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Rethinking Protest Management: A Crisis Management Lens on Police Command Strategy

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ABSTRACT *This article proposes a new theoretical lens for studying protest management by integrating crisis management insights. While protest scholarship has emphasised political influence and frontline police-protester dynamics, the meso-level of command post practices remains underexplored. By drawing on theoretical frameworks and explored variables from protest and crisis management literatures, command posts can be put more into focus. Where traditional protest management studies stress external variables such as protester characteristics or surveillance technologies, crisis management research highlights internal dynamics: cognitive framing, command post structures, and synchronisation technologies. Based on a scoping review of 637 publications, this analysis maps conceptual overlaps between the two literatures and identifies how bridging protest and crisis management scholarship can generate new questions about protest governance at the command level. By showing how protest may be perceived and managed as crisis, the article rethinks responses to dissent and the negotiation of legitimacy in public order.*

KEYWORDS Protest management, crisis management, protest policing, gold commander, protest, crisis

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1 INTRODUCTION

Following a substantial rise in different forms of mobilisation since the late 1990s, collective action by social movements is increasingly understood as a normal feature of political life in many regions (Bédoyan et al., 2004; Ortiz et al., 2022; Quaranta, 2015). This development coincided with scholarly interest across disciplines (Roggeband & Klandermans, 2017), particularly at the micro-level of police-protester interaction. Models such as the (Elaborated) Social Identity Model (Drury & Reicher, 2000; Stott & Reicher, 1998), explain how in/out-group dynamics and perceived indiscriminate coercion can escalate confrontation, while related work has examined how both negotiation-oriented and coercive operational choices shape protest outcomes (Gillham et al., 2013; Gilmore et al., 2019). Although this micro-level focus is justified given its immediate visibility and impact, its dominance risks producing an overly narrow understanding of protest policing that foregrounds street-level action at the expense of broader organisational dynamics.

Macro-level variables shaping protest management have also received sustained attention. Della Porta and Reiter's (1998) police knowledge model, for instance, highlights police-specific factors such as militarisation and occupational culture alongside legal frameworks, political culture, and degrees of (in)direct political influence. Relatedly, the threat model suggests that perceived threat from protesters increases the likelihood and severity of repression (Fillieule & Jobard, 1997; Soule & Davenport, 2009), while the weakness model argues that repression is more likely against movements deemed easy to undermine (Earl, 2003; Gamson, 1975). In practice, officers may therefore be steered toward particular interventions due to anticipated "in-the-job trouble", including the need to justify operations to governments or media (D. Waddington, 1994). These approaches have broadened the analytical lens to include external pressures, yet their conclusions are still often framed in relation to street-level policing.

A significant gap therefore, remains at the meso-level: the command tier that mediates between political authorities and frontline officers during protest events. In both planned protests and unexpected public order incidents, police organisations, often alongside other emergency services, establish formal command structures. In many Western European contexts, this relates to the Gold-Silver-Bronze (GSB) model (College of Policing, 2013; Molnar et al., 2019), in which Gold commanders set strategic objectives, Silver commanders translate these into coordinated tactics and manage information flows, and Bronze commanders direct frontline operations. The Silver commander and staff have been described as a "decision-making sub-system" in a command post (Pearce & Fortune, 1995, p. 185), although adaptations of this UK-based model in other countries indicate notable variation, including a more direct tactical and operational role for the Gold commander. Elsewhere, particularly in the United States, protest management is organised through the Incident Command System (ICS), a standardised framework structured around five functional areas—

command, operations, planning, logistics, and finance/administration—coordinated within a single command post (Burgiel, 2020). The objectives set at the command level, their translation into practice through operations, and the analysis of information by planning staff are particularly salient in this protest setting. Despite their centrality to protest governance, these command structures have received comparatively limited attention in the literature.

One notable exception is research on commander accountability, which shows how decisions made during protest events are shaped by accountability, understood not as retrospective scrutiny but as an ongoing, anticipatory pressure structuring interpretation and action (Cronin & Reicher, 2006, 2009). Commanders are simultaneously accountable to multiple internal and external audiences, including political authorities, media, courts, specialist units, and (frontline) police officers, whose interests often diverge and conflict (Cronin & Reicher, 2006, 2009). External audiences typically expect order to be maintained with minimal visible force and compliance with human rights standards, while internal audiences often prioritise safety and control (Cronin & Reicher, 2006, 2009; Martin, 2021). As a result, commanders engage in continual balancing work, reassessing decisions in response to risks ranging from physical harm to (personal) reputational damage, while remaining aware of their limited capacity to shape street-level behaviour directly (Cronin & Reicher, 2006, 2009; Leach, 2021; Waddington, 1994). In this context, command-post assessments can be heuristic and oriented toward anticipated scrutiny, explaining precautionary strategies such as over-resourcing in uncertain situations, even when effective control is most tenuous (Leach, 2021; D. Waddington, 1994).

While these studies provide important insights, their emphasis on individual commanders' decisions leaves scope for greater attention to the command post as an organisational setting in which decisions are collectively produced, coordinated and mediated by technological systems. A fuller understanding of this setting is crucial for two reasons. First, it contextualises research on accountability and decision-making by locating political influence, strategic framing, and authorisations—or restraints—within the command post itself. Second, it opens new avenues of inquiry: how do commanders interpret ambiguous protest information under time pressure? How are competing perspectives negotiated in real time? And how do digital tools used for coordination, rather than surveillance, generate new capacities and vulnerabilities? Together, these questions position the command post as a crucial but overlooked 'missing middle' bridging political authority and street-level policing.

One body of scholarship that does emphasise tactical leadership and command settings during public order events is crisis management literature. Studies have examined command-level responses to man-made and natural disasters, such as the Utrecht terrorist attacks, Hurricane Katrina, the Great East Japan earthquake, and Fukushima (see Morris et al., 2007; Okada & Ogura, 2014; Rimstad et al., 2014; Rosenthal et al., 1989; Wolbers, 2021). Therefore, this article draws on both protest and crisis management literatures to argue that insights from

crisis studies can usefully complement existing protest management research. Recognising that a scoping review necessarily reflects a selection of sources, this comprehensive search of 637 studies identifies key overlaps and distinctions between the two literatures, clarifying how current debates might be extended. While protest research has largely focused on protest dynamics, management philosophies, and frontline interactions, crisis management literature has long examined commanders' roles and coordination between partners across the full temporal trajectory of events, creating productive points of dialogue.

By placing this literature in dialogue, this article develops an integrative lens on command-level protest management. It first reviews protest management scholarship, outlining key models of police action and the variables shaping protest management, before turning to crisis management literature to examine overarching frameworks of crisis command, such as Boin et al.'s (2016) five critical tasks, and the factors influencing command practices. Through this dialogue, the article identifies directions for future research that conceptualise the command post as a central setting in protest management.

2 METHODS

This article is based on a scoping review examining how protests are managed in police command posts and how crisis management frameworks can enrich this perspective. Scoping reviews are designed to “systematically identify and map the breadth of evidence available on a particular topic, field, concept, or issue, often irrespective of source” (Munn et al., 2022, p. 950), making them well-suited to broad research questions and comprehensive overviews. The review was guided by one main question: What does existing research reveal about police command post practices in protest management, and how is this phenomenon studied across protest management and crisis management literatures? This question was specified through two sub-questions: (1) Which overarching frameworks describe what commanders and command posts do before, during, and after protest or crisis events? and (2) Which variables are identified as shaping command post practices during protest or crisis management? Based on the findings, an additional question was formulated to guide future research: How can both literatures be bridged to inspire future research concerning command post practices in protest management? The aim was not to produce a full systematic review, but to map the literature, identify recurring themes, and highlight conceptual gaps.

The literature search was conducted using Google Scholar and Web of Science, capturing both cross-disciplinary and specialised research. Search strings combined key terms related to protest management, protest policing, command posts, strategic or Gold commanders, commander tasks, crisis management, and decision-making, using Boolean operators (e.g., “protest policing” AND “command post”; “crisis management” AND “commander”). Results were sorted by relevance, and where possible, the first 200 sources were screened. This threshold was chosen because results consistently became irrelevant beyond

approximately 175 items. Reference lists of relevant publications were also examined.

Studies were included if they (1) were academic publications (preferably peer-reviewed), (2) were written in English, French, German, or Dutch, and (3) addressed either (a) protest management, protest policing, or related models of public order management, or (b) crisis management and command-level decision-making relevant to policing. Studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on other event types (e.g., football), offered purely technical accounts of surveillance tools without linking them to management processes, or examined only social movement emergence or protester identity. No exclusion was made based on publication type; theoretical and empirical studies using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods were included. This process yielded 637 publications spanning political science, sociology, public administration, criminology, and crisis studies.

The selected studies were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. All publications were read in full for data familiarisation, after which inductive codes were generated, compared, and grouped into themes refined in relation to the research questions. As an initial step, studies were categorised as protest management or crisis management research, based on event type and terminology. During analysis, a further distinction emerged between studies that defined protests or crises, those proposing general models of protest or crisis management (e.g., policing philosophies or crisis management tasks), and those identifying specific variables shaping practice. Including both definitional and model-oriented work allowed the review to address normative issues surrounding the terminology, while capturing differences in temporal focus. Finally, variables were analysed by distinguishing factors common to both literatures from those specific to either protest or crisis management studies, using original terminology from papers to construct themes (e.g., movement characteristics defined by novelty, organisational structure, and participant diversity).

3 FROM PHILOSOPHY TO PRACTICE: HOW LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGES PROTESTS

As a first step, this section anchors the analysis in protest management research by examining how scholars have defined what constitutes a protest. Definitional clarity has long proven elusive (Newburn, 2021; Saunders, 2007), partly because overlapping and non-mutually exclusive concepts, such as activism or political violence, create conceptual ambiguity and empirical challenges when capturing an evolving phenomenon (den Heyer, 2020; Hanna et al., 2016; Saunders, 2007; Vassallo, 2018). Protest behaviour is also context-dependent, varying across social, cultural, temporal, and political settings (Hanna et al., 2016; Saunders, 2007; Vassallo, 2018). Finally, protest itself is politically contested: authorities may use the label strategically to delegitimise events, while protesters invoke it to signal resistance to what they perceive as unlawful power (Newburn, 2021).

Despite these difficulties, and although some scholars avoid defining protest altogether (Newburn, 2021), the literature identifies several characteristics. Protest is widely conceptualised as collective action involving more than one participant and oriented toward a shared interest (Fillieule, 1999; Opp, 2009; Rafail et al., 2012; Rucht et al., 1992; Rucht & Neidhardt, 1998; Soule & Davenport, 2009). There is also broad agreement that protest must be public or publicly accessible and involve the intentional articulation of claims aimed at influencing, promoting, or preventing social change (Bekker, 2021; Belyaeva, 2019; Etim et al., 2022; Hanna, 2017; Opp, 2009; Quaranta, 2013; Rafail et al., 2012, 2012; Soule & Davenport, 2009). Greater debate surrounds who protests and how protests are enacted. Some authors emphasise actors lacking direct access to policymaking who seek indirect influence (Barnes & Kaase, 1979; Bekker, 2021; Dalton & van Sickle, 2005; Marsh, 1977; Opp, 2009; Vassallo, 2018), while others include both state and non-state actors targeting institutional authorities (Earl & Kimport, 2008; Hitman, 2020; Snow et al., 2004). Similarly, while protest is often described as non-routinised or non-institutionalised political action, scholars have challenged this distinction, noting that movements may rely on institutionalised actors, conventional repertoires, or repeated protest, resulting in varying degrees of routinisation (Barnes & Kaase, 1979; Dalton & van Sickle, 2005; Diani & Eyerman, 1992; Fillieule, 1999; Marsh, 1977; Tarrow, 1989; Woods, 2003).

3.1 Identity, crowd psychology, and protest management philosophies

Beyond definitional debates, scholars have drawn on crowd psychology and collective identity to explain protest dynamics in ways that inform strategic assumptions about risk, legitimacy, and control underpinning command-level protest management, shaping how situational factors are assessed and acted upon in practice.

Classical crowd psychology is commonly traced to Gustave Le Bon's *The Crowd* (1895), developed amid rapid urbanisation and elite anxieties about social unrest (Bürger, 2023; Hoggett, 2009; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2009). These contagion or breakdown theories depicted crowds as irrational, emotional, and violence-prone, with anonymity dissolving individual identity into a primitive "group mind" (Bürger, 2023; Reicher, 1996; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2009). Similar assumptions informed later approaches such as collective behaviour, mass society, and relative deprivation theories, which framed protest as expressive responses to social strain (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2009).

From the late twentieth century onwards, these perspectives were increasingly criticised for weak empirical grounding, decontextualisation, and their inability to explain why most collective gatherings remain peaceful (Bürger, 2023; Reicher, 2004; Rudé, 1964). In response to the expansion of mass protest since the 1960s, newer approaches conceptualised protest as a normal, meaningful, and often rational form of political participation (Cohen, 1985; Diani & Eyerman,

1992; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2009; Walgrave & Vliegenthart, 2012). In the United States, resource mobilisation and political process theories emphasised organisational capacity and political opportunity, while European scholarship foregrounded identity, culture, and post-materialist claims through new social movement theory (Cohen, 1985; Diani & Eyerman, 1992; Walgrave & Vliegenthart, 2012).

Building on these developments, the (Elaborated) Social Identity Model ((E)SIM) offers an influential interactional account of collective action (e.g., Drury & Reicher, 2000; Reicher, 1996a, 1996b, 2004; Stott & Reicher, 1998). Drawing on self-categorisation theory (Turner, 1982), (E)SIM conceptualises protest as guided by shared social identities dynamically shaped through intra- and intergroup processes. Crucially, it shows how police-crowd interactions can transform identities during events, particularly when policing is perceived as indiscriminate or illegitimate (Drury & Reicher, 2000; Reicher, 1996a; Stott & Reicher, 1998). Disorder, from this perspective, is not inherent to crowds but emerges in relation to police practices, underscoring the importance of perceived fairness and legitimacy in public order policing (Bürger, 2023; Drury et al., 2003; Prati & Pietrantoni, 2009; Stott & Reicher, 1998).

While these theories illuminate street-level protest dynamics, they also inform strategic assumptions about how protests are anticipated, interpreted, and managed by police. Accordingly, police response is commonly framed through protest management philosophies, defined as “the conceptual principles and guidelines underlying police operations” (Winter, 1998, p. 188). Typically articulated at the strategic level and enacted through command structures, these philosophies shape how protests are understood as unfolding events and how police-citizen interactions are organised. Scholars commonly distinguish four models—escalated force, negotiated management, strategic incapacitation, and facilitated management/strategic facilitation—each with distinct origins and critiques.

The escalated force model, identified by McCarthy and McPhail (1998) and McPhail et al. (1998), has historically been applied in Europe and the United States and remains evident in contexts such as South Africa and Chile (Bonner & Dammert, 2022; della Porta & Fillieule, 1998; Nyar & Wray, 2012). Grounded in the assumption that crowds are inherently problematic and misrepresent the community, the model legitimises forceful dispersal (Bourne, 2011). It is characterised by limited concern for fundamental rights, low tolerance for disruption, minimal communication, extensive (often unprovoked) arrests, and coercive responses to militancy (Bourne, 2011; della Porta & Fillieule, 1998; Gillham, 2011; Gillham et al., 2013; Soule & Davenport, 2009). Following mass protest mobilisation and rising violence in the 1960s, this approach was increasingly questioned (Bourne, 2011; Vitale, 2005), alongside critiques of irrational crowd assumptions (Borch, 2012).

A shift toward liberal conceptions of protest rights in the 1960s led Western police forces to adopt more tolerant strategies of negotiated management (della

Porta, 1997; della Porta & Fillieule, 1998; Gorringer & Rosie, 2008). Police increasingly framed their role as safeguarding fundamental rights, even when peaceful protest disrupted everyday life, emphasising joint planning, cooperation, and communication over confrontation (Noakes and Gillham, 2006; Gorringer and Rosie; 2008, Bourne; 2011, Gillham et al., 2013). From the 1980s onwards, however, risk-oriented governance—shaped by global events such as 9/11 and evolving protest tactics—reinvigorated coercive approaches (Borch, 2012; Gillham, 2011; Gillham & Noakes, 2007; Gorringer et al., 2012; Jackson et al., 2019).

This shift contributed to the rise of strategic incapacitation, a proactive and risk-averse model observed in Canada, Europe, and the United States. The model relies on extensive surveillance, spatial zoning, and containment, and legal justifications for pre-emptive arrests and less-lethal weapons (della Porta & Tarrow, 2011; Gillham et al., 2013; Waddington, 2011). Critics note that restrictive permit regimes and expansive surveillance may produce chilling effects and undermine freedoms of expression and assembly through pre-emptive arrests and crowd fragmentation (Bourne, 2011; Murray et al., 2024).

Finally, facilitated management and strategic facilitation emerged in England and Wales following critical assessments of policing during the 2009 G20 summit protests in London. Oversight bodies called for clearer communication, stronger accountability, and greater facilitation of lawful protest, including dialogue policing inspired by Swedish models (Jackson et al., 2019; Waddington, 2011). Dialogue officers engage in pre-event negotiation, monitor crowd sentiment, and de-escalate tensions, enabling targeted interventions and correcting false assumptions (Gorringer et al., 2012; Stott et al., 2013). Critics nonetheless argue that facilitation may dilute protest goals or resemble surveillance, discouraging participation (Farrow, 2003; Gorringer et al., 2012, 2024; Jackson et al., 2019; Stott et al., 2013). In practice, police often combine facilitation with incapacitation, resulting in hybrid forms of strategic facilitation (Gorringer et al., 2012; Jackson et al., 2019).

3.2 Variables shaping (command) practices in police management

A second strand of research has examined the variables shaping how protests are policed in practice. While prominent models such as the police knowledge model (della Porta & Reiter, 1998, 2006b) and the “blue” approach (Earl & Soule, 2006) integrate multiple explanatory factors, this section adopts a different strategy. To identify recurring influences across studies and enable comparison with crisis management research, the scoping review disaggregates these models into their constituent variables.

Across the literature, the legal framework is consistently identified as a key variable shaping protest management (della Porta & Reiter, 1998, 2006b). At the constitutional level, scholars emphasise the formal protection of rights such as freedom of assembly and expression, alongside procedural safeguards for

defendants and detainees (della Porta & Reiter, 1998). Statutory provisions defining police powers and mandates further shape practice, with broadly framed public order laws expanding discretionary intervention (della Porta & Reiter, 1998, 2006a). In Italy, for instance, historically entrenched police powers combined with legislation addressing terrorism, organised crime, and football hooliganism have prioritised security over civil rights, widening investigative authority and conspiracy offences (della Porta & Reiter, 2006a). At the same time, scholars caution against viewing legislation as a straightforward solution: rigid frameworks may constrain adaptive responses and exacerbate tensions (Björk, 2005; P. A. J. Waddington, 1994). Police often rely on informal negotiation and discretion rather than consistent enforcement of all legal provisions (Fillieule & Jobard, 2020; Hoggett, 2009; P. A. J. Waddington, 1994; Wisler & Kriesi, 1997). Furthermore, the application of legislation depends on social, cultural, and structural contexts. In German-speaking Switzerland, for instance, public order is defined legalistically through the notion of *Rechtsstaat*, where breaches of constitutional order are treated as disorder requiring state intervention, whereas in French-speaking regions it is linked to “social peace”, enabling more tolerant interpretations of protest (Björk, 2005; Wisler & Kriesi, 1997).

Political influence—direct and indirect—is another central variable, operating across supranational, national, and local levels (Robinson, 2003; Waddington, 2007). Structural features such as electoral systems, state centralisation, and institutional openness condition how protest legitimacy and appropriate police responses are assessed (della Porta & Reiter, 1998). Political culture, understood as elite consensus on public order (Wisler & Kriesi, 1997), further shapes interpretations of rights and police authority, with historical legacies playing a key role (della Porta & Reiter, 2006a). Authoritarian legacies in Germany and Italy, for example, have framed protest as a democratic threat, legitimising restrictive policing, whereas more open political cultures, such as Geneva compared to Zurich, are associated with greater tolerance (della Porta & Reiter, 2006a; Wisler & Kriesi, 1997). Political influence also varies with degrees of police autonomy, from tightly controlled national forces to more independent local agencies (della Porta & Reiter, 2006a; Earl, 2003). Political pressure may be exerted explicitly through governmental intervention or implicitly through expectations to protect symbolic sites, dignitaries, or international events, often encouraging coercive displays of sovereignty (Eggert et al., 2018; Fillieule & Jobard, 1997; Hoggett, 2009; King & Waddington, 2006; Waddington, 2017; Wahlström & Oskarsson, 2006). At the same time, police autonomy allows officers to resist directives perceived as arbitrary or counterproductive to some extent (Waddington, 1998).

Next, police organisational structure emerges as a multidimensional variable encompassing militarisation, (de)centralisation, formal procedures and plans, and training, each shaping how protest management is organised and enacted. First, a substantial body of work documents growing militarisation and professionalisation, including specialised public order units, military-inspired

tactics, and equipment such as riot gear, armoured vehicles, and less-lethal weapons (della Porta & Reiter, 1998; 2006a; Den Heyer, 2014; Peterson, 2006). While some argue that militarisation promotes discipline and impartiality by limiting discretion, but can lead to more forceful operations; others emphasise variation across contexts and caution against equating militarisation with coercion (Jefferson, 1990; Waddington et al., 1987; Waddington, 1993, 1998). Second, organisational hierarchy and the degree of centralisation shape implementation: protest operations are often coordinated at senior command levels, with frontline officers expected to follow orders (Peterson, 2006). Here, centralised and militarised police forces may be more aggressive because officers blindly follow orders, but leadership may also have a greater sense of restraint over officers in specific situations (della Porta & Reiter, 1998, 2006a). Scholars nevertheless highlight persistent tensions between organisational control and discretion, as senior commanders retain accountability despite limited direct control over street-level action (Atak, 2017; Peterson, 2006). Third, organisational structure is reflected in formal procedures and plans which guide police interpretations of protest events under conditions of uncertainty. Larger metropolitan forces tend to develop specialised units and bespoke planning frameworks, while smaller forces rely more on mutual assistance (della Porta & Reiter, 2006b; McPhail et al., 1998). Certain police forces or teams may also have more technologies at their disposal to surveil protesters. Police forces have increasingly expanded their use of surveillance technologies, such as camera-based systems, algorithmic tools like facial recognition, and mobile data tracking (Akhgar & Wells, 2018; Dencik et al., 2015, 2018; Engberts & Gillissen, 2016; Fussey et al., 2020; Gillham et al., 2013; Irfan et al., 2016). While such tools may enhance forecasting, situational awareness, and accountability (Akhgar & Wells, 2018; Brayne, 2017; Dencik et al., 2015; Engberts & Gillissen, 2016), the literature documents significant risks relating to bias, inaccuracies, privacy infringements, limited oversight, and chilling effects on protest participation (Brayne, 2017; Dencik et al., 2018; Fussey et al., 2020; Zalnieriute, 2021). Finally, training translates structure into practice, with professionalised instruction and experience shaping tactical repertoires and decision-making under pressure (della Porta & Reiter, 2006a).

Occupational culture also plays a central role in protest management (della Porta & Reiter, 1998). Studies identify culturally embedded dispositions such as macho crime-fighting orientations, secrecy, suspicion of outsiders, excitement around protest situations, and pride in specialised equipment in police organisations (Cain, 1973; della Porta & Reiter, 1998; Manning, 1978; McCabe & Waddington, 1988; Myers-Montgomery, 2016). Given the discretionary and time-pressured nature of policing, officers frequently rely on culturally informed stereotypes to guide rapid decision-making under conditions of limited information (della Porta & Reiter, 1998), seen as the “inevitable fallibility of policing” (Newburn, 2022). These schemas often take the form of friend-foe distinctions between “good” protesters (organised, familiar groups) and “bad” protesters (unfamiliar, loosely organised, disruptive actors) (della Porta & Reiter,

2006a; Gargiulo, 2022; Saari, 2009; Stott & Reicher, 1998; D. Waddington, 1994). Such categorisations serve both symbolic and pragmatic functions, enabling identification with familiar groups and facilitating negotiation with actors perceived as predictable and manageable (Gargiulo, 2022; D. Waddington, 1994), although the link between crowd theory and management tactics should not be overstated. Importantly, occupational culture is not monolithic: it varies across ranks, roles, and contexts, shaped by experience and interaction (della Porta & Reiter, 1998; Reiner, 1985). Fillieule and Jobard (1997), for instance, identify a divide between senior officers favouring restraint and rank-and-file officers associating effectiveness with confrontation.

Outside of politicians and the police organisation, protest management is also influenced by more external audiences, such as the media, the public, and the protesters themselves. Across the literature, media and public opinion are identified as indirect yet consequential influences on protest management, operating through police knowledge, legitimacy concerns, and anticipatory decision-making (della Porta & Reiter, 1998). Public opinion is shaped by political parties, interest groups, trade unions, and voluntary associations whose views are filtered through the media, generating competing pressures ranging from civil-rights coalitions advocating restraint to law-and-order coalitions demanding coercive intervention (della Porta, 1997; della Porta & Reiter, 1998). Beyond transmitting opinion, the media acts as an independent actor: while journalistic presence has at times encouraged restraint, it may also legitimise repression through security-oriented framing, reliance on police sources, and stereotyping of protesters (della Porta & Reiter, 1998; Waddington, 1992). Media and public scrutiny further shape protest management through accountability dynamics. Anticipated public reactions may lead police to selectively refrain from enforcing legal provisions against certain groups, despite formal grounds for intervention (della Porta & Reiter, 1998; Fielding, 1991). Particularly at the command level, senior officers may seek to avoid interventions that may later provoke lawsuits, official inquiries, or political criticism with the benefit of hindsight (Cronin & Reicher, 2006; Waddington, 2017). At the same time, accountability may be unevenly distributed within police organisations, with weak internal oversight facilitating coercive practices in some contexts, as illustrated by cases such as the G8 summit in Genoa (Alcadipani et al., 2023; della Porta & Reiter, 2006a). Finally, scholars note that increasing political complexity complicates police claims to act for a single public interest, making protest management sensitive to fluctuating media climates (King & Waddington, 2006).

Finally, movement and protest characteristics constitute a central variable in protest management research, as police assessments of risk and appropriate intervention are shaped by both who is protesting and how the protest unfolds in practice (della Porta & Reiter, 1998). A first set of factors concerns movement characteristics, including experience, organisational structure, and heterogeneity (della Porta & Reiter, 1998; Eggert et al., 2018). Organised movements with experience, such as trade unions, are often seen as predictable, whereas

heterogeneous, loosely organised, or new movements pose challenges due to unfamiliarity, fluid structures, and limited trust-showing links to previous discussions on police culture (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011, 2012; della Porta & Reiter, 2006b; Fillieule, 1999; Gerbaudo, 2012; González-Bailón & Wang, 2016; Milan, 2015b, 2015a). A second set of factors relates to protest event characteristics, including the expected size of the demonstration, whether protests are stationary or mobile, the presence of counterdemonstrations, the use of confrontational tactics such as blockades or sit-ins, and whether protesters are received by targets in face-to-face delegations (Earl et al., 2003; Eggert et al., 2018; Rafail, 2010). These situational features are widely associated with increased difficulty of control and higher perceived risk from a policing perspective (Earl et al., 2003; Soule & Davenport, 2009; Warner & McCarthy, 2014). Digital communication adds volatility by enabling multiple modes of participation and echo chambers that may fragment movements and escalate contention (Bédoyan et al., 2004; Bennett, 2003; Button et al., 2002; den Heyer, 2020; Mooijman et al., 2018; Pang & Goh, 2016). These assessments are commonly theorised through threat and weakness perspectives: repression is more likely when protests are perceived as threatening by politicians or police officers or, conversely, as weak and unlikely to generate backlash due to the presence of primarily marginalized groups or little possibility for redress (della Porta & Fillieule, 1998; Earl et al., 2003; Earl & Soule, 2006; Nassauer, 2015). Empirical studies caution, however, that threat and weakness often co-occur, requiring attention to interaction effects rather than additive models (Earl et al., 2003).

4 FROM CONTESTATION TO COMMAND: APPLYING A CRISIS MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK TO PROTESTS

To deepen understanding of command-post work, this section draws on crisis management scholarship, which has systematically theorised how complex, time-pressured events are governed through command structures. Rather than treating crisis response as a single decision point, the literature conceptualises it as an evolving set of organisational tasks carried out before, during, and after events. Accordingly, the section proceeds in two steps: it first reviews overarching management frameworks that specify what command arrangements are expected to do, and then synthesises key variables shaping how these tasks are enacted in practice.

To assess the implications of applying a crisis management framework to protest, however, the conceptual overlap between “protest” and “crisis” must be examined. Like protest research, crisis management scholarship is marked by definitional diversity (McConnell & Drennan, 2006). Referring back to the Greek concept of *κρίσις*, Muhren and Van de Walle (2010) distinguish two uses of the term. The first associates crisis with disastrous events, a framing ill-suited to protest, as protesters are not inherently negative. The second focuses on situational characteristics—such as serious threat, urgency, unexpectedness, or systemic

disruption—that can be linked to the work of crisis managers, including protest managers (McConnell & Drennan, 2006; Quarantelli, 1993; Boin et al., 2016). Yet critics note that these criteria remain imprecise: what counts as “disastrous”, how urgent is “urgent”, and for whom is an event unexpected? Such ambiguities are especially problematic when the analysis targets management practices rather than events themselves.

Rather than treating crisis as an objective condition, this article finds an interpretive perspective more fruitful for examining command post management, focusing on how situations are understood and acted upon as crises by authorities. Based on a more social constructionist perspective of a crisis (see Coombs & Holladay, 2001; Gephart, 2007; Gigliotti, 2020), crisis is less a property of events than a mode of interpreted governance characterised by uncertainty, time pressure, contested legitimacy, and anticipatory accountability. Applied to protest management, this interpretive perspective helps explain why even largely anticipated and peaceful events may come to be governed under crisis-like conditions. Although there are protests that are largely described as crises or threats to institutions, such as the 2011 London “Riots”, the Arab Spring uprisings, the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, the French Yellow Vest protests, or Extinction Rebellion actions, most protests are foreseeable and regulated. Nevertheless, while most protests would not meet the substantive definition of a crisis, command-level actors remain acutely aware of their inherent fluidity and of the possibility that negotiated arrangements, risk assessments, and expectations may rapidly unravel. Developments such as broken agreements, confrontational tactics, or occupations of symbolically sensitive spaces can sharply heighten perceptions of urgency and uncertainty without rendering the protest substantively extraordinary. As Quarantelli (1993) observes, the organisational challenges that arise in such moments—particularly around preparation, communication, and coordination—closely resemble those encountered in disaster response, where delays, misalignment, or information breakdowns carry disproportionate consequences. Similarly, Zoeteman et al. (2010) show that across crisis and risk events, authorities prioritise impact mitigation, media management, and the preservation of public trust to restore normalcy. Read through a command-level lens, these dynamics point less towards escalation as an objective threshold than to a shift in how situations are interpreted, prioritised, and governed under conditions of heightened sensitivity and anticipated scrutiny.

Using this interpretative definition of a crisis, looking at how a situation is interpreted by the relevant authorities, thus opens up the world of crisis management frameworks to study protest events. Importantly, one needs to be aware that framing protests as crises is not a neutral analytical move. Crisis narratives can legitimise exceptional measures, intensify surveillance, and constrain facilitative policing, even where protest dynamics do not warrant such responses. States have at times explicitly invoked emergency framings to access extraordinary powers in protest contexts (Loor, 2019), underscoring that crisis functions as a political and organisational construct as much as a descriptive label.

The contribution of crisis management frameworks, therefore, lies not in reclassifying protests as crises but in providing analytical tools to examine how protest events are governed under crisis-like logics. By focusing on command-level tasks and variables shaping crisis operations, this literature foregrounds the command post as a critical yet underexplored arena in protest management.

4.1 Managing the unexpected: crisis management frameworks for protests

According to Boin et al. (2013, p. 81), crisis management can be defined as “the sum of activities aimed at minimizing the impact of a crisis”. Crisis leadership then becomes “a set of functions that—one way or the other—will need to be performed, often repeatedly over the course of an evolving crisis” (Ansell et al., 2014, p. 422). Much of the crisis management literature conceptualises these functions through staged or cyclical models that distinguish between preparation, response, and aftermath. Fink’s (1986) four-stage model, for example, differentiates between prodromal, acute, chronic, and resolution phases, each associated with specific managerial tasks such as forecasting, containment, and recovery. Similarly, Mitroff’s (1994) five-stage framework emphasises signal detection, preparedness, damage containment, recovery, and learning, while Augustine (1995) further disaggregates crisis management into avoidance, preparation, recognition, containment, resolution, and post-crisis adaptation.

While these models offer valuable insights into preparedness and sequencing, they tend to treat crises more as technical or managerial challenges, paying rather limited attention to political and symbolic dimensions. This limitation is especially salient in protest management, where events constitute public claim-making processes and police responses are inherently entangled with legitimacy, authority, and accountability. Boin et al. (2014, 2016) explicitly address this gap by reconceptualising crisis management as a political process in which leaders must not only assess situations and coordinate action, but also engage in meaning-making, justify decisions to multiple audiences, and manage accountability over time. This perspective resonates strongly with protest policing, where command-level actors operate under intense scrutiny and must balance order maintenance with democratic rights. Boin et al.’s framework identifies five interrelated “critical tasks”—sense-making, decision-making and coordination, meaning-making, ending and accountability, and learning—conceived as functional tasks generated by crises. Crucially, the framework does not prescribe how these tasks should be performed or by whom specifically, but offers an analytical lens for examining how crisis command unfolds. Its task-oriented and politically attuned approach is therefore particularly well suited to analysing protest management at the command level, as it can capture not only how decisions are made but also how they are interpreted, justified, and evaluated in contested environments.

Although analytically distinguished, these tasks typically unfold simultaneously and remain closely interconnected in practice (Ansell et al., 2014;

Kitamura, 2019). The first critical task concerns sense-making (Boin et al., 2014, 2016). Despite variation in definitions across disciplines and contexts (Bayer, 2010; Groenewald et al., 2017; Kilskar et al., 2019), sense-making broadly refers to processes through which actors interpret situations marked by uncertainty. Weick et al. (2005, p. 409) famously captured this in the questions “what is going on here?” and “what do I do next?”. Through this process, actors construct meaning to reduce uncertainty and orient action (Weick et al., 2005; Moore et al., 2021). Importantly, sense-making does not require dramatic rupture; it also applies to sudden shifts or ambiguities in otherwise anticipated protest dynamics (Cristofaro, 2022). In protest management, sense-making is concentrated in the command post, where intelligence, operational reports, legal assessments, and political signals are synthesised to assess likely protest trajectories and emerging operational, situational, and legitimacy risks.

Sense-making feeds into decision-making and coordination, the second critical task (Ansell et al., 2014). Decision-making scholarship highlights that crisis managers operate under conditions of time pressure, uncertainty, and information overload, rendering fully rational choice impossible. Simon’s (1957) and March’s (1994) concept of bounded rationality captures how decision-makers rely on satisficing—judging options as “good enough” rather than optimal—to simplify complex environments (March, 1994; Trenholm, 2018). Naturalistic decision-making research further explains how actors draw on experience and pattern recognition to act effectively in these real-world settings (Stanton et al., 2011; Waring, 2011). Once a strategic direction is chosen, managers must coordinate actors and resources to implement it. Coordination has been conceptualised both as a managerial outcome and as an ongoing process of task alignment across networks (Groenendaal et al., 2013). Galbraith (1974) identifies three coordination mechanisms: coordination by rules (following predefined plans), by hierarchy (vertical authority and horizontal collaboration across units or agencies), and by targets or goals, involving negotiation and adjustment across actors (Boin et al., 2013, Ansell et al., 2014). Based on these interpretations, commanders play a central role in deciding when and how to intervene, while coordinating these decisions across ranks and agencies and managing trade-offs between operational flexibility, organisational control, and information constraints.

The third task, meaning-making, concerns how crisis managers explain events and justify their actions to external audiences, including the public, media, political authorities, and oversight bodies (Ansell et al., 2014; Boin et al., 2013, 2016; Chan, 2013; Neri et al., 2012). Meaning-making is not merely communicative but political, as it seeks to shape interpretations of both the crisis and the response. Boin et al. (2021) and Rosenthal et al. (2001) identify three key functions: an instrumental function that mobilises support for or opposition to policy choices; an empowerment function that enables stakeholders to make informed judgments; and a legitimacy function that sustains, restores, or contests public confidence in crisis managers and institutions. Applied to protest

management, meaning-making highlights how interpretations of events are stabilised and communicated to external audiences. While multiple actors may be involved, the command post can influence what information is released, how police actions are framed, and how accounts align with political, media, and public expectations.

Following implementation and explanation, crisis managers must bring crisis governance to an end through ending and accountability (Boin et al., 2016). This involves signalling a return to normalcy, providing closure, and preventing crisis decisions from remaining indefinitely contested (Boin et al., 2021). Accountability processes—including attributing responsibility and justifying choices—are central to restoring trust and meeting legal and moral expectations (Boin et al., 2013, 2016). Public confidence rests on the assumption that crisis managers can protect core values, limit harm, and act competently under pressure; perceived failure in these respects often fuels demands for intensified scrutiny and reform (Boin et al., 2016). Although anticipatory accountability shapes decisions throughout operations, formal responsibility for closure often crystallises after the event, as courts, oversight bodies, and political institutions assign responsibility. Command-level actors may nevertheless shape how operations are wound down, how debriefings are organised, and how organisations prepare for post-event scrutiny.

Finally, crisis management entails learning before, during, and after the event to inform future preparedness (Boin et al., 2013). Crises can expose vulnerabilities, disrupt routines, and create opportunities for organisational change by relaxing structural constraints (Boin et al., 2013, 2016). Reflecting on failures and near-misses can generate new frames of reference that become embedded in future procedures and training (Muhren & Van de Walle, 2010). In protest management, learning occurs across organisations and institutional environments, but the command post can serve as a focal point where experiences are consolidated and translated into reflection. Given their seniority, commanders may play a key role in initiating reviews, legitimising lessons, and determining whether operational assumptions are revisited.

4.2 Variables shaping critical tasks in crisis situations

Similar to protest management research, crisis management scholarship has identified a range of factors shaping how crises are governed. As illustrated in the left-hand column of Figure 1, this literature similarly emphasises the legal framework, (in)direct political influence, organisational structure, occupational culture, and the role of media and public opinion. Legal frameworks are discussed as enabling and constraining infrastructures for multi-level action, particularly through the need to overcome legal silos to clarify authority, coordinate procedures, and upscale responses across domestic and international settings (‘t Hart & Sundelius, 2013). Political dynamics are closely tied to crisis termination and accountability, with the aftermath often treated as a crisis in its own right,

shaped by inquiry timing, political interests, scapegoating dynamics, and institutional context (Boin et al., 2009, 2016, 2021).

Organisational structure is another central concern. Emergency services such as the police tend toward centralised command systems, valued for clear role definition, accountability, and coordination in routine situations (Helsloot & Groenendaal, 2017; Morris et al., 2007; 't Hart et al., 1993), yet criticised for producing rigid hierarchies, asymmetric information flows, and excessive pressure on senior decision-makers (Boin et al., 2016; Comfort, 2007; 't Hart et al., 1993; Wolbers, 2021). As a result, decentralisation often emerges in practice, especially under operational pressure or strategic overload, enhancing flexibility and improvisation while risking fragmented sense-making and coordination failures (Bye et al., 2019; Kalkman, 2020; Renå, 2019; 't Hart et al., 1993; Wolbers, 2021). Plans and procedures, moreover, function as key sense-making and coordination scaffolds, helping actors cope with ambiguity and information overload by shaping interpretation, categorisation, and escalation, while requiring testing and training to be effective in practice (Christensen et al., 2016; Kalkman, 2019; Ormerod et al., 2005; Steen & Pollock, 2022; 't Hart & Sundelius, 2013). Furthermore, scripts and procedures of the organisation can have a considerable influence on the crisis response. These scripts can be particularly helpful to avoid crisis managers becoming overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of information and its ambiguity (Kalkman, 2019; Ormerod et al., 2005). Crisis classifications will also lead to certain devised procedures and routines in organisations and upscaling where necessary (Kalkman, 2019; 't Hart & Sundelius, 2013). Relatedly, training or simulation exercises can help develop crisis managers' sense- and decision-making skills and can improve coordination (Steen & Pollock, 2022).

Organisational culture further conditions crisis management, as differences in identity, informal structures, and shared values influence coordination, learning, and decision-making (Boin et al., 2016; Hoel & Barland, 2021; Hoel & Mehus, 2022; Kalkman, 2019). While effective crisis cultures are associated with shared vigilance, responsiveness to weak signals, and tolerance for false positives (Boin et al., 2013), blame-oriented climates and anticipated personal responsibility may instead foster passivity, choice deferral, or strategic evasion (Eyre et al., 2008; Scholtens et al., 2014). Furthermore, organisational cultures may shape how individuals interpret situations and make decisions, often due to a perceived need to conform to prevailing cultural norms and to avoid embarrassment or criticism (Pearson & Rowe, 2020). Police cultures may discourage vulnerability or critique, while blame-avoidance may stifle risk-taking, innovation, or open learning (Adams & Anderson, 2019; Eyre et al., 2008; Scholtens et al., 2014; Waring, 2011). Finally, different subcultures among ranks, with different job expectations and difficulties in reviewing each other's work, may inhibit lesson-drawing (Hoel & Barland, 2021). Perceived unsupportive blame cultures may also prevent learning due to a reluctance to report mistakes and defensive attitudes (Moynihan, 2008; Waring, 2011; Boin et al., 2016).

Finally, crisis research highlights public communication and media relations as central to legitimacy and accountability: in fragmented, real-time environments, how and when information is communicated shapes public interpretation, with media acting as key actors in framing crises and attributing responsibility (Almond et al., 2008; Boin et al., 2016, 2021). Trust-based relationships and credible engagement can strengthen acceptance of crisis narratives, whereas misinformation, denial, or delayed disclosure can rapidly undermine legitimacy and erode trust (Palttala et al., 2012; 't Hart & Sundelius, 2013).

Figure 1

Comparison protest and crisis management literature

Shared variables in protest and crisis management literature	Variables specific to protest management literature	Variables specific to crisis management literature
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal framework • (In)direct influence political culture • Police organisational structure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Militarisation, (de)centralisation • Procedures, plans • Training • Police occupational culture • Media and public opinion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Movement characteristics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Novelty of movement • Organisational structure • Range of claims and participants • Protest characteristics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of technology • Action repertoires • (Non-)violence • Technology 'as surveillance' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crisis manager characteristics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience • Skills • Heuristics – stress • Crisis characteristics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crisis nature • Workspace <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size and location • Proximity to incident • Collaborative structures • Technology 'as synchronisation'

While both fields address overlapping variables, they prioritise different dimensions. Protest research tends to emphasise external characteristics such as protest(er) traits and surveillance technologies, whereas crisis management literature looks inward to leaders, workspaces, and synchronisation technologies. Integrating both perspectives, therefore, promises a fuller understanding of command post protest management.

Crisis scholarship highlights the importance of crisis manager characteristics. First, experienced crisis managers are typically more familiar with tools, procedures, and stakeholder roles in command posts (Militello et al., 2007). Familiarity with sense-making processes aids information assessment (Vynckier et al., 2008), while stored mental representations help generate hypotheses, spot deviations, avoid overly risk-averse decisions, and regulate emotions (Harman et al., 2019; Launder & Perry, 2014; Oosterwold et al., 2018; Penney et al., 2022). Second, specific skills matter: information literacy, decision capacity, and communication skills are crucial for avoiding tunnel vision, maintaining flexibility, and fostering team cohesion (Abrahamson & Goodman-Delahunty, 2014; Boin et al., 2016; Bruggemans et al., 2015; Moynihan, 2008). Communication skills are especially important for meaning-making, including message framing and timing (Boin et al., 2016, 2021). Third, information

overload, stress, and ambiguity can impair cognition—pushing decision-makers to freeze or overreact (Chen et al., 2007; Steen & Pollock, 2022). In the face of multiple, contradictory, and complex cues, managers often rely on heuristics to simplify their environment, which may work in many situations, but can also distort sense-making and learning (Almond et al., 2008; Boin et al., 2021; Brooks et al., 2020; Gargiulo, 2022; Ley et al., 2014).

Furthermore, three variables linked to the specific crisis operation are of importance. First, the nature of a crisis—its uncertainty, duration, and societal framing—affects how it is managed (Boin et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2007). Fast-moving or clearly bounded crises that do not exceed crisis managers' capabilities are deemed easier to frame and conclude (Boin et al., 2016, 2021). Additionally, when an independent inquiry is opened into the crisis management practices, the direction of that review will depend greatly on the timing of the inquiry, the emergence of possible scapegoats or distractions, the political plans of authority figures, and the (institutional) context (Boin et al., 2016, 2021). Severe consequences may limit learning opportunities, as the risk of visible failure discourages bold adaptation (Moynihan, 2008; Boin et al., 2021).

Second, spatial factors such as command post setup and proximity to the scene influence operations (Abrahamson & Goodman-Delahunty, 2014; Wahlström et al., 2011). The physical proximity between law enforcement officers or units may influence the extent to which they communicate and share information with one another (Stol, 1999; Vynckier et al., 2008). Furthermore, collaborative structures, such as round-table meetings and shared professional training, and shared workspaces can promote shared sense-making, improve information exchange, and increase common ground (Bergeron & Cooren, 2012; Bergstrand, 2011; Landgren & Bergstrand, 2016). Co-located workspaces near the incident often lead to faster comprehension, fewer delays in information transmission, and a stronger alignment between people and tasks, although existing off-site facilities may help commanders to focus their time and resources on the operation (Useem, 1997).

Third, within the workspace at a certain event, it is also important to look at the technology that crisis managers can utilise. Shared sense-making can, for instance, be supported through synchronisation technologies. Being able to plot different actions on an electronic timeline could make decision-making practices easier (Paul & Reddy, 2010). Furthermore, direct radio, telephone, and video links can provide a platform to discuss understandings (Treurniet & Wolbers, 2021). Additional field channels, such as body-worn cameras and drones operated by police officers, can help to assess the situation (Milić & Milidragović, 2021). Relatedly, communication technology, such as social media, can benefit sense-making and meaning-making practices by providing a platform to seek and share information (Jungblut et al., 2022; Mirbabaie & Zapatka, 2017). Yet technological overload, other priorities, tool unfamiliarity, and system incompatibilities may obstruct real-time information flow (Sheptycki, 2004; Militello et al., 2007; Abrahamson and Goodman-Delahunty, 2014). Moreover, seeing as different

actors often do not monitor each other and may have different systems and styles of communication, discrepancies between the information different stakeholders share, can create uncertainty among citizens (Palttala et al., 2012).

5 BRIDGING LITERATURES: A USEFUL LENS FOR PROTEST MANAGEMENT

Bringing protest management and crisis management literatures—each developed around distinct empirical objects, normative concerns, and analytical traditions—into dialogue helps refine how command-level protest management is conceptualised and studied. Protest management research has generated rich insights into the political meaning of protest and the external conditions under which police responses vary. While its primary focus has been on what unfolds during protest events, it has also examined preparatory phases, such as pre-protest negotiation and pre-emptive risk mitigation. This literature has particularly emphasised external variables, including protester and protest characteristics and the use of surveillance technologies. Crisis management scholarship, by contrast, offers process-oriented accounts of how complex, time-pressured situations are governed through command structures before, during, and after events, foregrounding more internal variables such as the characteristics of crisis managers, command workspaces, and the use of technologies to synchronise operations.

From this perspective, crisis management research contributes a systematic focus on how collective interpretation, coordination, justification, closure, and learning are organised within command structures, allowing for a more fine-grained specification of how police response is produced in the command post than has typically been offered by protest management scholarship. Conversely, protest research is indispensable in specifying what is at stake in these situations: protests are public acts of claim-making embedded in asymmetric power relations. When crisis frameworks are applied uncritically to protest contexts, they risk obscuring these normative dimensions by privileging control and the restoration of normalcy. The bridge proposed here therefore, works in both directions: crisis management concepts sharpen the analysis of command-post practices in protest management, while protest scholarship forces a rethinking of key crisis concepts when the “crisis” itself takes the form of democratic contestation.

This reciprocal adjustment is particularly evident in relation to the five critical tasks identified by Boin et al. (2014, 2016): sense-making, decision-making and coordination, meaning-making, ending and accountability, and learning. These tasks provide an analytically useful framework for examining what command-level actors do across the full course of complex events, without presuming consensus, success, or a single authoritative interpretation. In this light, Table A1 in the appendix highlights the different insights from both literatures and broad research questions to inspire future research, structured for each critical task.

With regard to sense-making, crisis management literature directs attention to new questions concerning information flows within the command post: how and what type of information reaches the command post, and how does this influence the image that police officers have of the protest event? What happens when police officers or partners have different views of what is going on and how are these debates settled? How do synchronisation technologies play a role in enabling or causing disruptions in the flow of information? Analysing how protest events are framed at the command level is crucial for understanding subsequent decisions and street-level practices. At the same time, protest contexts challenge core assumptions often embedded in crisis research. Crisis studies frequently presume a shared objective of harm mitigation and a relatively uncontested horizon of normalcy. Protest research complicates this premise by showing that normality is politically contested and that police actions themselves may become objects of dispute. Protest studies can help highlight how protesters actively shape information environments, including through tactics such as *sousveillance*: the strategic use of technology to disrupt, redirect, or counter police information-gathering efforts (Monahan, 2006; Storbeck et al., 2025; Ullrich & Knopp, 2018). Building on this, future research could examine how sense-making in the command post is shaped not only by uncertainty and information overload, but also by the protest management philosophy to which commanders subscribe. Rather than merely reflecting developments on the ground, such philosophies may actively guide how protest actions are initially framed into identity-based categories of “good” versus “bad” protesters, how symbolic threat is assessed, and how plausibility is prioritised over accuracy under time pressure. At the same time, protest unpredictability or protesters’ counteractions and inter- or intra-agency complexity may lead commanders to jump to familiar scripts, as information becomes too much to process, takes too long to reach the command post in a volatile situation, or is fragmented among different ranks and services.

A similar re-specification emerges with decision-making and coordination. Crisis management scholarship offers a vocabulary for analysing how decisions are taken and coordinated under pressure, drawing attention to the heuristics that shape individual and command-level judgment and may constrain adaptation as protest dynamics shift. It also highlights how authority and responsibility are distributed across ranks and partner organisations, and how these arrangements complicate accountability when decisions are made collectively. Different partners may have different goals, possibly leading to disputes about the way forward and delays in coordination. Protest management research, by contrast, foregrounds the substance of command decisions, examining choices about deployment, containment, visibility, and restraint, as well as the external factors that shape them, including protester characteristics, protester agency, and anticipatory concerns about legal, political, and media scrutiny. Future research can investigate how commanders experience external pressures, for instance, because of the economic cost of a protest action, and to what extent decisions become risk-averse to avoid political scrutiny rather than proactive based on the

goals of protesters. It further draws attention to how command decisions may be unevenly translated into practice due to cultural and experiential divides across ranks. Read together, these literatures frame command decisions not simply as technical coordination problems, but as efforts to sustain operational coherence and legitimacy simultaneously.

The task of meaning-making further illustrates the analytical value of bridging protest management and crisis management literatures. Crisis management scholarship has developed a broad account of this task, showing how commanders are required to explain and justify decisions to multiple audiences whose expectations and evaluative criteria differ. These explanations are often produced under conditions of incomplete information and time pressure, meaning that command actors may have to commit publicly to interpretive frames before sense-making is settled. Once articulated, such frames can become difficult to revise, helping to explain why command-level interpretations may appear resistant to change even when new protest-related information emerges. Protest management research complicates this picture by emphasising that protesters themselves are active meaning-makers who contest police narratives through media engagement, public claims, and legal mobilisation. This raises analytically important questions for command post research: under what conditions do internal police interpretations diverge from dominant public or media frames, how are such discrepancies managed within the command structure, and when does meaning-making shift from strategic framing to reactive justification? Pressured by high media visibility or external frames that diverge from internal police frames, commanders may feel that the legitimacy of their actions becomes contested, resulting in more symbolic or defensive external communication strategies. Bringing these perspectives together foregrounds meaning-making not as a post hoc communication exercise, but as an ongoing, politically charged command-post practice.

A key divergence between protest management and crisis management literatures concerns how events are understood to end, and how ending, accountability, and learning are conceptualised. Protest management research has often treated the conclusion of a protest as the analytical endpoint, or has focused primarily on how protesters may be subject to legal proceedings after the event. Crisis management studies, by contrast, show that ending a crisis can itself be a strategic command decision, deliberately timed to restore authority, stabilise interpretations, or shift political and public attention. This perspective raises questions about how blame cultures, beyond formal political influence, shape command-level practices after protests, for instance when responsibility is contested across ranks during debriefings or internal reviews. Some protest studies do underscore the importance of recognising protester and citizen agency in this phase: complaints, legal challenges, and counternarratives, including those generated through citizen journalism and visual documentation, may challenge official accounts and influence command-level responses. Future research could therefore examine how ending processes become more complex: when partners

have different ideas about what happened and who is to blame, ending the event may be delayed, although protest activities have finished. Similarly, coercive tactics can escalate post-event scrutiny by other commanders during disciplinary investigations or via political inquiries, requiring command posts or commanders to manage not only operational stand-down but prolonged negotiation with political, legal, and public audiences.

Learning reveals a similar asymmetry between the literatures. In protest management research, learning has been addressed implicitly through shifts in broader policing philosophies, such as moves toward negotiation or facilitation. Crisis management scholarship, however, shows that learning can occur during, immediately after, and long after an event, and that it is frequently selective, shaped by organisational cultures, blame dynamics, and resistance to change. This opens up new questions for protest research, such as how command posts decide which lessons from protest events are institutionalised—in the form of operational recalibration or broader shifts in underlying philosophies—which are ignored or contested, and how accountability pressures, internal hierarchies, and external scrutiny shape what is ultimately learned, and by whom. When protest events were unexpected or led to operational failure, senior commanders may call for debriefings and reviews, although cultural resistance to change or political blame games may lead to an underestimation of the problem, defensive attitudes, and stifled learning.

6 CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the command post constitutes a ‘missing middle’ in protest management research: the organisational arena where political pressures, legal constraints, and street-level dynamics are translated into collective interpretations, coordinated tactics, and publicly defensible accounts. While protest policing scholarship has generated strong insights into the political meaning of protest, the external conditions shaping police responses, and micro-level police-protester interactions, it has, with notable exceptions such as work on commander accountability, tended to leave the command post undertheorised as a setting in which decisions are jointly produced, negotiated, and mediated by technologies over time.

Bringing protest management and crisis management literatures into dialogue is therefore not a claim that crisis scholarship is more valid, but that each literature foregrounds dimensions the other often brackets. Crisis management research contributes a process-oriented account of how command structures organise collective interpretation, coordination, justification, closure, and learning across the full life course of high-pressure events. Boin et al.’s (2014, 2016) five critical tasks—sense-making, decision-making and coordination, meaning-making, ending and accountability, and learning—are particularly valuable because they specify what command-level actors do without presuming success, consensus, or a single authoritative frame. Protest scholarship, in turn, recalibrates

these tasks by showing that in protest settings, notions of harm, order, proportionality, and normalcy are politically contested, police actions themselves may become objects of conflict, and protesters actively shape informational and symbolic environments through negotiation, counter-framing, and sousveillance. The bridge thus works in both directions: crisis concepts sharpen organisational analysis of command-post practices, while protest research reshapes what those concepts mean in democratic contestation.

Overall, the article advances a research agenda that takes the command post seriously as both an empirical site and a theoretical object: a workspace where contested events are governed through organisational routines, technologies, and cultural dispositions, and where the state's claims to legitimacy are actively produced and put in practice. The article articulates a set of sensitising questions and propositions that orient attention to command-level protest management. By combining the normative sensitivity of protest management research with crisis management's process-oriented vocabulary, future studies can generate sharper accounts of how command posts shape protest governance over time, and how crisis-like logics are invoked, resisted, or transformed when the incident is based on democratic contestation.

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APPENDIX

Table A1

Bridging protest and crisis management literatures

Crisis management task (Boin et al. 2016)	Insights from protest management literature	Insights from crisis management literature	Broad research questions to explore
Sense-making	No shared objective of harm mitigation or uncontested normalcy: protest and police actions as politically contested	Highlights information streams, interpretive ambiguity, bounded rationality, and frame plurality inside command posts	How do information flows within the command post shape command-level sense-making of protest events, particularly when interpretations diverge or information is fragmented, delayed, or excessive? How does the protest management philosophy to which commanders subscribe shape the framing of protest actions at command level, including the categorisation of protesters as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, assessments of symbolic threat, and the prioritisation of plausibility over accuracy under time pressure? Under what conditions do protest unpredictability, protester counter-actions, and inter- or intra-agency complexity challenge or destabilise dominant command frames, prompting reliance on familiar scripts or necessitating reinterpretation within the command post?
Decision-making & coordination	Focus on substance of decisions (visibility, deployment...), protest(er) characteristics and anticipatory scrutiny concerns	Shows role of cognitive overload, heuristics, and fragmented intra- and inter-agency structures that delay or distort decisions	How do commanders make and coordinate decisions under time pressure when authority and responsibility are distributed across ranks and partner organisations, and how do such arrangements shape disputes, delays, and collective accountability within the command post? How do external pressures – including political scrutiny, legal risk, media attention, and the economic costs of protest actions – influence command-level decision-making, particularly in shaping risk-averse, scripted, or precautionary responses rather than proactive engagement with protester goals? How are command decisions translated into practice across hierarchical levels, and how do cultural and experiential divides between commanders and frontline officers affect coordination, compliance, and operational coherence during protest management?

Crisis management task (Boin et al. 2016)	Insights from protest management literature	Insights from crisis management literature	Broad research questions to explore
Meaning-making	Protesters as active meaning-makers	Frames legitimacy as narratively constructed under media pressure; messages shaped by timing, political context, and internal coherence across agencies	How do commanders construct and stabilise public interpretations of protest events under conditions of time pressure and incomplete information, particularly when sense-making within the command post remains unsettled? Under what conditions do internal command-level interpretations diverge from dominant media or public frames, and how are such discrepancies negotiated, contained, or revised within the command structure? How does heightened media visibility and protester-led counter-framing shape command-level meaning-making, and when does this process shift from proactive strategic framing to reactive or defensive justification of police actions?
Ending & accountability	Protest dispersion often treated as the analytical endpoint or focus on proceedings against protesters, but protester agency	Crisis lens stresses closure as symbolic and contested; accountability distribution depends on internal structure, (blame) cultures and political pressures	How do command posts determine when and how a protest event is considered 'ended', and how is this process shaped by strategic concerns about authority, interpretation, and public attention rather than by the cessation of protest activity alone? Under what conditions do divergent interpretations among commanders, partner organisations, or ranks delay or complicate ending processes, even after protest activities have formally concluded? How do coercive tactics during protest operations shape post-event accountability dynamics, including internal reviews, disciplinary processes, and political or legal inquiries, and how do command posts manage these extended phases of negotiation beyond operational stand-down?
Learning	Limited attention beyond shifts in policing models; assumed lessons absorbed through shifts in philosophies (e.g., from escalated force to negotiated management)	Emphasises fragility of learning: blame avoidance, political inquiries, and cultural constraints can block institutional reform	How do commanders decide which lessons from protest events are institutionalised as operational recalibrations or broader shifts in policing philosophies, and which are ignored or contested? How do accountability pressures, internal hierarchies, and external political or media scrutiny shape who is involved in learning processes and whose interpretations of events become authoritative? Under what conditions do unexpected protest dynamics or perceived operational failures trigger meaningful organisational learning, and when do cultural resistance or blame dynamics instead produce defensive responses that stifle lesson-drawing?