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Exigency and Overflow in the L'Aquila Case

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In “A Rational Reconstruction of the L’Aquila Case: How Non-denial Turns into Acceptance,” Christian J. Feldbacher-Escamilla (2019) revisits the L’Aquila earthquake controversy, linking public dismissal of seismic risk to scientists’ failure to explicitly reject politicians’ misstatements. This analysis stems from his reading of the minutes from the pre-earthquake emergency meeting between scientists and politicians coupled with select trial documentation.

### **Articulating Exigency**

As Feldbacher-Escamilla points out, the L’Aquila case has received a significant amount of global attention, both inside and outside scholarly fields. It is a fascinating and troubling case. Especially in a situation that has been as misunderstood as the L’Aquila earthquake and its subsequent trials, I agree that there can be value in reconstruction and treating it on its own merit, as opposed to using it as an example to support theoretical arguments. But, I’m still left wondering why this reconstruction is being offered up now, ten years later? How does it contribute to the level of reconstructive detail already provided by the astute work of scholars like Alexander (2014), Ciccozi (2013), and Pietrucci (2016)? Articulating why this case should still matter to scholars, scientists, citizens, politicians, and so on is an important step if we want the work that we do to be more than an academic exercise.

Feldbacher-Escamilla begins to hint at one possible exigency in the final sentence of the article: “Scientists concerned with topics that are closely related to public interest have to make more of an effort in figuring out their role in such a situation and make the boundaries of applying their results more explicit” (10). We know that scientists have and do play many roles. For example, Haraway’s “modest witness,” Walsh’s “scientist as prophet,” Pielke’s “honest broker,” or Pietrucci and Ceccarelli’s “scientist-citizen.” In light of the manslaughter charges, some have hypothesized that the role chosen will be one of further separation or differentiation as “scientists are learning to keep their mouths shut” (Cartlidge, 2012, 451). This approach implies that there can be separation between public and technical spheres. But earthquakes and their aftermath are sites at which the technical and public intertwine. And this blurring of boundaries, as Feldbacher-Escamilla’s comment implies, requires scientists to reflect and reevaluate their roles in society. If anything, the lesson from L’Aquila seems to be that being separate, purified technical experts is detrimental.

The situation in L’Aquila illustrates many of the matters facing experts and publics—what do we know and what don’t we know about particular disaster situations? How do we communicate about events that have a low probability of occurring but very high consequences (e.g., earthquakes, landslides, volcanic eruptions, tornadoes, hurricanes)? How can experts communicate with publics about the changing nature of scientific conclusions as new evidence is presented? How can experts and publics interact most productively with the press, politicians, and community leaders?

A case like L’Aquila also highlights the specific challenges of public-expert communication about risk and uncertainty. Natural hazards such as earthquakes are inherently uncertain; they involve complicated systems that are, by in large, invisible and uncontrollable on a time

scale that is often at odds with human time. People hunger for prediction, and yet the most seismology can offer is earthquake forecasting, which is particularly convoluted and often delivered in extended timeframes that complicate communication about probability. Communicating about these technical aspects alone is inherently difficult, let alone accounting for the social, environmental, economic, and so forth. While challenging to talk about, this uncertainty can act as an intersection for expert and non-experts (Walker and Walsh, 2012), raising questions about who should be included in deliberation and decision-making and how to determine that. And as the unprecedented addition of a criminal trial indicates, the stakes surrounding the communication of risk and uncertainty—for experts and publics alike—have never been higher.

### **Non-Denial and Acceptance**

The primary promise of the article, “How does non-denial turn into acceptance?”, is an important question to consider. As the L’Aquila case shows, this particular rhetorical move, which certainly is not unique to L’Aquila, can have significant consequences. It’s a question to which I would like to know the answer.

In Section 5 (How Non-Denial turns to Acceptance), Feldbacher-Escamilla purports to provide one. This section is heavily concerned with the analysis and challenging of Judge Billi’s reasoning from the first trial. Feldbacher-Escamilla first walks the reader through Billi’s now-refuted critique of inadequate risk assessment, carefully showing the rather technical differences between forecasting and types of prediction. Though he did not frame it this way, Feldbacher-Escamilla’s analysis nicely demonstrates why technical experts would benefit from considering their audience when communicating about technical matters. Failure to consider one’s audience could certainly contribute to how non-denial turns to acceptance.

Then Feldbacher-Escamilla turns to Billi’s second critique concerning inadequate communication, which he describes as more relevant to understanding how non-denial turns into acceptance. Describing the flow of communication, he writes, “the scientists’ analysis in form of the statements by the DPC/De Bernardinis, namely the reassurance, were considered by the public” (8). Though he did not frame it this way, this simple description (further emphasized by the 2015 appeals ruling) of the flow of communication suggests that the authorities’ reassurance seems to be the main factor that had a strong impact on the citizens. This middle step with the authorities seems to provide another answer to the question of how non-denial turns into (public) acceptance. Here, non-denial is first transformed into reassurance and then turned into acceptance. (See DeVasto, Graham, and Zamparutti (2015) for a detailed exploration of this first transformation.) Otherwise, the citizens of L’Aquila really did not have access to the non-denial of the scientists. It was always filtered through the authorities. Statements like “the scientists’ non-denial of false or unproven hypotheses...misdled the public to read a non-denial as acceptance” are misleading (Feldbacher-Escamilla 10). The public never saw statements of "non-denial." They received statements of denial of risk and reassurance (via De Bernardinis and Bertolaso) and statements of confirmation of risk (via Giuliani).

And while the scientists may not have said anything directly to the public, their silence at these critical moments is deafening. Silence, as rhetorical scholars Glenn & Ratcliffe (2011)

show, is persuasive. While some of the scientists were present at DPC-CGR-PUBIC events like the press conference, their silence sanctioned the flawed statements of reassurance being circulated by local authorities and government officials. In other words, their silence, their failure to voice a correction, could have also contributed to the conversion of non-denial into acceptance. If nothing else, these were certainly missed opportunities to engage as fellow citizens, as Pietrucci and Ceccarelli (2019) have argued.

### **Approaching Overflow**

My final response to Feldbacher-Escamilla's article concerns the framing of overflow. Overflow is a metaphor used by STS scholars Callon, Lascoumes, and Barthe to describe moments of increasing regularity in which unanticipated events cause issues that had been circumscribed as technical concerns to escape those boundaries and extend into the public sphere. It's nearly identical to Latour's (2005, 115; 2008, 39) distinction between matters of fact and matters of concern.

As I have argued previously, overflow is an apt term for describing L'Aquila. It can also be useful for thinking through how to approach these kinds of cases more effectively and ethically. But, if that is to be true, then we must be careful with how we characterize it. In his attempts to summarize DeVasto, Graham, and Zamparutti (2015), Feldbacher-Escamilla writes that "overflow took place and caused a fatal misunderstanding" and later calls it "the illegitimate values/fact overflow" (6). This characterization of overflow casts it in a rather negative light, as something to be avoided. But overflow is only a problem if the objective is to keep fact and value, objective and subjective, technical and public separate. In fact, in the case of L'Aquila, it was the attempts to resist overflow (both by purifying the matters under consideration and the possible speakers) that were the problem, not overflow itself.

This failure to account for overflow can be seen in some of Feldbacher-Escamilla's own analysis. For example, in his reading of the meeting minutes, he concludes that "...the scientists were quite explicit about what they thought could be concluded from their claims and what not, and it is hard to see how this could have been missed by the authorities" (7). In some ways, this reasoning mirrors, perhaps, the scientists' own by assuming that the truth of what they are saying couldn't be missed. As Pietrucci and Ceccarelli (2019) show in their layering of trial transcripts with meeting minutes, authorities were "not equipped to detect Barberi's subtle irony nor process the very technical assessment of the seismic swarm that followed Barberi's question" (114). But also, this reasoning ignores the broader rhetorical situation. As DeVasto, Graham, and Zamparutti (2015) suggest, the DPC had an agenda—to reassure the public. This pressure could have further influenced how authorities heard what the scientists said because they needed it to be reassuring.

Failure to account for overflow can be further seen in the discussion of the discharge hypothesis (*b*). As Feldbacher-Escamilla writes, "Given the costs at stake, De Bernardinis would have needed to be much more sure about *b* than he actually reasonably could have been" (8). But which costs? The cost of human life? The cost of scientific or political reputation? The cost of evacuating communities? That De Bernardinis was sure seems to suggest that it might not have been about cost in the sense of protecting human life or

adhering to scientific knowledge. Rather, there were other factors at play in the broader rhetorical situation.

Cases like L'Aquila are wrapped in an array of competing exigencies. Perhaps De Bernardinis' certainty stemmed from other reasons but not necessarily scientific ones. It is, of course, easier to deal with earthquakes as technical objects. But L'Aquila is a vibrant reminder that earthquakes and their aftermath are not just technical but also personal, social, political, economic, spiritual, material, and so forth. If we ignore or characterize it as something to be avoided or as something that is illegitimate, we run the very real risk of repeating L'Aquila rather than using it as a tool to help us see these situations in a new way and develop more effective responses to them.

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