And also resiliency, which is sort of emotional, you could call it psychological security, but it really is an awareness of your own state of mind. How the stress can get to you, covering refugees, depravity, horrific acts. And how to take care of yourself so you don't just survive, you thrive.

So what does this training look like? I am going to show you a video, and then I am going to show you one more. The audience saw the *University of Miami/ 2Lives Sotloff training video (4:04 minutes)*: <https://youtu.be/9dzAC-Ls6U4>

Now, the next question is, Does the training work? We have video from one of our recent trainees who was part of a National Geographic crew in northern Mexico operating in Ciudad Juarez, on the Mexican side of the border. And they were interviewing a drug trafficking suspect, somebody who was an alleged member of a local drug trafficking organization. And as they were interviewing him, rival drug traffickers burst into the house where they were conducting the interview. Shot the subject, the interviewee dead in the chair during the interview. Shot and killed another man in the process and ended up shooting and wounding one of the journalists. This is Luc Forsyth, one of our training graduates. Here he tells you what he did and discusses the training and how it influenced his decisions.

Audience saw video of a *Luc Forsyth interview on Mexico attack (1:03 minutes)*: <https://youtu.be/1pvER3zwege>
There we have it. I want to thank you for your attention, and we'll take questions at the end after the other presentations.