

Coordination: From Crisis C-  
Shibboleth to In-the-  
Moment Communicative  
Action

Mariaelena Bartesaghi  
Associate Prof, Dept of  
Comm.  
[mbartesaghi@usf.edu](mailto:mbartesaghi@usf.edu)

## Crisis: A common wisdom?

There is a well known and well worn wisdom in crisis planning and evaluation of what went wrong with this planning that goes something like this:

“tight coordination among organizations, clear communication(...)and cooperation among individuals and organizations will make disaster response more productive”

(Clarke, 1999, p. 56)

## A narrative

- the fact that it is continuously retold in our communication about crisis – media, everyday, public, and scholarly discourse alike
- the appearance of coordination, communication, and cooperation as empirically unexamined “characters”
- its productive power; as Luhmann (1993) argues, the way we communicate about crisis reflexively constitutes crisis itself and our ability to manage it

## Hurricane Katrina: The events and “the narrative”

As the center of Katrina passed Southeast of New Orleans on August 29, 2005, winds downtown were in the Category 3 range with frequent intense gusts and tidal surge. Hurricane-force winds were experienced throughout the city, although the most severe portion of Katrina missed the city, hitting nearby St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes. Hurricane Katrina made its final landfall in eastern St. Tammany Parish. The western eye wall passed directly over St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana as a Category 3 hurricane at about 9:45 am CST, August 29, 2005.

In the City of New Orleans, the storm surge caused more than 50 breaches in drainage canal levees and also in navigational canal levees and precipitated the worst engineering disaster in the history of the United States.

Katrina's storm surge inundated all parishes surrounding Lake Pontchartrain, including St. Tammany, Tangipahoa, St. John the Baptist and St. Charles Parishes.

St. Bernard Parish was 80 percent underwater.



## Post facto accounts of Katrina as crisis

In post-facto accounts of the crisis, what went wrong with Katrina was located in what Clarke (1999) calls the c-shibboleths of planning: or the familiar narrative elements of crisis **coordination, communication, and cooperation.**

- Today, I choose one term, COORDINATION and problematize its narrative power, in three ways.
- COORDINATION is
- 1. a semantic shell, which has the appearance, but only that, of describing something concrete. It is a reification.
- 2. an organizing structure, which orders participants in an actual crisis and assigns them roles, within asymmetrical relationships
- 3. a social (meta)discourse of crisis, which amounts to the notion of speaking with one voice

## Reconstructing Coordination as Communicative Action



“Once personnel understand the risk clearly, they are more likely to **coordinate** their actions in mutually reciprocal ways”

- where
- (a) disaster (expressed probabilistically, as risk) is portrayed as an objective feature of the social world, entirely independent from those who must orient to it as such in their moment by moment choices
- (b) *once* is an adverb which indicates a specific timeframe, though *more likely* is a composite phrase = adverb (likely) + upgrader (more). Though *more* strengthens the illocutionary force or the likelihood of something happening, there is no continuum established and therefore no frame of reference (i.e. *more likely than what?*)
- (c) *coordinate their actions and in mutually reciprocal ways* presents an interesting tautology, where the behavior described in the first phrase is, in effect, defined by and synonymous to that described in the second.

Consider this  
claim from  
literature  
(Comfort, 2005,  
p.6)”

1. Nine conference calls between local, state, federal officials in the days immediately preceding and following Katrina's landfall until loss of communication. During these calls, participants invoked *coordination* as an organizing structure for accountable action and to frame decisions regarding timed evacuations. Coordination, I show, was synonymous with following the State's Plan developed during 2004 exercise Hurricane Pam – speaking with one voice,

2. LEXIS-NEXIS coverage of Katrina 2005-2011 in which COORDINATION appears in headline.

3. COORDINATION in public discourse

## WHAT DOES COORDINATION MEAN?

How it happens

Empirical data

## A. Coordination in works for area aid

Officials want a plan to *coordinate* those efforts.

Ken Oakes, commanding officer with the Salvation Army in Wilmington, said more *coordination* would be a good idea. “We’re doing a little of this here and a little of that there,” he said. “That can get chaotic.” Star News, 9/13, 2005.

- B. The service is being *coordinated* by Bishop Robert E. Farrow...in *coordination*...with the Rhode Island Council of Churches. The Providence Journal, 9/13/2005
- Bernstein, who *coordinated* the Southland effort...required the *coordination* of dozens of agencies. Whittier Daily News, 9/19/2005

## Coordination in the news

GDACS aims at facilitating coordination and decision-making primarily among bilateral responders and the affected country through reliable and timely alert notifications, automatic impact estimations, and the provision of a platform for structured information exchange between responders and coordinators.

*Global Disaster  
Alert and  
Coordination  
System (GDACS)*  
[http://www.gdacs  
.org](http://www.gdacs.org)

*Cordination, decision-making and response* are terms connoting human agency, where *coordination* and *decision-making* are semantically comparable. The activities designated by these terms appear to clue us in as to their possible “objective” or definitional meaning: sending alerts, estimating impacts and providing a platform for the exchange of information between responders and coordinators.

But where does that leave us? How are we to understand the actions which GDACS aims to facilitate: How would GDACS, for example, show how coordination is done or a decision is made?

As well, we do not know which activity is prescribed by which term ; is sending alerts a sign of good *decision-making* or of facilitated *coordination* or *response*? What is also unclear is what the last clause (beginning with “and”) expresses with respect to *coordination* and *response*. Here, *responders* and *coordinators* are expressed as two different categories of people within the semantic pole of “agency.” But this is not so in the first clause, where *coordination* is presented as an activity which responders should better engage in.

Also notice these passive constructions: reliable and timely alert notifications, automatic impact estimations, and the provision of a platform -- are all non human-agents in this process (or at least human-non human collaborations). Their participation in the process is evaluated.

“Lack of Coordination:” social dynamic of post facto accounting and redress.

On the other hand, the case of Hurricane Katrina. First responders followed the State of Louisiana’s Official Emergency Response Plan set out in 2004 by a week-long drill known as Hurricane Pam, an exercise which predicted much of what would happen during Katrina (Redman, 2005). By all accounts, this was no poor decision-making or “coordination” on the part of those in the midst of its unfolding. And yet it was widely called out as coordination failure (Cooper & Block, 2006).

Coordination –  
naming the  
failure  
in public  
discourse

I examine how  
coordination worked as  
an organizing resource  
in the phone calls –

Strategies

To moderate call  
structure, turn-taking,  
topics

To index to other  
speakers on how to  
proceed an agreed  
upon course of action

“Coordination” as  
metapragmatic  
organizing



I chose two extracts to examine coordination as a discursive dynamic. These extracts are part of a phone call that took place at 7:30 a.m. on August 27, 2005. They are moderated by Jeff Smith, Deputy Director for Emergency Preparedness with the Louisiana Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness. In each one, the topic at issue is the timing of evacuations for the different parishes of New Orleans, according to the stages of the State's Plan set in the Hurricane Pam exercise; speakers refer to the plan in the course of the conversation.

# Meanings Indexed By Participants'

## Use of Coordination

Appeal to reason

Common goal, procedure

Epistemic warrant

Normative protocol for action

Disaffiliation, rupture

## Practical conclusions

“Failure of coordination” (or like terms) keeps us trapped in continuous re-creation of our own disaster metadiscourse (Button).

Shells are a good place to begin to examine/transcend assumptions of crisis narratives, such as the popular wisdom of “speaking with one voice.” (Clarke, 1999)

A communication approach to a crisis is sensitive to the ways that crises, both as a social narrative and as an outcome of interactional dynamics cannot be decontextualized from the communicative and social context in which those who participate in its unfolding, thus affecting its outcomes.

As c-shibboleth coordination, like communication and cooperation amounts to speaking with one voice. Whether this course of action is actually beneficial remains a matter of careful scrutiny.