

Volume 5 , Issue 6 - December 2010

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Disasters as Social Interaction



In his recent (August 2010) *Communication Currents* essay, D Timothy Sellnow tackled crisis communication as an after the 1 discourse of repair. With the BP Oil disaster as his primary illustration, he advocated for a “discourse of renewal” for organizations to learn from *past* mistakes and a “prospective approach” for organizations” to move forward *after* a crisis. In this essay, we continue the conversation on crisis, risk, and disaster reformulating these terms as products of social interaction. Instead of taking a post-facto approach and asking “What went wrong?” ask “What is happening here?” so that the phrases “risk communication” or “decision making” become visible as moment moment communication. Our questions seek to unpack risks as decisions as practical things that we do together. To get the gi

this, stop for a moment and think: “How would I communicate risk?” Or “What does a decision actually sound like?”

When scholars, the media, and politicians examine decisions, they typically do so from a retrospective vantage point. *After* a decision is made and *after* the consequences of the decision are known, a retrospective approach looks back in hindsight, assesses what went wrong during the decision-making process. In many cases, retrospective accounts all that are available given how quickly organizations must respond to a crisis. But studying the discourse of decision should not be confused with analyzing decision making; knowing what decision-making looks like means having insight about discourse *as* decisions are being made, *and prior to an event reaching crisis status*. Using the example of Hurricane Katrina, we offer suggestions as to how organizational members may see decision making in terms of social interaction: talk that leads toward or away from disaster.

2010 is both the 5th year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina *and* the as yet ongoing BP Deep Horizon Gulf spill. Both have been described as “[unnatural disasters](#)”, events that cannot be separated from social concerns or political interests [government hearings](#), organizational speakers accounted for Katrina in the terms of unnatural disasters: “poor decision making,” “lack of coordination,” and “crisis of leadership”. In 2006, a select bipartisan congressional committee issued a report describing the government response as a ‘[crisis of initiative](#)’. These are familiar phrases in the aftermath of disaster: we see them in the media, and even in disaster research.

They reoccur after disaster because they perform important social functions, allowing wrongs to come to light, individuals to be found at fault, and healing to begin. To date, we cannot forget the images of Katrina after the toxic flood: a submerged New Orleans, the Superdome trapping residents in a makeshift shelter, the dead bodies on the street, the despair. Though restorative, post-facto accounts such as “poor decision making” cannot help make sense of crisis, coordination, or, for that matter, decision making as they are happening.

In his *Lectures on Conversation*, [Harvey Sacks](#) suggested that we “look closely at the world.” By close looking at how a single, direct utterance like “Fire!” moves a crowd out of a packed room, to an exchange at a meeting on fire prevention, we begin to see how endpoints are steps taken by participants in an exchange. As Hurricane Katrina approached the Gulf Coast, local, state, and federal officials participated in [a series of teleconferences](#) from August 26-29, 2005. We use the phone calls as the data for our research. Speakers included parish officials, emergency management officers, state transportation officials, and other state leaders as well as Mayor Nagin, Gov. Blanco, National Weather



Service representatives and FEMA representatives. During these fateful conversations (a phrase from the phone call literature) officials discussed the hurricane's trajectory and possible impact, evacuation plans, and recovery plans.



In times of crisis, nothing is for certain. Scholars' term for this uncertain knowledge is risk, which itself rests on calculations of probability and the likelihood of avoiding danger. We notice that in the conference calls, speakers communicated risk by being imprecise and indirect about what they knew and could say for certain, "There is a lot uncertainty still here" or "Ah, that is still being looked at." Though indirection sounds like a terrible choice, it accomplishes delay, and stalling is useful when action seems premature. When direct communication made an appearance, it was already past the point of avoidable danger. Consider Gov. Blanco's recommendation during the August 27 phone call, as the National Weather Service predicted Katrina to hit the following evening, to "tell them home and pack and get *out*."

We see the same logic of risk in terms of how the calls were structured: who was allowed to speak and when and how the speaking itself was characterized. Katrina meetings were moderated by Col. Jeff Smith and typically began with 'reports' from the officials and representatives from such organizations as the National Weather Service, the state Department of Transportation, or FEMA. Though each participant had a chance to report, reports did not generate feedback, no matter how dire the subject matter. Reporting sessions were followed by a period for 'questions' with meeting concluding by confirming the timing for the next conference call. Though *seemingly* allowing for each speaker to take a turn, the structure was at odds with participants' requests for immediate response and action.

A phone conference that occurred on August 28, one parish official requested to "*break in* real quick" in the middle of the reports. He was met with the immediate response of it being "against protocol." The parish representative was never able to be heard once he stated that there was an emergency and later the moderator labeled the comment as "a *valid break in*." What is significant here is that the way in which the meetings were structured led to the characteristic of direct communication, requiring immediate action, as break-ins and violations of the structure.

A last issue we wish to bring up is the dilemma of a 'unified voice' during the meetings (i.e., "It's important that our citizens hear a unified voice in these things"). We see this as a communicative dilemma. It is not "the wrong choice would its counterpart "speak alone" be the right choice. Rather, both choices implicate a different set of actions and consequences. The intention in having a unified voice was to present a clear, consistent and not confusing message to the public. Nonetheless, in emphasizing a unified voice, differences and problematic discourse were handled 'offline' that is, as private, indirect communication.



We offer our observations of Katrina as what John Shotter calls "sensitizing tools," to tackle decision making as an unfolding process. We suggest the following three recommendations. First, especially when action is required, there should be clear statement of responsibility and follow-up actions. This was a challenge during the Hurricane Katrina conference calls when there were hedge and indirect comments made. Second, the meeting structure should serve as a tool rather than trap for participants. Meeting structure is useful in helping participants to speak in an equitable manner but too rigid adherence to a structure that may not be appropriate to the immediate needs of a group can hinder decision-making and information exchange.

Finally, members should recognize that there is a time and place to be unified and a time and place to allow for single, opposing voices to "break-in." In moments of uncertainty, striving for unity too

early can stifle or ignore the individual needs of participants, and in the case of government decision-making, the role of 'individual' speakers represent those of many people! Our recommendation here is that "speaking together" not become an absolute value, but a resource to be defined as more or less valuable in the moment.

In the end, Col. Jeff Smith's takes us all the way from talk to consequences. Queried in the Senate as to his failure to evacuate enough New Orleans residents, he teaches us a lesson in best practices by showing how indirect communication is no failure, but a strategy of decision making. Commenting on how delay actually accomplished something *different* that action Smith testified that "Saving lives is more important than the evacuation of those who were while miserable, had food, water, and shelter."

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