

Communicating/organizing for reliability, resilience, and safety: special issue introduction

The organizations and interorganizational systems upon which we depend to keep us safe in a risky world rely on communication. Understanding the interplay between human beings, systems of interaction, and complex industrial and natural systems is the key to managing and mitigating the risks of modernity (Barbour and James, 2015; Beck, 1992; Kinsella, 2012; Lupton, 2013; Opdyke *et al.*, 2017). Information flows and meaning making are at the core of this interplay (Buzzanell, 2010; Keyton *et al.*, 2008; Maguire and Hardy, 2013; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2015). Building on ideas developed at the International Communication Association's 2016 Remembering, Regulating, and Resilience Preconference, this special issue called for theoretical and empirical submissions to investigate, engage, and/or critique the communicative and organizational accomplishment of reliability, resilience, and safety.

This focus reflects on a broad array of empirical scholarship and theorizing. For example, research has documented the centrality of communication processes for high reliability organizing (HRO) while at the same time highlighting the need for theory grounded in more robust notions of communication (e.g. Barbour and Gill, 2017; Jahn and Black, 2017; Scott and Trethewey, 2008). Reliable organizing is of particular importance in policy making for the regulation of complex industrial systems (e.g. Coan, 2002; Endres, 2012; Kinsella *et al.*, 2013); in environmental protection, stewardship, and sustainability (e.g. Buttny, 2015; Endres *et al.*, 2009; Kinsella *et al.*, 2015; Mitra and Buzzanell, 2015; O'Connor and Gronewold, 2012; Rich, 2016); in healthcare settings (e.g. Apker *et al.*, 2016; Eisenberg *et al.*, 2005; Stephens *et al.*, 2017); and in local and national security (e.g. Bean and Buikema, 2015; Bean and Keränen, 2007). Communication is central to effective disaster and crisis mitigation, preparation, and response (e.g. Agarwal and Buzzanell, 2015; Carlson *et al.*, 2017; Coombs, 2011; Doerfel *et al.*, 2010; Griffin Padgett and Allison, 2010; Heide and Simonsson, 2014; Houston, 2018; Novak and Sellnow, 2009; Seeger, 2006; Sellnow *et al.*, 2012, 2017; Stephens *et al.*, 2013; Theresa, 2009; Ulmer, 2012; Veil *et al.*, 2011; Westerman *et al.*, 2009; Williams and Ishak, 2017). Communication shapes the safety of our workplaces and work practices (e.g. Ford *et al.*, 2016; Myers and McPhee, 2006; Powley, 2009; Real, 2008, 2010; Thackaberry, 2004; Ziegler, 2007).

Research across these domains addresses fundamental questions important in the study of communication. For example, this research makes clear the difficulty and importance of getting the right information to the right audiences at the right time, especially in times of crisis (Seeger *et al.*, 2003; Sellnow *et al.*, 2017; Stephens and Barrett, 2016). It also makes clear the challenges of managing the tensions and contradictions that complicate organizational communication (Ashcraft and Trethewey, 2004; Lewis *et al.*, 2010; Mease, 2015; Putnam *et al.*, 2016; Tracy, 2016). It emphasizes the need for clarity, accuracy, and transparency in information sharing, but also the communicative dynamics that can make such openness difficult or undesirable (Eisenberg and Witten, 1987; Thackaberry, 2004).

Inasmuch as communication processes are essential to developing and nurturing shared vigilance, communication scholarship can address the practical exigencies of day-to-day communicating for safety as well as the theoretical questions that arise in organizing for safety and reliability. For example, although HRO (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2015) emphasizes the functionality of key communication processes (e.g. heedful interrelating), and normal accident theory (Clarke, 1999; Perrow, 1999; Sagan, 1995) emphasizes the inherent fragility of such processes over time, these theories concur on the importance of communication



(Leveson *et al.*, 2009). Although the centrality of communication is clear, how actual communication constitutes reliability, resilience, and safety is not yet sufficiently well understood (Barbour and Gill, 2017; Maguire and Hardy, 2013; Scott and Trethewey, 2008).

Communicating for reliability, resilience, and safety may depend on the temporal orientation of the work (Maguire and Hardy, 2013), which the design of communication processes for safety can and should take into account (Ballard and McVey, 2014). It may involve seemingly straightforward questions of who needs what information when, and more complex questions about the meaning making that occurs as individuals make decisions about what information to seek, share, and withhold (Mokros and Aakhus, 2002). Communication choices made in day-to-day work have important implications during emergencies, and the logics underlying those choices may have powerful effects on the forms that reliability, resilience, and safety take. Communicating for reliability, resilience, and safety may also depend on the audiences, internal and external, implied, and evoked. Individuals reference external audiences in their communication with each other, work across organizational boundaries, and must explain their actions to external stakeholder groups. Furthermore, these internal communication processes are linked with external communication processes in ways not yet well understood (Barbour *et al.*, in press; Cheney *et al.*, 2014). For example, individuals and organizations are also embedded in larger systems of discourse, power, and knowledge that inform meanings and possibilities for action.

The call for this special issue articulated 14 questions to spark the interrogation of these topics:

- (1) What does or what could the communicative accomplishment of reliability, resilience, and safety entail?
- (2) How does a communication perspective necessitate a reconceptualization of terms, such as reliability, resilience, and/or safety?
- (3) How are reliability, resilience, and/or safety intertwined?
- (4) How do micro-, meso-, or macro-social communicative action and the work practices they comprise contribute to, undermine, and constitute reliability, resilience, and/or safety?
- (5) How do processes typically conceptualized as inside organizations (e.g. regulatory oversight) interact with processes typically conceptualized as outside organizations (e.g. policy making)?
- (6) How does public and institutional memory of disaster (e.g. Bhopal, Chernobyl, Deepwater Horizon, Exxon Valdez, Fukushima, Love Canal) enable and constrain the communicative accomplishment of reliability, resilience, and safety?
- (7) What tensions and tradeoffs characterize organizational enactments of reliability, resilience, and safety?
- (8) How and to what degree are conceptualizations of reliability, resilience, and safety related to local, national, ethnic, organizational, and professional cultures?
- (9) How are conceptualizations of reliability, resilience, and safety entrained into careers, occupations, and professions?
- (10) How do people engage in and negotiate reliability, resilience, and safety expertise in team, organizational, and/or interorganizational engagements?
- (11) How can reliability, resilience, and safety be cultivated at and across multiple levels of human experience simultaneously?
- (12) How can research in this domain inform the design of communicative interventions?

- (13) How might research in this domain have a positive influence on policy making?
- (14) How do questions of justice, equity, and democracy play out around issues of reliability, resilience, and safety?

In responding to these questions and provoking others, the articles in the special issue have broad relevance for reliability, resilience, and safety and demonstrate the usefulness of communication research for addressing pressing societal problems.

The articles build theory and contribute to practice in this domain by reconceiving of resilience and integrating theories of reliability using communication theory. Jahn and Johansson studied a facilitated network of crisis communications specialists who compiled, organized, revised, and made available crisis information during the Västmanland wildfire, the largest in Sweden in 40 years. Their investigation prompted them to broaden the definition of resilience to include adaptive capacity. Applying and extending four flows theory (McPhee and Zaig, 2009), they analyzed responders' coordinated construction of disaster response, shed light on the spaces between internal and external communication processes during crisis, and offered concrete advice for implementing useful communicative practices, such as stabilizing structuring practices, adaptive structuring practices, and responsive affiliation. Ishak and Williams sought to explain not just resilience processes as they are, but to explicate and predict variations in how organizations construct resilience. Their theorizing incorporates implications of an organization placing resilience at the core of its identity. Finding a common thread with Jahn and Johansson's effort, they argue in favor of adaptive over anchored resilience. Applying Buzzanell's (2010) communicative processes of resilience, they theorize that adaptation and resilience become impetus for talking about disruptive events and recovery, building and modifying interorganizational relationships, developing and drawing on alternative logics, and engaging emotion as a central facet of organizing. Jessica Ford develops the communicative mechanisms of HRO theorizing by reconsidering the core processes that make up the theory. Drawing on her own and others' research exemplars, she conceptualizes obstacles, such as information accessibility, identity constructions, message fatigue, information environments, and generational differences. Each obstacle has a communicative basis and may be addressed through communicative intervention.

The articles also contribute to communication theory and practice focused specifically on stakeholders in the aftermath of crisis and disaster. Elizabeth Carlson analyzes a case of renewal discourse emphasizing preparedness as opposed to orthodox concerns with prevention or recovery. She analyzes the case of the Enbridge Enterprises Emergency Response Team Straits of Mackinac Exercise, which was organized after the 2010 Line 6B oil spill in the Kalamazoo River. Her analysis reconsiders the rhetorical and resilience-building opportunities in renewal efforts and offers an alternative conceptualization of renewal itself, not as peace, but as awakening. Eaddy and Jin consider the effects of crisis communication predicted in situational crisis communication theory (Coombs, 2007; Coombs and Holladay, 1996). Their experimental study examines how the source of information and publics' knowledge about the relevant, previous actions of the organization can affect evaluations of crisis communication efforts.

The articles in this special issue further expand how individuals and organizations manage the tensions and contradictions that are both fundamental to organizational life and at the same time particularly challenging in organizing for reliability, resilience, and safety. Jacob Ford's study of volunteers at an animal shelter investigates how they managed the difficulties of stigmatized work, known as dirty work, through identification and disidentification. His study contributes to our understanding of resilience labor by considering work that requires constant resilience as a routine matter of the work itself rather than as a response to a particular incident, thus extending resilience labor beyond disasters (Agarwal and Buzzanell, 2015) and into the everyday. Hagen, Bighash, Hollingshead, Shaikh, and Steves engage ethical questions surrounding video surveillance technologies. They theorize the tensions between

safety and privacy with broad implications for questions about the security of the collective and the rights of the individual. They put communication at the center of their effort by focusing on communicative interventions to manage the tensions and contradictions emergent in each stage of the implementation of such technologies. In doing so, their work has implications not just for video surveillance but for the increasing number of technologies involved in the massive collection and analysis of data about our daily lives.

These papers address the concerns of the special issue and the broader theoretical and practical efforts at stake. They offer concrete ideas for changing existing and emerging communication practices inspired by their theorizing and empirical evidence. They bridge literatures that, though relevant to each other, are rarely in conversation with each other. These bridges span disciplines such as communication and allied organizational studies areas. They also address domains within communication such as organizational communication and public relations while linking contextual frames such as organizational and environmental communication. Taken together, they offer multi-level approaches to organizing and resilience that focus on processes and practices available to individuals, organizations, communities, and occupations (Buzzanell, 2018). The special issue makes clear that the problems of utmost importance in communicating and organizing for reliability, resilience, and safety cross disciplinary and contextual boundaries.

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