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Sensemaking a public library’s internet policy crisis

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Abstract
Purpose – Using Weick’s sensemaking theory within a KM framework, and storytelling methodology, this study aims to deconstruct a recent public internet access policy crisis at the newly amalgamated Ottawa Public Library (Canada). As the library’s former Manager of Virtual Library Services, the author retrospectively enacts the story of how the library board and management resolved a public controversy led by the staff and the community newspaper. At issue were the library staff’s right to be protected from viewing internet pornography, the community’s reaction to the issue of protecting children’s internet access, and the library’s commitment to intellectual freedom online.

Design/methodology/approach – Plausible meanings are presented, the public library’s identity and beliefs are reinterpreted, organizational vocabularies are challenged and tacit and cultural knowledge is created and shared.

Findings – In keeping with a commitment to knowledge creation and use, the library should be actively engaged in multiple tellings of this organizational story by both staff and management. Such tellings, while perhaps not building any new consensus, would contribute to future sensemaking and could aid future strategic planning.

Originality/value – Applies Weick’s theory, developed in a larger KM framework, and using storytelling methodology, to deconstruct the experience of a recent organizational crisis involving public Internet access in a Canadian public library.

Keywords Internet, Organizational planning, Storytelling, Public libraries

Paper type Case study

Introduction
Knowledge management is the latest organizational discipline that uses sensemaking as one of its critical foundational approaches (Choo, 1998; Choo et al., 2000; Ericson, 2000; Hannabuss, 2000; Lehr and Rice, 2002; Moss, 2001). I will apply Weick’s theory, developed in a larger KM framework, and using storytelling methodology, to deconstruct the experience of a recent organizational crisis involving public Internet access in a Canadian public library.

There are many versions of this story, but only one is available for comparative purposes (Deane, 2004). As both the narrator and one of the principal actors, I acknowledge the inevitable biases in my telling of the story. I am a participant observer and storyteller, reflecting one of multiple viewpoints on this particular crisis.

My primary goals are to make sense of this particular organizational crisis, to inform future decision-making processes for any public library by explicitly applying a sensemaker’s framework with a storytelling methodology to the situation (Choo, 1998; Orton, 2000; Weick, 1995) and finally, to highlight the value of the knowledge created and shared, through one telling of this organizational story.
**Sensemaking framework**

Weick (1995, 2001) articulates seven distinguishing characteristics of sensemaking that are “more like an observer’s manual or a set of raw materials for disciplined imagination than ... a tacit set of propositions to be refined and tested”. These properties (identified by italics) provide us with a sensemaking recipe for discussion in the context of organizational behaviour and decision-making:

We could say that when people in an ongoing social setting experience an interruption, they often enact something, retrospectively notice meaningful cues in what they previously enacted, interpret and retain meaningful versions of what the cues mean for their individual and collective identity, and apply or alter these plausible meanings in subsequent enactment and retrospective noticing (Weick, 2001, p. 95).

In their KM framework, Choo (1998) and Choo et al. (2000) locate sensemaking as the passageway for receiving and interpreting environmental signals. The shared meanings, agendas or purposes, and identities resulting from sensemaking can inform the structures behind rules for decision-making which are often codified as policies, routines, procedures. These shared meanings also inform future situational learning when choices are required to guide rule activation – “What kind of situation is this?” and “What kind of rules do we have for dealing with this type of situation?” Enactment, sensemaking leading to knowledge creation, and decision-making together form the model for a “knowing organization”, an organization that can constantly redesign itself without suffering costly disruptions or displacements (Orton, 2000).

**Methodology**

Stories are one of the most widely recognized methods of sensemaking and stories are also frequent outcomes or artefacts of sensemaking, and of tacit and cultural knowledge creation (Choo, 1998; Choo et al., 2000; Gabriel, 2000; Hannabuss, 2000; Martin, 2002; Sole and Wilson, 2002; Weick, 1995). The act of telling or writing the story is one act of sensemaking.

There is a critical paradox characterizing the sensemaking process. A shared experience is often narrated in multiple versions according to the perspectives of the tellers. Storytellers typically believe that they have still experienced a shared meaning even though individually they may “tell” different versions of the same experience or story. All organizations are made up of ongoing individual beliefs about causality, structural outcomes, decision-making processes, and redesign or renewal processes. These beliefs may or may not be explicitly reflected in an organization’s mission, values and goals. However over time, these individual beliefs are typically transformed into a “loose organizational consensus” or a “workable version of reality” that allows the organization to carry out its business (Orton, 2000). These versions become the organization’s stories of identity and in this sense they are more archetypal or mythic. Although they can be less factually accurate, they are usually no less reliable at the level of sensemaking.

While many organizations are modelled on argumentation, their realities are based on narration. People within organizations trying to make sense, or meaning, find themselves applying narrative models to structures that are based on more theoretical paradigms. Czarniawska (2003) contrasts organizational learning through more traditional formal structures described as “rationality myth(s)” with learning through
narrative and storytelling characterized as “endless accounts of organizing as muddling through”.

Despite an organization’s reliance on standards and approved practices, people often continue to engage in inductive practices, such as storytelling, to locate and communicate meaning. Weick elaborates:

But in an equivocal, postmodern world, infused with the politics of interpretation and conflicting interests and inhabited by people with multiple shifting identities, an obsession with accuracy seems fruitless, and not of much practical help either. Of much more help are the symbolic trappings of sensemaking...such as myths, metaphors, platitudes, fables, epics and paradigms. Each of these resources contains a good story. And a good story, like a workable cause map, shows patterns that may already exist in the puzzles an actor now faces...The stories are templates. They are products of previous efforts at sensemaking. They explain. And they energize.

When sharing knowledge and innovations among their peers, public libraries often use a sensemaking methodology and tell a “how we did it” story (Hale, 2003). The following story demonstrates in stark terms, the need for public libraries to recast themselves as “knowing organizations” constantly engaged at the frontier of enactment, with a changing repertoire of organizational folk stories and with expectations only for moments of constructed order (Orton, 2000).

Finally, while every organization has its own myths and metaphors, that are unique to a time and place, stories that transcend organizational boundaries usually have a larger mythopoetic quality, with embedded meaning that is easily understood (Gabriel, 2000). In this story, the subject matter – intellectual freedom, protection of children and the public library’s mediating role in its community – is a well established meta-myth with many related stories already recorded in public library literature (Curry, 1997; Usherwood, 1989). This story extends this tradition and warrants telling because of it links to the past while also foreshadowing future versions.

**Story of organizational crisis**

This story meets the requirements to produce a plausible narrative (Weick, 1995). The story will put forward a history of how the newly amalgamated Ottawa Public Library resolved its public relations crisis as a “porn palace”; as first-person story-teller and principal (management) actor, I will tell the story that begins with the staff committee developing the public internet access policy, and concludes with a union-management labour arbitration resolved and the public image of the library as a safe place for children accessing the internet, restored. The story will follow the beginning-middle-end sequence. And in this chronology of events, is the story’s sense or meaning, for other librarians in other libraries to hear and learn from.

While the internet’s information value has been largely undisputed, the internet has also been characterized as a dangerous place, particularly for children (Reddick et al., 2001). An industry of research and public debate, involving all types of private and public organizations has developed around the internet phenomenon[1]. Generally, no individual or group refutes the notion that all children should receive some protection from the “adult” content available on the internet. The debates most often take place around how that protection is practised.

Public libraries internationally have responded to this concern in various ways most particularly, through the introduction of filtering technology such as that required by
library funding agencies in the USA. The range of policy responses to this debate, varies along an “intellectual freedom – protectionist” continuum.

How the Ottawa Public Library (Canada) addressed this concern through the development and implementation of its first “Public internet access policy” became a hotly contested internal and later, a public debate that reached a crisis launched by this newspaper headline: “Internet use policy makes library a ‘porn palace’ union says” (Ottawa Citizen, 2003, p. A7). At the centre of public debate was the question of how the Library protected children from the “dark” side of the internet.

In the fall of 2001, I was directed to lead a staff team in the development and implementation of the recently amalgamated Ottawa Public Library’s first public internet access policy. In addressing the question of whether or not to introduce filters for children, the children’s librarians on the committee recommended against any filtering, arguing instead for education and critical thinking as effective tools for children and parents navigating the internet safely. All committee members supported that position and a draft policy went forward on that basis.

The committee’s first draft policy went to the library’s senior management table for discussion and approval in November, 2001. The recommendation to have no filters installed was overruled at that table by the city librarian, who felt that the Library should be seen to be demonstrating “due diligence” by having some filtered internet workstations available for children.

An amended policy was presented to the library board in December, 2001. Board members were generally against any use of filters; however, they eventually voted in favour of the policy subscribing to the legalistic rationale, and the policy was passed unanimously. In spirit and in practise, the policy was an open access policy with provision for a few filtered workstations (39 of 250) and which could be shown to demonstrate “due diligence” if the need ever arose.

During the spring and summer of 2002 staff, a small but influential main library staff group became openly critical of management’s emphasis on provision of open, unfettered internet access; they communicated their concerns frequently to their colleagues, to library managers and to members of the public. Their main issue was an ongoing problem that some public library patrons were inciting librarians to view “inappropriate” (i.e. pornographic) images on the internet; these images were deeply disturbing especially to some female staff in particular. In support of these staff members, the union submitted a grievance alleging that library management was creating a poisoned workplace that violated the staff’s human rights by not effectively managing patrons’ internet usage. This grievance later became the subject of a formal arbitration process. These discussions highlighted major problems with the library’s information system resources and with the library’s apparent inability to adapt its procedures to a changing internet environment, during this period.

The library’s information systems support had recently been taken over by the city’s information technology department and that major re-organization in roles, and resources, introduced many more communication and process requirements for all information technology (IT) projects. All major system changes had to be negotiated, and resourced by the city’s IT department and for the first time, the library had to compete with all other city departments for scarce IT resources. While this internet policy was being developed and staff concerns from the city’s main branch became
louder and more intense, the newly constituted Ottawa Public Library’s immediate information technology priority – the implementation of a new integrated library system (ILS) bringing together 11 former catalogues into one database and one integrated ICT network – was occupying all available human and financial resources.

At this time, library management learned of the availability of a public internet management program that could potentially alleviate some of the pressure front-line librarians were experiencing with clients, based on successful installations in other public libraries. Had the city and library’s technical and resourcing limitations been more rigorously challenged, perhaps the library crisis precipitated by staff tension, may not have erupted as it did. However, we could not implement a technical solution more quickly – at least, at the time, we thought we could not have done so.

In January, 2003, although the internet policy had already been in place for one year, the local newspaper published a story in which the library’s union accused management and the board with creating a library-based “porn palace” (Ottawa Citizen, p. A7). That news story triggered a full public debate around provision of internet access at the public library, and a management crisis ensued. Until that time, the public was not engaged in any active debate with the library; a very small percentage of library patrons had been advocating the use of filters to control access to “inappropriate” internet content. The request that had been voiced by a dissatisfied staff group at only one branch – a request for stricter regulations around the public’s internet use – was quickly redefined through the media as a choice between protecting the citizens from the evils of the internet by installing filters or leaving the internet completely open for everyone.

The union-management arbitration had been proceeding since July, 2002. When the union spoke to the newspaper in January, 2003, library management immediately charged the union with violating an earlier agreement to restrict the public’s access to this labour issue. Although management successfully requested that the arbitrator take corrective action by placing a media ban on all subsequent hearings, the damage had been done. As could be anticipated the newspaper became angered at the restriction and charged the library with censorship, arguing the media’s right to report the facts.

Almost daily newspaper headlines then appeared in the local paper throughout the spring of 2003 including “Library porn hearing delayed for ruling: arbitrator asked to exclude media”, “Gag us with a policy”, “Don’t censor”, “Porn raises library profile”, “Library shouldn’t ban Hustler magazine but will allow web access to porn”, and “Library bill a Kafka tale.” Although the arbitrator supported management’s request to ban media from the process, the public had become totally engaged by the sensationalist newspaper stories.

The library’s internet policy required parents to actively monitor their children’s usage and to direct their children to use any of the few filtered stations if they had concerns. But in reality, parents were not accompanying their children to the library and journalists were easily able to identify unsupervised children at “inappropriate” internet sites.

While the public media frenzy was underway the library administration and board were engaged in a private battle that never became part of the public record. Although the city librarian had accepted our recommendation to maintain open access with a token number of filtered workstations, she was wavering in her decision. She discussed
with me and my colleague handling the arbitration, the possibility of the library adopting a more restrictive filtered internet environment to address public concerns but in the end she went forward with our recommendation for the status quo. Library management’s principal argument in the arbitration rested on our maintaining the existing policy of open access with limited filtered access and with the responsibility for enforcement of any filtering restrictions, clearly with parents. However, a growing uncertainty with our original policy position had surfaced, but was ignored because changing course would be seen as a dramatic reversal especially in the face of management’s public commitment to intellectual freedom.

However, during the two weeks following the board’s public confirmation of the existing policy, in late April, 2003, the pressure from the public to install filters and protect our community’s children was its most intense. The library board chairman and city councillor was himself asking us to come up with some kind of proposal that would leave the policy language intact, but that would also provide some technical solution to offer the protection parents in his constituency were demanding. Responding to this pressure, a few senior managers including myself, put together a creative policy/technology workaround that we then presented to the city librarian and board chairman. While keeping the existing internet policy language, we introduced a requirement for all parents to personally register their approval of unfiltered internet access for their children. With some additional, selective installation of filtering software, with a commitment from the information technology services department for resources to install the internet management software, and with some finely selected language, by default, all children would only have access to filtered internet services.

The introduction of the internet management software also enabled filtered access to be selected through a menu option with a default choice of filtered access, for all children. This adjustment to the standard public desktop configuration combined with changes in use regulations were gratefully approved by all board members in a specially convened meeting in late April 2003. Both at that meeting and afterwards, board members privately expressed their individual residual concerns that they would be wrongly perceived to have changed their minds about the library’s overall position on intellectual freedom. The scales were now tipped in favour of restricted internet access for all children; and children were redefined as being any youth under the age of 17 years.

Although the booking system had been recommended and funded for implementation 12 months previously, IT staff had always insisted it could not be installed before completing the implementation of the amalgamated library’s first integrated library system. Had this process not taken so long to complete and had more IT staff resources been available, this internet story might have had a completely different plot line, climax and resolution. When the technological and card registration procedures were finally implemented, the newspaper responded with this headline: “Library board OKs Net filters for children” (Ottawa Citizen, 2003, p. D.5)

In what seems almost a post-script to this story, three months after the introduction of the internet access management system and the policy forcing all children to access filtered workstations by default, the union withdrew their grievance, noting their satisfaction with the solutions the library had finally introduced.
Discussion
This story is only one of many possible versions; it is a version that is generally consistent with the library’s managerial perspective. And having “told this story” many times to my colleagues in other libraries, I am aware of how each of my tellings enacts either a new meaning or a difference in emphasis.

What meanings are exposed in this narration? The generic public library identity is grounded in conservative, moral, educational, and nurturing qualities that its history reflects. One of the initial discontinuities that library management had such difficulty acknowledging and then addressing, was how could the library be portrayed as an immoral institution when we know we are not? And of course, we exhibited a defensive posture in the face of that criticism. What we did not do well in this episode was to understand the logic, the emotion and most importantly the public’s perceptions. The library experienced something of an identity crisis – even though the official language of the library’s internet access policy never changed from the beginning to the end of the story, how we understood the conflict and then responded to it, did change. We began to see our identity from the public’s perspective, rather than from a more bureaucratic, organizational perspective.

Only in reflecting back on the story, can we see that another major frame or set of cues that management ignored at our peril, were the staff concerns and the power of the media to take over the agenda. The library could not prevent the social dynamics of multiple voices drowning out, the “official voice” and therefore, the official messages the library was trying to convey. Instead, unmanageable, unpredictable staff members and members of the public, in concert with an emotionally charged media, created a cacophony of hyperbole and rhetoric rewriting the “facts.” The process of sensemaking conjures many meanings and the library needs to become more adaptable to the ambiguous meanings socially constructed by the cacophony of voices. We might have been able to enact sense more effectively if we had listened more attentively, rather than spending time, defending ourselves through verbal and textual responses.

There was a great deal of semantic “play” as documents were drafted and prepared for the board and for public consumption throughout this process. Sensemaking has at least six levels of vocabularies and any organization should be vigilant about knowing and being conversant in all of the vocabularies, regardless of managerial preference or style. In this story, library management hired experts to advise staff on the precise legal definitions of “pornography”, “obscenity” and “inappropriate” material so that staff would then adapt those meanings in their daily work with the public. Some staff rejected the imposed meanings; they instead enacted their own.

By insisting on our organizational vocabulary or “premise controls” (Weick, 1995), library management was ignoring the meanings in the other vocabularies in use by the media, and by the public. No one wanted to hear about “intellectual freedom”; everyone wanted to know about “pornography”. As managers, we painstakingly avoided the “p” word, at our peril, it appears. Premise controls or organizational vocabularies can become “professional blind spots” that block meanings or understandings.

The process of labour-management relations is another dimension of meaning in this story. Whereas library management strove to keep the arbitration or family squabble separate and apart from the policy development and implementation process, they could never succeed. Perhaps had library management been less stubborn or
insistent about keeping the arbitration and the policy debates as unlinked events, their worst fears would not have been realized, and the grievance would not have been linked to the public debate. Although the grievance was finally withdrawn by the Union in August, 2003, once again, the library’s identity (from management’s point of view) was so heavily invested in a successful outcome to the arbitration, that we ignored the cues and messages coming from staff and members of the public. An organization’s identity is never fixed, no matter how entrenched or how historically rooted it might appear on the surface. Sensemaking encourages organizations to change, to be fluid, to reflect, and adapt, even at the level of identity construction.

This story is a belief-driven process of sensemaking. The library’s values and beliefs as a moral institution upholding intellectual freedom and the freedom of ideas, came into direct conflict with its belief as a protector of children. Where conflicts exist, argumentation and discourse is encouraged by the sensemaker. In every new story, where core values conflict, through a shared process of enactment, one value will be privileged on any particular occasion. In this story, library management did not sanction a process of argumentation over the conflicting values until forced to do so by the minority voices. And by the end of this story, the Library had changed its priorities, but not its core beliefs – protection of children was finally stated as the value that needed upholding at the expense of intellectual freedom.

Sensemaking requires that in the inevitable clash of majority and minority positions, minority voices and influences be supported, encouraged and valued. The cost of not listening to minority voices is to risk discrediting yourself and to risk an erosion of both formal and informal power. Powerful ideologies can be built on an organization’s inability to tolerate ambiguity and to insist instead, on fixed or certain beliefs even if they are no longer appropriate or relevant:

People exposed to strong, consistent minority positions do not spend more time thinking about the explicit message of the minority. Instead, they engage in more divergent thinking, thinking that goes beyond the minority’s message but remains relevant to the issues raised by the minority (Weick, 1995).

In this story, I would argue that not enough time and attention was paid to individual, minority voices.

Other libraries have already benefited from this sensemaking story as it has been told by other actors. Meanings will likely be contested again and again in future re-tellings. And it will difficult for the actors to assess the full value of meanings enacted through this story until more time has elapsed and the story becomes more like myth and less like historical non-fiction.

In keeping with a commitment to knowledge creation and use, the library should be actively engaged in multiple tellings of this organizational story by both staff and management. Such tellings, while perhaps not building any new consensus, would contribute to future sensemaking and could aid future strategic planning. Such conversations would address the questions posed by Choo (1998): “What kind of situation was this?”, and in the inevitable next crisis: “What kind of rules or new meanings have we acquired to deal with it?” Instead, in resolving the labour-management issue formally through the union’s withdrawal of the grievance and a signed agreement distributed by both parties, the library has missed a powerful sensemaking opportunity that might foster shared meanings across the organizational
hierarchy. If the glue of organizational culture is shared meaning (Martin, 2002), then the library’s staff and management cultures likely remain divided.

Conclusion
The temptation to sum up a sensemaking story with “lessons learned” should be resisted because sensemaking occurs in the telling, in the listening, and in the retelling. Sensemaking is ongoing in that way, and it is active and alive. The knowledge created through these processes of enactment, selection and retention may differ for each audience hearing the story, and over time, as other contexts, events, values, beliefs overlay this story. Such is the power of good stories.

Note
1. For an overview of public internet issues related to children, see www.safekids.org and www.media-awareness.ca The professional library community represented by associations in Canada and the USA has taken a position of promoting open access to the internet (Curry, 1997, 2000; Dupelle, 2004). The Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA), a bill legislating receipt of funds for public libraries with a requirement to limit children’s access to the internet through use of filtering software, was recently unsuccessfully challenged in the United States Supreme Court by the American Library Association and the American Civil Liberties Union. See www.ala.org and www.cla.ca for more information. A cogent review of the Supreme Court decision and its implications for public libraries is also provided by Crawford (2003).

References


Further reading


