



The temporal dynamics of sensemaking: A hindsight–foresight analysis of public commission reporting into the past and future of the “new terrorism”[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to extend sensemaking theory in public commission reporting by drawing attention to, and demonstrating differences in the temporal dynamics between past and future, hindsight and foresight within the sensemaking/sensegiving processes of two public commission reports. They are *The Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* and *The United States Commission into 21st Century Terrorism and National Security Report*. Stemming from our analysis of how these commissions make sense of the risk posed by terrorism to national security, we seek to make three contributions. First, we develop sensemaking/sensegiving concepts in public commission reporting by theorizing about hindsight–foresight temporal dynamics. In particular, we extend existing sensemaking scholarship on public commission reporting by directing attention towards the important, yet under-scrutinized role that these inquiries have in sensemaking about the future. Second, we extend the presuppositions underpinning sensemaking theory by operationalizing concepts of antenarrative and employing them in our comparative analysis of the two reports. Third, we contribute to practice by illustrating empirically some of the ‘tactics’ that can be used for challenging hindsight about the known past for the purpose of improving foresight about an unknown future.

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1. Introduction

A defining feature of the 21st century world appears to be societies’ intransigent vulnerability to low probability, high impact “black swan” surprises [1]. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 in the United States are a prominent example. When such unthinkable events occur, a period of confusion ensues followed by a cultural readjustment of society to the changed reality [2]. To make such events sensible, sensemaking and sensegiving processes are invoked to render what are often seemingly chaotic circumstances intelligible so that a new order can emerge. Where it has been argued that sensemaking has seven properties, which are grounded in identity construction, retrospective, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, focused on and by extracted cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy [3], sensegiving is a process by which attempts are made to influence the meaning construction and sensemaking of others towards a preferred interpretation of an occurrence [4].

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Public commission reports can aid in such order-creating sensemaking and sensegiving processes by constructing a narrative that depoliticizes events and relegitimizes institutions with recommendations that implicitly promise increased security in the future [5–8]. Yet, in public commission reporting, sensemaking is presented as a process of dealing with dissonance by reducing uncertainty in *hindsight*. Such portrayals negate the possibility that sensemaking and sensegiving also operate in another, more prospective mode that has the capacity to accommodate a frequently uncertain and often surprising world with *foresight*. Such a prospective mode is reflected in notions of antenarrative, which directs attention towards sensemaking and sensegiving processes that embrace five future-oriented properties including complexity, emergence, flux, reflexivity and speculation [19,20]. This article examines such temporal dynamics in public commission sensemaking into the risk posed by terrorism to national security.

1.1. Research questions

Public commission inquiries are ceremonial occasions organized by governments [5]. They are important because the sensemaking and sensegiving processes within them – literally how we make things sensible and project that sense to others – help to structure the unknown [8]. And while public commission sensemaking has become a fertile area of research interest, ambiguities remain. For instance, research into public commission sensemaking processes focuses exclusively on retrospective sensemaking into the past in *hindsight* to the exclusion of prospective sensemaking into the future with *foresight* [e.g. 5–8]. Nonetheless, public commissions often purport to be looking backward to look forward. This suggests that such commissions are as concerned with *foresight* as with *hindsight* in both sensemaking and sensegiving processes. Such ambiguities leave significant gaps in our theorizing. Research questions to be addressed might include the following: How do public commission reports make and give sense about the future? Do the ontological presuppositions underpinning sensemaking constructs that view it as a device for reducing equivocality need to be rethought and/or extended in a complex, uncertain world? If life is understood backwards, but must be lived forwards, as the philosopher Kierkegaard suggests, what does living forwards mean in terms of the temporal dynamics between *hindsight* and *foresight* for sensemaking/sensegiving theory and practice?

1.2. Article purpose and contribution

The purpose of this article is to extend scholarship on sensemaking in public commission reporting by examining both retrospective sensemaking processes that make events sensible in *hindsight* after they have occurred, and the under-researched prospective sensemaking processes, which, we argue, are germane to speculating about an uncertain future with *foresight*. It is predicated on the assumption that the extant literature on sensemaking in public commission reporting has been insufficiently sensitive to the temporal dynamics between past and future, which may be linked to different orientations of sensemaking/sensegiving processes in public commissions. By temporal dynamics we thus mean simply the interplay *within* public commissions between *ex post* sensemaking after the fact – i.e. *hindsight* – and *ex ante* sensemaking before the fact – i.e. *foresight*. As Weick, who is widely regarded as consolidating sensemaking concepts, argues persuasively, “living forward [...] is unsettled, emergent, and contingent [and] contrasts sharply with our backward oriented theoretical propositions that depict that living as settled, causally connected and coherent after-the-fact.” He goes on to argue that: “better theorizing lies in ‘keeping up with what perhaps is going on’ through the use of tactics that weaken *hindsight*, highlight interruptions, articulate the nature of ready-to-hand alertness, fold action and cognition together, and focus on projects as the unit of analysis” [9 p 1732].

In this article we analyze how two public commissions make sense of the risk posed by terrorism to national security. Stemming from our analysis we seek to make three contributions. First, we develop sensemaking/sensegiving concepts in public commission reporting by theorizing about *hindsight*–*foresight* temporal dynamics. In particular, we extend existing scholarship on retrospective sensemaking in public commission reporting by directing attention towards the important, yet under-scrutinized role that public commission reporting has in making and giving prospective sense about the future. Second, we extend the ontological presuppositions underpinning sensemaking theory by operationalizing concepts of antenarrative and employing them in our comparative analysis of the two public commission reports into the risk posed by terrorism to national security in the United States constituting the research context of this article. Third, we contribute to practice by illustrating empirically some of the ‘tactics’ that can be used for weakening *hindsight* about the known past for the purpose of improving *foresight* about an unknown future.

1.3. The study

The two public commissions into security and terrorism constituting the research context of this article are examined through a textual analysis. The first of the two commissions analyzed here, *The Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (henceforth “9/11CR”), is a retrospective study that presents the findings and recommendations of an inquiry into the causes and consequences of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia and on United Airlines flight 93 which crashed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania [10]. The second of the two commissions analyzed, *The United States Commission into 21st Century Terrorism and National Security Report* (henceforth “USCNS/21”),² is a prospective study into the changing nature of risks, including terrorism, in the U.S. national

² The USCNS/21 is frequently referred to as the Hart–Rudman Commission after their two sponsors, Senators Gary Hart (D-CO) and Warren Rudman (R-NH).

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