

**Navigating the Intricacies of Political Activism and Responsibility: The Sarah Jama Crisis**

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## **Introduction**

In the contemporary digital world, countless politicians are constantly under intense scrutiny and hyper-examination of everything they say, do, and post online. Especially considering the new communication methods and experiences that social media platforms have introduced, crises have only become increasingly amplified. In the context of sensitive international disputes, the recent controversy involving NDP MPP of Hamilton Centre Sarah Jama's social media post emphasizes the difficulty of speaking freely online and remaining publicly accountable in a world where communication's two-way, dialogic nature has heightened the severity of punishments. This crisis emerged after Jama received significant backlash for her initial tweet, which demanded an immediate end to hostilities and the occupation of Palestinian territory. This tweet can be identified as a discursive break, analyzed for the effectiveness of her apology and its deficiencies, and examined to determine alternative crisis prevention tactics and the role of political parties in crises. Essentially, this incident can be viewed as a case study for a more extensive discussion of the boundaries between political action, free expression, and civic responsibility, as it demonstrates the difficulties which well-known personalities experience in negotiating such issues.

## **Background**

On October 7th, 2023, terrorists from Hamas—the Palestinian-based Islamic Resistance Movement group—launched an unwarranted surprise attack on Israel and penetrated the nation by land, sea, and air. The region faced hundreds of casualties on both sides of the Israel-Gaza border and still feared more conflict. Subsequently, on October 10th, 2023, the NDP MPP of Hamilton Centre—Sarah Jama—published a contentious post on X, discussing her support for Palestinians and their fight for independence. The tweet read, "I'm reflecting on my role as a

politician who is participating in this settler colonial system, and I ask that all politicians do the same. #FreePalastine” (Jama, 2023). Attached to this tweet was an image of a more formal statement that calls for “an immediate ceasefire” (Jama, 2023). This statement (Appendix 1) not only references Michael Lynk, the UN Special Rapporteur for the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territory, but also includes Jama’s thoughts on the conflict and suggestions on how to proceed. The MPP declared how “we must look to the solution to this endless cycle of death and destruction: end all occupation of Palestinian land and end apartheid” (Jama, 2023). In this tweet, although Jama expressed her support, she did not think to mention anything about the recent acts of violence the Hamas militant group committed—including the murder of children and the kidnapping of hostages.

Following this tweet and the backlash it received, Jewish organizations, the general public, and even Ontario Premier Doug Ford demanded her resignation in response to the harsh remarks. Despite NDP Leader Marit Stiles’ claims that she “spoke to MPP Jama at great length” and had “resolved this,” other politicians, such as Interim Leader of the Ontario Liberal Party, John Fraser, argued that her tweet “left the impression...that somehow [those innocent lives] they had it coming” (Ranger, 2023b). Consequently, Sarah Jama later apologized, expressing her conviction towards the violence against civilians and acknowledging the suffering experienced by Jewish and Israeli Canadians; Jama also denounced Hamas terrorism. In addition, she argued that the Ford government was amplifying her tweet to mitigate the backlash Ford was receiving in the ongoing Greenbelt crisis. In this crisis, Ford is reversing course on his Conservative administration’s intention to develop a portion of the Greenbelt’s environmentally protected areas (Globe Staff, 2023). As a result, despite Jama’s apology, correction of her original statement, and additional arguments against Ford, she was nevertheless removed from her caucus

and silenced in the legislature (The Canadian Press, 2023). Moving forward, Jama will not be recognized in the House until she issues another apology and withdraws her initial remarks (The Canadian Press, 2023).

The Sarah Jama Crisis is, without question, a social media crisis, as social media platforms were paramount to its emergence, growth, and resolution. Social media users initially sparked the online debate by sharing Jama's initial controversial tweet. Public outrage was imminent due to the viral nature of platforms like X and the rapid spread of the political figure's inconsiderate tweet. This debate grew popular as people and organizations worldwide used social media to express their views, criticisms, and support. Additionally, Sarah Jama's public apologies and clarification were shared on social media, allowing for an immediate and wide-ranging distribution of her response. Ultimately, the crisis served as an unfavourable illustration of social media's vast impact and power in influencing, escalating, and resolving public issues.

### **The Tweet as a Discursive Break and in Relation to the Ritual Model of Communication**

If there is one medium where discursive breaks have become increasingly recognizable, it is social media. Since a discourse can be defined as appropriate speech and behaviour in social situations, a discursive break is when someone crosses the metaphorical boundaries of a community through their actions or words (Koerber, 2017a). This concept directly coincides with the Sarah Jama Crisis as her original tweet, which defends Palestinians but does not condemn the Hamas terrorist group, can be identified as a discursive break. While it is clear that some audiences did not see anything wrong with the tweet, others, such as the Conservative and Liberal parties, were in blatant opposition. In this situation, the "metaphorical boundary" that Jama crossed was her unclear statement in her initial tweet. While Jama made it clear that she does support the protection of innocent Palestinians, she did not originally state that she is not in

support of the Palestinian terrorist group and the horrific actions they have committed. The “break” occurred because of the lack of condemnation regarding Hamas. The discourse continued to sever after the MPP’s subsequent corrections of her statement online and testimonies in the House. This infringement of discourse exemplifies how, although Sarah Jama has freedom of speech, her current position in the Canadian government and the dialogic nature of online communication resulted in her dismissal instead of a warning. Since this discursive break took place on social media and was a reflection of the Canadian government, the severity of her punishment intensified.

Discursive breaks, especially with the help of social media, are accentuated. It is evident that, in the Ritual Model of Communication, professionals in crisis communication are not viewed as attempting to persuade the public to adopt new views or attitudes. Instead, they are conceptualized in connection to individuals within communities that are based on language and relationships (Koerber, 2017b). That being said, it is discernable that, throughout the Jama Crisis and the significant amount of backlash she has been receiving, while some of it may be warranted, some users may only be participating for the experience that online activism provides. In today’s world, many have “only the vaguest recollection of who” they “piled onto and what terrible thing they’d done to deserve it” (Ronson, 2015). Social media users can be identified as an online mob, and most of the time, even though the media unites us in Marshall McLuhan’s global village, it also facilitates the distribution and alteration of discourses that individuals are either compelled to conform to or defy at their own risk (Koerber, 2017b). As a result of these sometimes unconscious mob mentalities, Jama’s reputation and eventual punishment were brought to a new level.

## **The Apology, Jama's Strategies, and Their Deficiencies**

Sarah Jama used several strategies throughout this social media crisis, attempting to “lessen the blow” in both virtual and physical settings. In this case, the MPP tried to align her strategies with image repair theory, based on the idea that one of communication's fundamental objectives is to uphold a positive reputation (Koerber, 2017e). While Jama attempted to recognize that the “ultimate control of meaning” is still in audiences' hands by apologizing for and correcting her original tweet, this tactic failed due to her inability to remove the original tweet from her profile. More specifically, Jama employed two major crisis communication strategies: clarification and good intentions. After the backlash she received from the original tweet, Jama attempted to “explain why there is no crisis” by posting additional tweets that clarified her previously poorly received messages (Appendix 2). Furthermore, her subsequent tweets can be recognized as good intentions that serve as “an explanation of ‘those who do wrong while trying to do good’” (Koerber, 2017e). However, it is apparent that, given the outcome of the crisis, these strategies were insufficient in combating the intense two-way discussions that occurred on social media. Jama's censorship is evidence of how one must always think cautiously before uploading any picture or message to social media platforms, as, even if well-intentioned, there are countless ways for it to be interpreted, misconstrued, and intensified.

## **Potential Crisis Prevention Tactics**

Although Jama apologized for and corrected her statement in subsequent tweets, there are multiple strategies that the MPP could have enacted that would have considered the dialogic norms of online communication, lessening the severity of her punishments. One of these strategies is establishing legitimacy, or the extent to which an organization or individual is

socially supported (Koerber, 2014). Since legitimacy develops as an individual's values continuously align with those of their surroundings, Jama could have used such a strategy before the crisis to alleviate her discipline later on (Koerber, 2014). For instance, if Jama had made a conscious effort to upload posts that condemned Hamas's actions before posting her tweet on October 10th, her legitimacy would have been established, and the two-way online discussions would have been less aggressive. It is apparent that interpretive communities "are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading but for writing texts, for constituting their properties.... these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read" (Koerber, 2014). The article clarifies how, if Jama had established her online legitimacy, she could have simultaneously created her interpretive community. This community would have stood behind her and not have "cancelled" her for one poorly received tweet.

The application of relationship theory is another pivotal strategy Sarah Jama could have used to moderate the negative publicity she received following her controversial tweet. Relationship theory states that many interactions occur between organizations and their stakeholders across time; only one is the crisis (Koerber, 2017c). This theory posits that "involving public stakeholders helps the organization [or public figure] determine stakeholders' views, find a consensus, and prevent conflicts" (Koerber, 2017c). That being said, if Jama were to have adopted a similar approach to Rob Ford, the former mayor of Toronto, and made a conscious effort to "understand the norms and values of the political community" and engage with her audiences through virtual and physical mediums, she may have been treated less harshly by social media users as well as the Canadian government (Koerber, 2020). Relationship theory proves how an indirect friendship is created by creating a bond with your audience, influencing them to perceive you as a more genuine and authentic public figure. Although Jama was not

proactive and did not implement relationship theory, it characterizes how, while speaking freely and carefully online is challenging, it is critical to be proactive to conquer the intensities of dialogic communications and “cancellations” on social media.

### **The Role of Political Parties**

In addition to preventative measures, the role of political parties in social media crises is also critical to examine concerning the Jama Crisis, her wide-reaching shaming, and eventual removal from her caucus. It is apparent that, in the political sphere, discourses give politicians influence and authority; however, a crisis delegitimizes these elements (Koerber, 2017a). This fact is especially relevant to Jama’s case as her opinions and reputation were quickly discredited following her problematic tweet, bolstering the hostilities evident in the political sphere in two-way communication methods. Her case reinforces how politicians deal with complex groups of audiences that frequently overlap, and, particularly in online settings, these consistently conversing groups can amplify the negative discourse surrounding any media uploaded (Koerber, 2017a). Even if the politician affected by the crisis believes their ideologies are correct, all politicians must remember that “they regularly face institutionalized antagonists, whose job is to publicize and amplify actions, illuminating and elongating crises” (Koerber, 2014). This reminder directly coincides with the MPP’s experience and how the argumentative nature of opposing politicians and the dialogic dispositions of social media platforms worked in tandem to exacerbate the ramifications of Jama’s inconsiderate message. Therefore, it is unquestionable that political parties complement the already daunting, tendentious arenas of social media sites like X.

Furthermore, on top of the threatening dialogic environments on social media, political crises also have specific repercussions intended to damage the image and worsen the outcome for



the politician(s) involved. Politicians are forced to confront disagreement, conceptual contest action, and communicative breakdown issues since they are “built into the very structure of political discourse” (Koerber, 2017d). These concepts are pronounced in the Jama crisis as her original tweet was not only broken down and hyper-analyzed by the public and politicians to highlight its negative aspects but also openly disagreed with and contested on a large scale. In this case, the primary issue in Jama’s tweet was not necessarily what she said but what she did not say and implied. Her “faux pas” or “embarrassing social mistake” was not blatantly condemning the Hamas terrorist group and acknowledging the many lives lost in the ongoing war (Koerber, 2017d). By not doing so, although her tweet may not have been the most considerate message to post online and was most likely posted “off the cuff,” a “pseudo crisis” arose (Koerber, 2017d). Such a crisis occurs when stakeholders, either inside or outside of government, try to instigate a crisis to give themselves an advantage in terms of politics, institutions, or personal relationships (Koerber, 2017d). This notion correlates with Jama’s case as she claimed that Premiere Ford was amplifying her tweet to diminish the negative attention he was receiving for the Greenbelt crisis. Essentially, these concepts that are most often identified in political discourse strengthen the argument that, when expressing opinions online, politicians such as Sarah Jama must remember the possibility that whatever is uploaded can be used against them in multiple ways. Whether it is by her fellow truculent politicians or the consistently conversing audiences on social media, individuals of this stature must be cautious as severe punishments and public shaming are always lurking.

By comparing the nature of political crises to that of business crises, the severity of Jama’s punishments following her offensive tweet becomes increasingly apparent. It is notable that crises in the business sector can have “many possible breakdowns” and can directly affect

the lives of many innocent customers or clients, painting the business or organization in a negative manner (Koerber, 2017d). Comparatively, the pressure is more on the individual than the organizational level in political crises. Speaking to the entirety of a community intensifies the risk of a politician upsetting some members of it unless the speech only addresses everyone's common sense, which is the set of beliefs about how to live that members of a particular community share but frequently do not express outright (Koerber, 2017a). The notion of common sense is especially applicable to Jama's tweet as, when writing this tweet, she only considered her personal opinions about Palestinians and not the widely accepted notion that Hamas's actions are unjust. While her tweet negated the NDP party, it did not negatively reflect the Canadian government as a whole but Jama on an individual level. Accordingly, it is unquestionable that, in addition to the two-way communication methods on social media, the targeted, individualized nature of political crises also influenced Jama's public and profound consequences.

## **Conclusion**

Conclusively, Hamilton MPP Sarah Jama's social media crisis on X unquestionably asserts the ongoing obstacle of holding yourself accountable online while also enacting your right to speak freely in a society where communication's two-way, dialogic character has rendered individual punishments more severe. Jama's insensitive tweet can be considered a discursive break that formed an online "mob" of users. These users thrived on the politician's downfall and contributed to her demise by attacking her simply for the experience of feeling a part of something more prominent on social media. Although Jama did apologize for and correct her original statement, her strategies were not effective enough to combat the exceedingly large audience she faced in both physical and virtual settings, resulting in her severe punishment.

Despite the several crisis prevention tactics that Jama could employ in the future to mitigate the backlash she received and perhaps lessen her penalty, it is crucial to consider the prevalent aggressive nature of political parties that significantly impacts the types of punishments received online and in person. Ultimately, the Sarah Jama Crisis is evidence of how, in the modern, digitized world, everything posted will be hyper-examined, discussed dialogically, and amplified with the intent of “cancelling” or punishing someone to the greatest extent for their words or actions. The question remains when contemporary society will be able to collectively acknowledge that humans make mistakes and, while some punishments are necessary, their intensity can be deliberated.

## Appendix

### Appendix 1 — Sarah Jama’s Initial Statement Attached to Tweet



# SARAH JAMA

MPP/Députée provinciale de Hamilton Centre

#### A CALL FOR AN IMMEDIATE CEASE FIRE:

The generations long occupation of Palestine, as explained by Michael Lynk, the UN Special Rapporteur for the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territory, is apartheid i.e., "a political regime intentionally prioritizing fundamental political, legal, and social rights to one group over another in the same space on the basis of racial-national-ethnic identity". We are seeing this definition of apartheid in real time through the continued violation of human rights in Gaza through the use of white phosphorus chemicals, the withholding of access to food, fuel, electricity and water, and the destruction of the only exit from Gaza that isn't controlled by the State of Israel- the Rafah boarder.

Especially with this context in mind, the news coming out of Israel and Palestine is deeply concerning. For 75 years, violence and retaliation rooted in settler colonialism have taken the lives of far too many innocent people. I call for an immediate ceasefire and de-escalation. We must look to the solution to this endless cycle of death and destruction: end all occupation of Palestinian land and end apartheid. Canada must hold true to its history of peacemaking, and refrain from military intervention. My heart genuinely goes out to all those impacted by this on-going violence.

(Jama, 2023)

### Appendix 2 — Sarah Jama’s Subsequent Corrections and Apologies



(Jama, 2023)

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