



## SENSEMAKING PROCESS IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

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### ABSTRACT

*The development of digital ecosystems and increasing community participation in community-based organizations have given rise to communication complexities that have the potential to create ambiguity of meaning. In this context, the sensemaking process is crucial for understanding how organizational members construct shared understanding and guide collective action. This study aims to analyze the sensemaking process in organizational communication within community-based organizations in the digital era. The study employed a qualitative approach with an interpretive case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 12 key informants, four months of participant observation, and analysis of internal communication documents and the organization's social media. The analysis was conducted thematically, referring to the stages of enactment, selection, and retention in sensemaking theory. The results indicate that information ambiguity, particularly that originating from digital communication, is a key trigger for the collective meaning-making process. Sensemaking occurs cyclically, influenced by community value framing, relational dynamics, and the mediation of communication technology. These findings expand the application of sensemaking theory by emphasizing the relational and digital dimensions within community-based organizations. Practically, this study emphasizes the importance of digital communication literacy and dialogic leadership in maintaining organizational cohesion and accountability. Future research is recommended to develop comparative and longitudinal studies to deepen understanding of the dynamics of sensemaking across communities.*

**Keywords:** sensemaking, community-based organizations, digital media

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Community-based organizations, ranging from social-humanitarian communities, environmental communities, professional communities, and digital philanthropic

networks, are increasingly prominent as important actors in contemporary social governance. Their role is no longer merely a complement to the state or the market, but rather as a community coordination hub capable of mobilizing resources, building solidarity, and responding quickly to public problems. In Indonesia, this context is reinforced by a massive digital ecosystem: by early 2025, there were approximately 212 million internet users and 143 million social media user identities, confirming that community interaction, coordination, and mobilization are increasingly dependent on digital communication flows (DataReportal, 2025). Consequently, community organizations face a dynamic, networked communication landscape that is also vulnerable to misinterpretation, making the process of meaning-making a key issue for scientific understanding.

The urgency of this study is also supported by the increasing trend of social participation and philanthropy, which expands the scope for community organizations to operate. The World Giving Index report shows that Indonesia has once again ranked among the most generous countries, with a high proportion of citizens donating and volunteering (Charities Aid Foundation/CAF, 2024). On the one hand, this trend opens up opportunities to strengthen the capacity of community organizations through the flow of volunteers, donations, and public support. However, on the other hand, increased participation increases the complexity of coordination: organizations must reconcile the diverse orientations, values, and expectations of members/volunteers, while maintaining accountability in a fast-paced digital public space. Thus, the communication issue is not simply about "delivering information," but rather about how organizations build shared understanding so that collective action remains focused.

In the study of organizational communication, this problem can be explained through the perspective of sensemaking: the process by which organizational members interpret ambiguous situations, construct "working narratives," and then use them as a basis for action. Sensemaking emphasizes that organizations are essentially systems that continuously "make meaning" from uncertain information flows (Weick, 1995). This framework is deepened by the idea that sensemaking transforms circumstances into situations that can be explicitly formulated in words and become a "springboard" for action (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Therefore, studying sensemaking means studying the heart of organizing: how interpretations are formed, selected, stabilized, and then passed down through communication practices, routines, and organizational memory.

The relevance of sensemaking is even stronger in community-based organizations, which are generally characterized by more flexible structures, tending to be horizontal relationships, reliance on volunteers, and high levels of cross-role coordination. Volunteer management literature suggests that nonprofits and community organizations need to adapt volunteer management practices to their context, as motivation, institutional recognition, and participation dynamics significantly influence movement sustainability (Araque et al., 2025). In practice, community organizations often operate with limited resources, implement project-based programs, and rely on informal communication, making the meaning-making process often rapid, distributed, and not always documented. This situation raises an analytical need: how members interpret change, negotiate priorities, and align collective action when information comes from multiple channels and interests.

The primary issue underlying this topic is the high level of "equivocality" in community organization communications. When organizations operate in a digital space with millions of simultaneous conversations, notifications, and information flows, messages can easily shift meaning, decisions are easily debated, and coordination is prone to fragmentation. DataReportal notes Indonesia's high internet penetration and the sheer number of social media user identities, which in practice means organizational communication often occurs in an ecosystem of dense signals and competitive attention (DataReportal, 2025). At the same time, issues of digital space governance are also gaining traction, including discourse on age restrictions and child protection on social media, reflecting growing concerns about the risks of digital communication (Reuters, 2025). For community organizations, this situation can trigger misinterpretation of objectives, conflicting internal narratives, and a gap between "program intent" and "member understanding."

Although sensemaking has become a well-established research field, gaps remain that need to be addressed. First, most historical sensemaking research has focused on formal organizational, corporate, or high-stakes contexts; while the dynamics of community-based organizations, with their volunteer logics, solidarity, and digital networks, often lack adequate empirical explanation. Conceptual reviews confirm that sensemaking is particularly relevant for understanding novel, confusing, or expectation-defying events, but research still requires a more detailed contextual and processual understanding (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Second, studies that position community organizational communication in Indonesia as an arena for sensemaking, primarily through qualitative approaches that explore everyday experiences, narratives, and communication practices, are still relatively limited. Consequently, our understanding of how collective meaning is produced and stabilized in community organizations in the digital era remains incomplete.

Against this backdrop, this article aims to analyze the sensemaking process in organizational communication within community-based organizations through a qualitative study, focusing on how members interpret ambiguous information, build understanding, and guide collective action in dynamic situations. Theoretically, this article is expected to enrich the study of organizational communication by expanding the application of sensemaking to the context of networked and volunteer-based communities, while emphasizing the processual dimension of sensemaking as the core of organizing (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). Practically, the findings are expected to have implications for community administrators in designing internal communication strategies, managing narrative conflicts, strengthening cross-channel coordination, and building accountability and public trust in an increasingly crowded digital space (CAF, 2024; DataReportal, 2025).

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

This research uses a qualitative design with an interpretive case study approach, aiming to deeply understand the sensemaking process in organizational communication within a community-based organization. A qualitative approach was chosen because the focus of the research is not on measuring variables, but rather on exploring the meanings, experiences, and dynamics of organizational members' interpretations in dealing with

ambiguous situations. Case studies allow researchers to explore phenomena contextually and holistically within a real-life organizational setting (Yin, 2018), while an interpretive perspective is relevant for examining how meaning is constructed through social interactions and everyday communication practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, this design aligns with the article's objective of explaining how community members interpret events, construct shared narratives, and guide collective action as part of the sensemaking process.

The research data sources consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews, limited participant observation of organizational activities, and internal communication documentation such as meeting minutes, digital group conversations, and organizational social media content. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, with the following criteria: (1) actively involved in decision-making or program coordination; (2) having a membership of at least one year; and (3) direct involvement in organizational situations that give rise to ambiguity or significant change. This technique was used to ensure that informants had relevant experience with the sensemaking process being studied (Patton, 2015). The number of informants was determined based on the principle of data saturation, which occurs when additional interviews no longer yield new themes (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013). Secondary data in the form of organizational documents and communication archives were used to strengthen the context and triangulate sources to increase the credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The data analysis procedure was conducted using thematic analysis, with the following stages: data transcription, open coding to identify units of meaning, grouping codes into categories, and developing key themes representing the sensemaking process, such as enactment, selection, and retention, as proposed in sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995). The analysis was conducted iteratively and reflectively, comparing data across informants and checking for consistency of interpretation through triangulation and member checking techniques to ensure qualitative validity and reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, an audit trail was developed to transparently document the data collection and analysis process. With this procedure, this research method is expected to produce in-depth, contextual, and scientifically sound findings, while also being relevant to the article's objectives regarding the dynamics of sensemaking in community-based organizational communication.

### 3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

This study presents key findings related to the sensemaking process in community-based organizational communication, based on in-depth interviews with 12 key informants (community leaders, program coordinators, social media administrators, and active volunteers), observations of organizational activities over four months, and analysis of internal communication documents (WhatsApp groups, meeting minutes, and social media content). The findings indicate that the sensemaking process occurs dynamically through three main stages: enactment, selection, and retention (Weick, 1995), which are articulated in the organization's daily communication practices. In general, this study found that sensemaking is not linear, but rather cyclical and is strongly

influenced by the intensity of digital communication and interpersonal relationships between members.

### **Sensemaking Triggers: Information Ambiguity and Situational Change**

The data shows that the sensemaking process is most often triggered by ambiguous situations, such as changes in partner policies, miscommunication in task allocation, or an unexpected public response to community programs. Of the 27 critical incidents analyzed, 18 (66.7%) were related to differing interpretations of digital information (text messages, social media posts, or online instructions).

Table 1. Types of Events that Trigger Sensemaking

No	Jenis Peristiwa	Frekuensi	Persentase
1	Perubahan kebijakan mitra eksternal	7	25,9%
2	Miskomunikasi internal (chat/rapat daring)	9	33,3%
3	Respons publik yang kontroversial	6	22,2%
4	Konflik pembagian peran relawan	5	18,5%

These findings indicate that digital communication is a primary arena for the emergence of ambiguity. Unlike formal organizations with stricter standard procedures, communities tend to rely on rapid and informal communication, allowing for greater room for interpretation.

### **The Role of Digital Media in Sensemaking**

Another important finding is the dominance of digital media in the sensemaking process. Approximately 80% of crisis discussions took place in WhatsApp groups before formal discussions. Digital media accelerates the interpretation process, but also increases the risk of distortion of meaning. Informants mentioned that text messages are often "read with different emotions" than face-to-face communication.

This suggests that communication technology is not just a medium, but also shapes how meaning is produced.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study confirm that the sensemaking process in community-based organizations occurs cyclically through the stages of enactment, selection, and retention, as formulated in the classic sensemaking framework (Weick, 1995). However, unlike Weick's initial description, which largely focused on formal organizational contexts and institutional crisis situations, this study demonstrates that ambiguity in community organizations more often stems from everyday digital communication, rather than solely from major crisis events. This broadens the understanding that sensemaking emerges not only in extraordinary circumstances but also in dense, rapid, and fragmented communication routines, particularly within social media and instant messaging ecosystems (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Thus, this study affirms and

contextualizes sensemaking theory within the realities of digitally networked community organizations.

At the enactment stage, the finding that 75% of crisis discussions begin with a framing of community values demonstrates the importance of collective identity as a source of initial interpretation. Theoretically, this aligns with the view that sensemaking is identity-centric, where the way individuals and groups define "who we are" influences how they interpret situations (Weick, 1995). In a community context, values such as solidarity, inclusivity, and transparency serve as interpretive anchors. Unlike corporate organizations, which often use performance indicators or business rationality as primary references (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), communities place greater emphasis on the alignment of meaning with shared moral and social values. This suggests that normative identity plays a central role in shaping the reality of community organizations.

The selection stage demonstrates the dynamics of negotiating meaning that are not entirely egalitarian. Although the community structure is semi-horizontal, data indicate that central figures still wield significant influence in determining the direction of consensus. This phenomenon can be understood through the concept of symbolic leadership, where the leader's legitimacy derives not only from formal structures but also from the trust and social recognition of members (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Thus, the selection process in a community is a combination of collective deliberation and relational influence. These findings further the argument that sensemaking is not always fully distributed but remains influenced by symbolic power dynamics, albeit within seemingly non-hierarchical structures.

At the retention stage, the institutionalization of meaning through new communication habits, such as double-confirmation rules or digital documentation, indicates that community organizations learn from the ambiguity they experience. Retention does not always take the form of formal SOPs, but rather socially institutionalized and repeated practices. This is consistent with the notion that retention is the process of storing interpretations deemed successful for reuse in similar situations (Weick et al., 2005). However, within communities, retention is more flexible and based on collective agreements, rather than rigid written regulations. This suggests that organizational learning in a community context is adaptive and relational.

The dominance of digital media in the sensemaking process strengthens the argument that technology is not simply a neutral medium but also contributes to the construction of meaning. Approximately 80% of crisis discussions occur in WhatsApp groups before formal forums, indicating that the digital arena becomes the initial space for enactment. From a contemporary organizational communication perspective, digital media accelerates information exchange while increasing the potential for distorted interpretations due to the absence of nonverbal cues (Leonardi, 2014). Thus, the results of this study contribute to the expansion of sensemaking theory by including the mediatization dimension that communication technology influences the structure and tempo of meaning formation.

The theoretical implication of this research is the need to enrich the sensemaking model to be more sensitive to the context of community-based organizations and digital ecosystems. Previous studies have focused on sensemaking in the context of corporate crises or strategic change (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), while this study shows that in community organizations, ambiguity often stems from volunteer dynamics and informal

communication. Therefore, this research contributes to developing a more contextual, relational, and digitally-oriented perspective on sensemaking.

Practically, these findings imply the importance of more reflective digital communication management in community organizations. Administrators need to recognize that the framing of values at the beginning of discussions significantly determines the direction of collective meaning. Furthermore, digital clarification and documentation mechanisms need to be strengthened to reduce the risk of ambiguity. The presence of a central figure capable of facilitating inclusive dialogue also contributes to the stability of interpretations. Other contributing factors influencing the results are the level of social cohesion among members, the organization's experience in dealing with conflict, and members' digital literacy. Conversely, limited digital literacy and excessively high communication intensity can increase the risk of misinterpretation.

However, this study has limitations. First, this study focused on a single community-based organization, so generalization of the findings should be done with caution. Second, the four-month observation period may not fully capture the long-term dynamics of meaning retention. Third, the use of internal digital data relies on access and available archives, thus creating the possibility of documentation bias. For future research, it is recommended to conduct comparative studies across several communities with different characteristics and use a longitudinal approach to examine how meaning evolves over time. Furthermore, the integration of software-based digital conversation analysis could provide a more in-depth mapping of enactment and selection patterns in online spaces. Thus, the study of sensemaking in community organizational communication can continue to be developed in a more comprehensive and contextual manner.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that the sensemaking process in community-based organizational communication occurs cyclically through the stages of enactment, selection, and retention, which are clearly manifested in digital communication practices and interpersonal relations between members. Ambiguity in information, especially that originating from digital communication, is the primary trigger for the formation of collective meaning-making processes, where members first frame the meaning based on community values before negotiating interpretations and institutionalizing them in organizational customs. These findings provide a deeper understanding that sensemaking in a community context is not only cognitive, but also relational and mediative, as it is heavily influenced by symbolic figures and the digital communication ecosystem. Theoretically, the results of this study expand the application of sensemaking theory by showing that in community-based organizations, the process of meaning-making is more flexible, value-based, and distributed, although still influenced by the dynamics of symbolic power. Socially and culturally, this study emphasizes the importance of digital communication literacy and dialogic leadership in maintaining community cohesion and accountability in the networked era. However, the limitations of this study lie in its focus on a single organizational context and relatively short observation period. Therefore, further research needs to develop comparative and longitudinal studies to deepen

understanding of the dynamics of sensemaking across communities and over a longer period.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that community-based organization managers strengthen reflective and structured digital communication mechanisms, such as implementing message clarification protocols, systematically documenting decisions, and establishing regular dialogue forums to reduce ambiguity and strengthen collective cohesion. Community leaders or coordinators also need to develop inclusive, dialogic leadership so that the selection process is not dominated by symbols, but remains participatory and transparent. For academics, the results of this study can serve as a foundation for developing a more contextual sensemaking model for community organizations and digital ecosystems, including expanding the study to include dimensions of organizational culture and members' media literacy. Future research is recommended to utilize a cross-community comparative approach, a longitudinal design to examine long-term retention dynamics, and triangulation of methods such as digital conversation analysis or communication network mapping to deepen the analysis. With these developments, the study of sensemaking in organizational communication can become more comprehensive and relevant to social change in the digital era.

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