Sensegiving and Sensemaking of Highly Disruptive Issues

Sensegiving and Sensemaking of Highly Disruptive Issues: Animal Rights Experienced Through PETA YouTube Videos

Yanfei Hu
Surrey Business School, University of Surrey
Guildford, United Kingdom
E-mail: yanfei.hu@surrey.ac.uk

Claus Rerup
Frankfurt School of Finance & Management gGmbH
Management Department
Adickesallee 32-34, Suite C4.41
D-60322 Frankfurt am Main, Germany
Email: c.rerup@fs.de

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This study examines how highly disruptive issues cause profound dissonance in societal members that are cognitively and emotionally invested in existing institutions. We use PETA's (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) entrepreneurial advocacy for animal rights to show how this highly disruptive issue interrupted and violated taken-for-granted interpretations of institutions and institutional life. We compare 30 YouTube videos of PETA's advocacy to explore pathways to effective sensegiving and sensemaking of highly disruptive issues. Our findings augment the analytical synergy that exists between sensemaking and institutional analysis by unpacking the micro level dynamics that may facilitate transformational institutional change.

Keywords: Highly disruptive issues, sensemaking, sensebridging, emotions, microfoundations of institutions

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INTRODUCTION

Highly disruptive issues, such as anti-slavery in the 18th century (King & Haveman, 2008), women's movement in the 19th and early 20th century (Clemens, 1993, 1997), and animal rights (Jasper & Poulsen, 1993), call for fundamental change in how we organize society, and impose moral challenges for societal members. Such issues are “highly disruptive” because they interrupt and violate taken-for-granted interpretations of a wide swathe of institutions and institutional life. For example, “almost all of us grew up eating meat, wearing leather, and going to circuses and zoos. We never considered the impact of these actions on the animals involved” (PETA website). This begs the question: how might highly disruptive issues transform deeply rooted institutions?

Institutional change analysis within neo-institutional theory (NIT) has captured incremental change but has only started to grapple with more disruptive problems that require radical change (de Rond & Lok, 2016; Lawrence, 2017; Whelan & Gond, 2016). Highly disruptive issues are distinct in their effects on societal members: they generate dissonance and resistance within an audience that is cognitively and emotionally invested in existing institutions (Voronov & Vince, 2012; Voronov & Weber, 2015; Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018). Therefore, such issues pose challenges to “the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 215). Institutional entrepreneurs – “agents who initiate, and actively participate in the implementation of, changes that diverge from existing institutions” (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009: 72) – are one type of actors that sponsor highly disruptive issues. Understanding how highly disruptive issues might transform deeply rooted institutions is important, because such change often drives the evolution of societies. However, changes in the context of highly disruptive issues has been underexplored. For instance, such change likely hinges on a distributed process through which a critical mass of

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society needs to experience cognitive and moral transformation; yet it is unclear how institutional entrepreneurs facilitate this transformational change of societal members.

Institutional entrepreneurs often attempt to convey highly disruptive issues to a wide audience through numerous micro-episodes (e.g., through media and social media platforms). These episodes constitute sensegiving attempts to “influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of ... reality” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991: 442). These attempts trigger sensemaking – the social process “through which people work to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectation” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014: 57). Everyday activities aimed at “sensemaking, alignment and muddling through” (Powell & Rerup, 2017: 12) are significant microfoundations of institutional change (Haack, Sieweke, & Wessel, 2019). In this study, we explore the process of micro-level sensemaking during institutional change.

Sensemaking scholars have focused on how people respond to violations of expectations (Patriotta & Gruber, 2015). But it is unclear how a wide and distributed audience make sense of interruptions since existing research has privileged the study of sensemaking in co-located groups (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). For highly disruptive issues to reach distributed societal members, institutional entrepreneurs need to craft discursive accounts—interpretations or explanations that may justify and enable actions (Cornelissen, 2012; Maitlis, Vogus, & Lawrence, 2013)—to attract broad-based attention and prompt positive involvement in the focal issue. Unfortunately, little is known about what accounts constitute sensegiving of highly disruptive issues as well as how these accounts stimulate the audience to make sense differently. This provokes our first research question: *How do institutional entrepreneurs’ sensegiving accounts stimulate distinctive sensemaking in the audience about highly disruptive issues?*

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While the first research question aims to explore the relational patterns between sensegiving accounts and the outcomes of subsequent sensemaking stimulated by these accounts, we are also interested in unpacking the processes through which these patterns emerge. During sensemaking, sensemakers are cognitively engaged (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014) but they are also emotionally involved. Emotional involvement is especially salient when the focal issue is highly disruptive (Bartunek, Balogun, & Do, 2011; Cornelissen, Mantere, & Vaara, 2015; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). This leads to our second research question: *how does the audience cognitively and emotionally make sense of accounts about highly disruptive issues?*

To explore these questions, we examined 30 micro-episodes through which an institutional entrepreneur—People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)—used YouTube videos to nudge viewers’ sensemaking of animal rights. We developed an empirically grounded typology that explains how PETA’s sensegiving accounts triggered distinctive modes of audience sensemaking. We paid particular attention to sensegiving accounts and mechanisms that generated *positive engaged sensemaking*—sensemaking that not only resulted in positive evaluations of the accounts but also deeply engaged the audience. This mode of sensemaking is central to our inquiry: an audience member will consider change only when he or she starts to view an issue in a positive light and with serious engagement. Therefore, *positive engaged sensemaking* signals potential transformation of audience members’ views on animal rights.

We contribute to Neo Institutional Theory (NIT) by explicating micro processes that suggest pathways to transformational change. We found that sensegiving accounts that conveyed disruptive raw truths of animal cruelty stimulated *positive engaged sensemaking* only when combined with *high forms of sensebridging*. In other words, these accounts incorporated materials that resonated with the audience’s existing higher values and

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sentiments (rather than lower pursuits such as sex). These blended accounts broke existing sense, while providing generative materials that the audience could use to update their sensemaking (Christianson, 2019). We also found that such accounts elicited complex issue arousals comprised of negative and positive emotions, as well as cognitive processes of judging and layering.

SENSEMAKING OF INSTITUTIONS AND THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS

The microfoundation movement highlights how explanations of higher level phenomena can benefit from involving micro phenomena and actors (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Felin, Foss, & Ployhart, 2015; Harmon, Haack, & Roulet, 2018). Specifically, to build microfoundation research within NIT we need systemic approaches to link micro with macro and vice versa (Haack et al., 2019).

Sensemaking research is highly compatible with institutional theory because both traditions share an orientation toward cognitive and social processes. In addition, scholars within both communities recently emphasized the role of emotions. Despite the fact that scholars largely studied local sensemaking (Strike & Rerup, 2016), the potential synergy between sensemaking and institutional analysis has regularly been noted. For example, Weber and Glynn (2006) proposed that institutions impact sensemaking through mechanisms of priming, editing and triggering. Powell and Rerup (2017: 322) specified that “[s]ocial movements take hold when individuals doubt a settled aspect of the world that is taken for granted ... Doubt might rupture the frames that currently provide the foundation for interpretation and reality construction.” Accordingly, in this study we employ the sensemaking perspective to address recent calls in institutional theory to “reinvigorate institutionalism’s phenomenological roots by populating institutional processes with emotionally and socially embedded people” (Creed, Hudson, Okhuysen, & Smith-Crowe, 2014:276).

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Sensegiving of Highly Disruptive Issues

Sensegiving is an important construct within the sensemaking perspective. Current sensegiving research provides limited insights on sensegiving accounts and their outcomes (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014) although some studies acknowledge the importance of such accounts. For instance, in a study of postmerger acquisition, management sensegiving resulted in organizational members accepting, resisting, or distancing themselves from a new frame of justice; these reactions played a crucial role in determining the enactment of management-preferred norms of justice (Monin, Noorderhaven, Vaara, & Kroon, 2013). This finding suggests that we need to know how diverse accounts influence receivers' sensemaking.

In conveying highly disruptive issues, sensegiving accounts necessarily comprise novel and jarring interpretations of institutions. Sensebreaking, “the destruction or breaking down of meaning” (Pratt, 2000: 464), will be necessary to stimulate the audience to make sense of issues that drastically depart from existing meanings. Indeed, in studying the network marketing organization Amway, Pratt (2000) uncovered how senior Amway distributors first disrupted new members' sense of self to create a meaning void and “seekership”, and then impregnated them with ideal new selves to drive identification with Amway. In contrast, research on frames has illuminated the importance of frame resonance; that is, an audience reacts positively to cognitive frames that align with their beliefs and values (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014). For instance, in a study of the effects of framing on audience evaluations, Giorgi and Weber (2015) found that analysts adopting frames that resonated with investors' needs were more likely to be positively evaluated (i.e., being shortlisted as best analysts of the year). Therefore, when giving sense to highly disruptive issues, the institutional entrepreneur will need to leverage both sensebreaking and frame resonance in order to positively engage a wide audience. Yet, little is known about how these

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different tactics might be deployed together to convey the same issue as well as their effects on the audience.

Sensemaking of Highly Disruptive Issues as Emotion-laden Events

Sensemaking occurs in the minds and through emotions (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). Emotions are likely to be particularly salient when people make sense of highly disruptive issues. Within sensemaking, scholars have only recently paid attention to emotion, defined as “a transient feeling state with an identified cause or target that can be expressed verbally or non-verbally” (Maitlis et al., 2013: 2). Intense negative emotions, such as panic, fear, and anxiety, forestall sensemaking by consuming cognitive capacity (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Weick, 1993), and may trigger escalation of commitment to faulty frames (Cornelissen et al., 2015). Maitlis et al. (2013) suggested that moderately intense negative emotions can energize sensemaking by signaling problems without exhausting cognitive resources. Indeed, Schambram and Maitlis (2017), in a process study of how animal shelter workers pursued challenging careers, found that when these workers encountered setbacks, manageable negative emotions (e.g., sorrow) fueled subsequent sensemaking.

Just like scholars working within the sensemaking literature, institutional scholars have also started to pay attention to emotions (Harmon, 2018; Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018). Voronov and Vince (2012) proposed that emotional scripts are integral parts of institutional structures, and people engage in institutional change only when they have lowered both emotional and cognitive investments in existing arrangements. Toubiana and Zietsma (2016) described how members of a non-profit organization responded to a disappointing event by expressing negative emotions on Facebook, which amplified those emotions and energized members to promote change. In a study of Ontario’s cool-climate wineries, Massa, Helms, Voronov & Wang (2017) found that wineries drew from institutionalized vinicultural

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templates to craft rituals that led to inspiring emotional experiences for audiences, converting them into evangelists of this emerging wine practice. Overall, scholars have paid limited attention to how diverse *sensegiving accounts* generate emotions that fuel or stifle sensemaking and institutional processes, despite the significance of such accounts in communicating highly disruptive issues and driving transformational change.

METHODS

We used a case study to understand *how institutional entrepreneurs' sensegiving accounts stimulate distinctive sensemaking in the audience about highly disruptive issues, and how the audience cognitively and emotionally make sense of such accounts*. Our goal was to compare patterns across diverse sensegiving and sensemaking contexts. For this purpose, we analyzed 30 sensegiving and sensemaking micro-episodes of PETA's video communication to a general audience through its YouTube channels. We chose this type of data because Youtube is an important social media platform on the Internet. Further, the rise of Internet-mediated communication has generated questions about how such communication is playing an increasingly significant role in societal change (Dutton, 2013).

Research Context

In Western cultures, humans and animals have long been considered as distinct and human exceptionalism is taken-for-granted (Smith, 2012). This deeply institutionalized view has served as the foundational justification for a broad range of human practices exploiting animals (Descola, 2013; Purser, Park, & Montuori, 1995). The rise of factory farming after World War II, combined with the prevalent use of animals in scientific research, education, and entertainment, prompted small groups of societal members in America and European countries to voice concerns about the abuse of animals (Jasper & Nelkin, 2007). While some

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groups merely wanted to raise animal welfare without fundamentally challenging the institutionalized view on human exceptionalism, other groups contended the equal moral standing of humans and animals (Whelan & Gond, 2016).

The concept of animal rights was popularized by utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer. Singer's book *Animal Liberation* (first published in 1975) argued that animals' capacity for suffering gives them the right to equal consideration of interests: "we would be on shaky ground if we were to demand equality for blacks, women, and other groups of oppressed humans while denying equal consideration to nonhumans" (Singer, 1995:3). Another philosopher, Tom Regan, extended the Kantian ideal of rights to animals. He suggested that just like humans, animals are "subjects of a life" that have "intrinsic value"; as such, they must be treated as ends in themselves, and "the fundamental wrong is the system that allows us to view animals as our resources, here for us to be eaten, or surgically manipulated, or exploited for sport or money" (Regan, 1986:179).

These theorizations fueled the growth of animal rights organizations that acted to oppose the use of animals for human ends in any form. One such organization is PETA. Founded in 1980, PETA has been known for its perseverance in communicating highly disruptive issues of animal rights to the public (Smith, 2012). As a consequence of PETA and other similar institutional entrepreneurs, animal rights as "a belief system, an ideology" has "seeped into the bone marrow of Western culture" (Smith, 2012:3). It has led to fundamental legislative change in some contexts. For example, Switzerland amended its constitution in 1992 so that animals were acknowledged as "beings" rather than things; similarly, in 2002, Germany changed its constitution to add animals, alongside human beings, as beings who have a life that are subject to state protection (Connolly, 2002). These changes partially acknowledges rights to animals, indicating the gradual erosion of the dominant institution that views and treats animals as being distinct, and inferior, to human beings.

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Data Collection

We collected the top 30 videos with the highest viewer counts from PETA's YouTube channel and transcribed them noting visual and audio elements. For each video, we collected the numbers of "likes" and "dislikes" and the top 15 comments. These data were pulled on June 6, 2015. In addition, we examined PETA websites and publications, read media coverage and books on PETA, and viewed a large number of PETA videos. These broader data were not directly used in this study, but provided important anchors for reliably interpreting PETA's sensegiving and viewers' sensemaking related to its top 30 videos. The production and dissemination of texts is central to the process of institutionalization (Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004), but institutional analysis has predominantly focused on verbal texts when studying the role of communications in institutional processes. Recently, scholars have emphasized that multimodal texts (e.g., video content that include not only verbal, but also visual and audio, texts) may stimulate emotional and bodily involvement in addition to cognitive processing (Meyer, Jancsary, Höllerer, & Boxenbaum, 2017). The presence of multimodal data in our dataset allowed us to explore multimodal communications during a microfoundational process of institutional change.

Data Analysis

Our analysis comprised three steps. In the first step, we explored viewers' sensemaking modes by looking at how they evaluated and engaged with the video. The ratio of likes and dislikes established a measure of viewers' collective evaluation, with ratios higher than "1" signaling positive evaluation, and ratios lower than "1" signaling the opposite. The total number of likes and dislikes, divided by view counts, established an indicator of viewers' engagement level; a high ratio suggested that a higher percentage of viewers were propelled to "like" or "dislike" the video rather than just browsing it, which

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indicated higher engagement. When looking across *viewer evaluation* and *viewer engagement*, we found viewer sensemaking followed four modes: *positive engaged sensemaking* (positive evaluation and high engagement), *positive superficial sensemaking* (positive evaluation but low engagement), *contested sensemaking* (negative evaluation and high engagement), and *ineffective sensemaking* (negative evaluation and low engagement).

In the second step, we identified four distinct types of sensegiving accounts by iteratively comparing video transcripts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We first noted *fact-based sensebreaking*, in which undercover footage of animal cruelty was used to break viewers' existing perceptions (e.g., footage showing workers pulling fur from screaming Angora rabbits). Relatedly, *meaning-based sensebreaking* broke viewers' perception of an issue by linking two domains that were generally thought to be unrelated in meaning (e.g., showing women on a dance floor exposing milk-dripping breasts which look like cow udders).

We also identified a variety of bridging elements in videos that resonated with existing viewer desires, values or sentiments. We called this “sensebridging” and found that bridging elements had patterns. One group of videos sought to appeal to viewers' interests in sex. Another appealed to shared higher values such as loyalty, justice, and tenderness towards children. We labeled the former *low forms of sensebridging*, and the latter *high forms of sensebridging*. Teasing out these differences allowed us to see that distinct accounts, or certain combinations of accounts, were linked to different modes of viewer sensemaking. By linking steps 1 and 2, we inductively established four modes of sensegiving and sensemaking of highly disruptive issues (see Figure 1). The first two steps of our analysis addressed our first research question.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

In the third step, we coded viewer comments to identify sensemaking mechanisms in each mode of sensegiving and sensemaking (see Figure 1). In order to distill the predominant

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mechanism of sensemaking, we focused on what the commentator was saying in entirety and tried to capture the overall tone of his or her comment (Toubiana & Zietsma, 2016).

Most codes were highly emotive, and we developed three categories—“negative emotions”, “positive emotions”, and a much smaller, third, category for comments expressing both negative and positive emotions. Examples of negative emotions included “feeling sad”, “feeling shocked or disgusted”, “feeling angry”, “feeling shameful”, “feeling helpless”, etc. Examples of positive emotions comprised “feeling motivated”, “feeling hopeful”, “feeling compassionate”, etc. A comment containing both negative and positive emotions can be illustrated with the following:

Can someone stop this madness? I'm crying. Poor animals? What have they done to deserve this? NOTHING!!!!!! They have feelings, they have a soul. They deserve better!!! so much better. this is so horrible. I just want to go and help all those poor horses and take them with me back to Norway. (Comment for video “Horse Racing Exposed: Drugs and Death”)

While the first half of the comment expressed negative emotions including feeling sad and feeling angry, the latter half contained the positive emotion of feeling motivated to take actions (to help the horses).

In addition to emotions, we also identified cognitive mechanisms. We identified two predominant mechanisms: “judging” and “layering”. “Judging” concerned making an explicit judgment, for instance, “*That’s abuse*”. “Layering” was more subtle and concerned offering additional layers of meaning that would expand and enrich the video message. The following is an example of “layering”:

I've known how animals were slaughtered since grade school... I went with my parent's to Mcdonalds (for the WiFi basically and didn't eat) and while my parents scarfed down cheeseburgers I had the image of them grabbing flesh out of a hole in a cows chest like zombies devouring a human. (Comment for video “Peter Dinklage: Face Your Food”)

Importantly, both “judging” and “layering” can either negate or support the message conveyed in the video. By looking across our codes for emotions and cognitions, we

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identified patterns in each of the four modes of sensegiving and sensemaking. Consequently, the third analytical step addressed our second research question.

FINDINGS: SENSEMAKING OF HIGHLY DISRUPTIVE ISSUES

We identified four types of sensegiving accounts that PETA used to convey highly disruptive issues of animal rights, including *fact-based sensebreaking*, *meaning-based sensebreaking*, *low forms of sensebridging*, and *high forms of sensebridging*. In some videos PETA used these accounts alone, but it was also common to blend two types of accounts in one video. We related these accounts, in pure or blended forms, with viewer sensemaking, in terms of whether viewers positively or negatively evaluated the sense being given, and how engaged they were. The outcome of this process was a typology that captured four modes of sensegiving and sensemaking of highly disruptive issues. Below, we explain each mode and the emotional and cognitive arousals (sensemaking mechanisms) related with each mode.

Positive Engaged Sensemaking

In this mode, viewers' collective evaluation was positive and engagement level high. Sensegiving tended to be a combination of *fact-based sensebreaking* and *high forms of sensebridging*. Viewer comments demonstrated both positive and negative emotions as well as cognitive responses. We illustrate this combination with a video in which actor Alec Baldwin called for boycotting circuses that use animals.

Sensegiving account. This video used undercover footage to break viewers' existing perception of circuses (i.e., fact-based sensebreaking). Baldwin's explanations of animal abuse are accompanied by footage showing, for example, terrified baby elephants being slammed to the ground and shocked with electric prods, circus elephants lining up with a trainer repeatedly hitting them, and elephants being hit repeatedly in the face. Dramatic sound

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effects include trainers shouting: “Tear that off! Make them scream!”, “When he starts squirming too f--ing much..”, and “... Hurt them!”

The video richly uses high forms of sensebridging. For example, viewers are shown an elephant family roaming in the wild with Baldwin explaining “the bond between these animals is strong and females spend their entire lives with their mothers.” These images resonate because they resemble the free life we all cherish. The frequent use of the images of baby elephants also resonates as general viewers are expected to care about children. Alternatively, baby elephants may evoke the image of an endearing pet. Also in this video, “Dr. Mel Richardson, Veterinarian with 40 years of experience with elephants”, claims that allowing careless treatment of elephants in circuses is “absolutely inappropriate for the American people.” The opinion of an expert and the reference to the American people (and their values) constitutes high forms of sensebridging as well.

Sensemaking mechanisms. Baldwin’s sensegiving account elicited both emotional and cognitive responses. Negative emotions included three types: 1) *Feeling sad*: “I couldn’t bear to watch it”, or “This is very sad”. 2) *Feeling disgusted or shocked*: “Good god this is sickening”, “Horrendous!!!!”, or “I had no idea this type of abuse goes on”. 3) *Feeling angry*: “I’d love to see the same done to those heartless ‘trainers’!”

Viewers also demonstrated two positive emotions: 1) *Feeling motivated*: “We need to ban circuses”, or “Because Animals can’t defend themselves – That’s why we’re here”. 2) *Feeling enthusiastic*: “Well said Alec!”, or “Good for him! That's what we need to help stop animal torture....CELEBRITIES!”. Sometimes the same comment contained both negative and positive emotions. For instance, “This is sick and I never dreamed all this went on. I want the elephants to go back to Africa where they can roam free.”

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We also identified significant cognitive mechanisms of judging and layering. 1)

judging: “This should be outlawed”, or, “People need to stop abusing animals for

entertainment”. 2) “*layering*”: examples included personal reflections such as the following:

“I own horses and have raised many from birth. I have never needed to inflict pain during my training ... Instead I develop a loving bond where my animals know I will never hurt them. Once they understand this they will do anything for me. What I don't understand is this: these huge animals when in the wild would kill a human so why don't these animals fight back and hurt or kill the people...?”

Layering also included attempts to follow up on the video message for issue solutions:

“... getting celebrities involved. Just think of how much good they could do if they would get behind stopping the torture and killing of animals in China and other countries ...”

In sum, the sensemaking mechanisms associated with *positive engaged sensemaking* were characterized by a complex range of negative and positive emotions as well as active cognitive processing that concurred on the video message.

Positive Superficial Sensemaking

In this mode, viewers made positive evaluations of issues but displayed low levels of engagement. Low forms of sensebridging constituted the predominant sensegiving account. It was sometimes mixed with a small amount of undercover footage (fact-based sensebreaking). We use the PETA video “Model Vida Guerra’s naked photo shoot” to unpack this mode of sensemaking.

Sensegiving account. The video shows behind-the-scene footage of Vida’s photo shoot “Spice up your life”, including footage of her talking to the camera about vegetarianism. The video shows Vida lying naked on top of a bed of hot chilies, with close-ups of her breasts and legs, and showing her face with a pepper seductively placed in her mouth. When Vida mentions PETA’s anti-fur campaign, viewers were shown undercover footage including a fox in a cage and a fox being struck repeatedly on the head. Overall, the video is dominated by sexy images of a naked Vida on hot chilies from various angles.

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Sensemaking mechanisms. Viewer sensemaking was characterized by positive emotions. Unlike *positive engaged sensemaking* in which viewers felt motivated, enthusiastic, or compassionate, two emotions displayed here were superficial in terms of engagement with the core message from the video: 1) *feeling (superficially) excited*: “She so right”, “Great video! we just started showing the hot legs and feet...”, or “If I wasn’t vegan, I would now...Dammm she’s sexy”. 2) *Feeling humorous*: “Veggies alone did not grow that sweet ass Vida, cmon now”, or “You crushing the chilies!! Those poor, poor chilies...”

There were occasions when cognitive mechanisms of judging and layering seemed to take place, but they were often irrelevant to the message the video intended to convey. Examples included sexist judgments (e.g., “she looks old now”).

Overall, the dominant characteristic of sensemaking in this mode seemed to include positive, but superficial, emotions with limited cognitive processing of the focal message.

Contested Sensemaking

In this mode, viewers were highly engaged but negatively evaluated the video. Typical sensegiving accounts were meaning-based sensebreaking combined with low forms of sensebridging. We use the video “Milk gone wild” to unpack this mode of sensemaking.

Sensegiving account. The video breaks viewers’ perception of milk by showing milk being produced in an apparently unrelated scene, that is, women on the dance floor. The video appeals to general viewers’ interests in sex, though its intention is to disrupt the meaning of “milk”. It shows a group of young women wearing small tops, dancing in a club. One woman lifts up her shirt to reveal what looks like cow’s udders, then quickly covers back up. Another woman does the same. Five women are on stage with their tops up and one is taking hers off while guys are heard hooting and hollering at them. Then, a man is sprayed

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with milk as he is yelling. Another man is on the floor with milk all in his mouth and over his body.

Sensemaking mechanisms. Viewer comments were dominated by one negative emotion: *feeling disgusted*. For examples: “That’s awful and milk isn’t from women”, “that’s just gross”, “awful and very disgusting”, and “No ... Bad PETA. No Oh GOD”.

Cognitive reactions were largely about *negatively judging* the video message: “There is nothing you can eat that doesn’t involve eating animals. Nothing. Nothing”, or “I’m glad this video has the dislikes it deserves. My faith in humanity is restored”.

There were some simple positive emotions (e.g., “Love this!!!”) and one occasion of *layering* (“To show how gross it is to drink cow’s milk. Their milk isn’t for us, it’s for their babies”). But overall, contested sensemaking featured negative emotions and negating reasoning.

Ineffective Sensemaking

This type of sensemaking was ineffective because viewers displayed a low degree of engagement and also evaluated the message negatively. Typical accounts exclusively and excessively used undercover footage (fact-based sensebreaking). We use the video entitled “Dogs killed for leather” to unpack this mode of sensemaking.

Sensegiving account. This video intends to break viewers’ perception of “leather gloves, belts...and other accessories” by linking these everyday items with inhumane practices. It shows workers in a Chinese slaughterhouse grab one terrified, yelping dog after another with metal pinchers before bashing them over the head with a wooden pole, rendering some unconscious but leaving others to writhe in agony. Workers cut dogs’ throats and drain their blood before throwing their bodies onto a pile. Some of the dogs are still alive and struggling. Screams from the dogs can be heard in the background.

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Sensemaking mechanisms. Viewers displayed three intense negative emotions: 1) *Feeling upset*: “I can’t really finish watching this video. It hurts me”, or “I feel really sad after watching this”. 2) *Feeling shocked*: “I ... I don’t know what to say ...”, or “This is the most shocking dog abuse video I’ve ever seen.” 3) *Feeling angry*: “Fuck people that support this shit”, “These people are some of the most disgusting, vile creatures on Earth ... Let them rot in jail...”, or “wtf? They do that and they go home and play with kids?” On one occasion a viewer blamed China: “I really hate China!!! The Chinese people are so cruel!” But for most viewers, the anger was so overwhelming it intermingled with a shameful feeling toward the entire human race. 4) *Feeling shameful*: “The human being is the most insidious and evil creature of God :(”, “I just threw up. Fuck the human race”, or “Who the hell would buy this kind of ‘leather’? Oh wait, idiots and about 90% of the human population ... yeah that pretty much sums up humanity”.

To summarize, ineffective sensemaking was characterized by overwhelming negative emotions with limited cognitive processing.

DISCUSSION

We studied micro-episodes of PETA’s interactions with a wide audience on highly disruptive issues. Such issues call for fundamental re-interpretation of aspects of society and impose profound moral challenges to people. Limited work has explored micro-processes of how such issues were conveyed to, and processed by, societal members. By investigating these micro-level processes, our study makes contributions to NIT and sensemaking.

Contribution to the Microfoundations of Institutions

We contribute to NIT by explicating micro processes that are linked to macro institutional phenomena (Cardinale, 2018; Raaijmakers, Vermeulen, Meeus, & Zietsma,

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2015). Positive and engaged sensemaking points to potential transformational change, and we identified pathways to this mode of sensemaking. Our results indicated that sensegiving accounts solely containing disturbing raw truths (in our case, footage of animal cruelty) led to *ineffective sensemaking*. The audience was overwhelmed with negative emotions that drove out cognitive reasoning and lowered engagement. These accounts also elicited negative evaluations, despite the unequivocal material evidence presented to the audience.

Research has pointed out that frames need to resonate with the audience to get their attention, engagement and positive evaluation (Giorgi, 2017; Giorgi & Weber, 2015; Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986). In contrast, we found that not all resonance leads to *positive engaged sensemaking*. In our case, when the institutional entrepreneur leverages people's interests in sexual images to establish resonance, the audience evaluated the sensegiving accounts positively but their engagement was low. *Positive but superficial sensemaking* does not promise a path to transformational change.

Our findings further illustrated that when the accounts appealed to the audience on commonly-shared higher values such as loyalty, justice, and tenderness towards children, the audience was willing to engage with disrupting raw facts and they were likely to positively evaluate the message. These blended accounts presented hard facts to the audience on one hand, and deployed high-forms of resonating elements on the other hand. While the former elicited negative emotions such as anger, disgust or sadness, the latter evoked positive emotions (e.g., feeling motivated) and stimulated cognitive efforts – the audience actively *judged* the message and *layered* it with additional meanings. This leads to the mode of *positive engaged sensemaking* which is a most desirable pathway for the audience members to make transformational change. One illustration is PETA's use of undercover footage from China fur farms. An earlier video ("China fur trade exposed in 60 seconds") exclusively used such footage, showing dogs beaten in the head and skinned alive. This video generated

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ineffective sensemaking. A later video blended similar footage with high-forms of sensebridging: actress Olivia Munn started the video by saying “[a]s a proud person of Chinese decent it broke my heart to learn just how terribly animals suffer and die on Chinese fur farms and there are no penalties for this abuse. Please join me in taking a look at where most of the world’s fur originates ...” By contextualizing disturbing footage with meanings of justice and compassion, this video scored very high in viewer engagement and evaluation. Videos in the mode of *positive engaged sensemaking* consistently showed the characteristics of blending fact-based sensebreaking with high-forms of sensebridging.

Correspondingly, a key insight from our study is to elaborate the role of sensebridging in conveying disrupting truth. We empirically distinguished low forms and high forms of sensebridging, showing that in order to orient an audience to the path of transformational change, the institutional entrepreneur needs to establish resonance in the audience with high forms of values and sentiments, as opposed to using sex appeal or other low-form equivalents.

We focused on micro mechanisms, but our findings have implications for macro level change. It is well understood that micro moments have a cumulative effects on macro structures (Haack et al., 2019). In our case, sensemaking via public spaces such as YouTube is likely to shape collective appraisals of events. We found that emotions were prominent mechanisms for making sense of highly disruptive issues. Research suggests that emotional contagion takes place in groups small (e.g., project teams) or large (e.g., demographic groups); with every sharing of an emotion, the appraisal of the event that elicited the emotion is also transmitted (Menges & Kilduff, 2015). Although we did not directly study emotional contagion, our results provide insights into how micro-level sensemaking processes may shape, or fail to shape, collective appraisals of institutions.

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We make an additional contribution to NIT by using multimodal texts to explore institutional processes. Recent conceptual work suggests that visual texts tend to stimulate engagement and generate emotional responses which override cognitive processing (Meyer et al., 2017). We empirically extended this insight. Using multimodal texts (i.e., video content that included verbal, visual and audio texts), we inductively identified distinct sensegiving accounts and explicated their varied effects on viewers of those texts. For example, we found visual (and audio) texts of animal abuse indeed incited powerful emotional responses. We further found that when used alone and excessively, disturbing visual texts led to overwhelmingly negative emotions that blocked viewers from processing the core message; but similar texts, when combined with verbal and visual texts of high-forms of sensebridging, generated complex emotional and cognitive processes that encouraged the audience to process the message delivered by the institutional entrepreneur. Future research needs to further explore blended use of multimodal texts during institutional interactions.

Contribution to Sensemaking

We introduced a grounded typology of four modes of sensegiving and sensemaking of highly disruptive issues. In studying the sensemaking process of social issues that are steeped in institutional practices and meanings, we contribute to the sensemaking literature by adding an “explicit account of...the embeddedness of sensemaking in social space and time” (Weber & Glynn 2006:1639). In our study, hard truths alone failed to prompt effective sensemaking. Such truths drastically broke down existing meanings of modern institutional life (such as the meaning of meat, milk, wool and leather belts), eliciting overwhelming negative emotions, such as felt shame toward the human race (Creed et al., 2014). These intense emotions seemed to “paralyze” the audience when they were given nothing to reconstruct meanings. We further showed that when the sensegiver contextualized hard facts with inspiring

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institutional meanings (i.e., high forms of sensebridging), the audience responded with complex emotions and active cognitive processing. Vogus, Rothman, Sutcliff and Weick (2014) proposed that a joint feeling of negative and positive emotions signals that an environment is both safe and problematic, making individuals more receptive to alternative perspectives. Our study resonates with their proposition. We add to it by suggesting which sensegiving accounts may instigate complex emotional states, and we provide evidence that such a state of feeling indeed leads to *positive engaged sensemaking*. Accordingly, sensemaking does not happen in a meaning void; sensegivers must package “naked truth” with inspiring institutional elements with which the audience can reconstruct meanings. This explains why it is important to distinguish low- and high-forms of sensebridging. Despite the fact that both forms of sensebridging resonate with the audience and lead to positive evaluations, only high-forms of sensebridging provide generative materials that inspire the audience to develop new meanings.

Limitations and Boundary Conditions

We drew on a small sample of videos and our findings are explorative. While sample sizes in *positive engaged sensemaking* and *positive superficial sensemaking* were fairly robust, they were small in *contested sensemaking* and *ineffective sensemaking*. We addressed this issue by examining PETA videos beyond the top 30 list. After developing the constructs and their relations from our sample, we compared how our initial findings aligned with other similar PETA videos. This step validated our initial findings, but studies with larger samples are clearly needed to further augment this line of research.

Another limitation concerns data from online forums. License holders of YouTube channels can delete offensive comments. In our case, PETA likely did so to some videos; for example, comments for one video with footage of extreme animal cruelty were disabled. In the

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other 29 videos we found a variety of negative and positive comments. Despite a lack of total control over social media data, we believe they still provide valuable insights that otherwise would be inaccessible to researchers (Kozinets, 2010).

Our study can be generalized to audiences similar to Youtube users: individuals representative of the general demographics of Internet users that are largely untrained on animal issues. Extant research suggests that issue specialists focus on empirical evidence rather than sweeping claims, applying clear criteria and knowledge to rationally assess a specific claim (Crilly, Hansen, & Zollo, 2015). It has also been demonstrated that organizational leaders or officials are less prone to emotional expressions than average members (Toubiana & Zietsma, 2016). We therefore anticipate different sensemaking patterns for audiences distinct from average Youtube users. Examples of such audiences may include regulators, veterinarians, and academics, who are well trained on issues and who by profession would favor cognitive, over emotional, processing of sensegiving accounts.

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Figure 1: Four modes of sensegiving and sensemaking for highly disruptive issues

Viewer engagement	High	<p>Contested Sensemaking</p> <p>Characteristics of sensegiving account:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meaning-based sensebreaking + sensebridging (low form) <p>Characteristics of sensemaking mechanisms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative emotions • Negating reasoning 	<p>Positive Engaged Sensemaking</p> <p>Characteristics of sensegiving account:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fact-based sensebreaking + sensebridging (high form) <p>Characteristics of sensemaking mechanisms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complex emotions • Supporting reasoning
	Low	<p>Ineffective Sensemaking</p> <p>Characteristics of sensegiving account:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fact-based sensebreaking used excessively <p>Characteristics of sensemaking mechanisms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overwhelming negative emotions 	<p>Positive Superficial Sensemaking</p> <p>Characteristics of sensegiving account:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensebridging (low form) used alone, or with sensebreaking <p>Characteristics of sensemaking mechanisms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Superficial positive emotions
		Negative	Positive
		Viewer evaluation	