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The domination of sense

A qualitative case study which explores sensegiving in relation to power and virtuality

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Abstract

Managing meaning – or sensegiving – during organizational change is often argued to be of value. While there are ample previous studies into sensegiving, there are two important limitations in extant literature. First, sensegiving literature ignores the medium through which sense is given, implicitly assuming that sensegiving occurs through face-to-face (as compared to virtual) interactions. Second, while recognizing that power influences sensegiving, previous studies rarely explore power as an internal feature of sensegiving, i.e. how power is exerted through sensegiving. Drawing on a qualitative case study of how sensegiving was conducted through virtual communication in a Swedish company, this paper suggests that power is manifested within sensegiving in four ways: i) normalization, ii) exclusion, iii) attachment, and iv) glorification. In addition, internal and external power are seen to enable one another in the sensegiving process. The findings furthermore suggest that virtual sensegiving differs from sensegiving in face-to-face interactions regarding message, socio-emotional setting and symbols. This study contributes to the sensegiving literature by extending power beyond an external influence to an internal feature, understanding sensegiving as an *exertion of power*. The study moreover adds to the literature by recognizing that the *medium of interaction* influences sensegiving. The results of the study imply that managers should acknowledge that sensegiving is an inherently power-imbuend process and should carefully consider the medium through which interaction is conducted when trying to manage the meaning of change.

Key words

Sensegiving, organizational change, virtuality, communication, power

Introduction

In a business environment where organizational change is seen a prerequisite for survival (Beer & Nohria, 2000; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), being able to manage the meaning and direction of change has become of significant importance (Dawson, 2003). An area which has persistently emphasized the importance of successfully being able to convey meaning in change processes is the field of sensegiving (Poole, Gioia & Gray, 1989; Gioia, Thomas, Clark & Chittipeddi, 1994). Studies have established sensegiving as a prominent process in shaping the understanding and reality of individuals during change (Foldy, Goldman & Ospina, 2008; Gioia

& Chittipeddi, 1991), by causing them to construct new meaning through the process of sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Sensegiving is primarily described as a leadership activity of fundamental importance for sensemaking, focusing on the explanation of cues in the organizational environment (Maitlis, 2005), or a process in which managers are trying to influence others' meaning construction toward a desired redefinition of organizational reality (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Accordingly, sensegiving and change have been established by previous research to be tightly linked, but with change efforts still at a high failure rate (Beer & Nohria, 2000) understanding the sensegiving process in depth has a current value. This while sensegiving aims to create a shared understanding of the change among employees (Mantere, Schildt & Sillince, 2012) and is seen as tool through which management can affect employees to adopt a positive attitude towards change (Kraft, Sparr & Peus, 2018).

Significant insights have already been accrued within the area of sensegiving by previous research, regarding strategies (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Sonenshein, 2010; Fizz & Zajac, 2006), leadership (Foldy et al, 2008; Sparr, 2018) and triggers and enablers (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). An intriguing area which has however received insufficient attention within the sensegiving literature is power and politics (Filstad, 2014). Sensegiving has been recognized as a political process (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007) and studies have established politics and power to influence how sensegiving is carried out (Filstad, 2014; Kraft, Sparr & Peus, 2015; Hope, 2010, Voronov, 2008; Drori & Ellis, 2011), impacting on its conduct as well as outcome.

However, although these studies have looked deeper into power and politics in regard to sensegiving, apart from the recognition of sensegiving as a political process (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007) there is a general feature of treating power as external to sensegiving. Literature on the matter tends to view power more as an influential aspect rather than internal and inherent to the sensegiving process, but with sensegiving being a process of attempting to shape individuals' understanding based on desired outcomes of change, it has clear connotations of being a power exertion. As research have established that further investigation of power and politics might be imminent for a better understanding of change and that additional efforts aiming at understanding power and politics in relation to sensegiving are needed (Filstad, 2014), it is this study argumentative position that research applying a different perspective on power in regard to sensegiving is motivated. By utilizing knowledge from previously uncombined fields of literature and drawing on the third dimension of power (Lukes, 2005), a theory emanating from the critical tradition (Hardy, 1995), novel insights regarding how power is to be understood in the sensegiving process are argued to be gained.

Besides the need for greater knowledge regarding power, there is an unaddressed assumption that imbues the sensegiving literature, which could be seen to be incoherent with today's highly technological business environment. This regards the medium through which sensegiving is conducted and how that affects the sensegiving process. Although a broad selection of activities has been identified, including but not limited to expressing an opinion, justifying a view, promoting a position and contesting a proposal (Maitlis, 2005) it is nevertheless in the absolute majority of studies not addressed though what interaction the act of sensegiving is carried out,

leaving readers to implicitly assume the most likely option of face-to-face interaction. Yet, in today's highly technologized and globalized society virtual communication is becoming a standardized feature of organizational reality and often utilized in change processes. Several studies within the field of computer-mediated and virtual communication have established that this form of communication differs in numerous ways from face-to-face interaction (DeSanctis & Monge, 1999; Qiu & McDougall, 2013; Mantovani, 1996; Schulze, Schultze, West & Krumm, 2017). Research have found that: i) the volume tend to increase and the efficiency tend to decrease when communication is conducted electronically (DeSanctis & Monge, 1999), ii) biases regarding the message decreases, but comprehending the understanding of the message is more difficult in comparison to face-to-face interaction (ibid), iii) establishing a shared cognition when communicating virtually is imperative (Marlow, Lacerenza & Salas, 2017), iv) the relative poorness of social cues within virtual communication compared to face-to-face interaction due to the lack of physical proximity could make it seem like virtual communication is conducted in a social vacuum (Mantovani, 1996), and thus, v) greater attention need to be focused on how to get the right message across (Ferraro & Briody, 2013). Thereby, giving sense using technology-based communication tools rather than in person should consequently face similar prerequisites. Accordingly, this study argues that opening the previously uncharted box of virtuality regarding sensegiving will provide a beneficial addition to the literature. The purpose of this study is thereby twofold: it intends (1) to investigate power as internal to sensegiving by identifying power as manifested within the sensegiving process, (2) to address the largely unexplored area concerning the medium of interaction in sensegiving and the possible consequence of virtuality. Based on this, the research questions stand as follows;

RQ 1; How is power manifested within sensegiving?

RQ 2; How does virtuality affect sensegiving?

With the intent to provide further insights within the sensegiving literature, this paper outlines a case study featuring a Swedish multinational company which recently went through a substantial change process. In order to capture the sensegiving that was conducted at the company during the change, virtual communication was collected through documents and interviews with the ambition to shed light on in what way sense were given and what the prominent features of the sensegiving were. By applying a different view on power than normally found within traditional sensegiving research, the study brings forth an alternative perspective, with power seen as internal to the sensegiving process. In addition, by utilizing learnings from the computer-mediated and virtual communication literature, the paper shows how virtual sensegiving differs from sense given face-to-face. The contribution of this study to the sensegiving literature unfolds in two parts. Firstly, it identifies four manifestations of power within the sensegiving process, which contribute to the understanding of sensegiving as a power exertion. Secondly, it recognizes the medium of interaction to influence the sensegiving process, thereby consequently breaking the implicit assumption of sensegiving as a face-to-face process wide open. Due to practical circumstances, the study limits itself to focus on solely virtual communication.

This paper will initiate with a literature review, which outlines the most prominent studies within sensegiving relevant for this research. The subsequent section constitutes of a theoretical framework of power and an argumentation on its contributing value in relation to sensegiving, which is then followed by a methodological description. Further, the empirical findings are presented, accompanied by analytical sections following each empirical theme. The paper proceeds with a discussion on sensegiving in relation to power and virtuality, placing the findings in relation to previous research. Lastly, a conclusion is provided, which outlines directions for future research and implications for academia and practice.

Literature review

Strategies for effective sensegiving

In an attempt to manage meaning regarding a new reality when conducting change, managers utilize different strategies of sensegiving. In trying to gain employees understanding and convince them about the new direction, several researchers emphasize the importance of framing the intended meaning (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Fiss & Zajac, 2013; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). The notion of framing, which can be described as ‘schemata of interpretation’ (Snow, Rochford, Worden & Benford, 1986), is relevant for studying sensegiving since it refers to how something is cognitively presented to generate a certain understanding and thus, arguably takes place in the sensegiving practiced by managers. Fiss and Zajac (2013) underline the role of framing by arguing that frames simplify and condense the ‘world out there’, and by articulating a specific version of reality, organizations may secure both the understanding and support of employees for their new strategic orientation. The authors elaborate on two different frames that might be used during a change initiative, namely acquiescence framing and balancing framing. Acquiescence framing regards when an organization through its framing shows obedience to institutionalized norms and processes, while balancing framing denotes a frame which harmonizes stakeholder interests and symbolic processes. Although having different logics, both frames showed to have positive impacts in the creation and legitimation of the change’s intended meaning (ibid). Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) found comparable results for symbols in their study of a change effort conducted in a public university. The choice of guiding image, memos, speeches and appointments of key personnel, even timing of such activities, had a strong symbolic component which served to inform and motivate meaning construction. These findings have been added to by the use of metaphors in later studies by Gioia, Chittipeddi, Thomas and Clark (1994), in which they argue that meaning is most effectively grasped through symbols or metaphorical representations. They further mean that metaphors and symbols provide “a bridge between the familiar and the strange and, thus fostering a sense of continuity while simultaneously facilitating change processes” (1994: 365).

Contextual conditions of sensegiving

Even though frames and symbols are deemed to have significant impact on sensegiving, it has been argued that sensegiving moreover needs to be studied in its context (Kraft et al, 2015; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Since sensegiving never takes place in isolation, but always in a specific environment (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014), it is important to understand facilitators and boundary conditions of this process (Kraft et al, 2015). Kraft et al (2015) examine how different

moderators on an individual and organizational level affect leaders' sensegiving. The authors argue that, on an individual level, leader sensegiving is moderated by legitimate power. Depending on the leader's perceived level of legitimate power, the leader will make different choices of strategy and language in sensegiving. Correspondingly, leaders' sensegiving is furthermore moderated on an organizational level, labelled schema consistency, which is a moderator that determines leaders' messages so that they are in line with what is anchored about the organization in employees' schemas. Thus, individuals' interpretation and understanding of events are based on their knowledge about the culture and identity of an organization. Therefore, it is argued that leaders in their sensegiving process shall create a message that is suitable for their employees' sensemaking needs (Kraft et al, 2015). Conversely, from employees' sensemaking perspective, Maitlis, Lawrence & Vogus (2013) argue that bringing forth emotions provides the fuel of the sensemaking process, providing it with energy, and the emotional state of the individual has a crucial role in executing the sensemaking. Accordingly, recognizing emotions facilitative value generates conditions for a stronger sensegiving process. The idea of modifying sensegiving to employees' needs and current state is furthermore emphasized by Maitlis and Lawrence (2007), who conducted a study about triggers and enablers for sensegiving. The researchers found that leaders are triggered to engage in sensegiving when they perceive issues as ambiguous, unpredictable, and when an issue involves complex stakeholder interests. Leaders are in other words more likely to give sense when they perceive uncertainties among employees. Furthermore, although there are triggers for sensegiving which get leaders motivated to participate in such activity, factors that enable sensegiving are also needed to be able to engage in the process. One such factor relates to the area of expertise, meaning when leaders have expertise relating to an issue, they are better able to shape others' interpretation of it (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007).

Politics and power in sensegiving

Although sensegiving has the ability to take place on a variety of hierarchical levels (Balogun, 2006) and is shaped by its social embeddedness (Kraft et al, 2015; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007), a major body of the literature ascribe leaders with the prerequisites of such activity. Common findings within previously mentioned studies hold forth the leaders' privileged position in attempting to shape employee sensemaking. Maitlis and Christianson (2014) discuss that this way of exerting influence on employee "sensemaking is most often restricted in nature, with leaders driving and controlling the process" (2014: 79). Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) describe sensegiving as an undoubtedly political activity, emerged by tensions from employees' divergent versions of reality. In order to reach shared accounts of reality, leaders generally undermine the viability of status quo by normalizing and legitimizing certain perceptions in their sensegiving, while delegitimizing others (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). A resemblance between sensegiving and political activity could therefore refer to the activities of both creating, shaping and imposing certain legitimated perception of reality on others. How this correlation is expressed in organizations has nevertheless been research only in a few studies. Voronov (2008) revealed in his study on sensegiving and deep-structure politics how deep-structure political dynamics, described as a system of influence, embedded in culture, symbols, communicative acts and taken for granted rules, neutralized new work routines and legitimized the new institution. They furthermore enabled a VP to the

position as a sensegiver, which allowed him to choose what he wanted to see as normal and neutral practices, which consequently led to altered identities of organizational members. In contrast with the many top management approaches, Hope (2010) has contributed to the literature by looking at middle managers' own sources of power as a way of giving sense. This implies a challenge of the earlier widespread definition of sensegiving as a leaders' top-down process, as well as examines how managers of varying power bases are able to give sense. Findings in this case revealed how middle managers were able to sculpt sensemaking through a mobilization of different sources of power, being power of resources, processes and meaning. Due to power of resources (expertise) and power of processes (control over who participates in decision making), middle managers got the means to establish power of meaning construction and thereby directly and indirectly manipulate and control the sensegiving process. Based on the emphasized studies above, a further analysis of sensegiving and power can arguably be of value in order to understand the sensegiving process, since recent studies have mainly focused on exploring who the actors engaging in sensegiving are, what strategies they are using and under what conditions sensegiving occurs, leaving power as an influence behind the scenes. Even though a few studies have examined a correlation between sensegiving, politics and sources of power, there is deemed to be less research on how sensegiving function as a way of exerting power and what aspects of power that could be seen to be present within the process of sensegiving, and accordingly a different theoretical approach is argued to be needed.

Theoretical framework

The critical tradition of power

Power is a highly fragmented theoretical area with several different branches. One of these branches is one of a more critical stance that emerged from the work of Marx and Weber, where domination, which is embedded within organizational processes and structures, is the main form of power (Hardy, 1995). This sharply contrast with for example the early management approach to power, which saw power as the illegitimate resistance to the legitimate form of power in terms of authority, which was embedded in the organizational hierarchy (ibid). Originally, power within this critical tradition was seen as the ability to make others do what the person exercising power want them to do, possibly against their will (Weber, 1978). However, a variety of researchers within this tradition has since this early conceptualization conducted a detailed exploration of domination as a way of exercising power and its various meanings and one important contribution is the work of Steven Lukes (1974, 2005). The author backtracked developments in the study of power within this critical tradition and in doing so came to develop his third dimension of power.

The third dimension of power

The third dimension of power is developed from a first and second dimension. Both of them argue that there needs to be a noticeable conflict of interest for power to be exercised, but while the first dimension views power as an observable behavior that enforces decisions, the second dimension argues that power can also be found in being able to prevent decisions from being taken (Lukes, 2005). Power thereby regards being able to secure one's own preferences and aims in the presence of opposing wills as well as regards being able to keep issues from being

up for discussion, by mobilizing biases favoring some preferences over others (Edwards, 2006). The third dimension builds on these aspects, but adds to the notion of conflict, with Lukes (2005) stating that it is in the least observable aspects that power is the most effective. Based on this, what signifies the third dimension is the fact that the conflict might be latent, made up of inconsistency between the interests of the people exercising power and the actual interests of those excluded as a consequence of this, the latter possibly not giving voice or even being aware of their interest (Edwards, 2006). Power is thereby reflected in “institutionalized norms and procedures that shape and maintain definitions of what may and may not be legitimately brought into open conflict” (Fiol, 1991: 549). Below four important aspects of the third dimension will be highlighted further.

Acquiescence

In his second edition, Lukes (2005) focuses much on the acquiescence to dominance (e.g. power) by the dominated. Conforming to dominance is according to the author not always a conscious choice as it can work through subtler mechanisms such as norms, ideologies and culture and it is furthermore a natural part of social systems. The acquiescence to the dominance could occur either through the individuals being dominated actively internalizing the values that dominate them or by simply resigning to them, modifying their beliefs and wants to align with the bias of the system (Lukes, 2005). This works primarily through underlying power relations and mechanisms and results in the apparent acquiescence to norms and values, thus concealing the latent conflict (Hunt, 2013). With these relations and mechanisms Lukes (2005) refers to means and components which has been used by A to prevent, or acted in a way sufficient to prevent, B from acting differently.

Adaptive preferences

Following the discussion above, power is thus not only about getting someone to do something they would not want to do if not under the influence of power, but by influencing and shaping the very interests and preferences of the individual (Lukes, 2005). Power thus has the ability to make individuals view their desires and beliefs in accordance with the bias of the prevailing value and belief system, which in turn is dictated by the ones in power (Hunt, 2013). Lukes (2005) refers to this as ‘adaptive preferences’, which is when preferences are adapted non-autonomously as a result of familiarization and is a way to reduce cognitive dissonance. Related to this, the author draws on Bourdieu and his notion of ‘symbolic violence’, which is a type of symbolic domination meant to shape the reality of actors on a subconscious level, and argues that such influence embeds the individual and his or hers preferences, making such symbol a natural and self-evident point of reference.

Naturalization and false consciousness

Similar to the position above, Lukes (2005) argues that the effectiveness of power is heightened when it is “rendered invisible by naturalization, where what is conventional [...] appears to the actors as natural and objective” (2005: 141). This naturalization could apply for power-holders and the individuals being dominated alike, as the power in this dimension is far from always intentionally exercised (Hunt, 2013). In relation to this, Lukes once again draws on Bourdieu and argues that such naturalization can be sustained by those endowed with symbolic capital in

terms of expertise or status, since such capital allows them the power to impose values and norms. Related to the notion of naturalization is false consciousness, which Lukes (2005) admits comes with a lot of unwanted historical baggage, but he revises the idea to refer to the cognitive ‘power to mislead’. The author states this to have many forms, one being promoting and sustaining illusory thinking, which refers to internalizing the reality being presented by those in power. In this sense, people are led to believe that the best or only thing is to oblige to the interests of those in power (Hunt, 2013).

Critical discussion on the third dimension

A noteworthy discussion could be held regarding what actually counts as power in these instances and how to differentiate that from people merely affecting each other. According to Lukes (2005), the difference lies in the conflict of interest, meaning that when no conflict of interest exists no power is exercised, and this is dependent upon the identification of the real interests of the people being dominated. When the real interests of the people being dominated are not in line with the desired interests with the people in power, a conflict exists. The author further argues that the identification of these real interests is up to the individual being dominated, B, when “exercising choice under conditions of relative autonomy and [...] independently of A’s power” (2005: 37). Critique referencing to Luke’s first book has however been raised regarding how to identify such real interests empirically (Bradshaw, 1976). Although sympathizing with the possible empirical difficulties, it is in this paper argued that due to sensegiving being a process of intentional influence on individuals perceived realities in the presence of a *novel* situation (as organizational change) the real interest of the individual being dominated are conceivably not in line with the interest of the people in power. This is based on the underlying assumption that information asymmetry prevents the dominated individuals from defining their real interests in such unknown situation. Consequently, the real interests of the dominated are based in the current situation while the interests of the individuals in power, who have superior knowledge, are based in their desired view of the new situation, placing them by default in conflict. Noteworthy, the real interests of the dominated could plausibly be in line with the desired interest of the people in power, but in a change process of large magnitude the likelihood of such alignment declines drastically. However, this does not eliminate the possibility that the interests align as soon as the knowledge bases are the same, but at the moment of power being exercised they are argued to be conflicting.

Building on previous literature utilizing power in a consequential way, this paper aims at following a similar conceptualization, making the theory of Lukes (2005) applicable. Further application is found in the imminent similarities between the process of sensegiving and power exertion as it is described in the third dimension. Firstly, both are grounded in the idea that in order to be exercised, influence needs to be exerted. While sensegiving emphasizes influence over meaning construction, the third dimension of power highlights influence over interests and preferences. Secondly, sensegiving aims at shaping the reality of individuals, much like the third dimension of power intends to make the dominated internalize the reality conveyed by the dominator. Consequently both base themselves in the idea of reality alteration. Concluding, although being an unconventional choice for understanding power in relation to sensegiving,

the third dimension is argued to have the ability to bring forth power as internal to sensegiving due to its strong correlations with fundamental features of sensegiving.

Methodology

Research Design

In order to fulfill the aim of this study, a qualitative research strategy was deemed the most appropriate since it allows for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Bryman & Bell, 2013). In accordance with Silverman (2013), the intention of conducting a qualitative research was to gain insights about the respondents' 'interpretive practice', studying how sensegiving was conducted through virtual communication and how such activity could be related to power. The researchers' comprehension of data was moreover believed to be facilitated by a qualitative methodology, as it emphasizes words and social practices in the data collection (Yin, 2011). Such extraction of "rich data" was deemed valuable when attempting to capture the intended meaning behind the communication, an act which requires thick and nuanced descriptions of reality. Furthering such extraction of rich data, a case study design was found to be the most relevant choice based on the premises that sensegiving needs to be studied in its specific context and not in isolation (Kraft et al, 2015; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014). By focusing on a single case organization the researchers could position themselves in the organization where sensegiving took place to gain deeper understanding of the contextual setting (Flyvberg, 2006). With power and internal communication found to be highly dependent upon the organizational context, the case study design is seen to further the purpose of this study. The organization which were used for this study was partly a choice of convenience, since initial contact persons were already available. It was furthermore a choice based upon the researchers' knowledge regarding the organization, which recently underwent a large organizational change, moving to a new business center and altering their way of work to become more dynamic. Such choice of convenient selection falls in line with Eisenhardt's (1989) reasoning that it's not always preferable selecting a case based on random selection. Instead, making an appropriate choice in correspondence to the studied phenomenon, in this case being sensegiving, is more ideal, with the chosen company being perceived to be an organization where the research phenomenon can be successfully investigated. In order to remain in line with ethical consideration of protecting the participants and the case organization (Silverman, 2013) and due to particularly power being a controversial subject, the paper applies full anonymity. The researchers were furthermore required to sign a non-disclosure agreement regarding confidential aspects of the company in order to gain access to the intranet and has adhered to the agreement throughout the paper.

Data Collection

With a qualitative case study at hand, the chosen method for gathering the major part of data was document collection. Since this study aimed at empirically examining how sensegiving took place through the use of virtual communication, the documented virtual communication which had been provided in the case organization was the natural source for furthering the research purpose. The virtual communication is in this study defined as all communication conducted using technology to transmit text, imagery, audio and video to communicate with

people not physically present in that person's immediate proximity. The documents were available via the organization's Intranet or provided by the contact persons and were presented in the following formats;

- 113 blog posts
- 11 videos
- 64 emails
- 2 questionnaires
- Q&A site with connected email address

In accordance with Silverman (2013), the data was collected with the intention to understand language and other sign systems, in this case revealing how sense was given through the virtual communication. Drawing on previous studies by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), Gioia et al (1994), and Fiss and Zajac (2013), sensegiving is in this paper seen as an act to convey meaning through words, signs, pictures, or sounds, intending to shape or influence the understanding of the receiver. Furthermore, consideration is paid to when, how, why and by who the act of sensegiving is carried out. Although the documents are restricted in their ability to provide further elaboration in regard to the underlying meaning of the sensegiving, they have the benefit of durability and could consequently provide the researchers with the 'original story' through a detailed account of the virtual communication, spanning over one and a half year. With its unedited format, the documents laid the foundation of the empirical material and with the foundation in place the second part of data in terms of interviews was conducted.

The in-depth interviews was deemed necessary since sensegiving is an intangible process of interpretation (Kraft et al, 2015) not directly observable for the eye, thereby requiring for a deeper interpretation of specific language and signs. Interviews were held in a semi-constructed manner with the intention to let respondents answer questions as freely as possible, thereby allowing them to set the pace and progression of the interview (Silverman, 2013), as well as encouraging further elaborations. Nevertheless, due to the complexity of the studied phenomenon and in order to attain valuable data, as discussed by Kvale (2006), the researchers remained to some extent in control over the general direction and proceeding of the interviews. Furthermore, due to the fact that the researchers were not able to partake during the change process and thereby unable to interview the respondents as the sensegiving occurred, the capability of recollection could be seen to limit the reliability of the material. In order to mitigate this limitation, interviewees were exposed to examples of the virtual communication and asked to elaborate on the virtual communication in general in the beginning of the interview, thus deliberately constructing a frame (Alvesson, 2003) surrounding the interview situation.

An amount of 15 interviews were conducted, five of them chosen based on their responsibility for the creation of the virtual communication, the other ten chosen based on a 'snowball selection' (Silverman, 2013) with the sole criteria of having worked at the company during the one and a half year the virtual communication was provided as well as providing their consent for partaking in an interview. Interviews were conducted until the data was perceived to have

reach saturation, meaning that new data did not longer provide the researchers with any new or pertinent knowledge in the matter (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The two sets of respondents were deemed by the researchers to provide different insights to the research area. Firstly, the five individuals responsible for the creation of the virtual communication were interviewed to bring forth the intended meaning behind it and consequently their sensegiving, describing *how* they chose to communicate and *what* they wanted to communicate. Although a fairly small group of respondents due to there not being any more creators available, they were seen as the primary source of the interview material. Such small sample has the drawback of possibly limiting the ability of being representative for the sensegiving process at large, but as these five respondents were responsible for the absolute majority of the communication provided, they still in an adequate manner constitute the elementary base of the sense given. The additional ten interviewees were employees who were solely on the receiving end of the communication, meaning that they were not involved with giving sense. Nevertheless, these were claimed to be needed from a complementary perspective, as they provided insights from another angle of the sensegiving and facilitated the researchers understanding of the contextual conditions of the sensegiving process. These interviewees were instead asked to deliberate on how they *experienced* the virtual communication.

By combining different methods for data collection, the researchers have in this study intended to ensure high reliability. Although limited to two different data sources, the combination of methods facilitates the search for patterns across the data (Bryman & Bell, 2013) and furthermore makes it possible to see whether the collected data corroborate one another (Silverman, 2013). A combination of methods was deemed necessary in order to reach a data set more accurately capturing the intangible aspects of sensegiving in general and power in particular.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted utilizing an approach inspired by grounded theory. Grounded theory was deemed a suitable choice due to its argued appropriateness for analyzing qualitative data (Martin & Turner, 1986). Moreover, with sensegiving being a complex phenomenon to study and comprehend, the iterative and recursive process of grounded theory (Bryman & Bell, 2013) was presumed facilitative, as it provides a detailed and thoroughly crafted account of the phenomenon under investigation (Martin & Turner, 1986). The data analysis encompassed three major steps; i) first round analysis, ii) second round analysis, and iii) application of the theoretical framework.

In the first round of analysis, the researchers started by interpreting the documented virtual communication using open coding (Bryman & Bell, 2013) which was done to generate an overview of the virtual communication and a rigorous comprehension of how the sensegiving was conducted during the change process. Then the transcribed interviews were coded with the intent to create a deeper understanding of how sense was provided, focusing on underlying features not visible in the documented material. Codes were then compared by examining similarities and discrepancies between and within the two sets of data (documents and

interviews), with the aim of finding patterns across the material and identifying which codes that resurfaced on a frequent basis, which was then focused upon.

In a second round of analysis, adhering to the principles of axial and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), codes with strongest presence within the data were compared, developed and re-evaluated, resulting in four major categories, being *consistency*, *steering and control*, *familiarity and emotion*, and *portraying*. Within these categories virtuality was a strong subcategory, highly relatable to the categories' main focus. In this step the focus lied on finding relationships within the material, building concepts which captured how sensegiving was expressed in the virtual communication.

In the third step of the analysis the theoretical framework of power deemed to bring forth power as internal to the sensegiving process was utilized. By linking the categories with theoretical concepts stemming from the third dimension of power (Lukes, 2005), researchers allowed for correspondences to emerge between the sensegiving and power, resulting in four themes, labeled manifestations of power, being *normalization*, *exclusion*, *attachment* and *glorification*. Virtuality remained an overhauling theme present within the manifestations and provided strong explanations for the manifestations' presence. These themes aid in explaining how power could be seen as manifested in sensegiving as well as provide insights in how virtuality affect the sensegiving process, thus furthering the purpose of this study. For a graphic example of the major three steps in the data analysis, turn to Appendix 1.

The case organization and its change project

The case organization in this study is a Swedish multinational company with almost 50 thousands employees. Recently, the company was conducting a large move for one of its main offices in Sweden, where over one thousand employees were relocated to a new business center. Simultaneously, the shift of local also required new ways of working, one example being open plan offices, which was a major adjustment for many employees. The entire project spanned over five years, however, the project was internally communicated towards employees for about one and a half year. A substantial part of the communication was steered to the company's Intranet, where the project group had created a platform for virtual communication, constituting of primarily a blog, videos, and a Q/A page. In addition to the platform, an email address was established to enable employees to send their inputs and concerns to the project group. The five people responsible for creating the virtual communication were of varying positions and titles within the company, and together they created blog posts, answered questions that were sent to the email address and arranged videos. Due to their role in the project, they are titled as "creators" when using their quotations in the upcoming section. Quotes from individuals who solely received the virtual communication are from this point on called "receivers".

Empirical section

Consistency is key

When going through the blog posts and videos as well as emails, what became apparent was that these were recurring in a fairly stable pattern, with intervals spanning from weekly to

monthly announcements. By adding together all blog posts announced during a year and then dividing it by the number of weeks during which they had been posted, an average of 2,9 blogpost/week 2015, 1,2 blogpost/week during 2016 and 1,6 blog posts/week 2017 was found. Videos followed a less frequent schedule, with four being released 2015 and seven 2016, but they had a rather even distribution. Viewing this as a whole, the virtual communication was perceived as frequent, with employees receiving continuous information intended at keeping them aware of the proceedings. The information flow could furthermore be seen as a factor acting as a constant reminder of the change about to happen and by having a certain frequency, this was imbued into the minds of employees at a regular basis. Strengthening recollection as a reason for the frequency further was the fact that many posts and emails did not contribute with new information deemed relevant for the progression of the move, but was merely information about information or trivia surrounding the project. Such information included for example introduction of project members and announcements about upcoming information. Interviewees deliberated on this and the necessity of keeping the communication current and updated and additionally highlighted the importance of informing even when not that much has happened;

Continuity is especially important. It is good with a high frequency and sometimes we had to say that not that much new had happened, but that is also a communication and important to know. People realize that this is where we are now. (Creator 3)

Thus, having a timely consistency when it comes to the dispersion of information appears to be of importance. Over time, employees moreover increased in their use of the virtual information provided, which was indicated by the two surveys regarding perceived informativity concerning the project. These surveys were conducted six months apart, one five months prior to the move and one two months after the move, and was meant to provide insights into how satisfied employees were with the information level as well as through which medium they got the information. The surveys showed how the blog and videos as well as the Intranet and email address all inclined in usage over these six months, the blog and videos increasing from 34% to 52%, the intranet from 47% to 80% and email address from 5% to 15%. Simultaneously, the other information channels, such as townhalls, entrance hall meetings and exhibitions, declined, indicating that people had altered the way they assimilate information. Thus, chronological time was seen to have an effect on the amount of employees being drawn into the virtual communication. The mere presence of the blog, videos and email address and their functioning appeared to over time make them stronger channels for employees to seek out information. Interviewees confirmed this and brought up the normative factor of mere presence;

[The blog] was supposed to come out with an even interval and with new themes. [...] I believe many read the blog. Maybe not at first, but after a while you had gotten used to it being there. You heard in the hallways that people started talking about it. (Creator 2)

Nevertheless, not only consistency in time, but also in what was being said weighed heavily. Several blog posts and videos were built on information from previous ones and although the dispersion of information where frequent, the message was often quite limited in span. In particular, the content of the message often regarded details or very specific issues, often only one issue per occasion, and repetition of information were not uncommon. Examples of repetition and message continuity were often given in blog posts regarding aspects needing employee participation, one example being the four office cleaning days. Each of these “cleaning”-blog posts were announced in two parts, one “save the date” and one “all you need to know”, and they were moreover reminded of through emails;

The 22nd of September it is time to take the third step in our new office move [...] Celebrate the effort with your colleagues by having a “korv och bröd” BBQ in the canteen area! Products and material not needed by employees will be donated to charity. (Email, 2016-09-01)

As the example shows, the information provided was highly limited in nature, but it was still presented to employees at three different occasion, one of them moving beyond the Intranet and reaching the employee directly through email. The persistency in reaching the employees with this information as well as repeating the message were seen as ways to ensure employees’ comprehension of the message. With the persistent flow, but limited message span, the virtual communication appeared to have the intention of informing often, but not too much. Respondents discussed this as well, with a majority holding forth the large flow of information and its benefits of providing a sense of importance;

For this specific purpose it was a positive thing to repeat and to explain again and to point out and remind people. Just because it was so many practical things that needed to come together and for people to truly understand that it was important. If you had heard it three times before, then you understood that it was important. (Receiver 7)

Accordingly, the information was seen as constantly being repeated in order to create a comprehension of the message and it was through this repetition that employees grasped the importance of what was being said.

Analysis

The consistency in frequency and message as well as the detailed content described above are deemed as a way to persistently infuse the employees’ realities with the content the project group wished to convey. By continuously transmitting the same message through the virtual channels and creating a coherency in the communication flow, employees were faced with incessant repetition, which eventually could be seen to take hold and shape the reality they perceive. Subsequently, the sense conveyed virtually (henceforth virtual sensegiving) is perceived to imbue the cognitive space of the employees with the desired reality of the project group, making it shared among the employees and thereby normalizing it. The continuous infiltration of the communication through the virtual channels, which in their very nature are

several and vast, had the ability to crowd out other perceptions, and thus became a way to influence the reality of employees in a unanimous direction.

Further light could be shed upon this using the third dimension of power. The project group is found to attempt to make the move and the future way of work appear as a given reality, by continuously and repeatedly imbuing employees with sense of the new situation to come. Such persistent and intense conveying of reality, intensified by its virtual nature, is deemed as an intent to anchor the change in employees' minds as the normal and conventional way of things, showing great similarities to the notion of naturalization (Lukes, 2005). By being highly consistent in both frequency and message and as a result disregarding alternative perceptions, the project group is seen to try to secure to the largest possible coherency in how the future situation of the office is perceived, using their given validity as project members, which has high likeness to symbolic capital (ibid), to impose the values and norms related to such reality. The fact that the employees does show an increased use of the virtual communication as the project proceeds could arguably be a sign of internalization of the reality the project group is presenting, indicating employees building up a false consciousness (Lukes, 2005) of such reality as the best and only option. In this sense, virtual sensegiving is seen to consist of a power manifestation of normalization, rendering the reality conveyed by the project group conventional and consequently becoming internalized by those being subjected to it, leading to acquiescence to the dominating power. Noteworthy, this process is deemed to be unquestioned or even noted by the project group and employees alike, indicating a highly social and institutionalized exertion of power.

The importance of steering and control

Relatable to the feature of consistency and the aspect of informing amply, but with limited message extent, is the idea of controlling the communication flow. Having all information that had been officially released to employees collected in one place, being the virtual platform, and solely using one non-person related email address for responding communication from employees allowed the project group to largely secure what was being communicated. The email address made it possible to refer the absolute majority of employee feedback and questions to one place as well as keeping that line of communication personal and private. In a blog post after the move the project group addressed some of the most commonly asked questions to the email address. Being perceived as an attempt to provide transparency, it furthermore allowed the project group a desired response to the questions and divert further inquiries;

Thank you for continuously sending suggestions for improvements! To make sure that the suggested solutions are optimal from all perspectives, we will need 90 days to get settled and evaluate. [...] All deliverables and completions will be handled as soon as possible – although the requests that are critical for the business are always prioritized. The aim is to ensure that business gets very little or no disruptions. Please be mindful of this before sending reminders to the project team on a request that is not business critical. (Blog post, 2017-02-06)

The blog post indicates the project group to show transparency and attentiveness to alternative views and in its unedited form it listed the different areas that had been brought up in bullet points, but it did not provide specifics regarding how they will be addressed. In this regard, the blog post provided the function of reassuring, while leaving out the details regarding subsequent action. In the interviews the choice of information release was elaborated on by respondents, especially what information to release at what time. The policy of the project group concerning this was to say everything or nothing regarding the matter at hand and being honest regarding the unknown;

We chose to wait to inform until we could give the whole package. Because otherwise there will be questions. So this was a way to reduce the insecurity [...] What we decided on early was that if we don't know, then we should answer that we don't know. Or more that we don't know yet. (Creator 1)

Thereby, the idea of providing information as complete as possible was both a way to reduce insecurity as well as to protect incorrect information to take hold. Making sure to only release information that was certain and to do so only when everything regarding the aspect was known largely secured that faulty information didn't spread. Such control became of particular interest due to the virtuality of the communication, as it has a vast and instantaneous reach as well as the difficulty in assuring correction of the faulty information to a receiver not physically present, where you can't guarantee that the message has been delivered. The 'everything or nothing'-policy did moreover, in combination with the virtual technology, have the ability to create a perceived equality factor, indicating that everyone, regardless of physical presence, received the same information at the same time, something which virtual communication is superiorly able to do due to its technical nature. The usage of a virtual feedback channel in terms of a email address furthermore hindered instantaneous responses to information, allowing for responses that were well processed and regulated as well as avoided spur of the moment inclinations from both responder and receiver.

Related to the aspect of incorrect information, and one of the most frequently brought up positive aspects of communicating virtually, was the factor of having everything on print. In its very nature, information documented in text, pictures or video becomes much harder to dispute than spoken information. Accordingly, the documentation became solid evidence of what had been said, which can be compared to spoken communication where it becomes word against word. Some blog posts and the Q&A had the function of reaffirming things that had already been communicated. These were primarily aimed at establishing that a certain type of information had been released to employees and encourage the one that had missed the information to catch up. Often this encouragement were accompanied with a statement that many other of the employees had already taken part of the information, creating a feeling of the employee not being as up to speed as his or her colleagues. The information furthermore frequently requested employees to read through or search for the information before attempting to utilize any other communication channel for questions, stressing that the information most likely were available virtually. Having the information available virtually did in this case strengthen the validity of information process, since it could be confirmed that the information

had in fact been released. When asked to deliberate on this matter, respondents frequently brought up the value of being able to refer to the virtual platform if people argued that they had not gotten the information;

With the virtual communication you can say that [the project group] have come out with this information and if they say that they haven't heard anything you can always say it is written here online. (Receiver 2)

Having the virtual information available makes it much easier for the project group, since everyone cannot know everything or remember everything. Then if you get a question you can always refer to the virtual platform. (Creator 4)

As the quotes show, the virtual communication became a point of reference for what had actually been said or not. Accordingly, the virtual communication became a security, both in terms of what had been communicated and as an information backup for those in charge. It removed the human factor of misspoken information or incorrect recall of what had been said, thus strengthening the correctness of the information during the change process at large. Moreover, the virtual availability largely minimized the ability for employees to argue they had not received the information and fully eliminated the possibility to say they did not have access to it.

Another topic that arose in the empirical findings, closely related to controlling the communication, was the ability to steer employees to the virtual channels. Constant references within the videos and e-mails to the blog or the official e-mail address of the project served as reminder of where to find information. One clear example was how every Meet & Learn video (presentations regarding the move held at seven times during the time of the project) dedicated its last minutes to promote the virtual platform and to go there if in need of information or wishing to ask any questions;

Feel free to send an email straight to the project team. You will get quite quick feedback as well, directly from the project team. We also have a webpage where you can see all the latest update and read a little bit more about the project and the house and stuff like that and you can enter it directly in the search area. [...] Here we also have the blog where you get the latest updates. It is updated around every week so there you will always get the latest updates on what's happening. You can also subscribe so you get an email when there is a new post coming in. [...] [And there is] the Q&A and a lot of the questions that have been coming in is actually the same so have a look there first and see if your question already has been answered. (Video, 2016-02-15)

This particular example shows how virtual channels were the only ones mentioned and they were portrayed in a positive light, highlighting the directness and quick feedback as well as being able to take part of the latest news. The constant emphasis on using the different virtual

channels to procure information attempted to steer employees towards the virtual channel, something interviewees confirmed;

Everything was available online and every channel pushed [employees] back towards the virtual platform. That was the function, the constant referencing, where you did many different [communicative] things, but in the end, you directed them to the e-mail address or the website if they had any more questions.
(Creator 4)

What is described above, was a deliberate attempt to make the virtual communication the main source of information. By steering concerns and questions back to the platform, it was constantly verified by management as the place to turn to when in need of information. The project team intentionally diverted and redirected information flows and noticeable was the lack of reference to personal or face-to-face interaction.

Analysis

As the section above describes, the virtual sensegiving indicates a comprehensive degree of steering and control. By controlling the information flow the project group had the ability to minimize the spreading of incorrect information. The elimination of the human factor through restricted access and influence over the virtual channels and thereby the chance of the message being transmitted in different ways allowed for a more coherent sensegiving process. Consequently, it furthermore dismissed alternative views and perceptions by leaving the sole creation of the message to the project group. The perceived coherence in the sensegiving resulting from this control arguably provided the chosen reality the project group wished to convey with validity, since it appeared as the only message being transmitted and contradicting messages were limited. The virtual feedback channel moreover hindered instantaneous responses, allowing for a controlled response process. Furthermore, by steering the information from all available channels to the virtual ones, validating it as the primary place to seek out information, the sensegiving provided there could consequently be seen to gain legitimacy, since it received endorsement by management in terms of the project group. By accentuating the virtual communications importance, it is perceived as the desired choice by the project group for the main information flows, actively subverting other channels. Thereby, providing sense virtually appears to endorse coherency, which accordingly eliminates conflicting sensegiving and ratifies the desired reality of the people in charge.

The third dimension of power could provide a further elaboration on such unanimity. In this case, the project group used the knowledge asymmetry and sanctioned legitimacy relatable to their inclusion in the project, aspects which arguably could be seen to represent underlying power relations and mechanism (Lukes, 2005), to legitimize their sensegiving. The perceived legitimacy and validity of the sense provided by the project group in combination with the elimination of conflicting or diverging messages, primarily made possible by the virtual communication, reasonably has the ability to prevent employees from questioning the sense conveyed or contemplating another possible reality, thus acquiescing to the biased reality desired by the project group (Lukes, 2005). Based on the above, virtual sensegiving is deemed

to contain a power manifestation of exclusion, eliminating contradicting or alternative perceptions through steering and control over the communication flow and endorsing the reality conveyed by utilizing underlying knowledge and legitimacy mechanisms.

Creating familiarity and emotion

In processing the virtual communication, a common aspect that re-occurred on numerous fronts was the attempt to highlight issues and aspects with a personal connection to the receiver. Depending on the theme of the message, personally addressing the receiver as “you” or “we” and using features with emotional relatability to the receiver was used to a large extent. An example found in the documentation was the recurring feature of the old building and its upcoming fate, a theme of high personal engagement among employees. In a video created by an external actor regarding the old and the new building, the good features of the old building was highlighted, as well as its drawbacks, and then leveraged to raise the new building.

All the functions that exists here in the [old] house we will bring with us to the new office and what we have been working with is getting a better flow, more adapted to today’s business and the way we see it in the future. [...] We have been here for 20 years and there are many things that today is not up to date on how we want to work. (Video, 2015-12-07)

Thus, in this case, the familiarity of and personal involvement in the old building was used as a way to explain how it was going to be in the new building. The project group drew on something that was known for the employees and explained the need for change based on that known element. The virtuality of the communication allowed for the combination of audio, imagery and visual effects to come together in one medium, thus creating a message appealing to a variety of senses and in terms of sense-impact generate a stronger effect. Being able to relate the information to an individual known by the employees was moreover both a feature found in the communication as well as highlighted by the respondents as important. In all blog posts, videos and emails, an individual was put as the sender of the information, thereby providing a person behind what was being communicated. In general, the project members took a very visible part in the virtual communication, in terms of signing blog posts, appearing on videos and responding personally on emails sent to the open email address. This connection between what was being said and an object or person which employees had a personal relation to was an aspect deliberated on by interviewees;

People can experience [a personal touch] with a picture, a face or a quote and you place it in a time and space that people can relate to.[...] So there were as much personal addressing as possible, to profile people. Preferably individuals that people know and have a personal relationship to [...] people in the project that everyone could identify with to make it more personal. (Creator 5)

What is highlighted in these examples was the effort of not allowing the virtual communication to be decontextualized or faceless. By attaching personally known objects or individuals to the information, the communication was deemed to be more relatable for employees. Although not

explicitly saying that the information would be considered less trustworthy if anonymous, what was implicitly implied was that being able to relate to the information provided a security. It became more personal and closer to what employees were familiar with, bridging known with unknown aspects.

Another feature that shone through in the material was a perceived willingness to create not just recognition in the information, but emotion and commitment as well. Primary, several blog posts emphasizes positive emotions and associations, particularly regarding information that had the perceived purpose of lifting spirits and creating feel-good;

As a result of the charity donations during the office move cleaning days, the organization Pay It Forward received a container with products. Thank you to all of you who were involved in making this possible by contributing with products! (Blog post, 2016-11-18)

The visit to 'The Building X' construction site was a great success! With great enthusiasm more than 300 employees visited 'The Building X' construction site some weeks ago. (Blog post, 2016-07-06)

You are invited to celebrate great memories from 22 years in our (soon to be) old office. [...] All employees are welcome to celebrate great memories shared over the years. [...] You will also get the opportunity to check out some historic things displayed and write in a 'memory book'. (Blog post, 2016-11-29)

In these blog posts the project group utilized feelings, such as enthusiasm and joy, and leveraged that to associate aspects of the move with something good. The first post appealed to employees' humanitarian side, by connecting their hard work with cleaning the old office to a good cause. The second emphasized that several employees willingly and gladly visited the new building, conveying that people are embracing the move. Lastly, the third post utilized nostalgia, highlighting the greatness of the time spent in the old building and recognized people's' need to say goodbye, relating what can be a difficult day for some to a celebratory walk down memory lane. In common for all of them was the use of emotion to create connotations between the move and positive feelings. Moreover, the emotional aspects of these messages is seen to have the purpose of creating a certain commitment from the employees. All of them featured employee participation, either past or future, and accentuated in some way how this participation was or will be central to the success of the main message being communicated. By doing this, employees were encouraged to remain committed to the change as positive experiences or results would be the outcome.

Analysis

As described empirically, a common aspect in giving sense virtually was the use of features employees were familiar with to relate that to features of the change that was novel to the employees. In doing this, the project group used parts of employees' present reality which was of personal value and meaning to them and linked those to a desired new reality. Such activity

conceivably generated a bridge between the old with the new, thereby making the transition easier. The virtuality of the communication allowed for a combination of various sense stimulating aspects, which through its impact on more senses could be seen to strengthen a cognitive connection with employees. The section above furthermore features several characteristics of attempting to utilize emotion and associate positive feelings with the move. By drawing on emotions like empathy, nostalgia and happiness, the project group harnessed the employees' emotional capital and in doing so generated the capacity for a deeper connection to the message. Due to this, employees could relate to the message on more than an informative level. Arguably, the deliberate associations between positive emotions and the new working environment intended to imbue the employees with positive feelings towards the move, thus purposely aiming at reinforcing or altering their emotional state. Such attempt could make employees, who were initially less inclined towards the move, change opinion, thus arguably having a positive effect on possible resistance and consequently increasing the chance of a successful change process. The virtual sensegiving could thus be seen to utilize relatable features and encouraging feelings in order to make the employees more inclined to embrace the reality being conveyed.

The third dimension of power is used to view this from a power perspective. By drawing on aspects which are relatable to the employees, the project group could be seen to leverage familiarity as a way to create a connection between the known and unknown, which arguably is be used by employees to reduce cognitive dissonance (Lukes, 2005). The use of a variation of positive feelings tap into the emotional life of the employees and by relating the new situation to come with these emotions, the norms and values of such future becomes more attractive, creating a bias in favor of those norms and values (ibid). Building on the underlying assumption that people wishes to be happy, employees will likely want to harness such emotions, thereby making them adapt their preferences and beliefs (Lukes, 2005), which in turn are in line with the desired interests of the individuals in power. Accordingly, familiarity and emotion are deemed as ways to induce employees with a willingness to conform to the virtual sense being given, as it creates a connotation between the individuals current and future reality. Based on this, virtual sensegiving is seen to have a power manifestation of attachment, relating familiarity and positive emotion to the desired interests of the people in power, thus influencing the individuals being given sense to adapt their own wills and desires in accordance.

The value of portraying the message

A common feature that was found in major parts of the empirical material was the substantial effort put into portraying the virtual communication in a certain way. This feature is largely consistent with the familiarity and emotional aspect, although being more of a descriptive and univocal nature as well as relating to future events rather than being personally related and past oriented. Emails, videos and blog posts were often provided in a relatively straightforward manner and depending on the message intended to get across, certain examples connected to reality, symbols and associated imagery were positioned in the communication. The virtuality of the communication enabled such placement in various forums and accordingly leveraged the symbolic value, as it was present in multiple situations for multiple purposes. Connecting diverse aspects of the communication with a common denominator made the information

appear more tightly linked to the relevant message. An example from a blog post shows how the move was compared with a kitchen renovation;

How hard can it be?, you might think. But the details are tremendous. Many of you know what it's like to build or renovate a kitchen [...] workbenches and other interiors need to be bought and installed before moving in [...] there is a balance between budget, functions and quality when choosing supplier to meet our needs. (Blog post, 2015-12-10)

This blog post aimed to describe the construction of new working facilities and was expected to generate a greater employee understanding and patience about the move. This was confirmed by one of the interviewees who stated the following;

We tried to make parallels to how it works when you, in your personal life are moving to a new house and what you need to think about [...] for example with a kitchen, there are so many details to consider, you need to install appliances and be patience because everything takes time. (Creator 3)

In an attempt to keep employees updated, photos and videos revealing the progress of the house construction were provided. Some photos showed how the company sign was taken down from the old building and placed on the new. Such dismounting did not only mean that the sign was physically relocated, but created a highly symbolic impression of how the past was being left for a new era in the future building. By removing symbolic elements from the old to the new, previously established values were utilized to amplify the new working environment and simplify employees' understanding about the move. Another example that could be related to symbolic impression was how the entire project, the blog as well as the new building were entitled 'The Building X'. This title was given large attention throughout the virtual communication and it gradually became the conventional way of addressing the future. Below is one example of how the new building was beneficially portrayed in order to get employees to become more acquainted with the idea of moving and starting to envision about a positive future;

We see 'The Building X' as a great meeting point, it will give energy to the daily work and new possibilities for meetings. We want you to be happy when you come to work, and the environment should be easy to develop and adapt to over time to future needs. (Blog post, 2016-01-28)

To facilitate such envision, further visualization of 'The Building' was shown through 3-D animated pictures published at the blog. These pictures exemplified a typical work desk in an open landscape, social meeting areas and other interior worth showing employees, and aimed at creating a sense of a potential reality in the new building. These selected illustrations were furthermore elevated by pitchings regarding opportunities and facilities that employees would be able to access in the surrounding area of the new business center. Noticeable however, was how potential drawbacks or difficulties in majority were left out from the message, while the

value of moving was further intensified by a constructive and forward looking approach. This was confirmed by interviewees, who stressed the need for appropriateness and to sell the information;

Well, we tried to make [the virtual communication] sellable, to make it pleasant and positive. You can't write with an uninspiring approach as "we will soon move and time to pack" [...] it needs to be positive. (Creator 2)

The given information was largely built upon a desired image of the company in the future. 'The Building X' came to represent this future and it was symbolically modified in line with the project groups intent. When trying to anchor this image with employees a considerable amount of details was given in an attempt to show how every aspect had been taken into account. Details regarding suppliers and materials, locations of departments, colors at the walls as well as parking lots were emphasized. Choices were portrayed as being deliberated thoroughly, indicating an attempt to ensure a smooth transition from the current to the new situation. As an additional attempt to reduce ambiguity regarding the new working environment, the project group portrayed in the communication great sympathy for current work conditions. Due to the absence of body language and thereby the rather limited plausibility for interpretation with virtual communication, showing such considerations were deemed beneficial for the employee response. A further reply to employees anxieties about the move was also demonstrated in the attempt to provide information perceived to be required by employees. It was advocated that employees were able to send in questions to the email address, some of them were later on presented in a fairly unedited style on a Q/A site or mentioned at the blog;

Thank you all for great input and ideas, we are taking all your input into consideration in the project work ahead [...] over 100 ideas has been shared so far, and we would like to emphasize the importance of continuous dialogue and feedback with the project group and employees. (Blog post, 2015- 11-18)

The virtuality of communication allowed for a vast collection of employee input and also render it visible the concerns of employee for others to take part of. share the project group promptly promoted the possibility of employee to express their opinion by finishing blog posts, videos and emails with a reminder of this. However, although showing consideration for employee accounts by encouraging them to use the mail address, it consequently provided the project group with an impression of attentiveness towards employee needs.

Analysis

The project group's use of associated imagery, examples and depictions as described above, is deemed an attempt to guide employee perception about the move. Illustrative pictures and descriptive elaborations of the new working environment built a strong vision of the future based on the desires of the project group, which in its intense portrayal arguably influenced employees to start envisioning the future in a similar light. Amplifying inherent values and relating them to specified symbols, for example 'The Building X', enabled a transfer of

prevailing values to the novel future aspects as well as allowed them to be shaped and modified by the project group. Due to a majority of the virtual communication being portrayed in a relatively specific direction, holding forth the benefits of moving while largely excluding shortcomings, employees were strictly presented with an edited version of reality. By selling and advocating for a strictly edited future, it arguably presented employees with a reality beyond its actual capacity. In this sense, the depicted future became glamorized and enhanced due to its selected emphasis.

Applying the third dimension of power, the project group is perceived as attempting to portray the virtual communication with the intent to shape employee perceptions. Through a constant usage of symbols and illustrations as well as inherent values related to a novel future, employees were infused with a new image that became the conventional idea of talking about the future. Such activity hold a strong likeness to symbolic violence (Lukes, 2005), as the project group dominated the meaning of 'The Building X' and thereby made it an obvious reference of future reality. More elaborately, by using 'The Building X' and related symbols in an edited way, their meaning and association became dominated by the project group and consequently aimed at altering meaning construction among employees. The portrayal of the future image of the company in its amplified nature could be seen as a way to lead employees towards a subconscious anchoring of such enhanced view, showing great similarities to the 'power to mislead' (Lukes, 2005). Seen to further the power to mislead is the combination of such glorified image with a projected concern for employee needs. By advocating a new reality in which employee concerns have been taken into account, the project group shows attentiveness beyond their own sphere and creates a perceived correlation between their desired future to the need of employees. Building on the above stated, virtual sensegiving is deemed to consist of a power manifestation of glorification, utilizing portrayal and care to create an amplified and enhanced version of reality and as a consequence lead individuals towards internalizing an overly edited reality.

Discussion

The findings show how virtual sensegiving emphasized consistency in message and frequency, which came to normalize a certain reality by persistently imbuing the cognitive space of employees. This was aided by the steering and control made possible through the virtual channels, which excluded the human factor and alternative views. Furthermore, familiarity and positive emotions were utilized to create a personal attachment, aimed at the adaptation of employee preferences in line with desired interests. A portrayed image strengthened by a concern for employee needs further supported this by promoting internalization of a glorified reality. These findings were analytically seen to have clear connotations to power and resulted in four manifestations of power - normalization, exclusion, attachment and glorification - being revealed within the sensegiving. Figure 1 summarizes the power manifestations, the main expressions they take in the empirical material and virtual features relatable to the manifestation.

Power manifestations	Empirical expressions	Virtual features
Normalization	Consistency in message and frequency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Durability - Vastness
Exclusion	Steering and controlling the communication flow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Restricted access - Inability for direct response
Attachment	Drawing on familiarity and emotion relatable to the message	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Combination of various sense stimulating aspects
Glorification	Portraying an amplified image of the future reality and emphasizing employee needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Placement of symbols in various forums - Ability to collect concerns independent of time/place

Figure 1. Summary of power manifestations in sensegiving, their empirical expressions and relatable virtual features.

Due to power manifesting itself within the virtual sensegiving throughout the full extent of the findings, it displays an inherent relation to how sense is given. By being a salient feature in all empirical expressions, power is seen as intrinsic to fundamental aspects of the sensegiving process. This in turn provides initial evidence of power to be an internal feature of sensegiving. Moreover, the virtuality of the sensegiving plays an important role in how the power manifestations take form. Their dependence upon virtual features arguably indicates the likelihood of them being different if not under the conditions of virtuality and accordingly, virtual sensegiving is presumed to differentiate from sense conveyed face-to-face. Below, a discussion is held regarding the implications from seeing power as an internal feature of sensegiving, followed by a deliberation of virtuality's suggestive impact on the sensegiving process.

Internality

As the use of the word *manifestation* indicates, power was found to be manifested, e.g. be revealed or embodied, when sense was given, depicting it as an inherent part of the sensegiving process. The manifestations were furthermore analytically argued to encompass influence and reality alteration, features previously established as fundamental to the sensegiving process (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). In this sense, power is seen to be an internal feature of sensegiving, furthering previous studies conclusions regarding sensegiving as a political process (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Acknowledging power as internal to sensegiving consequently makes the sensegiving process power-imbued and when exercised it thereby becomes understood as an *exertion of power*. Bringing power to the front stage of sensegiving by seeing it as internal to the sensegiving process could reasonably evoke a normative discussion of sensegiving as good or bad. Could it be seen a valid way to manage meaning or is it a necessary evil? This paper argues that the answer has to do with how power is viewed and emphasizes the need for power in its internality to be considered a 'lens of understanding' in regard to sensegiving. Lukes (2005) argues that power always 'arises out of and operates within a particular moral and political perspective' and that it is 'one of those concepts that is irradicably value dependent' (2005: 29-30). Pfeffer (1992) furthermore explicitly states that power is one of the more difficult subjects to talk about, but argues that the circumstances are nevertheless that organizations govern individuals' reality and are primarily political in nature. Although viewing

these claims to have validity, this study addresses power as explanatory, rather than viewing it as a value-laden concept. Based on this, power becomes a linguistic and cognitive tool through which the concept of sensegiving can be further comprehended, not the concept of focus itself. Such emphasis is however not claimed to in any way remove power as a normative phenomenon, but it could increase its presence in the sensegiving literature and yield a more nuanced view of its relation to the sensegiving process.

Intriguingly, although the findings as discussed above show power as internal to sensegiving, there is a simultaneous presence in the material of power features that continue to operate external to the sensegiving process. The concurrent presence of internal and external power indicates power to not be exclusively confined to either side, but surrounding and imbuing the entire sensegiving process. One of the more prominent external features of power present is legitimacy. Legitimacy is implicitly present in all manifestations, but is explicitly most identifiable in the manifestation of exclusion, where it is found to be an underlying mechanism enabled by the empirical aspects of steering and control. By being tied to access and knowledge, legitimacy bestowed the project members with the ability to conduct the virtual sensegiving. Accordingly, it shows strong similarities to Kraft et al's (2015) contextual legitimate power, where the sensegiving is affected by the legitimate power leaders perceive themselves to have. This while the privileged access to the virtual channels and superior knowledge regarding the project arguably provided the sensegiver with legitimate power to shape the sensegiving after desire. However, the power is in this case not bound contextually, but rather in inclusion and it is in this inclusion in the project group that the manifestation of exclusion emanates. The members of the project group had different positions and authority in the company as a whole, indicating a high diversity in perceived legitimate power, but through their inclusion in the project group they were provided with the legitimacy to conduct sensegiving. Accordingly, power correlating to sensegiving does not only appear to stem from contextually established legitimacy, as for example hierarchy, but rather other forms of legitimacy relatable to inclusion in different groups.

The privileged access to the virtual channels, which related to the legitimacy, provided the ability to control what was being said and who was allowed to say it and in this shows great similarity to the power of process described by Hope (2010). Through the virtual channels, sensegiving was isolated from further distortion by human involvement, which is a probable side effect when cascading information down through an organization using managers as intermediaries. The responding communication was furthermore also controlled, by providing one channel for interaction and keeping the communication between the sender's and the receiver's eyes only. Knowledge regarding the project, also relatable to the legitimacy, could be seen to furthermore correlate strongly with Hope's (2010) power of resources and Maitlis & Lawrence (2007) enabling factor of expertise, as the superior knowledge granted to the project group provided them with a similar notion to expert status regarding the move. Much like Hope (2010) then concludingly argues, the control and expertise provided the project group with the legitimacy to construct meaning and through this shape the sensegiving process. However, what differs between this study and previous studies is who possesses the access and knowledge. While previous research ascribes power in terms of 'control' and 'knowledge' to leaders

and managers of varying levels, this study finds it to be related to a specific task, in this case being the project. Accordingly, power can no longer be seen to only be correlated to managers providing sense, but need to be recognized in relation to the partaking in a knowledge-specific task.

Concludingly, what the above discussion brings forth is that while power is identified as an internal feature of sensegiving, power appears to externally influence the sensegiving process as well. The analysis and discussion on legitimacy indicates that, while being a fundamental aspect in seeing power as manifested within sensegiving, it simultaneously operates as an source of power external to the sensegiving process. Consequently, external and internal power are found to co-exist in and with the process of sensegiving and does enable rather than limit one another. The found existence of external power does not provide the sensegiving literature with new insights, but what however is novel about the findings is the source of external power. Previous literature on sensegiving in general and in relation to power in particular have had a focus primarily on managers and leaders (Filstad, 2014; Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007; Kraft et al, 2015; Voronov, 2008; Hope, 2010, Drori & Ellis, 2011) and as a consequence hierarchy, context and positions as relatable to the sources of power. In contrast, the findings show that power is instead related to inclusion in a group or a particular task and it is these two sources that are seen to enable the project members as sensegivers (Voronov, 2008). This study thereby argues for the need to widen the research focus from managers and leaders to include other groups of organizational members.

Virtuality

One of the main aspects of the four manifestations of power found in the material is their dependence upon virtuality. Due to the empirical material being focused solely on virtual sensegiving, it is only natural that features of virtuality will imbue the findings. As no other studies have been found that focus on virtuality or that elaborate on the medium through which sensegiving is conducted, no comparison based on equal conditions can be made. However, the findings in this study can be placed in relation to previous research on sensegiving and by utilizing literature that addresses the area of virtual communication, insights could be gained regarding how virtuality might influence the sensegiving process.

The manifestation of normalization and its empirical feature of consistency both have relatable usage in previous research. Maitlis & Lawrence (2007) as well as Maitlis & Christianson (2014) discuss how leaders can normalize and legitimize certain perceptions to create shared accounts of reality. The manifestation of normalization has a high comparability to this, but what mainly differs is how the normalization is achieved. While it in the previous studies is a focus on legitimization and delegitimization of perceptions, the normalization as discussed in the analysis focuses on consistency in message and frequency through insistent penetration of employees' cognitive space. In doing so, the reality intended to be conveyed is seen as strongly advocated for, while no other realities are up for discussion. Thus, the aspect of delegitimizing is not to be found, whereas the legitimizing aspect could be seen to be heightened. This can be related to virtualities technical nature, as it drastically limits varying perceptions as it could be designed to restrict the number of individuals able to partake in the process of providing sense.

It furthermore limits the possibility of the same message being altered due to its durability. Thereby, virtual sensegiving could be seen to restrict or even eliminate the need for delegitimization of perceptions found in assumed face-to-face sensegiving and instead amplify the legitimizing aspect.

Relatable to the above argued is the importance of consistency found in the material, which is deliberated on in a similar manner by Kraft et al (2015), who talk about schema consistency. Although both studies have a similar definition of consistency, the attribution of the concept diverges. Kraft et al (2015) refer to consistency with what is normatively known about the organization, while consistency in this study regards that there is a coherency in the message and continuous frequency in the distribution of said message. An explanation to these differences could lie in the virtuality of the sensegiving, as communicating virtually is found to decrease the bias of the message, but making the comprehension of the message more difficult compared to face-to-face interaction as well as volume tends to increase while efficiency tends to decrease (DeSanctis & Monge, 1999). Such prerequisites could help explain why normalizing becomes more about pushing for message coherency and frequency, and in doing so increasing the chance of comprehending the message as intended, rather than 'de-normalizing' other points of view. Consequently, virtual sensegiving could be seen to differ from face-to-face sensegiving in that it increases the need for making the message understood, but decreases the need to delegitimizing other messages.

Regarding the manifestation of attachment, this has been researched primarily from its emotional feature and its found emphasis and use throughout the material shows comparable insights to Maitlis et al's (2013) view on emotions. The notable usage of positive emotions is seen as a conscious way to instill employees with a desire to capitalize on happy feelings, thus making them adapt preferences. The desire of feeling good could be seen as similar to the notion of emotions as fuel emphasized by the authors, where ample use of positive emotion by the project group arguably aims at stimulating the adaption of preferences for employees in favor of the move. In turn, as preferences are adapted to align with the positivity in the communication, employees could be seen to perceive themselves as having a more positive emotional state, deemed by Maitlis, et al (2013) as critical for employees to embrace the sense given.

However, less is expressed regarding the actual emotional state of employees within the material and the focus lies with applying and bringing forth emotion rather than allowing for the current emotional state to shine through. Virtual communication provides an alternative explanation for this, as the lack of physical proximity to the employees makes their emotional states harder to read (Mantovani, 1996; Ferraro & Briody, 2013), thus making the application of emotion a more convenient choice. The emotions emphasized in the virtual communication as well as the familiarization generated through personally relatable features create what can be seen as an artificial social and emotional reality in which the sensegiving is conducted, which has relatable, but arguably positively amplified similarities to the current organizational reality. Accordingly, the virtual sensegiving is seen as conducted in an (artificial) social vacuum (Mantovani, 1996), but through its familiarity aspects it relates to the actual social and

emotional reality of the employee. The familiarity aspect could in this case be deemed of high importance as it bridges the virtual with the real, making the sensegiving relatable to the employee. Consequently, virtual sensegiving appears to differ from face-to-face sensegiving in that it is conducted in a socio-emotional setting that not only exists, but can be actively shaped by the sensegiver.

The manifestation of glorification found in the virtual sensegiving shows several similarities with previous research, primarily on framing and symbols. The strong portrayal of the information provided is seen as a way of framing (Fiss & Zajac, 2013) the future. The frame provided by the project group was highly glorified and used as a way of pitching the new future to come. By using selected illustrations and symbols, which were being related to the new building and the future way of work, the project group was deemed as attempting to create symbolic values that in turn benefited the alteration of employee perception and served to motivate meaning construction (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Moreover, the relatedness between old and new through symbols and illustrations resonates well with Gioia et al's (1994) suggestion that such usage simplifies the transition from known to unknown during change processes. By furthermore showing concern for employee needs, much in similar to a balancing frame (Fiss & Zajac, 2013), the frame came to include a glorified future, strengthened by relatable symbols and employee concern.

Perceived as different from previous research however is the way in which the symbols are used. While previous studies emphasize that symbols hold a meaning or value of their own and that such meaning and value can be used to bridge the known with the unknown, the manifestation of glorification holds forth the symbols to become dominated by the project group, which in turn can alter their symbolic value. As the example with 'The Building X' shows, through intense and specifically portrayed utilization it became a symbol whose value and meaning came under the project groups subjection, making it not only a bridge, but the conventional way of referring to the future. What 'The Building X' meant and stood for was clearly stressed and in becoming the normal way of talking about the future it became shared throughout the organization. This domination of symbols might be explained when considering the virtuality of the communication, as shared cognition is stressed as imperative when communicating virtually (Marlow et al, 2017). By taking control over symbols and their meaning and values, they can be actively shared throughout the organization based on a desired understanding, attempting to make them equally understood among employees. As the virtual context lacks many of the social cues present in a physical setting (Mantovani, 1996), forcefully crafting symbols meaning and value appears to be a way of overcoming their possible misinterpretation in relation to the desired future conveyed by the sensegiver. Consequently, virtual sensegiving is perceived to differ from sensegiving conducted face-to-face in that it dominates symbols, as compared to utilizes their inherent meaning and value, in an attempt to establish a shared understanding in a virtual context that lacks in social cues.

Based on the perceived differences above, it is suggested that virtual sensegiving and sensegiving performed face-to-face does have different prerequisites. The differences found in this study regards message, socio-emotional setting and symbols, and while symbols have been

researched extensively in previous studies, message and socio-emotional setting have been elaborated on substantially less. A reason for this conceivably lies within the virtuality of the sensegiving, as it holds other facilitators and boundary conditions (Kraft et al, 2015) than found in face-to-face interactions, thus consequently brings forth alternative features of significance when attempting to give sense.

Conclusion

In this study sensegiving in relation to power and virtuality has been explored by examining how sense was given through the use of virtual communication in an organization which recently underwent a large organizational change. Fulfilling the first aim of the study, findings revealed the presence of four manifestations of power within the sensegiving being conveyed at the case organization; normalization, exclusion, attachment and glorification – and through these manifestations power was acknowledged as internal to sensegiving. This highlights sensegiving as power-imbued and as a consequence it is found to be an *exertion of power*. Furthermore, the study reveals internal and external power to enable one another through their coexistence in and with the sensegiving process and two new sources of external power are found in relation to virtual sensegiving - inclusion in a group and a knowledge-specific task - implying managers and leaders to not be exclusively ascribed the ability of shaping others' meaning construction. By moreover addressing the issue of virtuality, the results show virtual sensegiving to differ from implicitly assumed sensegiving conducted face-to-face. Differences regarded message, socio-emotional setting and symbols, features found relatable to the virtuality of the sensegiving, thus fulfilling the second aim of the study. In establishing suggestive difference between virtual and face-to-face sensegiving, the study highlights the need for considering the *medium of interaction* when giving sense.

The main findings presented in this study provide implications for academia and practice. In identifying power as internal to sensegiving, the paper broadens the application of power within the sensegiving literature, which has the capacity of responding to the argued need for a deeper understanding of power and politics in relation to sensegiving (Filstad, 2014). The study furthermore extends the literature by implying the need for a widening of the research focus within sensegiving literature from managers and leaders to other organizational members. Extending beyond managers and leaders as sensegivers would reasonably provide a more nuanced understanding of how sensegiving is conducted in organizations. A major implication for the sensegiving literature regards the identification of suggestive differences between virtual and face-to-face sensegiving. By arguing the medium of interaction to influence how sense is given, the study opens up for investigation of the unexplored area regarding the medium through which sensegiving is conveyed, providing a new prerequisite for the sensegiving literature to address. The managerial implications of the study unfolds in two parts. In viewing the issue of power in an alternative light, this paper argues for managers to recognize sensegiving as an inherently power-imbued process and consequently realize change to privilege certain interests. The privileging of certain interests over other does not necessarily impose a normative issue for managers, as it is argued a natural part of organizing, but by demonstrating an awareness of the power aspects of sensegiving, managers might be able to

provide sense more effectively. Moreover, following the increasing use of technology in organizations, the study suggests that managers need to take the medium through which interaction is conducted into consideration when trying to manage the meaning of change. With change being seen as a condition for survival (Beer & Nohria, 2000; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) and organizations becoming more geographically dispersed and virtual, understanding how to convey sense through a variation of mediums could be seen as a prerequisite for successful change initiatives.

Limitations and future research

The study charts waters scarcely travelled before, and should thereby be seen as primarily explorative in nature, with the ability to open new doors for subsequent research to follow through. Accordingly, the study has two major limitations of interest for future research. Firstly, the findings are highly dependent upon the specific parameters of virtuality and power in combination. Arguably, it is highly conceivable that power would manifest itself differently if not dependent upon the features of virtuality. Accordingly, future research need to disentangle these parameters and research them separately in order to gain a better understanding of their implication for sensegiving. Secondly, although sensegiving and sensemaking are argued to influence one another in a reciprocal and iterative process (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), the study focuses solely on sensegiving due to the inability of being present at the company during the change process and thereby collect the sensemaking of employees. An intriguing avenue for future studies to pursue would accordingly be to include sensemaking in the setting of virtuality, to explore how sensegiving - sensemaking process is influenced by such conditions.

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Appendix. 1 Presentation of how data was analyzed

