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Crowd-Based Accountability: Examining How Social Media Commentary Reconfigures Organizational Accountability

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Abstract. Organizational accountability is considered critical to organizations' sustained performance and survival. Prior research examines the structural and rhetorical responses that organizations use to manage accountability pressures from different constituents. With the emergence of social media, accountability pressures shift from the relatively clear and well-specified demands of identifiable stakeholders to the unclear and unspecified concerns of a pseudonymous crowd. This is further exacerbated by the public visibility of social media, materializing as a stream of online commentary for a distributed audience. In such conditions, the established structural and rhetorical responses of organizations become less effective for addressing accountability pressures. We conducted a multisite comparative study to examine how organizations in two service sectors (emergency response and hospitality) respond to accountability pressures manifesting as social media commentary on two platforms (Twitter and TripAdvisor). We find organizations responding online to social media commentary while also enacting changes to their practices that recalibrate risk, redeploy resources, and redefine service. These changes produce a *diffractive reactivity* that reconfigures the meanings, activities, relations, and outcomes of service work as well as the boundaries of organizational accountability. We synthesize these findings in a model of *crowd-based accountability* and discuss the contributions of this study to research on accountability and organizing in the social media era.

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Organizational accountability, defined as “how organizations conduct, implement, and monitor policies and practices in relation to the demands of various stakeholder groups” (Frink et al. 2008, p. 186), is critical to organizations' sustained performance and survival (Roberts 1991). Examining how organizations are held to account by various groups; how they, in turn, respond to such accountability pressures; and with what outcomes have become important areas of inquiry in organizational research (Roberts 2009, Hallett 2010, Espeland and Sauder 2016).

Existing literature on accountability examines the response strategies that organizations have conventionally used to address accountability pressures from different constituents, such as customers, regulators, advocacy groups, and intermediaries (Chaney and Philipich 2002, Dubnick 2005, Bundy and Pfarrer 2015). These include structural responses (e.g., establishing compliance structures, creating separate roles/

departments) and rhetorical responses (e.g., use of framing tactics, communicating, and explaining actions via press releases) to accountability pressures. These organizational responses produce a convergent reactivity (Espeland and Sauder 2007) to accountability pressures, whereby organizational actors attempt to align their behaviors with the evaluative criteria of their constituents (Chatterji and Toffel 2010, Sharkey and Bromley 2015, Espeland and Sauder 2016).

With the rise and spread of social media platforms, organizations are pressured to account to various constituents in new ways (Jeacle and Carter 2011, Wang et al. 2021). Such pressure has increased of late, heightening concern with how engagements with emerging technologies are redefining meanings, activities, and ways of organizing. If organizations do not meet service expectations, negative and emotionally charged comments may be posted about them on social media platforms (Orlikowski and Scott 2014, Etter

et al. 2019, Barnett et al. 2020). Recent research suggests that organizations experience new dilemmas and difficulties in responding to concerns on social media (Albu and Etter 2016). In the pre-social media era, constituents' demands tended to escalate when explicit breaches in organizational performance standards could be substantiated. In contrast, accountability pressures generated by social media are marked by open-ended, sometimes unsubstantiated, and often conflicting concerns that achieve widespread prominence and damage organizational reputation. Many managers and workers feel pressured to respond (Etter et al. 2019) but find this challenging because of how accountability pressures manifest on social media.

Although the enactment of accountability pressures on social media shares some similarities with prior forms of accountability pressures (e.g., organizational shaming, emotionally charged language), they also differ in important ways. The constituents in prior forms of accountability are generally known and identifiable *stakeholders*, their evaluative criteria relatively clear, stable, and well-specified, entailing more-or-less defined issues that are used to hold organizations to account. The constituents on social media platforms manifest as a diverse, dispersed, and largely pseudonymous *crowd*. Their evaluative criteria are unclear, in flux, and unspecified, imposing uncertain and variable demands on organizations.

As the volume and visibility of social media commentary increase, the accountability pressures on organizations expand. The structural and rhetorical strategies typically used by organizations in response to accountability pressures are less effective in addressing social media criticisms as vividly shown in recent public controversies involving United Airlines, Starbucks, and Dunkin' Donuts (Victor and Stevens 2017, Stevens 2018, Wang et al. 2021). In these cases, the organizations' structural and rhetorical responses backfired, generating a series of online tweetstorms and firestorms. The social media crowd viewed these organizational responses as intended to obfuscate and misdirect criticism (Goodman 2014, Aratani 2018, Reinstein 2018, Stevens 2018). Given that existing response strategies are not working effectively in the social media era, we sought to understand how organizations respond to accountability pressures from social media commentary and with what consequences for organizing.

To address this research question, we conducted a multisite comparative study (Bechky and O'Mahony 2015) to examine how organizations in two service sectors (emergency response, hospitality) respond to accountability pressures manifesting as social media commentary on two different platforms (Twitter, TripAdvisor). We find that as organizations engage with social media commentary, they enact changes to their practices that reconfigure their ways of organizing, shifting how risk is calibrated,

how resources are deployed, and how service work is defined and performed.

We theorize that these dynamics produce a form of reactivity we term *diffractive reactivity*. Unlike convergent reactivity whereby organizational actors modify practices to conform or align with the evaluative criteria of their stakeholders (Espeland and Sauder 2016), in diffractive reactivity, encounters with social media commentary produce scattered and equivocal organizational responses to the unclear and unspecified evaluative criteria of the pseudonymous crowd. These variable responses split attention and fragment processes as organizational actors (e.g., managers, front-line workers) shift focus to address immediate complaints and short-term demands, getting sidetracked from longer-term priorities (Chu 2021). This is further exacerbated by the online visibility of social media, materializing a stream of commentary for a distributed audience. These shifts reconfigure the boundaries of organizational accountability, making organizational actors unsure about for what they are held accountable and uncertain about how, when, and to whom they are accountable. Building on these findings, we propose a model of crowd-based accountability that explains how accountability is reconfigured in the social media era and the consequences for workers, managers, and organizing.

Organizational Responses to Accountability Pressures

The literature on organizational accountability spans multiple fields, ranging from political science to social psychology (Power 1996, Dubnick 2005, Frink et al. 2008, Tetlock et al. 2013). In organizational studies, scholars examine how organizations are held to account by stakeholders, such as regulators, customers, advocacy groups, news media, and valuation intermediaries (Rao 1998, Lerner and Tetlock 1999, Pollock and Rindova 2003, King 2008, Bundy and Pfarrer 2015, McDonnell and Werner 2016). Researchers also study how organizations respond to such pressures and with what outcomes (Chaney and Philipich 2002, Hallett 2010, Espeland and Sauder 2016). We first consider the types of organizational responses that have been identified for stakeholder-based accountability pressures before turning to the implications of social media for accountability.

Organizational Responses to Stakeholder-Based Accountability Pressures

We organize prior literature on organizational responses to accountability pressures by the type of response—*structural* and *rhetorical*—enacted by organizations. Although both types may be enacted concurrently by organizations, we consider them separately here for analytic clarity.

Structural Responses to Accountability Pressures.

Organizations facing accountability pressures commonly institute internal governance arrangements (Chaney and Philipich 2002, Bergsteiner 2012) such as compliance structures (Dobbin and Kelly 2007), which designate roles or units to establish and enforce policies that manage constituents' concerns. For example, Hallett (2010) describes the appointment of a finance professional as school CEO in response to accountability pressures for improved student test scores in the United States. The CEO enforced compliance with standardized curricula, set benchmarks, and threatened to close low-performing schools. Other research shows how organizations institute new roles and departments in response to pressures from constituents concerning environmental sustainability, workplace safety, equity, diversity, and inclusion (Huisig 2015, Augustine 2021). Although such changes may address constituents' concerns, research also finds that some organizations use these merely as window dressing to comply ceremonially with constituents' demands (Sandholtz 2012).

Organizations face additional accountability pressures from the global spread of what Power (1997) terms the "audit explosion," which has increased demands for conformance to external standards and benchmarks (Porter 1995, Strathern 2000, Espeland and Vannebo 2007). This has led to an escalation of responses, including the emergence of "technologies of accountability" (Suchman 1993, Shore and Wright 1999, Treem 2015) that use multiple measures and reporting tools to render different parts of organizations "auditable" (Jeacle and Carter 2011). By instituting, tracking, and publicizing metrics, scorecards, ratings, and other performance indicators, organizations are held to account by known stakeholders, such as auditors, regulators, and accreditation agencies (Pollock and Rindova 2003, Sauder and Espeland 2009). Research also documents organizational attempts to gather additional information and game the metrics and the ensuing negative consequences (Shore and Wright 2015, Espeland and Sauder 2016; see Bryne 2021 on how a business school dean fabricated the numbers to game the metrics associated with the U.S. News rankings).

Rhetorical Responses to Accountability Pressures.

Organizations may also respond to accountability pressures with various rhetorical strategies. The premise for such approaches is that organizations must communicate the changes, whether substantive or ceremonial, that are aimed at addressing constituents' concerns because the latter cannot truly verify internal governance arrangements or policy changes.

Rhetorical response strategies involve constructing and disseminating narratives of progress and remediation and sharing information about change initiatives

implemented within the organization. These narratives are often used in conjunction with impression management efforts (Pfarrer et al. 2008, Zavyalova et al. 2012) aimed at shaping, safeguarding, or repairing organizational reputation (Rao 1998, Bundy and Pfarrer 2015, Ravasi et al. 2018). Prior research identifies a number of impression management tactics, such as promoting social responsibility initiatives, offering public apologies, deflecting, and disclaiming (Bolino and Turnley 2003, Busenbark et al. 2017).

Scholars also examine when, why, and how organizations respond rhetorically to minimize social disapproval and gain social legitimacy (Suddaby and Greenwood 2005). Research finds organizations managing stakeholder concerns with framing tactics (King 2008), using different messaging techniques and communication channels (McDonnell and King 2013), and disseminating information through news releases and press conferences (Rao 1998, Bergsteiner 2012, Zavyalova et al. 2017). Although some rhetorical strategies, such as outright denial or blaming the accuser, are defensive, other strategies, such as acknowledging culpability, are accommodative (Bundy and Pfarrer 2015). Recent research finds that, although accommodative strategies are effective against capability violations (i.e., not meeting expectations about firms' ability to consistently deliver value), they are less effective against character violations (i.e., not evincing consistent trustworthiness and integrity) and for managing the organization's reputation in general (Bundy et al. 2021).

The overarching goal of these strategies is to manage concerns and controversies, minimize social disapproval, strengthen or repair organizational reputation damaged through the public exposure of misdeeds (e.g., corporate scandals, financial discrepancy) revealed by stakeholders (Nader 1965, Pfarrer et al. 2008, Zavyalova et al. 2012), and more importantly communicate that the type of corrective changes espoused by the organization are suitably aligned with stakeholders' demands and expectations.

Convergent Reactivity to Accountability Pressures.

Many of the structural and rhetorical responses to accountability pressures aim to modify organizational structures, roles, and communications in order to comport with stakeholders' evaluative criteria, both substantively and symbolically. These responses produce what has been referred to as *convergent reactivity*, the idea that organizational actors "change their behavior in reaction to being evaluated, observed, or measured" (Espeland and Sauder 2007, p. 1) in a way that pressures organizations to "conform and perform to the [evaluative] criteria" (Gioia and Corley 2002, p. 110). For example, Espeland and Sauder (2007) show how law schools changed structures and rhetoric (e.g.,

student admissions, staff hiring, pedagogy, graduate career counseling) to conform to and align with the evaluative criteria of the *US News and World Report* (see also Wilbers and Brankovic 2021). Likewise, Cotter and Snyder (1998) describe how French restaurateurs respond to the Michelin rating system by changing their restaurants' structures, practices, and menus in their attempts to align with the Michelin guide's criteria.

Convergent reactivity is enacted through mechanisms of self-fulfilling prophecy (whereby reactions to measures confirm their expectations) and commensuration (whereby qualities are transformed into quantities that share a metric) (Espeland and Sauder 2007, 2016). Such mechanisms entail organizational actors gathering additional information about evaluative criteria, figuring out the parameters constituting those criteria, engaging in commensuration to simplify and integrate the criteria, and then changing their responses—whether structural or rhetorical—to address the criteria in a way that becomes self-fulfilling (Espeland and Sauder 2007, 2016; Espeland and Vannebo 2007; see also Rahman 2021).

Organizational Responses to Accountability Pressures in the Social Media Era

The advent of social media further complicates the organizational accountability landscape. Not only are organizations confronted by negative and emotionally charged social media comments about their products and services (Etter et al. 2019, Barnett et al. 2020), the growing volume and influence of social media has increased accountability pressures, compelling organizations to respond (Wang et al. 2021). Many organizational actors find the complexity of platforms and the visibility of social media commentary to be particularly challenging (Pfeffer et al. 2014, Ferrara and Yang 2015).

The capabilities of social media platforms are markedly distinct from other communication technologies (Majchrzak et al. 2013, Kane et al. 2014, Albu and Etter 2016), enabling users to publicly and rapidly express their views about organizations to a distributed audience (Leonardi and Vaast 2017). For example, studies of enterprise social media technologies (e.g., corporate wikis) have identified various affordances of social media (Treem and Leonardi 2013, Majchrzak et al. 2013, Leonardi 2018), including visibility (observing conversations, behaviors, and preferences), persistence (accessing content across time), editability (crafting messages before the content is viewed by others), and metavoicing (reacting online to others' profiles, content, and activities). Researchers propose that material features of social media, such as network articulation, social transparency, and user-generated content, have "the potential to bring about dramatic

changes to the nature of work, time, boundaries, and practices of surveillance and control" (Leonardi and Vaast 2017, p. 179).

Scholars suggest that social media technologies accelerate the spread of social disapproval (Wang et al. 2021), noting the crowd's active role in denouncing organizations (Pfeffer et al. 2014, Toubiana and Zietsma 2017, Tsugawa and Ohsaki 2017). Others show how the social disapproval stemming from increased social media attention significantly shapes organizational reputation (Etter et al. 2019, Proserpio and Zervas 2017, Ravasi et al. 2018). Such intensified social media commentary poses important challenges to organizations attempting to be accountable to constituents' concerns, demands, and expectations.

Recent social media controversies (e.g., Hill 2012, Victor and Stevens 2017, Reinstein 2018, Etter et al. 2019) suggest that prior accountability response strategies may be ineffective in the social media era. Indeed, controversies may escalate as firms' existing structural and rhetorical responses backfire, creating further disruptive publicity and amplifying social disapproval (Goodman 2014, Aratani 2018, Stevens 2018, Adut 2019). Accountability pressures before and after social media, thus, need to be distinguished as similarities (e.g., organizational shaming, emotional language) are outweighed by key differences.

Stakeholder-based accountability pressures are enacted by constituents who are generally known, identifiable, and often authorized (e.g., regulators, auditors). With the emergence of social media, different accountability pressures are produced, constituted by the diverse, dispersed, and pseudonymous social media crowd. The concerns and expectations of stakeholder-based accountability pressures tend to rely on relatively clear, stable, and well-specified evaluative criteria. In contrast, the concerns and expectations of a social media crowd are typically unclear, in flux, and unspecified.

In stakeholder-based accountability, constituents' scrutiny of organizational actors is performed largely off-line and in circumscribed spheres, characterized by bounded and situated visibility. With the emergence of social media, constituents' scrutiny of organizational actors is performed online and in public, characterized by a continual and often persistent visibility. The widespread and relatively easy availability of social media platforms, thus, expands the visibility of organizational actors, subjecting them to the relentless gaze of the social media crowd and its often-provocative online commentary.

These key differences in accountability pressures are creating substantial challenges for organizations accustomed to responding with structural and rhetorical strategies designed in the presocial media era (Jeacle and Carter 2011, Scott and Orlikowski 2012).

Such challenging conditions raise a critical question about how organizations respond to accountability pressures materializing as dynamic and emerging social media commentary. We address this question in our research study.

Research Methods

Following prior work (e.g., Bechky and Okhuysen 2011), we use a multisite, comparative approach in this study. This approach is a particularly useful way to contrast findings from field studies examining organizations in different sectors as it allows us to identify common (as well as divergent) processes and outcomes and cumulatively synthesize our understanding about organizational accountability in the social media era.

Research Context and the Rationale for Comparative Site Selection

In line with our theoretical approach, we sought to understand organizational responses to accountability pressures from social media commentary by focusing on the practices that are enacted in and through platforms and organizations in different sectors. Our selection of field sites and social media platforms was not based on similarity criteria pertaining to common platform features, technological affordances, or organizational domains, but rather on how different organizations were managing accountability pressures from social media commentary. We, thus, adopted a “pooled” comparative sampling strategy (Bechky and O’Mahony 2015, p. 170) whereby “data from multiple organizations are pooled to build theory on a common process.” The common process we focus on is organizational responses to accountability pressures from social media commentary.

Our analysis draws on intensive fieldwork and online data collection conducted in two different service sectors (emergency response and hospitality) and on two social media platforms (Twitter and TripAdvisor). We integrated this data to produce an expanded data set that allowed us to perform comparative analysis and develop theorizing about organizational responses to accountability pressures in the social media era. By observing commonalities and variations in organizational responses across diverse settings and platforms, we increase the analytic power of our findings and the robustness of the theory generated from them (Shestakofsky and Kelkar 2020). We describe the specific settings, off-line and online, in which our research was conducted.

Emergency Response. We focused our data collection on emergency response in the Delta Emergency Management Organization (DEMO), the organization

responsible for emergency management in Delta City (pseudonym), a major city in the United States. The primary work of emergency management organizations (EMOs) is to coordinate police, fire, and medical services during an emergency response. These organizations employ 911 call takers and dispatchers. The former answer 911 calls from the public, gather critical information about an incident, and evaluate whether the incident is a valid emergency or not, and the latter assigns the emergency incidents to the relevant available first-responder (e.g., police, fire) nearest to the scene of the emergency. Today, more than 240 million calls are made annually to 911 in the United States. With the rise of social media, DEMO’s responses to 911 calls have become subject to social media commentary, particularly on Twitter.

Hospitality. Our investigation of hospitality studies a strategic sample of hotels as well as the organizations that assess them. We focus on small to mid-sized hotels, representing 80% of accommodation services within the hospitality industry as this is where the influence of social media commentary is manifesting more strongly. Given the large number of online reviews available, we selected 10 hotels located in a single region of the United Kingdom for detailed examination. We also study services within the hospitality sector that are focused on accrediting or evaluating these hotels. Our particular focus is on how the social media commentary on TripAdvisor, the largest and most influential online review platform for hospitality, is changing hotel accountability practices.

Rationale for Comparative Site Selection. Although emergency response and hospitality operate in their own distinctive contexts and undertake different kinds of work, they share some salient and analytically valuable commonalities. Both sites are within the domain of service work, and both are directly affected by the intense and ongoing commentary rendered on social media platforms (Pugh et al. 2018). Within both sites, frontline workers and managers have considerable discretion in the decisions they make and the tasks they perform in the process of their service provision. Both sites are also subject to stakeholder-based processes of accountability that produce convergent reactivity as the organizations attempt to conform to known and identifiable metrics. The EMOs are formally held to account by external bodies (e.g., city government, advocacy groups) by metrics such as call wait time, call dispatch time, and overall response time. EMOs are mandated to track these metrics, report them periodically, and justify any significant increases in response time. Hotels are held to account by national tourist boards and hotel industry associations. In the United Kingdom, the most influential

formal body is the Automobile Association (AA), which annually inspects hotel facilities and services based on explicit criteria defined in the AA's 65-page quality standards guidebook. Hotels then base their improvement strategies on the details of their annual AA report in order to comply with the AA criteria and remain within the purview of its accreditation scheme.

In addition to the similarities, there are also valuable differences across the two sites that can be productively leveraged for theory building on accountability. A salient difference is that EMOs are in the public sector, and hotels are typically in the private sector. EMO staff are, thus, government employees, and those employed in hotels are private-sector employees. By and large, service expectations and accountability pressures vary across the two research settings. In the case of emergency response, there are tiers of service expectations and acceptable levels of response time that are proportionate to the type and severity of emergency calls. In the case of hospitality, service expectations are proportionate to the type (e.g., bed and breakfast, luxury hotel) and rating of the hotel (e.g., three-star, four-star). All of these have implications for how accountability is understood and enacted on the ground across the two settings.

Social Media Commentary. Our treatment of social media commentary enacted on two social media platforms recognizes the necessarily entangled nature of this relation. That is, social media commentary only exists through its distinctive materialization on digital platforms. As Milan (2015, p. 56) notes, in social media “content and infrastructure are utterly linked” with content being incapable of manifesting “in the same form outside the specific structure of a given social media platform (e.g., the tweet, the hashtag, the shortened link).” We, thus, view every social media post as a discursive materialization, constitutively shaped by the particular social media platform through which it is produced. Our description and analysis of tweets and TripAdvisor reviews presuppose that such commentary only exists through its materialization on digital platforms. Given this, we propose that it is the *practices* enacting online commentary through the specific structure of a social media platform that make them analytically valuable. In this regard, we see both similarities and differences across Twitter and TripAdvisor.

With Twitter, social media commentary develops as tweets are directed at a Twitter account (e.g., @account name), using hashtags within tweets (e.g., #911isAJoke), replying to tweets, liking, retweeting, and adding commentary to tweets by other users. Tweets may be brief because of the character limitations set by Twitter, but given the possibility of

retweeting and hashtagging, any tweet can diffuse widely and potentially go viral. The service-providing organizations that use Twitter have the option of responding publicly to a tweet, responding privately through direct messaging (DM), or choosing not to engage online. With TripAdvisor, social media engagement involves searching, reviewing, and rating on the website. TripAdvisor enables users to search for reviews of hotels, book hotel reservations, and then rate and review hotels based on their experiences. In addition to rating hotels on such criteria as cleanliness, rooms, and value, users can write narrative accounts of their hotel experiences, ranging in length from a sentence to multiple paragraphs, and include images (O'Connor 2010, Xie et al. 2014).

As with Twitter, TripAdvisor offers service-providing organizations (i.e., hoteliers) the option of responding publicly to reviews, responding privately through sending a direct message, or choosing not to engage online. Unlike social media engagement on Twitter, which is polyphonic (i.e., multiple users can like, retweet, and add their commentary to a tweet by another user), social media engagement on TripAdvisor is dyadic (i.e., interactions are solely between the service user/reviewer and the service-providing organization/hotelier). The potential for a particular review to diffuse widely and go viral is limited, but other users can click on a “this review was helpful” button, thus adding weight to the review. The click-button ratings and sentiments expressed in the reviews are aggregated by TripAdvisor's ranking algorithm (the popularity index) that determines hotels' standings as displayed in search results.

Given these similarities and differences, we believe the two service sectors and two distinct social media platforms serve as particularly useful strategic research sites for our investigation of organizational responses to the accountability pressures manifesting as social media commentary.

Data Collection

Emergency Response. The primary source of data includes longitudinal and embedded observations and interviews at DEMO, conducted by the first author. These were supplemented with qualitative analysis of archival materials about the history of accountability processes in emergency management. Observations took place over a two-year period (between May 2015 and May 2017) and involved following the 911 call-taking, call-dispatching, and shift-supervising practices. This includes observing the call-taking practices by sitting next to a 911 call taker and listening in to 911 calls via headphones, observing the call-dispatching and shift-supervision practices, and documenting the 911 call takers' and managers' responses to Twitter postings. During this process, shorthand

notations were jotted down, particularly those that pertained to changes in practices. Within a 24- to 48-hour time period, these handwritten notes were then transcribed and elaborated in a Word document.

During and immediately after the observation process, 142 ethnographic interviews were conducted to obtain a deeper understanding of practices. This was complemented by semistructured interviews ranging from 40 to 90 minutes (65 with 911 call takers and dispatchers; 18 with DEMO supervisors, shift managers, and senior managers) most of which were recorded and transcribed. The first author also had access to DEMO's Twitter feeds with tweets posted about the 911 emergency service and DEMO's responses to those posts. We compiled further data on Twitter commentary about 911 emergency services provided by DEMO (1,138 tweets in total) and the organizational response to such posts (438 comments).

Hospitality. The second and third authors collected data from multiple research sites: hotels, hotel accreditation agencies (e.g., the AA), TripAdvisor, and the hospitality industry more generally. For hotels, 140 hours of field observations of hotel work practices were conducted over a two-year period (between April 2009 and June 2011) with ongoing interaction to date. Observations included the guest check-out and check-in processes at the reception desk, focusing on how the hotel staff managed guest arrivals and departures and how they addressed issues and complaints raised by guests (including paper-based comment cards). In addition to observations at hotels, industry and academic conferences on hospitality were attended as well as trade events at which pop-up talks at the TripAdvisor booth were given by TripAdvisor employees on topics such as review responses and Q&As with hoteliers. For all these observations, written notes were captured in a fieldwork journal and then elaborated later the same day in a Word document. Observations of TripAdvisor involved accessing its English-language websites and gathering online content on policy statements, guidelines, and press releases as well as hundreds of posted reviews on hotels. We also participated as users and contributors on the TripAdvisor website.

We conducted 55 semistructured interviews within the hospitality industry. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours, and nearly all were recorded and transcribed. We interviewed 21 hoteliers (12 hotel owners and nine managers) probing about their hotel management and accountability practices and how their engagement with hospitality assessments (by the AA and on TripAdvisor) shaped those practices. Questions included "What are your experiences as a hotelier with formal valuation schemes?" and "What are your experiences as a hotelier with online review websites?"

Interviews with 14 TripAdvisor employees in the United States and United Kingdom (three executives, five directors, and six managers) focused on the company's history, strategy, and operations; the rationale for the social media platform; its development over time; reviewing policies; rating criteria; and the design of ranking algorithms. For the UK-based Automobile Association, interviews with 11 employees (two executives, four editors, and five inspectors) sought to understand the history, organization, and operation of the AA star-rating scheme. Questions enquired about everyday activities of grading, inspection, and editing. Finally, we sought insights about online hospitality reviews and their influence on accountability within the industry by interviewing nine professionals from UK hospitality associations, travel magazines, and national tourist boards.

We also examined the TripAdvisor commentary associated with 10 specific hotels, focusing on the online reviews received by hotels and the online responses they posted. These hotels had been receiving TripAdvisor reviews for an average of 10 years, accumulating a total of 11,021 reviews. We selected the top 10 hotels within a single region of the United Kingdom so as to reduce variability in industry opportunities, location, and type of tourism. As small to midsized hotels, they were experiencing the accountability pressures of social media commentary more acutely and were, thus, particularly salient to our study. We parsed and downloaded all TripAdvisor ratings and reviews for these 10 hotels along with hotel responses (if any) to those reviews. Having collected a total of 11,021 reviews, we conducted in-depth analysis of 2,413 hotel reviews rated three and below. TripAdvisor has a five-point rating scheme (i.e., five is excellent, four is very good, three is average, two is poor, and one is terrible) with a rating of three defined as "average." Close examination of comments rated three revealed that most are negative albeit milder in tone than those rated two or one. We, thus, included them in our sample of reviews on the grounds that they generated accountability pressure for hotels, making them central to our research focus on accountability. We also conducted in-depth analysis of the 1,385 online responses to the negative reviews posted by the 10 hotels.

These multiple sources of data across the two settings enabled us to generate an understanding of social media commentary and organizational accountability from multiple vantage points (see Online Appendix A1 for further details of data collected across the settings).

Data Analysis

Data analysis unfolded in an iterative manner over three phases. First, we analyzed the field data in our two settings using qualitative analysis methods

(Charmaz 2006), cycling through multiple readings of field notes, interview transcripts, online postings, and archival documents alongside our reading of relevant literature on accountability. At this stage, we wrote descriptive memos focusing on the shifts in everyday work practices associated with experiences of accountability pressures from social media, including online responses to those accountability pressures. In parallel, we started coding the data using a combination of software (Atlas.ti and Word for the EMO study and Word for the hospitality study) and manual tools (data tables and color-coding in both studies). This step generated multiple lists of codes (such as “bullshit calls,” “unfair criticism,” “lack of recourse,” and “diverting attention”) and helped us identify specific organizational practices that the service-providing organizations were performing in response to the social media commentary. For instance, in DEMO, the frontline workers (911 call takers) referred to their fear of “getting called out” and “publicly shamed” for “just doing my job well” as a significant consequence of social media commentary. Likewise, within hospitality, hoteliers described their frustration at the development of an unjust “he said this, I said that” dynamic on social media and focused on ways in which their service practices were being altered by idiosyncratic “reviewers walking through the door.” We then wrote distinct descriptive memos for the separate settings detailing the response practices identified in each organization.

Second, we coded both the social media commentary posted by service users as well as the service organizations’ responses to the negative commentary. Our coding scheme was informed by our analysis of the field data as well as multiple readings of Twitter and TripAdvisor posts. The scheme included codes for tone (e.g., aggressive, friendly, courteous) and content (e.g., complaint, compliment, confrontation) of the social media commentary (see Online Appendix A2 for our coding scheme across the two settings). Independent coders were hired and trained to code the social media data (tweets and EMO responses on Twitter, reviews and hotel responses on TripAdvisor). The coders first coded a subset of the data. As new observations and anomalies emerged in this coding process, we revised our scheme, which was then used to code the entire data set. As part of this process, we also wrote analytical memos about emerging themes on accountability reconfigurations, specifically focusing on accountability pressures via social media and organizational responses to those accountability pressures across the two settings.

Third, we built on the prior phase of data analysis and performed a comparative analysis of our findings (Bechky and O’Mahony 2015) to identify commonalities, variations, and cross-cutting themes. The research team had regular meetings during this process to

discuss overarching patterns in how accountability pressures from social media commentary and organizational responses to them were manifesting in our respective settings. We articulated themes related to negative social media commentary across both platforms, noting similarities (e.g., complaint, disappointment) as well as differences (e.g., update request) in the postings about emergency response and hotels on Twitter and TripAdvisor. We also found similarities as well as differences when we compared how the service-providing organizations responded to social media commentary through their online posts. For instance, although both hoteliers and 911 emergency managers provided justifications for organizational actions, only hoteliers confronted online reviewers and disputed the authenticity of their comments; the 911 managers never publicly challenged the authenticity of Twitter complaints.

We then returned to our field settings’ off-line response practices that we had analyzed in previous phases. We abstracted the codes we had earlier identified to higher order analytical categories. For instance, in the emergency response case, we abstracted codes, such as “play it safe” and “cover your ass” to “recalibrating risk”; for the hospitality case, we abstracted codes such as “diverting attention” and “compulsion to act” to “redeployment of resources.” Comparing the separate findings evident in our respective analytical memos, we identified interesting parallels and contrasts across the two settings. For example, within DEMO, we coded for managerial attention being refocused, and in hotels, we coded for the redefinition of hotel management. Our pooled data pointed to common motivations among the responses and similar practices even if the kind of enactment varied across settings (e.g., DEMO managers focused on protecting staff and hoteliers on providing staff feedback).

During this process, we also engaged more deeply with relevant literature, particularly on organizational accountability (Roberts 1991, Power 1996, Miller and Rose 2008, Espeland and Sauder 2016) and social media (Treem 2015, Leonardi and Vaast 2017, Etter et al. 2019, Wang et al. 2021). We wrote theoretical memos to highlight the significance of our findings, identifying further convergences and divergences. This helped us organize our insights into types of accountability pressures, organizational responses to accountability pressures, and consequences for organizing. This iterative process of data collection and analysis allowed us to theorize how organizational responses to social media commentary are reconfiguring organizational accountability with significant consequences for organizing.

Findings

In discussing our findings, we first consider the kinds of accountability pressures that are manifesting online

as social media commentary. We then examine the organizational responses enacted in practice within emergency response and hospitality.

Accountability Pressures from Social Media

Across both emergency response and hospitality settings, formal bodies continue to hold EMOs and hotels accountable for their performance. As we describe earlier, city governments require EMOs to maintain a defined level of emergency response times, and accreditation agencies, such as the AA, ensure that hotels uphold specified quality standards based on their grade of hospitality. Alongside these accountability pressures, both EMOs and hotels are now also subject to a stream of online comments posted on various social media platforms. These are experienced as adding distinctive kinds of accountability pressures for organizations with significant outcomes.

Within emergency response, the nature of 911 calls is changing because of rising levels of digital connectivity among the public (via mobile devices and social media platforms). For example, 911 calls reporting “neighbors playing loud music” and “power outage” have become more common, and news media have noted the rise of 911 calls about issues such as “running out of toilet paper” (Kim 2020). These types of calls—informally referred to as “bullshit calls” by the 911 call takers—may be of urgent personal importance to callers but are not considered 911-level emergencies by established criteria of the city’s administrative agencies. The frequency and variety of nonemergency calls have increased substantially with the growing use of cellphones. Currently, nonemergency calls constitute more than half of the daily 911 call volume, creating challenges for workers dealing with higher priority calls reporting incidents such as accidents and cardiac arrests. Based on our findings, we suggest that what the public defines as an “emergency” has shifted and expanded over time.

A critical aspect of the 911 call takers’ work is to sort and separate nonemergency calls from valid emergencies while also diagnosing and initiating a response appropriate to the type and severity of the emergency. This sorting work has become considerably harder with the rise in nonemergency calls. It has also become more stressful as 911 callers share their grievances to a growing online social media audience. Social media platforms, such as Twitter, enable callers to complain about their interactions with 911 call takers, to name and shame those call takers (e.g., criticizing a call taker for refusing to categorize a reported incident as a valid 911 emergency), and even to post private recordings of 911 calls.

Our analysis of the 1,138 tweets (96% of which were negative) relating to DEMO (and emergency response in Delta City more broadly) identified four specific types of online comments: complaint (48%), disappointment

(45%), compliment (4%), and update request (3%). The tweets range from criticizing the tone, voice, or fact-seeking interactions of 911 call takers to outrage over their incident not being treated as an emergency. Many tweets also expressed dissatisfaction with specific aspects of emergency response encounters, including wait time for their 911 call to be picked up or acted on. Two examples are provided with more illustrations of each comment type provided in Online Appendix B¹:

“Just saw an accident and tried calling 911. Took them a minute to answer my call and then they asked 8 questions. Yeah, that’s rite. EIGHT fuckin questions to get some lame ass info. #Delta911.” “@DEMO My 6-old old developed an allergy, I called 911 and spoke to [call-taker name], she was so rude and dismissive. Never let me finish, kept interrupting, and then told me she couldn’t send anyone for this. THIS IS SO FUCKED UP.”

Within hospitality, we observed similar accountability pressures although the sources and timeline of pressures varied. A substantial shift in accountability pressure for hotels emerged in the early 2000s with the rise of social media travel websites, the most prominent of which is TripAdvisor. Since 2001, when TripAdvisor first allowed reviews on its platform, the volume, volatility, and visibility of social media postings on this platform have grown rapidly. TripAdvisor currently lists more than 8.7 million global venues that have received almost 900 million pseudonymous comments with nearly 500 million monthly visitors to the platform. The growth and significance of social media commentary for hotels is immense as the CEO of the Institute of Hospitality observed, “The online world has changed pretty much every industry, but hospitality beyond recognition” (Kinstler 2018).

The hotels we studied were reasonably well-rated on TripAdvisor (overall ratings ranged from 3.5 to 4.5), but as the hoteliers told us, it is the negative comments (evident in reviews rated three and below) that are more concerning as these carry the greatest risk to reputation, consuming much of their time and attention. These comments offer detailed descriptions of how hotel facilities, services, or staff members fail to meet guest expectations. Review titles often highlight one or more issues, which are explicated in the (often dramatic) narration that follows. In our analysis of 2,413 TripAdvisor reviews posted for the hotels we studied, we identified three comment types that overlapped with emergency response—complaint (48%), disappointment (26%), and compliment (7%)—and one additional type, information provision (20%). Two examples are provided with further illustrations of each comment type provided in Online Appendix B²:

“Where to start... dead spiders in the bed—pee on the toilet—mould on the walls—window wouldn’t

open—dirty cutlery and glasses in the breakfast room—and the bed was so bad I have no words for it. The hotel claims it’s “quirky”—I’d say dirty. And it’s quite expensive too.”

“I’m no hospitality expert. I’m not a hotel professional. I’m frankly not the world’s most organized person. But. Dining room the size of an aircraft hangar... busy breakfast service. One toast machine. One. Toast. Machine. Guess what ensued. Please rethink.”

Hoteliers were deeply concerned about the risks of negative comments, whether they deemed them to be reasonable (e.g., justified identification of issues) or problematic (e.g., unfair, incorrect, or offensive). These latter comment types were more troubling to hoteliers (see Online Appendix C for additional examples). Notwithstanding their concerns and frustrations, hoteliers recognized that TripAdvisor was transforming the travel sector leaving them little choice but to come to terms with it, noting, for example, that TripAdvisor is “not going away, so get over it,” and “it’s just something that we all have to live with.”

Looking across the two settings in our study, we found organizations being held to account by social media commentary on both platforms. Despite operating in diverse sectors (public/private) and providing distinct services (emergency response/hospitality), both DEMO and hotels experienced comparable kinds of accountability pressures from social media posts calling out their organizations, services, and workers. In contrast to standardized evaluative criteria and formalized procedures typically entailed in stakeholder-based accountability assessments of emergency response and hospitality, the online Twitter and TripAdvisor posts are informal and idiosyncratic. They draw attention to individualized issues that often lie outside the established categories and evaluative criteria of professional or regulatory purview. As some of these comments are referenced by others on social media platforms, the issues grow in salience, demanding further scrutiny. DEMO and hotels attempted to respond to this proliferation of highly charged social media commentary, producing, as we discuss, consequential outcomes.

Organizational Responses to Accountability Pressures from Social Media

Our analysis of organizational responses enacted in the face of social media accountability pressures identified four distinct organizing practices that were enacted within both emergency response and hospitality: replying online, recalibrating risk, redeploying resources, and redefining service. As we discuss, the ongoing enactment of these practices substantially influences what is being held to account, by whom, and with what consequences.

Replying Online. In both emergency response and hospitality settings, we found managers writing online responses to the social media comments posted about their services and performance. Within DEMO, three senior managers on the 911 operations floor (covering the morning, evening, and night shifts) were made responsible for maintaining the DEMO Twitter account, keeping track of tweets directed at them (e.g., @DEMO) as well as monitoring Twitter feeds via a social media monitoring tool that searches for relevant keywords (e.g., Delta 911, DEMO, Delta Emergency) and hashtags (e.g., #Delta911). These three DEMO managers regularly read the Twitter posts about their emergency response services, and we found that they responded to 38% of tweets in our data set (438 of the 1,138 tweets). Over time, however, this practice changed, and as we discuss, the DEMO managers halted social media engagement after five months when they decided to stop responding to Twitter posts.

For hoteliers, social media monitoring and engagement were undertaken by hotel managers who regularly (daily or weekly) accessed their hotel’s TripAdvisor web page to read the latest reviews and ratings. A few had signed up with TripAdvisor’s owners portal and requested direct email notifications to alert them when new reviews had been posted about their hotel. We found variation in hoteliers’ online response practices with some regularly posting responses, some posting occasionally with long pauses lasting weeks and months, and a few hoteliers choosing not to post at all. Of the 2,413 TripAdvisor reviews we analyzed, 57.4% (1,385 reviews) received online responses from the hotels.

Looking across both research settings, we found four common online response practices (providing justification, offering apology, posting stock response, and inviting private follow-up) as well as three variations (providing process updates, offering thanks, and challenging details). We provide illustrations with more examples provided in Online Appendix D.

Providing Justification. In response to negative social media comments, both DEMO managers and hoteliers sought to explain and justify the situation. In our Twitter data set, 32% of DEMO responses included some form of justification for a 911 call decision. For example, when a Twitter user complained that an incident she had reported was not considered a valid emergency, the DEMO manager provided additional rationale for the call-taker’s decision, explaining the criteria for a 911-level emergency and the resource constraints (number of police patrol cars and ambulances available for dispatch at any point in time). Another Twitter user complained that his 911 call

about water leakage was not deemed an emergency. In response, a DEMO manager posted,

“@username We fully understand the issue you are facing. As per the information gathered from you, we inferred that there is no imminent danger of flooding. This seems to be more of a plumbing issue and not a 911 emergency. We have limited number of first-responders, and therefore, we cannot dispatch for this ... We hope you understand, and in the future, we look forward to serving your emergency needs.”

In our TripAdvisor data set, 19% of hotel responses included a justification with hoteliers articulating the conditions that led to some of the issues raised. These were intended to explain what had happened, often providing important contextual information, and to allow TripAdvisor users (as well as potential future guests) to make their own judgment about the reasonableness of the review. For example, responding to a complaint about no parking facilities, the manager posted,

“Thank you for taking the time to leave this review. We clearly state everywhere that we do not have parking however parking in [town] is plentiful and mostly free. We will always help guests find suitable parking on request. We note your other comments and are grateful for the feedback. Thanks.”

Offering Apology. About a quarter of both Twitter and TripAdvisor online responses included some form of an apology for the concerns or difficulties raised in social media comments. In our Twitter data set, we found 27% of the DEMO responses contained apologetic content, often accompanied by a justification or invitation to follow-up privately. For example, in response to a Twitter user complaining about a homeless person camping out in front of his house, a DEMO manager posted,

“@username We sincerely apologize for the inconvenience caused. Multiple other residents too have complained. We have already dispatched and requested a police officer presence. Since the DPD gets several of these requests each day, there must have been a delay.”

On TripAdvisor, 26% of hotel responses expressed some form of regret about disappointments or difficulties described by guests in their reviews. Common forms of apologetic content include the following:

“Hi there. Sorry you had these issues on your visit, I just wanted to let you know that we are currently working on further staff training in regards to food service.”

“Thank you for taking the time to post a review. We are sorry that you had a disturbed night’s sleep. It is sometimes difficult to fully satisfy the needs of our

hotel guests when also operating a busy pub and restaurant on the same site.”

In some cases, the apology is stand-alone and unaccompanied by further explanation. In other cases, apologies are followed by a description of the steps being taken to address the issue (see first preceding example) or a justification for the situation (see second example). In a few cases, staff frustrations are evident alongside the apology as they highlight circumstances that make the review seem unreasonable (e.g., weather conditions or location):

“Oh dear, I’m really sorry you didn’t appreciate [hotel name]. Maybe [city name] would have been a better bet for you than [this scenic rural area].”

“Well it’s a shame the floods got in the way of your stay. I’m sorry there wasn’t much we could do about that.”

Posting Stock Response. Both DEMO managers and hoteliers occasionally resorted to posting stock responses in template format, similar to a “form letter” sent by mail. We found 24% of DEMO responses on Twitter contained “bureaucratic boilerplate” phrases that were repeatedly used across postings:

“@username Thanks for your message, we acknowledge receipt. We will look into it as soon as possible.”

“@username Thank you for your message, we acknowledge receiving it and we have passed on the information through appropriate channels. If the issue persists, please call [phone number] and you will be routed to talk to a 911 supervisor. You can also file your complaint at [website url].”

The use of such stock responses by DEMO came to be derided by Twitter users and viewed as inauthentic and uncaring.

Stock responses were similarly evident in 15% of the hotel responses on TripAdvisor. In these cases, hoteliers acknowledged the review but did not engage with any of the specific issues described in it. They offered similar and generic phrases in response to multiple, varied reviews:

“Thank you for taking the time to leave a review. I have passed your comments on to the team. We hope to see you again in the future.”

“Thank you for taking the time to leave your review on your recent stay with us. I am sorry to read your stay fell below expectations and your comments will be shared with the management team for review and changes made where necessary.”

Inviting Private Follow-up. Across the two settings, both DEMO and hotel managers also invited social media users to contact them privately and follow up on

their issues or concerns. We found DEMO managers requesting a private follow-up (via DM) in 6% of their Twitter posts. This occurred more frequently in situations when additional information was required (e.g., address and phone number). For instance, in response to a user rereporting a domestic disturbance that had started to escalate, a DEMO manager posted:

“@username We sincerely apologize for the delay. We’d already dispatched for this, but we couldn’t reach the location [of the victim]. Can we DM you to obtain more information?”

In 10% of the hotel responses, we found hoteliers also occasionally inviting reviewers to contact them directly (via telephone or email), so that specific issues could be further discussed, for example,

“Thank you for the feedback on your recent stay. We are extremely concerned to learn that we did not meet your expectations. ...It would seem that some elementary tasks were the cause of your disappointment which will be addressed immediately. I have been trying to contact you directly to discuss your experience without success and I would be most grateful if you could give me a call at your convenience.”

A few hotel responses included an inducement to return to the hotel as a way to make amends:

“I can only apologise for the delays in service [today]... This is definitely not our normal level of service. We would like to invite you back and offer you the same on the house. If you would like to discuss this further, please contact a member of management team on [email address]. Please accept our sincere apologies once again and we hope to see you again in the near future so we can show you how we do normally operate.”

Giving Process Updates. In emergency response, 911 callers occasionally requested status updates on Twitter (e.g., “how long will be it take for an officer to reach my home?”). In response, DEMO managers provided process updates about the situation while refraining from sharing exact information to limit liability. In our data, we found that 11% of the DEMO responses included process updates. For example, in response to a user complaining about the delay in dealing with a neighborhood bar that was playing loud music on a Friday night, a manager posted,

“@username Thank you for raising this issue to DEMO, we fully understand the problem. We have already dispatched your call at 23:10. An Officer is on his way and will reach the premise shortly. We hope that this issue is resolved very soon.”

Offering Thanks. We found that about a quarter (23%) of hotel responses on TripAdvisor expressed

appreciation for the review and articulation of specific issues. Such thanks often provided details about how the feedback would be used to address problem areas and guide further improvements within the hotel:

“Thank you for the review from your recent trip to [hotel]. I am disappointed that your trip was marred by the service you received in the [restaurant]. Your comments regarding service and the food have been shared with our Food & Beverage team who will take the necessary corrective actions to ensure there can be no repetition of such delays in service.”

Challenging the Details. In 6% of responses, hoteliers challenged the veracity of social media comments, suggesting that the issues raised are incorrect, inappropriate, or even dishonest. Concerned about reputational damage to their businesses, these hoteliers provided explanations to “put the record straight” so that others could judge the validity of complaints:

“When you stated that you had booked a room in the [main hotel] itself. I investigated this immediately. The confirmation [email]... correctly confirmed that you had booked a room within the grounds. I advised you of this and you denied receiving the email. At this time, as we had a room available in the [main hotel], I offered that to you as a complimentary upgrade. It was very apparent from your demeanour that there was nothing I could do that would appease you.”

Recalibrating Risk

Within both DEMO and hotels, we found workers and managers recalibrating the risks entailed in doing their work while being subject to the persistent possibility of negative social media comments. We found two primary ways in which such risk recalibration was manifesting in their practices: not responding online and acting overcautiously (see Online Appendix E for additional examples).

Not Responding Online. Although we found managers in both settings choosing not to engage with social media comments, the reasons for and implications of this decision differed. When their Twitter account was first set up, DEMO managers actively responded to posts. However, they quickly found that their direct engagement with Twitter posts led to further vitriolic comments, escalation from retweets, and heightened visibility for those involved. As this DEMO manager noted,

“Well, we tried. We really did, and wanted to engage [with social media commentary]... Personally, I thought this is the next wave of city-wide emergency communications and all that—the future. Yeah, the future! But turns out, I was fucking wrong and this is just some stupid shit... We tried to be responsive on

social media, I think we were one of the first [911 EMOs] to do so, but [it] didn't work out... things blew up [on social media], and in fact, the more we tried, the more it blew up. It's just fucking terrible."

The riskiness of responding online was underlined when a Twitter storm helped fuel a major controversy in which a 911 call taker mixed up the details of an incident in progress, creating problems for the police officers dispatched to deal with it. The incident was reported on local news channels, and anger over its handling erupted via multiple social media platforms. Despite attempts by DEMO management to provide further details and justifications for what had happened—via Twitter as well as through press releases—social media outrage about DEMO's role in the incident ensued. DEMO management ultimately suspended the call taker and dispatcher involved in the call on the grounds that they had not collected sufficient information to enable the police officers to act effectively.

At a subsequent incident review meeting, the director of DEMO announced a series of policy changes about internal training and supervision. He stated concern that online responses by DEMO to Twitter posts had inflamed the situation, provoking further tweets, retweets, and negative comments:

Yes, we would like to communicate more [with the public on Twitter]. I thought that by having a direct channel we should be able to explain ourselves better, on what we do, who we are, what kind of challenges we face ... and also get better information ... but honestly, I don't know if we are helping or hurting ourselves by doing this. We still need a social media presence, but I am having second thoughts on whether we should respond to the Twitter complaints. I mean, we still have formal channels if someone wants to raise a complaint, so why do we need a second channel, and that too, a very public one.

Five months after DEMO had set up its Twitter account and in consultation with senior managers, the director called for the DEMO Twitter handle to be confined to "official" updates about citywide emergencies rather than single incidents. Although users continued to post comments about DEMO on Twitter—we collected about 700 such tweets in our data set—none of these received an online response from DEMO. Despite this change in policy, social media comments by emergency service users continued to be avidly read by both DEMO managers and workers alike.

Not responding online to social media comments was also evident within hospitality. Of 2,413 TripAdvisor reviews posted for the 10 hotels in our data set, 1,028 reviews (42.6%) did not receive an online response. We found four hotels responded less than 5% of the time (even in the face of many negative

reviews), two hotels responded less than a third of the time, and four hotels responded more than two thirds of the time. From our interviews, we learned that hoteliers choosing not to respond online were acutely uncomfortable with their responses being visible to everyone on the platform and permanently part of their hotel's online record. They disliked the limited text box available for responses on TripAdvisor and felt frustrated by not being able to engage privately with unknown guests expressing issues with their hotel. Many had learned from experience that commenting on negative reviews could embroil them in a "tit-for-tat" exchange that could further damage their hotel's reputation:

"Years of experience in hospitality train us *not* to enter into 'he says this; I say that' situations. ... We create holidays ... not ugly confrontations. That's *not* what we are about! It goes against every fiber."

"If this type of thing [complaint or issue] happened in the hotel lobby, I would ask the guest to step to one side so that other guests don't witness it all. It would be a flash in the pan, boom, dealt with, over! [When we reply on] TripAdvisor [sigh]... it becomes a spectacle. You know, damned if we do, damned if we don't."

One hotel owner who chose not to post online noted, "I think it's very dangerous to start to pick through points [in a TripAdvisor review] as you just [sound] mealy-mouthed." Some hoteliers who refrained from responding online explained that they preferred to focus on bolstering their hotels' standing in other accreditation schemes in the hopes that other, more positive accounts will counterbalance the weight of negative social media reviews.

Acting Overcautiously. For 911 frontline workers, continued social media commentary about their work along with the suspension of two colleagues led them to shift their practices in ways that would reduce risk. This manifested as call takers becoming overcautious in their categorization of incoming 911 calls. Following the highly publicized controversy mentioned earlier, we found that call takers were categorizing more 911 calls as valid emergencies than they had done in the past. That is, motivated by their concerns about being slandered online, call takers were assigning higher priority codes to incidents to which they had previously assigned lower priority codes. For example, in the two weeks after this controversy, the average percentage of calls categorized as valid emergencies rose from 52% to 78% and remained at that level for the next 12 weeks. As this 911 call taker explained,

I get that people outside do not fully understand what we [911 call takers] do. That's fine, and no one is expecting them to do so and feel sorry for us. No,

I'm fine ... But this social media stuff y'all, that hurts. Because it's plain wrong whichever way y'all look at it. I mean, there's a job that we got to do, we were trained to do, and I think we were doing it quite well. In a professional way ... But now it feels as if we are thrown under the bus. For what? For doing our job? That's some next level BS y'all and it sucks. So yeah, everyone is now watching out for themselves, because no one wants to be exposed this way.

Overcautious responses were similarly evident in hospitality with hoteliers becoming careful about what and how they post online, for example,

"I used to reply straight away to put the record straight but my management team were like, 'Erm ... maybe we should talk before you do that?' They got me to back off. I wake up thinking about it, but what can you do?"

"Now we seldom reply ... I don't want staff wasting time on it. Less is more."

Hoteliers also reported trying to anticipate and preempt possible guest concerns that may end up becoming problematic reviews on social media. For example, one hotelier explained how he had told his staff to appease guests and acquiesce to demands made during their stay so as to prevent possible negative comments being posted online. As he noted,

"It's bad, I know it's bad. But now, if a guest starts on and on about posting a bad review [when checking out], I've told my staff on the front desk to take something off their bill or offer them a discount on their next visit. I'm not proud of that."

Redeploying Resources. Across both emergency and hospitality settings, we found that the work practices of managers and workers began shifting with more attention, time, and effort being redirected toward specific issues raised in online comments. Within DEMO, for example, the proliferation of negative Twitter comments led managers to reorder their priorities, moving away from important tactical issues (such as the appropriate categorization of incoming 911 calls) and longer term considerations (such as improving emergency response training and providing ongoing feedback to the 911 call takers). Instead, they began to privilege short-term demands, motivated by the desire to avoid controversy on social media. This changed how they monitored and managed the call takers.

In particular, we observed that, over time, the 911 supervisors were focusing less on call takers' conduct and their call-categorization accuracy and more on "scandal avoidance." Indeed, 911 supervisors were well aware that growing social media scrutiny had led their 911 call takers to be overly cautious in how they categorized calls in order to avoid being pilloried on

Twitter. Despite the increase in collective overcaution within DEMO, the 911 supervisors resisted taking corrective action. By "looking the other way," many 911 supervisors subtly sanctioned the call takers' overcautious categorization. In acquiescing to less effective performance outcomes for the organization, they hoped to reduce the risk of reputational damage from negative social media comments for both the individual workers and DEMO as a whole. This collective shift in call categorization has consequences for resource distribution across the emergency response system with specific spillover effects for the work of dispatchers and police officers.

During peak hours, the 911 dispatchers' dashboard is filled with more than 60–80 calls to be dispatched, each of which needs to be dispatched within the maximum time-to-dispatch limit. As both lower (higher in volume) and higher (relatively lower in volume) priority calls compete for attention, the increase in nonemergency calls that are assigned a higher priority impacts how effectively dispatchers can do their work. And this has implications for how quickly police officers can be dispatched to deal with emergencies. As the number of available police officers is limited, real emergencies have to await resource deployment given that police officers have already been allocated to dealing with earlier, less severe incidents. A senior police administrator at Delta City's Police Department observed,

"There are so many [911] jobs, that the Officers don't have time to do anything else. ... Our Officers are always busy, always attending to something. ... [They] are frustrated but they just don't want to say no as it is risky."

Collectively, the ongoing overcautious actions of 911 call takers are significantly changing how emergency response practices are enacted on the ground, increasing the number of calls dispatched and extending police involvement in nonemergency incidents. Recalibration of risk at the front end of emergency response is having the unintended consequence of tying up resources at later stages of emergency response and increasing the risk of emergencies not being handled quickly enough.

Within hospitality, negative social media comments similarly shifted hoteliers' attention, time, and effort toward specific issues highlighted by TripAdvisor reviews. Hoteliers view these comments as demands that require quick investigation to address particular problems. Following a negative review, resources are refocused on extensive inquiries examining what happened and why. One hotelier referred to this investigative work as "getting to the bottom of things," and another noted,

"We have a bit of an inquest on what the hell has gone wrong, and what we can do and, you know, who's fault was it and why it happened. We do have an inquest if some comment is made."

Having identified what led to particular complaints in reviewers' posts, shifts in practices are made to address the issue going forward. One hotelier told us that, in response to comments about his hotel, he changed when and how food was served in the dining room, and another remarked, "I've put more continental style breakfast stuff, which some people, you know, wanted, and which I have taken up." When replying to reviewers' comments online, many hoteliers make a point of referring to these changes in practice. For example, after repeated reviews complaining about the lack of poolside beds, a hotelier responded, "I am delighted to confirm that we have recently received and now institute 30 new beds and loungers around the pool." In another case, when a reviewer complained about the lack of late-night access, the hotelier responded by referring to the installation of a "new system in regards to keys ... so no guest will ever be able to check-in without receiving everything they should need."

Hoteliers note that they feel compelled to quickly address the specific issues raised in reviews because these have been made public online and are now widely known. They know from comments made by guests arriving at their hotel (or potential guests inquiring about the hotel) that they have read about and are aware of issues in TripAdvisor reviews. Giving immediate attention to such issues is, thus, seen to be imperative but is often done at the expense of other work, leading to delays in scheduled maintenance and postponement of longer term programs of improvement. As one hotel manager noted,

This morning, after reading a review I said 'Forget it, just get on with the day.' But I found myself going up to Room 7 and looking out the window to see if I could understand their point about the 'offensive view.' But it is nonsense and I was in a bad mood all day because I had let it get to me when I was already busy. If we want to get our next star, I mean we know what we have to do for the AA's next inspection. What are we doing being pulled into [social media] stuff? Comments that just aren't right? I'm a busy man!

In addition to investigating and addressing issues in reviews, hotel managers also use social media comments in their management of frontline and back-office staff. In particular, they now use detailed comments made in TripAdvisor reviews to focus staff on certain aspects of their work. This happens through staff appraisal discussions as well as highlighting portions of printed reviews on bulletin boards in the staff room. Some managers bring copies of TripAdvisor reviews into weekly staff meetings, reading out selected comments that call out staff members by name or position, doing this to both praise and chastise. Scrutiny of TripAdvisor comments in staff meetings or

appraisal sessions is followed by a discussion of any changes required in service work or staff demeanor to address them.

Uncertainty over the veracity and validity of social media comments taxes organizational attention and potentially redeploys resources in the wrong direction. As an industry expert noted,

"Now there is a degree of difficulty in being able to monitor exactly what it is people are intending to say and whether it's true or not. So, you know, clearly if you are the general manager of an establishment where your reputation, you know, is put at risk by what is being posted, then you're going to find that stressful, because, you know, if it's true, it shouldn't have happened, therefore you will be very stressed, and if it's not true, then you've got a whole set of recovery sort of activities to undertake for no good reason."

Although hoteliers value the opportunity to address problematic issues, several participants reported that they dreaded going online, fearing what they may find and what that will mean for their day's work. As one hotelier said, "I resist looking at TripAdvisor in the morning because otherwise I make staff run around fixing problems mentioned in reviews, and the important things scheduled for the day don't get done."

Redefining Service

In both settings, the work practices of emergency response and hospitality shifted in response to highly visible and often aggressive demands made in social media comments. Although DEMO is a public-sector organization and, as such, not subject to competitive pressures, there had been a long-standing service ethos among call takers. During their training, 911 call takers were coached in how to connect with panicked callers, calming them down before asking questions about the nature of their emergency. In doing so, 911 call takers effectively served as the "first responders" by reassuring and supporting distressed callers before initiating a line of action. Increasing volumes of 911 calls (including bullshit calls) and rising numbers of social media complaints pressured senior managers to rescript the call-taking protocol, significantly changing their work practices. Instead of initially counseling callers, 911 call takers are now required to quickly take control of the call trajectory, asking a series of rapid fact-finding questions to obtain basic details about the emergency and its location. This new call-control protocol generated cynical comments among call takers who saw it as a defining shift in practice. They regarded it as a move toward mundane "customer service" work in which they are positioned as "customer service representatives" in an impersonal and distanced relationship with callers. Call takers

experience this work redefinition as demoralizing and identity challenging. As one 911 call taker put it,

“I have come to terms with this. Do not think too much, it will only get you in trouble ... just take the call, get the info, send it out, take the call get the info send it out, take the call get the info send it out. That’s ALL there is to it. The folks who call are customers, I am there to take the call and give them what they need. This is no emergency management, and I am no longer in the public safety profession.”

The shift in service ethos from providing critical assistance to the public in need to customer service became evident in way that the meaning, relations, and activities of their work practices were enacted. For example, a more cynical customer service tone appeared in some online responses posted by DEMO managers: “... in the future, we look forward to serving your emergency needs” and “Every #DeltaCity resident is important to us and we look forward to serving you.” In sum, these changes in practices—recalibration of risk by workers and managers, redeployment of resources to deal with short-term demands and avoid social media controversies, redefinition of emergency response as customer service—decreased organizational morale and effectiveness. As this DEMO senior manager noted,

Every agency I was part of [in the past], there was a goal, sometimes more than one. But they were all anchored around a more basic mission... For us at DEMO, our goal is citywide emergency management and also emergency communications, but it was anchored around 911 calls. That’s our everyday reality. We answer and screen calls made to 911, we then process and dispatch those calls... based on standards about what would fall within the bounds of a 911 emergency and what would fall outside the bounds... But now, I’m not sure [of the distinction] anymore, and [pauses] that is making my life—and all of our lives in this Ops floor—difficult. And painful.”

Within hospitality, hoteliers are increasingly concerned about their responsiveness to TripAdvisor reviews. Both workers and managers note considerable anxiety at the possibility of a poor hotel review, fearing, in particular, online comments that criticize them personally for inadequate or inappropriate action. Our findings highlight how much the established norms and locales of hotel engagement have changed. Traditionally, hotel staff engaged with guests personally and face to face. When issues needed to be discussed or addressed, these tended to happen in private, whether at the reception desk, over the phone, or by letter/email. With social media commentary, hotel responses are now enacted online, publicly, loudly enough for everyone to “hear” without the hotel staff knowing who the reviewers are or even if

they stayed at the hotel at all. One hotel manager observed,

“I’ll tell you what TripAdvisor was designed to do. It was designed to give hotel managers psychological problems. ... Once it’s out there, a bad review, that’s it. For all the world to see. You can’t shake it. They don’t think about it, the impact on us. It goes public and stays public for the world to read.”

Many hoteliers are dismayed at what they see to be a dramatic change in how they perform their hospitality work. Whereas previously they welcomed “guests” to their hotels, they now see prospective “reviewers walking through the door.” Instead of hosting guests, they now obsess over the details of online reviews, the issues they raise, and the potential reviewers currently staying in their hotels. The ongoing stream of social media comments has taught them to anticipate possible queries and concerns, and they now attempt to preempt these by explaining particular conditions (e.g., policies regarding pets, parking, spotty wifi, etc.) during the check-in process or when showing guests to the room. One hotelier explained,

“We were getting quite a number of comments about TVs not working. Now, in every bedroom, we have a notice saying, ‘[The region] is just about to go through digitalization. We’re really sorry, but the TVs aren’t working.’ But people would still write and say, ‘The TVs didn’t work.’ Even though this had absolutely been pointed out, and we had apologized in advance. ... But it did make us a bit more proactive about actually speaking to people, not just assuming that they would read something that was in their room.”

Some hoteliers attend seminars or participate in webinars that offer advice on how to manage online commentary and use it for generating feedback. More hoteliers actively encourage guests to post reviews on TripAdvisor despite worries over the possibility of false or offensive reviews. One acknowledged that many hotels in his region “work harder at trying to get the customers to write reviews” with a couple that “positively campaign to get people to write reviews.” These hotels prominently display TripAdvisor signs on doors and in lobbies and remind guests to write TripAdvisor reviews via nudges and email requests:

“If we get it right, instead of saying ‘glad you liked it, enjoy your day’ like we used to do, we have cards that we give out saying ‘please leave us a review.’ Leave one in the room, give them one at check-out.”

“We have it all set up now on the system. Unless we change the setting, they [guests] get the follow-up email asking if they enjoyed their stay with the TripAdvisor logo and a link. It’s how it is done now. All automated.”

Hoteliers are acutely aware of the scale, speed, and power of social media commentary, and many engage

with the social media comments online while taking action on the ground to address issues in the reviews. The shift in hospitality practices—recalibration of risk and redeploying of resources to quickly investigate issues and redress problems with facilities and staff—produces an overall redefinition of hotel service in ways that engender a focus on immediate and short-term issues along with a displacing of longer term priorities, tactical maintenance, and improvement projects. Hoteliers' work on the ground has been substantially redefined from enacting hospitality service to being oriented to the demands of social media commentary; they are, in effect, being "micromanaged by the crowd." As one manager noted, "TripAdvisor is in the room now." For some, such a redefinition of hospitality work is intolerable:

"We will see this season out... then we are getting out [of the hospitality business]. I didn't opt in to this rubbish. Judge me for the actual service I provide, the hotel, how I run it and what we offer from this location. I set up my hotel for people to get away from the world, to do something different for people. Because I loved living here and hosting them. I'm not [willing to] be given the runaround."

Discussion: Reconfiguring Accountability in the Social Media Era

In this research, we set out to understand how organizations respond to accountability pressures from social media commentary and with what consequences for organizing. Based on our comparative analysis, we distinguished a number of practices enacted by organizational actors in response to social media commentary posted on two platforms. Although the Twitter and TripAdvisor platforms are different and the organizations we studied operate in distinct sectors (emergency response and hospitality), our comparison of commonalities as well as variations in practices and outcomes allows us to identify and elaborate key insights about accountability and organizing in the social media era. Leveraging the analytic power of data from multiple field studies (Bechky and O'Mahony 2015, Shestakofsky and Kelkar 2020), we theorize how accountability pressures by the social media crowd and the accountability responses by organizations together enact what we refer to as *crowd-based accountability*. We develop the notion of crowd-based accountability and contrast it to stakeholder-based accountability.

Theorizing Crowd-Based Accountability and Its Organizational Consequences

Crowd-based accountability entails both accountability pressures materializing as social media commentary and the accountability responses of organizations

to those pressures. Although crowd-based accountability shares some commonalities with stakeholder-based accountability, there are notable and consequential differences as we detail in Table 1.

In stakeholder-based accountability, the constituents are generally known and identifiable stakeholders (e.g., customers, auditors, and regulators) with evaluative criteria that are relatively clear, stable, and well specified, entailing more-or-less defined issues that are used to hold organizations accountable. In crowd-based accountability, the constituents are a diverse, dispersed set of actors posting accounts on social media platforms with evaluative criteria that are unclear, in flux, and unspecified, thus imposing uncertain and variable demands on organizations. Whereas constituents in the former are positioned as stakeholders, the constituents in the latter are positioned as a collective phenomenon, the crowd (Borch and Schiermer 2021). The idea of subject position recognizes that subjects are not bounded, stable entities, but rather that different subject positions are performed in practice (Hultin and Introna 2019). As Hultin and Introna (2019) observe, it is through practices that subjects become positioned to be and act in certain ways. This conceptualization of subject positioning allows us to understand how the largely individual-level grievances and disaffections of actors, when posted pseudonymously on social media platforms, become enacted as a collective stream of commentary materializing as the crowd.

As the assessment criteria of the social media crowd are uncertain and mutable, the precise focus of accountability pressures is often not identifiable in advance. Instead, it becomes determined in practice as microdetails of recounted incidents become negatively amplified in social media commentary of the crowd. A key way in which this amplification becomes power charged is the distinctive form of visibility that is enacted through social media platforms. Recent studies suggest that new digital technologies can make communications and behaviors visible in ways that were not possible before (Leonardi and Treem 2020). As Leonardi and Treem (2020, p. 1608) note, the visibility of actors' actions enabled through digital connectivity is no longer within their control, but "belong[s] to a broad and heterogeneous empirical audience that typically has to expend very little effort to become exposed to them." Similarly, postings on social media platforms are readily available for viewing and posting 24/7 by a large and distributed audience. The visibility of social media commentary, however, differs from that of behavioral trace data or enterprise-wide communications in that it is a visibility of accounts that others have posted about actions, interactions, and decisions of organizations and their members. These accounts of others manifesting as

Table 1. Comparing Stakeholder- and Crowd-Based Accountability

| | Stakeholder-based accountability | Crowd-based accountability |
|---------------------------------|--|--|
| Accountability pressures | | |
| Constituents | Generally known, identifiable, and often authorized stakeholder groups | Diverse, dispersed, and largely pseudonymous social media crowd |
| Evaluative criteria | Evaluative criteria are relatively clear, stable, and well specified | Evaluative criteria are unclear, in flux, and unspecified |
| Target | Directed at the focal organization and/or its top managers and rarely at frontline or back-office workers performing operational work | Directed at the focal organization and named individuals performing both senior-level as well as frontline and back-office work |
| Temporality | Episodic (e.g., once a year, every three months, by incident) | Continual (occurring 24/7) |
| Manifestation | Scorecards, metrics, reports, rankings, campaigns | Multimodal narratives, text, and images posted on social media platforms |
| Visibility | Bounded and situated, typically manifesting off-line and in circumscribed spheres, panoptic-like as the few observe the many | Persistent and pervasive, manifesting online and publicly, synoptic-like as the many observe the few |
| Accountability responses | | |
| Characteristics of responses | <p><i>Structural</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designating roles to establish and/or enforce policies that address stakeholder concerns • Instituting subunits that monitor and/or enforce compliance <p><i>Rhetorical</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Circulating narratives, using framing techniques, and messaging to manage stakeholder concerns • Employing impression-management tactics to strengthen or regain the reputation of the organization | <p><i>Online</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging with social media commentary so as to explain, justify, challenge details, offer apology, etc. <p><i>Off-line</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recalibrating risk: not responding online, acting overcautiously • Redeploying resources: shifting attention, time, and effort; privileging short-term demands over strategic considerations • Redefining service: shifting work practices that constitute the core meanings, activities, and relations of service |
| Motivations for responses | <p><i>Structural</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complying (substantively or symbolically) with stakeholder demands <p><i>Rhetorical</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimizing social disapproval and increasing legitimacy | <p><i>Both online and off-line</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimizing controversies, avoiding exposure, and/or preempting social media escalations and scandals that concern the organization (e.g., its products, services, managers, frontline workers) |
| Critical outcomes | Convergent reactivity: Organizational actors change their behavior in reaction to being evaluated, observed, or measured in a manner that aligns or conforms with their stakeholders' evaluative criteria | Diffraction reactivity: Organizational actors produce scattered and equivocal responses that split attention and fragment processes in attempts to deal with the varying and uncertain demands of the social media crowd |
| Consequences | | |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational structures and rhetoric conform with stakeholders' evaluative criteria • Organizational actors may engage in gaming the criteria • Organizations' relations with primary stakeholders are "managed" • Boundaries of accountability remain relatively stable | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizations' core activities, relations, and outcomes of service are repositioned • Organizational actors respond in variable and often ad hoc ways • Organizations' relations with primary constituents become fraught • Boundaries of accountability are reconfigured |

tweets and reviews are generally pseudonymous, often provocative, and posted with few limits. They enact a form of visibility that departs substantially from that enacted by stakeholder-based accountability.

In stakeholder-based accountability, visibility materializes through the episodic and delimited metrics, audits, and inspections performed by stakeholders. In

contrast, the visibility of crowd-based accountability materializes as the persistent, pervasive, and public gaze of the social media crowd viewing the accounts of others. Although the scrutiny of stakeholder-based accountability is panoptic-like, rendering the many visible to a few (Thompson 2005), the scrutiny of crowd-based accountability is synoptic-like (Mathiesen

1997), rendering a few visible to the many (Thompson 2005, Adorjan and Ricciardelli 2021). Some see synoptic visibility as a return (albeit partially) to the prominence of the spectacle in social life (Mathiesen 1997, Brighenti 2010). But, unlike the colocated, event-like, temporal–spatial boundaries of spectacles in prior ages, the synoptic-like visibility enacted on social media platforms materializes as a continual stream of accounts by and for a distributed audience across space and time. Uldam (2018, p. 43) notes that “increased synoptic visibility has brought about new reputational challenges for companies.” We find similarly that the synoptic-like visibility of social media amplifies the extensive and potentially corrosive, accountability pressures experienced by organizations.

In response to accountability pressures, organizations typically respond by conforming to and aligning with the criteria of evaluation. Espeland and Sauder (2007) characterize such responses in terms of reactivity, whereby organizational actors change their behavior in reaction to being evaluated or measured. With stakeholder-based accountability, organizations respond in ways that affirm the evaluative criteria. This produces a convergent reactivity that is achieved through the mechanisms of self-fulfilling prophecy and commensuration (Espeland and Sauder 2007, 2016; see also Rahman 2021). For example, organizational actors gather additional information about the performance expectations and evaluative criteria of external stakeholders and then change their structures, processes, and messaging in relation to them (Dobbin and Kelly 2007, Espeland and Sauder 2007, Sauder and Espeland 2009, Hallett 2010). Even with some variance in response among organizational actors, the changes nonetheless tend to converge with regard to estimating, experimenting, complying, and fulfilling the evaluative criteria (Brandtner 2017, Rahman 2021). Akin to the self-disciplining of those subject to panoptic-like scrutiny, organizations subject to stakeholder-based accountability pressures internalize their stakeholders’ evaluative criteria and adapt their activities accordingly.

With crowd-based accountability, it is difficult for organizations to comply with or conform to constituents’ evaluative criteria as these are not clear, stable, or well specified. Instead, organizations struggle with how to be accountable to the diverse, dispersed, and pseudonymous social media crowd that manifests as a stream of negative and wide-ranging commentary. Although some organizations with limited or no competition over clients may be able to reduce their social media activity (such as DEMO in our study) and even deactivate their social media accounts, other organizations facing competition over clients do not always have this option (such as some of the hotels in our study). Despite variations in their online responses,

organizations across our two settings responded similarly in enacting changes to their off-line practices. Specifically, we found organizations engaging in scattered and often ad hoc attempts to address the accountability pressures of the social media crowd. Such responses enact what we term diffractive reactivity,³ whereby organizations respond equivocally in multiple and variable ways, bending and even contorting (as opposed to complying or conforming) their practices in multiple ways to deal with the crowd’s unclear, in-flux, and unspecified evaluative criteria.

Our findings across two settings suggest that diffractive reactivity is produced as organizational actors attempt to rework the situation and reposition their core activities in order to avoid unnecessary social media exposure, minimize controversies, and even preempt escalations and scandals on social media platforms. When provoked by negative social media posts that describe particular incidents, experiences, or concerns, organizations confront accounts of situations depicted by others. In reworking the situation, they may engage with these accounts directly to explain, justify or redress the issues. They may also post stock responses or decline to respond altogether, thus distancing themselves from the social media commentary to avoid stirring up controversy or triggering further criticism. These findings resonate with those from a recent study of rural police officers by Adorjan and Ricciardelli (2021) that observed the synoptic-like visibility of social media eliciting a form of prudentialism on the part of the officers. This involved the officers taking preemptive action to avoid or alleviate anticipated negative outcomes arising from their acute awareness of the ubiquitous scrutiny of the many on social media. In our settings, we similarly observed the emergency response and hotel staff attempting to prevent negative commentary online by anticipating and even preempting potential concerns.

In repositioning the core, organizations change—either deliberately or inadvertently—the activities that constitute service work in significant ways. Seeking to minimize the risk of further reputational damage to themselves or organizations, workers and managers become overcautious in their decisions and actions. Resources are redeployed when managers feel compelled to address or contain the social media crowds’ demands for change. This has unintended consequences for downstream or future activities that have to contend with reduced resources to execute longer term priorities as organizational resources and attention are directed toward addressing shorter term issues and demands. This, in turn, renders organizations’ relations with their service users increasingly fraught, unpredictable, and even hostile. Forced to aim for daily perfection when every interaction with a service user, no matter how small, short, or appropriate, must be enacted flawlessly, organizations defer

putting in place effective policies, facilities, and infrastructure that would ordinarily be viewed as ensuring good service. As a result, these processes produce consequential outcomes on the ground in ways that generate subtle but substantial shifts in the nature and quality of service provisioning.

The emergence of social media commentary on platforms, such as Twitter and TripAdvisor, complicates the conditions of possibility for organizations to respond to accountability pressures. Reactivity is no longer what it used to be. It has multiplied into convergent *and* diffractive forms. Organizations now find themselves responding with convergent reactivity to stakeholder-based accountability pressures (to comply with the criteria set by stakeholders, such as regulators, auditors, and rating agencies) while also responding with diffractive reactivity to crowd-based accountability pressures (to assuage the highly visible, immediate, and often idiosyncratic demands of the crowd). Because these distinct forms of reactivity are entangled in practice and elicit disparate responses, enacting both at the same time creates serious challenges for organizations given bounded resources, physical constraints, limits to managerial attention, and emotional toll on frontline workers. Thus, the simultaneous enactment of both convergent and diffractive reactivities provokes organizations to privilege quick fixes and short-term changes while undermining their capacity to consider strategic priorities or implement longer term changes (Chu 2021).

As the accountability pressures of social media commentary penetrate directly into the core of organizations, they redefine service work and what it means to be a service organization. As a result, core aspects of organizations (their products, services, service work) shift in substantial ways. For instance, previously established understandings and implicit definitions of what counts

as service (e.g., an “emergency,” “five-star hospitality”) are up for grabs. Furthermore, the meanings and boundaries of organizational accountability are being reconfigured. In the social media era, what does it mean to hold organizations to account? What criteria are relevant or appropriate in the shifting and sliding kaleidoscopic worlds of social media commentary? Organizational actors are increasingly unsure about what they are held accountable for and uncertain about how, when, and to whom they are accountable.

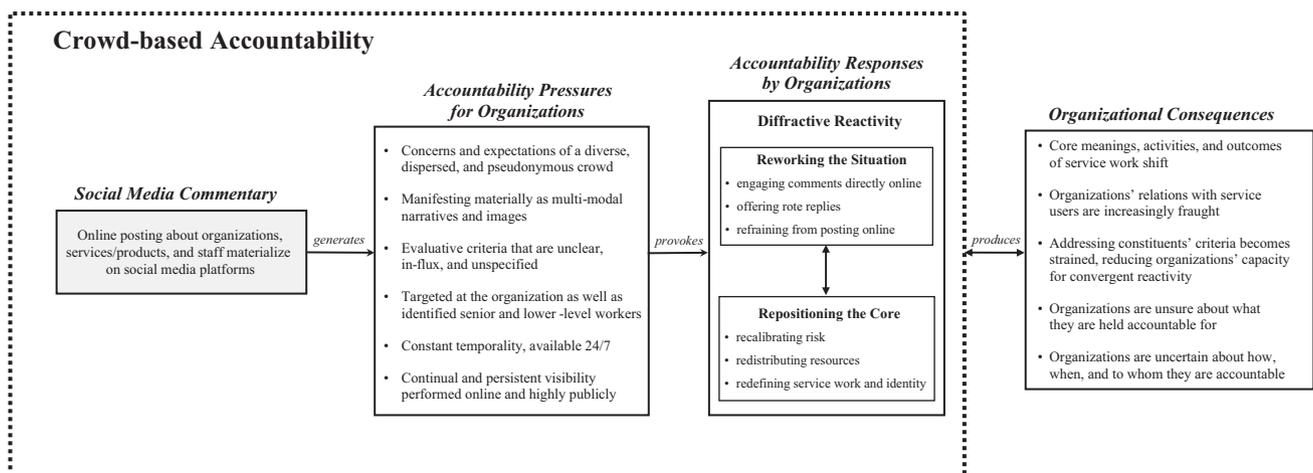
Figure 1 synthesizes these insights in a model of crowd-based accountability, highlighting the critical aspects of this distinctive form of accountability: how social media commentary generates accountability pressures provoking organizational responses that change practices and enact a diffractive reactivity, which, in turn, produces important organizational consequences.

Contributions to Research on Organizational Accountability and Social Media

This study advances our understanding of organizational accountability by examining the practices through which it is reconfigured in the social media era. In doing so, this research contributes to the literature on organizational accountability and social media in the following ways.

First, we unpack and highlight *how* organizations respond to social media commentary from the crowd. Although prior empirical research tends to focus on *why* and in what ways the social media crowd pressurizes organizations by disseminating concerns and accelerating social disapproval (Pfeffer et al. 2014, Toubiana and Zietsma 2017, Wang et al. 2021), there is less empirical research on understanding how organizations respond to such pressures and with what consequences for

Figure 1. A Model of Crowd-Based Accountability and Consequences for Organizing



workers, managers, and organizing (for an exception, see Albu and Etter 2016). We address this gap by focusing on organizational responses to accountability pressures manifesting as social media commentary. In doing so, we propose a model of crowd-based accountability that articulates the distinctive accountability pressures produced by the social media crowd and theorizes organizational responses to those pressures along with their consequences. Our insights into crowd-based accountability are analytically transferable to other service organizations (e.g., restaurants, retail outlets, public service agencies) that have one-off or fleeting “service encounters” (Guttek et al. 2000) with their constituents, who may choose at any time to comment about these encounters on social media platforms.

In developing the notion of crowd-based accountability and contrasting it with stakeholder-based accountability, our research identifies how social media commentary exerts acute as well as chronic accountability pressures on organizations, provoking them to substantially alter their core practices. These shifts are consequential for organizations and workers/managers, fragmenting focus as attention and resources turn toward short-term demands and displace longer term priorities. Such changes, in turn, reconfigure the boundaries of organizational accountability, leaving open and unsettled the question of what constitutes organizational accountability in the social media era.

Second, and relatedly, we propose the concept of diffractive reactivity to characterize the type and tenor of organizational responses to accountability pressures from the social media crowd. We contrast this with the convergent reactivity (Espeland and Sauder 2007) that characterizes organizational responses to stakeholder-based accountability pressures from identifiable stakeholders such as regulators, auditors, rating agencies, and news media, such as the *U.S. News and World Report* and *Businessweek* (Chaney and Philipich 2002, Gioia and Corley 2002, Espeland and Vannebo 2007, Hallett 2010). Whereas convergent reactivity relies on self-fulfilling prophecy and commensuration to achieve congruence, diffractive reactivity entails reworking the situation and repositioning the core to produce significantly different organizational realities. In the former, we see alignment, conformity, and even isomorphism, and in the latter, overcautious activities, diverted resources, and shifting identities alongside increasingly fraught relations with service users (Levy and Barocas 2018, Rahman 2021). Our research, thus, goes beyond prevailing understandings of how managers and workers adapt to or resist the criticisms of the social media crowd. We draw attention to the markedly different way that practices of service provisioning, service relations, and service identity shift in response to social media commentary. We raise

concerns about organizations compromising their core focus, activities, and values in attempts to preempt controversies and address short-term demands, which end up eclipsing longer term priorities. In the wake of social media commentary, what counts as an emergency or as hospitality and what it means to be an effective emergency management organization or good quality hotel are being substantially redefined.

Third, this research advances our understanding of the public visibility of social media commentary and its consequences for organizations. Although prior research largely focuses on enterprise-wide social media (e.g., Leonardi and Treem 2013, Turco 2016, Leonardi 2014), this research examines the organizational consequences of commentary on public-facing social media platforms characterized by continual and persistent visibility by which the few observe the many. Although stakeholder-based accountability tends to be enacted in circumscribed spheres, crowd-based accountability is enacted in public, leaving organizational actors with little room to maneuver. In the face of synoptic-like public scrutiny of the social media crowd, organizational actors work with heightened anticipatory anxiety, effectively with a sword of Damocles over their heads. Our insight into this synoptic-like visibility of social media commentary supports the notion of synoptic prudentialism (Adorjan and Ricciardelli 2021) and positions it as a significant organizational response to crowd-based accountability pressures. Further research can help elaborate how synoptic visibility of social media commentary may elicit additional responses from organizations subject to the relentless gaze of the many on social media platforms.

Fourth, our study sheds light on the ways in which organizational work is redefined in response to social media commentary. Extant literature points to how social media rapidly amplifies social disapproval about organizations, providing valuable ways of understanding how organizations respond online to social media commentary (Barnett et al. 2020, Wang et al. 2021). This prior work is largely focused on externally oriented communications and impression management in which organizations need to engage in order to prevent, contain, or minimize social disapproval resulting from social media commentary. By providing a more dynamic view of organizational change in which responses to social media commentary rework situations and reposition core activities, we highlight the criticality of organizational practices enacted on the ground in response to social media commentary. In that sense, this research advances understanding of how social media commentary influences the “collective reputational judgments” of organizations (Etter et al. 2019, p. 29) through the dissemination of emotionally charged evaluative accounts. For instance, our findings provide empirical support for

conceptual frameworks positing that an organizations' reactive reticence and limited engagement with social media commentary can help contain social disapproval and minimize reputational damage (Etter et al. 2019, Wang et al. 2021). Our findings also go further, indicating that social media commentary does not just influence organizational reputation, but also engenders changes to practices that alter meanings, activities, relations, and outcomes, thus disrupting organizational identity and focus.

Fifth, the practice-based perspective we follow in this research helps us advance our understanding of social media commentary in reconfiguring the boundaries of organizational accountability. Prior research shows how different affordances of social media technologies shape organizing in unique ways (Leonardi and Treem 2013, 2020; Majchrzak et al. 2013; Kane et al. 2014), specifically focusing on existing material properties of these technologies and the "action possibilities" (Gibson 1977) they afford users. In contrast, our practice-based approach focuses on how social media commentary materializes on two social media platforms to provoke organizations across two different settings to change their practices in consequential ways. Our research underscores the important theoretical point that what makes a difference to work and organizing are not the affordances or properties of emerging technologies per se, but how they are entangled with practices. Although we found particular outcomes of crowd-based accountability by studying practices in emergency response and hospitality, further research is needed on transformative changes relating to other social media commentary. For example, the #MeToo movement on Twitter consolidated private information spread across multiple people, making it public and common knowledge, provoking specific and significant policy changes in organizations.

Our research, thus, suggests that focusing on practices is critical to furthering empirical and theoretical understanding of transformative organizational change and emerging technologies. More generally, our approach can help scholars investigate how organizational phenomena, in practice, materialize differently with novel digital technologies and with what outcomes. By focusing on reconfigurations in practice, researchers can account for how digital organizing is producing organizational realities in new and unexpected ways that are deeply consequential for work, workers, organizations, and society at large.

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Endnotes

¹ Names and locations mentioned in the tweets are anonymized for confidentiality. Some of the tweets are threaded and multipart, but for the purpose of readability, we have consolidated and presented them as a single tweet.

² We have redacted nonrelevant details (e.g., hotel name, location) in the TripAdvisor postings to retain confidentiality.

³ In physics, diffraction refers to phenomena that arise when a wave encounters an obstacle or opening. It is defined as the bending of waves around the corners of an obstacle or through an aperture (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diffraction>).

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