Sensemaking, knowing and storytelling: 
Making sense of the Public Internet Access Policy debate at the Ottawa Public Library

Abstract: Sensemaking is a critical information management process for an organization to understand and put into practise because of its particular value in improving decision-making and in developing and implementing strategic change. I apply Weick’s sensemaking theory (1995), developed in a larger knowledge management framework (Choo, 1998), to a policy development crisis at the Ottawa Public Library, using a storytelling methodology.

The story tells one version of a pivotal, meaning-full environmental “crisis” (Habermas, 1975) that took place in the Ottawa community, between 2001 and 2003. At the centre of the debate launched by this newspaper headline: “Internet use policy makes library a ‘porn palace’ union says” (Ottawa Citizen, Jan. 25, 2003, p. A7) is the question of how the public libraries protect their clients from the “dark” side of the Internet.

While the Internet’s information value has been largely undisputed, the Internet has also been characterized as a dangerous place, particularly for children (Young Canadians in a Wired World, 2001; Reddick, Boucher and Groseilleurs, 2001). Organizations and government departments working directly with children, formally or informally through education, through the justice and legal communities and through community support agencies, agree that among the dangers for children, relatively easy access to sites containing pornography, obscenity, hate literature, and gambling is a primary concern. Generally, no individual or group refutes the notion that all children should receive some protection from the ‘adult’ content available on the Internet. The debates most often take place around how that protection is practised.

In developing its first, post-amalgamation Public Internet Access Policy, the Ottawa Public Library’s commitment to intellectual freedom came into conflict with staff and public concerns about protecting children and the community at large.

From an ethnographic research perspective, I am a participant observer and storyteller, reflecting one of multiple viewpoints on this particular crisis. Through the lens of the sensemaker, representing one of a number of management voices, I answer these questions:

1. How can we know what we think about this event until we see what we have said about it? How can the Library make sense of the conflicts that ensued and were resolved both publicly and internally when it was publicly denounced as a “porn palace”?
2. What can the library community learn from this story – what is the value of the knowledge gained from making sense of this story?
My goals are to make sense of this particular organizational crisis, to inform future decision-making processes at the Ottawa Public Library by explicitly applying a sensemaker’s framework to the situation (Choo, 1998; Weick, 1995), and finally, to highlight the value of the knowledge created and shared, through one telling of this organizational policy development story.