

# Metacommunication During Disaster Response: “Reporting” and the Constitution of Problems in Hurricane Katrina Teleconferences

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## Abstract

“To anticipate and forestall disasters is to understand regularities in the ways small events can combine to have disproportionately large effects.” Taking Weick’s observation to heart, we examine teleconference calls between Louisiana local and state officials and federal officials as Hurricane Katrina gathered momentum by applying action-implicative discourse analysis (AIDA). AIDA highlights the linkages between communication dilemmas and communication practices. We analyze “reporting” as a metacommunicative speech act that implicated pragmatic communication dilemmas of how to act in the face of emerging disaster. We explicate how, during the Hurricane Katrina teleconferences, “reporting” shaped and constrained the formulation of problems and responses by creating a structure that facilitated order while inhibiting the identification of and “talking through” of confusion points, and the communicative sharing of local resources. As such, we identify how sensemaking is interconnected with interactional framing. Reporting thus constituted a “small event” that occurred with “regularity” during the Hurricane Katrina disaster.

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How does one make sense of a crisis as it is occurring? As Weick's (1995) work on organizational sensemaking underscores, making sense of a crisis is something that is easier to do in retrospect, *after* a crisis has occurred. From a practical perspective, crisis managers want to be able to understand and manage a crisis *as* it is occurring (Massey & Larsen, 2006). Given the complexity of crisis situations, "real-time" sensemaking presents many challenges (see Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998). For instance, social factors such as organizational routines and frames may shape interpretations and subsequent actions (Colville, Pye, & Carter, 2013).<sup>1</sup> To understand the communication processes of crisis managers during a crisis and gain insight into real-time sensemaking, we analyze communication by crisis managers in the midst of an emerging disaster, namely, Hurricane Katrina.

That Hurricane Katrina was one of the greatest natural disasters in the history of the United States is beyond question. Approximately 1,800 lives were lost and millions were left without homes (Zimmermann, 2012). The damage and casualties of Katrina was in large part due to human-made circumstances, as the levees protecting New Orleans were poorly planned and the relief efforts poorly coordinated (see Brinkley, 2006; Cooper & Block, 2007; Zimmermann, 2012). Emphasizing the role of these human-made circumstances, Hurricane Katrina was characterized on National Public Radio as "no natural disaster" (Conan & Shearer, 2010), a sentiment echoed by political columnist Michael Niman's (2005) story "Katrina: Not a Real Disaster." The political aftermath of Hurricane Katrina involved a media maelstrom of criticism, the forced resignation of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Director Michael Brown, and a congressional investigation (see U.S. Government, 2005). Studies of Hurricane Katrina as disaster have tended to focus on retrospective accounts (e.g., Cole & Fellows, 2008; K. Taylor, Durant, & Boje, 2007; Westerman, Spence, & Lachlan, 2009) or on media accounts (e.g., Daniels & Loggins, 2007; Littlefield & Quenette, 2007). Taking to heart Weick's (2001) claim that "to anticipate and forestall disasters is to understand regularities in the ways small events can combine to have disproportionately large effects" (p. 125), we examine the Hurricane Katrina disaster through the lens of "social interaction" by focusing on communication that occurred as the events unfolded, even before the label of disaster was applied (see Bartesaghi & Castor, 2010).

Crises and discourse are interconnected in many ways. For example, discourse may function to shape perceptions of events as crises (De Rycker & Mohd Don, 2013). Discourse may also play a role in managing and recovering from crises (Seeger et al., 1998). Our project takes a discursive approach to organizational communication (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004) and examines how discourse constitutes organizational problems (Grint, 2005). We identified and analyzed metacommunication as a key discursive practice that contributed to shaping organizational sensemaking (see J. R. Taylor & Robichaud, 2004).

This study contributes to the understanding of how crisis sensemaking is shaped in “real time” through interactions (see Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Our analysis proceeds as follows. We review Katrina as an object of scholarly theorizing and explicate action-implicative discourse analysis (AIDA) as a framework to understand organizational sensemaking. We provide a theoretical backdrop for metacommunication and apply AIDA to communication during the Katrina disaster. In our analytical section and conclusion, we examine how “reporting” functioned to shape and constrain the formulation of problems and responses to problems during the Hurricane Katrina teleconferences.

## **Discourse and Crisis Communication**

The first section of this review focuses on research related to Hurricane Katrina to emphasize the breadth and depth of research already conducted on Hurricane Katrina and to position how this project complements that work. The second part expands beyond Hurricane Katrina to the concept of organizational sensemaking to explain how this project addresses a gap in analyzing communication and sensemaking as a crisis is occurring.

### *Analyses of Hurricane Katrina*

Analyses of Hurricane Katrina fall into three overlapping categories that more generally reflect communication research on disaster management: public relations and crisis communication, news analyses, and community responses and recovery (Garnett & Kouzmin, 2007; Gouran & Seeger, 2007). Public relations and crisis communication research has examined communication on the part of government leaders, and especially President George Bush, during and after the crisis (Benoit & Henson, 2009; Gallagher, Fontenot, & Boyle, 2007; Littlefield & Quenette, 2007; Waymer & Heath, 2007). Governor Blanco’s leadership communication has also been the subject of analysis. Fairhurst and Cooren (2009) applied actor–network theory

by comparing and contrasting Governor Blanco's leadership communication with Governor Schwarzenegger's to describe how Schwarzenegger, in published texts and media appearances, created greater "presence" as a leader by associating himself with several "agents" in the disaster management network. In contrast, Governor Blanco was inadequate in creating such associations. Other scholars attended to how affected communities were kept informed during the hurricane (Cole & Fellows, 2008) or afterward (Davis & French, 2008; Durham, 2008). Not unlike studies of public relations, news analyses center on questions of how public health issues were conveyed by media channels (Cohen, Vijaykumar, Wray, & Karamehic-Muratovic, 2008), with attention to the particulars of visual framing (Booth & Davisson, 2008; Borah, 2009).

Studies that addressed community responses and recovery emphasized the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The phrase *community response* mobilizes notions of grassroots efforts and the communication between groups stricken by the Hurricane; by the same token, community recovery research addressed public health implications of Katrina. For example, Chewning, Lai, and Doerfel (2012) examined the role of information and communication technologies during Hurricane Katrina recovery efforts. Doerfel, Chewning, and Lai (2013) studied the significance of social capital for aiding interorganizational networks during disasters and demonstrated the importance of pre-disaster relationships to postdisaster recovery (see also Doerfel, Lai, & Chewning, 2010). Focusing more on communication with the public, Vanderford, Nastoff, Telfer, and Bonzo's (2007) examination of the Center for Disease Control's efforts in working with victims of Hurricane Katrina also took a postdisaster approach, as did Beaudoin's (2009) study of a media campaign that targeted posttraumatic stress disorder in those readjusting in the wake of disaster. Key themes of this work are recovery, resilience, and interorganizational collaboration and networks. This project complements this work, but in terms of timing and when a crisis is examined, this project addresses disaster management *as* the crisis is unfolding, thus examining sensemaking "in process" rather than retrospectively.

### *Crisis Sensemaking Research*

Not focusing on Hurricane Katrina per se, Seeger (2006) took a grounded practical theory approach to disaster management by using an expert panel method to propose ways to develop best practices. Seeger's recommendations, which include planning preevent logistics, coordinating networks, accepting uncertainty, forming partnerships, listening to public concerns, being open and honest, being accessible to the media, communicating

compassion, and providing self-efficacy, correspond with issues implicitly and explicitly addressed by interlocutors in our own data; like Seeger, we take a grounded practical approach, though we examined discourse as the crisis was unfolding.

The crucial distinction between our project and the aforementioned work on Hurricane Katrina as well as sensemaking is our focus on “real-time” sensemaking among crisis managers. Thus, our focus is on the organizational communication rather than the public relations of crisis communication. Although studies have been conducted on real-time sensemaking (e.g., Balogun, 2005; Maitlis, 2005), these have focused on noncrisis situations such as strategic change management. As Gephart (2007) noted, it is difficult, possibly dangerous, to gather data as a crisis event is unfolding.

Recognizing that real-time data are difficult to come by, there are two relevant exceptions to the post facto approach to crisis sensemaking: Sarangi’s extensive work (e.g., Sarangi, 2013; Sarangi & Candlin, 2003) in genetic risk counseling, and Bergeron and Cooren’s (2012) ventriloquial analysis on the collective framing of crisis by emergency management teams. By constructing risk in terms of the discursive resources and strategies mobilized by experts in ways that index “facts” in terms of institutional knowing, Sarangi’s work makes evident that constructions of risk organize experience once deployed by those entitled to characterize it as such. Likewise, disaster and crisis may be conceptualized as realized within matrices of discourse that enact organization and in turn organize activities in the context of disaster.

Bergeron and Cooren’s (2012) study of an organizational crisis in the framing drew from real-time transcripts of a simulated emergency meeting called to act upon a gas leak. Using ventriloquial analysis (Cooren, 2010), the authors examined how speakers invoked figures that, in a sense, spoke for them—such as shelters and the possibility of a pandemic—to realize the need to act collectively. Inasmuch as the metadiscursive speech act of “reporting” is also a figure that pragmatically allows speakers to “do” things within the interaction, Bergeron and Cooren’s (2012) study opens a novel way to examine disaster communication as constitutive and consequential.

In public, scholarly, and governmental fora, one powerful reconstruction of Hurricane Katrina was within a metadiscourse of *unnatural disaster*: an avoidable and socially contingent event (e.g., Levitt & Whitaker, 2009). This narrative was assembled by means of retrospective accounts of failure—survivor stories, eyewitness accounts of what went wrong, failures of leadership. At the same time, it was a narrative of possible remediation—projected toward a better, as yet unforeseen, future. Narrative studies of Katrina were thus recollections, or, alternatively, analyses of the roots of crisis and its causes (e.g., Cole & Fellows, 2008; K. Taylor et al., 2007; Westerman et al., 2009).

It has been 10 years since Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. Ten years and the Deep Horizon oil spill, Fukushima, and the 2010 tsunamis in Indonesia and Haiti, to name only a few of the crises that have occurred since then, yet Hurricane Katrina is still with us. In June 2015, the American Meteorological Society's spotlight panel was on Hurricane Katrina. Important scholarly monographs are very recently published (e.g., Browne, 2015; Lugo, 2014). Examination of how its events unfolded offers a practical epistemic approach as an alternative to the reconstructions of unnatural disaster scholars.

## Summary

Our project differs from prior analyses of Hurricane Katrina by examining in-the-moment decision making that organized crisis managers' experience in the course of the hurricane. In doing so, we provide a contribution to the understanding of sensemaking *during*, rather than after, a crisis. This entails a focus on specific communication practices that occurred and are captured at the time of the crisis.<sup>2</sup> For this, we turn to AIDA, an analytic framework that provides theoretical and methodological guidance for studying communication practices and dilemmas.

## Conceptual Tools

The notion that organization is discursively constituted is now well established (e.g., Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a, 2000b; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; Mumby & Clair, 1997). Our discourse analysis is guided by AIDA, a framework attuned to the details of discourse in interactions and its relationship to dilemmas in communication. We focus on metacommunication as an analytic resource for examining dilemmas and the communicative constitution of organizations.

## AIDA

AIDA is a grounded practical theory that links communication practices, dilemmas, and situated ideals with the goal of developing normative theories of communication (K. Tracy, 1995, 2005). AIDA has intellectual roots in grounded practical theory, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, speech act theory, discursive psychology, and critical discourse analysis (K. Tracy, 2005). It also focuses on developing situated theoretical insights about and from communication practices. Given these features, AIDA is well suited for analyzing discourse in institutional settings (K. Tracy, 2008).

AIDA addresses the analysis of communication at three levels: practice, dilemmas, and situated ideals. Given that the purpose of this project is to

examine communication practices during crisis sensemaking, AIDA is appropriate for teasing out the relationship between discourse and the challenges of crisis sensemaking. In identifying communication practices, AIDA is grounded in language and social interaction, relying heavily upon discourse analytic research methods. Examples of communication practices that have been analyzed through AIDA include questions (Agne & Tracy, 1998; K. Tracy & Naughton, 1994), discussions (K. Tracy & Baratz, 1993), citizen commentaries (K. Tracy & Durfy, 2007), metacommunication (Castor, 2007), and framing (K. Tracy, 1997b). Practices are interrelated with dilemmas in that practices are focal points for the enactment of dilemmas.

Trethewey and Ashcraft (2004) noted the significance of studying dilemmas for organizational communication scholars in critiquing rational notions of organizations, and power and control within organizations (see Putnam, 1986). AIDA conceptualizes dilemmas as communication problems or challenges where different assumptions, strategies, or frames emerge in interactions. For example, with the practice of questioning in academic colloquia, there is the dilemma of how to ask a question in a way that balances the question format requirement of seeking information with the situational requirements of appearing intellectually competent (K. Tracy, 1997a). AIDA has been applied in the study of public controversies and conflicts such as problems related to the management of a school district (K. Tracy, 2007; K. Tracy & Muller, 2001), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) crisis negotiations (Agne, 2007), and emergency service requests (K. Tracy, 1997b).

We use the principles of AIDA to examine dilemmas as stretches of talk during which participants display multiple competing choices (Craig, 2012; K. Tracy, 1997a). Dilemmas are a rich resource for analysis because they help to reveal the tensions and competing priorities within decision making in the unfolding of crisis situations. An analysis of dilemmas can be used to reconstruct the ideals that are based on in situ communication practices and describe what rules participants believe should be followed in a given situation.

The three levels of analysis are interrelated. For instance, situated ideals may be inferred from dilemmas or practices, or dilemmas can be understood based on situated ideals or communication practices. It is not a requirement that all three be applied; typically, at least two of the three are applied and related to each other. We focus on the communication practice of “reporting” and use this analysis to adduce members’ dilemmas of communicating and “coordinating” during a crisis. In doing so, we provide insights into the relationship between a specific communication practice and crisis sensemaking.

## Metacommunication and Reporting

Metacommunication indexes participants' stance with respect to ongoing interaction and the multiple interactional contexts at play—the immediate event, the organizational setting, and the institutional framework (also see Castor, forthcoming). Bateson (1972) noted that metacommunication “is geared towards the speaker-addressee relationship by, e.g., relating what is said to the current communicative or interaction *frame* [emphasis in original]” (Bublitz & Hubler, 2007, p. 4). Ethnographers of communication have described the range of metacommunicative terms across cultures (Carbaugh, 1989) and the cultural variability in the meanings for those terms (e.g., Katriel & Philipsen, 1981). Metacommunication has also been at the center of studies on meetings (see Cooren, 2007). Putnam (2007) examined metatalk about feelings during a corporate meeting retreat that addressed an organizational leadership crisis. Her analysis underscored the dualities between professionalism and unprofessionalism constituted in metatalk. Buttny (2010) examined metacommunication during public meetings on a potential community crisis, and how conflict and dilemmas were managed.

Language action verbs (LAVs) are specific types of metadiscursive speech acts (Verschuereen, 1980). Extending Austin's work on performativity, Verschuereen (1996) noted that LAVs such as “speak,” “talk,” “say,” and “tell” functioned to frame relationships between speaker and hearer (see Dirven, 1982; Lucy, 1993; Silverstein, 1993). While speech act theory has been criticized for focusing on the perspective of single speakers and single utterances, and ignoring the role of situation and context (Hymes, 1972), some applications of LAV analysis have attempted to include context. For example, in Philipsen and Leichter's (2007) analysis of the use of “tell” in the same meeting examined by Putnam (2007), they described the rhetorical use of “tell” by the board chair to discursively manage the crisis and the relationship between “tell” and “one-way communication.”

As metalanguage that signals users' reflexive interpretations of their own activities (Verschuereen, 1980), LAVs show how knowledge is negotiated by means of speakers' evaluations of “appropriateness of one's own and other people's communication,” as well as offering feedback on the ongoing interaction (Caffi, 1998, p. 581). By being tied to rules, metapragmatic utterances are an analytically productive site to examine the connection between discourse and social action. A focus on metacommunication enables examination of the processes of organizing and sensemaking. AIDA is utilized to connect the micropractice of metacommunication with the communication dilemmas involved in decision making and coordination during a crisis.

## Research Questions

Based on the above, this project addresses the following research questions:

**Research Question 1:** How does metacommunication contribute to communication dilemmas among crisis managers during crisis situations?

**Research Question 2:** How does metacommunication during a crisis event structure interaction and sensemaking?

The first question connects our focus on metacommunication as a discursive unit of analysis and communication dilemmas, thereby relating practices to dilemmas in congruence with the AIDA framework. The second question relates our discursive unit of analysis with the broader conceptual framing of sensemaking.

## Data and Analysis

We analyzed transcripts of teleconferences among Louisiana parish officials, state officials and representatives, Mississippi state officials, and federal representatives as Katrina approached Louisiana from August 27 to 29, 2005. The calls were recorded by Jefferson County emergency manager Walter Maestri and were later released to the public (Zwerdling, 2005). Twelve conference call transcripts are the subject of this analysis. The calls were moderated by Jeff Smith (JS), deputy director of the Louisiana Department of Homeland Security.<sup>3</sup>

Because AIDA is concerned with longer stretches of interaction, we transcribed the calls at an intermediate level of detail, and note that “in transcribing, AIDA seeks to capture full words and those that are cut off, repetitions and restarts, and ums, uh huhs, and other vocal sounds” (K. Tracy, 2005, p. 311). We indicate disfluencies (e.g., um, uh).

The analysis began inductively and proceeded in an iterative manner (S. J. Tracy, 2012) going back and forth from emerging qualitative analysis to theory and extant research literature (see also S. J. Tracy, Eger, Huffman, Redden, & Scarduzio, 2014). We began by reading through the transcripts multiple times to identify patterns and communication problems as acknowledged by teleconference participants (e.g., disagreement, violations, and repairs). These instances were coded or tagged by means of the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis program, NVivo. Our use of coding was to enable later retrieval of segments for closer analysis and comparative analysis. It was through this process that we identified “reporting” as a significant metacommunicative action.

NVivo was then used to generate a frequency count of all the words uttered across the teleconferences with stemmed variations grouped together (e.g., “report,” “reporting,” and “reports”). Through this process, we found that *report*<sup>4</sup> and its variations constituted the most frequently occurring metacommunicative term; it was the ninth most frequently occurring term overall, occurring 189 times and constituting 0.63% of the terms used.<sup>5</sup> To develop our interpretations of how “reporting” operated within the interactional frame of the teleconferences, we examined “reporting” within the context of the utterances that preceded and followed, and identified patterns in responses to the use of this term.

To explicate “reporting” as a regulating device, we also analyzed when the “reporting” frame was violated. As Shimanoff (1980) noted regarding the importance of examining violations,

In arguing that a behavioral rule is the result of a rule rather than chance, researchers should report the occurrence of behavioral regularities, repaired deviations, negatively sanctioned deviations, and they should offer alternative explanations for deviations, such a [*sic*] conflicting rules, humor, and interruptions. (p. 103)

Thus, the examination of when the “reporting” frame was explicitly violated or disregarded helped us further to characterize its interactional function.

## Report(ing) Katrina

“Reporting” provided an overarching structure for the teleconferences that followed a pattern of roll call, reporting session, and then question session. A National Weather Service (NWS) representative typically provided a weather report first, followed by representatives from state agencies such as the state police and Department of Transportation and Development (DOTD). Then, each parish provided a report, followed by troop reports and shelter reports, and reports from agencies such as the Red Cross, Mississippi Emergency Management, and FEMA. The exact order varied slightly from meeting to meeting. Typically, parish representatives were invited to pose questions in a section of the meeting occurring after the reports.

The extract below illustrates how the speech act report comes off over multiple turns, functioning to maintain orderliness.

Excerpt 1 (August 26, 5:00 p.m.):

1 JS: Uh, DOTD do you have ah any **reports**?

- 2 DOTD: We've got all our people on standby . . .
- 3 JS: We'll now go to our parish **reports** to discuss ah your thoughts, and again this
- 4 is **not your time for questions**, that will be later in the **report**, we just kinda
- 5 wanna know what your thoughts are, ah, at this time, if you have no **report** please
- 6 say "no **report**." Ah, we will start with Ascension.

In line 1, JS, elicits a report from a DOTD representative. His "ah" is multi-functional; though seemingly a delay device, it also acts as a marker for redirection or framing for what is to follow. It is a means for JS to signal this section of the meeting is for reports rather than questions or other types of communication (line 4). Although JS equates the content of reports as being about the ambiguous category of "your thoughts" (line 5), there are unspoken constraints on what such formulations may involve. Thus, the appropriateness of "reports" is contingent on contributions not previously evident, and the success of the report will be evaluated by nonspecific contextual criteria: *an apparently inclusive, but very much exclusive, and evaluative "we"* (line 4).

Reports ask for acknowledgment of receipt. That is, the "reporter" is accountable for providing an appropriate report, and the hearer of the report is accountable for receiving the report. But the interactional uptake of the report as a speech act (i.e., *how* or even whether the information of the report should be acted upon) is not an inherent aspect of reporting. However, there is a tension between the performative requirements of reporting and the organizational requirements in which this action is situated: on one hand, it is as if the classic one-way information transmission model of communication that consists of a sender sending a message in the form of information to a receiver is operating. As Deetz (1994) has explained, such a view of communication ignores meaning-based views and the complexity of communication as would be required during a crisis situation where circumstances are complex, dynamic, and emergent.

Although there were opportunities in the meetings to ask questions (thus providing feedback to "noise" if we keep to a transmission view), these were relegated to a separate section, as illustrated by JS's instruction (lines 4-6). "Reporting" also functioned as an interactional regulating device through the labels of "offline" and "break in" for other communication activities.

## Going Offline

Appearing 27 times in the course of the calls, the adjective “offline” functioned in multiple ways: to designate communication that should *not* take place during the teleconference, as a way to implicate a category of speaker who could not discern between inclusive and exclusive communication, and, reflexively, to signal the content of the contribution itself as an infraction. An “offline” issue was one that called for “coordination” among select participants in the teleconferences at a later point outside of the teleconference context. Below, we see how as a representative from the DOTD was providing an update, he stated,

Excerpt 2 (August 27, 3:30 p.m.):

- 1 Ah, we also, we'd like to talk with Jefferson parish **offline** about sandbagging
- 2 US-61. We want to **coordinate** that and make sure that we don't sandbag that too
- 3 prematurely. We know you want to block the water off ah, you know flooding in
- 4 that vicinity, but we also want to coordinate that with ah, with evacuation route.
- 5 That concludes my **report**.

In this excerpt, the DOTD representative accounts for an offline call *in terms* of coordination (lines 2 and 4). What is interesting is that the supposedly offline content of the report is already offered online (lines 2-4), and what appears to be left out is a matter of coordination (the evacuation route), which was, at that particular time, deemed either not pertinent to others and/or not sufficiently worked out.

“Offline” communication was also used in instances when a speaker—in this case, the Ascension Parish representative—needed to delay a response to a request for a “status” report. In this instance, the request for an offline call is framed as a temporary state of insufficient knowledge, which is then followed up by another request, this time regarding insufficient knowledge worthy of inclusive communication.

Excerpt 3 (August 27, 7:30 a.m.):

- 1 Uh, Ascension doesn't have a status right now on the gas supplies so
- 2 we'll check in and call ya back **offline**, Colonel. I'd like to find out again  
the three
- 3 information points that are open?

From the perspective of meeting management, requesting that the ethos of shared communication be suspended is a situated problem within a larger discursive tension. In this case, waiting online for Ascension to report back on the matter of “gas supplies” would have been an inefficient use of time. However, the delegation of specific communication to the “offline” realm created asymmetries of knowledge concerning local needs and resources that excluded most on the authority of a select few. Invoking a notion of “coordination” as agreement to act in unison, offline communication has the appearance of presenting participants with a moral dilemma of exclusivity. As Bartesaghi (2014) argued, “coordination” functioned as a metapragmatic structure during the calls to organize and moderate reports and ensure that speakers’ versions conformed to “The Plan” already in place. By allowing for “offline” communication, any contribution that might have hindered “coordination”—or, as JS put it, “being on the same sheet of music”—if shared with everyone, could be sorted out more expeditiously, allowing for inclusive material to be structured according to clear rules.

### “Breaking In”

The phrase “break in” was used once during the entirety of the teleconference calls. We consider this a key metacommunicative phrase given its evaluative nature given that a “break-in” is considered a violation in need of remediation. The label “break in” orders interaction by signaling what participants oriented to as appropriate and inappropriate for the “reporting” phase of the meetings.

In Excerpt 4, the DOTD representative had just given his report when the representative from St. Tammany “breaks in”:

Excerpt 4 (August 28th, 12:00 pm):

- 1 St. Tammany: Ah, Colonel Smith, this is [name] from St. Tammany. Can I **break**
- 2 **in** real quick?

- 3 JS: Ah, this is **against protocol** but ah . . . [go 'head
- 4 St. Tammany: [We have an emergency, Colonel.
- 5 JS: Go 'head, go 'head.
- 6 St. Tammany: We have the highway 90 bridge out by the east Pearl is broken in
- 7 the upright position, it is two (inaudible) and we have people trapped out on the
- 8 bridge, about six vehicles with people trapped at this time, on the east Pearl,
- 9 between the east Pearl and the west Pearl.
- 10 JS: We got that information and the appropriate people will be working at it out at
- 11 this point. Thank you, that was ah, a **good valid break in**. At this particular point
- 12 in time—ah, you got more?

The St. Tammany speaker introduces his own contribution as a “break-in” (line 1), signaling awareness of its inappropriateness; nonetheless, he mitigates the illocutionary force of the speech act by an account (line 2). Although JS positions himself in accordance to the structure required of reports, deeming the speech “against protocol” (line 3)—and in turn this elicits an additional bit of facework from St. Tammany (line 4)—he nonetheless allows it, over two separate turns (lines 3 and 5). After the emergency is shared (lines 6-9) and comments provided regarding remediation (“the appropriate people will be working at it out at this point”), the comments from the St. Tammany representative are labeled as constituting a “good valid break in” (line 11) and an invitation for “more” (line 12) is issued, presumably meaning that additional emergencies could be shared at that moment.

The “break in” label highlights a dilemma in the episode. The “break in,” immediately labeled as going “against protocol,” emphasized the violation that occurred of interjecting a comment out of order during the reporting portion of the meeting. However, the St. Tammany speaker was allowed to interject as he justified his comment on the basis of “emergency.” The comment was a “break” or violation but deemed an allowable one. This reinforced the

notion of the normal structuring of turns for the meeting. Labeling this “break in” as “valid” underscores the possibility of suspensions to the protocol. However, there is the risk that speakers could decide to self-censor if they assumed their situation was not dire enough to warrant “breaking in.” Also, this leaves open the question of which emergencies are legitimate for a “break in.”

### *Meeting Without “Reporting”*

In her study of politeness and aviation disasters, Linde (1988) examined the effect of mitigation by analyzing naturally occurring communication recorded on “black box” devices during air disasters and flight simulations. In doing so, she was able to analyze disaster communication with varying degrees of mitigation. Within the Hurricane Katrina teleconferences, two episodes can serve as our comparison of what could happen without the reporting frame.

In the first instance, we analyze a segment of talk that occurred after the second conference call. The official meeting had an awkward ending when the moderator attempted to end the meeting while the participants still had questions. The participants’ attempts to continue the conference call were not heeded, possibly due to noise and distortion, and the moderator being unable to hear or make sense of their attempts to stay on the line. Although the moderator left, other participants stayed on the line and talked to each other, posing and answering questions. This segment illustrates what can occur outside of the reporting–questioning frame of the meeting. While it primarily illustrates confusion on the part of some meeting attendees on the evacuation logistics, it also illustrates specific communication problems such as the challenge of understanding directives during the teleconference and the need for clarification of decisions negotiated over multiple turns of talk.

This first excerpt is from a talk that occurred immediately after the moderator left the teleconference:

Excerpt 5 (August 27, 7:30 a.m.):

- 1 Woman: Aren’t they gonna say, (inaudible) phase one at nine?
- 2 DSS: I don’t [know
- 3 Woman 2: [I don’t know
- 4 Woman: [Are they gonna do phase three?
- 5 Man: Phase one, no.

6 Woman: Phase one we know is at nine—

7 Man: Phase one at nine and (inaudible)

The extract above displays overlapping speech by three speakers, Department of Social Services representative (DSS), Woman 2, and Woman (lines 2-3). In lines 2 and 3, DSS and Woman 2's overlaps show alignment rather than attempts to take over another speaker's turn; like the original speaker (Woman), they are joined in not knowing matters concerning Phase 1 of the evacuation. In line 4, the original speaker (Woman) introduces a new query concerning Phase 3, which, according to the plan, would involve evacuating the entire metropolitan area of New Orleans. Then, the next three speakers (lines 5-7) stated definitively that Phase 1 will occur at nine. Although an answer was ultimately provided, of note is that not just one but at least three other speakers did not know when Phase 1 was going to be declared (multiple "I don't know's"). Beach and Metzger (1997) pointed out that "I don't know" serves not just an epistemic function but also an interactional function: "a prefaced claim of insufficient knowledge may necessitate additional talk simply because participants orient to such a claim as somehow troublesome and construct other talk to ward off the consequences of the claim" (pp. 579-580).

This exchange occurred after the official meeting. Not only was the dialogue not heard during the meeting but there was also no mechanism built into the meeting structure to allow for participants' feedback. If the teleconference had actually ended when officially concluded, the meeting attendees with missing information would have either had to operate on ambiguous information or contact another party for clarification; the former might have meant communicating to the public and the latter using time better spent on other things.

The following excerpt illustrates how some meeting attendees claimed "not knowing," thus positioning themselves as less capable of action. The grounds for this epistemic debacle may be found by recovering the instructions that were meant to be issued to the public on how to proceed with the evacuation itself:

Excerpt 6 (August 27, 7:30 a.m.):

30 Woman 2: But people who are evacuating who won't have a shelter, just don't

31 have any place to go, [no hotel.

- 32 Women: [Where . . . We're talking about WHERE.
- 33 Woman 2: Who are out, who are outside. If you were on . . . .
- 34 Woman: Okay, go 'head, I'm listenin'.
- 35 Woman 2: If you were on US 65 [and] . . . it must be at 84 . . .
- 36 Woman 3?: [Uh-huh] Evacuation areas of the state.
- 37 Woman: If you're coming from south, on US-65 from Mississippi blah, blah,
- 38 blah? You go to the Tourist Welcome Center, this is the address of it [and they
- 39 gonna] tell you
- 40 Woman 2: [Okay]

In lines 30 to 31, Woman 2 expresses concern over the lack of shelter for evacuees. In line 32, the speaker added a comment to clarify what Woman 2 is talking about (“WHERE”), and once the clarification was affirmed (line 33), the woman indicates that she was ready to listen to more (line 34). In lines 35 and 37 to 39, the speaker narrates through the imagined travel path of evacuees as a way of trying to figure out and confirm the directions that she must pass on to the evacuating public. It is as if she is visualizing a map and pointing on a road; however, she does not have the benefit of being able to point to a map and must therefore rely on shared knowledge of the routes. This is a multiturn, jointly constructed questioning sequence that relies on material objects that aren't physically present—speakers needed to rely on jointly shared recollections of roads.

During the teleconference, knowledge about evacuation procedures was never rendered actionable. This may have been due to factors such as noise distortion or interference, listener distractions, and/or purposeful ambiguity. In addition, there was no mechanism built into the meeting to allow for clarification.

This segment of postmeeting talk that occurred outside of the reporting frame provided us with a comparison to analyze the significance of the reporting frame. This segment seemed disorganized with multiple speakers trying to take the floor, multiple interruptions and overlaps, and no clear order. It also illustrates the basic challenge that attendees had in attending to

information perhaps due in part to the poor audio quality of the conference call.<sup>6</sup>

On September 9, 2005, one last teleconference call occurred; the main speaking participants in this call were JS and parish representatives. Absent were a FEMA representative as well as other federal and state officials. This call was the only one that occurred among these officials post-Katrina, and as stock was being taken of the damage and worsening conditions of survivors. The meeting also broke with past ways of organizing the meetings. There is no “reporting” or “questioning” section. There is no discernible moderator. Speakers seem to collaboratively shift from topic to topic. The tone of the meeting is also more informal as speakers addressed each other by first name rather than by the agency or parish they represented. Although reporting as a regulating device has been removed, reporting is still present as a metadiscursive *topic*.

The excerpt begins after the start of the teleconference with comments that express dissatisfaction with the unfolding relief efforts:

Excerpt 7:

- 1 JS: Field office so that the right hand is not always knowing what the left hand is
- 2 doing, is that kind of it, Bill?
- 3 Bill: That’s kinda it. The local guy is working hard to try and do that but people
- 4 just keep *showing* up!

JS immediately orients to a problem of coordination by making a comparison between groups not coordinating as akin to two hands attached to the same body not knowing what the other is doing. From this line, it is unclear what the “hands” represent—the different federal and state agencies or the relationship between those agencies and local groups. Bill provided qualified agreement to the statement (“that’s kinda it”) while providing his own description of how local responders (“the local guy”) were doing “work.” However, this work was stymied by others who are presumably not local (“**but** people just keep *showing* up!”). They may be federal officials, state officials, or possibly nongovernmental groups. By implication, they are not doing work that contributes to the relief efforts and, by their appearance, are possibly inhibiting relief efforts in that their activities were described as “just . . . *showing* up!”

There are a number of instances, such as the one below, in which interlocutors discussed reports occurring in other places and locations:

Excerpt 8:

- 1 JS: Okay now, one of the things that I just was made aware of, I think this process
- 2 only started a day ago or so, is that each day the FEMA rep liaison is calling into
- 3 the joint field office and is kind of giving a report on issues and how the parishes
- 4 stand. Were you all aware that that, that that started to happen, and this is true
- 5 with you too Walter, but are y'all, are you aware of that Bill?
- 6 Bill: Yeah, we are aware of that and uh, we've actually had Dexter on ah, sitting
- 7 next to the guy when he makes the calls and I know that he is been, look we've
- 8 got a problem here, a coordination problem here. We thought we were gonna have
- 9 a meeting with Baton Rouge people, the FEMA people yesterday, but cancelled
- 10 that one, so I don't know where we are with it. It's just creating downright chaos.
- 11 We're trying to, we got a temporary housing issue that we're trying to, that we *do*
- 12 need FEMA on but we can't, if somebody is going around and (inaudible) to a
- 13 different um, set of, elected officials, making commitments—we don't even know
- 14 whether they need those facilities or not.

In this segment, “reporting” is characterized as a problem of exclusive communication and “coordination.” In line 6, Bill rejoins JS’s “aware” (line 5) to perform a partial modified repeat (Stivers, 2005) over multiple turns, thus claiming his rights to knowledge from second position.

In the excerpt above, local responders were turned into objects to be observed at a distance and reported on by FEMA; they are, in short, no longer agents involved in reporting and relief efforts. This example relates to the preceding example by highlighting the interrelationship between authority, voice, and reporting in that some can report and some are reported on. Reporting has become a struggle for the epistemic right to present a candidate version of events. The crux of this is explained a few turns later by JS: “Yeah, that’s, that’s, ah, that a team is a *regional* team that’s not reporting to the joint field office and no sense being a FEMA basher here, we’re trying to solve problems.”

The break-in incident in Excerpt 4 and the call after the hurricane in Excerpt 8 above provide interesting exceptions to the constraints of reports. By “breaking in,” the representative from Ascension’s structural rupture created an opening for an unforeseen moment in the flow of reporting, a dilemmatic moment, in which JS exercised flexibility to risk a lack of “coordination.” In the second instance, Bill’s account of FEMA’s expropriation of parish representatives’ role of providing reports in a set of alternative conference calls aimed at organizing response efforts also produced a new communicative situation by creating a conflict with JS’s version of “coordination” as speaking with one voice. Bill’s move meant that a new version of events had to be acknowledged, and one that meant reframing upsetting the asymmetry of “reporting.”

## Discussion

This project contributes to the understanding of sensemaking as it occurs *during* a crisis rather than as reconstructed after a crisis. Our analysis of meta-communication examined how communication is framed as a way of understanding dilemmas and interactional challenges on the part of crisis managers during a crisis situation. In the following section, we elaborate on the theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

### *Theoretical and Conceptual Implications*

“Reporting” functioned to provide structure and order by operating as a turn-regulating device. “Reporting” worked at an episode level by designating the purpose of communication in different phases of the meetings. At the individual turn level, “reporting” indexed the expected content and function of

talk to convey status information. “Reporting” also functioned to constrain communication. Speakers had to account for the disruption created when violating the reporting frame as in the case of the “break in” and many “offline” communication events. These illustrated how the meeting structure was better prepared for “routine” rather than unusual disaster needs. The system in place could not handle severe and time-sensitive scenarios, and as such, a communicative “break in” or going “offline” were the best courses of action.

The use of “reporting” as interactional ordering device is related to Colville et al.’s (2013) study of sensemaking during a counterterrorism event that went awry when a police officer shot an innocent man who was mistaken for a terrorist suspect. Colville et al. attributed this tragic error to the application of one organizational routine (of high-alert antiterrorist procedures) in a circumstance when others in the police unit were communicating under assumption of a different police organizational routine. Colville et al.’s project calls attention to the *multiple* frames at play during organizational sensemaking. Our project illustrates the significance of *interactional* framing. For meeting participants, “reporting” provided an organizing interactional grammar, in a Wittgensteinian sense, in telling participants how to “go on”; in other words, it served as a practical epistemic device that marked participants’ retrospective and anticipatory framing in the emergent meeting discourse. However, this *interactional* framing placed constraints on the *interpretive* framing of events where the former addresses expectations of how to interact, whereas the latter involves expectations in interpreting or understanding what certain communication means (see Hymes, 1972). In other words, with sensemaking, there is not just a single circumstance to be made sense of but multiple circumstances (i.e., what is going on *and* how do we communicate about what is going on).

“Reporting” created a one-way or unidirectional communication flow—someone reported and the report would be acknowledged. To further analyze “report” as a metacommunicative term, we turn to speech act theory (Searle, 1969) and LAVs (Verschuere, 1980). Within speech act theory, “report” would be considered an “assertive” in which the speaker is “representing” a condition or state of affairs in the world. “Reports” focus on the content of speech, and prioritize the speaker as active (she or he is doing the reporting) and the hearer as passive (she or he is receiving the report). In this framing, the hearer is not obligated to take any particular action with respect to the report, other than to receive the report and possibly accept or deny its truthfulness. This reading regarding the obligation of the hearer to merely receive the report is supported through our data and the responses to the reports, which were typically to call upon the next speaker to provide his or her report. Reports, while not prohibiting, do not invite action or follow-up.

## *Practical Implications*

AIDA highlights how communication dilemmas and communication practices are interrelated. For the teleconferences, the metacommunicative practice of “reporting” was interconnected with the communication dilemma of maintaining (interactional) order in turn taking and conversational contributions in contrast to disorder and multiturn talking. The former represents efficiency according to a communication as information transmission model, whereas the latter illustrates the inefficiency by which the “information” was received. However, the latter also underscores how communication during the teleconferences was not just a matter of information transmission but also had the potential to be a site in which problems and solutions were jointly and collaboratively coconstructed in the process that we have labeled practical epistemics.

“Reporting” illustrates a dilemma regarding efficiency in communication. By providing structure, “reporting” facilitated efficient communication to smoothly run the meetings. This is similar to what Beck, Littlefield, and Weber (2011) noted in their study of city-televised public meetings during a North Dakota flood crisis: “The high level of harmony in public meetings, which is rarely seen in public meetings about controversial issues, is in part due to the controlled structure of the meetings” (p. 229). The officials in Beck, et al.’s study were able to conduct staff “premeetings” prior to the official telecast meetings. In the premeetings, conflicts, disagreements, and questions were worked out prior to the more controlled, official staff meetings. “Reporting” created a unidirectional interaction structure:  $A \rightarrow B$ . In this structure, A (the moderator) would call on B (a representative) to report. Then, the cycle would repeat itself with A calling on the next representative:  $A \rightarrow B_2$ . The phone segment when the official teleconference ended illustrated what the “reporting” frame was inhibiting when follow-up questions of clarification were asked and multiple parties were involved with the communication. This event functioned to identify the need for clarification or elaboration that could then be worked out through multiple turns.

“Reporting” makes evident various epistemic asymmetries; parish representatives had the ability to author accounts deemed valid by the moderator only if they adhered to the format of “reports.” Going “offline,” however, opened up the possibility to engender conversation that, though creating yet another asymmetry of knowledge, might go beyond the structure required of reports. Requests for offline communication therefore provided an alternative interactional framing in that offline communication afforded a degree of undecidability given that what would actually be spoken about offline could not be fully anticipated by speakers at the time of the request.

The communication challenges emergency managers faced during their teleconference meetings can be described as coping with two dialectically opposing contextual exigencies: on one hand they needed to deal with their “in-the-moment” experiences of unanticipated contingencies of the hurricane, evacuation, and recovery preparations, and on the other hand, they needed to be able to orient to a shared understanding of actions. The meeting structure and teleconference technology favored one-way communication; however, problems arose when there was a need for interaction to clarify issues over multiple turns. The generic structure of “reports” and “questions” implicitly left out “problems” unless one decided to report on a problem or ask for help (a type of question). Granted, dealing with all problems during the meetings would have been unwieldy and many problems were taken “offline” to be dealt with. But, taking issues offline limits knowledge sharing, as noted in our discussion of asymmetry of knowledge. However, a third segment or subsection of the meeting as a part of reporting, as a tag at the end of the meeting, or both could have been added to allow for discussion of problems such that the meeting would have consisted of more than “reporting” and “questions” segments.

Multiple technology channels could be used to help clarify issues. For example, if the teleconferences were supplemented with a twitter or instant messaging system, as questions arose, that feedback could be provided instantly with, potentially, clarification provided during the meeting or via a text messaging system. We recognize that certain social media were not available to disaster managers during Hurricane Katrina; however, the specific problems that were encountered during Katrina highlight the importance of including new communication technologies for disaster management.

## Conclusion

Weick’s work on sensemaking during organizational crisis highlights the challenges of understanding a crisis as it is occurring. We applied AIDA in our analysis of communication practices and the communication dilemmas of the teleconference meetings. Beginning with an inductive approach, we honed in on the prevalence and significance of “reporting” within the meeting, and identified how it operated as an enabling *and* constraining interactional device.

Our analysis highlighted how sensemaking during a crisis occurs within *multiple* interrelated frames: interpretive and interactional. This project illustrated how organizational routine of “reporting” placed constraints on interpretive frames relating to dealing with unexpected crisis contingencies. Thus, a key finding of our project is that crisis sensemaking is multifaceted where organizational members need to make sense of not only the circumstance but

also how to communicate about the circumstance. It is especially with this latter aspect of sensemaking and interactional framing where communication scholars are particularly well poised to contribute to the understanding of in situ sensemaking and organizational decision making.

### *Limitations*

We acknowledge the limitations of our project. First, our data consist of teleconference meetings, excluding other interorganizational communication that could have enriched our analysis. This narrowing of scope of data was appropriate for our focus on describing real-time sensemaking and dissecting this process at the level of interactional, discursive practices. In addition, the teleconferences themselves were deemed significant on the part of disaster managers such that in the aftermath of the Hurricane Katrina disaster, one parish emergency manager chose to release the teleconference tapes to the media as evidence of the mishandled coordination. Another related limitation of this project is that it relied exclusively on meeting transcriptions and did not include interviews, which could have helped provide insight regarding how the meeting participants viewed the events and meeting discourse. At the same time, this would have shifted our analysis from “real time” in the moment sensemaking to the examination of retrospective accounts.

### *Future Directions*

Although Hurricane Katrina is a notable disaster, it is but one disaster. We encourage future research that examines additional in situ sensemaking practices to better understand how organizational decision makers make sense of the uncertainty and indeterminacy of ambiguous circumstances to decide if a crisis is occurring and, if so, how to act within the moment of crisis. Such research could identify communication patterns and practices that contribute to the amelioration of the crisis or, conversely, the shaping and development of the crisis (e.g., Colville, Pye, & Carter, 2013). In essence, we advocate not just the study of additional in situ or contemporaneous crisis sensemaking but also the comparative analysis across cases of such circumstances. The goal of such a project would be to step outside the unique circumstances of specific crises to see the larger picture of relationships between discourse and organizational crisis sensemaking.

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## Notes

1. We thank one of our reviewers for calling our attention to the relevance of Colville et al.'s study to our project.
2. We refer the reader to Boden (1994), Fairhurst and Cooren (2004), and Llewellyn and Hindmarsh (2010) for expanded discussions of the contributions of discursive approaches such as discourse analysis, conversation analysis, and interaction analysis, among others, to the study of organizations and organizing. Llewellyn and Hindmarsh (2010) in particular expand upon the methodological contributions in general of these approaches and elaborate on the specific significance of audio- and video-recorded data for organizational analyses.
3. The phone recordings were obtained by the second author who wrote to the Jefferson Parish Office to request the recordings.
4. From here, when the term *report* is used, it will be in reference to the cluster of report-oriented words that including report, reporting, and reported.
5. The terms that were used more often than report were, in this order: ah, we've, you've, I've, JS (moderator), having, St. (abbreviation for saint, which was a term common in many of the Louisiana parish names), and shelter.
6. We have multiple examples of the moderator repeatedly asking participants to "mute their phones" due to background noise from individual sites being heard during the teleconference. At one point, there is even music that can be heard in the background.

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