



Commemorating Disorder in After-Action Reports: Rhetorics of Organizational Trauma after the Las Vegas Shooting

Rebecca M. Rice¹  and Emma Frances Bloomfield¹ 

1. Department of Communication Studies, University of Nevada, Las Vegas,
Las Vegas, NV, USA

ABSTRACT

After-action reports are important texts that make sense of moments of crisis and restore organizational order. We add to existing research on these reports by incorporating the rhetorical concepts of terministic screens and the pentad to understand how reports commemorate disorder and organizational trauma. Analyzing the multiple reports created after the 2017 Las Vegas Shooting, we find that reports from different professional fields commemorate crises in disparate ways that select and deflect memories of trauma. This study extends risk and crisis studies of crisis documentation by highlighting the emotional role reports play in making sense of organizational trauma and considering how professional fields influence post-crisis rhetoric of renewal.

KEYWORDS: after-action reports, sensemaking, terministic screens, organizational rhetoric, rhetoric of renewal

The Las Vegas Shooting that occurred on October 1, 2017, was the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history. A lone gunman fired down from a hotel room window into a country music festival on the Las Vegas Strip, killing 60 people and injuring hundreds more. Local, state, and federal law enforcement, fire departments, and emergency medical service providers flooded the scene to transport survivors to hospitals, locate the shooter, and ultimately launch an investigation into the effectiveness of the multiagency

CONTACT Rebecca M. Rice  • E-mail: Rebecca.Rice@UNLV.edu • University of Nevada, Las Vegas • 4505 S Maryland Parkway • Las Vegas, NV 89154 USA



Copyright 2022 Authors. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) license.

response. In the aftermath of the incident, multiple organizations had to make sense of their shared crisis response. Five after-action reports captured the events of 1 October¹ in attempts to make sense of what occurred that night, what organizations did effectively, and what organizational practices should be improved.

After-action reports (AARs), accident reports, and post-crisis inquiries are significant organizational texts that serve multiple purposes after crises.² Reports can generate insight into preventing future crises and create an understandable narrative out of chaotic events (Brown, 2004; Gephart et al., 1990). Reports are not simply factual accounts of crises; instead, they are made up of decision points where rhetorical choices direct attention toward certain perspectives. That is, AARs seek to reconcile conflicting points of view to create a coherent and *persuasive* account of both the crisis and, often, who is at fault (Dwyer et al., 2021). Here, we use an organizational rhetoric lens to understand how AARs function as reflections of the various stakeholders involved in crisis response, their priorities, and their professional biases. Organizational rhetorical studies are interested in how organizations create written texts that help them achieve their goals by persuading and influencing readers (Offerdal et al., 2021), whether intentionally or as byproducts of their reconstruction of events.

Studies of AARs to date have focused on how reports restore order, but scholarship can do more to understand how multiple organizations make sense of the same crisis and even promote healing or renewal after the crisis (Ulmer et al., 2007). AARs are likely to be written more frequently in the coming decades as natural disasters escalate (Woods, 2020) and multiple organizations must respond to them. To contribute to our understanding of AARs and the ways they make sense of crises, we use two rhetorical concepts by Kenneth Burke that center decision-making and symbolic choices. First, we use the rhetorical concept of terministic screens to highlight that any recounting of a crisis necessarily

1. Henceforth we name this incident 1 October to mirror the local and report terminology (Montero, 2018).

2. After-action reports are also sometimes called after-action reviews or post-crisis inquiry reports. We refer to all reports in this genre as after-action reports throughout the paper.

selects certain events and details and simultaneously deflects other parts of organizational experiences (Burke, 1966). Second, we use the rhetorical concept of the pentad to understand how crises are reconstructed differently, with different emphases, which leads to different crisis responses and suggestions for future preparation. Guided by these rhetorical concepts, our qualitative content analysis of 1 October reports explores what reports emphasize and downplay and the differences that emerge between the reports.

This study extends risk and crisis communication research in two ways: First, it introduces new rhetorical tools to consider how different professional fields of risk and crisis practitioners influence post-crisis sensemaking, and second, it expands the rhetoric of renewal to consider official documents. In what follows, we first expand on the theoretical foundations of crisis communication, AARs, terministic screens, and the pentad. Then, we detail our methods before examining findings from our comparative analysis. We conclude by reiterating the importance of organizational rhetoric as an area of study and reflect on the points of convergence and divergence in AARs as impactful for public, organizational, and interorganizational memory.

Literature Review

Studying AARs creates the opportunity to examine how various organizations make sense of shared crises. An organizational crisis is an event that begins with an unexpected trigger and creates high levels of risk and potential loss for the organization (Seeger et al., 2003). While crises can be destructive to the organization's members, reputation, and existence, crises are also opportunities for renewal, learning, and understanding (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002). As such, how organizations choose to remember crises and preserve corresponding lessons has implications for their future resilience (Rice & Jahn, 2020). AARs are an important site of remembering that can create improvements in organizational activities that prevent future crises. We should also recognize that reports are made up of rhetorical choices and thus serve an inherently persuasive function. Risk and crisis communication scholars have drawn on rhetorical concepts including narrative theory to understand how

order is restored via storytelling (Seeger et al., 2003) and ethos to examine challenges to authority during a crisis (Offerdal, 2021). Scholars proposing a rhetoric of renewal have argued that crises are opportunities for organizations to learn and heal after a crisis (Ulmer et al., 2007). This research tends to focus on leaders' rhetoric (Ulmer et al., 2007); however, renewal expands beyond leader communication to include memorials (Veil et al., 2011) and, we argue, organizational texts.

Risk and crisis scholars have already documented numerous purposes of AARs. These reports serve as sensemaking tools for practitioners, creating a coherent and authoritative account of crises (Brown, 2004). They can also reestablish public trust and positive perception of the organization (Gephart et al., 1990). Reports tend to be treated as sites of rule development and organizational learning (Jahn, 2016). When findings are released, practitioners must make sense of the reports, assess their resonance, and adjust practices to accommodate report recommendations (Dwyer et al., 2021). Reports and their subsequent recommendations also serve as resources in member interactions and become tools that inform future actions (Jahn, 2016). Attempts at fact-finding are often complicated and incomplete due to the chaos caused by disasters (Andrade et al., 2020). While these studies highlight the role of reports in reestablishing order after a crisis, more research can be done to consider how reports can also contribute to renewal and healing.

After-action reviews can also be situated in the broader rhetorical situation of crisis response. Scholarship in this area has already identified and assessed rhetorical strategies available to organizations and individuals, including image repair strategies (Benoit & Henson, 2009; Coombs, 2006). Benoit and Henson, analyzing presidential rhetoric, found that strategies can include taking corrective action, bolstering the reputation of the speaker, and framing the crisis as an unprecedented challenge. AARs play an important part in what Coombs (2006) terms sharing "instructing information" about a crisis, or basic facts that stakeholders may need about the crisis (p. 246). Official documentation can also deny or diminish organizational blame for the crisis and answer questions about

evidence and the locus of blame for the crisis (Sellnow & Ulmer, 2004). AARs serve an important role in crisis response strategies.

Further research can also examine what viewpoints are documented in AARs, especially as crises frequently involve and will continue to involve multiple organizations in coming decades (Rice, 2022). Professional fields, or viewpoints drawn from career expertise, play an important role in the interpretation of AARs (Dwyer et al., 2021). We know that risk and crisis practitioners must read and make sense of AARs to understand how these reports should inform how they do their jobs. Despite our understanding that professional fields influence the *interpretation* of reports, less is known about how professions influence the *construction* of reports in the first place. We consider how different professional fields created different accounts of the same event to enhance understanding of how multiple organizations converge or diverge on their interpretation of crises.

An Organizational Rhetoric Framework for Analyzing Reports

AARs function rhetorically by shaping organizational understanding of crises. We draw on Burke's (1966) concepts of terministic screens and the pentad to examine how organizational understanding involves selections and deflections about the event that are informed by the organization's perspective. Terministic screens refer to how all language involves selections and deflections in where we point our attention; thus, every choice to select one aspect or feature for inclusion in official reports is simultaneously a "deflection" of other choices (Burke, 1966, p. 44). Symbolic choices about how to represent events are biased and non-neutral. AARs are informed by the terministic screens of various professions that "direct attention away from some interpretations and toward others" (Burke, 1966, p. 45). Terministic screens become accepted vocabularies that may dictate future rhetorical choices. Different terministic screens lead to different choices of emphasis, which may result in very different perspectives and retellings of the same reality (Burke, 1966). Unlike the related concept of framing, terministic screens are self-reinforcing concepts whereby

the language, or terminology, that we use to understand reality influences the vocabularies available to us in future situations. In other words, our terministic screens develop over time to prevent us from considering other perspectives, vocabularies, and ways of knowing, which Burke referred to as a “trained incapacity” (Burke, 1966, p. 189). Over time, the development of one’s experiences, education and training can influence our perspectives, and “abilities can function as [inabilities]” that prevent certain ways of understanding situations (Burke, 1935, p. 7).

Burke proposed the term *casuistic stretching* to describe how we engage with adjustments to our terministic screens. At times of struggle, old vocabularies may be modified or extended to adapt to new situations (Burke, 1984). When that stretching cannot fully make sense of the new situation, the framework might break, causing a new one to be formed in its place. This process can upend people’s ways of life, so instead of adopting new frameworks, people often make language choices to “reduce perceived incompatibilities” between the old and new principles (Tschirhart & Bloomfield, 2020, p. 699). In other words, people tend to stick with pre-established vocabularies instead of stretching them but may be forced to stretch or abandon them given changing circumstances, such as those involved in crisis.

To explore these relative emphases in the retelling of events, Burke (1945) offered the pentad, which is a series of five terms (act, agent, agency, scene, and purpose) that compose the elements of any event. For Burke, retellings of all events include an emphasis on some of these elements and a de-emphasis of others, which indicates different underlying worldviews and ideologies (Bloomfield & Tscholl, 2018). Attending to pentadic terms can offer rhetorical insight into how various organizations engage with crises in how they characterize the act, the agents involved, the relevant agency and purpose, and the appropriate scope of the scene. In addition to focusing on individual components within the pentad, rhetorical scholars also track the ratios between the terms to interpret perspective, motive, and implications.

Organizational scholars have already engaged with the pentad to understand how the organization is framed as a scene that is positioned as dictating member choices (Meisenbach et al., 2008).

Scene has the potential to be powerful during sense-making in emergencies as well, as the emergency itself can be framed as dictating subsequent response. For example, does the surrounding Las Vegas community after 1 October *count* as part of the scene? Agents are additionally a potential point of selection and deflection for AARs, especially as these reports make sense of multiple responding agents from different organizations and professions and choose which activities and agents to draw attention to over others.

Using rhetorical theories, this project interrogates AARs from 1 October to ask the following research question:

RQ: How do after-action reports select and deflect aspects of the crisis relevant to their professional fields' terministic screens?

Methods

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection included a thorough search for reports related to the Las Vegas shooting conducted in the fall of 2020. By this time, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (LVMPD), and Nevada Hospital Association (NHA) had all published reports, ranging from criminal investigations (LVMPD, the FBI) to AARs that sought to reflect on the organizational responses (FEMA, LVMPD, NHA). After conducting a complete search for reports, the authors read all five reports for first impressions of report purposes. We removed the criminal reports and focused on the three AARs for the purpose of analysis (for a summary of reports, see Table 1).

During data analysis, the three AARs were coded using NVIVO, a qualitative data analysis software. Analysis was conducted using multiple phases of coding. First, the first author engaged in primary level coding, asking what was occurring throughout each report and establishing codes to break segments of data down by line (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Analysis used the constant comparative method to compare new data to already created codes, generating new codes for new phenomena in the data and adding depth

TABLE 1 Overview of Reports and Findings

Agency	Report Purpose	Page Count	Key Findings
Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)	“...distributing best practices and lessons learned for other communities around the country to better prepare for a mass casualty incident should one occur” (p. i).	61	“Strong cross-agency collaboration is critical for a quick and effective response. Response training that is tailored to address an incident of mass violence is an especially valuable preparedness investment. Coordinated, cross-agency planning for an incident of mass violence is necessary for successful outcomes” (p. 1).
Nevada Hospital Administration (NHA)	“provide supplemental hospital emergency management educational material via the case study of one of the worst mass-casualty incidents to occur in our nation’s history” (p. 3).	67	26 insights and recommendations, including: hospitals had no notice of the event, there was a lack of situational awareness, there was a surge in patients, throughput of patients was key, issues with patient registration, supplies ran low.
Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (LVMPD)	Detail overall police response and document “lessons learned” (p. 1).	164	93 findings organized by categories including preparedness, law enforcement departments, leadership, equipment, and training.

and changing understanding to already created codes (Charmaz, 2014). Primary coding yielded 168 codes, indicating the breadth of topics covered throughout the reports. Informal observation of codes suggested that there were some points where reports converged and other points where they differed. As a result, the secondary coding cycle compared codes to the research question to clarify relationships (Charmaz, 2014). During secondary coding, the first author grouped codes together to create categories of like codes and to observe the relationship and value among those codes. This analysis yielded three points of convergence in the reports and two points of divergence, discussed next.

Results

Points of Convergence

The reports converged on three themes: (1) the scene as uncontrollable and controlling, (2) the clash of professional fields, and (3) the importance of future planning and lessons learned from this event.

Scene as Uncontrollable and Controlling

The reports converged upon the scene as influential over agents' actions, deploying a scene-act ratio. The unprecedented nature of these events simultaneously compelled organizations to respond and challenged existing plans of action to launch appropriate responses to the unanticipated circumstances. The reports converge around the theme that the event scene was uncontrollable, thereby constraining the potential acts of agents within the scene. Instead of first responders having control over the scene and their actions, the AARs portrayed the scene as placing demands on the organizations involved and thereby causing them to act. Such a rhetorical choice can be a strategy to downplay culpability, shifting blame to a scene that compels action as opposed to being a conscious, free choice of the agent. These reports show a potential motive to downplay the responsibility of the agencies in the sense that the groups were doing the best they could under difficult, unprecedented circumstances and thus should not be admonished

but praised. Additionally, such an emphasis on the scene could also be a strategy to highlight the unique circumstances of the scene to garner attention to the problem and the importance of preparing for future incidents of this nature.

All of the reports mentioned the fatality count and qualified the mass shooting as the largest in U.S. history. For example, the FEMA report (2018) opened by saying that “public safety agencies worked together to mount a collaborative, coordinated response to an incident of mass violence unlike any the nation had ever seen” (p. 50). Other quantities, for example, the number of supplies needed, ambulances dispatched, and the square footage over which the victims were spread out, were used throughout the reports to characterize the shooting as vast in size and scope. The NHA report (Lake, 2018) emphasized that hospitals faced “the sudden unanticipated need to start more than 1,000 IVs on one night” (p. 12).

In addition to the number of victims, the reports often called this event “unpredictable and unprecedented” (Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, 2019, p. 11). In particular, the NHA report (Lake, 2018) repeatedly mentioned that victims began arriving at hospitals with little to no warning to those organizations. The report characterized the shooting by saying, “America has never seen an incident of this type or scale. This situation and subsequent response helped to identify areas where additional planning, exercises and assumptions are necessary based on the changing world and social environment in which we now live” (p. 3). As a result, the reports praised organizations by citing the size and scope of the incident to explain that the organizations operated well, given the constraints.

The FEMA report explicitly noted this by explaining that there was not enough tracking as patients were quickly transported to hospitals. FEMA (2018) concluded that “While foregoing patient documentation on scene allows for an expedited transport process, it complicates patient accountability at the hospital and possibly hinders family reunification. Due to the size, scope, and complexity of this incident, it is an acceptable deficiency” (p. 22). Each report treated the scene as creating demands that organizations

responded to as best that they could. These descriptions were used to praise organizational responses as constrained by a period of overwhelming trauma and thus situates deficiencies and difficulties as results of the scene and not the agents' actions.

Clash of Professional Fields

Another point of convergence across the reports was the commitment to preserving the clashes between responding organizations. While this theme evokes disagreements between organizations involved, this shared finding preserves the conflicts as a challenge to the response that is important to keep in mind for future crises. These descriptions emphasized how terministic screens resulted in trained incapacities for communicating, collaborating, and responding effectively to the crisis caused by professional affiliations, norms, and training. In particular, multiple reports mentioned institutional barriers between professions; for example, U.S. patient privacy laws like HIPAA, which constrains what type of information can be released about hospital patients. The LVMPD and FEMA reports noted that this created challenges to victim identification. FEMA (2018) invalidated these concerns by saying that “*perceived* restrictions for sharing personally identifiable information made completing a deconflicted patient and deceased list very difficult” (p. 40, emphasis added). Conversely, the NHA report (Lake, 2018) explained this lag in identification as a professional necessity, as “the numbers of patients, tempo at which they arrived at area hospitals and acuity levels stayed steady, it was difficult to register everyone. Electronic health record (EHR) systems and registration clerks simply couldn’t keep up. Patients needed immediate surgery” (p. 12).

The reports also identified a lack of collaboration among professions as an area for future improvement. The LVMPD report (2019) said that hospital professionals were not in the shared “command post” during the response, had not been included in previous mass casualty exercises, and that “the inclusion of medical professionals may have facilitated the relatively urgent task of establishing patient identification and tracking” (p. 105). Similarly, the NHA (Lake, 2018) suggested that jargon from other professional

fields created confusion for hospital workers, and instead of using acronyms, “several hospitals felt it would have been better if callers simply explained who the parent organization is that they were working for” (p. 21). The reports all remembered conflict among responding organizations as a challenge throughout the response. In doing so, they converged on an identified problem in terms of collaboration and communication across professional fields that should be both remembered and addressed in the future.

The trained incapacities were caused by materials structures of the scene such as the technology used, but also by professional norms and jargon, which created terministic screens that prevented communication and collaboration. For example, norms of how to express information are not innate, but built through the professional agencies over time to become concretized as organizational norms that are not meant to be violated. In addition to a compelling and difficult scene due to the crisis, the scene of each organization’s norms and expectations also limited agents’ abilities to act. Each group’s terministic screens and trained incapacities resisted casuistic stretching and adjustment and thus halted clear and effective communication between the responding agencies.

Future Orientation

The reports all supported a future orientation: rather than looking back to cast blame for the shooting, the reports tended to focus on future planning and improving crisis responses. Overwhelmingly, the reports addressed failures from 1 October by suggesting more training. Although differences in training led to some of the perceived incompatibilities discussed in the previous section, trainings were still emphasized as a way to create future preparedness. LVMPD (2019) suggested additional training 16 times throughout the report, while FEMA (2018) suggested additional training 12 times. Of these suggested trainings, FEMA proposed training on triaging a bleeding person, training on ordering resources to the scene of an emergency, joint training with medical providers, and additional training for city and county employees. The NHA (Lake, 2018) suggested more documentation of knowledge so that

procedures are not based on “personalities” in future emergencies (p. 63). By this, the report suggested that current knowledge and relationships resided in individuals within the organizations rather than more formal documentation. LVMPD similarly recommended that procedures be formalized to preserve knowledge.

The reports also framed 1 October as part of a changing landscape of threat. The NHA (Lake, 2018) directed attention to this problem as part of the report’s purpose, saying that “This situation and subsequent response helped to identify areas where additional planning, exercises and assumptions are necessary based on the changing world and social environment in which we now live” (p. 3). The LVMPD linked the shooting to additional mass shootings around the world as if to argue that these events are proliferating, and more training and plans are needed to prepare for them. The LVMPD report (2019) found that despite the agency studying previous mass shootings, “policies were not sufficiently robust to handle the magnitude of what happened on 1 October” (p. 103). FEMA (2018) wrote that the incident could “inform future response efforts and protect responders and the communities they serve” (p. 50). The reports framed mass shootings as part of an inevitable future and positioned preparedness and training as necessary solutions.

By emphasizing the scene these reports directed attention away from blaming organizations to instead suggest improvements in responding to future threats. The implications of this choice is to remove culpability from the agencies authoring the reports regarding past incidents, but still position them as future agential heroes, which with future training could be even more equipped to respond within a changing scene.

Points of Divergence

Despite prominent overlaps, the reports diverged on two important themes, which reflected different selections and deflections of how to remember 1 October: (1) differences in negotiating old and new principles and (2) differences in responses to professional boundaries around trauma.

Negotiating Old and New Principles

First, the reports treated improvisation, adaptation, and changes to procedure differently, marking whether casuistic stretching of existing protocols was needed or whether to resist casuistic stretching by reifying old principles. Each report included remembrances of quick thinking that seemed necessary to the response, especially given the scope of help needed and the pace of unfolding events. However, the professional frames of the reports led to different conclusions. In particular, FEMA, representing the U.S. federal government perspective on 1 October, acknowledged improvisation but encouraged future preparedness to continue to follow rules and procedures, while the local reports treated improvisation as necessary and even generative of new knowledge. Such rhetorical differences may be expected due to FEMA's scope being over national boundaries and thus needing to emphasize generalizability across a variety of different scenes. Local reports, however, are not beholden to such audience restrictions and may be more willing to celebrate the acts of groups operating within the unique circumstances of the Vegas scene.

The FEMA report (2018) included multiple findings that suggested that organizations failed to follow the rules. The report opened by saying that “when agencies followed pre-established plans and procedures, they improved communication and strengthened the response. Where plans were not integrated or not widely known and understood by responders across all responding agencies, difficulties arose” (p. 1). Here, the report tied plans and procedures to interorganizational success, as these guides facilitate shared actions. An illustrative example of this is that the FEMA report condemned ambulances for transporting patients without first checking in at a staging area. The FEMA report (2018) acknowledged that “timely patient care is critical for any incident, but some fire department units that assisted patients did not communicate to command or staging that they were occupied and unable to report to the staging area to receive an assignment” (p. 21). The FEMA report (2018) also criticized the improvisation of off-duty first responders, and noted that “as ambulances arrived, responders, concert-goers, and well-intentioned bystanders removed medical supplies from them to

support on-scene response; however, the ambulances in turn were being rendered less effective without these supplies” (p. 22). The terministic screen of FEMA, which emphasized the importance of existing protocols, deflected improvisation as a useful and prudent measure to incorporate into crisis management. These statements also communicate a resistance to casuistic stretching, whereby even the acknowledged difficulties of the scene should not deter agents from following standard procedures.

Conversely, the NHA report praised the improvisation of first responders and civilians. As the NHA (Lake, 2018) said, “human factors and ingenuity were observed from everyone involved. Many concert goers put themselves at great personal risk to save people they’d never met” (p. 37). The LVMPD report (2019) focused less on improvisation by the community and instead discussed the improvisation of on-duty police officers. For example, the LVMPD report (2019) praised a police officer who saw that the position of staging manager was unfilled and “assigned himself to the position where he remained until he was relieved” (p. 38). The reports ultimately suggested different actions (i.e., following previous trainings versus improvising) and treated interference with and adjustments to proper procedures differently in response.

The suggestions for organizational learning that followed from these findings also diverged. The FEMA report (2018) recommended further (FEMA) trainings to help personnel remember procedures during stressful situations to deter improvisation; it reinforced that additional trainings were needed because “protocol is especially critical when managing incidents of this geographic size, magnitude, and complexity” (p. 20). Conversely, NHA and LVMPD findings encouraged the codification of successful improvisations from the incident so that they could be remembered in future emergencies. The NHA (Lake, 2018) reported that “it was the hospitals’ ability to move the patient quickly through triage and the emergency department to surgery that was the main determinant of appropriate care. Steps should be taken to memorialize these processes and standard operating protocols created” (p. 34). LVMPD (2019) suggested that trainings should occur at the local level to bring multiple organizations together and encouraged the preservation of knowledge about how to perform various roles.

The NHA and LVMPD reports thus engaged in casuistic stretching whereby the old principles were modified to include the successful improvisations caused by the 1 October crisis. Instead of shattering the old protocols, as a group like FEMA might fear if old principles were to be modified, the NHA and LVMPD welcomed what they viewed as useful insights gleaned from the incident. All of the reports suggested memorializing knowledge, but this knowledge differed dramatically depending on the professional point of view, with the federal perspective suggesting a return to previous protocols and local organizations seeking to commemorate local improvisations.

Professional Boundaries around Trauma

The reports also differed in the treatment and boundaries around trauma, with some organizations acknowledging shared trauma among organizational members and other reports treating trauma as external to the organization and therefore outside of the scope of AARs. Here, terministic screens and the pentad help explain how professional orientations change the relevant scope of the crisis and the extent to which trauma is included as a relevant factor in crisis responses.

The NHA report (Lake, 2018) most clearly acknowledged emotional trauma to doctors and nurses caused by treating wounded patients. This included drawing from direct quotations of organizational members; for example, “I felt like I needed to be an emotional superhero for these people,” and, “It was difficult not to break down yourself and cry with each story being sadder or more heart-wrenching than the next” (p. 11). The NHA report (Lake, 2018) used words like “emotion” and “trauma” throughout; for example, “Many responders and staff members still suffer from the events of that day. The emotional and psychological wounds, horrific memories and difficult humanitarian interactions with the injured and their families may never fully dissipate” (p. 3). The NHA treated trauma as internal to hospitals, thereby including trauma under the scope of the scene of NHA’s (Lake, 2018) crisis response, especially by noting that hospitals felt their security was threatened. This was because “hospitals were being told that additional gunmen were seen on their campuses, and the rumors

of multiple attacks made hospitals feel as though they could be the next soft target” (p. 16). Trauma breached the organizational boundaries of hospitals, and, as a result, the NHA reported that hospitals developed strategies to defend those boundaries. The NHA report overtly named and remembered trauma as internal to the organization.

Conversely, the FEMA (2018) and LVMPD (2019) reports were more likely to acknowledge trauma to “victims” or civilians that first responders assisted. The reports used more formal and less emotional terms, like “debriefing” and “employee wellbeing,” to discuss the impact of the shooting on organizational members. The terministic screens of FEMA and LVMPD included more professional and formal language that consequently eschewed emotional engagement. For example, LVMPD (2019) reported that “leadership also needed to consider the health and wellbeing of LVMPD personnel—during and after the incident” (p. 88). This report also noted that many police officers returned to the debriefing site “exhausted” (p. 41). While the reports both mention offers of counseling, the LVMPD and FEMA reports referred to the reasons for this counseling as exhaustion and “mental and physical welfare” (FEMA, 2018, p. 48). When mental health was discussed, it was often labeled as “stress,” for example, in FEMA’s (2018) reporting of “stress debriefing” available to first responders (p. 48).

In the FEMA and LVMPD reports, civilians endured trauma, making the scene of trauma *external* to the organization. Both reports praised the victim assistance center opened after 1 October, and FEMA (2018) explained that it provided “long-term support to victims, many of whom were not injured but experienced mental health problems and associated issues, including lost wages due to post-traumatic stress disorder” (p. 47). This was, strikingly, the only mention of post-traumatic stress in the FEMA report. LVMPD (2019) similarly only mentioned post-traumatic stress once as something supervisors should look out for in case it emerged in any employees (p. 119). Thus, trauma was treated as hypothetical or only linked to civilian “victims” instead of an expected part of organizational impacts, thereby deflecting the potential to recognize trauma and value trauma responses broadly and within organizations.

The reports drew different boundaries around remembering trauma, thereby adjusting the scope of the scene and the ability of agents to suffer trauma within law and emergency management organizations and delegating trauma as part of the scene to be addressed (FEMA, 2018; LVMPD, 2019) or remembering trauma as internal to healthcare organizations, their work, and members (Lake, 2018). Ironically, even though all of the organizations deployed a scene-act ratio in acknowledging the restrictions the scene placed on their ability to act in their professional capacities, only the NHA acknowledged how the controlling, unprecedented power of the scene might also have influenced agents' emotional and personal well-being beyond their agent status as first responders.

Discussion

We studied multiple AARs generated from the same crisis to understand how reports remember and forget organizational trauma. This research contributes to the understanding of risk and crisis communication in several ways: (1) by demonstrating that organizational documentation can work to commemorate disorder versus simply to restore order after a crisis, (2) by introducing new rhetorical analysis tools for understanding how crises are interpreted, and (3) by highlighting the importance of studying multiorganizational crisis response.

First, this study adds to scholarly understanding of crisis communication by analyzing how after-action reports and written texts more broadly contribute to rhetorics of renewal. Research on rhetorics of renewal has focused on leadership communication (Ulmer et al., 2007); however, organizational texts are also important rhetorical artifacts that serve a function in the crisis recovery process. Ulmer et al. suggested that renewal rhetoric is characterized by provisional communication, prospective outlook, optimism, and effective leadership. Here, we find that after-action reports can also engage in rhetoric of renewal, in particular by *commemorating disorder*. Previous studies of AARs have examined how these reports restore understanding of the world and trust in the organizations involved (Boudes & Laroche, 2009). An additional function of

AARs is to cope with highly stressful events. Therefore, AARs do not just function logically to restore order; they can also function to increase emotional understanding of these events. AARs need not produce certainty about a crisis, and, as demonstrated here, they can also be open and provisional in their retelling of events (Ulmer et al., 2007). The reports here included multiple aspects that went beyond restoring legitimacy and instead preserved the feelings of chaos, doubt, and confusion throughout the response. This analysis adds to our understanding of the rhetoric of renewal by noting that organizational texts may also serve a purpose in renewal; however, this process does not only include looking forward, but also looking back in order to commemorate the trauma and struggle of responding to the crisis.

Second, we introduce rhetorical tools to understand crisis rhetoric in new ways. Terministic screens allow us to examine how the same crisis can be interpreted in multiple ways as organizations involved select and deflect parts of that crisis (Burke, 1966). The use of pentadic analysis demonstrates the importance of considering a scene's circumference in crisis communication (Burke, 1945). Studying multiple reports demonstrated that some organizations preserved organizational trauma as part of the experience while others downplayed trauma or treated it as external to the organization. A circumference broad enough to include the ongoing mental health impacts on responders and victims as part of the crisis might encourage deliberative actions with mental health within its scope. Conversely, narrowing the circumference eliminates such considerations by making them irrelevant (Burke, 1945).

Similarly, a circumference that includes employees and responders within the category of "victim" would direct attention to services and support for their mental well-being in addition to physical impacts. For practitioners, this introduction of new rhetorical tools demonstrates the policy effects of AAR choices. In the case of 1 October, an LVMPD fund for victims continued to downplay the mental effects of the shooting, with funds distributed based solely on the cost of treating bodily injuries (Survivor, 2018). Here, the report that downplayed trauma also corresponded with later organizational actions that ignored the importance of promoting mental, not just physical, recovery from that trauma.

Pentadic analysis allows risk and crisis scholars to consider how various elements of the crisis are highlighted and downplayed to create reasonable explanations during crisis response. AARs are just one aspect of crisis response strategies. They appear to serve several purposes identified in broader crisis response research, including crisis framing, self-enhancement for the organization and renewal (Diers & Donohue, 2013). Pentadic analysis in particular allows scholars to look at how these crisis response strategies are accomplished and which elements of the crisis play a role. The scene, in particular, appears to be an important rhetorical element that has already been identified as useful in the reputation management strategy of “defeasibility,” or describing the event as unprecedented (Benoit & Henson, 2009). Burke’s concepts allow crisis communication scholars to examine further questions about how the locus, or responsibility, for the crisis is constructed in texts (Sellnow & Ulmer, 2004). Ultimately, pentadic analysis adds to our understanding of crisis response strategies by providing a tool for understanding how these strategies are accomplished.

Third, this study adds to the understanding of AARs by examining multiple reports about the same event. As emergencies transcend single organizational boundaries, multiple report-authoring organizations can be involved in one crisis response. This study demonstrates that AARs can be a site of professional clash and that examining multiple reports from the same event creates opportunities to examine how different professional fields interpret the same events. Using an organizational rhetoric perspective, we find that professional fields function as terministic screens that select and deflect different aspects of the same crisis in their memory processes. This study adds understanding of how professional frames influence sensemaking (Dwyer et al., 2021). For example, the professional scope of FEMA constrained its ability to praise improvisation over federal standards and procedures. Conversely, the terministic screen of a more localized organization such as the LVMPD did not constrain the ability to acknowledge the need for on-the-ground adjustments to federal standards. Studying multiple reports of the same crisis generates insight into how reports

interrelate (Boudes & Laroche, 2009). In AARs, organizations not only comment on the tragedy but also their organizational operations and how they intersect with other organizations. Part of the constraints of the particular scene of 1 October were the number of organizations involved.

Conclusion

AARs are sites of organizational communication that include rhetorical choices about how to remember crises. This study adds the consideration of new rhetorical tools that demonstrate that AARs can commemorate disorder differently in their attempts to create organizational renewal. We find that multiple organizational frames can clash in their post-crisis sensemaking efforts and that different professional fields function as terministic screens that select and deflect organizational trauma based on their own boundaries and norms. This finding has serious implications for organizational post-crisis learning, as reports that commemorated trauma also tended to praise improvisation and flexibility during crisis response. In other words, these reports were more likely to adopt a new frame that accounted for changes in understanding caused by shared trauma. This study extends crisis communication by highlighting that reports function as part of the rhetoric of renewal by commemorating the disorder of organizational trauma and looking toward future renewal. As cascading, increasing, and prolonged crises impact our world, multiple organizations will be called to respond and create resilience. AARs are an important site of this resilience work that demonstrates both rhetorical opportunities and challenges for organizations working together to respond to crises.

ORCID

Rebecca M. Rice  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6678-5195>

Emma Frances Bloomfield  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6211-4471>

References

- Andrade, E., Barrett, N., Edberg, M., Rivera, M., Latinovic, L., Seeger, M., Goldman-Hawes, A., & Santos-Burgoa, C. (2020). Mortality reporting and rumor generation: An assessment of crisis and emergency risk communication following Hurricane María in Puerto Rico. *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research*, 3(1), 15–48. <https://doi.org/10.30658/jicrcr.3.1.2>
- Benoit, W. L., & Henson, J. R. (2009). President Bush's image repair discourse on Hurricane Katrina. *Public Relations Review*, 35, 40–46. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2008.09.022>
- Bloomfield, E. F., & Tscholl, G. (2018). Analyzing warrants and worldviews in the rhetoric of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton: Burke and argumentation in the 2016 presidential election. *KB Journal: The Journal of the Kenneth Burke Society*, 13(2). http://kbjournal.org/analyzing_warrants_bloomfield_tscholl
- Boudes, T., & Laroche, H. (2009). Taking off the heat: Narrative sensemaking in after action reports. *Organization Studies*, 30(4), 377–396. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840608101141>
- Brown, A. D. (2004). Authoritative sensemaking in a public inquiry report. *Organization Studies*, 25(1), 95–112. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840604038182>
- Burke, K. (1935). *Permanence and change*. University of California Press.
- Burke, K. (1945). *A grammar of motives*. University of California Press.
- Burke, K. (1966). *Language as symbolic action: Essays on life, literature, and method*. University of California Press.
- Burke, K. (1984). *Attitudes toward history*. University of California Press.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory*. SAGE.
- Coombs, W. T. (2006). The protective powers of crisis response strategies: Managing reputational assets during a crisis. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 12(3–4), 241–260. https://doi.org/10.1300/J057V12N03_13

- Diers, A. R., & Donohue, J. (2013). Synchronizing crisis responses after a transgression: An analysis of BP's enacted crisis response to the Deepwater Horizon crisis in 2010. *Journal of Communication Management*, 17(3), 252–269. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-04-2012-0030>
- Dwyer, G., Hardy, C., & Maguire, S. (2021). Post-inquiry sense-making: The case of the 'Black Saturday' Bushfires. *Organization Studies*, 42(4), 637–661. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840619896271>
- FEMA. (2018). *1 October after-action report [Las Vegas Shooting]*. United States. Federal Emergency Management Agency; Clark County (Nev.). FEMA. <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=814668>
- Gephart, R. P., Steier, L., & Lawrence, T. (1990). Cultural rationalities in crisis sensemaking: A study of a public inquiry into a major industrial accident. *Industrial Crisis Quarterly*, 4(1), 27–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/108602669000400102>
- Jahn, J. L. S. (2016). Adapting safety rules in a high reliability context: How wildland firefighting workgroups ventriloquize safety rules to understand hazards. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 30(3), 362–389. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318915623638>
- Lake, C. K. (2018). *A day like no other: A case study of the Las Vegas mass shooting*. Nevada Hospital Association. <https://web.archive.org/web/20201029071638/https://nvha.net/a-day-like-no-other-case-study-of-the-las-vegas-mass-shooting/>
- Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department. (2019). *1 October after-action review*. Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department. https://web.archive.org/web/20190711070651/https://www.lvmpd.com/en-us/Documents/1_October_AAR_Final_06062019.pdf
- Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2019). *Qualitative communication research methods* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Meisenbach, R. J., Remke, R. V., Buzzanell, P., & Liu, M. (2008). "They allowed": Pentadic mapping of women's maternity leave discourse as organizational rhetoric. *Communication Monographs*, 75(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637750801952727>

- Montero, D. (2018, September 29). In Las Vegas, it's called "1 October." How the horrific mass shooting got its unusual moniker. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20180930042233/https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-vegas-shooting-name-20180918-story.html>
- Offerdal, T., Just, S., & Ihlen, Ø. (2021). Public ethos in the pandemic rhetorical situation: Strategies for building trust in authorities' risk communication. *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research*, 4(2), 247–270. <https://doi.org/10.30658/jicrcr.4.2.3>
- Rice, R. M. (2022). *Communicating authority in interorganizational collaboration*. Routledge.
- Rice, R. M., & Jahn, J. L. S. (2020). Disaster resilience as communication practice: Remembering and forgetting lessons from past disasters through practices that prepare for the next one. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 48(1), 136–155. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2019.1704830>
- Seeger, M. W., Sellnow, T. L., & Ulmer, R. R. (2003). *Communication and organizational crisis*. Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Seeger, M. W., & Ulmer, R. R. (2002). A post-crisis discourse of renewal: The cases of Malden Mills and Cole Hardwoods. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 30(2), 126–142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909880216578>
- Sellnow, T. L., & Ulmer, R. R. (2004). Ambiguity as an inherent factor in organizational crisis communication. In D. P. Millar & R. L. Heath (Eds.), *Responding to crisis: A rhetorical approach to crisis communication* (pp. 251–262). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Survivor of 1 October disputes allocation of \$31M Victims' fund. (2018, March 5). *FOX5 Las Vegas*. https://web.archive.org/web/20220204164310/https://www.fox5vegas.com/news/survivor-of-1-october-disputes-allocation-of-31m-victims-fund/article_db5e3d49-ef8a-5230-b0d9-oda5895ca52c.html
- Tschirhart, P., & Bloomfield, E. F. (2020). Framing the Anthropocene as influence or impact: The importance of interdisciplinary contributions to stratigraphic classification. *Environmental Communication*, 14(5), 698–711. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2020.1716033>

- Ulmer, R. R., Seeger, M. W., & Sellnow, T. L. (2007). Post-crisis communication and renewal: Expanding the parameters of post-crisis discourse. *Public Relations Review*, 33(2), 130–134. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2006.11.015>
- Veil, S. R., Sellnow, T. L., & Heald, M. (2011). Memorializing crisis: The Oklahoma City national memorial as renewal discourse. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 39(2), 164–183. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2011.557390>
- Woods, D. D. (2020). The strategic agility gap: How organizations are slow and stale to adapt to turbulent worlds. In B. Journé, H. Laroche, C. Bieder, & C. Gilbert, *Human and organisational factors: Practices and strategies for a changing world* (pp. 95–104). Springer Nature.

