# Avoiding Fantasy Documents in Pre-Crisis Planning through Imaginative Analysis and an Ethic of Inclusivity

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**Abstract**: Ronald C. Arnett's robust work on civil dialogue identifies both the problems and solutions for achieving civil dialogue in crisis communication. Embracing fantasy over imaginative solutions to crisis planning and response heightens the risk of failure. Still, many government agencies are lured into embracing the false sense of security provided by fantasy documents. This essay highlights the holy sparks of truth, described by Arnett in his analysis of works by Arendt and Levinas, as they offer the means for eschewing fantasy and embracing imaginative crisis planning based on civil dialogue.

**Keywords**: crisis communication; risk communication; crisis planning; dialogue; pandemic

## Introduction

"Some will say this discussion of the Avian Flu is an overreaction. Some may say, 'Did we cry wolf?' The reality is if the H5N1 virus does not trigger pandemic flu, there will be another virus that will" (Estes 2019, para. 1). This statement was made by Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Michael Leavitt in November 2005 after fears that a new strain of influenza, known as Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (H1N5), would begin spreading among humans and cause a global pandemic. This concern became the impetus for the National Infrastructure and Advisory Council (NIAC) to establish a task force formally titled the Prioritization of Critical Infrastructure for a Pandemic Outbreak in the United States Working Group. The final document produced by this group, titled *Final Reports and Recommendations by the Council*, was published on January 16, 2007, and represents the efforts of professionals from three key areas: healthcare, infrastructure, and food and agriculture. The three team co-chairs included

Rebecca Denlinger, a fire chief, Martha Marsh, a hospital CEO, and Bruce Rohde, the former CEO of ConAgra Foods, Inc.

As the world now knows, Secretary Leavitt was (mostly) correct. A global pandemic did come to fruition a decade later, though its cause, a novel coronavirus, differed from the working group's assumed source, influenza. Despite that difference, the document reads as if the working group members had a crystal ball. They correctly predicted many aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic including, for example, the need to stockpile and strategically disseminate personal protective equipment (PPE) and the extended time needed to develop and deploy a vaccine.

One major section of the plan that focused on the Food and Agriculture sector failed to predict the scope and impact a global pandemic would have on that sector's entities. Because of these shortcomings, this document could be considered what Clarke (1999) calls a "fantasy document"—a document underestimating the challenges and overestimating the response capacity of the agriculture industry to human pandemic. The industry's slow response to the rapid spread of COVID-19 among its workers forced processing plants to close and resulted in hundreds of thousands of animals being euthanized. This general disregard for worker safety is unambiguous evidence that the pre-crisis planning of the agriculture industry created more "security theatre" than meaningful protection (Schneier 2006, 38).

Although the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the global emergency over on May 5, 2023, learning from industry failures in responding to COVID-19 remains a high priority among the food and agriculture industry. For example, the reemergence and rapid spread of bird flu (H5N1) in the US, Europe, and Asia has health officials around the globe "on high alert" (Dekimpe 2023, para. 9). The H5N1 disease spreads quickly and is capable of destroying entire flocks in a matter of days. Although this pathogen has not yet easily spread to and among humans, the fundamental fear is that its increasing prevalence is creating ample opportunities for the virus to mutate into a highly transmissible and potentially life-threatening human disease (Penn 2023).

In this analysis, we first summarize how and why crisis planning can result in fantasy documents that increase rather than decrease potential risks and intensity crises that cause notable harm. We then characterize the creation and promotion of such documents as an ethical violation. Specifically, we turn to Ronald C. Arnett's (2013; 2017) distillation of the ethical standards voiced by Hannah Arendt and Emmanuel Levinas to articulate the ethical lapses inherent in fantastical pre-crisis plans. Next, we illustrate how the global pandemic working group plan functioned as a fantasy document that failed to provide an adequate reflection of best practices and ethical expectations for crisis communication. We end by proposing recommendations for crisis planners who aspire to meaningful and ethical pre-crisis plans grounded in imagination rather than fantasy. Thus, we honor Arnett's work by offering his wisdom as it informs effective pre-crisis planning and communication.

## Fantasy Documents and Pre-Crisis Planning

Pre-crisis planning is identified specifically as a widely recognized best practice for risk and crisis communication (e.g., Seeger 2006; Seeger and Sellnow 2019). Doing so involves "identifying risk areas and corresponding risk reduction, pre-setting initial crisis responses so that decision making during a crisis is more efficient, and identifying necessary response resources" and is essential "for the management of risk and the prevention of crisis" (Seeger 2006, 237). Engaging in pre-crisis planning often produces physical products (e.g., risk plans and related documents). However, it is only effective when the process is continuous and the products are updated and revised regularly based on new insights (Seeger and Sellnow 2019).

The inevitable need to accept uncertainty and ambiguity in pre-crisis planning is also acknowledged in the best practices of crisis communication (Seeger 2006; Seeger and Sellnow 2019). Because crises, by their nature, are unpredictable and non-routine events, creating a plan that will adequately address all aspects of an unforeseen event is impossible. For this reason, Eriksson and McConnell (2011) caution against casting too much blame on crisis planners for the failures incurred during the acute phase of a crisis, while also acknowledging that "contingency planning for crisis is neither a simple recipe for success nor a crude political fantasy" (98). That said, however, failing to engage in pre-crisis planning is likely to contribute to far more dramatic failures during a crisis. Thus, pre-crisis planning is a risk and crisis communication best practice.

Our concern in this analysis, however, focuses on planning documents that are overly optimistic and, thus, unlikely to yield the results they claim, or on planning documents that are based on accurate content but, when enacted, are highly unlikely to protect those at risk. Eriksson and McConnell (2011) point to the Exxon Valdez oil disaster as a clear example of such unsuccessful pre-crisis planning. The authors conclude that Exxon's failed crisis response was the result of a plan that read like "complete fiction" (93). Another compelling example is the pre-crisis plan in place prior to the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill. When oil began gushing into the Gulf of Mexico, the company's futile response revealed the inadequacy of their pre-crisis plan.

Clarke (1999) coined the term "fantasy documents" to refer to crisis plans that create a perception of crisis readiness; but are, in fact, unfeasible, insincere, or both. Clarke explains that fantasy documents function rhetorically to reduce fear by creating an appearance of control and safety where such control and safety are unattainable or by disingenuously implying their intention to fully implement the document's recommendations if a crisis erupts. Thus, crisis plans based on fantasy documents make organizations less prepared for a crisis than those that realistically acknowledge limitations in both capacity and willingness to act. As Clarke explains, "the antithesis of a fantasy document is the forthright admission that risk and danger are being created . . . as well as an honest appraisal of the uncertainties our organizations create" (171). Clarke laments, however, that "we

don't have many leaders" who are willing to take "full responsibility for putting people at risk" (171).

Birkland (2009) expanded on Clarke's work by exposing the use of fantasy documents in the "lessons learned" reports often produced in the wake of a disaster. Disasters can be learning opportunities for organizations when they engage in close examinations about what happened in all phases of the event. Too often, however, these post-crisis investigations fail to stimulate meaningful actions based on lessons learned. Birkland (2009) identifies several examples of post-crisis lessons learned about process failures. First, post-crisis actions can be taken without or prior to conducting a "lessons learned" investigation. Thus, they are not necessarily based on a complete review of the evidence. Second, an investigation can be manipulated to justify policy changes made to serve the interests of those in control rather than to improve crisis planning and response. These post-crisis investigations can also fail to generate any meaningful policy changes at all, or the implemented changes can be ignored or forgotten over time. Each of these failures reveals how investigative "lessons learned" reports conducted in the aftermath of crises can easily digress into fantasy documents.

When crisis plans "provide the feeling of security *instead of* the reality, they are nothing more than *security theater*" (Schneier 2006, 38, italics in the original). Security theatre can function rhetorically as an enactment of fantasy documents intended to mask true threats. The woefully inadequate crisis plan implemented by BP in response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill (Arnett et al. 2017) is an example of security theatre. The company took action, but those actions did not meaningfully address the source of the crisis.

Security theatre, however, is not always intended to deceive. Security theatre plans can be appropriate, for instance, in conditions of overwhelming uncertainty and adversity as long as they do not increase potential threats or harm. Schneier (2006) argues some plans are designed primarily to provide reassurance to stakeholders and concerned publics that those with resources and responsibility are doing something, albeit imperfect, about a worrisome threat. For example, the temporary use of heavily armed military in boarding areas of airports in the weeks after 9/11 likely did more to create a sense of safety in the minds of American travelers than to prevent new attacks. Schneier (2006) asserts that this form of security theater is forthright in its intention to create "the feeling of security" (38). Ironically, security theater can be used to mask real threats and as a well-intended and innocuous reassurance in response to risk.

Thus, at their worst, fantasy documents are used by organizations to deceive and "assuage those who would challenge their construction of reality: citizen groups, social movements, and the occasional recalcitrant regulatory agency" (Perrow 1996, 375). They may be enacted in the form of security theatre that does not meaningfully address the threat at all. At their best, however, fantasy documents may be enacted in the form of security theater that is well-intentioned and assuring, but largely symbolic.

This conundrum leads to questions about the distinguishing factors in contentious and perplexing contexts of crisis planning. We argue that answers may be found in the ethic of inclusion as articulated by Arnett (2013; 2017). More

specifically, they appear in his explication of Arendt's vision of ethics in dark times and Levinas's rhetorical demand to consider the needs of those whose lives are impacted by risk, but who are not at the table where crisis plans are crafted.

## Fantasy Documents and Crisis Communication Ethics

Arnett (2017) eschews fantasy as described by Clarke (1999), Birkland (2009), and Schneier (2006) by distinguishing fantasy from imagination. Inspired by Immanuel Kant's distinctions of fantasy and imagination, Arnett maintains that fantasy merely rouses a false sense of confidence, whereas imagination is the source through which solutions are conceived and tested in the inescapability of reality. Adopting the perspective of Levinas, Arnett (2017) further defines imagination as the ultimate pursuit of justice. In doing so, Arnett establishes the ethical criterion of inclusion where "justice requires imagination that sees farther than the near attending to a large sense of community—protecting those beyond proximate obligations" (148). For Arnett, such inclusion must protect those at the margins of society. Arnett, Sarah M. DeIuliis, and Matthew Corr (2017) introduce transparency as a means by which to expose fantasy, empower imagination, and prioritize inclusivity.

Arnett and colleagues establish inclusivity of all stakeholders as the foundation of ethical risk and crisis communication. They argue that transparency, by its nature, is inclusive when it engages stakeholders both within and external to the organization. All who are at risk participate in decision-making processes based on the discernment of "publicly vetted evidence and rationality" (2017, 64). This inclusive and candid discernment process has the capacity to expose tensions and biases in "what is protected and promoted" (64). In other words, transparency requires considering the opinions of those who have the most to lose as well as those with the most to gain. When external stakeholders are excluded from crisis planning, the potential for promoting the organization over protecting diverse stakeholders remains unchecked. Conversely, transparency through inclusive dialogue among diverse internal and external stakeholders creates "crucial organizational relationships" through which diverse parties advocate for distinct and shared priorities (64). Capitalizing on these relationships increases the likelihood that crisis plans will account for the diverse needs of multiple stakeholders. This guiding principle for effective risk and crisis communication generally and crisis planning specifically is further illuminated in Arnett's (2013; 2017) examination of works by Arendt and Levinas.

Despite the promise of transparency in crisis planning, the process may be disrupted or even rescinded altogether by what Arnett (2013) describes as the "unearned confidence and optimism" inspired by modernity. Consequently, fantasy documents fall within the realm of what Arnett (2013) referred to as the "bad faith" of modernity (3). Arnett (2013) asserts that "such persons of self-professed confidence are like those who run full speed ahead in the dark while asking others to follow, somehow failing to ask whether running at top velocity is prudent or even safe" (4).

Bad faith sets the stage for two potentially tragic crisis planning errors. First, unmerited confidence fuels a bias on the part of organizations and industry assuming paradoxically that human-caused risks will be dismissed through crisis plans based on the same human engineering that created the risks in the first place. At the extreme, the bad faith of fantasy documents proposes solving a problem by doing more of the same actions that produced it. Second, crisis planning in bad faith lacks the transparency needed to account for all stakeholders. For the sake of profit and expediency, those at the margins of society who have the most to lose and may be the most difficult to protect are also ignored in the planning process.

## Addressing Problems with Problems

Arnett portrays the paradox of solving problems with more problematic action as an illumination of events through what Arendt described as artificial light. Assuming light where there is only darkness creates conditions for the reality of risk to "unleash havoc when expectations of unrealistic hope go unmet" (Arnett 2013, 4). Thus, the fantasy or theatre of risk reduction impedes meaningful planning by relying on unrealistic assumptions. For Arnett, part of the transparency process is based on accepting the reality of darkness, the unknown, or uncertainty. Accepting darkness in favor of transparency allows all stakeholders to engage in a dialogue accepting what is known and what is unknown. The pursuit of true light, "holy sparks" in Arnett's words (3), is the place at which dialogue begins. Risk planning, then, is only effective when all stakeholders work together to seek light in the darkness of uncertainty. As Arnett explains, "The philosopher does not trust the darkness of the cave, but it is darkness that gives opinion, friendship, and community its fabric—one cannot confuse the importance of navigating through life with a snapshot of truth in self-generated light" (187).

## Inclusivity

Through the works of Levinas, Arnett reveals the foundational criterion for inclusivity. Specifically, he establishes consideration for those who are not at the table, "the unseen Other," as paramount (Arnett 2017, 147). For Arnett, the genuine search for those stakeholders forgotten by standard operating procedures of superficial crisis planning is endless: "Levinas is attentive to justice located within a community that considers the unknown third as the heart of the judgment and discernment. Attending to those not present is at the core of justice" (146). Transparency in the public discernment of evidence, described above, is impossible without situating all stakeholders at the table, regardless of their material wealth or social regard. Crisis plans created without accounting for such inclusive transparency at best lack imagination and, at worst, are relegated to mere fantasy.

In summary, fantasy documents create an illusion of risk reduction and enhanced crisis response capacity. Consequently, communities are lulled into

assumptions of safety by hollow, superficial actions that create a theatrical sense of security while allowing original risk to remain unabated or further intensify. For Arnett (2013; 2017), the remedy to fantasy is imagination. Unlike fantasy, imagination fosters creative solutions forged by reality. Imagination invites transparency through which information is discerned in an inclusive dialogue among all stakeholders, both internal and external to organizations or industries. Such inclusivity is not possible without engaging in an earnest search for all who are at risk, accompanied by a sincere invitation to participate in the crisis planning conversation.

## The Report

The *Final Report and Recommendations by the Council* created by the Prioritization of Critical Infrastructure for a Pandemic Outbreak in the United States Working Group was intended to assist in managing infrastructural challenges to the food supply during a pandemic (Denlinger et al. 2007). The group was charged with addressing six key issues which were believed to be essential for protecting the nation's economy:

- Identifying and defining "critical services" that must be maintained in a pandemic

- Establishing criteria and principles for critical service prioritization

- Defining critical services priority (with principles for variation, if needed)

- Identifying critical employee group(s) in each priority critical service

- Building a structure for communication and dissemination of resources

- Identifying principles for effective implementation by DHS and HHS

With the benefit of hindsight, we now know that a pandemic did indeed develop. Moreover, although the document was written based on a hypothetical pandemic caused by influenza rather than a novel coronavirus, the descriptions about how events might play out are eerily similar to how the COVID-19 outbreak progressed from late 2019, when the virus began spreading in China, through 2020, when it became a global pandemic (Edwards et al. 2023).

In many ways, the report accurately predicts the progression and consequences of a global pandemic. However, one area where the report falls short is in the section focused on the Food and Agriculture sector. The report focuses on the production, processing, and delivery systems of the US food supply chain. The US food supply chain is a complex system of many entities including farmers, production and packaging plants, transportation, restaurants, and grocery stores. The report accurately acknowledges the size and complexity of the Food and Agriculture sector and recognizes that its sustainability depends on other services and sectors such as infrastructure, finance, and transportation, but it does so in just two and a half pages of text (Denlinger et al. 2007).

## The Analysis

We use a case study method focusing on US meat-processing plants and their failures during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic to illustrate places where statements and observations made in the NIAC's 2007 plan did not translate into meaningful action during the pandemic. In this sense, the food and agriculture section of the report is a clear example of a fantasy document. This is evidenced by noting the industry's failure to account for a diminished workforce, failure to prioritize its workers for vaccination, failure to have adequate PPE stockpiled for workers, and blatant risk-taking behaviors even when the dangers of COVID-19 were fully realized.

The facilities where meat is processed and packaged became some of the earliest "hotspots" during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (Saitone et al. 2021). Several factors made processing plants ideal environments for viral spread. The temperature was kept at levels where the virus appeared to thrive, workstations did not adhere to social distancing recommendations, workspaces included many metal surfaces on which virus-laden fomites could collect, and the working environment was replete with loud machinery, resulting in workers (even those in close proximity) having to yell to be heard, thereby releasing more droplets into the air. Combined, these factors led to 57,000 infected employees and 270 deaths by February 2021 (Whitehead and Kim 2022). Other employees, who became known as the "worried well," chose not to come to work because they did not feel safe, and, consequently, plants were forced to close and cease operations for a period of time (Gallagher and Kirkland 2020). Doing so was particularly devastating to the pork industry, as the three major plants responsible for 15% of all pork production in the US (Smithfield Foods in Sioux Falls, South Dakota; JBS Pork Processing in Worthington, Minnesota; and Tyson Fresh Foods in Waterloo, Iowa) had to shut their doors (Gallagher and Kirkland 2020).

These plant closings created backlogs throughout the supply chain. Producers who rely on a very strict timeline to raise pigs from farrowing to finishing, for example, found themselves with hogs ready for processing and nowhere to send them. Unfortunately, this supply chain backlog meant that nearly 600,000 hogs that would otherwise have been processed for meat were instead culled by farmers (Eller 2020). The economic and emotional impact caused from killing and disposing of these animals before they reached production was unprecedented and became a secondary crisis caused by the virus.

The first problem illustrating that this section of the report is a fantasy document focuses on the role of the workforce as critical to operations during a pandemic. The report begins by acknowledging the potential threat of a pandemic devastating the industry:

> If a pandemic outbreak strikes the United States, production capacity could be severely limited due to an unavailable workforce . . . Many entities have already established Pandemic Flu Continuity of Operation Plans and many more are in various stages of development. Given a pandemic influenza vaccine will likely not be readily available until many months after the onset

> of the pandemic, it is imperative to minimize the virus' spread and impact by ensuring these plans . . . are in place and functional prior to such onset. (Denlinger et al. 2007, 84–85)

However, the report falls short in acknowledging the critical role of plant workers as essential just a few lines later by claiming that "after extensive discussions, the Food and Agriculture sector determined that few, if any, critical food or agriculture facilities exist that would warrant . . . employees from those facilities to be included in a pandemic influenza vaccine/antiviral prioritization scheme" (85). The authors acknowledge the potential impact of a pandemic on the industry's workforce and production; however, they fail to acknowledge that this same workforce should be considered "critical" when prioritizing vaccine distribution. These contradictions, coupled with evidence of what actually ensued in 2020, further illustrates that this section of the report is a fantasy document.

In addition, the report claims that "many entities have already established . . . plans and many more are in various stages of development" (Denlinger et al. 2007, 85). However, another report published eight years later as a joint effort between the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and and Department of Homeland Security (DHS), titled *Food and Agriculture Specific Plan*, suggests otherwise when it urges the industry to prepare for "interruption of operations within the sector [that] could have a potentially devastating impact on the nation's public health and economy" (United States Food and Drug Administration 2015). This second document goes on to highlight the four highest risks as (a) food contamination and disruption, (b) disease and pests, (c) severe weather, and (d) cybersecurity. Moreover, the disease and pests section is devoted solely to animal disease. There is no mention of how to respond to a human health pandemic. Nearly a decade after publishing the original report calling for each sector to finish developing their pandemic response plans, the Food and Agriculture sector still failed to even mention human disease as a potential threat that could cause substantial disruption to this sector.

Second, in addition to failing to prepare for workforce shortages, the food and agriculture section of the report also failed to recommend that leaders stockpile for and/or distribute to employees any PPE to use while on the job. In fact, there is no mention of PPE in the entire food and agriculture section of the report. In Appendix B, the report does discuss medical and non-medical countermeasures. The report correctly assumes that, "given the assumed shortage of vaccines and antiviral medications, non-medical products are likely to play an even more critical role" (Denlinger et al. 2007, 49). Another document prepared by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in 2009, titled *Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for an Influenza Pandemic*, gives very specific instructions about the need to stockpile various kinds of masks, including N-95 respirators and surgical masks, depending on the level of risk and exposure for employees. The report even goes so far as to give a specific formula for estimating the number of masks needed by recommending two masks/employee/shift for 120 pandemic workdays, which means 240 masks per exposed employee. The final

report issued by the NIAC Working Group recognized the need to implement non-medical countermeasures while a vaccine was being developed and distributed and made specific recommendations about the types of masks to have on hand in another document, yet the food and agriculture section fails even to mention PPE in its plans, further demonstrating that this plan qualifies as a fantasy document.

The final, and perhaps most egregious, failing of this plan is the "wait and see" approach it takes to the entire process. The following quotation illustrates the sector's overstated optimism:

> The Food and Agriculture sector also possesses many factors that will likely bode well for operations continuity during adverse situations without intervention. For example, the sheer numbers of entities . . . and experience dealing with past natural disasters and strikes will be beneficial to keeping operations running. Moreover, American ingenuity will help the industries/entities adapt and continue operating during and after a pandemic outbreak. It is critical to embrace this concept, as the development of vaccine is likely to require four to six months from the time a pandemic materializes. (Denlinger et al. 2007, 86)

This blasé attitude turns from worrisome to downright dangerous when we see the deliberate risks that were taken with employee lives at these processing facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic, workers at the Smithfield plant in Sioux Falls were offered a $500 "responsibility bonus" if they worked for one month without an unexcused absence (Jankowicz 2020). Clearly, this incentive was meant to encourage workers, even those who were sick or had been exposed to someone who was sick, to come to work anyway and potentially expose and infect more workers. Sadly, this is not the worst example of negligence to occur in this industry. The most egregious example of this industry's lack of care for its employees came when Tom Hart, plant manager of Tyson Fresh Foods in Waterloo, Illinois, allegedly organized a "winner take all" betting pool for management to make wagers on how many workers would test positive for COVID-19. Ultimately, 1,000 of the plant's 2,800 workers were infected and six lost their lives due to COVID-19 (CBS News 2020). Rather than "American ingenuity" prevailing in a way that would prioritize employee health and well-being, corporate greed and negligence took hold and spurred decisions that had devastating consequences on the physical and mental health of employees and farmers throughout the supply chain.

In response to public criticism for the industry's failure to act responsibly, Kenneth Sullivan, CEO of Smithfield Foods, issued a letter to Senators Elizabeth Warren and Cory Booker. In it he writes, "What no one anticipated, and has never happened in our lifetimes, is the scenario we are living through today. That is, our harvest facilities, which are the critical linchpin in the supply chain, could be threatened, en masse, by a global pandemic that threatens our ability to produce food" (Grabell and Yeung 2020). Obviously, Sullivan's letter is wrong on several accounts. For instance, the fact that the NAIC Working Group was formed and its report was published in 2007 demonstrates that this sector *did* anticipate a pandemic and the potential impact it could have on the industry. What the Food

and Agriculture sector failed to do was make realistic plans for how to handle these potential threats should they manifest into a crisis. Instead, the report limited its focus to other risks generally and animal disease specifically. As one industry executive stated, "We were probably more prepared for animal pandemic issues than we were for human pandemics" (Grabell and Yeung 2020).

Although the food and agriculture section of the report falls short of being a helpful, realistic plan, it does get some things right. The report correctly predicted that a significant period of time would be needed to develop and deploy a vaccine. Although the authors of the report anticipated four to six months rather than the ten to twelve months required in the case of COVID-19, they did acknowledge time as a factor. In addition, the report mentioned the benefits of industry leaders having experience with natural disasters and strikes. When an organization experiences a "focusing event," it creates an opportunity for learning and thus policy changes (Fishman 1999). In this case, however, previous experiences did not lead to learning or policy change, constituting what Birkland (2009) calls "fantasy learning." Although the plan makes note of experiencing previous focusing events, it does not discuss what was learned from those events or how those experiences informed an approach to this planning process. The plan also fails to note how a pandemic differs from previous focusing events and how those key differences will impact the response.

The food and agriculture section ends with one final vague and uninspiring paragraph:

> Unfortunately, a lot of the future needs will depend on variables (i.e., timing, location, preparedness efforts) that are yet unknown. In addition to these known unknowns, there are likely many things (the "unknown unknowns") that we do not even know that we do not know at this stage. As a pandemic situation develops and materializes, the unknowns will become known and the needs of the sector will become more apparent. Once this happens, the Food and Agriculture sector will be able to take the appropriate actions. In the interim, it is in the Food and Agriculture sector's best interest to prepare for the worst while continuing to explore its options. (Denlinger et al. 2007, 86)

While there are myriad issues to this "wait and see" and "figure it out in the moment" approaches, especially considering something as potentially devastating as a global pandemic, the bigger issue is the clear evidence that the meat processing facilities did *not* take appropriate actions to protect its workforce or slow the spread of COVID-19 while waiting for the development of a vaccine (Kindy 2020). The industry did not have continuity plans in place in the event of severe worker shortages, which had a domino effect for producers who wasted time and money raising hogs that were then culled due to closed processing plants. These facilities also incorrectly anticipated the criticality of their workforce for vaccine prioritization, failed to stockpile or distribute necessary PPE for workers, and, in some instances, took deliberate and devastating risks with employee health in the name of financial security.

## Conclusions and Implications

Some of the rhetoric surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic has been that there was no way to know or predict how things played out and that many industries were left on the back foot when the world changed in March 2020. This statement is only partially true. As risk and crisis communication professionals know, there is no way to anticipate fully how an event might play out, but there is still value in the crisis planning and preparation process (Seeger and Sellnow 2019) so long as that process does not result in fantasy learning or fantasy documents (Clarke 1999). As this examination of the 2007 report demonstrates, the world *has* been planning and preparing for a pandemic like COVID-19 for over a decade. Even though the NAIC working group focused on influenza as the cause of the hypothetical outbreak, the fact remains that the document very accurately predicted the impact of the pandemic, many of its major disruptions to daily life, and the need for non-medical interventions to slow the spread of the disease while vaccines were being developed and deployed. However, the section focusing on the Food and Agriculture sector does not appear to have taken these predictions to heart when attempting to plan its response. This was made clear by four key failings: not anticipating worker shortages due to life-threatening illness, not prioritizing workers for vaccination, not stockpiling or distributing adequate PPE for workers, and, in some cases, prioritizing financial goals over worker health and safety.

The lack of specificity or genuine attempts at planning in the working group report coupled with the actions taken by some meat processing facilities in the Food and Agriculture sector highlights how this report meets Clarke's (1999) definition of a fantasy document. While Clarke generally referred to documents produced *after* a crisis had occurred, usually in the form of a "lessons learned" piece, this report is a clear example of a fantasy risk communication and crisis plan produced prior to a crisis and seemingly ignored by one of the three main sectors involved in its production (1999). Admittedly, the plans gave industry leaders little to nothing to work from when the pandemic began, but even basic measures were not taken, like understanding what to do to keep workers safe so plants could continue operating.

Furthermore, as illustrated in the Tyson and Smithfield examples, deliberate and unnecessary risks were taken as plant leadership gambled with their workers' health and safety. As the world emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, there will no doubt be talk about "lessons learned" and probably some newly drafted and revised crisis plans to prepare better for the next global disruption. As illustrated here, those tasked with creating and revising such documents must not fall into the same trap as the 2007 team: that of producing a fantasy document that fails to make any reasonable or realistic attempt at protecting workers at all levels of the industry and supply chain.

We argue that Arnett's (2013, 2017) ethic of inclusion based on the works of Arendt and Levinas provides a way forward in crisis planning. Line workers in meat processing plants suffered tremendously during the pandemic. Thousands of illnesses and hundreds of deaths were documented among workers in US meat

processing plants (Whitehead and Kim 2022). As we described above, working conditions and a failure to adapt them at the onset of the pandemic contributed to these illnesses and deaths. One can assume that the lack of planning to protect workers, and the unwillingness or inability of the industry to adapt as COVID-19 spread, caused deaths and illnesses that might have been prevented with better planning.

As the pandemic continued, many of these plants had to close, resulting in human despair through illness, death, the emotional toll of culling healthy animals, and a loss of employment among low-income line workers. The physical and emotional toll on workers during the pandemic may not have been shared by plant owners and managers. In some cases, plant owners experienced notable short-term financial gains as meat prices rose during the pandemic (Edwards et al. 2023). Based on Arnett's ethic of inclusion, the needs of workers remained at the margins of both the planning and response processes for the COVID-19 pandemic.

How might the situation change if workers were invited to the table with crisis planning decision makers? Would workers have innovative ideas for self-protection in the workplace? Would they be able to pinpoint the most debilitating flaws in the assembly lines of meat processing plants? Weick and Sutcliffe (2015) offer compelling evidence that the answer to these questions is likely yes. They insist that the workers placed closest to the actual product, in this case the meat being processed, have profound insights on how to address risks associated with the product and process. Workers witness failures that are both addressed and unaddressed by management. They also observe innovative workers who find ways to work around inefficiencies, sometimes for good and sometimes in ways that further intensify risk. Failing to garner this knowledge leaves plants less informed and more vulnerable to failure. Thus, the dialogue Arnett (2017) recommends among all stakeholders, including those workers at the margins, is good for the workers who bear the brunt of the risk but may potentially be valuable for the organization, as well.

We realize that a shortage of animal protein in the supply chain created challenges for consumers during the pandemic. These challenges were met with a proclamation by then-president Donald Trump, declaring meat processing plants critical infrastructure. Thus, plants could reopen and be "shielded from some liability" (Swanson et al. 2020, para. 6). The industry deserves credit for its efforts to protect workers upon reopening. Plants included new features such as plexiglass barriers between individual workstations, face shields, and masks (Swanson et al. 2020). While these changes were a helpful reaction, a planning process with an ethic of inclusivity could have recognized the need for such protective features and had them in place or ready much earlier in the pandemic.

On an applied or practical level, this study establishes two irrefutable observations. First, stakeholder inclusivity is essential to effective crisis planning. A failure to include all stakeholders, including those at the margins who are easily overlooked, can have devastating effects. In this case, many lives were lost among workers, and their quality of life was negatively impacted due, in part, to poor crisis planning. Second, inclusivity cannot be assumed in the crisis planning process. The working group appointed by Secretary Leavitt was likely well

intentioned in their planning process. The group foresaw the food supply chain problems manifest during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the group did not recommend or enact an inclusive information gathering and planning process. The current best practices for crisis communication explicitly advise crisis planning. This list of practices, however, can and should be improved by clearly articulating the need for inclusivity in this planning process. Our hope is that this essay provides an initial step in that direction.

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