

Making Sense of Bad News: The Media, Sensemaking, and Organizational Crisis

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Abstract: This paper explores the construction of organizational crisis through the discourse of media. Using a critical sensemaking framework, the authors conclude that the media serve as a disproportionate influence in the creation of plausible organizational narrative after crisis. They implicate the practices of journalistic work and the relationships between news workers and those holding power in organizations. They use the 1992 explosion at the Westray coal mine in Nova Scotia, Canada, where 26 men died, to illustrate these contentions. They find that among available and plausible early narratives of this event, enactment of a discourse of natural disaster and tragedy has prevailed over those that incorporated human agency and organizational culpability.

Résumé : Cet article explore la construction de crises organisationnelles faite par le discours médiatique. Utilisant un cadre critique pour interpréter les faits, les auteurs concluent que les médias ont une influence disproportionnée dans la création d'une narration organisationnelle plausible après une crise. Pour expliquer cette influence, les auteurs impliquent les pratiques du travail journalistique ainsi que les relations entre les travailleurs des médias et les détenteurs du pouvoir dans les organisations. Ils illustrent ces affirmations en se rapportant à l'explosion de 1992 dans la mine Westray en Nouvelle-Écosse, Canada, où 26 hommes sont morts. Ils trouvent que, parmi les premières narrations disponibles et plausibles de cet événement, la promulgation d'un discours de désastre naturel et de tragédie l'a emporté sur les discours incorporant l'action humaine et la culpabilité organisationnelle.

Keywords: Corporate communication; Critical theory; Disaster and emergency communication; Management; Print culture/journalism

Real news is bad news—bad news *about* somebody, or bad news *for* somebody.
—Marshall McLuhan

Introduction

On May 9, 1992, 26 men died in an explosion at the Westray coal mine in Nova Scotia. This was unbearably bad news *for* many and ultimately bad news *about*

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many. The mine's operators, Curragh Resources, had opened the mine only eight months earlier amidst public and political celebration of renewal in an economically depressed region. The company secured both federal and provincial financing and favourable contracts to market the coal to the provincial electrical utility. In its short time operating, the mine had developed a reputation among miners for unsafe practices.

Media from around the world reported the explosion and the rescue efforts. Local, national, and international outlets established operations in the community hall that served as a makeshift media centre for five days as the rescue operation continued. CNN broadcast internationally; a reporter from the *New York Times* rubbed shoulders with those from local weeklies. Nova Scotians in particular read, watched, and listened intently. Rescue workers recovered 15 bodies; 11 remain underground. On May 14, citing the dangers of continuing the search and the impossibility of survivors, Curragh discontinued the rescue. On May 15, CEO Clifford Frame spoke, linking his offer of financial support to the miners' families to a request to strip-mine the area. Then the media went home.

Later that same day, on May 15, 1992, provincial premier Donald Cameron appointed Mr. Justice Peter Richard to head a public inquiry into the explosion. Justice Richard released his findings on December 1, 1997. In that intervening five years a myriad of legal proceedings ensued, including the laying and subsequent staying of both provincial charges under health and safety legislation and criminal charges against the mine's owners and managers. Justice Richard unequivocally found management derelict in its duties and the provincial inspectorate lax. He concluded that the explosion was both preventable and predictable (Richard, 1997).

Apart from the legal issues (see also Dodd, 1999), studies of the Westray mine disaster have focused on the psychology and perceptions of the miners and their families (Comish, 1993; Comish & Comish, 1999; Dodd, 1999; Wilde, 1997), institutional and structural pressures (Hynes & Prasad 1997; Wicks 2001), politics (Jobb, 1994), employer-employee relations (Glasbeek & Tucker, 1999), public relations (Richards, 1996), and newspaper reporting of events (McMullan, 2001; McMullan & Hinze, 1999). In this paper we explore the role of the media in the social construction of a *sense* of an organizational disaster such as that of the Westray mine explosion.

In particular we examine some of the socio-psychological processes that enable the media (both print and television) to construct a particular view of events, and we draw some tentative conclusions about what this tells us about the relationship between "knowledge" and media constructions of the truth. Specifically, we contend that analysis of the processes whereby media "truths" are created can move us beyond simple notions of "the power of the media" to an understanding of how such power is produced and reproduced.

We explore media construction of the Westray disaster through the lens of a critical sensemaking approach. Rooted in the work of Karl Weick (1988, 1990, 1993, 1995, 1996), critical sensemaking links the social psychological processes

of sensemaking to structural issues of power, activities, and rules (Helms Mills, 2003; Helms Mills & Mills, 2000). Thus, in approaching the media as a discursive, semiotic space (Dahlgren, 1995), we build upon Weick's (1995) framework and incorporate the underdeveloped discourse of power and knowledge (Foucault, 1972, 1980) in support of the importance of the media's role in the creation of plausible media narrative.

Weick's (1995) sensemaking framework has been the primary basis for study of other organizational crises. These include the Union Carbide gas leak at Bhopal (Weick, 1988); an oil spill by Union Oil on the California shore (Gephart, 1984); a fatal pipeline explosion in Alberta (Gephart, 1993); and studies of the *Challenger* disaster (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). A number of prior analyses explicitly refer to "making sense" of Westray without expounding theoretically on sensemaking; another refers to "political sensemaking" (Hynes & Prasad, 1997), thus providing a foundation for continued analysis in this vein. Some of these works on Westray preceded the conclusions of various courts and the public inquiry that followed. While acknowledging that the ongoing nature of sensemaking permits no recognition of "conclusion," we suggest that this body of work lays a foundation for another pause, for a "moment in time" to examine the processes that have constructed the reality that is the Westray case. Whatever the theoretical basis or communication goal of previous accounts, all without exception refer to media coverage of the explosion. The media, for better or worse, have authored our understanding of Westray. The position of privilege afforded the media warrants effort to explore their social implications.

In this paper, we will first introduce sensemaking and its properties. We will explore the discourse of media, primarily through the sociological processes of newswriters. Throughout, we will use Westray as exemplar as it provides a focused organizational lens. We will explicate the role the media play in the development of "plausible" accounts of reality and discuss the implications for both theories of the role of the media and sensemaking theory itself. We will discuss the organizational implications of our premise and propose an agenda for further research.

Sensemaking and Westray

Weick's (1995) notion of sensemaking provides us with a useful framework for understanding organizational crisis. He suggests a way of relating the process of sensemaking to organizational events, and furthermore, provides us with a heuristic of seven properties for "making sense" of organizational "shocks."

Weick and sensemaking

The notion of sensemaking is not new but by drawing together a number of social-psychological and sociological factors, Karl Weick has developed his own concept, which serves as a heuristic for understanding organizational events. Ironically, the starting point of Weick's (1995) approach is contra to that implied in the everyday use of such terms as "to make sense of" and "common sense." In common usage "making sense" suggests that we process or translate events in

reaching a state of “understanding,” i.e., we make clear(er) that which was not clear. Similarly “common sense” suggests a shared sense of knowledge, something that we instinctually know. In Weick’s hands sensemaking comes to mean the imposition of interpretation on events that have already occurred. Thus, “sensemaking” is the enactment of a retrospective account of events (see Helms Mills, 2003). From this framework, “common sense” refers to the enactment of a particular interpretation through a process of social sensemaking.

Sensemaking and organizational events

Using Westray as an example, at a surface level, reports of events at the mine seem contrary to common sense and raise many questions. Why did miners (who stood to lose their lives), managers (who stood to lose their business and their reputations), and inspectors (who stood to lose their jobs and their credibility) appear to ignore dangerous levels of coal dust? What were they thinking? Did the situation make sense to them? Clearly, the press, and later the Richard inquiry, were able to make sense of events by imposing a common sense framework on events, thus rendering the accounts plausible. A Weickian account, on the other hand, suggests that we need to understand events not simply through what makes sense to us but through the processes by which a dominant sense of the organization came to be enacted by those involved.

The importance of Weick’s (1995) approach is that it directs us away from rational accounts of organizations that focus on coping with or reproducing hierarchical notions of organization. Instead it directs our attention to the process of organizing and the social psychological linkages that encourage a sense of organization (Weick, 1969). Thus, as important as the Richard inquiry is in establishing responsibility and discouraging a repeat of the events that led to the disaster, another disaster will occur unless we understand the social psychological processes whereby people put themselves in harm’s way.

Sensemaking properties as a framework for understanding events

Weick (1995) makes clear that he is not proposing a social psychological model for analyzing organizational events. It is, instead, a “recipe” or a “set of ideas with explanatory purpose” (p. ix). Nonetheless, he provides the basis of a framework of sensemaking analysis through discussion of seven properties of sensemaking: (1) identity construction; sensemaking as (2) retrospective, (3) enactive, (4) social, and (5) ongoing; reliant on (6) extracted cues; and driven by (7) plausibility. Each of the properties is seen as integrally linked but separable only for the purpose of exploration and explanation. It is not entirely clear which, if any, is to be seen as more dominant, although logically “identity construction” is a crucial starting point. Nor is it clear to what extent we should see each property as standing in the same relationship across a number of situations. Explicitly, we might expect the priority of each property to vary across situations. We explore each of his seven properties and seek to unearth the processes by which the media enacted the tale of Westray.

Sensemaking and identity construction

How we make sense of an event is grounded in our sense of who we are and how particular enactments of self influence how we ultimately make sense of ourselves. In the Westray case this might work at many levels. A sensemaking framework might serve to uncover the identities of many key players in Westray: miners as victims and scapegoats; families as mourners; Curragh as avaricious corporate entity; management as image-conscious "spin doctors." However, we focus on the role of media in sensemaking, as it is through the media that all elements of the story, including the commission of inquiry, are filtered, framed, communicated, and made available to society for construction and enactment. Most of us will only know disaster through indirect experience (Garner, 1996; Molotch & Lester, 1974). The media render meaningful and observable otherwise remote happenings (Molotch & Lester, 1974). In so doing, they are much more than mere messengers, leaving open the question of identity construction of the journalist. The link between journalistic identity and news content is clearly made by Molotch & Lester (1974, p. 105):

The nature of the media as formal organization, as routines for getting work done in newsrooms, as career mobility patterns for a group of professionals, as profit-making institutions, all become inextricably and reflexively tied to the content of published news.

Berkowitz (1992) refers to the tension among journalistic norms (what people need to know), business norms (efficient resource use, organizational deadlines, and pacing the competition), and entertainment norms (holding attention in an entertainment-oriented medium). This characterization mirrors the tripartite identity of the journalist.

In exploring the media's role as facilitator of the public's right to know, Dahlgren (1995) draws on Habermas' concept of the public sphere to propose that in the modern world the media constitute the public sphere as a discursive semiotic space. The media bring us election coverage and the electronic town halls of party politics; they bring us into the halls of justice as court cases and public inquiries determine the reputation and fate of individuals and institutions. In so doing, journalists may conceptualize their roles as the truth tellers in a complex discourse. This may be juxtaposed to the way in which a reporter builds a sense of self around the use of journalistic conventions and practices that encourage the enactment of the unusual and the dramatic. These two elements of identity seem destined to collide, in particular in television reporting. In other words, journalistic sensemaking depends on the creation of a heightened sense of drama.

Black (1982, p. 130) quotes a former executive editor of NBC News: "[The] highest power of television journalism is not in the transmission of information but in the transmission of experience . . . joy, sorrow, shock, fear; these are the stuff of news." This same executive further notes that within unspecified "bounds of probity and responsibility, news should display the attributes of good fiction or drama." He proposes "structure, conflict, problem and denouement." Dynes, quoted in Sood, Stockdale, & Rogers (1987, p. 27), also notes that disaster

reporting, like a drama, “grips people’s imagination, heightens the sense of importance of human action and facilitates emotional identification.” Berkowitz (1992, p. 52) echoes this in his analysis of the “what-a-story” (a story characterized by such drama that the news worker exclaims “what a story”). He refers to reportage of an airplane crash as “fire, smoke, death and destruction” and invokes Vincent, Crow, & Davis (1989) in typifying the roles of fate, heroes, and sorrow as stories focus on “fate tragically disrupting everyday life.” He notes that after the crash, “families . . . appeared in emotion-laden interviews” and reporters updated the public from area hospitals. A number of studies that analyzed content of early print coverage of Westray noted the primary media construction of the event as a human tragedy, reflected and reinforced in the recurring imagery of suffering loved ones (Goff, 2001; McMullan, 2001; McMullan & Hinze, 1999).

In addition to acting as information broker and dramatist, the journalist assumes a third identity, that of worker. Most are employees of large corporate entities, while even the most independent of freelancers must develop and maintain relationships with contracting entities. Berkowitz (1992, p. 46) contextualizes his analysis of television disaster reporting thus, “The work of creating local television newscasts is largely dictated by the necessities of everyday life within a profit-seeking venture.” This accounts for much of the homogeneity of media accounts and thus the creation of dominant sense. When disaster happens, media converge on site and “pack journalism” ensues (Jobb, 1994). Within hours of the Westray explosion, local, national, and international news outlets had erected satellite dishes on the roof of a community centre and had snaked a jungle of wires throughout. The needs of reporters even prevailed over those of affected local residents, who ceded their telephone lines to journalists. With reference to competitive pressures and the high costs of 24-hour coverage, one producer noted, “You make the assumption that other organizations were also sending in their armies, so this was a time to mobilize all the resources.”¹ One reporter, a soldier in the referenced armies, describes the need to “cover the black on the tape,” to fill a minute and a half of TV. He colloquially describes this as “feeding the goat.”² One presumes that he chooses his metaphor with purpose, cognizant of the goat’s indiscriminate digestive propensities.

Sensemaking as retrospective, enactive, and social

Weick (1995) contends that action precedes sensemaking. We act and then we make sense of what we did. Thus, our sense of action is always retrospective. This is contrary to the goal-seeking, rational view of behaviour in organization. By the time dust buildup at Westray had reached dangerous levels and the explosion ensued, those involved had likely already made some sense of the situation. After the mine explosion, the media and the commission of inquiry placed their own retrospective accounts on events, profoundly shaping our view of the Westray mine disaster. The media’s role in retrospective sensemaking is closely linked to its selectivity of extracted cues, a topic warranting significant discussion later in this paper. We do note that every news story has a “backstory” against which the background of players and transactions may be retrospectively assessed. For Westray, it

is the failure to tell the story before the explosion that is noteworthy. One reporter, Betsy Chambers, working for the Thomson newspapers, tried to report on the political climate that characterized the mine's genesis but failed to gain institutional support (Jobb, 1994). A television news producer comments, "It [the story] had a phase that we missed that was before the explosion. We really don't think that any Nova Scotia journalist is proud of the way that phase of the story was covered."¹

If, as individuals, we simply made retrospective sense of a situation, we would end up with a multitude of expressed accounts. In a situation of uncertainty or ambiguity where there is the absence of an imposing voice, people seek out their own sense of events that they share with others to some extent. For each person a retrospective sense has been enacted that is now a conscious view of what is; the retrospective sense has become enacted reality. That lasts until a dominant view is enacted. This approaches the notion of common sense, where a more or less agreed upon sense is enacted and maintained as a reference point of reality. Exploring sensemaking as both enactive and social takes us beyond these multiple, individual, and retrospective accounts, as the notion of individual sensemaking is somewhat confusing and problematic. On the one hand, reflections of sense clearly arise in the minds of embodied persons. Yet, it is impossible to divorce sensemaking from language and social discourse. If retrospective sensemaking speaks to the notion of the individual, enactment references social sensemaking processes. One analysis proposes that as individuals, we are all "newsmakers" as we attend to and give social accounts of what we believe to be the world (Molotch & Lester, 1974).

Of events leading to the Westray disaster, we need to ask, what enacted sense was dominant? And what were the social processes that led to that enactment? In particular, we explore the role of the media in enacting definite senses of the disaster. Such an approach must focus on the media's discursive practices (Foucault, 1972) and the mediation of social constructs (Dahlgren, 1995; Stallings, 1990). Molotch & Lester (1974), in explicating how "occurrences" become "events," propose that events become significant as demarcations of time and ultimately through their construction as resources for discourse in public events. They suggest that journalists provide citizens with a framework for the construction of public time. It is by such a process that a familiar narrative framework is constructed to channel our sensemaking along common lines. In his support of a constructionist model of media, Gamson (1988, p. 165) notes, "We have a public of interacting individuals who approach media discourse in an active way, using it to construct their own personal meanings about public events and issues." Stallings (1990) describes "keynoting," or the presentation of images that guide our collective attempts to make sense of life, including its risks. As a demarcation of time, the anniversary of the Westray explosion serves to remind the public of the event and to reconstruct it annually in a way that incorporates new information, action, or response. Evidence of keynoting may be found in the event's influence on the vernacular as affected individuals, politicians, and media shorthand the issues of worker safety, government regulation, and political influence with the phrase "another Westray."

Ultimately, events at the Westray mine were not the cumulative outcome of a multitude of retrospective sensing, but of processes of enactment whereby many retrospective senses were made into a few dominant ones.

This raises issues of power that are relatively unexplored in Weick's (1995) theory of sensemaking in organizations (Helms Mills & Mills, 2000). It seems to us that structural location (i.e., ownership versus non-ownership) plays an important part in how and what gets enacted in a given environment. This is not to suggest that the "spin" an employer puts on a situation will be simply accepted by employees (or media consumers). That can depend on a number of things, not least the processes used to create a sense of self. It is, however, to suggest that some actors exert more powerful influence than do others on sensemaking. Nor are we suggesting that employers deliberately and consciously enact sense out of naked self-interest, devoid of other influences. This does happen (and was retrospectively attributed to Westray management), but often the enactment of a sense of a situation depends on location within a discourse (Foucault, 1979), whereby the outcome is arrived at in response to various, sometimes countervailing influences. In the Westray narrative, these influences include the constraining effects of internal power mechanisms, market forces, and external political realities. In their analyses of the explosion and its aftermath, Hynes & Prasad (1997), Glasbeek & Turner (1999), and McMullan (2001) all implicate the assumptions of the capital model to varying degrees.

Power also rests with those whose very job involves the enactment of a given sense of reality, i.e., the media. It is in this latter overt acknowledgment that we see an extension of sensemaking theory. Black (1982, p. 89), in his examination of the politics of the news, notes that news content is subordinate to "industrial structures, personnel organizational forms, control systems, institutional policies, occupational routines and the technologies of reproduction and distribution." In an early but direct challenge to the alleged objectivity of news, Molotch & Lester (1974) incorporated the discourse of power in their analysis of news work, "We see media as reflecting not a world out there, but the practices of those having the power to determine the experience of others" (p. 111). This exercise of media power is registered in two primary ways: the dearth of coverage of certain topics (Nelkin, 1988) and the reliance on experts as news sources (Berkowitz, 1992; Gamson, 1988; McMullan, 2001; Nelkin, 1988; Sood, Stockdale, & Rogers, 1987). Nelkin (1988) notes the normative class biases that marginalize occupational health and safety as newsworthy. McMullan's (2001) content analysis of early Westray print coverage found the failure of journalists to portray safety adequately as an issue, while at least one television producer responsible for national television coverage acknowledges similar responsibility.¹ Dodd (1999), in her analysis of the "unsettled accounts" of Westray, implicates the characterization of risk as individual. Once the construct has been depoliticized and thus, socially marginalized, risk is no longer "newsworthy." One of the lessons of Westray has been the politicization of occupational health and safety and an accompanying shift in media discourse. The television producer, referenced previously and dis-

satisfied with his own experience in the construction of the Westray story, notes that he would do things differently. If he were now confronted with information on unsafe organizational practices, he would go beyond ascribed political motivation and attempt to “look into it now, before somebody gets killed as opposed to reacting to it after it happens.”¹

The second way in which the media register power is their reliance on official sources. In McMullan's claim that news narratives are “highly selective, interpretive and profoundly invented” (2001, p. 132), he notes the reliance on experts, professionals, and their agents. In their analysis linking risk and news construction, Wilkins & Patterson (1987) refer to the tendency to “line up the usual suspects . . .” (p. 85). Gamson (1988) notes that the critics (one-half of Wilkins & Patterson's “suspects”) often share the same common unstated frame and thus fail in challenging official narrative. He refers to the absence of “supposedly illegitimate challengers” in media discourse of organizational or government issues. It is distrust of such expertise that characterizes the accounts of the group that collectively came to be known as the Westray Families' Group, conveying a profound contempt for both mine management and industry experts. It is their accounts that Dodd (1999) privileges in her examination of the “unsettled accounts” of Westray. McMullan & Hinze (1999) claim that journalists and corporate sources form a hermeneutic circle for rationalizing business practices. In their analysis of print coverage of Westray, they noted the accredited expertise of professionals and the clear articulation of business interests in the explosion's reportage. For the first few hours after the explosion, Curragh Resources, the owners and operators of the Westray mine, were unreachable; they appointed a public relations firm from Toronto to take phone calls.¹

Later, press briefings, orchestrated at inconvenient times and full of technical jargon, created a façade of organizational openness (Jobb, 1994) that belied a well-constructed demarcation between the company, the families, the media, and the public. One reporter referred to these “tedious briefings with maps and cross-cuts showing shafts and pointers and big maps and displays . . . [A]bsolute fabricated briefings and no choice but to cover them.”² He contends that “Curragh absolutely controlled that event from the get-go and they got away with it.” His producer reinforces this perception: “Curragh would parade into the community hall, and they would do their little set piece; they would use a lot of jargon; they would talk about methane parts per million . . . they would talk about cross-cuts and architecture of the mine as if we understood it. And then they would get up and leave.”¹

Sood, Stockdale, & Rogers (1987), in their analysis of news coverage of natural disasters, refer to reporters' preference for a “media czar,” a centralized source of credible and authoritative information. They propose that this czar would have authority and the expertise to interpret and clarify complexity for a generalist reporter. At Westray, before the cameras, in unconscious parody of such a role, sat Colin Benner. Benner was a Curragh executive with only a month's association with the Westray mine and no previous coal mine experience. Within

hours he became the corporate face of a company in crisis. He provided the technical information and updates on the rescue and recovery efforts both to the media and to the families. His telegenic presence (Jobb, 1994; Richards, 1996) delivered the message that the company cared only for the well-being of “our men.” His increasingly haggard appearance over the course of five days, his rolled-up sleeves, his discarded tie, his shadowed eyes all conveyed concern and compassion. Dean Jobb, an investigative journalist with the provincial newspaper *The Chronicle-Herald*, wrote a book about Westray in which he described Benner thus:

Benner, a forty-seven-year-old career-mining executive with just a touch of grey at the temples, was the perfect spokesman for a corporation under fire in the age of instant TV coverage. He had the grooming and good looks of a movie star or a model on the cover of *GQ*. And when he faced the cameras, Benner was the picture of grace under pressure. He exuded calmness, confidence, and just the degree of toughness as he deftly fielded reporters’ questions. *For millions of Canadians keeping vigil in front of their television sets, Benner came to symbolize the Westray drama.* (Jobb, 1994, p. 53, emphasis added)

In later days, Benner was variously described as “[a] pretty boy, seeking to make the public sorry for the poor company” (Comish, 1993), “slick willy,”¹ “old golden voice” and “the silver-tongued devil” (Dodd, 1999), and “a smooth, slimy, slick piece of work.”² A broadcast news producer¹ notes that Benner “disappeared on Thursday and I don’t think . . . he’s ever stepped foot in the province again.” He is wrong in that assertion, as Benner appeared before the commission of inquiry four years later and testified for two days. His testimony consisted primarily of a condemnation of then-current management practices and his planned changes had he assumed full responsibility for the mine. Benner’s media presence may be contrasted to the noted absence of Clifford Frame, president and CEO of Curragh. He declined to take the advice of his well-paid media consultant and appear on the company’s behalf during the rescue and recovery efforts (Richards, 1996). His image was captured infamously on the day after the search was called off as he beat a hasty retreat back to head office. A television reporter describes it as “that wonderful photo of Clifford Frame with a cigar in his mouth, throwing his very expensive piece of luggage into this very expensive car, slamming the trunk and driving away.”² In reference to Curragh’s management of the media process, McMullan & Hinze (1999) claim that the company “wrote scripts, provided the stage and trained the actors for a public culture drama” (p. 214). They find that “journalists were left (merely) to write about the performance.”

Sensemaking as ongoing

In proposing sensemaking as ongoing, Weick (1995) reminds us that enacted sensemaking has some stability. To reduce levels of uncertainty and ambiguity, we continually maintain an (ongoing) sense of a situation. If we were not to do so, social intercourse would collapse and literally nothing would make sense. Much of Weick’s (1990, 1993, 1995, 1996) work is focused on organizational “shocks”

as disruptions to ongoing sensemaking and how people cope with these. This work has proven invaluable in showing how we can learn from organizational disasters by helping people to prepare for sensemaking disruptions. At another level, Weick's theoretical approach is useful to explore the role of the media in creating ongoing sensemaking after such shocks and the potential this has for weakening individual and group sensemaking.

This examination finds its first precepts in the definition of news. News has been variously characterized by consequence, immediacy, prominence, oddity, and proximity (Gibson, 1984) as well as by conflict, change, action, concreteness, and personality (Metzler in Wilkins & Patterson, 1987). Organizational crisis will often embody many, if not all of these elements. Events that may be described alternatively as disasters, crises, or accidents by definition disrupt the normal flow of news work. In response, news workers routinize their work, even in times of crisis, through a process of typification (Berkowitz, 1992). This process locates the reporting of crisis as purposive and socially learned. As journalists view events, they modify them to approximate their stereotypes and ignore cues that stray too far from prototype (Berkowitz, 1992). As a result, both work processes and story themes remain remarkably similar. Berkowitz (1992) proposes three stages through which the reporting of crisis passes: (1) the human tragedy, (2) the exploration of the mystery of "why?", and (3) the official efforts to restore normalcy. One reporter, who was early on the scene at Westray, acknowledges this framework of typification, "Disaster stories have a formula; there's always a morgue, there's always a medical spokesperson."² This same reporter lamented the formulaic but necessary task of attending the funerals of dead miners and seeking out emotive, visual footage from grieving family members. The reporter describes the attempted transition to Berkowitz's (1992) second stage and the mining company's efforts to thwart this process, "so the story became about jousting between the media and the company; the company wanted to talk about rescue and we wanted to talk about cause and effect . . ."² In a press conference held only two days after the explosion, Colin Benner attempted to quell discussion of unsafe practices and lax management. He referred to the rumours as "most defeating in this time of sorrow and anguish" (Jobb, 1994, p. 70). Further confrontation ensued as the story developed. Curragh clearly wanted its efforts to "restore normalcy" to focus on re-opening the mine. In contrast, the public, miners, and family members remained fixed in a search for accountability.

The typification of journalists' work, corporate convergence, and the resultant homogeneity of news support Weick's framework of ongoing sensemaking. Rooted in dissonance theory, sensemaking supports our search to minimize equivocation. The confluence of media narratives serves to channel our sensemaking along paths that reproduce stable organizational portraits with minimal ambiguity. The early portrait of Westray, of widows and orphans, of grief and loss, continued until a new portrait took its place. This was one rooted in the search for accountability represented by the commission of inquiry.

Extracted cues and creation of the plausible

As human beings in complex environments there is only so much information we can process. We choose to focus on certain cues and not others. Thus, according to Weick (1995), one key to understanding the sensemaking process is to make sense of the cues that trigger a particular understanding of reality. At Westray the mounting coal dust was only one cue among others. Other dramatic cues included the threat of layoff, experiences of long-term unemployment, promise of economic upturn, etc. A sensemaking approach to the disaster needs to assess what were the various prominent situational cues and how through the micropolitics of organization each one was either stressed or ignored. Similarly, we are most interested in exploring the various cues that storytellers (i.e., the media) used to enact a particular view of the disaster.

We noted previously the characteristics of news that guide editorial choice (Gibson, 1984; Metzler in Wilkins & Patterson, 1987). We also noted the typification process whereby even the most disruptive of shocks are steered to the prototypical (Berkowitz, 1992). A producer assigns stories; a reporter at a scene makes choices of whom to interview; for television, a camera crew isolates images; an editor orders and selects items that will ultimately go to print or to air. These choices, rooted in the discursive practices of journalism, are key to the construction and enactment of the events and organizations portrayed. Nelkin (1988) notes the choices a reporter at a disaster scene makes to cover or not cover particular aspects of a story. She further considers how the choice of verbal and visual imagery and tone shapes the ensuing public discourse. Fishman (1980) calls this "seeing and not seeing," while Stallings (1990) refers to "absent accounts." He identifies the construct of the "claims maker" to contrast absent accounts to "winning accounts," produced by successful claims makers. In revealing the absence of coverage of safety issues in media discourse, he laments the lack of status held by claims makers who speak for workplace safety.

Content analysis of the print coverage of Westray from one provincial daily newspaper illustrates an early pattern whereby the dominant construction was one of "tragic accident" or "techno-tragedy" (McMullan & Hinze, 1999; McMullan, 2001). Both examinations noted the absence or diminution of a discourse of crime. Another study created a typology of risk and found that the print media examined portrayed a discourse of human harm and of political wrongdoing, while downplaying a discourse of crime. The author deplored the neutralized enactment of an event he characterized as a "violent corporate act" (Goff, 2001).

We noted at the beginning of this paper that we were unsure if any of Weick's (1995) seven properties stood in precedence over others and suggested that this question would be idiosyncratic to the issue studied. We also contend that the properties are inextricably linked. Many elements of our previous analysis culminate in confluence with our discussion of extracted cues. For example, it is in the construction of journalistic identity that news workers learn the practices that delimit the approaches they take and the questions they ask. It is within a context of constrained resources, including time, money, and technology, that reporters,

editors, and producers choose. Every day, news workers, in particular broadcasters, debate the merits of investigative depth over dramatic immediacy (Berkowitz, 1992). The ongoing nature of sensemaking, with its search for stability, also works to define and constrain news in ways that minimize equivocation. These include reliance on prototypical frames and corporate sources. All this takes place within an economic environment of increasing media ownership convergence. Finally, and arguably most significantly, the power dynamics of the interaction between corporate sources and news workers narrows the range of possible cues available to the journalist (and thus, the sensemaker). While neither iterative, nor quite linear, the sensemaking framework describes the processual nature of news gathering and dissemination. Ultimately, the reader, the viewer, the *sensemaker* will extract cues from a pool that is socially constructed, politically informed, and not of her making. Then the reader or the viewer will "make sense" of a situation by accepting a plausible narrative driven by these cues.

Weick (1995) contends that sensemaking is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. For example, when it was first argued that the world was round, whatever scientific evidence was marshalled to support this view was ignored in the face of the more plausible account that the world appeared flat. The notion of plausibility provides a useful way of exploring how dominant senses of reality are enacted. It gives us tremendous insight into the processes of the politics and micropolitics of work. The media's use of certain journalistic conventions and referencing of common sense notions of organization have served to make plausible accounts that often obfuscate, rather than illuminate. We propose that hegemonic media constructions represent both the implausible and plausible indiscriminately as truth (Gramsci, 1978). They do so through the disciplines of power and politics (social sensemaking) with the consequence that, in our search for cues and clues, we afford media representations undue privilege.

We focus on the element of plausibility in support of our premise that the media have become key sensemakers on our behalf. We suggest that the conventions of journalism root the identity of newsmakers and lead to typification of organizational disaster coverage. This, along with delimited cues determined by those with social influence, construct enacted narratives that will be accepted as plausible.

When the Westray mine exploded, the "public" was forced to encounter and reconcile discrepant cues. Men who go out to work each day come home at the end of a shift to their families; workplaces are safe; managers care about their employees; Westray was going to bring an economic boost to an economically depressed region. The cues vie for our attention and understanding. We look back in efforts to marshal an explanation. Perhaps there was an equipment malfunction; is it possible that there was human error? Mining is known to be dangerous and Nova Scotia has experienced mining disasters before. In seeking to answer these questions and resolve contradictions, we turn on the television and go out for a newspaper, in search of cues and clues. We try to make sense of the incomprehensible. Surely "our men" wouldn't place themselves in danger, would they? And

just as certainly, no company would jeopardize the lives of its employees and its own continuing viability by promulgating unsafe practices? At this sensitive time, we wouldn't want to besmirch the reputation of those involved. We read of the safety award given to Westray shortly before the explosion; we see Colin Benner, distraught and dishevelled, we hear the quiver in his voice; we mourn with and for the families we see in news coverage, their faces still vacant with shock. Finally, we settle, for now, on the tentative but *plausible* explanation: accidents happen.

Conclusion: Theoretical and research implications

Truth was a central character in the Westray drama. Claims makers quickly vied to advocate for the accuracy (plausibility?) of their narratives. The ritual and rhetoric of the media briefings exemplify this. In a foundational moment, Colin Benner unwittingly brought together the relevant discourses of power, media, and truth in his oft-quoted statement at a news briefing that "Mother Nature cannot always be predicted or controlled." In this admonition to reporters who would seek out a story of risk, of safety breaches, of careless and imprudent management, of political malfeasance, he maintained his trademark polish. With the false modesty of only the truly powerful, he ceded rhetorical authority to nature. In so doing he returned the narrative to accident, the company to a state of grace, the miners to a state of heroism, the families to a state of tragic bereavement, the media to a state of dependency, and the public to plausible coherence.

We suggest that at least three potentially plausible narratives of Westray emerged through media coverage of the explosion. They are: (1) the explosion as tragic act of nature; (2) the explosion as a result of the actions of individual miners and supervisors, who abdicated their safety roles and volunteered for dangerous work in response to economic imperative. This was never more evident than in the televised and reported inquiry testimony of Donald Cameron, provincial premier at the time of the explosion. He disputed inquiry counsel's contention that responsibility rests with those at the top. Instead, he castigated workers who smoked underground; and (3) the explosion as a result of corporate malfeasance perpetrated by owners and management who disregarded protective legislation and manipulated political influence. This is the story that a producer noted was not told prior to the explosion¹ despite the documented efforts of one reporter, Betsy Chambers, as well as scrutiny by a national television documentary a year and a half prior to the mine's opening (Jobb, 1994). We do not argue that this list is exhaustive; indeed, we propose that many other narratives are available to be unearthed in further study of the media's construction of Westray. However, we propose that these three examples demonstrate the influence of media in the enactment of organizational crisis and the processual evolution of dominant narrative.

In this paper we have sought to extend the theoretical frameworks within which we enact media reality of organizational crisis. We contextualized our analysis in discussion of the Westray mine explosion of 1992 in which 26 miners died. It is the first analysis of this event that is explicitly grounded in the theory of sensemaking, although this is a mechanism that has been applied to other studies of organizational crisis. In using sensemaking to explore the media and their con-

struction of Westray, we explicated the elements of Weick's (1995) framework. Weick (1988) identifies the media as a cause map of past experience and future expectation. He characterizes this as a space wherein the disjunctures that challenge our sensemaking may be resolved and decisions made. Using his framework, we must contest his claim that divergent views emerge through media texts in which organizations, institutions, and the state compete for the dominant reality. We conclude instead that dominant reality is channelled through the conventions of journalistic practices that reflect personal and professional identity as well as resource constraints. We find that the identity constructs of newsmakers, bound by dramatic imperative and typified responses to shocks, perpetuate a limited range of organizational imagery. In the case of Westray, the media authored an early tale of sorrow and loss and a later tale of blame and responsibility. In so doing they have profoundly influenced the larger discourses of worker safety and organizational responsibility in the province of Nova Scotia. In the construction and reconstruction of the Westray story, historical narrative has become overdetermined (Weick, 1995), allowing heuristics of grief and blame to represent pathological reproduction of dysfunctional practices (Mills, 1998; Wicks, 2001).

We propose a future research agenda that continues to explore the transition of lived experience to news narrative (McMullan, 2001). In particular, we see this as critical given the ongoing convergence of both media ownership and technology in Canada. We note as an example of Canadian media convergence in the past few years the purchase of the country's largest chain of newspapers by a commercial broadcast empire and the company's subsequent retrenchments. Overt editorial interference has resulted in the dismissal and resignations of numerous columnists and executives. These issues raise ongoing questions about the media's ever-narrowing source of cues to guide our sensemaking and the role of power in this process. We advocate an active exploration of the effect of these factors on media-constructed organizational reality.

In conclusion we note the limitations of media content analyses of Westray to date. Studies until now were limited to early print coverage from one provincial newspaper. To further develop, and ultimately to test the theories we have proposed, it is necessary to examine a broader range of media coverage including national print and broadcast. As well, it is imperative that a longitudinal examination of media content be undertaken to unearth the still evolving construction of the Westray narrative.

Notes

1. Personal communication with a former executive producer for a major television station, June 15, 2001.
2. Personal communication with a local television reporter, June 17, 2001.

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