Network graffiti: Interaction as sensemaking

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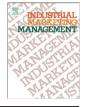
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ABSTRACT

As an alternative to the metaphor of network picture, this paper offers graffiti as a means to conceptualise continuous sensemaking in interactions within unbounded networks. The paper contrasts the cognitivist orientation of the picture to the social constructionist (especially discursive psychology) approach that refutes the separation of mind and world through the notion of language work. The ideological and ephemeral character of graffiti allows us to see interactions as sites of language work where truth is asserted through reference to other interactions. Thus sensemaking is a continuous process arising through the links made between multiple, networked interactions. This is illustrated by looking at the UK veal market and the TV series, Jimmy and the Giant Supermarket. The implications for management include cultivation of an ability to reduce equivocality whilst retaining ambiguity. A bridge to market making and renewed consideration of power are suggested.

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1. Introduction

The network picture is widely theorised as a manager's individual view of the network and has become a focal point within increasing discussion amongst network theorists about managerial cognition and sensemaking. Following Henneberg, Mouzas, and Naudé (2006, p. 408), researchers have taken these as 'literal' pictures that have been visually represented to compare, for example, differences in mental pictures within one organisation (Leek & Mason, 2009), across organisations (Leek & Mason, 2010), differences in complexity (Ramos, Henneberg, & Naudé, 2012) and in content (Corsaro, Ramos, Henneberg, & Naudé, 2011). Mouzas, Henneberg, and Naudé (2008) introduce the idea of developing network insight in which they consider how managers can improve their network picture by incorporating elements of others. To date, the development of insight provides the most widely adopted theoretic understanding of process in network pictures.

A less substantial field of work critiques the network picture mainstream (Colville & Pye, 2010; Geiger & Finch, 2010; Purchase, Lowe, & Ellis, 2010). Despite different theoretical emphases, these critiques nevertheless share a good deal of theoretic terrain. Each pursues ideas compatible with social constructionism, broadly defined. Each also argues that the network picture provides a view of sense that is rather too static, even taking into account the changes depicted in network insight. Through somewhat different arguments, each finds the processual and social characteristics of sensemaking to have been neglected.

In this paper, I return to treating picture as a metaphor. Metaphors transfer meaning from one domain (the picture) to another (cognition).

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For Lakoff and Johnson (1980), this transferral of meaning allows us to grasp concepts that are abstract or not clearly delineated and shapes understanding by highlighting some, and hiding other, aspects of the concept. Therefore, our comprehension is metaphorical and we 'live by' metaphoric understanding (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Several authors identify the pervasiveness of metaphor in marketing and the powerful effect of metaphors such as organisational identity (Cornelissen, 2003), management as art (Fillis & Rentschler, 2008), strategy as war (Hunt & Menon, 1995) and relationship metaphors (O'Malley & Tynan, 1999) on the development of marketing theory. These same authors, however, each refer to the lack of attention paid to metaphor amongst marketing theorists and to the 'literal and shallow' (Fillis & Rentschler, 2008, p. 493) application of metaphor. If metaphors shape thought by highlighting and hiding and produce understandings that we and the managers we attempt to speak to are to live by, then we should more deeply question their effects. Similarly, we might pursue extant metaphors more deeply, or consider alternatives, to see what understandings they might permit, that is, we might better utilise the creativity and novelty of insight associated with metaphor (Hunt & Menon, 1995). For these reasons, a turn away from treating pictures 'literally' (Henneberg et al., 2006) to more explicit consideration of this metaphor will allow us to consider how the metaphor promotes one view of network interaction and precludes alternatives.

Pictures take many forms, yet with few exceptions (Purchase et al., 2010) the picture form has been assumed rather than addressed. In questioning the metaphor I will argue that the network picture is predominantly seen as mentalist (Geiger & Finch, 2010) and static, as if either a photographic representation of the world (Purchase et al., 2010) or an impressionist painting (Ramos & Ford, 2013). This is consistent with the cognitivist assumptions on which the network picture theorists draw.

This, however, hides other possible understandings of network life. In this paper I shall argue that a related metaphor of graffiti highlights instead the ongoing 'picturing' (Colville & Pye, 2010) process and 'interacted' (Mattsson, 1988) character of sense negotiation in networks. In forwarding this metaphor I respond to the call for a greater understanding of 'sensemaking-as-interaction' (Henneberg, Naudé, & Mouzas, 2010, p. 357) and recognised need for fuller recognition of bi-directional influences between sensemaking and action (Corsaro et al., 2011; Roseira, Britos, & Ford, 2013) and address the suggestion from the call for this special edition that the network picture concept might be developed to better understand interaction in networks. Specifically, I argue that sensemaking is a social process in which understandings are created within and moved between interactions, often being re-shaped in that movement. Therefore, we might envisage sense as emerging through a network of interactions. At the more general level, I contribute to a social constructionist understanding of networks developed by Colville and Pye (2010), Geiger and Finch (2010), and Purchase et al. (2010).

The paper is organised as follows. The first section looks more deeply at the network picture literature to demonstrate its cognitivist assumptions that separate mind from world and therefore see interaction as the communication of information. I then introduce discursive psychology, a theoretic base that recasts putative cognitive categories and locates sensemaking in interaction through its view of language as work. That is, language *does* rather than *represents* things, allowing us to negotiate reality in interactions. The graffiti metaphor is then elaborated as a way of understanding continuous reality negotiation in interactions by highlighting the ideological struggle, ephemeral nature and consequentiality of graffiti. The fifth section illustrates the metaphor through consideration of meaning negotiation with respect to the veal market in the UK around 2012 — when a television programme, Jimmy and the Giant Supermarket, focused on this product. The analysis shows how meanings are created in the traces between texts so that previous interactions and outcomes are selectively diverted within current sensemaking — traces of which are carried through into yet other arenas. Outcomes of changed meanings are also shown. The discussion contrasts the picture and graffiti metaphors by looking at what both imply for effective management and looks at how managers might focus on interactions in order to contribute in a contested sensemaking space rather than for information collection. This demands cultivation of an ability to deal with 'simplexity', that is, to reduce equivocality whilst retaining ambiguity (Colville, Brown, & Pye, 2012). Further, the discussion considers how the metaphor is compatible with much of the IMP (Industrial Marketing and Purchasing) oeuvre. In particular a bridge between sensemaking theories and market making and further consideration of power through practices and ideology are suggested. Finally, conclusions are briefly presented.

2. Network pictures and cognition

In early usage, the term network picture (Ford, Gadde, Håkansson, & Snehota, 2003, p. 176) described participants' very different views of one network, emphasising the impossibility of a single and objectively understood network. Although the term was neither tightly defined nor tied to any particular social theory, it resonated with previous interpretive currents within the corpus of work undertaken by the IMP group. 'Network horizon' (Anderson, Håkansson, & Johanson, 1994) described the extent of vision of any member; 'network visioning' (Moller & Halinen, 1999) refers more broadly to how the network is seen; a 'network theory' (Johanson & Mattsson, 1992) is the theory-in-use on which actions are based; 'interactment' (Mattsson, 1988) takes core ideas of enactment from Weick (1979) whereby attention, punctuation and bracketing frame the way we see and act into the world. Interactment underscores the role of interaction rather than atomistic action within sensemaking process (Håkansson & Snehota, 1989).

For Ford et al. (2003), managers who are able to see the network as others see it operate more effectively. Such managers gain fuller understanding of possibilities open to them and can re-vision the network. The process whereby this knowledge may be gained is more formally set out by Mouzas et al. (2008) as 'developing network insight'. To date, the development of network insight provides the most sophisticated account of process related to network pictures, although other researchers have chronicled changes through 'snapshots' in time (Abrahamsen, Henneberg, & Naudé, 2012; Kragh & Andersen, 2009). Mouzas et al. (2008) is particularly germane to this paper since I am concerned with sensemaking process. It is important, therefore, to explore the explicit or implicit ontological and epistemological commitments in the picture and insight literatures.

Some terms in the discussion of network pictures are amenable to a range of ontological positions, thus pictures are 'meaning-creating devices' (Henneberg et al., 2006 411) and 'socially constructed' (Henneberg et al., 2006, 410). Mentalist and cognitivist vocabulary is, however, more dominant. The network picture is a 'mental picture', 'mental representation', 'cognitive picture', 'cognitive map' and a 'framing device' (Mouzas et al., 2008, p. 168), 'mental schemata', 'mental map' (Henneberg et al., 2006 p. 410). Pictures are "anchored in individual managerial cognition" (Henneberg et al., 2006, 410) and enable a "cognitive shortcut" (Henneberg et al., 2010 p. 355). The heritage of these ideas is well referenced, especially through the works of Hodgkinson (e.g. Hodgkinson & Johnson, 1994), Porac (e.g. Porac, Thomas, & Baden-Fuller, 1989) and their colleagues. The theoretic roots are traced back most clearly to ground-breaking work within sociology (Berger & Luckman, 1966) and to Weick, with particular emphasis upon cognitive elements drawn from an explicitly psychological background (Weick, 1979) and applied to a broader organisational perspective (Weick, 1995). The mentalist conceptualisation of a picture in the mind (Colville and Pye, 2010) is consistent with these academic origins and their particular assumptions about the nature of mind, world and communication.

The network picture is foremost an individual and internal possession 'held' by individual managers (Mouzas et al., 2008, p. 167). Reality is perceived through the lens of mental apparatus, making reality 'mind-dependent' (Öberg, 2012, p. 1271). Belief systems and attitude formations are antecedent to pictures (Henneberg et al., 2006, p. 409) and these mental constructs form the "lens of existing cognitive schemata" (Henneberg et al., 2006, p. 171). Recurring metaphors of the eye and lens indicate a filter to the reception of reality: impressions, images, identities and characteristics of context are "internalized through the eyes of involved actors" (Mouzas et al., 2008, p. 168). Hence, the literature asserts a reality and an equally real, if distorted, internal version, with cognitive structure standing between the two. Reality is not constructed through mental activity, but, construed through a static mental apparatus. This prompts concern about the distance between the world and its construal.

Pictures "constitute ad hoc theorising on cognitive structure that may be removed from reality" (Mouzas et al., 2008, p. 170), arising partly from cognitive limitations. Actors must 'validate' or 'falsify' the picture (Mouzas et al., 2008, p. 172) and gather additional information to narrow the gap. The ineffective firm, illustrated through the Aquarius case, lacks 'a fact based view' and there are aspects of the world that they 'did not know' and 'did not fully comprehend' (Mouzas et al., 2008, p. 175). Contrarily, the wise firm, SA Miller, more accurately incorporates the world into their picture becoming, for example, "*cognizant* of the *fact* that there is a growing back-lash against anti-social products" (Mouzas et al., 2008, p. 175, emphases added). Power positions also have a concrete, relatively static form, since they will be better gauged after several interactions. In this, power is an object communicated in, but detached from, the sensemaking process. The theory of developing network insight rests upon a world of facts that is solid and independent of (that is, not affected by) its perception. Since mental constructs such as belief systems and attitude formations are antecedent to picture, the explanation provides no account of change in attitude or belief and, instead, prioritises changed knowledge.