The Dynamics of Sensemaking and Information Seeking in a Crisis Situation

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Abstract

The present article investigates two questions: What determines citizens' use of different media to seek information in a crisis situation, and what influences their evaluation of the information found. The case analysed is a major fire at a chemical storage facility in the harbour of Halmstad in Sweden, where there was a risk of toxic fumes reaching the city and its approximately 60,000 inhabitants. The study is part of a larger project, financed by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, and in this part, focus group interviews are analysed. The results point to an interaction between citizens' perception of the world, the perceived information, and the development of how the situation is regarded, where sensemaking is the pivotal concept.

Keywords: crisis communication, media use, sensemaking, focus groups, Halmstad, fire

Introduction

What determines citizens' use of different media to seek information in a crisis situation, and what influences their evaluation of the information found? These two questions are crucial in a situation where the lives and health of citizens may be at stake. The present paper deals with a major fire at a chemical storage facility in the harbour of Halmstad in Sweden, where there was a risk of toxic fumes reaching the city and its approximately 60,000 inhabitants. The study is part of a larger project, Crisis Communication 2.0, financed by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, and in this part, focus group interviews conducted after the fire are analysed. The results point to an interaction between the citizens' perception of the world, the perceived information, and the development of how the situation is regarded, where sensemaking is the pivotal concept.

The Objectives of Communication during a Crisis

When crisis strikes, the authorities have a number of objectives for their communication with the public. When, as in the case of the Halmstad fire, the lives and health of citizens are at risk, the main goal is to avoid any loss of life or negative health effects.

The Swedish Parliament has decided that the goals of Sweden's emergency management are to minimize the risk and consequences of serious disturbances, crises, and accidents, to secure the health and personal safety of children, women, and men, and to prevent or limit damage to property and the environment. Given that public crisis

communication is part of the authorities' crisis or emergency management, the goals of communication in relation to the Halmstad fire could be specified as:

- Minimizing the consequences of the fire.
- Making sure that as few people as possible are exposed to as little danger as possible, either through fire or smoke.
- Making sure the fire does not spread to other areas, and that the toxic materials do not contaminate the water or soil.

There is one last point that transcends the specific crisis situation, and that is the minimization of risks. This is more of a pre-crisis task and includes physical measures, such as the construction of safer production and storage facilities, as well as informational efforts, such as informing citizens about procedures to be followed in case of a future crisis or emergency situation.

Sensemaking: The Individual Perspective

What happens in an individual when a crisis situation – a breach of normality, a rupture – develops? He/she receives some piece of information that threatens existing frames of interpretation and calls for a reevaluation of either the new information or the old situation. In other words, a process of sensemaking takes place, and the outcome of this process will determine the individual's initial reaction to the crisis situation (Klein, Moon & Hoffman 2006a: 71).

From a sensemaking perspective, a person's reaction to a crisis situation is a continuous oscillation between known and accepted knowledge and the input of new information, through perception or communication, leading to changes in what is accepted as knowledge – and thus how the person should act or react. Naturally, some of this knowledge is personal and depends on the person's prior experiences, etc., but a substantial part of it belongs to what Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1994) calls *doxa*, i.e. what a person or a group thinks or values at a certain time. This could also be characterized as a kind of unconscious “common sense” that affects all of us.

This means that whenever we try to make sense of events, we always start out “with some perspective, viewpoint, or framework – however minimal” (Klein, Moon & Hoffman 2006b:88). Our initial perspective can be seen as a *frame*, and it has serious repercussions for how the individual regards the status of *data*:

We can express frames in various meaningful forms, including stories, maps, organizational diagrams, or scripts, and can use them in subsequent and parallel processes. Even though frames define what count as data, they themselves actually shape the data (for example, a house fire will be perceived differently by the homeowner, the firefighters, and the arson investigators). Furthermore, frames change as we acquire data. In other words, this is a two way street: Frames shape and define the relevant data, and data mandate that frames change in nontrivial ways. (Klein, Moon & Hoffman 2006b: 88).

Basic sensemaking is thus a “data-frame symbiosis”, and it can evolve along several paths:

- The frame can be elaborated through details.
- The frame and its explanation can be questioned.
- Troublesome data can be explained away to preserve the frame.

In Figure 1, this is seen in the left side of the figure, but there is also another possible sensemaking cycle: the reframing:

Here, questioning the frame leads us to reconsider – to reject the initial frame and seek to replace it with a better one. We might compare alternative frames to determine which seems most accurate. Or we might simply be mystified by the events. The sensemaking activity here, akin to Piaget’s notion of accommodation, is to find some sort of frame that plausibly links the events that are being explained. (Klein, Moon & Hoffman 2006b: 88)

Figure 1. *The Data/Frame Theory of Sensemaking*

Source: Klein, Moon & Hoffman 2006b: 89.

Collaborative Sensemaking

An individual’s sensemaking cannot however be seen exclusively as isolated within him/her, but as a combination of internal and external or social processes. Actually, the very notion of sensemaking, as made popular by Karl Weick (Weick 1995), is itself collaborative. From his organizational point of view, sensemaking is what happens when members of an organization negotiate beliefs and interpretations in order to construct shared meanings and common goals, and it constitutes the framework for explaining observed

reality. In organizations, this collaborative sensemaking most often takes place through face-to-face communication, but with the new information technology and growth of social media, these media can be seen as a kind of forum that facilitates this process. The instantaneity and the spreading through networks combined with the possibility of “liking” and discussing provides the perfect background for a shared accepted meaning.

Information Seeking and the Choice of Media

When the individual experiences a gap between the existing frame and current events, the natural first step is to seek more information on what is going on, and determine whether there is any danger for oneself or one’s family and friends involved. Asking friends or neighbours is one way of doing this, but using media to obtain information is also an integrated part of most people’s behaviour. This includes everything from the telephone to radio and television, not to mention the Internet and all its different uses.

How a person seeks information in a crisis situation depends of a number of factors. One factor is his/her ordinary choice of media for information seeking and entertainment. Another is his/her ranking of the different media’s credibility in a serious situation (Ghersetti & Westlund 2013). The accessibility of the media also comes into play, including their technological requirements, functionality and cost.

The Collection of Data

To discover how information was sought in a specific crisis situation, focus groups were organized in Halmstad within a week after the fire in the harbour. The fire started late at night on a Friday, 21 September 2012, and lasted until the following Monday. The fire generated large amounts of toxic smoke, which at first blew out to sea, but at one point on Saturday noon it spread into the central part of Halmstad, which resulted in a VMA (Important Message to the Public), for which the official warning siren was used for the first time since World War II.

The official VMA can consist of both an alarm signal and information on radio and TV. The alarm signifies that there is some kind of public hazard, and when the signal sounds, every citizen should go inside, shut all doors, windows and ventilation, and turn on the local public service radio channel (SR P4) for more information.

Collection of interview data about how residents handled the situation with the fire and the VMA, was accomplished through semi-structured focus group interviews. The method and the composition of the focus groups were based on recommendations from Morgan (1997), Wibeck (2010) and Ekström and Larsson (2010).

In total, the focus groups included 25 people, 14 men and 11 women, all of them living in Halmstad. The interviews were conducted in three groups, the first with nine people aged 16-34 years, the second with six people 39-59 years, and the third with ten people 57-82 years. The grouping was based on the assumption that there would be differences in behaviour and media use among people of different ages (Westlund & Ghersetti 2014).

In the following text, the focus will be on the persons in Group 2 (39-59 years), who are individually presented with a summary of each person’s description of when and how she/he received information about the situation and from what sources. Also each

person's account of what she/he did next, in order to either avoid risks or obtain more information, will be presented, and how this process evolved over time with the addition of new information. After the analysis of Group 2, the results from Group 1 and 3 (16-34 and 57-82 years, respectively) are presented to broaden the material and to discuss possible differences related to age. In order to maintain anonymity, all names have been changed.

The Results of the Analysis

The information sources referred to in the present study were friends, family, neighbours, or strangers, that is, what is usually referred to as personal communication. But the main sources of information were official websites and mass media in a broad sense, often accessed via smart phones. As shown below, most of the interviewees used a combination of media throughout the fire, but with one or two preferred source(s). The presentation starts with the story told by Anna, 40, followed by the other participants in Group 2: The "grown ups":

Anna, 40:

The respondent was told about the fire on Saturday morning by her boyfriend. He had received an SMS from his sister in Gothenburg early in the morning. After that, they went online and read the web edition of the local newspaper, Hallandsposten. From their apartment they could see the smoke, its colour and direction, so they felt fairly safe. When the alarm sounded at noontime, they became very active, the radio was on and so were two computers. They tried to get information about the alarm, but Hallandsposten's website crashed, as did Halmstad Municipality's website. On the radio channel citizens are supposed to listen to in a crisis situation (SR P4), there was nothing about the fire. She zapped through all TV channels that might have had information, but there was nothing. Both she and her boyfriend were very irritated and anxious for their baby daughter. Finally, after 8-9 minutes, there was information about the alarm having sounded because of a change in the wind direction. This she found out through Halmstad Municipality's Facebook page, which was constantly updated and where the links to their websites worked, even when the main page was down. She did not spread the information to others, except for a relative in Norway who wondered.

The fire itself was a bit creepy, with the risk of explosion and such, but because we could see the smoke and which way it was moving and that it wasn't heading towards us, we felt calmer. But when the alarm sounded, I know I became somewhat edgy. Because then I expected it to be something really huge, so we both became very nervous and worried.

She was somewhat irritated that neither TV nor Internet websites were sufficiently fast in getting out information. Once they decided to use the alarm, they should have had an announcement ready to immediately put out on TV and radio, she said. When it comes to action, she did nothing particular, but saw people with breathing masks or a towel over their nose and mouth.

Bertil, 39

The respondent woke up on Saturday morning and was told about the fire by his wife (Fanny), who had woken up in the night when she smelled the smoke. He then went online and got the information.

When he heard the alarm, he was at his son's basketball match, and at first nobody there understood what it was. After a while they realized it was the alarm, but nobody reacted. He went online on his phone and checked Hallandsposten, he spread the information to other parents and talked about it, but nobody did anything, and there was no public information in the sports hall.

Carl, 52

The respondent became aware of the fire on Friday night, because there was a VMA (Important Message to the Public) in the form of a moving band of text across the TV screen. He reported having some experience with fires, as he works in the metal works in the harbour, and his first thought was that his own workplace was on fire. He could not smell any smoke, but the next evening he went by car to Örkeljunga, a small town 50 km from Halmstad, and drove through the smoke. Earlier, around noon Saturday, he went to his job to do some work, and saw that the whole harbour was shut off by the police, so he could not get to his job. Many of his colleagues were curious and went up onto a roof to look. When the alarm sounded, he did not make a connection to the fire, until later. He did not seek any information himself, nor did he share any information with others. His evaluation of the situation was based on his experiences from work: let it burn out and only then start using water so as not to create gasses and a higher risk of explosion. When it comes to information, he reported believing that the "old" public service channels on TV have the highest reliability; he did not read Hallandsposten, but from what he saw during this situation, everything was alright.

David, 54

The respondent drove his neighbours to the train station on Saturday morning and saw a lot of blinking blue lights, and thought he had better turn on the radio, so he got the information at 6:30 a.m. When he got home, he turned on the radio and it remained on while he read the papers. He even checked text-TV. He did not see or smell the smoke until Saturday afternoon, when he and his wife drove out of town. When he heard the alarm, the radio was on, "but there was no announcement. It was a bit like 'okay, shouldn't there be one now?' Then you were a little..."

After the alarm, his wife tried to go to the municipality's website, but it was down, so she looked up different newspapers' web editions instead. Around 2 p.m. they drove to a football match and exchanged information with others there, but that was all. When asked to give his assessment of the situation, the most important question was why they did not put out the fire to stop exposing people to smoke, but he understood that it might have to do with the chemicals.

But then you know that you shouldn't stay in smoky conditions, that's quite logical. Smoke is never good, no matter what kind of smoke. It's not good to inhale. But since I felt nothing in the air back home, you can't say that I was upset or

anything. But of course one listened to the radio and wanted information in case it turned out something.

David can be seen as a sort of “information hub”, actively seeking information and distributing it to others, in his case especially at the football match, but also to the neighbours he drove to the station, and to his wife and her parents.

Erik, 59

The respondent was away in Lund, 110 km to the south, and did not get back until Monday morning.

When I was out on Saturday morning, they interrupted the national broadcast on P1 and announced that there was a fire in Halmstad. Then I didn't get back until Monday morning, but I could follow the whole incident on the radio as they mention it several times. Even in the weather forecasts where they said that ‘now the wind is favourable’ or ‘now we have to be careful’ or exactly how the wind would blow here in Halmstad. So that way I got pretty good information even if I wasn't at home, but so to speak at a distance.

He did not seek information, but got quite a lot from public service radio and TV, and even talked to others in Lund about the situation in Halmstad.

Fanny, 40

The respondent, who is married to Bertil, woke up at 1:25 a.m. on Saturday morning because of a strong smell of smoke. She checked the apartment to see if the fire was there, but as she found no fire and there were no blue lights outside, she went back to bed and looked up Hallandsposten's website on her phone. There she read that there was a fire in the harbour. “It says there's a fire in the harbour, but it says nothing about shutting your windows or anything, so I went back to sleep.” She did not wake up her husband. When the alarm sounded on Saturday noon, she was in a café downtown and did not hear it:

Nothing could be heard downtown. I was in a café and couldn't hear the alarm. I read it on Facebook while sitting there, that is in the café surfing. Then you could see it on Facebook. Then I went to the library, here, and there was a notice on the doors that the alarm had sounded and that it was because the smoke was moving across the city.

Sitting in the café and learning that the alarm had sounded, she (and others) looked out and saw people continuing to go shopping as usual, and then she thought that “it probably wasn't that serious”. She did not go to any website to learn more. She only checked friends' Facebook pages, not the municipality's, and the reason was that nobody in the café gave any information about what to do. On Saturday evening they went to have a look at the fire, and there were a lot of people who did that. Once she had found out that the fire was not in her own home, she did not become scared, and the information on Hallandsposten's website also calmed her down – there was nothing about toxic fumes. She got all her information later on from Hallandsposten's website, not from TV or radio, but some of the links were to the live TV coverage of the municipality's press conferences.

Sensory Perception, Collaborative Sensemaking, and Media (old and new)

What becomes obvious from the interviews is that the persons in question may receive the initial information that something unusual is taking place in different ways. In some cases it is through perception of smoke or police cars with flashing lights, some are given personal information, and some find out through the media, but the next step for almost all of them is to search for further information or confirmation through the media. This was what Greenberg concluded already in 1964: People turn to the media even if they initially learned about the crisis from an interpersonal source (Greenberg 1964).

The web edition of the local newspaper is the first or second choice for most, in combination with the municipality's website, and public service broadcasting. Some do not actively look for information, while one person only looks at the Facebook pages of friends, i.e. no traditional news provider.

But what is also evident is that at one time or another, all of them include their own sensory perception in the process of sensemaking. One must conclude that personal experience of a sight, sound, or smell plays an important role in assessment of the situation: If you cannot hear it, see it or smell it, you may question its existence. What is normally labelled as "curiosity" might just as well be seen as an element of their attempt to make sense of the situation. Even the sight of other citizens plays an important role in assessment of the situation: If people are seen to continue with their everyday business, the favoured (default) conclusion is that the situation is not different or dangerous, not that people have simply not noticed the danger.

The initial information gives rise to a desire for more information, as does the addition of a new serious element of information: the sounding of the alarm. Some people ignore the public warning system, but those who do not, immediately try to find information about why the alarm has sounded – and become frustrated when several minutes pass without any information on any channel. This is experienced as a very long period of time, and may even lead to an erroneous conclusion: that since no further information is given, it cannot be important.

Although none of the interviewees give a description of their initial frames, it is clear that all have different frames for what might be happening when normality is disrupted. Fanny immediately thinks of a fire in her own home, and when she, after inspection and information, is sure that her home is fine, she returns to her previous state of normality and goes back to sleep. Anna's frame was one of possible danger to her baby, and she was the one who reacted most strongly to the combination of perception and lack of information. But she was calmed by her own observations and her interpretations of them. David saw the blue lights, found information, and was then calmed and could return to normality because he himself could not smell the smoke or see the fire. He seems to have a fairly open frame for interpreting the presence of blue lights and relies on a combination of his own perception and information from different sources. Finally, Carl's frame for interpreting the events builds on his rather extensive experience of fires in industrial plants. This results in a calm, almost fatalistic interpretation that there is nothing much you can do while the fire is raging. This interpretation is strengthened by his own observations.

It seems that there is an initial "normality frame", and that when the individual experiences a gap between this frame and the present situation, a need for information arises.

The outcome of this information seeking can take two paths: either the acknowledgement that the abnormality presents a danger, or that the abnormality exists but poses no danger.

The interviewees almost all discuss the situation at one point or other during this period. It might be with a partner, other parents at a sporting event, or people in a café, and it is obvious that these conversations deal with the question of how to interpret the situation. There is a collaborative sensemaking process taking place, in which different data are compiled and discussed in order to create a logic that is both descriptive (“what has happened”) and prescriptive (“what should we do”).

A crucial situation is when the official VMA sounds on Saturday noon. From discussions in the interviews, it is evident that people do not react in the way the authorities want them to. Most people continue their everyday business, believing the signal is a test or simply ignoring it because they a) do not perceive any signs of danger themselves or b) do not receive any supplementary information. This sequence can be seen as an instance of collaborative sensemaking, as the interviewees try to explain *why* nobody reacted as they were supposed to. One of the important parts of this process is establishment of the inefficiency of the present public alarm system. In some cases the alarm cannot be heard, and in other cases the lack of immediate information about the reason for the alarm leads to the conclusion that it was probably not serious. In this case, collaborative sensemaking takes the form of a shared apologia (Hearit 2006) for not following instructions: nobody did it, and thus nobody can be blamed for not doing it. Instead the diminishing number of sirens is brought up, the soundproofing of modern apartments, and the lack of information through loudspeakers in public places. With this lack of information, people either observed others and did as they did or went online to find information from news providers, official sources or friends.

At this point there is a discussion about the quality of information in the media used. Most of the participants have standpoints on Hallandsposten, a local daily newspaper, and on Aftonbladet, which is the largest national tabloid. Also its major competitor, Expressen, is mentioned.

Interviewer: And what about the press? I’m talking about this specific episode?

Erik: Well, the press on the Internet works alright, but apart from that you have to wait too long for that.

Anna: I think Hallandsposten was quite good. They updated regularly.

Interviewer: You’re thinking about the web edition?

Anna: Yes, the web edition. It was updated continuously so you could follow it there. Then I also went and had a look at Aftonbladet and Expressen, but it’s so hyped. “Halmstad is burning”, that kind of giant headlines.

Erik: That’s what I mean, when I say it’s not as reliable.

Anna: No. I normally read those pages on the web, but now I felt that, no, I’ll stick to Hallandsposten. It felt more secure when it was more local, then they knew what they were talking about. Aftonbladet and Expressen were a bit “Great fire in Halmstad”, it sounded like the whole city was burning down.

Bertil: Yes, it was probably a bit like that.

Fanny: And they didn’t update that information, that was what came first. But Hallandsposten updated all the time, right.

In this sequence, the subject is the reliability of the web edition of a local paper and the two Stockholm-based tabloids. The interviewees support each other and supply each other with arguments for why the local paper is reliable and the tabloids not reliable in this particular situation, and this is related to a normal situation where the tabloids have higher reliability. It is also obvious that this discussion works as an argument for Bertil, who appears to have moved from either a neutral or positive position regarding the tabloids and is approaching the position of the others. A clear hierarchy of important features in a paper is constructed, with continuous updating as the prime feature to be looking for in a crisis situation.

Generally, this group uses a combination of old and new media, but with the traditional providers of news as key actors: radio, TV, local newspapers, and to some extent the official website of the municipality. What is important is that the information be swift, reliable, and not overly dramatic or sensationalist. But as can be seen from the comments, swiftness is the most important aspect, and the authorities receive much criticism for the time span between the alarm and the information on radio and TV. Swiftness when it comes to updating is also the main reason for people to choose web-based news providers, as they are usually ahead of the others and the information is always available.

The role of social media differs between the interviewees, but it is generally ranked quite high due to the functionality and swift updating, though most people use it to access the municipality's or the local newspaper's websites. In other words, the source is the same, but the media have changed.

The Age Factor

In the other groups, there were similar reactions and actions, which are not repeated here, but there were also some patterns specific to the younger and older interviewees. Obvious differences are a greater use of social media among the young and of the traditional broadcast media among the elderly.

In Group 1 ("The youngsters", 9 people, aged 18 to 30 years) Facebook is used by practically everyone, and Twitter and Instagram are also quite frequently used. But even Hallandsposten's web edition and radio, TV, and Youtube are used to some extent during the weekend. Which media they turn to in the first place depends on their ordinary media habits, but combined with a search for "something I can use". If the person does not find anything useful, the media is abandoned quite quickly. Text messages on the phone from friends was how two of the interviewees received the initial information, but even parents worked as information sources for some of the youngest interviewees.

One feature that attracts attention is the assessment of different media with regard to credibility. Aftonbladet's web edition is generally considered less trustworthy and more exaggerated, but even Halmstadsposten's web edition is considered a bit dramatic by some. Even among those in the group who read them, this characterization of the two papers is found, i.e. they prefer them despite the questioning of their credibility. The reasons are either habit or entertainment. Nobody discusses the credibility of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Youtube, but there seems to be a general consensus that because these media are used by private individuals, you are always aware of the inherent bias and potential inaccuracy. But once again, this does not affect their preferences for these channels.

A second feature which is remarkable is that several bring up previous experiences with crisis situations in Halmstad. One of the girls received a mass distributed text message in the night to shut windows and doors because the storage might explode.

Gabriella: ...but then I didn't think so much about it because so much has happened here in Halmstad, that they have exaggerated it to the extreme, with acid in the water and such, but nothing has ever happened anyway, so I just thought "oh yeah", shrugged and went back to sleep.

The experience of a major disturbance over what turned out to be nothing has given the interviewees a feeling that danger is always exaggerated. It is a bit like "the boy who cried wolf." So apparently, the younger persons have different frames for interpreting a public alarm and a different scheme for evaluating the different media and channels. Apart from that, they feature the same mix of information sources, with personal perception playing a role as well.

In Group 3 (the "Senior Citizens", 10 people, aged 55 to 82 years) the interview becomes more of a group conversation with several instances of collaborative sensemaking, e.g. concerning use of the sirens and the apparent lack of information within the fire brigade about the presence of chemicals in the burning building. Most of the interviewees received their information from radio (both national, P1, and regional, P4), but they even looked up newspapers' web editions and other websites. One of the women heard it on national radio, and thought that "this has got to be something important. Local radio can pick up the tiniest things, but this was on national radio". Nobody contradicts this, meaning that apparently although the local radio is considered better with regard to the coverage of local events, it is ranked lower on the "credibility of seriousness" scale. But no matter how the interviewees received the initial information, they actively searched for more information from other sources. In general one can say that they initially became somewhat worried, but that they soon calmed down and considered this to be a non-dangerous event. Nevertheless, this group shows a remarkably higher degree of compliance with the standard orders on what to do when the alarm sounds – they closed their windows and doors and stayed indoors, many of them with the radio on.

There is a recurring theme of other citizens not reacting to the alarm and warnings, and how strange (or bad) this is. There are even references to the fact that Halmstad is in the vicinity of a nuclear power plant: Will it be the same if there is a meltdown at the plant?

Hanna: Well, I mean IF. I'm scared of nuclear power. I hope everything will just toot, flash, that all media will be... 'Cause otherwise, what's the point in warning people?

Ingvar: I had another thought. I had this ohvwell, if you don't feel anything, you don't see anything, it doesn't smell– then you don't care.

Hanna: No, that's why you have to be warned.

Ingvar: There was something implied here, that "it doesn't affect me, it's somebody else who's affected."

And as another interviewee later asks: "How do you find out at first?" This is combined with a desire for the authorities to be more precise when communicating: is this danger-

ous or is it not? Many of the interviewees express initial concern, but they were clearly all calmed by what information they subsequently found themselves.

In addition to this, the study points to a number of other factors to be considered and discussed in order to improve the efficiency of official crisis communication. One such factor is the routines when the siren is used. It is obvious that just using a siren is not enough to make the public aware of a danger. It must be immediately followed by other forms of information, both to underline that it is not just a test, but also to make clear what the warning is about. Use of many platforms when spreading the information is also of great importance. One reason for this, as shown in this study, is the ever-present risk that one platform will not work properly. Another reason is the great differences between generations in media use and habits.

Conclusions and Perspectives

One phenomenon that becomes clear through the interviews is the existence of a “default” frame, or a “normality frame” for interpreting and making sense of the surrounding world. If the individual does not receive any input that questions this frame (through own sensation or communication), the frame will remain in force. In other words: Those who do not see, smell, or hear anything out of the ordinary, and who do not get any such information through mass media or personal communication, will continue life as if nothing has happened. This is a rather banal observation, but it is significant because it also highlights the fact that questioning the standard frame and replacing it with an “ab-normal” frame, e.g. a crisis frame, is dependent on the input being of a certain strength. If the signal is not particularly strong, the individual will make a mental note of this deviation and wait for further and more conclusive signs that the standard frame is no longer valid. Or she/he will actively seek information to confirm one of the two frames.

Figure 2. The Role of Information Seeking in the Data/frame Model

In the case of a crisis, what happens when the normality frame is questioned is that the individual evaluates the situation using the following dichotomy: is this or is this not dangerous? Uncertainty about possible danger leads to information seeking, and a re-evaluation of the danger. Looking at the stories people tell in the interviews, the first threshold to be transcended if people are to start looking for information is not particularly high. Especially older people become anxious and active, as does the mother of an infant, and they immediately check for confirmation or rejection of the danger frame. But once this status has been established and the danger more or less dismissed, the

threshold seems to become much higher. In other words, it takes a very strong signal or combination of signals for the person to re-adjust her/his judgment about the situation. Once the citizen has been calmed (“the smoke and fire does not pose a threat to me”), even the sounding of the alarm and the knowledge that this ought to be followed by preventive action does not lead to any change in assessment of the situation or to any changes in behaviour.

There seems to be a strong need to provide diversified and immediate information for citizens if they are to make the kind of sense out of the situation that is intended by the authorities. As soon as people perceive a breach of normality – smoke, fire, etc. – there should be instant and evaluative information about the reason for and seriousness of the new situation. As Seeger et al. write:

Specific kinds of information are needed in a high uncertainty, post crisis environment. These include information about cause of the post crisis and identification of responsible parties, consequences such as scope of harm and instructions for mitigation of harm, and information about corrective actions necessary to reduce risk and re-establish security. [...] Information about consequences and scope of harm gives cue as to personal impact, how serious the crisis is, and about what might constitute reasonable levels of concern and attention. (Seeger et al. 2002:56)

Not only does this satisfy the need for information and present citizens with a realistic picture of the situation, it also increases their attention to future information – and it can restore their faith in the authorities: “Post crisis audiences, therefore, may need to hear that there is a system of authority and control and it is taking appropriate action” (Seeger et al. 2002: 56).

Naturally, this also has repercussions for the level of compliance. As the interview showed, the older people were generally more compliant with the standing recommendations for what to do when the alarm sounds, but doubt about the danger and the necessity of the precautions even grew in them, as they observed life going on as normal outside and there was no further information about the level of risk. Here, it is also worth noting that there was apparently never any “all clear” signal, signifying the end of the precautions. This lack of expected information is of course damaging to the authorities’ reliability in the eyes of the citizen who did what was expected.

The present study builds on a limited number of interviewees in one particular crisis situation, so the reader should be cautious about generalizing. The study does, however, bring a number of questions into focus, several of which have been addressed in other studies and textbooks. One is the threshold to be transgressed in order to get people to accept something as a crisis situation and to take appropriate action, but also the interplay between different sources of information and their prior status as reliable or not. But mostly it becomes clear that sensemaking is a collaborative and social process in which people collect and compare information and interpretations in order to achieve some kind of consensus about how to classify the situation and determine which action to take (or not take). Seen from the authorities’ point of view, this may pose a problem, especially if the people you cooperate with in order to create sense are your peers, as is often the case within social media communication. The actions of a homogenous group will most likely result in reluctance to question frames, as the inflow of communication becomes too univocal.

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