The Psychology and Politics of Sense Making  
Political Science 793, Winter 2014

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1220 Weill Hall, Mondays 4-6  
Office Hours Tu 2-4

The process of sense making relates new information to previous beliefs in a way that (hopefully) helps one function well in the real world. Sense making is ubiquitous and typically involves attribution, framing, pattern recognition, learning, and emotion.

This research seminar will be thoroughly interdisciplinary because theories and evidence about sense making come from many disciplines. Examples include:

- Political science (campaign politics and foreign policy decision making),
- Cognitive psychology (e.g., inference, analogizing and framing),
- Social psychology (e.g. cognitive consistency and social influence),
- Anthropology (e.g., shared culture and ethnocentrism),
- Economics (especially behavioral economics),
- Business (especially advertising),
- Sociology (e.g., social mobilization), and
- Artificial Intelligence (e.g., case-based reasoning)

Across disciplines, sense making helps us understand topics such as leadership, learning, preference formation providing input to deliberate choice, terrorist recruitment, the power of sacred values, use of historical analogies, and dynamics of identity. The course will require several short papers and a major research paper. Students will be encouraged to select a research topic that might be relevant to their dissertation.

There are no prerequisites except second year standing.

The course will require one or two short papers, and a major research paper. Students will be encouraged to select a research topic that might be relevant to their dissertation. The grade will be determined as follows: 10% short papers, 20% class participation, and 70% research paper. The research paper is due May 1.

Students are expected to be familiar with college and university policies on matters such as plagiarism, sexual harassment and help for students with disabilities. See for example [http://www.umich.edu/~spolicy/](http://www.umich.edu/~spolicy/).


Ostrom, Elinor, 1990. *Governing the Commons*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1-46. On how reframing a problem (such as management of a common pool resource) suggests the questions to be asked and the things to look for. How a political scientist won a Nobel Prize in Economics.


Schank, Roger C. 1990. *Tell Me a Story: Narrative and Intelligence*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, forward, ix-xl, preface, and 1-80. How narratives are a basic way in which people make sense of their world, and how they communicate that sense.

**4. Paradigms and Patterns. Feb. 10.**


Chambers, Daniel and Deborah Reisberg. 1985. “Can mental images be ambiguous?” *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 11(3): 317-328. Experiments showing that people have a hard time reversing their mental images of ambiguous figures even with hints, coaching, and training.

**5. Case-Based Reasoning. Feb. 17.**


**6. Challenges to Rationality: Biases and Emotion. Feb. 24.**


7. **Meaning of Meaning. March 10.**


8. **Sense-Making in Foreign Policy. March 17.**


**9. Computational Theories of Meaning. March 24.**


Kanerva, Pentti. 2009. "Hyperdimensional Computing: An Introduction to Computing in Distributed Representation with High-Dimensional Random Vectors." *Cognitive Computation* 1:139-159. Kanerva offers a computational model of how people make sense of things, and how computers might be designed to exploit similar principles. The math is not easy, but the conceptual framework is valuable.


**10. Sense-making As a Social Process. March 31.**


Brand Architecture. Wikipedia.

**11-13. Student Reports. April 7,14, 21.**
The research paper is due May 1.