



# **“While most are well intentioned, few are intentional”**

An examination of anti-trafficking  
communications and the need for  
ethical/equitable storytelling practices  
for strategic communication and  
public relations professionals

Sandra Boone  
Capstone Presentation  
Strategic Communication Master's  
and Minor in Literacy and Rhetorical Studies  
University of Minnesota  
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# Trigger Warning

This presentation includes a focus on sex trafficking along with mentions of police violence and examples of racist brand names. Individuals should be aware that this topic can be upsetting or triggering.

## Notes on Limitations

I wish to acknowledge that I, in many ways, chose to explore the subject of sex trafficking after taking PA 5426 (Research and Policy with Marginalized Populations in the Humphrey School) as it seemed to be a topic where there would be an obvious significance to questions about the ethical practices of communications professionals (along with powerful writing on the topic from victim advocates that I will share). While I attempted to be aware of my own biases and to do this research in a sensitive and thorough manner, my ability to do so is inherently limited by:

- My introductory level of knowledge about sex trafficking
- My life experience being from a position of privilege as a white cisgender woman with no known direct contact to victim-survivors, and
- My preconceived ideas about the role and responsibility of communicators coming from my 15 years of experience as a strategic communications professional.



# Summary

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Discussion of research plan and the need for ethical storytelling for communicators

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# I

## **Introduction**

Discussion of research plan  
and the need for ethical storytelling  
for communicators

## The Strategic Communication Mindset for Storytelling

“In a strategic communication setting, whether it's corporate or not-for-profit, **the stories you tell are containers for key messages that are designed to educate, inform, and persuade...**

**"The use of stories is inherently self-centered as you don't tell a story without it serving a strategic purpose.** So by definition, you're going to choose stories that help further your agenda and, within those stories, you respect the actors while highlighting the elements that get your point of view across.”

(Matt Kucharski, President, Padilla, emphasis added)

**As communicators using another's words, we must meet both of these.**

## The Survivor-Advocate's Mindset for Storytelling

“Story is a powerful medium. A well told story can make an issue like human trafficking personally relevant to those who hear it. Such stories encourage action in ways that facts and figures may not. However, **it is the responsibility of social service agencies and not-for-profits to protect the well-being of survivors.**

**“It is important that agencies reflect on why they are considering using a survivor's story.** Is sharing the story therapeutic and beneficial for the survivor, or is it a way to seek benefits for the agency?...

**“Ultimately, there is no cause significant or important enough to jeopardize the emotional and physical well-being of a survivor.** Survivors of human trafficking have overcome exploitation, and they should not be further commodified by those trying to help.”

(Countryman-Roswurm & Patton Brackin, 2013, p. 6, emphasis added)

# Problem Definition

Strategic communication and public relations professionals must balance a **dual responsibility** to develop communications that **fulfill organizational objectives** with the need to **honor and respect the individuals** whose stories we share.



# Method

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## **Semi-Structured Interviews**

Questions focused on the professional experiences and work practices with individuals who do strategic communication, public relations, and/or development at anti-trafficking and related\* organizations

\* Domestic violence, sexual assault/exploitation, homelessness, and torture-rehabilitation organizations

## **June 8-July 15, 2020 Mix of Zoom, Phone, and In-person**

Most mentioned one or more of the following world events:

- COVID-19
- Murder of George Floyd and subsequent riots and protests
- Increase in corporations issuing statements on racial equity

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## **Individual Background Interviews**

Interviews with experts on:

- Asset-based messaging
- Ethical photography
- Corporate communications
- Storytelling within healthcare-related settings (2)
- Ethical Storytelling Pledge (2)

## **Reviewed Strategic Communication & Public Relations Literature For Discussion Of Ethics, Equity, And Power**

While some critical public relations scholars discussed similar issues, none had my focus, and few tied their discussions to concrete work practices.



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# II

## **Background**

Information about  
sex trafficking and issues identified in  
anti-trafficking communications

# Definitions and Common Myths

- United States Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA) defines sex trafficking as occurring whenever **“a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion”** or whenever the individual performing the act is **younger than 18 years old.**
- Some common misbeliefs or myths include:
  - Individuals must have been snuck into the country.
  - There must be bondage, violence, or abduction.
  - Cisgender women and children are the victims of sex trafficking.
- There is disagreement within the anti-trafficking community regarding whether prostitution constitutes 1) a valid form of sex work or 2) trafficking and exploitation.\*

\* I did not pre-screen or eliminate organizations based on their philosophical or political viewpoints. While I am not taking a position, I included relevant quotes that describe prostitution as a form of trafficking or exploitation when the individual did so.

# Ethical Concerns Identified in Anti-Trafficking Research

## Simplistic Narratives

Stories use episodic frames where “individuals rather than society or social conditions at the center of solving problems” (Steinke, 2020, p. 6)



## Reinforcement of Stereotypes

With roots in the white slavery panic, trafficking stories feature weak females and villains who are “‘foreign’... or undesirable ‘others’” (O’Brien, 2018, p. 14)

## Pressing for Salacious Details

“I felt like I was covertly but firmly directed to retrieve my traumatic memories, which generated such graphic and suggestive imagery... that I questioned whether it was safe or responsible” (Cojocaru, 2015, p. 187)



## Problematic Visuals

“Images are dominated by portrayals of trafficked persons that fit into one of two frames: powerless victim or unworthy prostitute” (Krsmanovic, 2016, p. 139)

“While most involved [in the anti-trafficking movement] are well intentioned, few are **intentional**. Acts of awareness undertaken by allies are often harmful to the very victims and survivors they are declaring need to be ‘rescued.’ **In the name of anti-trafficking awareness, survivors are frequently reexploited... taken advantage of in the pursuit of a story that has emotional pull.**”

(Countryman-Roswurm & Brackin, 2017, p. 327, emphasis added)



# III

## **Findings**

Main themes from interviews with  
anti-trafficking communicators

# Finding #1

Organizations seek to balance the benefits and concerns about asking victim-survivors to share their stories.

- **Storytelling creates connection.**  
“One part that I really am cognitive when giving presentations is that **people want to be able to identify and they want to be able to have something real...** So we try to wrap and weave as much color as we can to make this tapestry or even just a better vision of what this puzzle is...”  
- Communications Specialist, Survivor-led Anti-trafficking/Prostitution Organization
- **There are differing opinions regarding the ethics of asking current/past clients for permission to use their stories.**  
“We are intentional about not re-exploiting survivors and not using survivors for their stories... **When I do use survivor stories, it's not the people that we serve.** I use stories from published authors who are also survivors who have written about their experience.”  
- Sex Trafficking Project Manager, Sexual Violence Center

# Finding #1

Organizations seek to balance the benefits and concerns about asking victim-survivors to share their stories.

- While some victim-survivors find it healing to share their story, others do not.

“I know a lot of journalists will say, ‘Oh, people feel better after they share their story.’ **Sometimes for people, it does help, but sometimes, it brings up bad feelings**, and they later realize that [their story] is how they're known to people that don't really know them, and it doesn't make them better.” - Former Communications Director, Torture-rehabilitation Organization

- Communicators must assist victim-survivors in setting boundaries.

“This was something that I really did have to learn... **you have to not sacrifice the person for the story... and the thing is that you can't expect the survivor or the victim to know their limits.**”

- Public Relations Coordinator, Anti-trafficking Organization

# Finding #1

Organizations seek to balance the benefits and concerns about asking victim-survivors to share their stories.

- Many organizations go beyond basic legal requirements regarding consent.

“If we are a community or a sector claiming to fight exploitation, then **that needs to be included in the way that we tell stories.** That does not mean we shouldn't tell stories, but **we have to be careful about our practices.**” - Strategy Director, Child Anti-trafficking Organization

- These deep consent practices include a commitment that the victim-survivor can say when they no longer want their story shared.

“There are and will be times again where time has passed and **a youth will come back to us and be in a different place in their lives and request we stop using their photo or story... We honor all requests from clients to remove a photo or story from our materials.**” - Development Director, Youth Poverty and Homelessness Support Organization

## Finding #2

Communicators cannot sensationalize the issue or tell stories that simply perpetuate stereotypes, but they must also ensure their stories represent and validate the real and varied lived experiences of victim-survivors.

- **Stories cannot sensationalize or oversimplify the issue.**

“Sometimes, in this field, we **work out of both extremes. There is a tendency for people to dramatize or sensationalize....** But the pendulum sometimes swings **too far the opposite way** where people are so worried about triggering that people are not really conveying the real truth and the reality of trafficking. **It needs to be a ‘both and,’ where we don’t do either extreme, but we do try to be representative of people’s experiences...**” - Sex Trafficking Project Manager, Sexual Violence Center

- **Communicators stress the importance of situating individual stories & stats within the context of broader trends.**

“Sometimes we have really horrific incidents that our clients are going through... **So beyond avoiding the sensationalism, we also try to describe what the norm is and give those facts.**” - Director, Sexual Violence Counseling and Prevention Center



## Finding #2

Communicators cannot sensationalize the issue or tell stories that simply perpetuate stereotypes, but they must also ensure their stories represent and validate the real and varied lived experiences of victim-survivors.

- **Communicators make a conscious effort to challenge stereotypes.**

“We are intentional about **representing a diverse group of people and identities**, whether that is race, class, religion, sex, sexual orientation as well as experiences. Since we do so much community education, we want to **make sure that we don’t reinforce stereotypes or myths about trafficking**, so we want to show the whole spectrum of what exploitation and trafficking look like.” - Sex Trafficking Project Manager, Sexual Violence Center

- **Communicators seek to show a victim-survivor’s humanity while also protecting their anonymity.**

“When we do quote survivors, if you share the person’s name and that they are a survivor, **it is also nice to share some of their other identities**, and that they are not only a survivor—they are also an advocate or an activist or an educator, a lawyer, a mom, a sister.” - Sex Trafficking Project Manager, Sexual Violence Center

## Finding #3

Communicators recognize the need to ensure they use a respectful process that puts the needs of victim-survivors first — even if that means not sharing a story or losing a communications opportunity.

- Communicators must work with program staff to ensure storytelling process is healthy & respectful.

*“It is critical for anybody doing communications consult with the direct service providers and advocates because those on the ground working with the human beings can be very different from a more detached professional that knows about an issue in an academic or ideological way.”* - Sex Trafficking Project Manager, Sexual Violence Center

- Only share an individual’s story if it benefits the victim-survivor.

*“We would only ever tell a story of a client who is at a good place in their life... and when it's going to benefit them to tell the story. I always go to the caseworkers and ask them, ‘Okay, who do you know?’ And [the caseworkers] will approach the students first and ask them if they're interested and willing, and then I get involved.”* - Strategy Director, Child Anti-trafficking Organization

## Finding #3

Communicators recognize the need to ensure they use a respectful process that puts the needs of victim-survivors first — even if that means not sharing a story or losing a communications opportunity.

- Use care when selecting imagery, particularly when using photos of actual victim-survivors.

“We want our images evoke emotion, but are not exploitative. *Our clients don’t identify with the posters and images showing people with tape over their mouths or in other ‘victim’ poses.* Survivors of trafficking can look like anyone on the street, so we take care to select images appropriately.” -

Communications Director, Nonprofit Social Services Organization

- Just with stories, victim-survivors must have control over how/when their photo will be used.

“Years ago, we used to have a blanket sign off on our Photo Release Form. *Several years ago, we changed this practice so that any time we have interest in using someone’s image for another purpose, we connect back with the individual to seek permission a second time.*” - Communications Representative, Faith-based Nonprofit Organization

## Finding #3

Communicators recognize the need to ensure they use a respectful process that puts the needs of victim-survivors first — even if that means not sharing a story or losing a communications opportunity.

- Due to the sensitivity of the issue, communicators struggle with demands from and about getting media coverage.

“I would say to the executive director and the director of development and the board members... there's always pressure to get more earned media... **But we have this problem that we can't respond quickly, and we didn't ever really promote individual stories of people.**” - Former Communications Director, Torture-rehabilitation Organization

“Sometimes, a client agrees to do a media interview, but **they change their mind** or something like that. **So my role is to support them** in that and go back to reporters saying, ‘**Nope, sorry. We don't have anyone willing to do an interview right now.**’” - Communications Director, Domestic Violence Shelter

## Finding #3

Communicators recognize the need to ensure they use a respectful process that puts the needs of victim-survivors first — even if that means not sharing a story or losing a communications opportunity.

- In particular, communicators must discuss the possibility that a victim-survivor may wish to share their story anonymously and whether that will be allowed by the reporter's network/publisher.

*“We had a survivor who agreed to share her story.... And we talked [with the journalist] about what we would talk about during the interview. **There was a stipulation that her identity would be protected—like her face wouldn't be seen. But because of the whole ‘we need a good story’ thing, the journalist’s editor pulled the whole thing.***

*“And so it was very frustrating for the survivor. **She put herself out there and her story to help other people and then nothing came of it.** It feels like a broken promise, and that's something that's really important, is that you don't break promises and you don't over-promise.” - Public Relations Coordinator, Anti-trafficking Organization*

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# IV

## **Recommendations**

Suggested work practices for strategic  
communication and public relations  
professionals

**First, to state the obvious question:  
Is this only for nonprofits?  
Why should businesses care?**

## **A Communicator's Responsibility To Their Organization**

"In a strategic communication setting, whether it's corporate or not-for-profit, **the stories you tell are containers for key messages that are designed to educate, inform, and persuade...**

**"The use of stories is inherently self-centered as you don't tell a story without it serving a strategic purpose.** Otherwise, it's a wasted effort on the part of the communicator. So by definition, you're going to choose stories that help further your agenda and, within those stories, you respect the actors while highlighting the elements that get your point of view across."

(Matt Kucharski, President, Padilla, emphasis added)

## **A Communicator's Responsibility To Those Whose Stories They Share**

"Story is a powerful medium. A well told story can make an issue like human trafficking personally relevant to those who hear it. Such stories encourage action in ways that facts and figures may not. However, **it is the responsibility of social service agencies and not-for-profits serving survivors of human trafficking to protect the well-being of these survivors.**

**"It is important that agencies reflect on why they are considering using a survivor's story.** Is sharing the story therapeutic and beneficial for the survivor, or is it a way to seek benefits for the agency?..."

**"Ultimately, there is no cause significant or important enough to jeopardize the emotional and physical well-being of a survivor.** Survivors of human trafficking have overcome exploitation and they should not be further commodified by those trying to help."

(Countryman-Roswurm & Patton Brackin, 2013, p. 6, emphasis added)



**While most will not deal with issues as complex or sensitive as sex trafficking, all communicators must consider the power and responsibility that come with our roles as storytellers and gatekeepers of information.**

## **Minneapolis police cite 'fluid' situation for troubling misinformation released after George Floyd death**

The most credible accounts of what happened that night came from bystander video and private surveillance footage.

## **Snyder Won't Deserve Credit For Redskins Name Change, Native American Leader Says**

Credits: (clockwise from top left): Mannix, A. (6/2020). MPD cite 'fluid' situation. *Star Tribune*. Singkirbysing. (6/20). How to make a non racist breakfast [Tiktok]. Greenwood, G. (3/19) What can digital agencies learn? *Wholegrain Digital*. Pepsi. (4/17). Live for Now. Garcia, T. (6/20). Companies are speaking out. *MarketWatch*. Walker, P. (6/20) How Michael Thomas worked with 'rogue' staffer. *CBS Sports*. Sprung, S. (7/20) Snyder Won't Deserve Credit, *Forbes*.



What can digital agencies learn about business ethics from the Fyre Festival?



Companies are speaking out against racial injustice after the killing of George Floyd, but they have to back it up with action

## **How Michael Thomas worked with 'rogue' NFL staffer to create Black Lives Matter video in only one day**

Risking his job for the cause, one NFL staffer reached out to Thomas to effect change



# Recommendations for Anti-Trafficking Communicators and Others Working with Victims of Trauma

1. Collaborate with program/direct service staff to identify individuals who would benefit from sharing their story publicly and to ensure a respectful process.
2. Empower victim-survivors from the start to shape their story, give them final approval, and allow them to say if they no longer want the story shared.
3. Follow deep consent practices and trauma-informed interview techniques.
4. Use extreme care when selecting visuals for your publications, particularly if you are using photos of actual victim-survivors.
5. Discuss with your organization's staff, leadership, and clients whether it would be possible to pay victim-survivors for their stories.

## Question

Why am I asking this survivor to share their story and experiences of abuse and exploitation?  
Is there another way to accomplish this same goal?  
Who benefits more from the telling of this personal account of abuse and exploitation: the survivor or my agency?  
Where is this survivor at in their recovery process? Will retelling their story cause emotional harm or be retraumatizing?  
Is the survivor developmentally, mentally, and emotionally able to consider the consequences of widely sharing their experiences of abuse and exploitation?  
What effects might this have on the survivor in both the short and long term?  
Is the survivor aware of these short- and long-term effects?  
Does the survivor have the proper emotional and social support to cope with possible side effects?  
Is the survivor being manipulated or do they feel pressured in any way to share their story?  
How is the survivor being compensated for their time and for sharing their story? If so, are they being compensated in a manner that I would expect to be paid for sharing my own expertise?

Questions for communicators to consider before asking a victim-survivor to share their story.  
(Countryman-Roswurm & Patton Brackin, 2017, p. 331)

**“These are people’s stories and their lives, and often at very vulnerable times.**

It is important for a communications professional to recognize clients as survivors and people, not just stories.”

- Communications Director, Nonprofit Social Services Organization

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# Recommendations for All Communicators Regardless of Sector

1. Challenge misinformation, myths, and stereotypes in communications through being cognizant of your own biases and intentional research, planning, consultation, and hiring.
2. Use strength-based messaging.
3. Follow informed consent practices—it is about more than just covering your legal liability and responsibility.
4. Discuss photo disclosure requirements and whether someone is blocked from participating due to a wish of not being photographed.
5. For White Communicators: Consider whether you are the appropriate person to write a story or whether you should hire a freelancer or make other arrangements.

OLD DEFICIT-BASED	NEW ASSET-BASED
Step Up addresses girls' barriers to success.	In Step Up, girls set goals. In Step Up, teens sharpen their problem solving skills.
Step Up seeks to reduce dropout rates and end the dropout crises.	Step Up works with girls to prepare for graduation. Step Up teens are graduating high school on time. In Step Up, girls work with each other and their mentors to think about and plan for life after high school. Step Up teens support each other in graduating from high school on time and ready for the next step. At Step Up, girls find the time, space and attention they need to realize their goal of graduating high school on time. Step Up seeks to increase graduation rates.
Step Up teens are often facing difficult family situations like violence, abuse, unemployment or illness.	Step Up teens are aspirational and taking action to graduate high school confident, college-bound, career-focused, and ready to join the next generation of professional women.
Summer internships are essential for crime prevention.	Through the Young Luminaries summer internship program, girls have an opportunity to contribute to the community.
We need to find more summer internships for at-risk girls.	Girls from our community are seeking summer internships.

Example Style Guide for Strength-based messaging. Step Up. (2016) [Words Matter](#).

“How do you help people understand your issue without reinforcing myths and stereotypes that people feel like they already know? **The information that we choose to share—the stories that we choose to share—I think makes a huge difference.**”

- Communications Director,  
Domestic Violence Shelter

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# What is Ethical Storytelling?

**For...**

strategic communication and public relations professionals

**It's...**

an invitation and commitment

**That...**

opens opportunities to authentically and ethically share another person's story so you can reach success together.



Archetype

**uncompromising explorer**

CREDITS: This presentation template was created by **Slidesgo**, icons by **Flaticon**, and image by **Freepik**. Thank you to all of the individuals who participated in my interviews.

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