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Organizational Disruptions and Triggers for Divergent Sensemaking

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Abstract

In recent years, scholars and practitioners alike have sought to better understand the emergent communicative processes involved in the implementation of strategic organizational initiatives. In response, this article builds on sensemaking and sensegiving theory to understand the interactions that developed between internal and external stakeholders in response to a post-9/11 change in the Maritime Transportation Security Act. A detailed, emergent account of a failed initiative was derived from public comments in the *Federal Register*, transcripts from public meetings, newspaper articles, and semistructured interviews with key internal informants. In-depth analysis of these data allowed us to examine a divergent sensemaking process and identify four critical triggers that led to a communication breakdown: (a) unidirectional and parsimonious communication, (b) multifaceted understandings of organizational identities, (c) misaligned cues, and (d) an emergence of interorganizational sensemaking. A first-order analysis presents data from an in-depth case analysis, and a second-order analysis uses the analysis to develop a divergent sensemaking conceptual model. From a strategic communication perspective, our findings demonstrate the importance of taking a broad perspective of the legitimate participants in a sensemaking process, as well as reconciling sensemaking trajectories to avoid contradictions between perspectives. We offer implications for theory, future research, and practice.

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Sensemaking and sensegiving help explain the convergent and divergent actions of organizational stakeholders in response to organizational change and strategy implementation (Hope, 2010; Lewis, 2000; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). To disentangle the dynamics of sensemaking and sensegiving, this article examines an incident that occurred at the Midwest District (MWD) headquarters of the United States Coast Guard (USCG). Over a 6-month period in 2006, the MWD sought to implement new training procedures to bring the regional units into compliance with national regulations set forth in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and engaged in a complicated process of sensemaking and sensegiving. Sensemaking occurs when organizational members seek to understand and interpret past enactments and to set forth interpretations that guide the organization forward (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). The sensemaking process embodies multiple stakeholders, both internal and external, and enables organizations to embark on trajectories of action (Brown & Jones, 2000; Dunbar & Garud, 2009; Gephart, 1993). On the other hand, organizations engage in sensegiving to influence others' sensemaking and meaning construction (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). This reciprocal process occurs through communicative behavior, but further research is needed to disentangle the dynamics by which stakeholders interact, and the mechanisms by which multiple interpretations (sensemaking trajectories) are reconciled (Kezar, 2013; Maitlis, 2005; Scott, Allen, Bonilla, Baran, & Murphy, 2013).

The new procedures implemented by the MWD focused on increasing preparedness by raising the effectiveness of training. To raise effectiveness, the USCG mandated mounting of new weapons on patrol boats and running exercise drills using live ammunition (live fire) on the Great Lakes. Following routine procedure, the district headquarters published a public notice outlining proposed live fire safety zones for training with live ammunition on the Great Lakes in the *Federal Register*, a federal publication of agency notices, rules, and announcements. Unexpectedly, the MWD's public notice announcing permanent training zones sparked unprecedented public outcry that developed into a major disruption. Six months later, the regional headquarters withdrew the proposal. In the end, the event had a significant negative impact on relationships between the public and the MWD, and the MWD has since reevaluated training procedures and its outreach to external stakeholders.

Analyzing the disruption of the MWD operations, this study builds on the Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) model by detailing the ways that sensemaking and sensegiving processes by multiple stakeholders can unfold. The analysis demonstrates the importance of reconciling sensemaking trajectories to avoid contradictions between perspectives. This work further examines the context in which divergent sensemaking can occur and identifies a number of triggers that enable divergence. Previous research is

considered in the following sections and subsequently a first-order analysis (Van Maanen, 1979) of the MWD disruption is presented. Building on the initial review, a second-order analysis is developed to better understand divergent sensemaking as a conceptual model of breakdowns in stakeholder communication.

Influencing Organizational Events Through Sensemaking and Sensegiving

Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) suggest viewing planned change and crises processes through the lens of sensemaking and sensegiving. *Sensemaking* is the individual construction and reconstruction of meaning based on available information and experiences; it is the process by which stakeholders seek to understand what has happened, and to develop a sense of what should be done moving forward. The process of sensemaking is often precipitated by a novel, confusing or ambiguous event (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), or equivocality (Weick, 1995). Weick (1995) identifies seven key properties of sensemaking that outline the process by which individuals construct individual identity, notice an event, frame the event based on their experiences, and come to create meaning based on both their individual framing and their interactions with others. In this framing, actors create their environments through dialogs and narratives (enactments) (Currie & Brown, 2003), and actors extract *cues* that help them determine what is relevant and what explanations are acceptable (Brown, Stacey, & Nandhakumar, 2008). Thus, sensemaking is a process that embodies both individual framing and interaction with others through social networks.

Simultaneously, *sensegiving* occurs when stakeholders attempt “to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred definition of organizational reality” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442), in order to communicate a changed vision to stakeholders and constituents. A new interpretive scheme of existing events is communicated through symbols and symbolic action. In particular, when communication becomes routinized, there is an opportunity for key members of an organization to engage in sensegiving, setting a path for future action by providing a clear path forward (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Prior studies of sensegiving focus on managerial action intended to influence subordinates toward a particular end goal (Hoffman & Ocasio, 2001; Hope, 2010; Rouleau, 2005; Smith, Plowman, & Duchon, 2010), although sensegiving could also imply a broader political agenda that could be employed to understand higher level action in organizations (Hope, 2010).

Sensemaking and Sensegiving as Interacting Trajectories

Sensegiving is often discussed within the context of the leadership of an organization (Bartunek, Krim, Necochia, & Humphries, 1999; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Here we go beyond leadership to understand how all stakeholders actively engage in sensegiving. In engaging with sensegiving, we seek to articulate the

iterative, sequential, and reciprocal processes of negotiation, both internally and external to an organization. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) proposed a four-stage model that accounts for the process of sensemaking and sensegiving: (a) envisioning, (b) signaling, (c) reenvisioning, and (d) energizing. In the first stage, the primary stakeholder engages in sensemaking and sets forth a vision for change or response. In the second stage, the primary stakeholder communicates a plan to stakeholders as sensegiving. In reenvisioning, internal and external stakeholders respond to the proposed plan, interpret, and engage in sensemaking. In the last stage, stakeholders come into alignment on a revised plan for resolution.

The process of change—in response to a disruption, or in response to more mundane managerial action—is a negotiation, through which stakeholders negotiate and interpret tasks (Isabella, 1990) through mutual sensemaking and sensegiving. Stakeholders negotiate meaning with the aim of moving toward agreement (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Convergent sensemaking is alluded to in existing sensemaking literature, whether describing successful organizational learning (Christianson, Farkas, Sutcliffe, & Weick, 2009), a change initiative (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), a collapse of sensemaking (Weick, 1993), or a successful, yet inaccurate notion of sense in a crisis (Weick, 1988). Sensemaking is thus a dialogue between actors attempting to identify a plausible, unified narrative, providing stakeholders a singular sense of a particular event or situation.

On the other hand, divergent sensemaking examines a relatively unexplored dynamic whereby multiple organizational entities engage and seek to resolve conflicting interpretations of the same event, but in the process they create increasingly different views of reality. Maitlis (2005) describes “fragmented sensemaking” where key actors have little control over a given situation, and there is room for interpretation and negotiation of meaning. Divergent sensemaking moves beyond this, implying that key stakeholders fail to reach agreement, moving further from resolution and further from a coproduced energized state. Current theory recognizes multiplicity of interpretation (Weick, 1990, 1995), but here we articulate conditions that can lead to divergent end points, rather than a dynamic where multiplicity of interpretation initially precipitates sensemaking only to later converge.

Building on Gioia and Chittipeddi’s (1991) original model of *intraorganizational* sensemaking and sensegiving, Figure 1 presents an adaptation of their original model applied to an *interorganizational* context.

The process begins when the primary stakeholder engages in sensemaking and envisions a way forward. That way forward is signaled out to stakeholders in an attempt to sensegive. Organizational stakeholders receive the signal and conduct their own envisioning in light of the received sensegiving, and then send their own signal. This initial exchange provides an opportunity for all parties to consider all signals and sensegiving messages in a reenvisioning stage. In this way, the reenvisioning stage is a shared space across all interested stakeholders. It is in this space that negotiation and alignment of visions can take place. If stakeholders are able to align their visions, they codevelop new directions and communicate a renewed interpretive scheme to the involved stakeholders. If not, then the stages are revisited again with each stakeholder

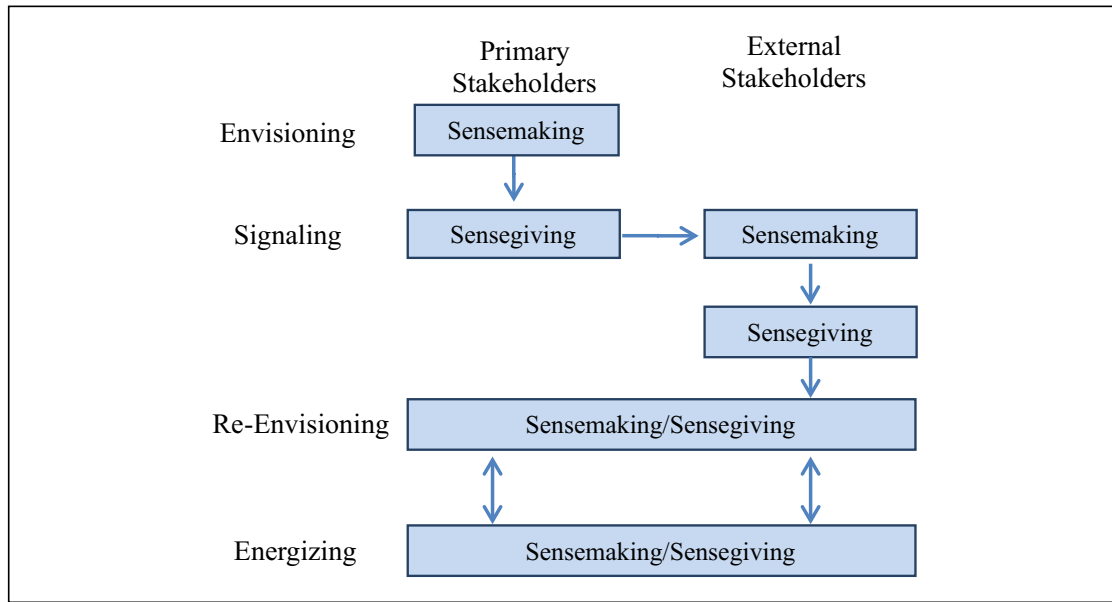


Figure 1. Convergent sensemaking/sensegiving map.

Source. Adapted from Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991).

attempting to envision and then sensegive before revisiting the reenvisioning stage. This dynamic leads to convergent sensemaking.

Research Method

In line with prior sensemaking studies (Christianson et al., 2009; Weick, 1988, 1993), this research takes an inductive approach to examining the environment within which the live fire event and subsequent actions occurred. This analysis focuses on the chain of events that was derived from an analysis of interviews with key participants from the MWD, transcripts from the public meetings, an in-depth analysis of public comments submitted to the *Federal Docket*, and an analysis of newspaper coverage throughout the course of the disruption. Through the examination of texts, documents, and individual perceptions of the relevant entities, the interpretive approach builds a symbolically constructed understanding of identity. The researchers were granted access to a generally inaccessible investigation site, and a single case method was selected in line with Yin's (1984) guidelines for case selection. A single case study allows for the development of rich and detailed descriptions of an organizational disruption and provides an opportunity to adequately capture the nuances of this focal event (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Data Collection

Onsite interviews were conducted with six key internal stakeholders over a 2-day period in September 2007. Interviews were semistructured and averaged 60 minutes in

length. Each interview was recorded and transcribed to ensure the accuracy of the subsequent analysis. Interviews began with an open-ended question regarding the interviewee's role in the USCG organization, role in the live fire event, and general role in the public communication process. Respondents were also asked to respond to coverage in external media such as newspapers and to explain the organizational responses to media commentary. Quotes from interviews are identified in the following analysis. In addition to interview data, substantial quantitative and textual data were aggregated for the case study. Through the course of the live fire event, the public comment period allowed external stakeholders to submit testimony and written opinions. From September 8, 2006, through December 12, 2006, 979 public comments were filed into the *Federal Register* as part of the public comment period. The public record included transcripts from the nine public hearings, which were held during the course of the incident. In addition, 265 newspaper articles were retrieved from the Lexis-Nexis search engine. Newspaper articles written between January 6, 2006, and March 24, 2008 (the period immediately following the disruption) were collected through a search using a set of keywords relevant to the case study.

Data Analysis

Data were coded to identify the key themes and general attitudes that emerged in both the public comments and the press coverage. Coders examined each public comment and each newspaper article and categorized them into one of 11 themes: commerce, community relations, civil rights, disruption, environment, fishing and recreation, government, international relations, militarization, public health, and zoning. Themes were determined based on an analysis of a subset of comments and interview data that suggested these as key topics representing the concerns of the public as reflected during the comment period. Coders also rated each public comment and newspaper article based on a Likert-type scale to rank the general attitude of the article. Two coders were used to measure the public's sentiment: intercoder reliability was measured using Cohen's Kappa (Cohen, 1968) and indicates substantial agreement ($\alpha = .82$). A first-order analysis was derived from the themes and sentiment analysis. These data were used to construct the detailed story that developed over the 6 months (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). A second-order analysis was subsequently conducted to develop an explanatory set of triggers to advance our theoretical perspective (Van Maanen, 1979).

Live Fire and the U.S. Coast Guard's MWD

In line with previous work on sensemaking and sensegiving (Christianson et al., 2009; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), this study focuses on ramifications of the live fire event as an organizational disruption. In order to understand the unfolding of divergent trajectories, it is first important to consider the context of the disruption. The primary mission of the USCG is to protect the public, the environment, and the United States' economic and security interests in all maritime regions located within the territory of the United States. At a national level, the USCG is broken down into 17 districts and

a headquarters in Washington, D.C. The MWD of the USCG is composed of approximately 6,000 men and women, with about 100 staff in the MWD headquarters office. The MWD headquarters is responsible for response, prevention, and planning operations in the Midwest region, and oversees five sectors that perform a wide range of functions at the local level. At the time of data collection, leadership within the district headquarters consisted of a District Commander and a command staff that included a Rear Admiral serving as the chief of staff, a Master Chief Petty Officer serving as Command Master Chief, a senior legal officer, and a public liaison officer. Prior to 2006, the office had two public relations officers but the MWD had recently been allocated an additional officer to serve in the new role of Chief of Response. The role of the Chief of Response was intended to be a mix of public relations and internal communication operations.

The MWD was continuing an ongoing process of increasing preparedness training in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and a subsequent 2002 mandated change in the Maritime Transportation Security Act. The USCG had increased border defense, increased shipping channel defenses on the international border between the United States and Canada, and increased general training for boating units in the district subdivisions. In 2005, as part of the upgraded defense, the USCG decided to arm boats in the Great Lakes area with larger caliber weapons. The USCG began mounting M240 machine guns, also called Mounted Automatic Weapons, onto patrol boats to provide added firepower. Prior to this, crews had been outfitted with handguns, shotguns, and smaller caliber M-16 machine guns. As with any maneuver involving activity near the border between the United States and Canada, counterparts in Canada were notified of the planned arming and subsequent training, and it was determined that there was no conflict with existing treaties that prohibit militarization of the border.

To facilitate automatic weapons training, the MWD established a number of temporary training zones in January 2006. Training zones are designated areas announced to the public; boaters are required to stay out of the zones during training for safety reasons. For each temporary training zone, an individual rulemaking proposal is filed in the *Federal Register*, as required, announcing the planned training exercise and the closure of the area around the training zones. After months of conducting training in temporary zones the district commander, in conjunction with the Department of Homeland Security, decided to establish permanent training zones to facilitate repeated training over a substantial period of time without the need for temporary zones. As part of this process, the district's legal officer filed federal document E6-123 on August 1, 2006, in a procedure referred to as "proposed rulemaking," which proposed the creation of 34 permanent safety zones on the Great Lakes within which the USCG would be able to conduct training exercises using live fire ammunition. By creating permanent zones, the MWD hoped to reduce bureaucratic waste associated with each temporary filing. The USCG viewed this process as a means of streamlining the process, reducing the time spent managing proposals for temporary zones, and standardizing public communication about the training. Mariners would be warned of trainings and prohibited from entering the zones only when training occurred. Training was expected

to happen roughly 60 days throughout the year, meaning that each of the 34 zones would be used 1 to 2 days a year.

The filing of the proposed rulemaking created a 30-day public comment period in which external stakeholders could file concerns regarding the rule. For proposed rules of this type, comment periods usually resulted in a handful of letters, with no more than 25 comments filed even in rare cases. The commanding officers of the MWD expected that the comment period would close, as planned, on August 31, 2006, and the training zones would become permanent. An article was published on August 24, 2006, in *The Bay City Times* (Kart, 2006) describing the MWD's plan for live fire training and questioning the proposed live ammunition safety zones on the Great Lakes. *The Bay City Times* article, "Bullets Over the Bay? Could Be the Coast Guard," was the first publication by an external entity to refer to the MWD's proposal. The article, paired with subsequent public statements issued by numerous state legislators, sparked an outcry from public stakeholders seen through increased media coverage, the involvement of a number of congressmen and senators (both at the state and national level), and an avalanche of public comments. As a result of the number of requests received after publication of the article in *The Bay City Times* and other news articles, the MWD agreed to extend the public comment period another 60 days and to conduct nine public meetings explaining the rulemaking process and providing public stakeholders an opportunity to voice their concerns. In the end, the MWD, in consultation with senior administrators, decided to withdraw the proposal for the live fire safety zones.

This broad event is referred to here as the live fire event; the full scope of the event provides a unique opportunity to study organizational sensemaking and sensegiving in the midst of an unsuccessful implementation of an important strategic initiative. This case underscores the central role that external stakeholders can take in shaping the sensemaking process. An examination of the roles of these various stakeholders demonstrates how multiple interpretations emerge and the conflicting perspectives of representative stakeholders exacerbated the situation and further fueled the unfolding incident to develop into a major disruption for the MWD. In considering the roles of various stakeholders, Table 1 provides an outline of the various stakeholders involved in this event. Table 1 gives a sense of the size and role of each stakeholder. In addition, sample quotes are included that characterize the communication that was typical of each group, as well as some of the primary concerns of each group.

Interplay of Sensemaking and Sensegiving in the Live Fire Case

Organizations often set forth a path of action, but all too often fail to fully understand external stakeholders' concerns. In this case, the USCG experienced a major disruption in which there was a clear and direct impact on the organization's primary goals. Unlike traditional sensemaking cases (Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1993), this system involved external stakeholders who actively interpreted and shaped the unfolding events. Following Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), the analysis of sensemaking and

Table 1. Examples of Key Stakeholders.

| Stakeholder | Example | Estimated stakeholders in category | Key concerns (illustrative quotes from stakeholders) |
|--|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| United States Coast Guard—Midwest District | Admiral | Staff of 100 | My decision throughout the summer of 2006 was let's move to the next level here, let's us save ourselves some work, let's get a consistent message out to the public, provide visibility they can put zones on the charts and do all these things, so let's us go ahead and formalize what we are doing. |
| Public—Citizens | Public citizen in Minneapolis | Approximately 40 million | I am concerned about the safety for boaters in nearby waters, as well as the possibility for environmental damage from the lead contained in the rounds fired. |
| Government—Federal | Congressman, 1st District, Michigan | 12 Senators and 73 congressional representatives | I understand the need for security at our nation's borders. However, with seven proposed zones on Northern Lake Michigan, six zones on Lake Superior, and six on Lake Huron, I have serious concerns regarding the Coast Guard's proposal to establish permanent live gunfire training in the Northern Great Lakes. |
| Government—State | State senator, 23rd Ohio District | 280 State senators; 660 state representatives | I am writing to express my strong objection to the proposal by the United States Coast Guard to create 34 safety zones for training and testing with live ammunition on the Great Lakes, including four such zones on Lake Erie. |
| Government—Local | Mayor, Cleveland, OH | Approximately 100 mayors | Cleveland believes that an environmental impact statement should be completed prior to approval of any live-weapons firing zones as proposed, because the proposal presents unacceptable potential impacts to public health and associated increased costs in water treatment by the Cleveland Division of Water. |
| Business—Shippers | Lake Carrier's Association | Approximately 125 business associations | Lake Carriers' Association supports the proposal to allow the U.S. Coast Guard to train with live ammunition in specified areas (with modifications to meet the needs to commercial navigation that will be discussed in following paragraphs), but we believe we should first acknowledge and address that this proposal has become rather controversial. |
| NGOs—Environment | Cleveland Peace Action | Approximately 150 business associations | Our organization is strongly against the proposed safety zones for weapons training and to the arming of vessels on the Great Lakes. |

sensegiving is first broken into the stages of strategic change: envisioning, signaling, reenvisioning, and energizing. Having established the process of change undertaken through the course of the live fire event, the unfolding of divergent processes are considered, setting forth conditions under which interorganizational sensemaking processes result in divergent outcomes.

Envisioning

Envisioning is a sensemaking process where the primary stakeholder sets forth a vision for change, or a path for responding to an event that is typically characterized by novelty or ambiguity. It is during this phase that leaders set forth a path of interpretation, seeking understanding of the equivocal nature of a situation. MWD leaders were initially certain that the proposed training zones would be accepted as unequivocally necessary and safe. They were also positive of the safety of the planned training because it had been ongoing for several months without incident or complaint through the use of temporary zones. Environmental assessments had also been conducted to determine that acceptable legal limits were met for ordnance released into the water. These experiences contributed to an unequivocal perspective on the safety of the training procedures, with regard to both the environment and public maritime safety. When the communications office thus detected a negative public response, a trajectory of sensemaking was set in motion that focused on a lack of understanding on the part of the public.

Internally, the MWD engaged in a routinized process. Routinization of the process stemmed from the viewpoint that the MWD had legal authority to proceed with the proposed training zones. The rulemaking process was well established, and one in which the public had not interfered. One member of the command staff captured the sentiment of the MWD, noting that,

At the field level, since we do safety zones or security zones all the time, we never publish . . . anything in the media, we rely upon the *Federal Register*, which is . . . the minimum legal requirement. (MWD Interview #6)

Indeed, according to another senior officer,

There was really not a thought given to right or wrong, as to whether this is a good thing. We do these things all the time. The fact that we've done this many exercises without a blip, I mean, we know what we are doing. (MWD Interview #3)

The quote speaks to the perception of training exercises as an internal matter and taken for granted, reinforcing the general perception held by members of the organization.

Equivocal situations often trigger sensemaking (Weick, 1990, 1995). Members of an organization, when faced with multiple interpretations, work to reduce the equivocality by engaging in conversation and negotiating a unified narrative to explain the situation. When the media began to cover the live fire proposal, starting with the

article in *The Bay City Times* on August 24, 2006, the event began to spiral into a major disruption. The appearance of media coverage signaled that the MWD envisioning of the rulemaking process had obfuscated the equivocal nature of the rulemaking process. Stakeholders had envisioned a different picture of the live fire zones. In an effort to achieve convergent sensemaking trajectories, the MWD thus sought to engage in sensegiving with external stakeholders.

Signaling

In the signaling stage, one stakeholder communicates a plan out to other stakeholders as sensegiving. In this case, the sensegiving process occurred from both the MWD and external stakeholders such as congressional members, reporters, mayors, and the general public. From the USCG's perspective, signaling occurred through the initial filing and subsequent communication at the public hearings. The first filing in the *Federal Docket* served as a signal that the MWD intended to formalize a change to existing routines. External stakeholders signaled back in response, expressing concern over the proposed plan. In response to stakeholder concerns over the proposed zones, and as an ongoing part of the sensemaking process, the MWD subsequently enacted public hearings as a way to communicate with the public. These sessions provided the MWD command with an opportunity to explicate what they perceived to be the intent of the live fire training zones. Maintaining the educational framing, the focus of the sessions was on educating the public regarding the importance of the ongoing training.

On the other hand, external stakeholders viewed news of the proposal for permanent training zones as a trigger event that indicated a need for active engagement, and thus through a series of active (and negative) responses to the *Federal Register* announcement a grassroots action emerged in opposition to the MWD. Early media coverage sparked additional reporting in states around the Great Lakes region, but also moved nonprofit organizations and business groups to action. For instance, the Michigan Environmental Council joined the cause and launched a call for new environmental studies. Numerous mariners and boaters' organizations also appealed to the public through editorials and interviews with the media (Hawthorne, 2006). The signaling phase began a process of organizing and coalescing on the part of external stakeholders, as the various external stakeholders responded to the MWD's actions.

Reenvisioning

In the reenvisioning stage, all stakeholders both internal to the MWD and external to the MWD, responded to the proposed plan, interpreted, and engaged in collective sensemaking (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). In this case, however, the transition from signaling to reenvisioning occurred as members of the MWD began to take note of the strong negative reaction from the public.

Officers within the MWD held a general perception that the public was not a valid participant in the rulemaking process, and that any misunderstanding invoked a need for greater education. But politicians, business owners, and residents around the Great

Lakes region actively reacted to the USCG's proposal. Internally, leaders within the MWD interpreted the public (external) response as grounds for sensemaking, calling for a need to recraft external communication strategy, rather than perceiving a need for sensemaking in cooperation with external stakeholders. In this way, the MWD can be viewed as having reverted to the envisioning stage where their original internal sensemaking was retrenched. External stakeholders were not viewed as valid members of the process, and external responses were integrated into the internal process without undertaking an internal-external dialogue. The public meetings, media coverage, and public comments did allow a wide variety of external stakeholder groups to engage in the reenvisioning process. What began as a variety of different signals of concern, such as environmental impact or citizen safety slowly were incorporated into an overall vision of the MWD as an organization that had overstepped its bounds. Environmentalists, commercial shippers, and local citizens started considering each other's concerns as they sought to make sense of the unfolding events. The volume and intensity of public comment, however, forced internal stakeholders to begin to address and to rationalize the response from external stakeholders. The appearance of *The Bay City Times* articles, as well as subsequent media coverage, triggered a deluge of public comments. As one public relations officer noted,

It was then we realized in the wrong, we did not communicate well enough ahead of time to know what kind of interest there would be . . . so we had to extend the comment period another 30 days. (MWD Interview #5)

Energizing

Finally, in the energizing stage stakeholders come into alignment on a revised plan. At this stage, a failure to gain alignment can derail the sensemaking process in its entirety, as appears to be the case in the live fire event. The perception that public concern arose from a lack of information in turn led to the enactment of a response by the USCG that focused on a series of public meetings intended to educate the public. The public education strategy was seen by internal stakeholders as a means to diffuse highly negative reactions from uninformed citizens. One MWD officer observed, "We really did an education piece, so when someone came in with a head of steam we were able to diffuse that to some extent" (MWD Interview #3). The internal perception that the enactment of education was as an appropriate response was supported by an organizational culture driven by routinized procedures, rather than fluid engagement and adaptation. With scientific studies and evidence from safely conducted trainings, it was clear to internal stakeholders that the trainings aligned with existing protocol for establishing safety zones. The communication office's message in its initial responses to stakeholders focused on an "American law enforcement mission and a homeland security mission that we have to provide to the public" (MWD Interview #5). The focus on education and information ultimately invalidated external perspectives; according to one officer, "Everybody has a right to their own opinion, but not everybody has a right to their own version of the facts" (MWD Interview #3). The notion that external stakeholders did not

have a valid version of the pertinent facts undermined the possibility that external stakeholders would be engaged as legitimate sensemaking participants. This disconnect, however, created an opportunity for external stakeholders to be energized around their interpretation of the events. As a result, they energized and became an even stronger force that the MWD could no longer discount.

Ultimately, it became evident that there was not enough public support to continue with the formalization of the proposed training zones. A retroactive process of sensemaking within the USCG revealed divergent internal and external trajectories pertaining to the discussion of the live fire zones. The public affairs officer explained,

We were able to determine that there were . . . environmental concerns, public safety concerns—am I going to get shot at when I am out there? Access to fishing spots, deconfliction with ferry routes and things like that. . . . Those are the broader categories, and we realized we hadn't been fully versed on the concerns of people. (MWD Interview #1)

The officer further commented,

The way I see it is because it was a long process nobody at any one point maybe we didn't quite connect the dots with what the interest might be in terms of the public and other entities in the Great Lakes. (MWD Interview #1)

Despite the need to establish permanent training zones, on December 18, 2006, the USCG announced its decision to withdraw the plan for permanent live fire zones on the Great Lakes. On January 5, 2007, a formal notice appeared in the *Federal Register* announcing the USCG's decision withdrawing their notice for proposed rulemaking. A summary of this sensemaking and sensegiving interplay is provided in Figure 2.

Viewing the interplay of the primary and external stakeholders, we can see how the MWD inadvertently makes numerous missteps with unintended consequences. First, they fail to engage with the external stakeholders in any significant way in the early envisioning stage. As a result, they are not able to anticipate the interpretations of their announcement in the *Federal Register*. When divergent views begin to emerge, they recalcitrantly persist in their original stance and insist that the public just needs to be educated. This persistence creates even stronger opposition as the external stakeholders interpret that they have been ignored. Ultimately, the external stakeholders, originally viewed as less powerful by the MWD, are able to dominate and shape the change implementation (Sonenshein, 2010).

Triggers for Divergent Sensemaking

Using the first-order analysis that allowed us to deconstruct the interplay between sensemaking and sensegiving, we next conducted a second-order analysis to develop generalizations that set the conditions for the divergent trajectories of sensemaking. This analysis revealed four key triggers that precipitated the divergence: (a) unidirectional and parsimonious communication, (b) multifaceted understandings of organizational

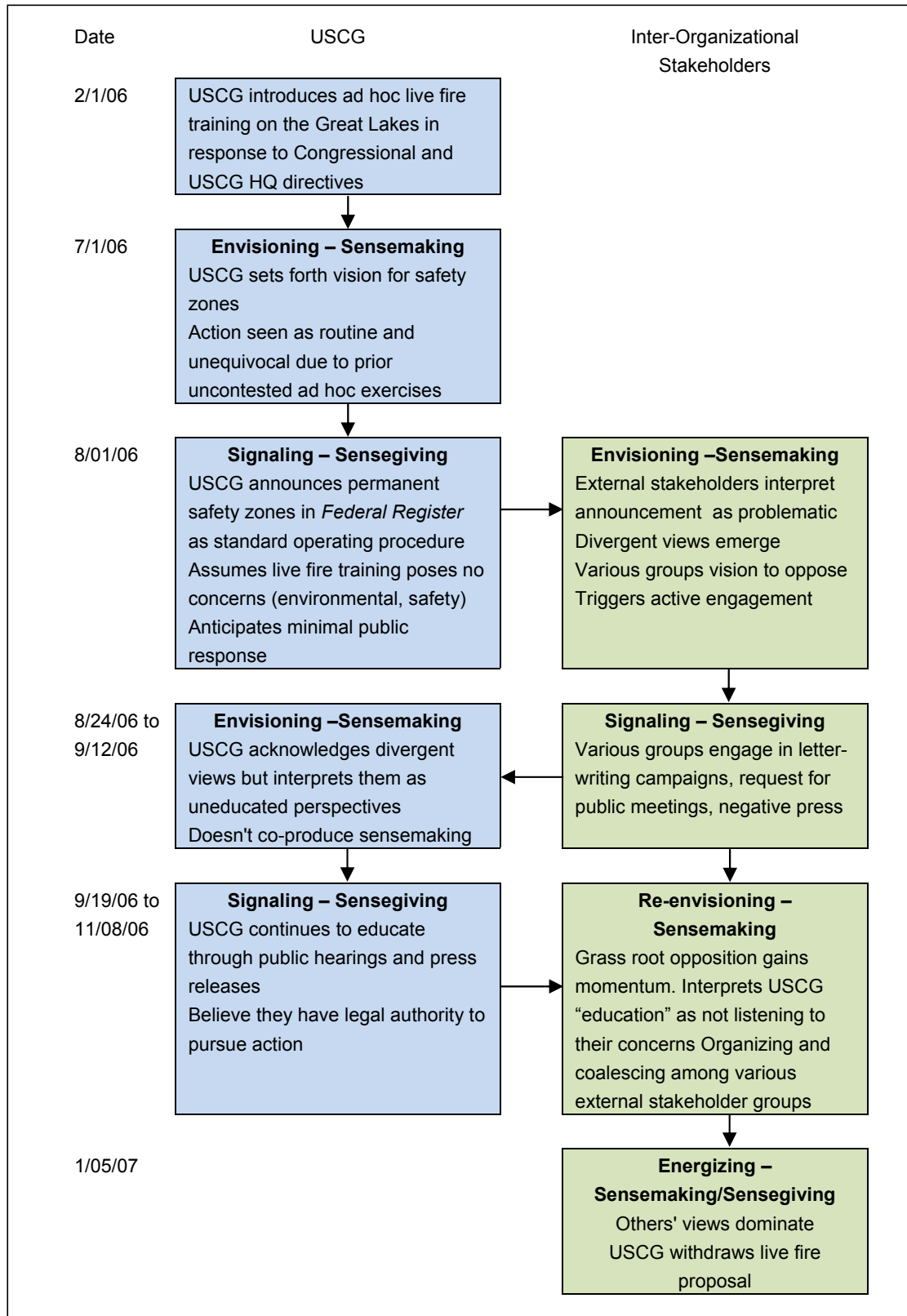


Figure 2. Divergent sensemaking and sensegiving during the live fire event.

identities, (c) misaligned cues, and (d) an emergence of coproduced sensemaking among the interorganizational stakeholders.

Unidirectional and Parsimonious Communication

Unidirectional and parsimonious communication by internal stakeholders led to a derailment of alignment in sensemaking and sensegiving, particularly toward later stages of the rulemaking process. Prior to the live fire event, leaders at the MWD did not consider external stakeholders as a part of the rulemaking process, and as a result, did not think it necessary to engage them in a sensemaking dialogue. External stakeholders were excluded for two key reasons. First, the merits of live fire training were not seen as equivocal, and thus early on, no sensemaking processes were initiated by the MWD, and no alternative explanations for events were sought. Second, the MWD considered rulemaking as an internal process. As a result, MWD leaders had little reason to inform the public of the permanence of the zones ahead of the proposal, much less to engage the public in the process of making sense of the need to train, or the need for safety zones. This perspective informed the unidirectional sensegiving approach observed during the signaling stage. Emphasis on facts, education, and a perceived naiveté on the part of the public resulted in the enactment of a reality in which external stakeholders were viewed as invalid participants in the sensemaking process. Although the legal requirements and the mandated mission lent credence to this sensemaking trajectory as a plausible one, the unfolding external reactions undermined the perception that there was a routinized and legitimate mandate to move forward.

Multifaceted Organizational Identities

Weick (1995) observed that sensemaking springs out of the concept of identity; in other words, the process of sensemaking is grounded in the organizational identity held by the stakeholders involved. Organizational identity is thus defined by what stakeholders of an organization find to be central, distinctive, and sustaining (Christianson et al., 2009; Hsu & Hannan, 2005; Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003). Over time, organizations and the individuals that comprise them, develop a coherent identity through actions and interactions. As an organization adapts and learns in response to changing conditions, the identity of an organization bounds the potential responses by limiting stakeholders' frame of reference (Christianson et al., 2009; Kogut & Zander, 1996). The sensemaking process is enacted within the framing of established identities.

As Christianson et al. (2009) observed, events such as the live fire event disrupt the limiting mechanisms of identity by raising questions about what the status quo is for a given organization. The events of September 11, 2001, provided the USCG with an opportunity to reevaluate its mission as an organization. In the aftermath, the U.S. government expanded the USCG's overall mission to include an increased emphasis on the defense of U.S. waterways, and a renewed focus on preparedness. As one officer

observed, “The Coast Guard fundamentally had to adjust its thinking with respect to being able to respond to threats to include vessel risks” (MWD Interview #4). For the MWD this increased responsibility was consistent with what it perceived as its identity. In reference to the military role of the USCG, another officer observed, “We are a branch of the Armed Forces, and we obviously work under the Department of Homeland Security” (MWD Interview #2). The role of the USCG as a military branch was viewed internally as an integral component of the identity of the organization.

The internal perception of the USCG as a military organization is critical in this incident. Military organizations represent a typification of routinized organizations (Blau & Scott, 2003; Janowitz, 1959; Roberts, Stout, & Halpern, 1994). The military is dependent on rational organizational processes that allow for the enforcement of a strict regimen of adherence to orders and procedure (Roberts et al., 1994). The bureaucratization of the armed services, paired with an organizational environment marked by professionalism and a high level of management results in a high level of collective rationality and observance of prescribed routines (Segal & Segal, 1983). From the perspective of the USCG, therefore, the arming of small cutters did not conflict with the existing identity as this was considered an inherent part of the organization’s enduring mission. Training with the new weapons, instead, was seen as a prescription for invoking a routine structure, which the USCG was well equipped to execute in its role as a military organization.

According to one senior officer, any course of action other than live fire training with the new weapons would have been inconsistent with the organization’s identity. As the officer observed,

Our people are out there to defend this nation and enforce its laws. If we are going to give them tools to do that, then they need to be trained to do that. So we have obviously given them the tools, it would be negligent of us if we didn’t train them. (MWD Interview #2)

This sentiment informed the decision-making process regarding how to proceed with establishing live fire zones. Internally, this identity further reinforces the notion that weapons were part of the USCG’s everyday existence. The machine guns that the USCG planned to mount on its cutters and control boats were actually just an updated version of the guns that had previously been used. In addition, the new version of the guns was perceived to be an improvement because it involved lower levels of required maintenance. Thus, the proposed change in training and arming was seen as an incremental change, and thus as consistent with the existing routines to handle adoption of new weapons.

Identity is not a one-sided coin (Pedersen & Dobbin, 2006); the USCG had a clearly established perception of its identity, but external stakeholders simultaneously held another perspective. Identity is a dual construct composed of internal culture and values, as well as the external expression of the organization to the public (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). The external identity of an organization is in part constructed through the external reputation of the organization, where reputation is defined as the long-standing and relatively stable collective judgment that outsiders hold toward a given

organization (Fombrun, 1996). The public rarely encountered the militarized identity of the USCG; it is clear from public comments that external stakeholders viewed the USCG as having a distinct identity as a relatively nonmilitarized organization. For instance, one commercial shipping outfit noted that the “icebreaking and buoy tending services [conducted by the USCG are] appreciated by commercial shipping and Great Lakes ports” [Public comment 552]. An individual commented, “I take great comfort in knowing the USCG is there in case I need them . . .” [Public comment 502]. Other individuals echoed this perspective, “The Coast Guard throughout history has been a welcome site on the Great Lakes” [Public comment 498], and “The Coast Guard is the guardian of our waters. They have dedicated their time and experience to improve and enhance our beaches and to prevent oil spills and pollution” [Public comment 485]. As these comments demonstrate, the USCG and the general public saw different aspects of the USCG’s identity as salient. These perspectives set the stage for the process of sensemaking undertaken as the live fire event unfolded.

Citizens in the MWD were familiar with the USCG largely through public outreach efforts and routine duties including lake rescues, boater assistance, and summer patrols; but these actions were not perceived to be components of a military organization. On the Great Lakes, the USCG is known for its search and rescue operations. The MWD of the USCG routinely patrols the Great Lakes region and is responsible for rescuing distressed boaters, monitoring licensing and regulations, and patrolling summer crowds. In addition, the MWD of the USCG is also responsible for ensuring that navigation aids on the lakes are in good working order. These types of activities do not generally involve visible display of side arms or firepower of any variety. Here then, is a conflict in the identity-image relationship of the USCG. The perceived militarization of the Great Lakes and patrol boats as presented to the public conflicted with the publicly held identity. The USCG’s own view of identity as a branch of the military, concerned with Homeland Security and defense of the inland water ways, led organizational members to view live fire exercises on the Great Lakes as routine and embarked on the enactment process in a routine fashion. Public stakeholders, on the other hand, saw the use of weapons in public space as contrary to the protectionist identity they associated with the USCG MWD, and therefore viewed the live fire exercises as conflicting with the traditional mission of the USCG. These conflicting identities precipitated the public outcry that followed the proposal of the permanent training zones, and set the stage for divergent sensemaking trajectories. In turn, this drove conflicting boundaries from which sensemaking processes were enacted.

Misaligned Cues and Divergent Trajectories

Weick (1995) notes that the focus on cues is a critical part of the sensemaking process and that they are small “seeds” that people use to grow larger stories to explain what is going on (p. 120). In this way, cues provide information that reinforces the plausibility of a given sensemaking trajectory. When researchers observe sensemaking from multiple perspectives, as in the current case, it is possible to see how the salience of cues can differ across sensemaking trajectories and drive multiple interpretations.

Internal cues and sensemaking trajectories. Examining cues in the live fire case, there was a misalignment between what the MWD perceived to be key issues and what the public considered to be the primary points of contention. The MWD relied on congressional aides and reporters as the primary feedback channels; this created a limited feedback mechanism through which officers were able to gain insight about external opinions. Internally, the MWD provided information about planned training and public outreach, and in turn, the MWD was able to gain feedback through the newspaper articles that were reported, and through input from officials. Evidence of the internal perception of the disruption is seen in the way that organizational leaders discuss their response. Following the public outcry, the MWD opened an extended comment period and a nine city public hearing tour; inside the MWD, success of the public hearings was judged based on community participation and active involvement on the part of the MWD leadership. “The whole point of the process [the public meetings] was to try to really show our willingness to . . . take [our officers] all over the Great Lakes . . .,” explained a senior officer at the MWD headquarters,

We were moving a whole bunch of people and these boards with all the information and all the equipment to record it. And I think another thing that made that thing as successful as it was the Admiral’s personal commitment to it. (MWD Interview #3)

As the organization progressed in its reaction, officers at the MWD headquarters looked for cues that their sensegiving signals were succeeding, thus reinforcing their current sensemaking trajectory. For instance, one officer considered a particular public meeting a success when a local Mayor thanked them for making the effort to visit their area. Comments from the public were perceived to be “very respectful,” although primarily “non-rational” (MWD Interview #4). In classifying the comments from the public as irrational for the most part, the MWD officers were able to maintain their existing trajectory without facing the reality of the public’s growing concerns as external stakeholders. In addition to gauging success based on feedback from officials, MWD officers took cues from the sentiment of press coverage as reinforcement. More than 250 newspaper articles pertaining to the live fire event were published in local newspapers throughout the region. Based on the coding, 34% of articles published during the incident focused on community relations. The tone of the press coverage, however, was consistently more positive than the content of the public comments, creating a misperception for the MWD as they focused on sentiment in the media, and not on the public comments.

External cues and sensemaking trajectories. MWD officers held the perception that the public meetings were providing much needed information to an uninformed public. On the other hand, the public response coalesced around a separate sensemaking trajectory that focused on the lack of coherence between expressed concerns and the response of MWD officials. The full 90-day public comment period yielded a total of 979 public comments. In analyzing the public record, only 7% of articles addressed issues pertaining to community relations. For instance, 51% of newspaper articles

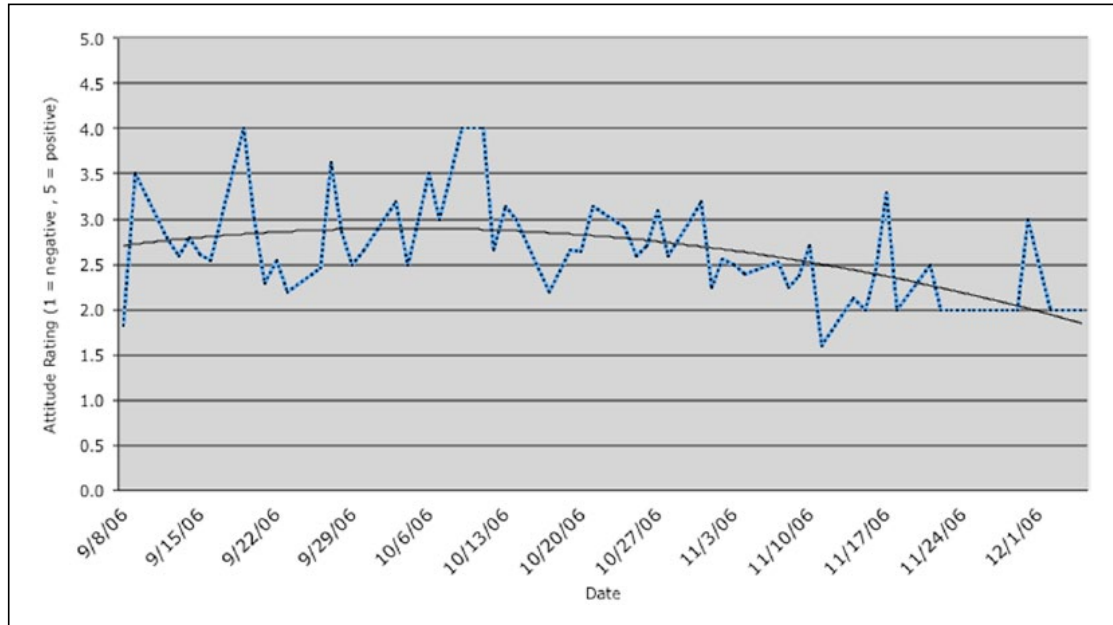


Figure 3. Trend of public attitude during organizational disruption.
 Note. Solid line = trend line.

focused on zone locations as their primary topic, echoing public concerns about where zones were located. Twenty-one percent focused on the impact of increased lead in the water as the result of live ammunition and 13% addressed concerns about increased militarization of the Great Lakes region.

During initial stages, public perception fluctuated significantly but trended downward over time. On the other hand, media coverage vacillated but trended positive in the long run. With the MWD relying on newspaper articles as a primary input channel, the true nature of public perception was never fully considered, despite the ready availability of public records of the comments. Indeed, while the MWD command assumed that their communication efforts were increasing public perception, Figure 3 more clearly illustrates the continued decline of public attitude toward the USCG's MWD proposal. As the diagram illustrates, the overall trend of public perception was downward over time, despite a small increase in the initial stages of the USCG's reaction to the disruption. The ongoing public hearings, focused on education and information, did little to improve public sentiment.

The primary themes of the comments also reveal insight into the public's feelings of dissatisfaction with regard to the proposal. Primary themes had little to do with the need for more education, but emphasized salient concerns relating to a host of issues. Concerns regarding safety focused on the location of zones and maritime safety. The Shipper's Trade Association of the Great Lakes, for example, noted that nine of the live fire zones were in or near major shipping lanes, and asked that nearly two thirds of the firing zones be changed to accommodate shipping concerns. Plans for informing boaters about training exercises were also a concern. Not all boaters have radios or use them

regularly; cell phones, e-mail, and the Internet are often used as primary channels for communication. Numerous citizens asked that the MWD establish a clear method for notifying the public of the exercises. In a quote to reporters, Duluth's Mayor Herb Bergson commented, "When people are thinking of where they're going to go fishing, are they going to go to the place that's quiet? Or the place where people are shooting?" (Egan, 2006, p. 5). The attitude of MWD officials was that the existing zones represented a compromise between existing boating areas and the needed training zones.

In addition to safety concerns, public responses focused on environmental issues. When planning to create the proposed safety zones, the USCG hired two environmental firms to conduct a health risk assessment study. The results of the risk assessment study found that there would be no elevated risks as a result of increasing lead levels due to lead bullets fired into the lake during training exercises. In his public statement during the public hearing in Waukegan, IL, a senior manager from one of the environmental firms said that the study had been conducted using overestimates of all materials to be used by the USCG, and that the risk assessment study clearly indicated that no risk existed and that lead concentration levels in testing areas would be one third of maximum allowable level. Yet the environmental study did nothing to quell critics: in a statement filed in the public record, the former Illinois Lt. Governor pressed the USCG to conduct further studies and submit the proposal for analysis by the Environmental Protection Agency. The call for additional studies was echoed in a formal letter by the attorney general of Illinois, and high-ranking politicians in other states including New York, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. The primary concern stemmed from the guns, which are capable of firing 200 to 600 rounds a minute, depositing an estimated 6,720 pounds of lead into the water each year.

The reliance by MWD officials on press coverage to indicate appropriate cues in turn meant that such calls for additional studies, paired with the general public's environmental concerns, were not given full weight in the course of the internal sensemaking process. The MWD continued to focus on cues that proved valuable in the past; press coverage and indirect feedback from officials, but as evidenced by the reaction to calls for additional environmental studies even this was couched within the frame of existing routines. Since the focus on existing cues provided the USCG with a plausible explanation of the event, that the public did not fully understand the information that had been shared, there was no need to seek additional feedback. Furthermore, in holding public hearings, officers within the MWD had stepped outside existing procedures and taken extraordinary steps to gain input.

Conflicting trajectories. External stakeholders—particularly public citizens involved in grassroots efforts—had approached the live fire zones with a different framing than that of the USCG through the construction of a distinct perception of the USCG's identity and a focus on different cues during the sensemaking process. Public stakeholders focused on the lack of transparency on the part of the MWD; stakeholders were interested in having their concerns heard by officials from the MWD at public meetings, yet it was clear that the MWD entered into the public meetings with the intention of listening without engaging. Indeed, interviews demonstrated that education of the public

took precedent over listening to concerns. Continued expression of what the MWD viewed as unreasonable or irrational concerns at the public meetings led the USCG to continue to focus on education and took the expression of concern as a cue that the public still did not understand. The public sensemaking trajectory was coalescing around a story about a distrustful, inconsiderate MWD, while the MWD story was forming around the idea of an uninformed public. These two trajectories were not headed toward convergence. When this fact became apparent, MWD officers took their cue from public officials and reporters (through newspaper articles), who placed blame on the MWD's inadequate communication and education efforts. In this way, the MWD's response was framed by a narrow perception of the situation at hand. Framing of the initial reaction as a community relations and education problem led the MWD to construct a response that focused dually on education and community outreach. The MWD's message did not change over the course of the public meetings, and in turn, external stakeholders took this as an indication that their concerns were not being integrated into the MWD's response plan. Continual enactment of these trajectories moved both parties further away from common understanding.

Coproduced Sensemaking Among External Interorganizational Stakeholders

The fourth trigger setting the condition for divergent sensemaking was set into action as the external stakeholders' interorganizational sensemaking unfolded. Hardy, Phillips, and Lawrence (2003) describe this as "a cooperative, inter-organizational relationship that is negotiated in an ongoing communicative process, and which relies on neither market nor hierarchical mechanisms of control" (p. 323). Recent studies have shown that collaborative interorganizational actions are often enacted around a particular issue or metaproblem (Hardy et al. 2006; Selsky & Parker, 2005; Werle & Seidl, 2012).

In this case, external stakeholders represented a wide array of groups, and through the process of engaging in public debate they coalesced as a movement on a common trajectory. In this way, the sensemaking process that external stakeholders engaged in led to the creation of informal structures, such as an informal coalition of shippers who worked together to voice their concerns to the MWD headquarters. Additionally, individuals and environmental associations called on Congressmen to exercise their influence, and Congressmen relied on the attendance of their constituents at public hearings to validate their involvement.

External stakeholders used the public meetings to weave an interdependent network and create an alignment of interdependent actors. Weick (1995) notes that face-to-face interactions serve as an opportunity for fine tuning the anticipated reactions of "others." In this case, the public meetings provided an opportunity for both MWD staff members and external stakeholders to calibrate their enacted sensemaking in response to cues. Unfortunately, the MWD's emphasis on a set of cues distinct from those of external stakeholders prevented officers from recognizing the conflicting public-private framings. The public, however, took advantage of these opportunities to develop

a set of expectations for the MWD as well as for each other, organizing through enactment. As the disruption continued, feelings of being forgotten, overlooked, or deceived took root in the minds of the external stakeholders and were shared and heard by other stakeholders. The various actors took action through the volume of public comments, written letters to congressional representatives and news media coverage. The ability of these varied external stakeholders to develop an alignment through sensemaking allowed them to have a voice significant enough to disrupt the MWD routines.

Discussion

A detailed examination of the live fire disruption reveals that the response to a major organizational disruption stems from distinct, but divergent, sensemaking trajectories that emerged in response to the proposal of the live fire training zones. This analysis reveals four critical triggers that set the stage for the emergence of divergent sensemaking perspectives: ignorance of equivocality of external stakeholders, multifaceted organizational identities, misaligned cues, and the emergence of interorganizational sensemaking. Because of the reinforcing nature of sensemaking, early diffraction caused the two trajectories to focus on different sets of cues as they continued sensemaking, causing further divergence in their views of reality. Finally, collective participation on the part of the external stakeholders created a powerful alignment of organizations that reshaped the environment.

The MWD's sensemaking routines led officers to enact a reality that assumed an unequivocal interpretation of the trigger event. The enacted ignorance of equivocality, in combination with conflicting identity lenses and misaligned cues, allowed for the emergence of a strong external interorganizational sensemaking that worked to shape the environment, resulting in the subsequent defeat of the training zones proposal. Seemingly inconsequential cues from external audiences resulted in an unwelcome outcome for the USCG. Following the withdrawal of the proposed rule-making, the MWD was forced to move its live ammunition training to regions on the East Coast where training zones were already established. In addition, much of the training is currently conducted using simulators, creating challenges for preparedness.

By evaluating a major disruption that emerged from a seemingly routine procedure, this discussion demonstrates that failing to recognize that external stakeholders may have an alternate understanding of an event resulted in a misguided and unintended sensegiving mentality. Officers within the MWD sought to provide the public with the justification for the live fire training exercises. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) posited that sensegiving was an initial step in the sensemaking process and reactions to the sensegiving were then incorporated back into the sensemaking trajectory to result in a convergent narrative. Contrary to Gioia and Chittipeddi's mode, we observe a deafness to incorporating the feedback from external stakeholders into the internal sensemaking trajectory. At this point, the divergent paths of sensemaking were so firmly entrenched that feedback could not be viewed through an alternative lens. Weick (1988) notes that irrevocable actions, such as the ones observed in this case, can lead

to “tenacious justifications and blind spots” (p. 310). Rather than observing sensemaking trajectories that converge as depicted in Figure 1, this case illustrates trajectories that diverge toward separate paths as seen in Figure 2.

Previous research has also demonstrated the importance of organizational identity in both the internal and external sensemaking process (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). It is, however, the salience of different facets of an organization’s identity among members of the broader sensemaking community that make conditions ripe for divergent sensemaking. Had officers taken a more holistic view of the USCG identity, convergence of sensemaking perspectives may have occurred. Furthermore, the unique lenses through which the MWD and its external stakeholders viewed the live fire disruption made focusing on a common set of cues more difficult. In this way, the conditions for divergent sensemaking were not mutually exclusive.

In addition, informal organizing is important to the sensemaking and sensegiving processes for two reasons. First, it demonstrates how organizing arises out of sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Prior to the live fire event, external stakeholders were not aware of each other, and were in most cases, not listening to each other. Through the disruption, individuals coalesced by interacting with one another about the live fire trigger event. The community came together to attend public meetings, consumed news media on the issue, and authored and enacted a “public opinion” sensemaking trajectory. That narrative provided the emergence of a common identity and because of the demonstrated willingness of individuals to work together and participate in dialogue; the other stakeholders’ wishes were honored. The second reason that this alignment of other stakeholders is important to understanding sensemaking is that it shows that the external stakeholders can influence and change reality for an organization (Lewis, 2014; Sonenshein, 2010). Officers in the MWD headquarters experienced a different environment once external stakeholders aligned and changed the ultimate trajectory of the sensemaking dialogue.

Theoretical Implications

This research engages critical issues of management and strategic communication, examining internal decisions made by the MWD, and the resulting implications for community relations. A number of important implications are apparent for how scholars think about sensemaking and sensegiving from a theoretical perspective and for framing future research. First, this work demonstrates the role that identities and boundaries have in sensemaking processes. Indeed, Weick (1977) notes that an organization’s views of its boundaries can influence sensemaking and potentially be problematic for the accuracy of sensemaking narratives. This dynamic was observed clearly in the live fire case. Employing a strict view of organizational boundaries created extensive blind spots for officers in the MWD and enabled officers to enact a reality in which those outside the formal boundaries were not legitimate participants. As boundaries change, so does the story that unfolds. Had the MWD adapted its boundaries prior to the live fire event, the unfolding disruption may have captured perspectives of external stakeholders earlier in the process.

If this analysis focused on traditional boundaries of the organization, then a different analysis would have emerged, whereby a convergent, but inaccurate, sensemaking narrative was told. By including external stakeholders in the analysis, this research illustrates how two distinct sensemaking trajectories emerged from a common precipitating event. Looking beyond traditional boundaries allows researchers to identify divergent sensemaking, and to see how participants in the surrounding environment impact the sensemaking process. In this way, the broader boundaries reveal how different stories emerge when we define the sensemaking community differently and as such, sensemaking stories should be qualified based on who was included in the sensemaking conversation.

Second, this research demonstrates the means by which enactments based on perceptions shape divergent trajectories from the same event. For example, existing work has focused on a crisis situation, or a rare event because it is often a change that precipitates conscious sensemaking processes (Christianson et al., 2009; Heverin & Zach, 2012; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). In this case, however, the disruption was borne out of the sensemaking process. If the MWD had viewed the introduction of live fire training as a contentious event from the start—or with awareness of external stakeholders—the subsequent events would likely have unfolded in a starkly different manner. Indeed, the live fire event was not a major disruption at first, but following the news coverage trigger, the event began to spiral. Following divergent sensemaking trajectories, the public quickly viewed the training as a major and controversial event, forcing the MWD to reevaluate its own perceptions. Trigger events can thus be used for reevaluation. When the MWD gained awareness of the public's perception of this event as a disruption, the MWD officers changed their classification of the event as well, but it was already too late. The use of sensemaking and sensegiving provides a theoretical mechanism for better understanding the interaction in an interorganizational context, extending prior work on sensemaking. The unfolding of the disruption is further the result of certain contextual features, such as conceptions of identity and salience of certain cues. This event did not become a major disruption until almost a year after the USCG had begun to enact it as routine. In this way, it is clear that triggering events can spark disruptions as a result of the enactment process undertaken by stakeholders.

Practical Implications

From a practical perspective, the live fire case and the analysis of the incident through a sensemaking lens suggest a number of practical implications for business communication professionals and for strategic communication. First, the officers in the MWD viewed the news coverage as a trigger event to deploy a routinized response of establishing a public comment period. But, as this analysis underscored, trigger events often are equivocal in nature. From a strategic communication perspective, the findings regarding trigger events suggest that organizations should routinize surveillance functions. When implementing routine public relations responses, an organization should take care to monitor and understand a wide range of stakeholder perspectives. To that

point, the MWD faced a number of challenges in understanding the perspectives of its external stakeholders. Prior to the incident, external communication was limited due to constraints on the staff and a lack of established monitoring routines. The consequences of the disruption underscore the importance of routinized monitoring of the relevant environment; technological tools including news search and social media can also provide organizations with means for monitoring when personnel are limited.

Likewise, the MWD had no system for analyzing the public comments, nor was the staff equipped to handle the volume of comments received. In turn, when public input is sought, organizations need to remember to listen. Officers at the MWD headquarters emphasized that the public hearings were opportunities for the officers to listen and hear concerns, but they did not view the hearings as an opportunity to learn from with key public stakeholders. As a result, the true concerns of public stakeholders were not integrated into their sensemaking process until after the comment period had closed and staff members began to systematically review the submissions. It is not enough to seek input; internal stakeholders need to be prepared to act on what external stakeholders view as reality.

Limitations and Future Research

As with much of the research on sensemaking, this is a single case study and the ability to draw generalizations is clearly restricted (Eisenhardt, 1989). Moreover, in order to conduct this case study, it was necessary to constrain the context of the research. Although the boundaries in this study are broader than other similar research, ours is no exception to the limitations of the boundaries we have drawn. In addition, the coding schemes and the analysis of press coverage used new measurement scales, and future refinement is needed to enhance the sensitivity of these measures. This study is also a call for future sensemaking research to evaluate the limitations that artificial boundaries can place on a sensemaking narrative and to ask the question “According to whom?” when examining new events. Finally, this case focused on a fairly common disruption by examining a public relations event. Building on this, future research should continue to examine seemingly common events to understand how sensemaking trajectories unfold and interact.

Conclusion

This study presents a comprehensive analysis of the 2006 live fire event in the USCG’s MWD. As this case study has illustrated, a retroactive examination provides significant insight to shape future communication efforts. It also shows how views of organizational and research boundaries and triggers can shape our perspective of reality and sensemaking as a theoretical framework. This article provides a unique set of data from which the sensemaking process can be observed from multiple perspectives by examining an organizational disruption. Through the use of multiple levels of data, it was possible to observe how internal organizational thinking contrasted with the perception of external stakeholders. By applying different boundaries in a sensemaking study, researchers can

see multiple, potentially divergent sensemaking trajectories. In aggregate, this work sets the stage for future research by expanding the boundaries of sensemaking research and advancing studies of interorganizational strategic communication.

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