KEYNOTE ADDRESS

A communication ethics response to “Communication Under Siege”

Jeanne M. Persuit, Ph.D.

University of North Carolina Wilmington
601 S. College Road, Wilmington, North Carolina, USA

Abstract: Presented as a response to the keynote speaker at ICRC 2020, this essay considers the communication ethics implications to crisis communication informed by the work of philosopher Hannah Arendt and communication scholar Ronald C. Arnett.

Keywords — Hannah Arendt, Steven Sotloff, communication ethics, crisis communication

SUGGESTED CITATION: Persuit, J. M. (2020). A communication ethics response to “Communication Under Siege.” *Proceedings of the International Crisis and Risk Communication Conference, Volume 3* (pp. 7-9). Orlando FL: Nicholson School of Communication and Media. <https://www.doi.org/10.30658/icrcc.2020.2>

INTRODUCTION

This response to Frank Smyth’s keynote presentation “Communication Under Siege: The Story of Steven Sotloff” provides a communication ethics framework to understand the risks and threats to journalists reporting locally and internationally in this historical moment. Communication ethics can inform a rhetorical response during what Hannah Arendt called “dark times.”

Frank Smyth describes the story of slain journalist Steven Sotloff as one of “tenacious hope.” That phrase shaped my response because it echoes the words of my teacher and mentor, Dr. Ronald C. Arnett, and inspired me to consider how communication ethics can get us to this powerful place of tenacious hope. More specifically, I chose the perspective of communication ethics literacy as the entrance into this conversation. Communication ethics literacy is understanding what good an organization chooses to protect and promote and understanding the communicative practices people engage in to protect and promote these goods. In this time of postmodernity, we do not all agree on what to protect and promote [1].

NEGOTIATING DIFFERENCE AS CRISIS COMMUNICATION

How do we negotiate this difference? Arnett et al. [1] offer a definition of crisis communication that is connected to this contention and difference – that “the rise of crisis communication is not only a way of assisting needed negotiation between contending views of the good; it is an indicator of the defining shape of this historical moment as marked by a contentious understanding of the good.” They cite Anthony and Sellnow (2011)’s explanation of the “first and second things” and the need to keep them separate – in this case, the first thing is safety that must take priority over the second thing, which might be profitability or reputation – as an illustration of a contentious understanding of the good. We need crisis communication to accommodate, if not resolve, these differences to move us forward. At the same time, crisis communication needs us to recognize that we no longer are working from agreed-upon narratives and that appealing to common sense and good judgement can no longer persuade or even clarify a course of action or response. We are witnessing this unfold in real time during the COVID-19 global pandemic; the clash between the first and second things are literally playing out in the ways individuals and organizations are responding to this crisis. Communication ethics that informs thoughtful, deliberate action is desperately needed in this time.

Communication ethics and crisis communication, then, are inextricably linked. When we theorize and practice crisis communication, we are navigating the differences between the goods that people and organizations protect and promote in the absence of agreed-upon goods and narratives. In this response, I will rely on the ideas of 20th century philosopher Hannah Arendt and on the interpretive work of Dr. Ronald C. Arnett to help us navigate.

HANNAH ARENDT

Hannah Arendt was born in Germany in 1906 and died of natural causes in New York City in 1975. At the time of her death, she had written 22 books and 149 articles. She fled Germany for Paris in 1933; in 1940 she was interned at Camp Gurs in southern France. She escaped, along with her husband, her mother, and best friend, and managed to get a United States visa and papers. She left for the United States from Portugal in 1941. Arendt's work in philosophy and social and political systems was informed by her first-hand experience as a Jew in Hitler's Germany. In New York, as a professor and scholar, she developed, taught, and published groundbreaking works such as *The Human Condition*.

In 1961, Arendt covered the trial of Adolf Eichmann, architect of the Nazi's Final Solution, for the *New Yorker*. In her dispatches from Israel, she observed that he was relentlessly ordinary and thoughtless, which she termed an example of "the banality of evil." This characterization garnered significant controversy; her critics argued that Eichmann had to be an anti-Semitic monster rather than the mediocre being that he was. In Arendt's opinion, "Despite all the efforts of the prosecution, everyone could see that this man was not a 'monster,' but it was difficult indeed not to suspect that he was a clown. And since this suspicion would have been fatal to the whole enterprise and was also rather hard to sustain in view of the sufferings he and his like had caused to millions of people, his worst clowneries were never reported." According to Arnett [3], "Arendt states time and time again that evil all too often lives in the face of the banal – in cogs, or bit actors, like Eichmann. The banality of evil lives wherever persons do not find a way to contend with actions and events that carry destructive consequences and are propelled by thoughtless action" (93).

Arendt contrasted this thoughtless action with the descriptions of people who prevailed during crisis and tragedy in her 1968 book *Men in Dark Times*. She uses the metaphor of light to contrast with darkness and in this next quote, although not her intent, she sums up the dangers of ignoring communication ethics literacy and crisis communication [5]:

"If it is the function of the public realm to throw light on the affairs of men by providing a space of appearances in which they can show in deed and word, for better and worse, who they are and what they can do, then darkness has come when this light is extinguished by 'credibility gaps'...by speech that does not disclose what IS but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that, under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality." (p. 45)

These themes of Arendt's work – thoughtlessness, banality, artifice, and sentimentality – should resonate with us as crisis communication scholars and practitioners. These are the barriers to effective and life-saving risk and crisis communication. These are the challenges we're up against. We must speak clearly, honestly, with conviction and integrity, without sugarcoating or trivializing. We face complex problems that require thoughtful, meaningful, difficult solutions.

CONCLUSION

From what I have learned about the life and work of Steven Sotloff [6], he recognized the world's complexity and thoughtfully engaged in, as Arendt describes it, "throwing light on the affairs of men." Reading Arendt's work alongside Sotloff's life story helped me to understand both. Arnett [3] calls the lives described in *Men in Dark Times* as "lamp holders," providing the light in darkness, and explains, "Lamp holders give us hope in existence – not false optimism but tenacious hope and courage. The figures discussed in *Men in Dark Times* met life on its own terms, in the darkness, providing a corrective to the social world gone awry and illuminating holy sparks. To know such a person in a moment of despair is to witness hope before one's own eyes. Lamp holders are not drawn by humanistic heroism but by the light claiming them, demanding that they hold it up for others to see. As a derivative creature called by the light, one then acts within a Jewish call, 'If not me, then whom?' Such are the lamp holders of Arendt's *Men in Dark Times*."

Steven Sotloff is a lamp holder who answered the call, if not me, then whom? He lost his life answering this call. May his memory be a blessing.

Author Biography

Jeanne M. Persuit, Ph.D., (Duquesne University) is an associate professor of communication studies at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Her email is persuitj@uncw.edu. She would like to thank Frank Smyth for his keynote presentation and dedicate this essay to the memory of journalist Steven Sotloff.

REFERENCES

- [1] Arnett, R. C., & Arneson, P. (1999). *Dialogic Civility in a Cynical Age*. State University of New York Press.
- [2] Arnett, R. C., Fritz, J. M. H., & McManus, L. M. B. (2017). *Communication Ethics Literacy: Dialogue & Difference*. Kendall Hunt.
- [3] Arnett, R. C. (2013). *Communication Ethics in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt's Rhetoric of Warning & Hope*. Southern Illinois University Press.
- [4] Arendt, H. (2006). *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Penguin.
- [5] Arendt, H. (1968). *Men in Dark Times*. Harcourt Brace & Company.

- [6] 2LIVES Steven Sotloff Memorial Foundation. (2020, March 8). *About Steven*.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20200525183140/https://www.2livesfoundation.org/about-steven>