HOW OCCUPATIONAL AFFILIATION SHAPES EMPLOYEES’ SENSE MAKING OF NEW TECHNOLOGY

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How do situated rules construct organizational actors’ sensemaking? Sensemaking refers to the process of structuring the unknown so as to be able to act on it (Weick, 1993). As such, it is an integral part of mundane reality, linked to many essential stances of organizational life: acting collectively (Weick, 1993); reacting to environmental challenges (Gephart, 1993; Smircich & Stubbart, 1985; Thomas, Clark, & Gioia, 1993); and improvising new technology uses (Orlikowski, 2000).

Actors in organizations are bound explicitly, by organizational premises, policies, professional codes of conducts, and tacitly, by norms, expectations and traditions. Organizational actors use these “raw materials for disciplined imagination” to construct sense (Weick et al, 2005). To address context is therefore crucial when it comes to understanding the ability of certain organizational groups to adopt new technology. Acknowledging how the context shapes collective sensemaking could cast light on why some groups are able to make sense of “the new”, and others are not.

Organizational scholars recognized that sensemaking does not occur “in vacuum” (Taylor and Van Every 2000). For instance, individual actor’s social position shapes the vision of organizational change (Lockett and colleagues; 2014), and interdivisional communication allows sharing and clustering the meanings (Balogun and Johnson; 2004, 2005). Occupational differences, however, had not yet been emphasized. Although, such differences can potentially carve different senses, taking into account documented resistance to technological innovations which are interpreted as potentially deskillling or disruptive for the current prestige of the occupational community (Van Maanen and Barley, 1964). Our study unpacks how exactly differences in occupation shape actors’ ability to make sense.

Sensemaking occurs either when the world deceives expectations, or when actors do not see an obvious way to engage with it (Weick, 2005). It usually happens when an incomplete or highly ambiguous tool is implemented in organization (Berente et al, 2011; Orlikowski, 2005).
We draw on the ethnographic study of a mid-size European publishing company to unpack how occupational communities influence the sensemaking processes related to the introduction of a new technology.

The publishing company under study owns two newspapers, one of them an influential outlet with circulation of 330,000 issues. For the teams, working on this newspaper, top-management fostered organizational use of the social media. Such decision imputed organizational members to make sense how to use this unknown technology with no guidelines and no boundaries.

This policy primarily related to the two departments of the company – journalists (Belanews) and advertisers (Advert). Both departments were similar in size, professional experience, age and gender composition of the members. They differed by the nature of their job. Advertisers’ main task was creating textual or visual ads for the clients and placing them on the pages of one of the two newspapers the company owned- big republican newspaper Belanews and free city newspaper Citynews. Journalists job was to fill the Belanews pages with the informational and analytic content. Both departments were closely working together to create the common product: Belanews newspaper. After three months, despite all of the similarities and similar implementation policies, Belanews was able to develop enabling interpretations and rich use of the social media, while Advert employees failed to make sense of it.

We conducted four two–week periods of participant observations on site and 19 month of participant online observations of the 58 organizational members’ individual social media accounts used for work. During the inductive analysis stage we relied upon 5556 posts 42 formal and 19 informal interviews with organization members: journalists, editors, sales, advertisers, heads of the departments, IT head, and CEO.

We found that advertisers interpreted work-related use of social media as a threat, while journalists defined it as enrichment for work and as an opportunity to gather more information. These different meanings of social media for organizational members were shaped by the situated rules, in particular, those of the occupation Professional norms
emphasizing autonomy, objectivity through the inclusion of multiple viewpoints and treating information as transparent enabled journalists to construct social media as opportunity. Conversely, of discretion, conformity and routinized work in advertising department led to perception of social media as either irrelevant or a threat to extant work practices.