

**Alone and in the dark:
Sensemaking through online platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic**

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“In lockdown... alone.
A COVID host to be a ghost?
Surfing endlessly from home.
Not me. I’ll get free.”

19 words on COVID-19 (Bastick, this essay)

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Introduction

In the years leading up to 1920, the French surrealists devised a method of collectively compiling works of poetry and drawing. Typically sitting in a Parisian café, artists took turns to contribute a few words to a poem, or a few strokes to an illustration. The final product would incrementally take form as it moved from person to person. This method of communally producing creative works – known as *exquisite corpse* – has as an attribute that it isolates the individual in a collective process. It is suggestive of systems: To the engineer who revels in the predictability of Boolean logic, it highlights the mechanics of information systems, with their sequential inputs, processes, and outputs. To the philosopher who revels in stories of unpredictability, such as of hurricanes being caused by the flap of a butterfly wing on the other side of the globe, it highlights how seemingly small and naïve contributions can produce large and surprising effects. It also highlights how individuals have come together online to make sense of the COVID-19 pandemic - with one person’s posts and retweets informing another person’s posts and retweets, and so on, until a communal but often temporary sense of reality emerges.

The poem at the beginning of this chapter was the initial input to an *exquisite corpse* – a first flap of a wing. I wrote it while in lockdown in Paris, sitting at a computer at home (instead of a café), in an environment replicated by dozens of other first world cities around the world: connected through the internet, guarded by the confines of a small apartment, and threatened by logistical and physical structures that breached those walls. It was prompted by a prompt of the *Massive/Micro* experiment to produce a 19-word script on sense-making between humans, machines, and the planet during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lynnette Widder at Columbia University, also while in lockdown (but on the other side of the Atlantic), produced a series of illustrations of this poem, shown below. Elizabeth Whitney from the City University of New York

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and Heidi A. Campbell from Texas A&M University also contributed. This produced a moving image that sought to reflect our experiences of the pandemic as individual social scientists and media scholars. This was a minute in lockdown: largely inconsequential to the outside world, but a snapshot of a shared journey. It was also a deliberate manifestation of the massive sensemaking process that concurrently occurred organically and digitally all over the world.



Fig 1: Line-by-line illustration of the poem by Lynette Widder (with permission from Lynette Widder)

In reality, of course, the processes of sensemaking in society are more complex than can be described by the exquisite corpse: they involve individuals but also communities, who interpret the world through very different lenses, both simultaneously and over time, and produce a multitude of worldviews, which translate to parallel and often competing realities. In addition, while lockdowns encouraged a migration to digital spaces (Bao et al., 2020; Nabity-Grover et al., 2020), praise of the internet as a ‘pandemic safe’ information source is tempered by concerns about authenticity and trust. The extent of COVID-19 misinformation has been described as an ‘infodemic’ by public health experts and combating this has become a priority for transnational organizations and national governments (Radu, 2020). The politicization of the pandemic has incentivized disinformation, especially within the context of the 2020 US presidential election

(Faris et al., 2020; Mian & Khan, 2020). In parallel, there is increasing discussion about platform governance, filter bubbles, echo chambers, and the effects of algorithms – all of which artificially mediate the information that we access online (Gorwa, 2019; O’Neil, 2016).

During lockdown and times of social distancing, online spaces provided various answers to the questions raised by COVID-19: How did the virus come to be? How is it spreading? What is the true extent of the pandemic? Will the pandemic die down naturally? What are the symptoms and fatality rate? How can one protect oneself from infection? Conflicting answers to those questions in turn raise auxiliary questions, including some of the most fundamental of our epistemological struggles: ‘What is real?’ and ‘What is true?’. Our dependence on the internet in a moment of crisis raises the issue of how we use the internet to make sense of COVID-19. More specifically, it raises the question of how we experience sensemaking online, and how we individually balance the digital affordances and pitfalls of the modern digital environment. In this chapter, I autoethnographically draw on my online experience during the early stages of COVID-19. I ask you, dear reader, to consider the following question: How does your awareness of the dynamics of online spaces affect your journey to make sense of the world?

Sensemaking as an experience

Sensemaking is the purposeful process by which one moves from not understanding something to understanding it. A long history of psychology literature proposes that we group together facts, attributes, and events. These groups feed mental models that help us to understand the world. In exploring how intelligence develops in children, for example, Jean Piaget purported that children are born with innate cognitive schemata that they use to interpret the world. Piaget understood a schema to mean a "cohesive, repeatable action sequence possessing component actions that are tightly interconnected and governed by a core meaning" (Piaget 1952, p. 7). By observing the behavior of his three young children, he concluded that these schemata develop organically through a process of assimilation and accommodation. That is, according to Piaget, we use schemata to interpret the information that we encounter. We then assimilate this information into our schemata, which we then apply to bolster our interpretation of future information; or, if the information does not fit the schemata, we modify our schemata.

This notion of schemata – or more generally, of *knowledge structures* – has been rearticulated in different contexts as stories, rules, images, common attributes, scripts, and templates. The need to operationalize sensemaking, such in the design of Artificial Intelligence, has led these various notions to be aggregated to the concept of a *frame* (Klein et al., 2007). Karl E. Weick (1995), who introduced the notion of sensemaking to organizational studies, referred to frames as the ‘structure of context’. He viewed frames as compartments into which people place and organize the data they encounter in the world. A decade later, the relationship between frames and data was conceptualized more procedurally by Klein et al (2006) in the data-frame model. They viewed this relationship between frame and data as symbiotic and cyclical: frames help us to interpret data, but data also modifies frames. New data might enable us to draw new connections within a frame, or we might encounter data that does not fit the frame and necessitates the frame to be refined or replaced. From this, various processes of sensemaking can be described.

A linear conception of sensemaking is easy to understand: One encounters a Twitter post, YouTube video, or online news article, and interprets it according to a frame, which is in turn modified by the new information. As noted in the introduction, however, neither sensemaking nor autoethnography is necessarily linear nor encapsulated; and the experience of sensemaking is richer than that which a procedural and positivist approach alone can encapsulate. Weick (1995) himself has stressed additional aspects of sensemaking: that it is grounded in identity, that it is enactive of social environments, and that it is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. The influential theory of sensemaking proposed by Brenda Dervin (1992; 2015), while originally focusing on cognitive and procedural information behaviors, such as seeking and processing information, has gradually evolved to emphasize verbing and structural powers or ‘energies’ which mediate sensemaking (Savolainen, 2006).

In line with this expanded notion of sensemaking, Annette Markham has argued that understanding the digital world requires that we become cognizant of our frames beyond what is traditionally expected in scientific culture. She criticizes academia for presenting knowledge as a final, often publishable product (rather than a continual exchange), and data as an object isolated from inquiry (rather than a source that shifts through the experience of inquiry, the latter of which produces data in itself). Markham recommends emphasizing “meaning versus method; engagement versus objectivity; interpretation versus findings; argument versus explanation” (Markham, 2013, section 4.2, para. 9) as a more realistic and ethical means of making sense of the world.

Autoethnography, similarly, highlights the salience of the researcher (their experience, identity, and perspective) in sensemaking, and brings to the forefront the limitations and affordances of personal experience (Holman Jones & Harris 2018; Adams et al., 2015). The complexity of sensemaking – the interrelatedness between and within the macro and micro of data and interpretation – became a challenge during the coronavirus pandemic. Epidemiologists remarked on the short time that the virus took to spread from its first identified source in Wuhan, China to every continent on earth (Chinazzi et al., 2020; Khachfe et al., 2020). While epidemiological models highlight the interconnectedness of human beings, they fail to capture many of the nuances of the pandemic (Enserink & Kupferschmidt, 2020). Indeed, the data produced during the pandemic is vast, and transcends the disciplinary confines of medicine, sociology, and political science. Perspective, too, is important, and Angeli and Montefusco (2020) stress that the interpretation of data depends in part on the political context, public health, and the time during which it is collected. To find sense in this agglomeration, they advocate a complex systems approach to pandemic sensemaking. As Joachim Sturmberg and Carmel Martin note in advocating a similar perspective, the “pandemic reveals that everything is connected to everything else” and this requires us to re-analyze our systems of sensemaking (Sturmberg & Martin 2020, p.1).

Despite the need for tangible policy proposals and empirical evidence, it should be remembered that sensemaking is a profoundly human activity. Sensemaking occurs at the collective, civilizational, and global levels, but also at the personal level. It involves the processing of information and frames, but also the externalities of this process: our hesitations, social bonds, dialogue with others, anxieties, and behaviors, to name but a few. Personal context mediates the process of sensemaking, but also situates it within our lives. That is, we must remember that sensemaking is an *experience* as well as a narrower *process*. This enables us to shed light not only on inquiry, but also on our relationship with inquiry and our relationship with the objects of our

inquiry. Hence, with people increasingly relying heavily on the internet to make sense of the pandemic, it is important to examine our experiences of online sensemaking.

Autonomy and shared space

My first recollection of experiencing sensemaking through online environments came from building a website in 1997 which hosted *dancing baby* videos. These videos were “all the rage on the net” (McNamara 1997, p. 39), as Network World magazine reported at the time, with internet users delighted at the sight of an animated baby dancing. These videos also illustrated that digital technology reconfigured reality (where else could you see a baby dancing like an adult?). A piece of Software called 3D Studio Max enabled anyone with basic animation skills to create a new dancing baby. As a result, a delightfully haphazard series of videos emerged online, becoming what might be regarded as the first graphical internet.

There was a certain thrill to watching the numbers going up on my website’s traffic counter. I recall trying to imagine all these people in a room – first to grasp the sheer quantity of real people behind the hit counter, and then to imagine what those people might look like and how they might interact. In this vein, I placed a guestbook on the website, which attracted comments that ranged from praise to threats. Perhaps the ability to comment anonymously unleashed facets of the human experience that society repressed. Indeed, it felt as though on this early web, individuals could disembodied their offline personalities and explore new facets of the psyche - as *The New Yorker* had phrased it four years earlier, “on the internet, nobody knows you’re a dog” (Steiner, 1993). This enabled a liberal and almost anarchic space in which everyone could be a ruler of themselves, precisely because their modems had set them free.

Decades later, a threat posted on this guestbook still sticks with me. It spared no detail in the vitriolic, gruesome, and vivid description of torture that would be performed on me. Being 11 years old, I recognized their words by their purely literal meaning, but had never experienced their forging into forceful language. I was left with a concatenation of questions that my current frames could not answer: To what extent were these threats contemplated, and to what extent were they instinctive lashes at a keyboard? What place did they have on my amateur dancing baby website (and should I delete them)? Who was the author of these threats and what circumstances motivate them to bring such darkness into my world? Would they have typed the same sentences knowing that I was only a young boy? I wondered how their experience of the world differed from mine, and how the contexts in which they lived could feel so alien to me. That is, I wondered about *their* frames and the limitations of *my own* frames.

This was a visceral, animalistic, and unforgiving experience in online sensemaking. It made me recognize that the internet empowers sensemaking by placing the heterogeneous experiences of humanity in a shared online space. It showed me, and made me feel, that the internet affords autonomy: autonomy to break offline boundaries, autonomy to explore the contexts of others, autonomy to be creator and participant, and autonomy to be yourself. The online world has now changed – as have the ways that we understand ‘autonomy’ and ‘shared space’ online - but reflecting on our online experiences can highlight that the experience of online sensemaking is richer than the process of online sensemaking.

The evisceration of online sensemaking during COVID-19

Today, it might seem quaint to associate ‘autonomy’ and ‘shared space’ with online sensemaking. It suggests the outmoded optimism of early digital communities, and hints at the romanticism of John Perry Barlow’s Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace (“property, expression, identity, movement, and context do not apply to us. They are all based on matter, and there is no matter here” [Barlow 1996, para. 9]). For many, the 2018 Cambridge Analytica Scandal was a wakeup call to changes in our online environments. Media scholars now decry the many emerging dangers of online spaces, which need not be repeated here to make the point that we are becoming increasingly reflective of our online environments. Given this, it is pertinent to ask how this reflexivity affects the ways in which we make sense of the world through online spaces.

In spite of the dampening optimism of media scholars, the internet was an important source of information on the pandemic. Social media relayed the initial attempts of the Chinese government to suppress news of the COVID-19 outbreak, including the government admonishing Li Wenliang, the physician who first alerted the world to the COVID outbreak on WeChat (Green, 2020). Amid fears of a government cover-up, researchers around the world dissected carefully worded statements by the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission and used the web to speculate on the appearance of a new coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2 (Gralinski & Menachery, 2020). Social media enables researchers to share emergent findings and healthcare whistleblowers to expose overburdened healthcare facilities. I came to fully realize the urgency of social distancing; not from a government campaign or epidemiological study, but from a post on the social journalism platform Medium that had been shared on Twitter. Within nine days of its publication on March 20, 2020, the post had gained over 40 million views and been translated to over 40 languages (Pueyo, 2020). Just as public authorities strived to grasp the rapidly unfolding situation, social media allowed millions around the world to collaboratively make sense of COVID-19. Likewise, I relied on the internet to make sense of the early days of the pandemic. The internet also provided me with a ‘digital’ form of stability amid the ‘biological’ turmoil of the pandemic. I recount the experience below:

I am in Paris, France, on the eve of the first national lockdown. On March 16, 2020, at 8pm, I turn on the television to watch French president Emmanuel Macron announce the lockdown, beginning at noon the next day. The French lockdown entails downloading an authorization form or writing out a sworn testimony to leave one’s home, under penalty of being fined by police. It feels like the world is moving; yet from one day to the next, the city turns silent as the streets empty of their traffic. At this moment, smartphones, tablets, and computers, offer an obvious way to remain connected to the world while being separated from it. For my part, I make sense of the pandemic through online news, social media, and COVID-19 data portals. Online news is my primary source of authoritative information on the pandemic, and I use social media to gain more granularity on public discourse. I also find myself reloading, multiple times a day, the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Dashboard (Dong et al., 2020). For the next months, that dashboard is often the first website that I check in the morning and the last that I check at night.

It has long been noted that the algorithms that curate newsfeeds and online news aim to not only return relevant data but to determine the criteria of what is relevant (Das et al., 2007). Evidence of news aggregators producing filter bubbles or reinforcing political stances is mixed (Bruns, 2019; Haim et al., 2018; Le et al., 2019). However, the politicization of the pandemic increased incentives to control public information – and that elevated the role of trust in using algorithmically mediated spaces for information provision. This becomes particularly real when considering the ‘algorithm’ as a metonym that hides complex power structures. These power structures involve real people making real decisions, and so reflect the values and interests of those who own, control, and exploit these algorithms. They also involve the machine uncertainty of artificial intelligence outcomes. The question that arises here, then, is not how the limitations of the internet affect online sensemaking (although this is a much asked and important question). Rather, the question that arises is how acknowledging these influences over online spaces affects the experience of online sensemaking.

Perhaps like yours, my online sensemaking journey began with the desire to answer immediate questions (such as ‘How did the virus come to be?’ and ‘What is the true extent of the pandemic?’). You may have experienced moments of insight while seeking out answers to these questions. For example, my social media feeds emphasized the benefits of national lockdowns, the importance of personal protective equipment, and the failed responses of national governments worldwide – but I came to realize that social media was isolating me from alternative narratives:

One day, I click on a YouTube video on a topic outside of my typical interests; then I click on a recommended video; and then I break the filter bubble. The comments on the video universally oppose lockdowns, decry the use of personal protective equipment, and praise the Trump administration’s handling of the pandemic. It feels as if I have entered a parallel universe – a feeling cemented by one comment noting that the clear agreement in the comment section was evidence of establishment media silencing ‘real people’. Have I escaped my filter bubble to view reality? Or have I entered a new filter bubble, with its alternative mirage of reality? It strikes me like a bat over the head at that moment, that I have no obvious way of determining the effects of the invisible decisions of platforms on my frames, and no obvious way of situating these frames in relation to anyone else’s. In moments like these, you feel alone and subjugated, rather than connected and free; and you have no clearer understanding of the world than when you began.

Reflexively analyzing our personal experiences in online sensemaking can shift our questions. For me, my immediate questions were supplanted by deeper epistemological and ontological questions, such as: How can you feel so isolated on the internet, a network that connects you to millions? How do you determine the extent to which your freedoms are limited by obscure digital influences? If you have no sense of shared space or objectivity, how can you determine the extremity of your own views? More fundamentally: To what extent can reality be shared? What does it mean to exist in a virtual world where your frames, and consequently thoughts and behaviors, are shaped by a relatively small group of people who govern online platforms? These were raised by an awareness that I no longer experienced a sense of shared space and autonomy

online. It illustrates how becoming aware of experience of online sensemaking can modify our lines of inquiry and change the assumptions of our online sensemaking processes.

Conclusion

It is paradoxical to feel isolated in lockdown while connected to millions online; and, in turn, to be connected to masses of information but disconnected from reality. These incongruities evidence the complexity of online sensemaking. In this chapter, I applied a critical autoethnography (Harris & Holman Jones 2019) to explore online sensemaking during the pandemic. This aimed to highlight that while we are increasingly aware that we use online platforms to make sense of the world, and of the dynamics of these platforms, a further step is to recognize that our awareness of these platforms also affects our sensemaking experiences.

More generally, being reflexive – in focusing on the full human *experience* of sensemaking rather than the narrower *process* of sensemaking – can encourage us to explore fundamental questions about sensemaking in the digital world. These questions can seem daunting at first ('if I don't know what is real, where do I go from here?'), but they can also be liberating. They highlight that sensemaking is more than a process – it is the experience of life.

As Daniel Harris, Mary Elizabeth Luka, and Annette Markham encouraged me to write about how we make sense of ourselves, others, and the world, and asked how the pandemic helped to make sense of the relationship between humans, machines, and the planet, I struggled with the contradiction being connected to the internet while also feeling alone and in the dark. This struggle is displayed in the poem at the beginning of the chapter and in the experience of online sensemaking.

You, too, might find that your awareness of digital platforms impacts the ways you make sense of the world. So, I invite you to reflect about your own experience of sensemaking online, especially during moments of heightened uncertainty: First, how does the internet affect your sensemaking processes? Then, how does being aware of this affect your sensemaking experience? Finally, what does this tell you about yourself, others, technology, and the world? If this inquiry raises new questions that appear destabilizing, you may find the act of reflection itself liberating. Hence, I encourage you to consider grappling with these questions – as reflexivity can manifest your role not only as a 'user of the internet', but also as an active and conscious participant of the digital world.

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