‘Epistemes’ and Structures of Sense-Making in Organisational Life

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Forthcoming in Journal of Management Inquiry

University of Exeter

Discussion Papers in Management

Paper number 07/05

ISSN 1472-2939

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Abstract

The issue of organisational sense-making has been much researched and written about in recent years. However, despite the extensive literature that has been devoted to articulating the crucial aspects of sense-making little has been written about *how* structurally such sense-making attempts are enabled and realised. Instead much of the attention tends to be focused on the manifest features of sense-making or the sequence of steps involved. In this paper we explore the underlying organising logic of alternative systems of thought that enable the local sense-making process to be accomplished, sustained and extended. ‘Episteme’, the underlying code of a culture that govern its language, its logic, its schemas of perception, its values and its techniques, etc., is what makes collective meaning and sense-making possible and in this paper we examine three epistemes of organizational sense-making for legitimising and justifying managerial actions and decision-making within the context of a family-owned newspaper called the *Courier*. We do this through a study of the justifying narratives employed in the sense-making process.

Keywords: positive unconscious, *episteme*, resemblance, emulation, mathesis, taxinomia

Introduction

The issue of organisational sense-making has been much researched and written about in recent years (Louis, 1980; Huber and Daft, 1987; Starbuck and Milliken, 1988; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1995, 2001). Weick, perhaps the foremost advocate of the sense-making perspective, identifies seven properties of sense-making that emphasise the fact that it is: grounded in identity construction, retrospective, enactive of sensible environment, social, ongoing, focused on and by extracted cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. He compares the task of sense-making to that of cartography. Like the terrain the mapmakers seek to represent, the sense-maker seeks to convert 'a world of experience into an intelligible world' (Weick, 2001: 9). Yet as Weick points out, this process of conversion is not such a straightforward activity as it might seem. The central problem of sense-making is quite unlike a puzzle-solving game such as Mastermind where the essential task is for a player to discover a true hidden code that has already been inserted by a code-maker. Instead, in sense-making, the essential task is to create a coherent and plausible account of what is going on without ever really seeking a one true and final picture of how the world actually is. The crucial imagery portrayed in sense-making is the impression that: 'there is nobody here but us scratching around trying to make our experience and our world as comprehensible to ourselves in the best way we can, that the various kinds of order we come up with are a product of our own imagination' (Fay, 1990: 38, in Weick, 2001: 9). Yet, if sense-making is indeed the unrestrained product of our imagination, there is still a need to ask how any form of consensus is at all possible regarding what constitutes a ‘coherent and plausible account’ of the goings-on in organizational life.). Weick and Putnam (2006) focus on ‘mindfulness’ or receptive awareness as a means of enhancing understanding of multiple-perspectives in problem-solving. For an account to be construed as plausible and legitimate at all it has to conform to some underlying structure of expectation; there

has to be some form of implicit understanding about what constitutes an acceptable and justifiable system of beliefs. An extensive literature has been devoted to articulating the crucial aspects of sense-making following Weick's seminal contributions, but much less has been written about *how* structurally such 'various kinds of order' become possible although there is a very interesting discussion on underlying logics in institutional theory (see e.g. lounsbury 2007, Anderson et al. 2006). Instead much of the attention as we have seen is paid to either the 'properties' of the sense-making process or the sequence of 'steps' involved (Weick, 1995, 2001). How meaning, order and regularity are accomplished in the sense-making process remains relatively unexamined although in his.

In this paper, we argue that sense-making involves the oftentimes unconscious invoking of an organising *episteme* for ordering the world. Epistemes, according to Foucault (1970) are implicit 'rules of formation' which govern what constitutes legitimate forms of knowledge for a particular cultural period. They are the underlying codes of a culture that govern its language, its logic, its schemas of perception, its values and its techniques, etc.. What knowledge means and how it relates to an epoch's sense of order, that is, the way in which it connects things and events to one another and disposes the collective psyche are intimately connected. An episteme organises our sensorium, educates our attention and orients our material disposition towards the world around us so much so that we are directed to attend to certain objects and events that have meaning and significance only within a particular historical-cultural milieu. It shapes the practice of sense-making by directing the process of *selection*, *censoring* and *centering* of the flux of our phenomenal experiences according to its pre-specified rules of formation. Such rules of formation for organising and sense-making may vary from epoch to epoch or from culture to culture. Through the use of these internalised rules of formation the processes of inclusion/exclusion, the creation of objects of attention, the fixing of key reference points as well as the setting-up of procedures for reading and interpreting sense-data are systematically internalised as social conventions. Like map-making, sense-making requires adherence to certain established rules, principles and conventions for it to be at all productively intelligible within a community. In other words, a generative *structure* of rules of formation, principles and limiting conditions must be first put in place for sense-making to be possible at all. Such rules, principles and established

conventions constitute here what we mean by the organising *episteme* of sense-making within a particular socio-cultural epoch.

What are the underlying *epistemes* of contemporary sense-making in organisational life? How are meanings, values and beliefs wrought out and sustained from the 'blooming buzzing confusion' (James, 1911/96: 50) of organisational goings-on? And, how does a particular scheme of explanation achieve coherence, plausibility and then dominance in the order of things? These are questions that have not been sufficiently addressed or explored in the organisational sense-making literature. There is however a very interesting discussion on multiple competing logics within the institutional literature that resonates with the ideas we seek to develop within this paper. For example, Lounsbury (2007, p.2) focuses on competing logics in understanding how multiple forms of rationality provide a foundation for ongoing struggle and change in organizational fields. In his study of the spread of a new practice, Lounsbury describes how it is shaped by competing logics that generate variation in organizational adoption behaviour and practice. Along a similar vein, Anderson et al (2006, p. 102) argue that organization theories will be enriched if scholars expend more effort to understand and clarify the social mechanisms at play in their work, "in essence to present a story about why acts, events, structures, and thoughts occur."

One way to understand how organisational sense-making takes place is to regard an *episteme* as an overlaying system of linguistic coding and ordering that isolates selective aspects of phenomenological experience, directs our attention to these part- elements, assigns them names and identities, and promotes the establishment of formal causal relations. Without the aid of these rules of formation we would not be able to objectify phenomena, specify their identities, speculate on causal relationships and logically string arguments together to develop a coherent and plausible account of the world around us. Episteme is, thus, a strict system of underlying rules for punctuating experiences in a way that renders such selected experiences amenable to conceptual identification and manipulation. Like the effect of Euclidean geometry which has dominated our comprehension of the world for the best part of two thousand years, each episteme superimposes formative figures on the lexical world and in so doing allows us to conceive of the world in terms defined and

specified by a small set of recurring regularities. Logical relations, explanatory coherence and plausibility are thus desired outcomes of this intellectual effort.

Sense-making accounts take place within socio-cultural contexts. They are motivated by a need for achieving economy, coherence, consistency and hence legitimacy in our thoughts and actions. But like much of social life such mental connections have to be continuously enacted, re-enacted and subsequently modified by alternative experiences and insights on an ongoing basis. Over time and given a relatively liberal social existence a proliferation of interpretative schemas, ideologies and perspectives emerge. Thus although each *episteme* is frequently associated with the consistency of thought, perception and values for a particular cultural epoch, in *practice* it is not uncommon to find a number of parallel, competing and oftentimes contradictory sets of rules of formation and hence 'logics' of sense-making in operation at a particular point in time. In this paper, we identify three competing *epistemes* of organisational sense-making for legitimising and justifying business, social and managerial actions and decision-making within the context of a family-owned newspaper called the *Courier*. In the course of its 160 year transformation from a traditional community-based understanding of its role as news carrier for the local community to a modern business enterprise several justificatory strands in its discourse are identifiable, each in continuing tension with the others. Our paper begins by a critical examination of the relationship between *episteme*, forms of knowledge and organizational sense-making. Drawing substantially from the work of Michel Foucault on *The Order of Things*, we identify and articulate three epistemes: the Traditional, the Classical and the Modern and the forms of knowledge associated with each of these. We then go on to show how each of these coexists in practice and serve to provide alternative logics of justification for sense-making and decision-taking in the *Courier*. We examine in some detail the tension-filled narratives associated with each of these three generative rules of formation that are produced to justify alternative accounts within the *Courier.* We end by reflecting on how the study of such underlying *logics of organising* can be productively employed to illuminate the different priorities, perceptions, and imperatives governing decision-making in organisations.

Episteme, Forms of Knowledge and Structures of Sense-Making

In his Foreword to *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault (1970) makes the interesting point that his intention in that book was to 'reveal a *positive unconscious* of knowledge' (p. xi, emphasis original): an attempt to reveal what underlay but eluded the consciousness of the Renaissance, Classical and Modern eras. The fundamental codes of a particular cultural epoch that govern its language, its schemas, its values, its techniques and its hierarchies of practices are often hidden from the view of those who are engrossed in their everyday activities. Yet such hidden codes and logics of ordering may be accessed through an 'archaeological' exposition of the knowledge practices of a particular cultural epoch. Foucault maintains that what underlay each of the Renaissance, Classical and Modern eras was a unifying set of rules for forming knowledge. Thus, what was common to a variety of disciplines and practices such as alchemy, science, natural history, and economics during each of these three periods, despite their seeming diversity of interests, was that they used the same governing rules to define the objects proper to their study and to form concepts and build theories about them. Such rules of formation constitute the underlying generative code of sense-making for a particular epoch or *episteme*. These rules of formation are intended to educate our senses and to cause us to selectively attend to specific aspects of our experiences since the sensory inputs of humans are invariably abundant and overwhelming. Equivocality is a basic condition of organisational life (Weick, 1979, 2001) and hence selective censoring is a fundamental feature of the sense-making process. The term censor is etymologically linked to a whole range of related terms including, sense, census, and censure. In 'making sense' we actively select an aspect of our phenomenal experience and censor what we do not wish to attend to. This selected aspect is then 'registered' so that it subsequently provides a legitimate focus of attention. But censoring alone is insufficient since having directed the focus of our attention we also then need to subsequently fix and locate or circumscribe the phenomenal experience so that we can name it, examine it, and manipulate it as an object of inquiry. This is the task of centering. Through locating and centering, naming and identity-creation and then the establishing of causal linkages then becomes possible. From the aboriginal 'sensible muchness' that is our primary raw experience, consciousness and attention proceed to carve out and then fix and name: 'in the sky "constellations", on the earth "beach", "sea", "cliff", "bushes", "grass"….We say *what* each part of the sensible continuum is, and all these abstract *whats* are concepts' (James, 1911/96: 50). The manner in which we translate our raw

experiences into 'abstract *whats*' is governed by the established rules of formation for a particular *episteme*. Each *episteme*, therefore, establishes rules that enable us to *harness* our sensory perceptions in order to drive it better to fit our needs and ends. Such rules steer us practically in our everyday life, they bring value into our actions and 'reanimate our wills by making our action turn upon new points of emphasis' (James, 1911/96: 73).

In great part, therefore, the *episteme* of a given epoch or culture organises our sensorium (McLuhan, 1967; Ong, 1967) in such a way that we are made to attend to some types of stimuli rather than others, by making an issue of certain ones while relatively neglecting other ones. Each *episteme* allows us to think in ways foreign to the others and the shift from one *episteme* to another is marked by the criticism and rendering invalid of the previous conceptual order. For Foucault (1970), there has been two major discontinuities in the *episteme* of Western culture over the last five hundred years: the transition from the Renaissance to the Classical age beginning from around the middle of the seventeenth and the transition from the Classical to the Modern age beginning from the early nineteenth century. Each *episteme*, the Renaissance, the Classical and the Modern, brings with it a different conception of what it is to *know* and this, in turn, is grounded in each epoch's experience of order.

Knowing through Resemblance

Beginning with the Renaissance period, things were ordered and hence known through the principle of *resemblance*. Resemblance suggests *likeness* or *similarity* and such likenesses or similarities provided the basis for ordering perceptions and hence understanding of phenomena during this period. Knowing through resemblance may take the form of proximal location in space. Thus, two things regularly found adjacent or close to each other reflect a form of resemblance since being somehow close together physically gives two things a sense of likeness and shared identity. Living together under one roof, kinship, friends, neighbours on the same street, members of the same village, people from a particular part of the country etc., share a likeness precisely because their immediacy and physical proximity to each other gives them a sense of collective unity and identity. Such similarities, familiarities and affinities made up the complex of rules for forging knowledge within this period.

Resemblance is also found through *analogies* and through *emulation* which is a kind of reflection or resonance that allows us to associate things that are otherwise

remote or appear disconnected from one another. The human heart, for instance, is often thought of as a mechanical 'pump' because of its similarity of function and by thinking thus it enables us to make the connection between things that are not necessarily physically proximate or adjacent to each other. This is how, in Renaissance understanding the seeds of the aconite plant were often used as a cure for eye diseases just because their appearance was that of 'tiny dark globes seated in white skinlike coverings whose appearance is much like that of eyelids covering an eye' (Foucault, 1970: 142). Similarly, walnuts were used for wounds of the pericranium because the physical appearance of the walnut resembled the human brain. Analogy is also found in the practice of palmistry where the lines on the palm of the hand are believed to reflect the tendencies, accidents and obstacles a person encounters in the whole fabric of his/her life.

We can therefore see that Renaissance thought relied heavily on the idea of an unending spiral of linked resemblances for its system of knowledge and understanding. On this view, signs observed in nature are no different from human signs since the material world and the symbolic worlds are all believed to be inextricably intertwined. So much so that in this worldview, there is nothing bizarre about Paracelsus's claim that snakes are repelled by chanting certain Greek words (Foucault, 1970: 33). Magic, alchemy, erudition and science are thus placed on par with each other in this Renaissance scheme of things. Hence, 'the resulting conception of knowledge is one that is….the essentially incomplete pursuit of an unending chain of similarities' (Gutting, 1989: 146). Science, alchemy, palmistry and astrology all sat comfortably with one another during this period. Proximity, convenience, analogy and emulation provided the organising code for the creation of knowledge during the Renaissance period.

However, whilst this way of thinking in terms of resemblance was dominant during the Renaissance, it persists in modern times albeit within pockets of social life and within certain organisational contexts steeped in tradition. For instance, it is not uncommon for the traditional family firm to be run in a paternalistic tradition with the owners treating employees as members of the family. Such a practice is based on the idea that business and families resemble each other in terms of authority structures. Or, for such traditional organisations to adopt business and employment practices that rely on networks of kinship and friendships within a local community rather than on formal contractual relations. Also, it is not uncommon for this logic of resemblance to

underpin sense-making and decision-making in non-Western cultures. For instance the practice of *Feng Shui*, a deeply-rooted Chinese tradition that operated on the basis of resemblance, is widespread in organisational sense-making in the East and increasingly popular in the West. Feng Shui, which literally means wind and water, is an art of divining how human activities and objects should be located in order to harmonise actions and decisions with the underlying hidden forces of nature. It is often considered a vital factor in business success. Thus, when the Han Seng bank in Hong Kong experienced a bad patch in its financial trading during the mid-1980s, the Geomancer (i.e., the Feng Shui expert) was consulted and the prescription offered was the demolishing and repositioning of a connecting overhead pedestrian bridge which linked the Han Seng building to another building because the *latter was likened to a dagger piercing into the heart of the Han Seng building.* Space does not permit a more detailed treatment of this phenomenon in Chinese business decision-making. Suffice to say, however, that in various parts of the world, and in certain types of established businesses knowledge and recognition through resemblance remains a strong organising force in the conduct of affairs and it is particularly exemplified in the smaller family-based businesses both in the East and West.

Knowing through Analysis, Classifying, and Causal Reasoning

With the beginning of the Classical age in the West, however, came the demise of the principle of ordering through resemblance and its replacement by one that emphasised the breaking-up and *analysis* of resemblance and the establishment of causal relations through the principles of identity and difference. Now it was no longer sufficient to merely recognise and order each phenomenon in terms of their resemblance to other things. Instead, each phenomenon had to be analysed and broken down into its constituent elements and systematically differentiated from others. Naming, representing, classifying and the establishment of causal relations became the key activities of a knowing mind. The overall project of knowledge is now that of achieving an accurate linguistic representation of things that 'places them in a series according to their identities and differences existing among their properties' (Gutting, 1989: 155). Taxonomies, tables and classificatory schemas replaced the idea of resemblance as the basis for knowledge. Collecting, identifying, differentiating and classifying phenomena, and relating causes to effects in a hierarchical scheme of

things became the order of the day. As Elsner and Cardinal in their recent book *The Culture of Collecting* write:

'…if classification is the mirror of collective humanity's thoughts and perceptions, then collecting is its material embodiment. Collecting is classification lived, experienced in three dimensions. The history of collecting is thus the narrative of how human beings have striven to accommodate, to appropriate and to extend the taxonomies and systems of knowledge they have inherited' (Elsner, and Cardinal, 1994: 2).

One major consequences of this analytical and taxonomising mentality was the development of an obsession with the creation of tables, hierarchies and classificatory schemas for representing both nature and the social world and the subsequent articulating of causal relationships linking these otherwise independent phenomena. Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae*, written in the early eighteenth century provides one of the clearest examples of this taxonomic obsession. In the broader social realm, this same preoccupation was to be found in the work of John Wilkins and Thomas Sprat, both founding members of the Royal Society. For both Wilkins and Sprat classical knowledge is to be based upon pre-established symbols, taxonomies, and hierarchies. Thus, in this scheme of things, 'you do not *call* a thing by its name, which would be arbitrary. No, you *use* the name to designate the thing's location in a taxonomic chart' (Kenner 1987: 87, emphasis original). Through this system of differentiation, classification and representational ordering, Wilkins and Sprat, amongst others, sought to create an exaggeratedly formal and ordered social world which could thereby be more precisely described and analysed and more importantly controlled and manipulated. It is this taxonomic strategy of representation that provides the leitmotif for the Classical mind-set.

There are four aspects of the Classical *episteme* that modified the Renaissance conception of knowledge and hence radically reorganised the underlying structure of sense-making. Firstly, the unending spiralling hierarchy of analogies and resemblance prevalent during the Renaissance were gradually substituted by the method of *analysis*. From now on every phenomenon was to be investigated by a method which involved breaking it down into its constituent parts, identifying and naming each part and then examining each of these for its distinctiveness and characteristics based upon a principle of similarity and difference. Accuracy of representation became the dominant priority in this classical ordering of things. The underlying reasons for

grouping similar things together and separating them from others had to take place not just through mere *convenience*, but had to be comprehensively *justified*. Every claimed resemblance in terms of likeness and similarity must now be subjected to *proof*. Proof in this instance entails the capacity for systematic discrimination and a comprehensive verification of the properties in terms of identity and difference. This is the second key transformation that the Classical era brought with it in terms of knowledge-creation. Thirdly, not only must similarities and differences be articulated they must now be subjected to measurement and enumeration using some common units so that proper *comparison* can be made. As Bohm, (1980: 20-21) noted, what was previously understood in terms of the 'measure of things' was reinterpreted during the Classical age into the 'measurement of things'. For the Classical period, it was the employment of *mathesis*, the quantitative, mathematical treatment of reality as well as *taxinomia*, which dealt with the qualitative ordering of complex nature that enabled proper *comparison* to be made with a high degree of accuracy and certainty. With this scientific basis for comparison it then becomes possible to *discriminate* and pass judgement in terms of the true and the good. Analysis, accuracy of representation, proof, comparison and discrimination thus form the underlying formative rules of organising and sense-making in the Classical epoch. This *episteme* or system of thought continues to exert its influence in organisational life today.

We can see this classical attitude to organisational sense-making being played out in the various techniques and devices used to 'direct', 'control' and 'motivate' employees through the increasingly more complex systems of accountability that have been installed into institutions and organisations. We have already mentioned the obsession with taxonomies and organisation charts but there are many more common practices that derive from this classical impulse. For instance, the idea of performance appraisal is based upon the analysis, identification, comparison and discrimination of performance of each individual within the organisation. Reviewing, planning, goal setting and performance-tracking are all recognisably clear elements of this classical obsession with accuracy of representation. Proof of performance or otherwise is needed to justify decisions and actions whether it be rewards or otherwise. Similarly, the obsession with the creation of league tables in a variety of organised settings - schools, hospitals, universities, etc., - reflect this need for *transparency* and *accountability* of actions and resources. 'Bottom-line' thinking dominates such a set of

organisational priorities. We see this system of priorities regularly played out in public and private institutions and organisations at all levels in society.

Knowing through Interpretation

Finally, within the Modern *episteme* the basic realities have become detached from their signifiers so much so that 'A thing is (now) what it is not because of its place in the ideal classification system but because of…the historical forces buried within them' (Gutting, 1989: 181). It is no longer adequate to know a thing in terms of its formal specification and location in the overarching scheme of things. The power of representation to connect must now be sought 'outside representation, beyond its immediate visibility, in a sort of behind-the-scenes world even deeper and more dense than representation itself' (Foucault, 1970: 239). Representations are no longer unquestioned, self-justifying starting points. What defines the Modern *episteme* is not the security of a single authoritative representation of things but a confusing proliferation of competing accounts. What is brought into awareness within the Modern *episteme* is a certain historical consciousness and a realisation of importance of *perspective* in the apprehension of things. Modern perspectivism as De Castro puts it well, is 'the conception according to which the world is inhabited by different sorts of subjects or people…which apprehend reality from distinct points of view' (De Castro, 1998: 469). As a consequence knowledge invariably involves an *act of interpretation*. Modernity is thus associated not so much with the triumph of the accuracy of representation as in the Classical era but in the *decline and failure of representation*. *Modernism represents the beginning of that moment of disillusionment that arises from a realisation of the impossibility of accurate representation because of the uncontrolled proliferation of competing regimes of signification* (Lash, 1990). Modernism as Lash argues *problematizes* representations and hence destabilizes the meanings of the latter.

In modernity already, representations are no longer unquestioned, self-justifying starting points. They do not command sufficient unitary justification for action and decision. What the Classical era, with its continued emphasis on individuation, differentiation, specialization, rationalization, control and discrimination unwittingly gave rise to is an overflowing proliferation of alternative and competing representations and a sense of relativity of perspective. Meanings are no longer stable, transparent and self-evident. Instead actions and intentions have

become more opaque and subjected to hidden motives and understandings. Deeper unconscious forces, historical embeddedness and ulterior motives that are difficult to empirically verify have to be increasingly countenanced as legitimate explanations. Marx's notion of 'false consciousness', Freud's idea of the 'unconscious' and even the notion of 'unintended consequences' are part of this shift in emphasis from a surface to a depth social-psychological understanding of human behaviour. Pluralism, relativism and the emergence of conflicting realities became the signature theme of this Modern period. A degree of suspicion, cynicism and disillusionment sets in as regimes of representation compete with each other for an ideological foothold in the collective psyche of societies and organisations. It is against this backdrop of the failure of Classical representation that the contest of meaning and hence control is played out in a multitude of domains, including especially in organisational life.

Whilst Foucault (1970) discusses these epistemological transformations in epochal terms and in terms of *epistemes*, that are more or less logically incommensurable it would be fair to say that *in practice* contradictory though they appear, the organising codes of all three *epistemes* nevertheless coexist as a multi-layered dimension of social reality. The displacement of one *episteme* by another is by no means ever comprehensive or complete. Thus, even now in the 21st century there is clear evidence of social and organisational practices that have been ordered around the principle of resemblance where the organising rules of adjacency, proximity, emulation and analogy remain very much alive even with the dominance of the Classical and Modern attitudes. Each of the three cultural attitudes previously elucidated, the Renaissance (which we will call here the Traditional), the Classical and the Modern, are to be found in various degrees in the modern-day organisation and it is to their empirical manifestation that we now turn.

The Case of the *Courier*[1]

The empirical research on organizational sense-making was carried out in the Courier, a 160 year old family-owned, community-based newspaper production and publishing company, to examine how employees made sense of events in organizational life (the everyday and the extraordinary) and how they ordered experiences so that meanings

[1] The identity of the newspaper company, as well as the identity of employees who were kind enough to give very honest accounts of working life in their organization, is being protected and therefore the pseudonym 'the *Courier*' is used throughout this paper.

could be shared. The focus was on organisational narratives since narratives provide a means of constructing identity and legitimacy (Lounsbury and Glynn (2001), and they are a mode of thinking for making sense of experience as well as a mode for discursively sharing experiences with others. As Weick (1995, p. 60-61) observes, what is necessary for sensemaking is a *good story*:

> "…something that preserves plausibility and coherence, something that is reasonable and memorable, something that embodies past experience and expectations, something which resonates with other people, something that can be constructed retrospectively but also can be used prospectively, something that captures both feeling and thought, something that allows for embellishment to fit current oddities, something that is fun to contrast."

Narrative deals with both the familiar and the strange, having the capacity to make the mundane appear unusual and unpredictable and to make the extraordinary into phenomenologically understandable experiences (Bruner, 1986, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988).

The research on logics and mechanisms within institutional theory involves theoretical research or archival research based on media resources. There is merit therefore in a deep ethnographic analysis of the symbolic meaning systems which structure practice. In this research, we have combined ethnographic and narrative methods in an approach, which Hanson (2006) terms 'ethnonarrative'. 'Ethnonarrative' refers to research in which context is a central focus in the creation of meaning and where analyses shifts between texts and contexts and texts within a context of construction (Hanson, 2006, p. 1049).

The research focussed on the narratives of employees in the *Courier* during a period of major change from a traditional paternalistic to a profit-focussed business organization (see O'Leary 2003 for a further discussion of the changes experienced in the newspaper industry). Over 100 *episodic* interviews with employees, past and present, were carried out over a five-year period. The episodic interviews, which lasted between two and five hours, concentrated attention on the move from traditional values towards a more professional market-oriented organization and in particular, on the shift in strategy from a local to a national newspaper. Episodic interviews that focus on narratives emphasize the meaning of events, since experience is always in need of interpretation (Bruner, 1990, p. 51). These narratives illustrate how employees in the

Courier, attempted to make sense of the events they experienced in ways that justified their own actions and interests. The material collected at the *Courier* was ordered according to common themes, which employees may or may not have been aware of. These themes included the Traditional (family and familiarity); the Classical (profit, performance and measurement); and the Modern (cynicism, irony and a sense of disillusionment). Foucault's notion of *epistemes* seemed to strongly resonate with the narrative material collected at the Courier and provides a useful conceptual handle for organising the underlying structures of sense-making taking place in the *Courier.*

The Traditional Episteme of Organisational Sense-making

The *Courier* has operated for many years as a traditional family-owned company, more of an institution for the local community than a profit-making enterprise. In this regard, the *Courier* reflected and emulated the concerns of the community. Older employees, particularly former printers and journalists who had worked in the newspaper for 15 years or more spoke with some nostalgia about their experience with the *Courier*:

> Yes, I came in as a trainee compositor, as an indentured apprentice, as all apprentices were. There was a legal document between my parents and the company – it's a pity that I don't have a copy of it here to show you because it's very interesting, it's a very funny document. It forbids me visiting alehouses, play houses and taverns! It is something that is worthy of the archives! It is very archaic but in a sense it did set the tone for a type of discipline that was expected.…. I come from a very, I suppose, Catholic background in the extended sense. It was a liberal household, but yet discipline was the order of the day. When you were told to do something, it was only once. This document was only an extension of home. It was like as if I had passed from my parents to the *Courier* …(Owner) became like a father figure to me.

The workplace for these older employees was an *extension of home* and the owners of the *Courier* assumed the role of father-figures so much so that there is a seamless continuity from home to work. The roles/rules of home *resembled* the roles/rules at work. It also has to be emphasised that the practice of apprenticeship in particular encapsulates the notion of resemblance because it is a structured relationship in which the apprentice learns to *emulate* the master so that he or she can then be subsequently *assimilated* into the craft tradition. These employees conceived of the organisation in terms resembling a family where the owner is at once, authoritative and protective, at

once a disciplinarian and a support. Control and discipline are unquestioningly accepted, including control over editorial decisions which one might expect to be made by the editor:

> If senior management didn't like a story, it was quashed. There was a story about a pilot boat that crashed in the harbour but since [Owner] was interested in boating and had a boat below there in the harbour, he didn't like the story and it wasn't written about.

Here, the personal interest of the owner overrode the editorial decision because as a 'father-figure' it was considered perfectly acceptable for him to decide what went into the papers and what did not. So news was only included if it suited the interests of the family that owned the *Courier* and the community that it served. Worthy news that was *sympathetic* to the cause of the family and community was assimilated and reported whilst that which was viewed as 'negative' was isolated and dismissed. Partiality and selectivity through sympathy, affinity, resemblance and incorporation provided the basis for decision-making in the presentation of news. This sympathetic approach to news reporting is further exemplified by a story told by a retired editor explaining the difference between himself and his replacement.

> When I was editor, as I was a family man myself, people would often come to my house to plead with me not to run a story which would ruin them. There was this one time when a neighbour in the council houses nearby called to the house and my wife was the only one home at the time. She let the woman in, who knelt on the floor and pleaded with her to ask me not to allow a story about her husband get into the paper.
>
> Her husband had bought bed linen and mattresses from another man on the estate and they turned out to be stolen. The husband was being charged with handling stolen goods. His job as a baker, and his pension, would be taken from him if the story got into the papers. My wife said she'd have a word with me. The woman called again when I was home and again knelt on the floor, just next to where you are sitting now, crying and pleading. I comforted her and said I'd see what I could do.
>
> I went into work the next day and asked if there was anything interesting going on in the courts. "Only one story," said the reporter who was covering the court cases. "Oh, what is it?" I asked innocently. "It's a case of a guy handling stolen property – he got a warning and a fine." "Don't bother with it," I said. "What are you talking about?" asked the reporter, "this is a great story – it's my day's work and I'm doing it." "Don't do it!" I insisted. "I'm

> doing it!" shouted the reporter. "OK, do it." I went back to my desk and eventually the reporter came over with his copy and I just thanked him and tore it up. The reporter went mad and danced in front of me. There was an awful scene but I couldn't let that man lose his job – he did have a family after all. Of course, they'd run the story if it happened today. The new editor, you see, he's not married!

This story places the newspaper company firmly within the community and the family. In the opening scene, it is the wives who appear, one pleading on behalf of her husband and the other agreeing to lobby her husband. The husband and editor places his neighbour's family ahead of an "easy" news story. Employees' families (as well as the wider community) are taken into account in decisions which affect the work organisation. It is suggested that the new editor being less integrated into the local community, and being unmarried, had different values, less regard for the local context, and hence would have printed the story regardless of its consequences.

Such partiality in decision-making has also its own upsides as the following story told by a company accountant with a long history in the organisation, illustrates.

> There's a poor fellow there now who died last week. I'll always remember he was married twice. But the first girl he married had a life-threatening disease before he married her, but he married her anyway. And she was dying, and she had always wanted a brass bed; and so the family [who owned the *Courier*] lent him the money to buy the brass bed.

The idea that a business can dip into its own accounts to lend money to an employee for what is clearly more of an aspirational ideal than a dire physical hardship reflects the power of a tradition to *assimilate* the personal concerns of the staff into the company business thereby treating employees like members of an extended family. This family atmosphere with its emphasis on caring creates a sense of security and belonging for employees and in turn, a great loyalty to the organisation as well as a sense of continuity that arises from the *Courier* employing different generations of the one family. As Foucault (1970) writes of this traditional logic of resemblance:

> 'sympathy is not content to spring from a single contact…it excites of the world to movement and can draw even the most distant of them together…Sympathy is an instance of the *Same* so strong and so insistent…it has the… power of *assimilating*, of rendering things identical to one another, of mingling them' (Foucault, 1970: 23).

Familiarity and partiality also form the basis of recruitment and selection in a paternalistic organization, as you were likely to get a job in the *Courier* only if you already had family members working there. The *Courier*, it was maintained is "littered with families" not just in the sense of the Courier being family-owned but in the practice of employing relatives of employees:

> By employing members of the same family you created a sense of loyalty, a perpetuity ... if you did something wrong at work it would catch up with you at home ... There is a greater sense of responsibility when you are part of a family tradition ... I was born in the shadow of the gates of the *Courier* – it's in my blood, it's what I do! To new people coming in today what does the *Courier* mean? It means a job; it means that they can pay the mortgage. That's all.

Loyalty can be best understood as a deep feeling of *sameness* and emotional *proximity* and this sense of sameness is also reinforced by a physical proximity: ('I was born in the shadow of the gates of the *Courier*') and hence a sense of a blood-bond as well as common destiny: ('it's in my blood, its what I do!'). This traditional view of organisational life, with its emphasis on resemblance through proximity and closeness, hierarchical order, discipline, generosity, loyalty and belonging, coexists in tension with a Classical view that sought a more professional, accountable, performance-oriented and profit-focussed set of outcomes.

The Classical Episteme of Organisational Sense-making

Events such as increased competition, declining sales of core products and so forth had focussed energies and attention on profit at the *Courier* and a survival strategy which included expansion into the national market. The fifth generation family members as well as non-family directors and new professionals who had recently joined the *Courier* (including a new editor) described this as a ruthless management philosophy where sentimentality and nepotism had to be replaced by a more professional attitude. It was argued that the *Courier* would have to move forward through a number of key changes including cost-cutting through redundancy, the introduction of a new salary structure, the employment of professionals from outside the organization in key positions in marketing and editorial, and the creation of a better product which would sell as a national newspaper. This new emphasis reflects the mentality of the Classical episteme. For, as we recall, Classical thought revolves

around the establishment of individual identities, their differentiation and classification into categories and their evaluation in terms of causal links. The idea of 'cost-cutting' is predicated on the ability to detect anomalies through comparison and proof of inefficiencies. The idea of 'redundancy' is predicated upon the ability to *identify*, *differentiate*, *isolate* and *remove* poor performers much like the way one would remove a malfunctioning or worn out part from a machine. The emphasis is on *analysis*: of profitability of the business; of poor performing staff; of better fit between the job and the person recruited; of the environment in terms of opportunities and threats; of better and more lucrative markets to operate in, and so on. The whole culture of the organisation is thereby re-oriented towards outcomes: performance, profits and progress:

> The whole organization has changed enormously. It has gone from being a dull, staid, provincial – very provincial – organisation to a very dynamic one. Change is at the centre of the philosophy of the *Courier* now.
>
> Improving the production process and the distribution are all important…Before there were some days when we produced wonderful papers, there were other days when they were awful….Our production, I believe, now is excellent and consistently excellent. Our distribution, in other words the availability of the bloody thing, is almost acceptable….
>
> Now it's a business, run like a business, that's the way it is… It's aggressive. It is aggressive in that it beats people up and it is aggressive in setting targets and achievement. But I love my job. I love everything I do. There are no illusions about it being a happy place. It's a snake pit.

This aggressive bottom-line focused operation with its emphasis on performance and responding to market expectations and the deliberate taking of action accordingly resulted in the creation of a more professional organisation structure and the specification of key roles within the business. The introduction of job titles and descriptions such as Human Resource Manager and Newspaper Sales and Marketing Manager as well as the institution of a system of performance appraisals and accountability replaced the older way of conducting operations. The new CEO (as opposed to the previous Director) suggested that his key task was to "put the right people in the right places" (i.e., the appropriate classification and categorisation of each individual and their proper 'fit' within the organisation):

> When I took over, I set about putting the right people into the right places.

> Am, [previous Director] is a very nice guy….He is a gentle guy with a big heart and he never liked delivering bad news. And he spent a lot of time with regard to the people ... *but he was never one to look at people and to analyse their characters and see if they were the right people for the job*.

'He was never one to look at people and to analyse their characters…' suggests a Traditional mentality where like-mindedness, was appreciated, assimilated and encouraged. There was little effort put in to *identify*, *compare* and *discriminate* between better and worse performing members of staff.

As well as the emphasis on measurement, comparison and control, the Classical grammar is also associated with the creation of a certain sense of what 'proper' behaviour constitutes. Cleanliness and personal decorum became an important aspect of workplace behaviour. The sanitization of the workplace is well illustrated in stories that relate to the physicality of work.

> Well it got cleaner! I used to arrive home everyday absolutely filthy after dealing with hot metal and graphite.….

> They won't allow the smell of alcohol, smoke or anything. And it's things like that they are interested in, not the quality of work. They came out one day with this clean desk policy. For Christ' sake. It's crazy…. We seem to be virtually sanitized now!

The Classical argument is that drinking, gambling and other addictive behaviour affects discipline and make the organisation less productive, destroy lives and cost the organisation a lot of money. The *Courier* is a profit-making organization, not a charity or a rest home for those with addictions. The idea that journalists are creative people who need alcohol and other addictive substances to fuel their creativity was no longer acceptable. Proper demeanours and proper behaviour was demanded of all staff.

Another key change involves the introduction of a new salary structure which meant new reporters entering the *Courier* earned significantly less than workers who had been there for a few years. Whilst acknowledging that this might seem unfair to the new employees, it was argued as necessary for cost control since the older employees were unable to leave even if they disliked their jobs as they were not likely to receive the same high wages in any other newspaper company. This aggressive profit-focussed view with its emphasis on productivity, professionalism and

progression had opposition not only from older workers but also from newly recruited journalists who were in temporary employment in the *Courier* and who describe themselves as 'the moral opposition' to the profiteering ways of management.

The Modern Episteme of Organisational Sense-making

The Modern mentality as we recall is characterised by a situation in which signifiers have become loosened and detached from reality itself. Modernity is a reflection of the realisation that signs are *problematic* and do not straightforwardly represent what they supposedly stand for. What is *said* and what is *done* are no longer congruent with each other so much so that actions and intentions are by no means transparent and unequivocal. Interpretation and reading beneath the surface of things is required. One consequence of this detachment of the sign from reality is the emergence of suspicion, cynicism and disillusionment since things can no longer be taken as they *appear*. The truth lies hidden from view. What is needed for a full comprehension is the excavating of the 'historical forces buried within' (Gutting, 1989: 181).

As a result of the shift in emphasis from a Traditional to a Classical approach to business, the *Courier* took on a number of new contract and free-lance reporters who appeared to mistrust management and who took it on themselves to expose what they saw as the injustice and incompetence in the workplace. This was done through telling humorous tales that publicised the weaknesses of management as well as self-deprecatory stories which illustrated the pathetic existence of the junior reporters themselves and the perceived lack of respect for journalism shown by management in the *Courier*. One of these temporary employees described the following key event that changed his attitudes towards the organization:

> I believed that this place stood for compassion, honesty and loyalty … but after the bank holiday pay fiasco, I don't think I really care about the place anymore … after Easter, having as usual invoiced for double days for three bank holidays … I discovered we hadn't been paid and that we weren't going to be …

The above incident, which recalls a refusal by management to pay extra for working on bank-holidays, was used to illustrate the underhand practices of the *Courier*, contrary to the new-styled claims of transparency, fairness and professionalism. Through such decisions, the *Courier* was perceived to display a lack of honesty, fairness, and sincerity and that, therefore, the management of the *Courier* had to be

regarded with suspicion in terms of their underlying motives. The disgruntled junior reporters employed cynical narratives to air their disillusionment about the organisation. For example, one reporter told the following story:

> Am, my mother died in January and I just took off and I was absent for about three or four weeks. But the boss in my department, he paid me for the first three weeks I was away, which is pure paternalistic society. It is purely the view that 'we'll look after you in times of hardship'. That's a pure sign of a paternalistic organization….

In the above account, the reporter initially gave the impression that the *Courier* had acted sympathetically to his cause. However, he subsequently turned the story around from apparent praise to cynicism:

> …but they use that to mask the fact that if they were a proper decent company who employed people in a fair manner, you would have holidays - you could take four weeks holidays. So they are able to slip back one mode to another to disguise the shortcomings, you know. So it's like the flip of a switch you know.

What at first appeared to be an act of generosity on the part of management - to pay an employee who takes time off for a bereavement - was in fact interpreted as a cover-up because the young reporter, like many others in the Courier, was appointed on a freelance basis and therefore did not have holiday entitlements like regular employees. What initially appeared as an act of paternalism was perceived by the reporter as a means "to disguise the shortcomings" at the *Courier.* Bakhtin (1984) terms this method of narration 'heteroglossia': a differentiated form of speech which is intended to stratify assertions in a 'double-voiced' manner such that it leaves a loophole for the speaker to alter the final meaning of his/her words. One example that Bakhtin gives is from the *Underground Man*:

> 'I happened to look at myself in the mirror. My harassed face struck me as extremely revolting, pale, spiteful, nasty, with dishevelled hair….
>
> "No matter, I am glad of it", I thought; "I am glad that I shall seem revolting to (Liza); I like that"' (Bakhtin, 1984: 236).

Here, as Bakhtin demonstrates, the initial impression is one of the Underground Man's concern about his own appearance but he leaves a narrative loophole to allow himself to subsequently reverse that sentiment from a negative to a positive one. This is the

nature of the double-voicedness of heteroglotic discourse. Thus, the junior reporter, on the surface seems initially appreciative of the act of compassion displayed by the organisation. But one subsequently learns of the cynicism with which he views company decisions.

Another narrative feature widely employed by these junior reporters was humorous self-deprecation.

> … they are introducing a dress code into the paper and I don't know what I am going to do because at the moment I earn so little that my personal wardrobe isn't very extensive … only two of my shirts have collars so wearing a tie isn't a possibility and I only have the one pair of trousers which I have been wearing for the past two weeks, they have to go to the dry-cleaners soon.

The above story was told in irony and jest and with a degree of sarcasm especially as it was later admitted that no such dress code was to be introduced but the story served as a humorous way to illustrate the poor salary of the young reporter. Similarly, the following story was told to illustrate the difficult life of the young newspaper reporter:

> Yeah. It's just - we are sent out to do extremely shitty jobs. Like - dress up as Oscar Wilde, get onto public transport, and recite poetry. Don't laugh - I had to do that! Am, there is a guy in there who has to go around doing Sambo Boy - he has to dress up as James Bond and eat a sandwich. That's just for a picture - the idea is that the public don't know that it is someone from the newspaper. There's a girl in the office, who a couple of weeks ago, had to dress up as a Frenchman - you know, tash, garlic the whole works. And it's just nonsensical really - we are news reporters, that is not news, that is features.

The junior reporters although they joked about some of the ridiculous tasks they were asked to accomplish, often got their own back on management by telling humorous tales that exposed the incompetence and inefficiency of management in the workplace. The following incident, recalled with some glee by a sub-editor, illustrates the rewards offered to sales staff, in this case because of their incompetence:

> If you look at the people who are being treated well - take tele-sales for example - they added up all their totals for what they sold in a certain month. And they put in one zero too much so their boss said 'brilliant, well done, great work' and arranged for a bottle of champagne to be sent to all of their houses before they came to work on Monday morning. He didn't wait until they got into work. Oh no, they got the champagne at home. Later on in the week, they admitted 'Oh dear, we added it up wrongly.' You

> know so ...If we (sub-editors) do something good we wouldn't even get to go for a pint, you know.

The reporters believed that in the new professional organization, the contribution of staff in marketing and sales were more highly regarded than the contribution of editorial staff. The above incident was recalled to make the point that this respect was misplaced. Mockery was often used by these junior reporters to expose what they perceived as the inefficiencies and mistakes made by management. The injustice felt by the junior reporters resulted in cynicism, disillusionment, and a desire to expose the incompetence of management and to refute the notion that the *Courier* was indeed a professional, national newspaper.

The Co-existence of Competing Epistemes

Foucault (1970) pointed to the incommensurability of epistemes with their different systems of ordering and different conceptions of what it is to know. However, in the case of the *Courier*, not only do the Traditional, the Classical and the Modern epistemes coexist but they occasionally overlap and furthermore, individuals sometimes shifted from one mode of justification and interpretation to another. This occured, as the *Courier* was variously perceived as achieving success or floundering under pressure from competition. As problems began to surface with the profit-oriented approach and sales did not quite meet with expectations, some managers who were initially driving the changes shifted to a more cynical position arguing that the *Courier* is incapable of change. On the other hand, although it was initially anticipated by the young reporters that they would have to leave the *Courier*, those who really excelled were promoted and became part of the success story and their narrating subsequently shifted from Modern disillusionment to a Classical story of profit and progress.

Some movement can also be observed between the Traditional theme and the Modern theme. Some employees who had been in the organization for many years and who had lived/worked through the paternalistic era had nonetheless survived the transition to a new role in the organization and although they were nostalgic for the past, saw the need for change. For example, a former printer who worked in the *Courier* for twenty nine years and who once felt very strongly about the importance of family, loyalty and generosity was now more concerned about the survival of the company:

> "We have to change – cars don't stand still, people don't stand still, the newspaper has to move on to other dimensions …"

The reverse is also in evidence with some movement from the Classical to the Traditional as some managers behind the changes lamented the loss of past values such as loyalty and a real understanding of the local market that had been removed along with the introduction of more progressive but restrictive practices. As a result, there were signs of a reversion to some more traditional values. For example, the latest editor is an internal promotion as is the most recent CEO (although he is the first non-family CEO he still has a history in the newspaper company).

As well as individuals shifting from one type of narrating to another, it is also possible to identify narratives which contain elements of more than one mode of organizing. For example, an older reporter discusses the benefits of a caring and paternalistic organization but accepts that a paternalistic organization that dies on it's feet is of little benefit especially to his son (who also works in the *Courier*) who he wishes to have a secure future and a good pension:

> … the man that said that profit doesn't matter is a liar and you can't exist without the man in the counting house doing the job … it has to be done otherwise the place won't last. They lasted long enough, now I hope it'll last until my son who also works here is sixty or seventy so he has the security…

The above narrative combines ideas about profit with ideas about security and contains elements of both the Traditional and the Classical *Epistemes.*

Finally, it is also the case that some of the stories can be interpreted through more than one mode of sensemaking. For example, the paternalistic stories about the generosity of the family who owned the *Courier* and who lent money to employees is told by older reporters as indicative of a caring and generous organization but is told by managers as an illustration of unprofessional and unsustainable management practices.

Concluding Remarks

Organisational sense-making takes place within the context of established rules of formation that constitute the underlying *episteme* for meaning-making. An episteme is a structure of social coding and ordering that organizes our consciousness, perception

and reflection and disposes us towards particular aspects of social phenomena. It directs our sensorium, orients our perception, and educates our attention. It provides a common basis for isolating specific aspects of our lived experiences and for rendering them significant and meaningful to us in our everyday life. Such rules of formation steer us practically in our daily lives by giving focus to our awareness and value to our actions and by making such actions turn on what is perceived to be significant points of emphasis.

In this paper we have drawn on a variety of theoretical sources to throw important light on what is not an uncommon organisational situation in which the pressures for change and shifting perceptions and priorities have created a degree of conflicting tensions and contradiction within organisational life. Foucault's three *epistemes*, whilst notionally related to epochal mentalities and whilst seemingly *logically* incommensurable can nonetheless be productively used to contrast the different underlying logics of justification shaping perceptions, sense-making and decision-making in organisations. For in the world of practice logical incommensurability of perspectives is not, in and of itself, a barrier in the working out of organisational life. Social life is inherently multi-tiered and deeply laden with contradictions. That of itself does not prevent decisive action from taking place. Instead, what we can see is that strategies of justification and sense-making are formulated 'on the hoof' so to speak. They draw freely from three distinct generic structures of discursive formation: The Traditional with its emphasis on resemblance through proximity, sympathy and affinity that provided a logic relating to paternalism, loyalty and community; The Classical with its emphasis on analysis, transparency, proof, comparison and discrimination; and the Modern with its cynicism and disillusionment and that is accompanied by the development of more subtle forms of discourse including self-deprecation and the kind of 'double-voicedness' that seem to characterise the junior reporter's accounts of the going-ons in the *Courier.* This rich panopoly of strategies for organisational meaning-making that we have attempted to capture represents the consequence of the tension-filled juxtaposition of competing *epistemes* that underly going-ons in organisational life. In many ways this is nothing exceptional for what actually goes on in the 'real' world of organisational life. Lounsbury (2007) calls for more attention to be paid to the origins and structuring of logics and how they shape industry practices as well as decision-making in organizations. It is our hope that the approach that we have adopted here can be

further developed to show the richness of insights that can be gained through a more sensitive appreciation of the subtle and nuanced character of human interactions.

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