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Sensemaking in the Shadow of a Superfund Site: Defining ATSDR Roles and Goals in an Agency- Saturated Community

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Sensemaking in the Shadow of a Superfund Site

*Defining ATSDR Roles and Goals
in an Agency-Saturated Community*

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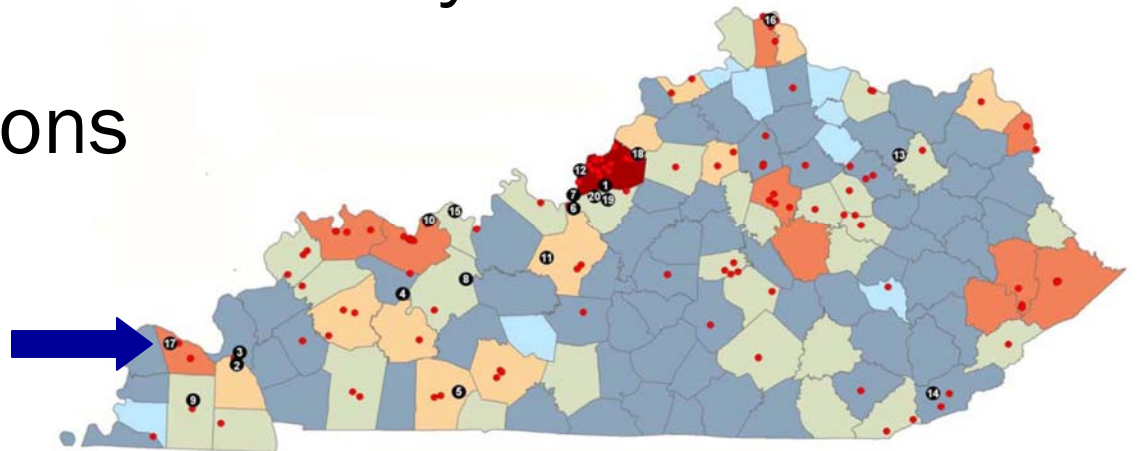
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Where We Are Going

- Sensemaking in Risk Communication
- The Superfund Tapestry
 - Locals
 - Outsiders
- The PGDP Case Study
- Implications



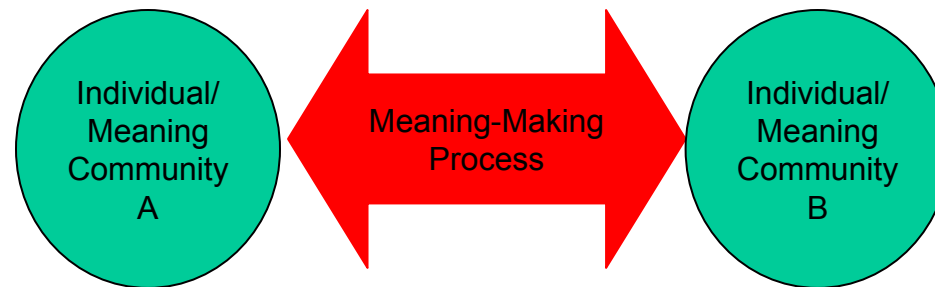
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Sensemaking

Individuals working together to create shared meaning



Seeks:

- ▶ Plausibility
- ▶ Coherence
- ▶ Reasonableness
- ▶ Social Acceptability
- ▶ Credibility

--Weick, 1995

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Cosmological Episodes

“When people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system”

–Weick, 2001



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Roles



“Thrust people into unfamiliar roles, leave some key roles unfilled, make the task more ambiguous, **discredit the role system**, and make all of these changes in a context in which small events can combine into something monstrous”

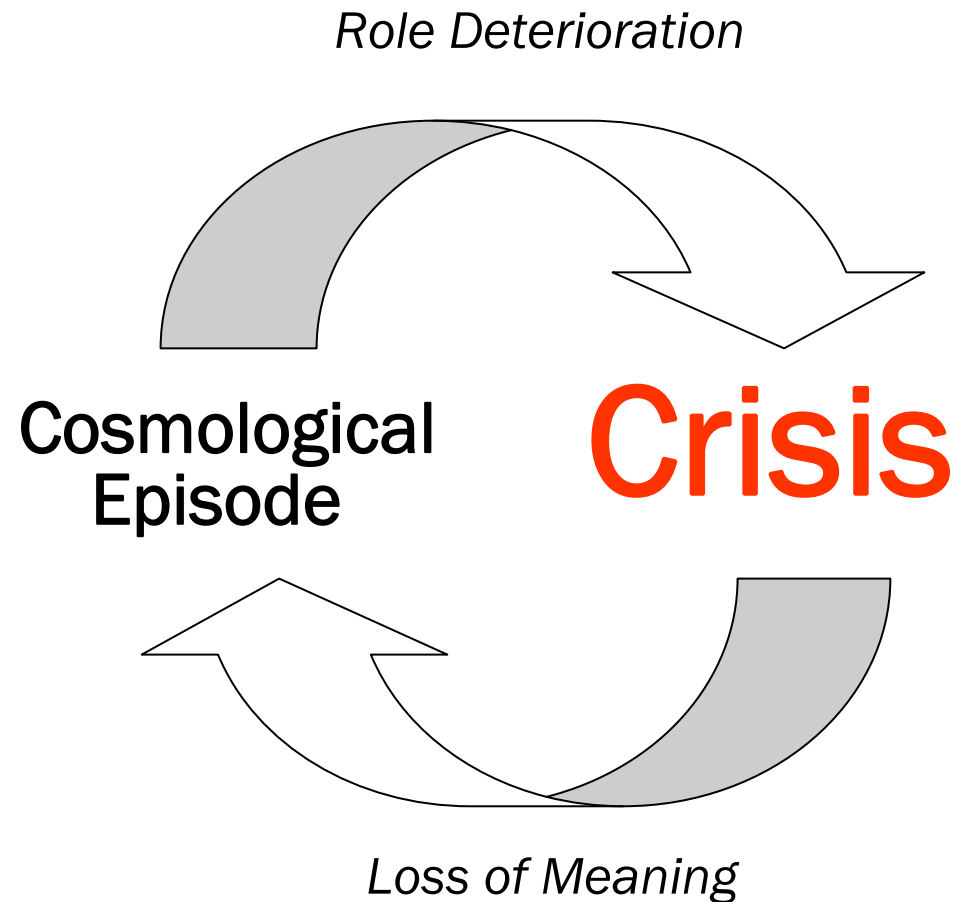
--Weick, 2001

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So What?



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The Superfund Tapestry

- Historically Situated
- Environmental and Health Concerns
- Stakeholder Heterogeneity
- Complex Statutory Environment

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Locals

- Homeowners/Landowners Near the Site
- PRP Employees
- Environmental/Health Advocates
- Healthcare Providers
- Educators
- Local Media
- Religious Community
- Hunters/Fishermen
- Tourism Industry
- Local Government
- SSABs/CABs



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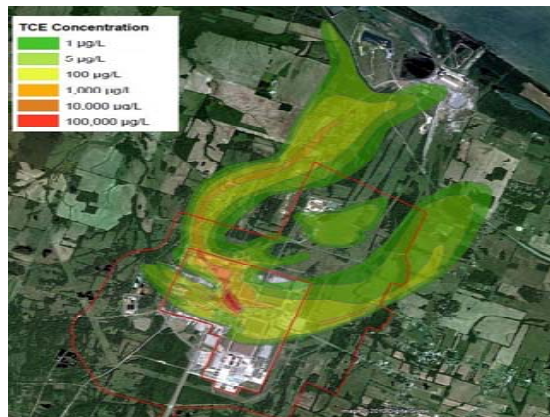
Outsiders

- Federal Agencies
 - US EPA
 - ATSDR
 - NIEHS (SRP)
 - DOE
 - DOD
- State Agencies
 - Environmental Protection
 - Divisions of Water
 - Divisions of Air Quality
 - Divisions of Waste Management
 - Superfund Branches
 - Health Departments
- University Researchers



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Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant



- Only operating US uranium GDP (1952-present)
- 1,200 workers/\$121M payroll
- TCE and Tc-99 in nearby private drinking wells (1988)
- EPA Superfund National Priority List (1993-94)
- One of the largest TCE plumes in the world
- Plant to close in 5-10 years

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Methods

- 4-Year Study
- Interviews (n=63)
- Focus Groups (n=8)
- Content Analysis: *Paducah Sun* (Jan. – Dec. 2005, n=85 articles)
- Internet Inquiry (Activist Blog)

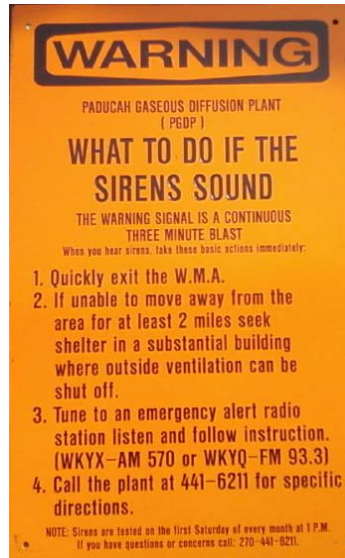
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Findings: Interviews



- “...[I]t’s all on the ATSDR/CDC site, and we even had a sick worker get up at one of the meetings and talk about some of this stuff... They never told anybody anything. And they’re still not doing it.”
- “So why didn’t ASTDR [sic] do an epi study? They [i.e., ‘the government’] never do any honest stuff...”
- “What you’re seeing in their ASTDR [sic] reports is a lot of good information, and they do capture a lot of things in the buildings. But then it’s almost like I’ve got the real facts of the workers, and it’s not matching what you’re assessing here...”
- “...[T]here’s been recent testimony that the ASTDR [sic] report was biased. These people were intimidated by the past administration.”



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Findings: Focus Groups



- “...[P]eople know that it’s a plant out here for the government...”
- “...The federal government is notorious about [using acronyms], if you’ve ever tried to read a federal government document...”
- “[J]ust get the government the ____ out... They came in and disrupted everything...”
- “I would not want [information from] anybody affiliated with the government in any way...”



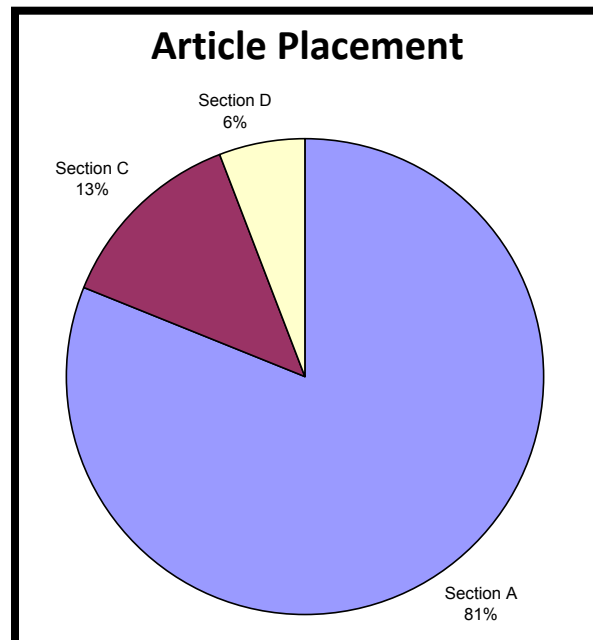
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Findings: Media

Dominant Themes

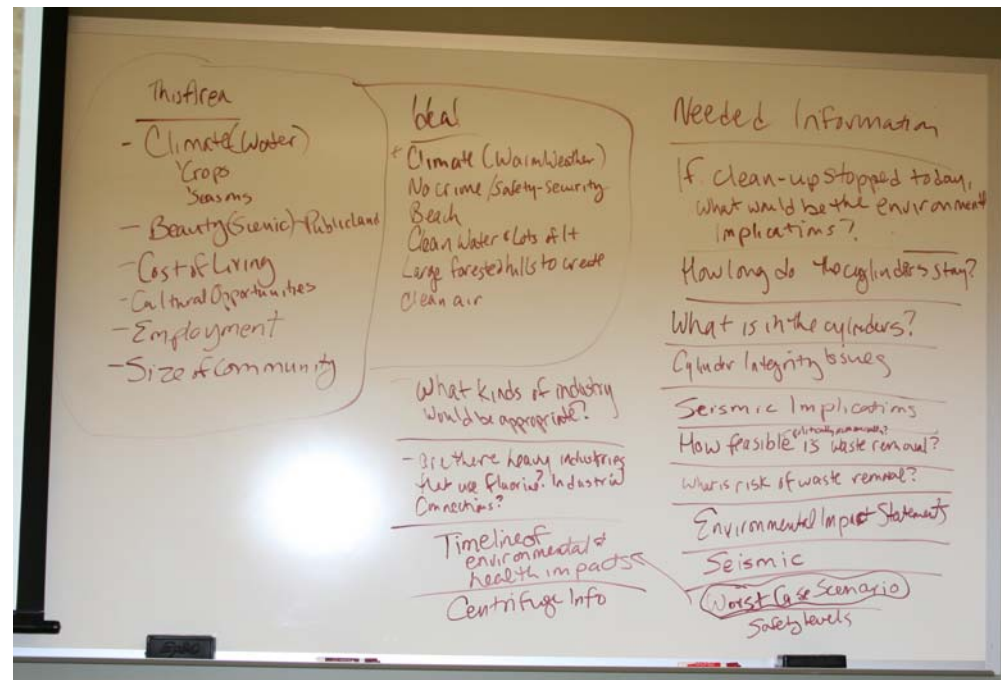
- Contamination/pollution
- Toxins/toxic/poison
- Government
- Distrust
- Radiation
- Costs
- Regulations & Procedures
- Compensation
- Exposure
- Cancer
- Backlogs
- Protest
- Safety and Security
- Cleanup
- Workers/Sick Workers
- Jobs
- Contracts
- Delays/Postponements
- Timelines and Schedules
- Technology
- Family
- Economic Development
- Health





Findings: Blogs

- “There were, on the other hand, 7 or 8 government people in attendance. ...”
- “At one point during this process, one of the university/government women, Anna Hoover, took the floor...”



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Implications

- Communicate ATSDR's role early, clearly, and often
- Coordinate with other “outside” stakeholders
- Listen



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* For a more detailed analysis of focus group data, see Chapter Seven of *Community Visions for the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant* at www.paducahvision.com.



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