

# WHO OWNS THE MESSAGE IN A CRISIS?

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Communication Failure, Authority Drift, and the  
Human Gap in Emergency Response.

Before the public hears the message,  
the message has already moved.

The first failure is rarely the statement.  
It is the handoff before the statement.

## CHANNEL WATCH – RECOVERED EXTERNAL MESSAGE TRACK

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External-facing message movement during incident window.

Internal operational log not shown.

## CHANNEL WATCH — RECOVERED EXTERNAL MESSAGE TRACK

| TIME         | SOURCE                | LOG ENTRY  | NOTE  |
|--------------|-----------------------|--|---|
| 06:23        | Local TV Desk         | Viewer asks whether channel flooding has affected plant or drinking water. |   |
| 06:31        | [NO LOG]              | —  |   |
| 06:36        | Citizen Post          | "HEARING THEY SHUT THE WATER INTAKE DOWN #ChannelWatch"                    |   |
| 06:38        | Local PIO             | Draft holding statement prepared, not released, pending confirmation.      |   |
| 06:41        | Chief of Staff        | Call to city manager mobile requesting "something brief before 7 a.m."     |   |
| 06:48–50     | Ops Notes             | → intake NOT offline (corrected)   |   |
| <b>06:52</b> | <b>Elected Office</b> | Post goes live before coordinated technical line is cleared.               | Authority transfers here<br>— undocumented. |
| 07:02        | Local PIO             | Holding statement released after public narrative has already moved.       |   |
| 07:06        | Reporter              | Public frame shifts to mixed signals / message inconsistency.              |   |

AUTHORITY TRANSFER – UNDOCUMENTED

06:52

no one signed for the handoff.

AUTHORITY TRANSFER – UNDOCUMENTED

06:52

no one signed for the handoff.

Now, do not answer this out loud.

In your most recent significant incident,  
who actually issued the first public message?

- 1 Incident Command / authorized operational lead
- 2 PIO or designated public information lead
- 3 Elected official or executive office
- 4 Agency social account outside the designated message chain
- 5 Citizen, media, or external platform source
- 6 Unclear / not formally assigned

That is not a communications preference.

That is an authority pattern.

Four authorities.

They rarely move at the same speed.

Most of the people who carry them  
were never conditioned to carry all four  
at once, under load.

TRACK 1

# LEGAL AUTHORITY

Who is allowed to speak?



INCIDENT ACTIVATION (T+00:00)

PUBLIC NARRATIVE WINDOW

# WHO KNOWS WHAT IS ACTUALLY HAPPENING?



ACTIVATION

INCIDENT WINDOW AXIS



RECOVERY

# WHO FRAMES WHAT THE INCIDENT MEANS?



T-0: ACTIVATION

INCIDENT WINDOW AXIS



T-END: RESOLUTION

TRACK 4

# PLATFORM AUTHORITY

Who reaches the public first?

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INCIDENT WINDOW START

PUBLIC SATURATION

TRACK 1: LEGAL

TRACK 2: OPERATIONAL

TRACK 3: NARRATIVE

TRACK 4: PLATFORM

T+00:00 [INCIDENT START]

T+WINDOW [INCIDENT CLOSE]

Four tracks. One incident window.  
They move at different speeds unless someone  
has engineered message custody before the event.



Same incident.

Same facts.

Same clock.

Different architecture.

Different public reality.

Path A – designed. Path B – assumed.

**T+04:00**

Citizen post claims intake shutdown.

High visibility before confirmation.

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No confirmed shutdown.

No confirmed impact to treated water.

# PATH A – DESIGNED

VS

# PATH B – ASSUMED

## PATH A – DESIGNED

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City/utility joint line owns first message

**STATUS: ASSESSING**

*"Intake remains in service at this time, no confirmed impact to treated water."*

Updates through official channels

City posts, utility reposts, county echoes

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COORDINATED, SEQUENTIAL, NO NARRATIVE GAP

## PATH B – ASSUMED

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PIO waits on utility confirmation

Utility waits on operations wording

County assumes city will speak first

**Rumor visible and circulating**

No official first line claims the space

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NARRATIVE VACUUM FILLED BY UNVERIFIED DATA

PATH A — DESIGNED ARCHITECTURE

## CITY, UTILITY: INTAKE STILL IN SERVICE; STORM CONDITIONS UNDER REVIEW

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RESIDENT REACTION

*"Still watching this, but at least there's one place to  
check."*

PATH B — ASSUMED ARCHITECTURE

## QUESTIONS AFTER POST CLAIMS CHANNEL WATER INTAKE SHUT DOWN

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RESIDENT REACTION

(no anchoring official line)

The rumor moved first  
because ownership of the first correction  
had never been assigned.

T+09:00.

Chief of staff calls city manager mobile requesting  
"two clean lines before the 7 a.m. hit."

Technical confirmation still in progress.

PATH A — DESIGNED

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Executive pre-brief lane active

Chief of staff routed through city manager + PIO + utility liaison

Pre-cleared language already drafted

Elected official reinforces lead message

No new technical claims introduced

PATH B — ASSUMED

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Informal reassurance moves through personal channel

Pre-cleared text not ready

Elected post goes live before coordinated wording

Message not wrong, but incomplete

## **ELECTED OFFICIAL: "NO WATER ISSUE" AS AGENCIES CONTINUE ASSESSMENT**

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(Path A produces no contradictory chyron – the elected message reinforces the lead line.)

The bypass did not begin with bad intent.

It began with no designed path

between reassurance and verification.

**TIME\_MARKER: T+13:00**

PRIMARY LOCAL AGENCY / DRAFT LOG

Local draft: intake remains in service / no confirmed impact.

REGIONAL PARTNER / SITUATIONAL AWARENESS

Regional note: potential intake disruption / under evaluation.

PATH A — DESIGNED

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Joint message hierarchy pre-engineered  
Common denominator agreed before public release  
Public-facing language separated from internal coordination  
City + utility designated for public updates  
Regional partner links rather than parallel-posts

PATH B — ASSUMED

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Local draft narrow, accurate, public-ready  
Regional note broader, accurate, situational-awareness language  
Regional note screenshot circulates outside partner channel  
Public reads one doc saying service and another saying disruption  
Story shifts from conditions to credibility

The public reads one document saying **SERVICE**  
and another saying **DISRUPTION**.

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The story shifts from CONDITIONS to CREDIBILITY.

Both statements were reasonable inside their systems.  
The contradiction appeared when no one designed  
which system spoke to the public.

**THE PUBLIC DOES NOT EXPERIENCE YOUR INTENT.**

**THE PUBLIC EXPERIENCES YOUR OUTPUTS.**



# Communication is infrastructure.

Infrastructure has:

- >> design standards

- >> redundancy

- >> maintenance schedules

- >> failure modes

- >> operators

Systems that matter under load  
are designed before the load arrives.

If communication is infrastructure,  
it requires operating disciplines:

- Pre-event message custody
- Executive communication pathways
- Platform authority mapping
- Public / internal language hierarchy
- Post-event message audit

The question is not whether your people care.

The question is whether the system  
has been built to carry load.

## **Five operating disciplines.**

None require new technology.

All require decisions you haven't made yet.

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Courage is not the system.

Conditioning is.

**Pre-event message custody**

*Who owns the first public statement before the event begins?*

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Name:

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Backup:

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Conditions for transfer:

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## Executive communication pathways

*How does the elected official get into the message flow without bypassing it?*

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Entry point:

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Review window:

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Bypass conditions:

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# □ Platform authority mapping

*Who speaks on which channel, decided before the rumor arrives?*

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PLATFORM

AUTHORIZED VOICE

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## □ **Public / internal language hierarchy**

*What stays in the coordination room? What goes outside? Who decides?*

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Internal-only terms:

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Public-release terms:

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Escalation authority:

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## □ **Post-event message audit**

*What moved? / Who moved it? / Where did custody transfer?*

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First public statement: \_\_\_:\_\_\_ by \_\_\_\_\_

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Custody transfers:

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Unlogged movements:

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Five disciplines.

Five pages of documentation.

Five decisions you can make next week.

One sentence.

No sharing. No discussion.

For your next activation.

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In my organization,

the message is owned by .

You are more than a spokesperson

You are the reliable, familiar and trusted source your community relies on.

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The message is part of how you do that.

Lives, trust, confidence, and public behavior are all in the room when the message moves.

## **WHO OWNS THE MESSAGE?**

The answer exists right now.

Whether it is documented is the operational question.

**Let Us Know  
What You Think!**

