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## **Authoritative Sensemaking in a Public Inquiry Report**

Brown, A.D. 2004. Authoritative sensemaking in a public inquiry report. *Organization Studies*, 25, 1: 95-112.

### **Abstract**

This paper attempts a discourse analysis of the Cullen Report into the Piper Alpha disaster in order to research how public inquiries seek to represent their efforts to make sense of events as authoritative. It is argued that inquiry reports are highly convention-governed sensemaking narratives that employ various forms of verisimilitude in order to bolster their authority. They are also monological storytelling performances that function hegemonically to impose a particular version of reality on their readers. The investigation of the means by which inquiry reports attempt to accomplish verisimilitude and hegemony are important as they may shed light on how this form of public discourse seeks to depoliticise disaster events, legitimate social institutions, and lessen anxieties by concocting myths that emphasize our omnipotence and capacity to control.

How are public inquiry reports constituted as “authoritative”? What can we learn about sensemaking from analyses of the texts of public inquiries? These questions are significant because of the importance of public inquiries, and the reports they produce, both as locales for the conduct of primary research and as fora which influence public policy. While public inquiries are interesting ceremonial occasions (Gephart, 1978; Trice & Beyer, 1984) that play important roles in the cultural adjustment stage of critical events (Turner, 1976, 1978), it is the reports that they produce which are the main focus of attention here. Constituted within discursive practices inquiry reports may be regarded as totalizing and monological (Boje, 1995; Rhodes, 2000) rhetorical constructs (Edmondson, 1984; Nelson, Megill & McCloskey, 1987). Such texts are authored in an effort to elicit verisimilitude attributions from their target audiences (Goodman, 1969; Tyler, 1987; Van Maanen, 1988) and thus to depoliticize disaster events, legitimate social institutions, and extend the hegemonic influence of dominant groups (Gephart, 1992: 117; Gramsci, 1971; Kemp, 1985: 177).

This paper is concerned with how a particular public inquiry report (Cullen, 1990) constructs the sense it makes of complex events and how this sensemaking is represented as authoritative. The starting point for the analysis is that an inquiry report is a narrative, albeit one that is highly convention-governed, and that this reflects the fact that "man is in his actions and practice...essentially a storytelling animal" (MacIntyre, 1981: 201) who needs to organize experience into coherent connected patterns or narratives (Goldberg, 1982: 242) in order to give meaning to our lives and events (Barthes, 1977; Burke, 1968; Fisher, 1984; Goody & Watt, 1962-3; Heidegger, 1949; Krashen, 1982). An emerging consensus that “human reason is narrative” (Medina, 1979: 30), in part explains the

paradigm shift identified by Martin (1986: 7) who argues that within the social sciences “Mimesis and narration have returned from their marginal status as aspects of ‘fiction’ to inhabit the very center of other disciplines as modes of explanation necessary for an understanding of life”. From a perspective that understands the world as “multivocal, fragmented, decentred, with no master narratives or central texts, a world in which meaning is radically plural” (Bruner, 1993: 23), inquiry reports are particularly interesting attempts to present a univocal and coherent view on what are generally readily acknowledged in the reports themselves to be complex and uncertain events.

A key question is how a text extends its hegemonic influence. Hegemony is understood as a form of cleverly masked, taken-for-granted domination, most often articulated as what is “common sense” or “natural”, and which thus “involves the successful mobilisation and reproduction of the active consent” of those subject to it (Clegg, 1989: 160; Baack & Prash, 1997; Boje, Luhman & Baack, 1999; Gramsci, 1971). Inquiry reports are, of course, merely one means by which the state seeks “constant renewal of hegemonic domination”, and public inquiries are “one practice amongst many in the process of reproducing specific ideological social relations” and “through which legitimacy crises are repaired” (Burton & Carlen, 1979: 8). In effect, a hegemonically successful inquiry report is one that is wholly or largely uncritically accepted as providing a comprehensive and accurate account of the events it purports to describe, which is seen to be fair in its assessment of culpability and the allocation of blame, and which makes seemingly appropriate recommendations (e.g, Brown, 2000). To be hegemonically effective, and thus to maintain and repair the legitimacy of state apparatus (e.g., Habermas, 1973, 1979), a text needs to be received as authoritative. Authority is not a property of texts *per se*, but a characteristic attributed to texts by their readers,

i.e., authority is ascribed to texts rather than inscribed in them, though partly on the basis of authority claims that texts themselves make.

The means by which texts make authority claims has been investigated many times and in multiple contexts by those interested in the deployment of textual rhetorical practices (e.g., Edmondson, 1984; Elwood, 1995; Gusfield, 1976; McCloskey, 1985; Nelson, Megill & McCloskey, 1987). This is, in some ways, a related study. Public inquiry texts make authority claims through recourse to a set of rules governing knowledge, its production and representation, which they present as establishing valid and reliable accounts. In this way reports bear witness to their own validity, constructing a "mask" of authority which creates a particular regime of truth (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994: 579). A large number of features that putatively make a story "work" have been proposed (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Ricoeur, 1984, 1985, 1988). The understanding of textual authority employed here suggests that it involves the text's appropriation by a reader who relates it to his/her own context and experience in a creative or hermeneutic process rather than merely reproductive fashion (Tenkasi & Boland, 1993: 86). The construction of meaning results from an interplay between the text, author and reader in ways which are pluralistic and dynamic (Barry & Elmes, 1997).

The authorship of an authoritative narrative is intimately bound-up with the issue of how inquiries "make sense" of the events under scrutiny. As a research site, an inquiry report renders visible what are often latent aspects of organizations, sheds light on how people make sense of complicated and problematic social situations, and how low probability but high consequence events are dealt with (Gephart, 1992, 1988; Kemp, 1985). Sensemaking is a generic term that refers to various individual and collective

processes by which meaning is produced and inter-subjective accounts formed (e.g., Leiter, 1980; Weick, 1995). The implication here is “that reality is an ongoing accomplishment” as “people try to make things rationally accountable to themselves and to others” (Weick, 1993: 635). Individuals create and sustain images of reality (Morgan, Frost & Pondy, 1983: 24) and “sense” occurs when people act as if these images were shared, though as a matter of fact there is often a lack of actual agreement which is ignored or assumed away (Garfinkel, 1967; Leiter, 1980: 78; Lynch, 1985). Man-made disasters such as Piper Alpha are of interest because they undermine “normal” sensemaking practices, revealing “alternative interpretations of events” and thus “the myth of a singular, shared organizational reality” (Gephart, Steier, & Lawrence, 1990: 30).

Sensemaking is essentially a narrative process (e.g., Brown, 2000; Bruner, 1990; Fisher, 1984; MacIntyre, 1981). Narratives are an important symbolic form through which meanings are constructed and shared, thus permitting researchers to engage in the “exposition of the intersubjectivity of organizational life based on the different personal experiences and sense-making assumptions of organizational members” (Rhodes, 1997: 12). Boje’s (1995: 1000) argument that organisations are collective storytelling systems “in which the performance of stories is a key part of members’ sensemaking”, and the many suggestions that, for example, individuals organise their experiences using narrative (Boyce, 1996; March & Sevón, 1984), that narratives “make the unexpected expectable” (Robinson, 1981: 60) and that narratives permit us to comprehend causal relationships (Sutton & Kahn, 1987), are indicative of the extent of prior research from this perspective. One aspect of the research contribution this

paper makes is to examine some of the textual practices by which apparently authoritative sensemaking narratives are authored.

### **Research Design: Public Inquiries, and Their Reports**

A public inquiry assembles an explanatory account from the statements of witnesses (Gephart, 1984, 1993), publicly allocates responsibility and blame (Douglas, 1985: 56), and makes recommendations that provide evidence for societal and organizational learning (Shrivastva et. al., 1988: 292; Turner, 1976, 1978). Inquiry reports are constructed according to the conventions of the public policy discourse in which they are located and to which they contribute, creating, clarifying, sustaining and modifying this particular version of reality (Dijk, 1985; Fairclough, 1995; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). As such, inquiries have attracted considerable attention from scholars (Douglas, 1986; Gephart, 1992, 1993; Gephart, Steier & Lawrence, 1990; Kemp, 1985; Turner, 1976, 1978), though these studies have tended to focus on the events described rather than the texts of the reports the inquiries have produced. While this is understandable in the context of a field in which theorists have often insisted that any sort of analysis must be “rigorous” and “accurate” (e.g. Eisenhardt, 1991), it has also meant that texts, which “constitute one important form of social action”, and are valuable political resources that impact patterns of social control and domination (Fairclough, 1992: 211), have, arguably, been under-examined.

In the UK, the modern public inquiry system has developed as an instrument of government “piecemeal...in response to the needs of public administration” (Toft & Reynolds, 1994: 21) with the consequence that there is “no clear definition of what a public inquiry is” (Toft & Reynolds, 1994: 22). In terms of their procedures, inquiries



assume much of their philosophy, procedures and ethics from the British legal system, and tend thus to be characterized by an adversarial formal public examination of evidence wherein witnesses are examined and subsequently cross-examined by lawyers. One genre of public inquiry, (of which the Cullen Report is an exemplar), is broadly defined as "disaster inquiries" or "*post mortems*" (Wraith & Lamb, 1971: 15). These are investigations into specific occurrences, or patterns of events, that constitute or which symptomize major problems with particular organizations or in society generally. This category of Inquiry is particularly useful for us because it deals with instances where the legitimacy of social institutions has been called into question, public interest is generally high, and media speculation is often intense. It is in such circumstances that the authority of public inquiry reports is most at stake.

This research was predicated on the assumption that quantitative analysis of texts "are likely to come to grief" because "words and phrases do not come ready packaged with a specific delimited meaning" (Parker, 2000: 2). Only a qualitative approach permits the highlighting of nuances of meaning and the sensitivity to language use which reveals texts as suffused with *interpretation* (Banister et. al., 1994). My approach derives from the view that the meaning of any term is governed by its *relations* with other terms (Hawkes, 1977), and our quest for the "horizon of meaning" encoded in textual patterns of signification. I explicitly recognize that words and phrases have meanings that are organized into systems and institutions, (Foucault's (1969/1972) "discursive practices"), that *position* authors in relations of power. From this perspective, public inquiry reports are social constructions (Burr, 1995) in which are detectable dominant and subordinate (often contradictory) meanings (Barthes, 1972; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). A public inquiry report is, thus, a text in which authors' embed interpretations (Knorr-Cetina,

1981), which derive from and acquire meaning in their relation to other texts in their discourse (Culler, 1982: 33, 103), and which incorporate and manifest the cultural and institutional circumstances in which they have been produced, i.e. are power effects (Foucault, 1977).

Recognizing a need for in-depth understanding of the text, the Report was read and lists of potentially interesting features were generated under category headings (codes). Adopting the principle of constant comparison, codes were variously generated, explored, refined, collapsed, and discarded (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). These codes were accompanied by theoretical memoranda that explored their possible textual implications as they related to the project. The approach taken was explicitly deconstructionist, seeking to surface and analyze dualities embedded in the text (e.g., Boje, 1995: 1007; Culler, 1982; de Beaugrande, 1985; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). These processes were more idiosyncratic than “rigorous” (Eisenhardt, 1991), and doubtless reflected the interests and prejudices of the researcher (Bruner, 1993: 2). Reflexivity is a theme to which I return in the discussion. The principal results of this activity were the generation of a detailed time-linear account of events, the identification of certain generic textual claims to authority, an exploration of several points of apparent vulnerability in the Report, and a discussion of the extent to which the account that Cullen presents is consonant with contemporary theories of how sense is made in organizations. Versions of these are reproduced below as major sections in this paper.

### **Cullen’s Account of the Disaster**

Located 110 miles north-east of Aberdeen, Piper Alpha was an offshore oil platform operated by Occidental Petroleum. On 24 March 1984 there was a serious fire, and in 1987 there was a fatality in which the shift handover and Permit To Work (PTW) systems were implicated. Two separate reports (by Captain Clayson and Mr. Saldana)

highlighting disaster scenarios and how they might be avoided were produced but ignored by senior personnel at Occidental.

On 6 July 1988 a number of routine maintenance tasks were being undertaken on Piper, one of which was the preventive maintenance overhaul of condensate injection pump A. There were two such pumps, and with A out of action Piper was reliant just on B pump. Another programme of maintenance concerned the approximately 300 pressure safety valves on Piper, each of which needed to be recertified at 18 month intervals. This substantial task was contracted out to a company called Score, and a two-man team consisting of Mr. Rankin and Mr. Sutton had been engaged on this since 13 June. On 6 July the single pressure safety valve, PSV 504, on A pump was removed for recertification by them. The valve was duly tested and a certificate issued. The valve was not then replaced as had originally been planned. Instead, blind flanges were fitted by Mr. Sutton. As A pump was shut down and subject to a full maintenance Mr. Sutton, who was a competent and careful fitter, made the blind flange on the pump side only finger tight rather than tightened with spanners and hammers (“flogged-up”).

Permission to undertake this work, and all the associated documentation, had been dealt with by day-shift personnel. Between 17.10 and 17.30 hours the night shift personnel came on duty in the form of: Mr. Vernon, the lead production operator, Mr. Richard, the phase 1 operator, Mr. Clark, the maintenance lead hand, and Mr. Bollands, the control room operator. The information that PSV 504 was still with maintenance was not communicated to them by those on the out-going shift. This may have been because they expected the PSV to be restored. Mr. Rankin then returned to the Control Room where he left a Permit To Work (PTW) document on the desk (CR 6.108). The way in which Mr. Rankin had filled-in the PTW made it unclear that PSV 504 was off.

At about 21.45-21.50 hours the working condensate injection pump, B pump, tripped. Mr. Vernon, who was then in the Control Room, left to attend the condensate pumps. Mr. Bollands contacted Mr. Richard and he too went straight to the malfunctioning pump. Mr. Vernon came back to the Control Room and said that B pump would not restart. Mr. Clark was contacted and it was agreed that A pump should be re-started. They were aware that maintenance was being carried out on A pump and that they (Mr. Vernon and Mr. Clark) would both need to sign-off a PTW so that it could be electrically reinstated. Mr. Clark came to the Control Room to do this. Within a few minutes there began a series of trips and alarms. The situation was now recognized by Mr. Bollands to be more serious as the whole platform was now 90% into a shutdown, though this should be understood in the context that Mr. Bollands had experienced similar situations up to twenty times before in 8-9 years: “He had confidence in the operators and felt the situation was under control. He could not recollect a total shutdown due to such a situation and did not consider initiating a shutdown”(CR, 6.14).

Mr. Vernon and Mr. Richard, unaware that PSV 504 was off, sought to re-start A Pump resulting in condensate being admitted to the relief line. There followed a two-stage leakage of condensate from a blind flange assembly at PSV 504 that was not leak-tight (CR 6.55). An initial explosion occurred at approximately 22.00 hours in C

Module. A fire spread rapidly through the platform fed by sources of fuel from other installations to which Piper was linked, and which were not immediately shut down.

No one working in A, B, or C Modules survived. Individuals and small groups of men working elsewhere managed to jump into the sea. 28 men left the accommodation block and survived, but 81 stayed and perished. The difficulties experienced on Piper were the result of many failures in the safety regime. Vessels in the vicinity of Piper engaged in a rescue operation. From the outset, however, co-ordination of search and rescue activities “was threatened by poor communications and a failure in the procedures which were intended to secure a prompt, well-informed and efficient response” (CR 9.30). Of 279 personnel just 61 people survived.

### **Towards an Understanding of Authority Claims: Telling a good story**

In order to be received as authoritative by its readership an inquiry report must elicit a verisimilitude attribution (e.g. Brown, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Van Maanen, 1988). My understanding of verisimilitude suggests that its attribution implies three related perceptions: that a text conforms to the rules of its genre, that it offers a vicarious experience, and that it provides good reasons for the events it describes. First, a text must convey “the appearance or semblance of reality” (OED). A verisimilitudinous text is one that sufficiently conforms to a reader’s preconceived conventionalized notions regarding narrative fidelity (Goodman, 1969: 38; Goodman, 1970, 1983). In Denzin and Lincoln’s (1994: 580) terms, “Verisimilitude can be described as the mask a text assumes as it convinces the readers it has conformed to the laws of its genre”. Such texts are seen to possess ‘credibility’, though, importantly, appearing credible may also mean being seen not to be wholly predictable and having the capacity to defamiliarize and renew a reader’s view of the world (Bann & Bowlt, 1973; Barry & Elmes, 1997; Lemon & Reis, 1965). Second, a text must elicit an acknowledgement that the narrative it contains offers a vicarious experience (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991: 617; Hammersley, 1992: 22/23; Philips, 1995: 633/634) that is memorable, powerful and permits us to understand the world from the perspective of others. The verisimilitudinous narrative invites the reader’s sympathetic engagement (Atkinson, 1990) in ways which “develop an experiential sense

of the way that individual actions relate to each other and to a larger whole” (Krieger, 1983: 179) and evoke “feeling responses” (Hodges, 1952). Third, a text must prompt recognition that the narrative it offers provides us with "good reasons" for occurrences that both support our biographical sense of self and our relationships with others (Medina, 1979: 30). Much the same point has been made by Bruner (1990: 112) who suggests that the object of (successful) narrativization “is not a match with a reality or a predefined system of logic...but achievement of coherence, livability and adequacy” (cf. Fisher’s (1994)). From our sensemaking perspective this is the most important aspect of verisimilitude, and most attention will be focused on how this is achieved in the Report.

*Conforming to Genre Rules.* Drawing on the work of, for example, Burton and Carlen (1979), Gephart (1992) and Brown (2000), it is clear that the Cullen Report makes a number of authority claims that characterise this form of official discourse. For example, it makes *provenance* claims in the form of detailed information regarding who commissioned it, under what legislation, with what remit, and the status and qualifications of Cullen and his assessors. It also makes claims regarding its *comprehensiveness*, especially in terms of the number of witnesses (217) from whom evidence has been taken. Where limitations are acknowledged (CR, 2.15) they are implicitly presented to the reader as reasonable and calculated within an implicit overarching *positivist conception* that an exhaustive investigation of the “facts” will, in 488 pages plus appendices, reveal the “truth” (e.g., Burton & Carlen, 1979: 74-5). The Report is written in the first person, ostensibly by Cullen, who as the single responsible “author-in-the-text” arrogates to himself alone the *omniscience* that accrues from having seen, listened, and read all the evidence provided to the Inquiry and who therefore interacts with the reader from a position of assumed superiority.

This permits him to sometimes disarmingly reflect on his own authorial judgement and, most importantly, to construct his own entitlement to adjudicate “on the balance of probabilities” (e.g., CR 6.177). Rather than relate one continuous and easily understood narrative the events are described as a series of fragmented episodes, not always in time-linear fashion, and frequently punctuated by technical asides “sensible only to select professionals” (Gephart, 1992: 123) and the opinions of named specialists. In these, and many other ways, the Cullen Report is constituted as a public inquiry report.

*The offer of a vicarious experience.* The Cullen Report seeks to narrate a story with which its readership can engage. Two of the most obvious ways in which the Report seeks to elicit a feeling-response is by the use of direct quotation material from witnesses and the inclusion of micro-situational details. Perhaps the most vivid example is the description given by Mr. McDonald, a rigger, regarding his escape from the accommodation block. Having found the Occidental lead production operator, Mr. Carter, to be delirious:

“I just said to myself ‘get yourself off’. I got my pal Francis, and I got him as far as the reception, but he would not go down the stairs because he says ‘We have done our muster job; they’ll send choppers in’. I said to Francis ‘I’ve tried to speak to Alan Carter; Alan Carter cannot talk to me, Francis. There’s something drastically wrong on this rig. We’ll have to get off’. Francis would not go, and he just slumped down... That was as far as I could get him” (CR, 8.19).<sup>1</sup>

Another way in which the reader is drawn into the narrative is by providing large amounts of fine contextual detail, much of which seems designed solely to add to the richness of the narrative rather than to permit investigation of the “facts”. For example,

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<sup>1</sup> In this context it is valuable to recall that research suggests that, generally, “individuals attempt to escape with group members...to whom they have strong psychological ties” (Johnson, Feinberg & Johnston, 1994: 169-170; Sime, 1983).

Captain Morton, master of the *Maersk Cutter*, is described as having gone “to the mess room to get some milk” and then “sitting drinking a cup of coffee on the bridge when he experienced the initial explosion” (CR, 5.13, 5.15). One of the affects of this explosion was to throw Mr. Bollands across the Control Room where “his left thumb was cut and his right hip injured” (CR, 5.31). Mr. Clark, who was also in the Control Room at the time “was hit with some force on the shoulder and side of the neck by the computer terminal” (CR, 5.31). Mr. Young, then located at the condensate injection pumps “felt a rush of hot air...and was blown on his back between the 2 pumps, losing his safety hat, ear defenders and glasses” (CR, 5.32). Mr. Elliott “was knocked over by the explosion, losing his hard hat and glasses” (CR, 5.33). While the fact that certain people were knocked to the ground may have been significant, (because this information can be used to calculate the strength of an explosion), none of these micro details (e.g., concerning cuts or the loss of a safety hat) appear key to the plot and none are picked-up on by Cullen. What they do is to encourage in the reader “an ‘aha’ experience” as we “vicariously experience the relationships and ideas presented” in ways that are graphic, memorable, and seemingly plausible (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991: 617).

*Providing “good reasons” for occurrences.* The authority, and so the hegemonic power and legitimacy success of the Cullen Report, depends in part on its credibility when read in the context of both generally held common sense notions of what is likely to have occurred on Piper, and prevailing theories of sensemaking. Were the Report to breach either socially sanctioned ideas regarding how people behave in crisis situations or more technical accounts of social behaviour in emergencies, then the authority of the Report would be jeopardised (Brown, 2000: 48). What follows is an

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exploration of the extent of the consonance between the Cullen Report and theories of sensemaking.

In general terms, the account of the disaster offered by the Cullen Report is strikingly similar to the template for understanding man-made disasters developed by Turner (1976, 1978) which suggests that “disaster-provoking events tend to accumulate because they have been overlooked or misinterpreted as a result of false assumptions, poor communications, cultural lag and a misplaced optimism” (Turner & Pidgeon, 1997: 89). It is also consonant with Perrow’s (1981, 1982, 1984) discussion of “normal accidents” which are “unavoidable since they involve multiple errors of design, equipment failure, and systems of operation” (Gephart, 1984: 211). Cullen’s narrative is susceptible to analysis from a cultural perspective, and in particular Clarke’s (1993: 187) discussion of how cultures “can insulate members from dissenting points of view” and “perpetuate myths of control and maintain fictions that systems are safe”. It can also be understood in terms of how assessments of risk and risk acceptance are made under conditions of uncertainty, and especially Vaughn’s (1996) work on how hazard norms are constructed in ways that de-emphasize perceptions of risk. In addition, Cullen’s narrative shares many similarities with Reason’s (1990: 197) description of man-made systems that:

“...contain potentially destructive agencies like the pathogens within the human body. At any one time, each complex system will have within it a certain number of latent failures, whose effects are not immediately apparent but that can serve both to promote unsafe acts and weaken its defence mechanisms. For the most part they are tolerated, detected and corrected, or kept in check by protective measures (the auto-immune system). But every now and again, a set of external circumstances – called here local triggers – arises that combines with the resident pathogens in subtle and often unlikely ways to thwart the system’s defences and to bring about its catastrophic breakdown”.

More specifically, the putative fact that the major incident in 1984 and the fatality that occurred in 1987 did not prompt a concerted response from Occidental, may be



understood in the context of research findings which suggest that when accidents happen as a result of departures from prescribed rules or mores these existing prescriptions tend to be reinforced rather than re-thought (Turner & Pidgeon, 1997: 71). As a result, “Few changes in the structures of organizations occur as the result of disaster” (Gephart, 1984: 221), and those adjustments that do take place are often best defined, in Molotch’s (1970) memorable phrase as the “routinization of evil”. Even under favourable conditions, the literature on sensemaking suggests that the response of an organization to a difficulty tends to address “the symptoms of a crisis, without eliminating its fundamental causes (Shrivastava, 1987: 24). These scholarly views are echoed in the Cullen Report, which asserts that while, following the fatality in 1987, two memoranda were issued in an apparent effort to make systems more robust, they “did not have a lasting effect on practice” (CR, 11.16). Indeed, there was even some evidence that discussion of the accident had been discouraged by senior Occidental personnel (CR, 14.33).

At a more micro-level, studies suggest that in order to make sense of a crisis situation people need first to take action and that the action taken can directly affect the crisis itself. As Weick (1988: 306) makes clear, “Understanding is facilitated by action, but action affects events and can make things worse.” As Cullen represents it, the retrospective nature of sensemaking meant that Mr. Vernon and Mr. Richards needed to act, in this case by attempting to re-start B pump and start-up A pump, without knowing whether such action was appropriate, but in the hope that it would assist their efforts to understand the problem they faced. From a sensemaking perspective it may be surmised that in-so-acting the operators drew on their private enacted environments regarding what constituted reasonable actions and their likely outcomes (e.g., Weick, Gilfillan & Keith,

1973), inadvertently determining “the trajectory of the crisis” (Weick, 1988: 309), by setting in train the sequence of events that led to the initial explosion. The context in which they acted is depicted by Cullen as a high-load, high-complexity, high-turbulence information environment (Huber & Daft, 1987) which consumed valuable memory space and limited the time available for mental information processing, a situation research suggests will restrict the number of cues that people extract from events and distort peoples’ perceptions of what is going on (e.g., Easterbrook, 1959; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978: 233; Wachtel, 1967). In such circumstances it is unsurprising, (to both Cullen and theorists of sensemaking), that “When a triggering event occurs, spontaneous reactions by different stakeholders” may “create new problems – thus prolonging the crisis and making it worse” (Shrivastava, 1987: 24).

According to Cullen, the night shift operators attempted to re-start A pump ignorant of the status of PSV 504 in part because of communication failures in the shift handovers which focused on other issues, and especially the maintenance work being undertaken on A pump. This symptomizes a more general tendency that people have to rely on ‘routine’ or ‘conventional’ interpretations of problem situations that are indicative of our preference for satisficing, pragmatism and expediency in sensemaking (e.g., Isabella, 1990: 17; Levine, 1985: 8; March, 1994: 178). In Cullen’s story, however, issues relating to the pumps turned out to be what Turner (1976, 1978) describes as a “decoy problem” that distracted attention from the less well defined source of danger (PSV 504) resulting in a “professional blindspot” (Weick, 1995: 113). The narrative suggests that the capacity and response repertoires (Weick, 1988: 311) of the on-shift operators were conditioned by the information they had received from the out-going operators. When evidence for problems arose the preconceptions that had arisen led them to bracket for

closer attention a portion of their field of experience that excluded PSV 504. This state of affairs arose in part because of the prolonged nature of the work on PSV 504 and the changes in goals, responsibilities and administrative roles that occurred at different times throughout the day. It was also compounded by the fact that the Score technicians, Mr. Sutton and Mr. Rankin were not members of Occidental, which meant that Mr. Bolland's new Mr. Rankin by sight but not by name, and Mr. Rankin did not know the names of the operators in the Control Room with whom he dealt.

Cullen's narrative relies on the observation that, when confronted with a complex threatening situation, there is a tendency for people to minimize or deny the magnitude of the danger they face resulting in their inaction (Janis, 1972; Wolfenstein, 1957). The version of events that dominates the Cullen Report invites us to consider whether this may in part account for Mr. Bolland's stubborn belief that the situation was controllable and that a shut-down of the facility was not justified, despite considerable evidence, in the form of multiple alarms, that the installation was in danger. Such "misplaced optimism" (Turner, 1976: 395) is "a powerful reminder that positive illusions (Taylor, 1989) can kill people" (Weick, 1993: 636). It is also testament to the "delicate tradeoff between dangerous action which produces understanding and safe inaction" (Weick, 1988: 305). According to Cullen, had Mr. Bolland initiated a controlled shut down at an early stage then the disaster might have been averted, and thus his lack of action constituted a further unwitting escalation of the crisis that is particularly associated with complex, highly interactive, non-routine, and poorly understood technologies (e.g., Shrivastava, 1987; Weick, 1988). In sensemaking theory terms this is a problem of requisite variety (e.g. Conant & Ashby, 1970). As

Perrow (1984: 10) notes, “our ability to organize does not match the inherent hazards of some of our organized activities”.

As Cullen tells it, the disaster was almost certainly exacerbated by two factors frequently found to be implicated in industrial crises. First, even though there was a substantial and diverse programme of construction and maintenance being undertaken on Piper two senior posts (lead safety operator and deputy maintenance superintendent) were vacant, and three important posts (maintenance superintendent, operations superintendent, and deputy operations superintendent) were filled by personnel who had been temporarily upgraded. Organizational memory, in the form of the rich and varied cause maps possessed by established and knowledgeable actors (Kletz, 1993; Weick, 1988: 312) was lacking, and Piper’s response capacity was consequently impaired. Second, the decision to continue production on Piper at the prevailing rate despite the unusually high level of maintenance work, a decision described by Cullen as “puzzling” (CR, 14.43), is also said to have contributed to the disaster. Significantly, it was a decision made at a distance to Piper by Occidental’s Production and Pipelines Manager, who, in testimony, agreed with Cullen that “there was room for mistakes to occur more readily at the time of the disaster than in normal circumstances” (CR, 14.42). This version of events supports Turner and Pidgeon’s (1997: 54) assertion that creative administration (i.e. foreseeing problems) is far harder when decisions “are taken by those remote from the scene at which the accident is likely to take place”.

According to Cullen, these specific failures need to be understood in the context of an organization in which safety had been de-emphasized to the extent that many people

on Piper had not attended the appropriate fire-fighting and survival courses, safety drills had not been conducted with the necessary frequency, and no full scale emergency exercise had taken place for three years before the disaster (CR, 13.12, CR, 14.23). One perspective on how this state of affairs may have emerged suggests that organizations are domains of (apparently) legitimate authority (Mumby & Stohl, 1991: 315) constituted by discursive practices that favour certain conceptions of truth and reality at the expense of others (Clegg, 1989). Such practices establish regimes of truth that discipline social action by privileging a particular form of rhetoric and its associated assumptions about decision premises (Gephart, Steier, & Lawrence, 1990; Turner, 1978: 165). This means that an area (such as safety) not regarded as important by an organization is always likely to be neglected because “of a vicious, self-reinforcing circle” which leads to “a pervasive and structural set of beliefs” in which “bias” and “ignorance” prevail (Turner & Pidgeon, 1997: 48). This in part explains why the cautionary voices of Captain Clayson and Mr. Saldana were so easily dismissed by senior executives at Occidental. Not having established a dynamic and plurivocal discourse centred on safety there was a tendency not merely to deny what were perceived to be remote dangers, but “to label as ‘cranks’ those who fail[ed] to agree with the organization’s policy” (Turner & Pidgeon, 1997: 59) on safety matters.

Cullen’s narrative regarding how people reacted to a perceived threat to their lives resonates with suggestions that our efforts to plausibly account for what we perceive are influenced by the rules and roles that we associate with a given place and which we use to generate our personal scripts that guide our actions and interpretations. An extensive literature suggests that in emergency situations, rather than panic, people behave internally rationally and intentionally (Donald & Canter, 1992; Drabek, 1994;

Mintz, 1951), but largely automatically in relation to their scripts (e.g., Langer, Blank & Chanowitz, 1978). In work organizations in which participants learn clearly scripted sequences of actions the considerable effort that is normally required to change script (Abelson, 1981) is reinforced by a form of rule-bound psycho-social continuity (Canter, 1990). It may also be the case that the more familiar a setting the greater the risk of any dangerous occurrence because people will be more likely to cognitively distort their interpretation of unusual events to fit with their prior expectations (Donald & Canter, 1992: 216; Fayol & Monteil, 1988). At Piper Cullen makes it clear that the safety regimen was defective to the extent that not only did employees not possess appropriate disaster scripts but many of those who died in the accommodation block “were not familiar with the platform outside the accommodation” (CR, 8.20). Actors attachment to their scripts may also, in part, account for Mr. Bolland's failure to shut the plant down in time to avert the disaster, and the failure of the managers of the installations to which Piper was linked to close the gas and oil pipelines that fed the fire for so long.

In summary, it seems that the disaster narrative told in the Cullen Report may be interpreted using organizationally based theories of sensemaking, and thus is able to offer us (as academics) what appear to be “good reasons” for the events described. The consonance between the two is strongly suggestive that, from this technical perspective, the text tells a realistic and plausible tale, i.e. is verisimilitudinous. Given that much of the research on disaster sensemaking has been culled from analyses of public inquiry reports (e.g., Brown, 2000; Brown & Jones, 2000; Gephart, 1984; Gephart, 1992; Turner, 1976, 1978; Turner & Pidgeon, 1997) this is an unsurprising finding, though one that should serve to remind us that what we know about is how inquiries constitute disaster

sensemaking rather than how sensemaking in actual disaster situations occurs. This said, the Cullen Report's quest for authority jars with a postmodern recognition that "All texts are personal statements" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994: 578) and "that there is no possibility of fixed, final, or monologically authoritative meaning" (Marcus, 1994: 566). While we may understand Cullen's position (given that Inquiry Reports are specifically designed to be important discursive means by which state "legitimacy crises are repaired" (Burton & Carlen, 1979: 8)), we may also question the extent to which the Report is in this respect successful.

### **Deconstructing the Narrative**

In constructing their narratives, inquiry reports can expect to have to reconcile the conflicting testimony of witnesses and to make judgements regarding the often speculative nature of the evidence provided by technical specialists. Unlike other types of public inquiry, however, disaster inquiries are often posed particular difficulties by the non-availability of key physical evidence and witnesses. This was the case for the Cullen Inquiry which reached its conclusions despite the fact that "most of the equipment on the platform was not recovered from the wreckage and... key witnesses did not survive the disaster" (CR, 1.5). The most immediately striking feature of the text is its use of terms such as "could" and "probably" together with phrases like "these estimates are very approximate" (CR, 5.108), and "No clear explanation emerged..."(CR, 5.109). In addition, there is an explicit admission that some witness testimony could not be accounted for in terms of the hypotheses offered by the technical specialists. For example, noises were not heard by those who should have heard something (CR, 6.21), while other evidence, such as the statements of Control Room survivors regarding how they

were affected, suggested that the initial explosion occurred in C Module (CR, 5.67) rather than as the Report concludes, B module (CR, 5.65). According to Cullen, however, "...these effects do not materially affect my conclusions" (CR, 5.109). The focus of this section is to show that this is a contestable position. In particular, Cullen's account is vulnerable at two key points, i.e., regarding the location and cause of the initial leak, and the putative actions of the principal operators.

*Accounting for the initial leak.* In response to considerable uncertainty some thirty scenarios and sub-scenarios based on the known facts were generated by consultants, though only two of these scenarios are considered sufficiently plausible by Cullen to be described in detail in the Report. While Cullen argues that the source of the initial explosion was PSV 504, he also (though more briefly) provides an account of how a leak may have occurred at PSV 505. This scenario depends on the fact that far more methanol is used in phase 1 operation of Piper relative to phase 2 (and, unusually, Piper was in phase 1 operation) in order to prevent hydrate blockage. However, on 6 July there was an interruption of the methanol supply between 16.00 hours and 20.00 hours leading to what Dr. Johnsen, a specialist consultant, described to the Inquiry as conditions "close to ideal" for hydrate formation (CR, 6.148). Hydrate blockage at B pump meant that the relief valve opened but also blocked with hydrate, the pump over-ran generating a high pressure and the relief valve (at or near the weakest point which was PSV 505) may have ruptured either at the initial trip or during an attempt to re-start the pump (CR, 6.149). Other evidence, such as the pattern of alarms noticed by Mr. Bolland in the Control Room and the noises heard by those in the workshop is consistent with a



two-stage leak from PSV 505 (CR, 6.162). Regarding this possibility Cullen says: “All versions depend upon a complex train of events and involve a number of assumptions which cannot be substantiated in evidence. On this evidence I do not rule out this scenario but consider it to be unlikely” (CR, 6.186). Versions of this account were, though, favoured by another consultant, Mr. Sylvester-Evans, the Crown, and Score. Further, the assumptions that have to be made in order to support a leak at PSV 504 (e.g., Sutton only made the blind flange hand tight; hydrate blockage did not lead to valve failure at PSV 505, and that Mr. Vernon and Mr. Richard did in fact attempt to re-start A pump) are largely ignored by Cullen.

*Accounting for the actions of the principal operators.* In order to argue that faulty PTW and shift handover systems were important causes of the disaster Cullen needed to provide a detailed account of the exchanges between the various operatives so that specific procedural errors (on which the PSV 504 scenario depended) could be identified. This proved problematic because neither Mr. Vernon nor Mr. Richard survived the disaster, and the evidence provided by the surviving witnesses was sometimes conflicting and at other times inconclusive. There are four major difficulties with Cullen’s account. First, the testimony of Mr. Bollands (the control room operator) and Mr. Clark (the maintenance lead hand) was discovered to be in conflict.

Mr. Bollands claimed that Mr. Vernon used the PA system to alert Mr. Clark who then telephoned-in to the Control Room. Mr. Clark and Mr. Vernon then had a conversation in which Mr. Vernon expressed his wish that work on A pump should be stopped and the pump re-started. Mr. Clark then came to the control room where he and Mr. Vernon signed-off the appropriate tags so that this work could go ahead.

According to Mr. Clark, when he called-in to the control room he spoke not with Mr. Vernon but Mr. Bollands, and that they had jointly come to an agreement that A pump should be re-started. Mr. Clark then went to the control room where he found that Mr. Vernon had already signed the tags and departed.

Thus it seems from the accounts that Mr. Bollands and Mr. Clark construct (as reported by Cullen) both seek to distance themselves from, (and implicate each other in), the decision to re-start A pump.

Second, Cullen's argument that Mr. Vernon and Mr. Richard sought to re-start A pump ignorant of the fact that PSV 504 had not been replaced is contrary to the evidence given by the Score supervisor, Mr. Rankin who, together with Mr. Sutton, had conducted the work on the valve. Mr. Sutton died in the disaster. According to Mr. Rankin, on July 6 he made three separate visits to the control room in order to have PTW documentation signed-off by the lead production operator. On his last visit at about 18.00 hours he was informed by the operator that there was no crane available to lift the PSV back into position, and he therefore suspended the PTW by writing "SUSP" in the gas text column of the document, which was normal practice on Piper (CR, 6.89, 6.105). Mr. Rankin's account suggests that the PTW system was followed and implies that errors were made by those who were in possession of full information. While Cullen briefly notes that "It is conceivable, though unlikely, that Mr. Vernon knew that PSV 504 was off" (CR, 6.74), he devotes far more space to discrediting Mr. Rankin's testimony. In particular, Cullen notes that Mr. Rankin could not recall the names of any of the lead operators he dealt with, and that Mr. Rankin had never before suspended a PTW "and appeared quite unsure how he knew that this was the procedure" (CR, 6.105). In his defence, Mr. Rankin himself was adamant that he had received instructions regarding the PTW system on his

previous trip to Piper, and that “he knew how to validate and suspend a permit” (CR, 6.81). But, in assessing the evidence, Cullen concludes that “I am not satisfied that I can rely on Mr. Rankin’s evidence on this last visit to the Control Room” (CR, 6.106).

Third, Cullen’s version of events requires that Mr. Vernon and Mr. Richard sought to re-start A pump. Regarding events at the pumps there was only one useful surviving witness, Mr. Grieve, the phase 2 operator, and his testimony was equivocal. Initially Mr. Grieve stated that he thought that Mr. Vernon and Mr. Richard had been (and were still) trying to re-start both A and B pumps, moving from one to the other. “However, when he learnt what effect the activities at the 2 pumps may have had, Mr. Grieve became more cautious” (CR, 6.58). He altered his position somewhat to the more “guarded” (CR, 6.58) view that “I would never say for definite. I never saw him [Mr. Vernon] open the GOVs [gas operated valves] on A pump at all” (CR, 6.58). The contractor, Score, submitted to the Inquiry that “there is no direct evidence that any action was taken to admit condensate to the discharge side of A pump nor can it be inferred from the actions of the operators” (CR, 6.61). Cullen acknowledges this: “I agree that there is no direct evidence that Mr. Vernon admitted condensate to A pump” (CR, 6.61), but follows up with the assertion that: “The evidence does, however, support the view that he had the intention and opportunity to do so. Any inference that he did is a matter to be considered in the light of the whole of the evidence” (CR, 6.61).

Fourth, A pump was supposed to have been electrically isolated for a full preventive maintenance, and so should not have been operable. However, while in the Control

Room Mr. Clark telephoned an electrician regarding the electrical re-installation of the pump, and he (or other electricians) may have reinstated A pump prior to the explosion. As Cullen states “This would not be normal practice, but there was a degree of urgency” (CR, 6.70). Mr. Bolland’s “was non-committal” regarding whether an amber light in the Control Room indicating that A pump was not electrically isolated was showing prior to the initial explosion. Mr. Clark, in several of his original statements asserted that the amber light was showing, “but told the Inquiry that he must have been mistaken; A pump was electrically isolated” (CR, 6.71). Cullen concludes that “I consider this evidence is inconclusive as to the state of the electrical isolation of A pump just before the initial explosion. However, there was reason to effect prompt de-isolation and there appears to have been sufficient time to do so. I conclude that A pump...could well have been de-isolated some time in the last few minutes before the initial explosion” (CR, 6.72).

In this section I have argued that in the Report there are hints of other versions of events that could have been told, and that the account that Cullen renders dominant relies on a number of questionable assumptions that are neither specifically brought to the attention of the reader nor commented upon. In Cullen’s view his conclusions are the result of the application of the ordinary standard of proof in civil cases – “proof on the balance of probabilities” (CR, 6.177) and specifically not “a mere possibility or a matter of conjecture” (CR, 6.177). However, the Report cannot with any certainty identify the source of the leak that caused the initial explosion. As it is, Mr. Bolland’s attempt to distance himself from the decision to re-start A pump, Mr. Rankin’s uncertain account of the operation of the PTW system, Mr. Grieve’s muddled description of the activities of Mr. Vernon at the pumps, and Mr. Bolland’s

and Mr. Clark's rather curious statements regarding the status of the amber light linked to A pump are sufficiently ambiguous to permit multiple interpretations both of the witnesses intent and of what really went on (cf. Brown & Jones, 2000). My argument is not that Cullen's preferred account is wrong, merely that it incorporates a set of contestable choices, that it is an invention not a discovery, and that inquiry sensemaking is better thought of as a craft activity (Watson, 1995) that involves the skills of the bricoleur (Weick, 1995) rather than the deductive logic of the laboratory chemist (Brown, 2000: 55). In particular, it is noticeable that the personal interests that may have influenced witnesses are not commented upon in the Report. Cullen's failure to provide a commentary on this matter may well reflect a tacit recognition that witness inconsistencies were damaging to his efforts to author a convincing report because they were suggestive of interpretive plurality. Authorial silences instead mark the spots where the monologic of the Report threatens to fragment.

## **Discussion**

To summarize, this paper has described some of the ways in which Cullen seeks to present his Report as authoritative, and some of the points of vulnerability in his preferred version of events. Prefaced on the guiding assumption that the report is a contrived rhetorical product that offers a contestable narrative, this discussion highlights some of the issues linked to power, sensemaking, and legitimacy that feature largely as implicit themes in the preceding sections. The important roles that inquiry reports play in mitigating public anxieties, and elaborating fantasies of omnipotence and control, are also examined. The paper concludes with a reflexive commentary.

The Cullen Report is “a discrete, regular, generalised and uninterrupted” (Burrell, 1988: 227) storytelling performance that readers are encouraged to adopt as an interpretive frame for understanding events on Piper Alpha. As such, it is an exercise in power in that it functions hegemonically to impose a particular version of reality on its readers. The impositional intent of the Report is, however, subtly masked by various claims to authority. Readers are encouraged to acquiesce to Cullen’s view but without entertaining a sense that their consent has been manipulated (Gramsci, 1971; Hall, et. al., 1977). By focussing attention on the extent to which an inquiry report is the result of arbitrary and contestable choices by its author(s) we can better understand the extent to which, as Fairclough (1992: 211) has argued, “...language is widely mis—perceived as transparent, so that the social and ideological ‘work’ that language does in producing, reproducing or transforming social structures, relations and identities is routinely ‘overlooked’”. Power, in this sense, is revealed as the ability to fix or reify meaning in particular ways, forming apparent consensual social relations and taken-for-granted categories and explanations that “cement and unify” competing interest groups (Gramsci, 1991: 328; Clegg, 1989: 183; Mumby, 1988).

The power-knowledge regime concocted by Cullen disciplines social actors within webs of meaning which systematically order some scenarios into existence and others into obscurity. Cullen’s voice is, ostensibly, the only one we hear. Rather than a dialogue or polyphony of voices the Report is better characterized as “The sound of one hand clapping” (Thompson & Thetela, 1995: 103). In a general organizational context the ability of elites “to impose their own monological and unitary perceptions of truth” (Rhodes, 2000: 227) through “artfully constructed”

and “carefully edited” narratives which are simultaneously panoptic, universalizing and totalizing in their effects has received some attention (e.g. Barry & Elmes, 1997; Boje, 1995). Considerable research suggests that “Sensemaking practices are...used in the context of relations of dominance” (Gephart, 1992: 132), i.e. are impositional acts of power (e.g., Pollner, 1975). Issues of power and hegemony as incorporated in the reports of public inquiries have, however, with a few exceptions (e.g., Brown, 2000; Brown & Jones, 2000), been under-researched in organization studies. This paper has extended these critiques by illustrating some of the means by which authority is claimed in inquiry reports and the fragility of the illusions of authorial omniscience and competence that a deconstructive approach can reveal. As Giddens (1979: 188) has asserted:

“To analyze the ideological aspects of symbolic orders... is to examine how structures of signification are mobilized to legitimate the sectional interests of hegemonic groups. The deconstruction of signified absence demonstrates some of the ways in which discourse becomes instantiated as a site of resistance and control in the production and reproduction of hegemonic social relations”.

Issues of power and hegemony are intimately linked to that of legitimacy, where legitimacy is understood as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995: 574; cf. DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Meyer & Scott, 1983). Public inquiries are instruments of government that “straddle the boundaries between the state and civil society” (Rodger, 1985: 426). Their role is to investigate those problems that threaten the state with a legitimation deficit, to re-establish and justify state authority, and thus to maintain “the requisite level of mass loyalty” (Habermas, 1973: 46; cf. Kemp, Riordan & Purdue, 1984: 478). Critical incidents such as

technological disasters are threatening because they expose incompatible objectives of the state, (i.e. to facilitate profitable production and to ensure effective regulation), while casting in relief the state's inability to achieve either (Gephart, 1992: 131; Shrivastava, 1987: 25). The Cullen Report may be regarded as seeking to offer a sufficiently appealing and plausible interpretation of events that would repair the legitimacy of social institutions (Gephart, et. al., 1990: 29; cf. Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In this instance, it suggested that while there were many systemic failures associated with the disaster, the prime cause were human errors committed principally by Mr. Vernon, Mr. Bollands, Mr. Rankin and Mr. Sutton. It is an explanation that "deflect[s] critique" (Turner & Pidgeon, 1997: 180), and that "depoliticizes" (Gephart, 1992: 117) the incident by allocating its genesis to "actors employing situational logic" (Gephart, 1992: 132). In such ways a public inquiry not only supports the state but helps in "maintaining advanced capitalism" (Kemp, Riordan & Purdue, 1984: 478).

The Piper Alpha disaster was extremely anxiety-provoking because it contested the general assumption that the MNCs operating in the North Sea were rational and competent bureaucratic entities, and that they were adequately monitored by Government. Perhaps most significantly the disaster threatened cherished societal assumptions regarding the predictability of people (Knights & Willmott, 1985: 25) in ways that suggested that organizations are "in a very literal sense out of our, or indeed anyone's control" (MacIntyre, 1981: 101; cf. Turner, 1978: 7). The Cullen Report constituted one means by which public anxieties were mitigated by making events seem more comprehensible and (in future) more controllable. It did this by offering seemingly plausible explanations for what occurred that



permitted apparently reasonable remedial actions to be taken. The Cullen Report may thus usefully be thought of as a public discourse myth that encourages feelings of omnipotence and fantasies of control among significant stakeholder groups (Boje, et. al., 1982; Bormann, 1983; Clarke, 1993; Gusfield, 1981). Such myths purify and make “innocent” and “natural” certain versions of reality that are “without depth”, creating “a world wide open and wallowing in the evident” (Barthes, 1972: 143). Thus do inquiry reports “reproduce in codified forms, relations of domination” that while seductive leave us impotent behind the bars of a “psychic prison” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) that closes down opportunities for reflection, questioning and critique (Filby & Willmott, 1988: 336).

To conclude, in this paper I have sought to make sense of a text’s claims to authority in order to illustrate processes of organizing both text and people. Like Cullen’s Report this version of what *is* is an exercise in power in which I have selectively appropriated, highlighted, marginalized and omitted material in my efforts to promote a particular and doubtless idiosyncratic interpretation. Certainly there is a sense in which “The ability of a text to make sense in a coherent way depends less on the willed intentions of an originating author than on the creativity of a reader” (Geertz, 1983: 141). Yet the power to story is itself hegemonic (Boje, Luhman & Baack, 1999: 341), and readers need constantly to be aware that even a story reflexively told is suffused with power, and to write a research paper “is to take control through text” (Rhodes, 2001: 3).

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