

Killing in a time of Covid 19: How do we communicate when we can't breathe?

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Killing in a time of Covid-19: How do we communicate when we can't breathe?

The importance of communication is never more apparent than at times of significant public events. From the UK leaving the European Union, to Harry and Meghan stepping away from British monarchy, it is through communication that our realities materialise. Indeed, as scholar Daniel Nelson reflects, it is a truism that 'wars start and end with words'. It is no surprise then that a deep-rooted concern with getting communications 'right' lays at the heart of the national response to the Covid-19 pandemic. From government messaging to public health advice, from media debate to conversations with our families, our awareness of the need for successful communications ripples through our consciousness as we try to overcome this disease.

We often, mistakenly, think of communication as a linear process. A means to transmit information from A to B. It is more helpful to think about communication as an interactive, dialogical process. This is obvious when we consider the back and forth of our everyday conversations, but even communications that at first glance appear to be a one way process, like a speech or a political statement, are no less of an interactive event. All communications are designed with the audience in mind and they always have a purpose. Through our communication we seek to evoke a certain feeling, encourage a particular action, and so on. Added to this, our talk is never neutral, all communications uphold some ideals and values whilst rejecting or downplaying others.

Throughout the pandemic a great deal of attention has focussed on the communications of our political leaders, there are interesting patterns emerging in the interactions between the key messages of our political elite and public response to those messages. Throughout March as the pandemic took hold in the UK we witnessed growing frustration at the lack of clarity in the government's messaging. As the nation became fearful of a disease that they could not see and had no ability to fight, we increasingly looked to our political elite for strong leadership and certainty. When Boris Johnson delivered his televised address announcing a UK wide 'lockdown', the nation appeared to let out a collective sigh of relief and any government fears about the willingness of the public to comply with these previously unimaginable constraints on individual liberties were swiftly allayed. What emerged was a national narrative of unity, a sense that 'we are in this together'.

The government's central message telling us to **Stay at home-Protect the NHS-Save Lives** seemed to hit all the right notes. The media referred to it as "one of the most successful communications in modern political history"¹. The behavioural scientists, including those who sit on the Independent Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Behaviours (SPI-B), liked it because it was specific and actionable. It told people what to do, why they were doing it and what the outcome of doing it would be. Most importantly, the public connected with it. With the NHS at its heart, this message captured, and perhaps catapulted a wave of national pride and gratitude. A sentiment reflected on so many Thursday evenings when people opened their doors to 'clap for the NHS'. We can contrast the success of this message with the subsequent shift which told us to **Stay alert-Control the virus-Save lives**. Scientists, political commentators and the public alike roundly challenged this new message, pointing to the ambiguity of it and querying how we can be alert to a killer that is invisible to us. But of course, uncertainty is exactly the problem we face with Covid-19, we are all too aware of just how vulnerable we are to a threat that we have little capacity to challenge, a killer that does not value our life.

¹ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2020/05/01/story-behind-stay-home-protect-nhs-save-lives/>

For many of us, this daily sense of threat and vulnerability is new and unpleasant territory. Yet, against the backdrop of a pandemic that has up to now left more than 400,000 people dead, we witnessed the brutal killing of black American George Floyd. **There is something uniquely obscene about watching the breath literally being squeezed out of him by the knee of a white police officer, whilst the world is simultaneously turned upside down just trying to keep the gravely ill breathing.**

For those that want to listen, George Floyd's death communicates to us what it means to be voiceless, his story tells of oppression so embedded in our history and culture that it renders all of black society fighting for breath. His final attempt to be heard was a quiet call for his own life to matter, just enough to be spared. His experience and the resolute lack of response to his final pleas echo centuries of black struggle both in the US and in the UK. The case of George Floyd begs each one of us to try and understand what life is like when seemingly every attempt to communicate with those in power is dismissed, denounced or denied.

With this in mind, what are we to make of the increasingly tense debate playing out about the wave of protests in the wake of George Floyd's death? Across political, media and public forums, the rights of protestors to gather and share their accumulated grief and rage at his killing and at the continued systemic oppression of black people are presented as incompatible with the social distancing behaviours needed to keep Covid-19 under control. There is certainly a tension here and no doubt for many who chose to protest, weighing up the risks to their own health, their loved ones and those they may come into contact with is not easy. But again, if we want to understand why people would choose to protest, especially during the pandemic, we need to rethink our assumptions about what communication can look like. When we are in danger we shout for help, when we are scared we scream, when we are grieving we cry. Dr Martin Luther King understood more than most the power of communication; he rightly argued that riots are the language of the unheard. When nothing else is open to us, when we are oppressed, often our only means of being heard is through protest.

For those of us who have never gone unheard, or who find it hard to put ourselves in the shoes of George Floyd, particularly those of us who, on some level at least, recognise our white privilege, perhaps we can imagine it like this ..

What if the people we must put our faith in and look to for leadership and protection could end Covid-19 as easily as police officer Derek Chauvin could have lifted his knee from the neck of George Floyd? What if scientists found a cure but the elite offered it only to a chosen few, letting the disease run unchecked and allowing generation after generation of people in our communities to suffer needlessly? What if no matter how much time we spent trying to negotiate with those in power, our pursuit of fair treatment never amounted to a just society? In these circumstances, even if we knew that engaging in protest might mean more people became sick, would it be such an unlikely option? How many years of refusal to respond to our calls for fair Covid-19 treatment for all would it take before we were willing to take to the streets and protest, perhaps to riot in order to be heard?

George Floyd was killed during the time of Covid-19 and yet he was not a victim of Covid-19. In the past week, protestors have pointed out that the term 'pandemic' is an excellent metaphor for racism. This seems a fair observation. Of course, the difference is, we have the tools we need to end racism, we have *always* had the tools. It just takes a collective will to use them and its way past time that we did.

Until all of us can breathe easy, surely none of us can, and until that day .. *protest talks.*