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**14 DAYS ON A ROLLER COASTER:  
FRAMING IN AN ADMINISTRATIVE CRISIS**

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**Abstract**

*This paper investigates a short, but complex framing contest. The case under study consists of a two-week political crisis in a Dutch town. During those two weeks three members of a board of mayor and aldermen try to blame their colleague. At the same time the political opposition does its best to show that the board members have something to account for and the media starts reporting on what begins to look like an administrative crisis. After what one of the main characters involved described as a 'roller-coaster ride', the whole board is fired. A frame analysis of the crisis shows how various actors made selections, proposed labels, told stories, used blaming tactics and performed in a setting that became highly politicized. The paper illustrates the way connections between various aspects of framing are established in order to end a crisis.*

**Keywords:** framing contest, storytelling, blaming, tactics, performance

**INTRODUCTION**

On the 13th of October 2004, three members of the board of mayor and aldermen in the middle-sized Dutch town Free City publicly announce a loss of faith in a fourth board member. This alderman is accused of weak management in the projects under his supervision. What makes the issue tricky, however, is that this alderman has been ill for some time. Even though during the days that follow the board members explain their act, the political pressure builds up. Various politicians state that firing is no way to treat someone who is ill. The alderman himself also gives his view on the matter. Some time after the announcement of the board members, the local and regional newspapers report of an *administrative crisis* in Free City. Two weeks after the announcement of the board members, in the presence of around 200 citizens, members of civil society and civil servants, the board members fail to convince the majority of the council members of their good intentions. The council, in its turn, announces a loss of faith in the board, leading to a replacement of all board members.

The firing of aldermen in Dutch local government is far from unique. However, the act of sending home a whole board, including the mayor – who is appointed by head of the province ('the queen's commissioner') – is quite an event.<sup>1</sup> As one of the civil servants told me, the firing of a whole board is not only one of the most traumatic episodes of board

members' careers, it also has a big impact on the civil servants working for it. The administrative crisis under study, with its emotional ending, could be understood as an illustration of an increasing dramatization of politics. But what has to be clear is that this crisis had a history. Some contextual factors lead us to understand the unstable position of the board at the beginning of the crisis. First of all, the institutional structure of local government in the Netherlands changed in 2002, with the introduction of 'dualism', separating the tasks of the local council and the board of mayor and aldermen (Staatscommissie Dualisering 2001). In some councils this, like in Free City, this might have increased the amount of antagonist encounters between boards and councils. Secondly, the party that became the biggest party in Free City after the 2002 elections (the Liberals) did not end up in the board. This seems to have raised negative feelings on the part of that party towards the coalition parties. Thirdly, the credibility of the board had already been publicly doubted for some time, not just by the opposition parties, but by one of the coalition parties. Fourthly, the board had suffered some serious illnesses, leading to a situation in which two out of three board members did almost all of the work. Finally, the mayor had been heavily criticized a year before, albeit behind closed doors. Still, these factors do not automatically lead to the end of boards. What is 'needed' is some kind problem for which the board in the end is blamed. To understand how this came about, we should investigate the way the board members and others tried to deal with what was going on. In other words: How did the members of the board try to give meaning to the situation they found themselves in? In what ways did other actors question their acts? And also: What helps to explain why in the end the board members lost their grip on the process? To answer these questions this paper will use a constructivist approach to crisis analysis ('t Hart 1993: 37), and finds inspiration in the wider interpretive literature (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006; Bevir and Rhodes 2003). The crisis is understood as a *framing contest* (Olmeda 2008; Boin et al. 2009). This kind of approach starts with the question how an issue comes to be called A CRISIS in the first place (Edelman 1977: 43-49; Edelman 1988: 31) and zooms in on the way crisis reality is framed (Rein and Schön 1977; 't Hart 1993). In addition, this paper asks specific attention for the narrative aspect of framing contests.

### **ASPECTS OF CRISIS FRAMING**

According to interpretive theories like symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969), a) actors act towards things on the basis of the meaning things have for them, b) the meaning of things arises out of interaction with other actors, and c) these meanings are dealt with and modified in a process of meaning making. This interpretive process finds its origin in answers to two simple, but crucial questions that actors pose whenever they are confronted with issues that are of some importance to them: '*What is it that's going on here?*' (Goffman 1974: 14) and '*What should we do?*' (van Hulst 2008) In order to answer these questions actors have to frame reality. In the public realm the interpretive process is a social one. That is, meaning is formed in interaction among (groups of) actors. However, as actors involved often do not agree on the answer to the questions, there is also an important political aspect to the interpretive process. Actors, whether individuals or groups, constantly struggle over the meaning of what happens in the world they inhabit. In times of crisis this political side gets dominant. A crisis can 'call into question the past, present and perhaps future functioning of particular aspects of society and, in many cases, government' ('t Hart 1993: 40). Or, as discourse theorists probably phrase it, at the appearance of a crisis the symbolic

order is dislocated and its ultimately contingent character shown (Howarth 2000). Crisis researchers have therefore talked about framing contests (Olmeda 2008; Boin et al. 2009). So, framing reality involves uncovering or highlighting some ways of looking at reality, while simultaneously hiding or downplaying other possible ways. It involves giving attention to some events, actors and situations, while ignoring others. During crises framing involves not only selecting events, actors and situations that are supposed to be relevant, it also entails labelling them 'crisis', 'fiasco', 'incident', 'victim', 'perpetrator' and so on.<sup>2</sup>

If a situation is called a crisis or a policy is named a fiasco, political blame games between government and opposition can be expected (Boin et al. 2009: 88-89). Not only do people want to know what happened, they also want to know why it happened and in the process they want to find out who should be held responsible (Brändström and Kuipers 2003: 292). From the perspective of elite actors avoiding to receive blame, there are various argumentative tactics to cope with these questions. In general, the game seems to involve claiming that 1) nothing is really going on – i.e. there is no crisis, or that 2) a lot is going on, *but* it is not fair to blame just those in charge, or, that 3) a lot is going on *and* the actors in charge are responsible for it (Boin et al. 2009). Bovens et al. (1999) have also formulated a list of no less than thirteen tactics,<sup>3</sup> including one or more possible lines of argumentation:

1. Denial: Nothing really happened or what happened was a routine matter. As long as possible actors in power will claim it is "business-as-usual" (see also Boin et al. 2009).
2. Accusing the accuser: The accuser did far worse.
3. Positive interpretation: The result is no harm, the benefits outweigh the losses. The overall benefit outweighs the individual losses.
4. Reframing: what seems to be a failure is really a success (if you look at it differently).
5. Combating causation: My contribution to this situation is non-existent. My contribution is only very small. The whole situation was beyond human control from the start. It was 'an act of God' or a matter of fate. Part of this tactic might be the extension of the time frame or the argument that a network of actors is to be blamed (Brändström and Kuipers 2003).
6. Blaming the messenger: Those who got this into the open (whistle blower, leak, media) did more damage than what was actually done.
7. Combating capacity: I admit my role, but there are extenuating circumstances, my intentions were good, I could not have known that this might have happened, there were others who took the decisions, there was enormous social or political pressure.
8. Disqualifying the analyst: There were partisan, unqualified, or unprofessional analysts.
9. Justification: It was right, or at least inevitable to act this way. And without my contribution things would have been worse.
10. Preventing labelling: The acts we are talking about are not typically of my acting in general, and if you look at my track record you would know.
11. Repentance: I was wrong, forgive me, I will pay for the damage and it will not happen again.
12. Scapegoating: Other people are to blame for what went wrong.
13. Symbolic reform: We have or will start major reforms, in order to prevent this from ever happening again.

Although analytically these tactics represent 'more or less linear, chronological steps in the genesis of a political scandal' (Bovens et al. 1999), in practice they might overlap. They do however show the different argumentative options that are often available to those who

want save their political careers. They are precise techniques for selecting and labelling events, actors and settings. However, I would like to suggest that these argumentation lines are just a part of a framing contest. A more inclusive approach should have to take into account the use of stories in framing contests. In the constructivist crisis literature on framing ('t Hart 1993; Brändström and Kuipers 2003; Boin et al. 2005; Olmeda 2008) this narrative aspect of framing contests has received some attention, but it has not been thoroughly developed.<sup>4</sup> The assumption at the basis the development of this narrative aspect is that actors in practice tell each other stories (Forester 1993; Van Hulst 2008), in which the selections, labels and lines of argumentation, mentioned above, all become a part. What this adds to the basic idea of framing is the observation that actors try to fit what they have selected and named into a somewhat coherent whole in which elements of reality become meaningful:

Last night policeman Erik tried to arrest neighbourhood resident Jan.  
Then, a riot began on Central Square.  
After which Jan threw a brick through the window of the jewellery.

In this example framing starts from the idea selecting some actors (for instance, Jan and Erik) and not others (for instance, other people who threw bricks). In addition, it involves labelling, for instance, an event as a 'riot'. Storytelling builds on these efforts.<sup>5</sup> Stories bring together settings (e.g. Central Square, last night), actors (e.g., policeman Erik and neighbourhood resident Jan) and events (e.g., a stone is thrown, a man is arrested), turning these elements into a plot (Van Hulst 2008). Stories suggest how elements of reality fit together into a coherent, comprehensible and sometimes unexpected, whole.<sup>6</sup> They also help to imagine future social action. In the stories actors construct, they make use of more general labels for events, actors and settings and ideas about the way the world works or should work. These labels and ideas are drawn from more general societal discourses.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, what complicates framing contests further is that they are public. This public aspect of crises has received attention from a variety of authors in the social sciences. Some have talked about a drama in which actors perform (Turner 1974; Alexander 2004; Hajer and Uitermark 2008). Such a drama is a process in which public values are at stake. In present day mediatised world, the importance of all sorts of media in the public representation – and continuation - of this drama not be underestimated (Edelman 1988). The availability of shocking images, statistics and witness statements can trigger negative emotions (Brändström and Kuipers 2003: 291). When acting a public realm filled with emotion, administrators have to convince other actors of the plausibility and feasibility of their way of looking at the situation. If they want others to cooperate with the projects, they have to persuade them to go along with them during public rituals on public stages. An important part of the success of this effort – Olmeda (2008: 64) even calls it '[t]he single most important factor that determines the effectiveness of crisis communication efforts' - depends on the credibility, the trustworthiness of the actors on stage, which in turn is in big part the result of their past performances. The public aspect also entails that those who tell the story (politicians/policy makers) nearly always have to address various audiences simultaneously (Hajer and Uitermark 2008: 16). What adds to the complexity of framing contests is the fact that the story that is put forward and the narrator putting it forward are often inseparable. An interesting way of handling the public outrage after the murder of Theo van Gogh (Amsterdam, 2004) in this respect was the division of roles among the

administrators involved. Both administrators involved (Cohen and Aboutaleb) served the need for a certain way of responding to the murder. As Hajer and Uitermark (2008) observe, together they reached different and larger audiences. What awaits naïve narrators, however, is what is called the so-called ‘credibility trap’: that is, when political elites ‘succumb to the temptation of espousing myopic, highly partisan readings of the situation; deny unwelcome, yet uncovered aspects of crisis reality; or make imprudent commitments of government resources and results’ (Boin et al. 2005: 81).

*Table 1: Five parts of framing in a crisis*

Selecting	Deciding which parts of reality matter in what has happened
Labelling	Deciding with which label selected parts of reality should be understood
Blaming	Making claims about who has a part of or the whole responsibility for what has happened
Storytelling	Making a coherent narration of actors, setting and events
Performing	Convincing audiences of the justness and truth of certain selections, labels and stories on various stages

In sum, the constructivist approach to looking at crises that I have sketched above consists of five parts (see *Table 1*). First, there are the general acts of select events, settings and actors that actors claim to be relevant. Second, these elements are labelled. Third, there is a number of specific blaming tactics that actors might use in times of crisis. Fourth, setting, events and actors have to be ordered with the help of storytelling. Fifth, for a crisis story to be successful, the narrator, the story and its performance have to gain and retain support among relevant audiences over time until some more or less permanent verdict is passed. It should be clear to the reader, that these five parts are only analytically separable. They can all be found within a single sentence, e.g. “In the year 2008 we in the Netherlands have become the victim of power abuse by the current government, against which we have protested”.<sup>8</sup>

The reason why aspects of framing contests in crisis situation, and I suspect in most situations, are hard to separate is because these processes are dynamic and chaotic. Since framing in crisis time is not over until the final verdict is passed (and that might take years or even longer, e.g. the Srebrenica case - Brändström and Kuipers 2003)<sup>9</sup>, today’s storytelling performance of actor X will become part of the tomorrow’s evaluation of actor Y. That becomes clear from the question ‘What is it that’s *going on* here?’<sup>10</sup> Even if the initial narrators may have had some ideal or realistic development in mind, the framing contest will often be ‘emergent, crystallizing only as the drama unfolds’ (Alexander 2004: 91). During crises, politicians, policy makers and other narrators in the public sphere perform in the face of uncertainty and ambiguity. How a particular crisis becomes A CRISIS and develops from there on surprises the most experienced practitioners. However, when the central actors are persuaded or feel themselves forced to accept a certain story about the causes of a crisis and the damage involved, the consequence will often be the end of political careers.

Using the approach outlined above, the data from a crisis in Free City were analyzed. The data included newspaper articles, letters, memos, the transcript of the council meeting that ended the crisis, an official investigation of the crisis and some 40 interviews with actors

involved. The stories were reconstructed by the researcher from the various documents and interviews.<sup>11</sup>

#### **FOURTEEN DAYS ON A ROLLERCOASTER**

Free City is a town with approximately 25,000 inhabitants in the middle of the Netherlands. The local authority and citizens often proudly refer to the town as a city. The town has a long history, which is symbolized most of all by its old town hall. This town hall is located on the municipality's main square. Although the main square these days accommodates national shopping chains like HEMA and Blokker, the building serves as a symbol of the city's rich history.

Since the 2002 elections the council sat six political parties. Labor, the Christian Democrats and the Socialists all have four seats. The biggest party is the Liberals, with six seats. Green Left is new to the council with two seats and the Democrats have one seat. Three parties form the board in Free City: Labor, the Christian Democrats and the Socialists. The Liberal party, that for the first time in over 20 years is not part of the coalition, lost its place on the board to the Socialists, even though the Liberals became the biggest party on the council.<sup>12</sup> Since the beginning of the year things have changed in the coalition. The Labor party at various occasions has taken an oppositional stance in political debates. Of interest is also that mayor Slotemaker started a second six-year term at the beginning of 2004.

*Table 2: Chronicle of the Crisis*

March 2002	New board starts
Spring 2004	Alderman Brinkhuis becomes seriously ill
13 October 2004	Board members announce loss of faith in Labor Alderman Brinkhuis
13 October 2004	Labor leaves the coalition
16 October 2004	Situation is called 'administrative crisis' in the regional newspaper
27 October 2004	Council supports a motion of no-confidence against board

#### **October 13-27: The Act and First Reactions**

On October 13, 2004, three members of the board of mayor and aldermen of Free City publicly announce they have lost faith in their colleague, alderman Brinkhuis. During the days after the event, many different accounts circulate.<sup>13</sup> Throughout October, more and more about the background of this event becomes public. The presidium of the council decides that the affair would be discussed on October 27.

On October 14 both the regional and the local newspaper take notice of what has happened the evening before. Before the municipal council meeting, the board of mayor and aldermen sent out a brief written statement to the municipal council members declaring that it had lost faith in one of its members. Apart from stating that they thought their colleague possessed 'too little administrative power and control,' the board members remained silent about the motives behind the step they had taken. Labor, to which the alderman belonged, reacts by withdrawing from the coalition.

The next day the board members state in a press conference that the background of the decision included problems with the so-called 'Urban Restructuring Program.'<sup>14</sup> This Urban Restructuring Program consists of various projects that the municipality started a couple of years before and that aim at renovating various parts of the city. Too much money has been spent on one of the projects. Brinkhuis is the alderman responsible for the

projects. His colleagues reproach him for withholding information and for having lost control over the projects. Although the city restructuring projects together are still 'within budget,' one of the board members says that they were no longer able to work together with Brinkhuis. On October 16, the word 'administrative crisis' is used for the first time in the regional newspaper. This is followed a couple of days later by the appearance of the word crisis in the heading of an article in the local newspaper.<sup>15</sup> A well-informed actor told me that it was known that the implementation of the various projects in the Urban Restructuring Program did not develop very well, but that 'on the inside [in the board], they were beating each other's brains in over the case came as a surprise. They had kept that very well hidden from the outside world. And then, all of a sudden... it is a crisis.'

In a five-page letter to the council and in three articles that appeared in the week following the board's decision, Brinkhuis gives his account.<sup>16</sup> He argues that the truth in this case would never be established. What is of importance is that all 'players' look at their own role in a critical manner. What matters are the city and its inhabitants. What was happening now, according to him, was that the rest of the board wants to wipe its slate clean. He claims that although he had made mistakes, he himself is still able to explain the 'Urban Restructuring-story,' but the others have robbed him of the possibility to do so.

Brinkhuis calls himself someone who had to 'sacrifice,' although in his opinion the board members together are responsible for the Urban Restructuring Program.<sup>17</sup> The others should have known that he was more concerned about *content* than *control*. He wanted to take his responsibility and account for what he did after resuming his work in November. In addition, the alderman describes 'an administrative climate' that developed in which he did not feel at home any more. 'Distrust' and 'games' played a big role. In his letter he also draws attention to the fact that he had been ill and argues that the disorganized board meetings regarding the projects in the Urban Restructuring Program had not helped his healing process. Brinkhuis aims his arrows mostly at mayor Slotenmaker, accusing her of taking 'panicky measures'<sup>18</sup> and identifying her as the main cause of the bad atmosphere on the board. At the end of the letter he said that '[t]here are many more questions, probably many more than answers, images and stories. But which truth will be declared the truth for now is up to you [the council, MvH].'

An opinion piece in the regional newspaper supports alderman Brinkhuis by stating that discharging him was 'a little *too easy*,' Moreover, it argues that the Urban Restructuring case is not so problematic that the members of the board had to let the situation get out of hand like this. In the journalist's opinion this is a matter of 'bad leadership.' As a follow-up, one day before the meeting, the regional newspaper publishes a critical piece on mayor Slotenmaker, portraying her as an actor who was 'not at all undisputed.' The newspapers also pays attention to the opinion of the political party Brinkhuis belonged to, Labor. In a reaction to the board's statement this party had withdrawn itself from the coalition on the night the board issued its statement. The party leader is quoted in one of the newspapers saying that '[t]hen, rather, it should all end.' Already for quite some time this party had missed the *élan* on the board and the coalition to really get things done for Free City.<sup>19</sup> The party also wants a new audit that can look into the management of the Urban Restructuring Program in order to find out what went wrong.<sup>20</sup>

### **October 27: A Long Council Meeting**

On October 27 the council meets in the Old Town Hall to discuss a report on the 'process side' of the Urban Restructuring Program and the letter to the council members in which three members of the board announced their loss of faith. The meeting takes place in the council meeting hall on the second floor of the town hall. At 8 o'clock the mayor typically proposes the agenda for the meeting after which visitors, who have asked for permission to address the council, normally get the opportunity to do so. Most of the time the 20 seats for visitors are not fully occupied, and the atmosphere that typically surrounds the council meetings could be described as relaxed.

This night things are a bit different. First of all, this meeting deviated from a regular council meeting because of the interest various audience members showed in it.<sup>21</sup> This night some 100 visitors want to witness the debate in the council room. Among these visitors are citizens with some kind of political interest, but also many civil servants who feel involved in the situation. The fire brigade denies many visitors entrance to the council's meeting room. They have to listen to the meeting in the Wedding Room on the first floor, which is connected to the room on the second floor through an audio system. Aside from the audience, almost all regular actors are present: the board members, 20 out of 21 politicians, the secretary of the council, the civil servants who had a role as supporting staff, and two journalists. Secondly, usually the mayor chairs the council meeting as president of the council, but now she does not. Since the mayor had taken over the Urban Restructuring portfolio from her ill colleague and in this way became involved in the case, the decision was made that this latter role be given priority over the role as chairman of the council. Therefore, one of the members of the biggest opposition parties chairs the meeting.<sup>22</sup> A third difference is the agenda of the meeting. Instead of setting the agenda and offering the public an opportunity to have a say, the first part of the meeting consists of the members of the board offering their view on the situation. The board members who sent away their colleague were specifically asked to account for this action. They all engage in detailed descriptions of their own actions and relations.<sup>23</sup> A final difference could be found in the atmosphere that surrounded the meeting. In interviews most actors describe the atmosphere as tense and emotional. The pressure had been building up in the weeks prior to the meeting. Various actors told me that the outcome was unknown and that the only thing everybody did know was that it was an important night for the future of the administration.

### **Board Members Speak**

At the beginning of the meeting the members of the board get their first opportunity to give their account. Alderman Van Zevenaar of the Christian Democrats, who became ill the year before and had started to slowly work again, gives her account first. Van Zevenaar said that she had had a difficult time when she realized that working together with her 'buddy' (alderman Brinkhuis) was no longer possible, but that there was no other option. The 'Urban Restructuring story' itself was not really the reason for the break-up however, although the 'facts' that were found indicated that it was bad enough to be. Although she and her colleagues had been willing to deal with the problem together with alderman Brinkhuis, embracing the motto 'all for one and one for all,' the alderman, in word and deed, had shown that he himself did not want to.<sup>24</sup>

The second actor who gives his account was De Groot, alderman for the Socialists. De Groot is said to be a very good alderman, capable of supervising many of the tasks of his ill



colleagues. A newspaper article that was published before the summer even suggested that he had become too much in control, demanding credits and occupying the political space that Labor had lost since its alderman had become ill. The alderman describes himself as a hardworking and critical person. The last year, often working 60 hours a week, had been especially hard. He states that good control is very important and talked about the way in which he and his colleagues had tightened control on projects in the Urban Restructuring Program during the year. At some point, he says, he realized that there was a problem on the board and with the way the administration worked. The discovery of yet another project outside of the Urban Restructuring Program under the guidance of Brinkhuis that was badly organized made something 'snap inside him'. He admits that he lost his faith in his colleague. This colleague had not been able to come up with good answers and had only pointed at the 'collective responsibility' of the board.

Alderman De Groot then poses the question of whether the board members had done the right thing with their announcement. Although the council passes the final judgment, he thinks the board did well to let the council know they had lost their faith because, although it makes the situation more difficult for the board, it was an 'honest' way to act. He ends with the statement that everybody in local politics should ask himself what his contribution has been to the administrative process during the last six months. In a short discussion among three politicians and the alderman, he indicates that the board members, in the days before the meeting, has tried to give the council clear information, 'mainly the facts.' He says that explaining to the council the legal aspects of sending away the alderman had not been very wise, because actors had reacted by saying 'do we need such a lesson,' but during the last days it had sometimes been 'chaotic.'

The next actor who has the opportunity to give her account is mayor Slotenmaker. At the beginning the mayor says: 'it is difficult for me to tell a factual process story here without also expressing the emotions.' Then she takes the audience back to a year ago when alderman Van Zevenaar became ill; she does this to describe the 'turbulent and difficult year' that followed and claims that the working pressure was enormous. Subsequently, she describes how she took over the work of Brinkhuis, who also became ill. She worked with the help of civil servants to make clear what had happened and to identify the financial situation of the projects in the Urban Restructuring Program. This had been difficult.

The mayor tells the audience that she has used only one 'yardstick,' the one that indicates the general interest of the municipality. In her opinion an administrator should be responsible for the control of issues and should manage public money in a responsible way. Nevertheless, there should also be space for creativity. When it came to public money, the first responsibility of an administrator is with 'the city and its inhabitants.' The mayor also addresses the issue of accounting over the situation that had developed. She had chosen to address the council directly. She says that the process of the last weeks 'was about people, colleagues.' The task of the mayor is to bring unity, although that is not always possible, because sometimes, political processes take their own turn, and that is 'not her cup of tea'.<sup>25</sup>

After this various politicians ask the mayor questions. The first question, raised by the party leader of Green Left, is why the board waited so long to inform the council about the problems with the projects if they had already become visible at an early stage. The mayor argues that, in the beginning, getting the facts right took a lot longer than she expected. It had not been possible to just 'push the button' to get all the facts. Subsequently, the mayor is questioned about her relationship with Brinkhuis and about what she did to maintain a

good relationship, since the alderman had personally attacked the mayor in his letter. In interviews actors told me that people were shocked to hear the mayor say that she had not visited Brinkhuis on his sickbed. The mayor says that their personal relationship was not of importance at that moment. The only thing she was after was trying to find out what was going on: 'there has to be clarity about the Urban Restructuring Program, and that has nothing to do with persons.' Moreover, what the mayor was after was 'factual information that was locked up in the organization.'

Brinkhuis is the last board member who has the chance to give his view and elaborate upon the letter he has send to the council. For many actors it is the first time in months that they see him. Various actors told me in interviews that the alderman still looked very swollen, physically changed as a result of the medicines he had been taking. According to one of them this was 'an emotional image against which rationale stands no chance'. Brinkhuis says he wants to set one thing straight. According to him, at the time the other board members claimed he was not willing to cooperate with them, it was already clear that the board members did not want to go on with *him*.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Council Speaks**

After a break, the chairman reopens the meeting. The leader of Labor, Panhuis, starts his speech by saying that the inhabitants of Free City has been able to see what is going on inside the municipal 'kitchen.' He states that it would have been better if the members of the board could have taken the alderman's illness, which is visible this night, into account instead doing 'as if.' He says that claiming to regret the personal consequences for the alderman, as the board members did, is a matter of 'crocodile tears.' Panhuis continues his speech saying that although Labor wants the board to account for their actions after Brinkhuis had started to work again, the board did not want to wait for Brinkhuis' return. In Labor's opinion there are two matters to discuss. In the first place, the state of affairs surrounding the Urban Restructuring Program and, secondly, the way the board has announced a loss of faith. The second matter, in the opinion of Labor, is 'the last straw.' The 'political reality' is that in the council there was no longer a coalition with a majority.<sup>27</sup> Normally speaking, the next question should have been how the board accounts for the situation that had developed, but 'sadly enough, the reality is that three members of the board have suspended their collaboration with a fourth one, an ill colleague.' Labor introduces two motions: a vote of no-confidence against the whole board - not only their own alderman but also the mayor, who, according to Labor, should have been 'above party' - and a proposal to install a commission that will investigate the case.

Then the leader of the Christian Democrats, Bosman, takes the opportunity to express his view.<sup>28</sup> Bosman tells the audience that sometimes people manipulate what happens, but sometimes what happens dominates people. Although both had been the case during the last weeks, this meeting should be seen as part of a process that has been going on for a long time. The situation, he explains, is as follows: the biggest possible part of the board has announced its loss of faith in a colleague and Labor has withdrawn from the coalition. This, he summarizes, 'is no way to treat people, not as a party and not as a board'. Bosman adds five remarks. Labor should have taken its responsibility towards the coalition and the coalition program. Secondly, the board should never have publicly announced a loss of faith in an ill colleague. The third remark is that the Christian Democrats think 'the facts,' although

partly known, are very serious. The fourth remark concerned the observation that, despite the signals his party sent, the board still has not been able to express a 'mea culpa' in order to show its regret. After pointing to Labor as contributing to the problem, he says that the board has not been able to admit its faults in the form of a 'mea culpa.' The board should resign, although that should be seen more as a gesture to the council than as something that has substantive significance, because the council itself makes the final decision on firing or not. Fifth, the Christian Democrats think the coalition program is still meaningful and they are sad to see that Labor does not want to wait for an independent investigation before they pass a verdict. The party wants this investigation to take place, focusing on the role that *all* actors involved have had, and not just the board members as Labor seemed to suggest.

The leader of the Liberals begins with the announcement the board made (about having lost faith in their colleague) and describes what happened next: a game of 'no it isn't - yes it is' that resulted in 'unjust behavior of this board towards the council, as well as towards the alderman involved. But most of all, it was a case of unacceptable behavior towards people. This is no way to treat people. Collegiality means protecting each other from mistakes'. People have been damaged and with this the 'standing of politics'. The party leader describes the situation as a 'soap opera' ('there is gossip, there is distrust') in which her party does not want to have a role. After some discussion Green Left gives its opinion. The party leader says that '[t]he situation in the board and in the coalition is, if we look at the position taken by Labor, basically untenable. Is it in the interest of this city to allow this political uncertainty to last any longer?' Since the coalition is no longer sustainable, the council should ask itself what to do. The party also asks about the attitude Labor has displayed and whether this had contributed to what the board has done to one of its members.

The last one to speak was the third coalition party, the Socialists. The leader of the Socialists starts by saying that although the speakers all used 'big words,' he wants to keep it factual. The leader of the Socialists stresses that the meeting is actually about the Urban Restructuring Program. According to the Socialists, he says, the state of affairs of the Urban Restructuring Program is not that bad. He also points to a letter of the housing corporation that supported this view. The leader of the Socialists argues that it was inevitable that the board members would make the decision they did, although it was not done in the most admirable way. An investigation is needed, but it would be 'madness' to, on the one hand, pass a motion of no-confidence, and on the other hand start an investigation.<sup>29</sup> When it comes to Labor, the leader of the Socialists argues, that although this party has started to take the 'leading role,' the question should be what they had done to prevent the crisis. Labor has not kept its word and did not take responsibility for its own alderman.

In reply to the idea of starting with an investigation, Panhuis argues that Labor does not need 'to analyze the facts and find the guilty one' any more. Labor does not want to refrain endlessly from making a decision, like other parties. There is more that went wrong than the Urban Restructuring Program and the party now wants to 'make a fresh start.'

### **A Debate around Midnight**

After the break the mayor has the opportunity to react to the proposed motions – one of no-confidence and one for an investigation - on behalf of the board. The mayor tells the audience that the board primarily wants to react to the proposal made by the Christian

Democrats. They have proposed that the board members will remain while the whole Urban Restructuring trajectory is investigated, including the role of all players. The mayor has the feeling of being 'symbolically' between the board and the council. She continues by saying:

We have to work this out together. It is a difficult subject. It is about people and people demand carefulness. The board wants to work together on this. In the meanwhile, the board, together with mister Brinkhuis, will work together on the governing of the city. We hope to be able to find a way, only in case he is able to do the same. I hope we can find each other in this, because, as we have all said, the city should go first.

One interview respondent told me that he found the board members' proposal to try to work together again with Brinkhuis an 'incomprehensible move' and another called it the 'blunder' of the evening.<sup>30</sup> They thought that the board would take 'the honourable way out' and resign before being sent away.

After another short pause the Liberals said that they thought that if the mayor said 'the human is important' [...] 'that apparently has been forgotten in the preceding trajectory. [The Liberals think] it is a sad pathetic proposal, a mere pretext, in brief, the Liberals do not have faith in it.' Labor, Green Left and the Democrats did not agree with it either. The party leader of Green Left reasoned as follows:

Politics is also politics of emotion and feeling and I have to admit that, in the past trajectory, the board, that is, those members still present, has seriously damaged that and... if I hear the story of the mayor at this moment, it is not very credible. There are no excuses...

The leader of the Socialists rephrased the question his leftwing colleague had just posed: 'What is in the interest of the city?' According to him the board's proposal was in the interest of the city. If we do not agree with the proposal, 'the whole city will be the victim'. He ended by saying that 'everybody has apparently counted heads, but according to me you have made a considerable miscalculation'. When it becomes apparent that it is only the Socialists and the Christian Democrats who are willing to support the board's proposal, it is rejected.<sup>31</sup> Then thirteen of the twenty council members present support the motion of no-confidence against the board. Only the two parties that are left in the coalition do not. Then the second motion (proposing an investigation) is discussed. Only the Socialists did not want to vote for it, because they thought the result was predetermined, since the 'scapegoats' were already found. After the motion for the investigation is approved the chairman thanks the council and closes the meeting.<sup>32</sup>

## **ANALYSIS**

With the help of the theoretical notions in the second section of this paper, we can now analyze this framing contest. The 'we have lost our faith'-announcement of the board forms a clear point of departure. This announcement develops into a first story. This first story, told by the three board members and supported most clearly by the Socialist Party later on, could be called the *Weak Alderman Story*. It argues that a member of the board had to be

fired. The setting in the story is the board during the last year. The main actor is Brinkhuis. His acts should be given attention. According to this story the alderman is malfunctioning: he acted weakly in the management of his portfolios and had broken fundamental institutional rules in a project of the Urban Restructuring Program, but also in another project under his responsibility. The announcement is presented as the only way the board members could act (argumentative tactic: 'justification'). At the same time the board stresses that the project that Brinkhuis was managing is still 'within budget'. In other words, the board members claim that there is no need to panic. They are in control and still doing their business-as-usual ('denial' tactic).

Once the announcement is made, other actors start to publicly interpret what is going on. The signal given by the board members and the alderman still could be redirected and amplified in different ways. It was, however, already quite hard for actors in the political arena to ignore the situation. Brinkhuis himself puts forward an opposing story and obtains the support of the press. The *Bad-Board-Members Story* argues that the board members ran into a problem and tried to blame it on one of their own ('accusing the accuser' tactic and also linking the 'scapegoating' tactic to the *Weak Alderman Story*). The last months form the time scope that is made relevant in this story; it is the period when things went wrong in the Urban Restructuring Program. According to this story there are various events that could be taken into account, but the event that really stands out is the announcement by the board itself. The main actors are the three members of the board, although there is special attention on the mayor. The victim in this story is alderman Brinkhuis himself. Later on this story is supported by various council members who say what the board members did is 'no way to treat an ill person'. What also stands out is that the alderman argues that the truth cannot be established in the case ('combating causation' tactic) and that it is up to the council to make a decision.

After the board members announce their loss of faith in their colleague, the coalition party redraws from the coalition. Instead of supporting the board, this act further destabilizes the position of the board. It pushes the situation in the direction of a political conflict. In addition, the mere labelling of the situation as an 'administrative crisis' helps to turn an ambiguous situation into a problem waiting to be resolved. The constructing work that these two acts – redrawing and crisis labelling - do, however, remains out of focus. That is, these acts as acts of sense making get little attention in themselves. It seems that acts like that, if they are seen as natural, do not draw attention because they do not exhibit a strong agency on their own. They are merely considered as reactions to what is done by others, or – in the case of calling something a crisis – as just stating the obvious. Because of this, they seem to need less explanation and justification.

By becoming an undeniable label, 'administrative crisis' develops into the *Crisis Story* that is told in the newspapers. The work the *Crisis Story* does can be found in what happens after it is introduced. In interviews the period between the board's announcement and the moment the board is sent away is referred to as something that had its own political dynamic: 'once it starts to roll there is nothing you can do.' A state of crisis invoked similar metaphors like that of a roller-coaster ride. The announcement of the board members is now the beginning of a crisis. That act is no longer a solution (as the board members hoped it to be), but a problem in itself. It is depicted as a breach in the fundamental norm. What happens next can hardly come as a surprise. As the anthropologist Turner already told us a long time ago, sides are then taken, and if not sealed off the crisis expands to a point at

which it coincides with a dominant rift across the concerned parties and social relations (Turner 1974: 38).

As said, in the two weeks after the announcement the political pressure builds up. When the night of the meeting arrives the board members have all prepared a speech that should convince the audience they will have to face. The setting in which the board members have to perform is out of the ordinary: it is crowded in the old town hall, the mayor does not chair the meeting and the atmosphere is tense and emotional. It is a setting that is in line with the *Crisis Story*. And as the actors involved might have thought: extraordinary situations permit extraordinary performances and might lead to extraordinary decisions. The board members, who understand that this setting is potentially dangerous for their political careers in Free City, have decided to shift their accounts towards a more personal story. Formal accounts, like the one they gave just after their announcement, are not sufficient any more. For the board members, shifting their account goes hand in hand with new blaming tactics. In defending their acts the board members construct a *Board-Under-Pressure Story* about how various members of the team became ill and the remaining members had to work very hard ('combating capacity' tactics). Mayor Slotenmaker fills in the picture of the setting saying that the pressure during the last year was enormous. Slotenmaker claims to have had the ultimate goal, the public interest, at heart during the whole period. She is saying: do not judge me on the appearance of one act; judge me on the intent of my actions in general ('prevent labelling' tactic). At the same time, the board members reinforce their announcement, saying that it was the best thing to do for them at that moment. Compared to the *Weak-Board-Member Story*, the attention has partly shifted from the alderman to the board members themselves and the setting they had to work in. Alderman De Groot also argues that the setting that that matters does not only include more acts of the board; it also includes more actors (not only the board members). In fact, everybody in local politics should have asked himself that night what role he played in what happened. So in this line of reasoning the blame for the situation is dispersed even more. It is suggested that it is hard to stay in control with such high pressure and with political enemies all around.

After the situation obtains the label 'administrative crisis', Labor started to put a certain line of reasoning forward. The leader of the party starts to put forward what could be called a *No-Good-Administration Story*. During the period the board is in charge (since 2002), the administration of the city has not been good ('accusing the accuser' tactic). The élan is missing. Examples of their bad management include Urban Restructuring, safety and housing. The whole board is to blame. The council and the city are the victims. Calling the announcement of the board members 'the last straw,' Labor integrates the *Bad-Board-Members Story* into the *No-Good-Administration Story*. The normative leap (Rein and Schön 1977) from 'is' to 'ought' is quite simple: the political period of the board should end. With the drama fresh in the minds of the audience, Labor integrates two meanings of the board's act makes a call for action: a motion of no-confidence that fires the board.

After others have proved unable or unwilling to integrate opposing views, the leader of the Christian Democrats, Bosman, steps forward to offer a novel view of the situation. Wanting to hold on to the coalition, he integrates the meaning of the act as something unethical with that of something done in despair. With this he presents a *Tragic Story*. He sees tragic human characters having a hard time completing their mission mostly because of circumstances they do not and cannot control ('combating capacity' tactic). The setting that is created is a setting in which actors try to organize the administration of the city, but are

faced with all sorts of events that cannot be attributed to them. On the one hand, the events that took place were the actors in the board becoming seriously ill. On the other hand, after a leadership change in Labor, this party undertook acts that damaged the coalition. As Bosman argues, 'sometimes people manipulate what happens, but sometimes what happens dominates people' and in this story 'both are the case.' Bosman goes on with the enlargement of the setting in a way that De Groot had started. More actors should be taken into account. Bosman tries to push some of the blame away from human intent towards the realm of fate ('combating causation' tactics; Stone 2001), thereby giving fate a role in what has happened. Nobody can be blamed for people getting ill. There is also special attention for Panhuis, the leader of Labor ('accusing the accuser' tactic).<sup>33</sup> Bosman attempts what could be called an act of *reframing*, not in the sense of claiming success where failure is perceived (Bovens et al. 1999), but in the sense of bridging a divide between opposing views of reality (compare Schön 1993). He points at the mess that the political story has made. He also points to the lack of control available when political enemies, who should be partners, try to harm you and when fate plays tricks on you. Whereas the stories that are circulating are obviously in favour or against the board, Bosman offers a view that condemns the act of the board members, but at the same time creates understanding for it and gives part of the responsibility to other actors. The board members have perhaps acted as villains, but they have also become victims.<sup>34</sup> They are tragic figures with character flaws, but at the same time they are heroes trying to do good things. Coupled with the tragedy, the way to go forward consists of a *mea culpa* and resignation of the board ('repentance' tactic), with a renewed effort to go on governing, perhaps in another constellation.

Both despite the efforts of the board members, and because of them, the framing contest does not lose its focus on the board and its individual members.<sup>35</sup> In an effort to present themselves as credible actors, the board members themselves become personal. Two of the board members characterize themselves as hardworking actors, doing what is asked and even more. They could have perhaps done some things differently, but the acts of the alderman and the situation in the board forced them to act the way they did. At least they were able stayed in control. They argue that it would not be fair to blame them for what happened. They are only human. This way the board members and the things they did - especially sending away the alderman - remain at the center of attention. The relationships between the main actors, everything the board has done backstage, is not just shown, it is *enlarged* on the stage. Despite the efforts of the board members and what is left of the coalition, the focus on the board members during the night of the meeting makes one event (act) matter most: the mistreatment of an ill man. On the night of the meeting, Brinkhuis - who looks swollen because of the medicine he was still on - as the ill alderman becomes a symbol, performing as the physical evidence of bad behaving board members *and* as a clear example of the bad policy making of the board members in general. Although various actors, using various stories, claim to be the victim or point at other actors like the coalition or the city to play that role (various accusers are being accused), Brinkhuis as the ill alderman embodies this part. The distinction between an ill and weak board member on the one hand, and healthy and strong board members on the other, is used successfully in this way. It helps to differentiate between villains and victims in a way that would have been more difficult if all board members had been labelled as ill or even weak. That one of the board members was said not to function at 100 % and that the other two might not have been in their right mind because they were overworked is downplayed in the final verdict. Focussing only on

what the board members have done wrong and presenting them as those in power makes it possible to blame the healthy and strong for mistreating the ill and weak.

The final judgment also becomes a judgment of character. A crucial question becomes more and more whether what has happened is a result of a difficult situation in which good actors became trapped or were of a bad character that made them try to deal with a difficult situation in the wrong way. The leader of the Christian Democrats, Bosman, trying to do damage control, argues that it is a little of both. What should be done in such a situation is also clear to him: the board members should take responsibility and resign. This is not what the board members do. The proposal they make – to work again with alderman Brinkhuis - breaks with their own view of reality because they said the act they performed was the only way out. It does not take into account the ‘political reality’ of the council meeting. This would have asked for the resignation of the board and a ‘*mea culpa*’ (‘repentance’ tactic), as Bosman indicated. This would have meant admitting the board is the weak player in the game now. On the night of the meeting a new fact about the way the mayor treated her colleague - the mayor did not even visit her colleague on his sickbed - makes the image even worse. The board members’ not resigning helps to sketch their own character: as bad, in the sense of ‘only after power,’ or at least stubborn. They are not willing or able to see their own mistakes and learn. The credibility of the accounts of the board members, then, is judged in light of the stories about board members.

Some interview respondents argued that the way the board’s final proposal – to work again with the alderman - was presented did the opposite of generating the support that was needed, and it proved what they had been thinking for a while: the board members do not really know what they are doing. Reflecting on the proposal of the board, other interview respondents used game language -‘incomprehensible move,’ ‘a blunder’ - to argue something similar. This shows that the board members had not only little control over the collective storytelling, they did not understand the impact their own storytelling would have. They took their own stories seriously and tried show their human face. They could have seen that the act that mattered most to the relevant actors was the act they kept on defending. For some parties the act then becomes the ‘last straw,’ for some the act is the problem itself. The result, however, is the same: the next event that takes place is the one that terminates the reign of the board.

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

‘The political communication process is highly competitive: each and every detail of words, pictures, gestures and performance matters’ (Boin et al. 2005: 70).

Framing is a crucial part of what elite political actors are doing to deal with crises and to defend their own positions. The analysis in the previous section (see *Table 3* below for an overview) showed how members of the political elite tried to give meaning to a situation they found themselves in. It showed how other actors tried to support them or blame them for what happened. The type of crisis investigated here does not have the magnitude of crises like the global financial crisis or crises that involve wars or natural disasters. Nevertheless the framing contest that it involved is similar to other types of crises. There are two camps, government and opposition, fighting a battle on various stages. In the case the main actors were both players and spectators. This led to a complicated process in which everybody seemed to blame everybody else.



During framing contests much work is done on the selection and labelling of the setting that is said to matter. Not just in a certain time scope, also the socio-political setting (climate, atmosphere) in which events took place are debated. In addition, when a crisis becomes personal, so the case study confirms, the character of actors and the motivation behind their acts become a crucial part of problem definition. What also stands out in this case is the influence of the crisis setting as it developed. The story about the crisis structured the events that followed, making them into political spectacles (Edelman 1988). It also made previous stories that denied the severity of the situation look odd. When acting in the spotlight, movements are out of proportion. Or, we should say, they get their own proportions. Similarly when politicians have to perform in front of an audience that doubts their credibility, they have to be aware of the fact that every word is 'weighted on a golden plate', as one of the respondents expressed it in an interview. They have to realize that every movement is checked for its sincerity. In those cases, institutional roles and standard performance are not sufficient. Consistency between what is said with how it is said, timing of what is said, how people look all matter to the overall judgement of action. In this case, the board members seem to have done it all wrong. But all these elements and tactics cannot be combined in whatever way that saves the day. In addition to the elements that are common in present-day constructivist studies of crises (e.g., Brändström and Kuipers 2003; Bovens et al. 1999; Boin et al. 2005; Boin et al. 2009), attention for the narrative aspects of framing contests suggests that actors constantly try to work on packages that are coherent.

What is clear is that in the end the situation is defined as a crisis in its consequences. Those in power were in first instance not able to prevent the crisis label from becoming dominant and in second instance not able to disperse the blame (Boin et al. 2009). Crucially in this case they did not show regret at all and only changed their performance when the political pressure endangered their careers. Trying to play hardball (claiming not to have done anything wrong, not asking for forgiveness) when you cannot count on support from central actors is a dangerous game. However, to understand framing contests with the help of game-language (*blame game, tactics*) would miss an important possible explanation of what might be going on. Indeed, political opposition parties see as their task to scrutinize those in charge, to hold them accountable and, when the opportunity arises, to grab the power. Those in government try to secure their positions with the help of tactics, amongst others, that they have at their disposal. But that is not the same as saying that all action in the political arena is an effort to overthrow the ruling elite or to stay in power. Since how would we understand the failure to show regret on the part of the board members in this case? Many acts are driven by an effort to judge what is going on according to standards like justice, fairness and so on. It is hard to believe that political actors do not have one goal in mind that they pursue rationally or even constantly. Even if some actors are probably focusing gaining power, others have moral values as an equally important guidance. In addition, emotion, as we can see in this case, can play an important role. What becomes clear in a framing contest more than in other moments in governance is the uncomfortable mixture of strategies and tactics on the one hand, and actors trying to be true to themselves, to the way they believe things have happened and to what they think is just, on the other. Nevertheless, there comes a moment, when various ways of looking at the same event, converge on a simple conclusion: this has to stop.

Table 3: Overview of Framing Contest

Story	Selected and labelled actors, settings, events	Blaming tactics	Performing
Weak Alderman	In the board, last year, the Alderman B makes mistakes, does not cooperate and breaks rules, the others make a managerial intervention	Justification, denial, scapegoating	The story is told in written statement, formal language, parts are repeated 'on stage', board members step into the credibility trap: one-sided story
Bad Leadership	The board runs into a problem, tries to blame an ill board member	Accusing the accuser, combating causation	The story is embodied on stage by the image of the alderman
Crisis	A loss of faith announcement, a coalition partner redraws, beginning of an administrative crisis (also called 'soap opera')	<i>This story mostly claims that the problematic nature of the situation is beyond denial</i>	Crisis is declared in newspapers, the crisis forms the setting for the telling of other stories.
Board-under-Pressure	Board members ill, pressure builds up, team member does not want to cooperate, 'act of despair' follows	Combating capacity, prevent labelling	The board members put forward this story in the council meeting, making their performance personal, but also changing the performance style
No-Good-Administration	Élan board is missing; board mistreats alderman ('last straw'). <i>Proposed end:</i> Board members are fired ('fresh start')	Accusing the accuser	The credibility of the storyteller is questioned, but the performance of Labor party mostly stays out of sight and the next step is feasible
Tragedy	Board members ill, Labor rebels, Board mistreats alderman. <i>Proposed end: Board asks for forgiveness</i>	Combating capacity, combating causation, accusing the accuser, <i>Proposed tactic: repentance</i>	The performance brings in realism, but is not supported by the board members themselves, this makes the proposed continuation problematic

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Recently, a political crisis in which a mayor also got into conflict with the council led to a similar drama as depicted here. This happened in Tilburg, the 6<sup>th</sup> largest city of the Netherlands.

<sup>2</sup> Schon and Rein (1996: 26) talk about selecting and naming, where I talk about selecting and labelling.

<sup>3</sup> This list was not meant to be comprehensive, but it does cover a broad range of tactics. I have rephrased some tactics a bit. For instance, I have made the scapegoating include others than employees of elite actors.

<sup>4</sup> Discourse and narrative are used as concepts (e.g. Boin et al 2005: 69; Brandstrom and Kuipers 2003), but not elaborated on. Bovens et al. (1999: 145) state that most of the tactics and arguments they mentioned need to be 'further operationalized to be useful for narrative analysis'.

<sup>5</sup> Boin et al. (2005) make a distinction between sense making and meaning making in crisis management. As I understand it selecting and labelling fall more into the sense making part of crisis, whereas storytelling is more part of the meaning making effort. They talk about meaning making as turning raw data into a picture of the situation. This picture of the situation is what I would probably call a story.

<sup>6</sup> Other possible orders of the same event show how the ordering makes a difference to how a situation can be perceived and who might be blamed for what is going on. 1. Last night Jan threw a brick through the window of the jewellery. Then, a riot began on Central Square. After which policeman Erik tried to arrest neighbourhood resident Jan. 2. Last night a riot began on Central Square. Then policeman Erik tried to arrest neighbourhood resident Jan. After which Jan threw a brick through the window of the jewellery. 3. Last night a riot began on Central Square. Then Jan threw a brick through the window of the jewellery. After which Policeman Erik tried to arrest neighbourhood resident Jan. Although in many cases the 'real' order of events can be established, this might also either take very long or never be really established. Part of the problem of establishing what happens is that we all use different labels about the same events, setting and actors. When do we talk about a riot, for instance? And when do we think there has been an attempt to arrest somebody?

<sup>7</sup> A discourse then - compare Hajer's 1995 definition of it - is an ensemble of ideas, concepts and labels by means of which reality is approached. These discourses can be recognized in language - Edelman (1964) talked about vocabulary - but they are also linked to specific practices. Discourse is what in frame analysis Schön and Rein (1994) call rhetorical frames (the talk), but not to be seen apart from what they called and institutional action frames (the acts, actual practices). Schön and Rein used discourse to refer to 'the verbal exchange, or dialogue, about policy issues' (1994: 31). I have referred to a similar phenomenon before, calling it stories of governing. A (formal) political discourse includes labels such as 'a debate', 'a mayor', 'a council' and so on, and can also be observed in the practice of, e.g., debating and voting. A crisis discourse is to be expected after what are perceived as unexpected, threatening events have taken place. If storytelling frames a situation by ordering them in a particular way, discourses help to contextualize the situation. In a framing contest, different stories and discourses are connected and opposed.

<sup>8</sup> This sentence contains a selection and labels that have been integrated in a mini-story with separate elements (actors: we, government, acts: have been abused, have protested, setting: the Netherlands, year 2008), blaming (the government) and finally is part of performance (might be of various kinds).

<sup>9</sup> One might even argue that the sense making never stops.

<sup>10</sup> Although in many cases people might pose the question 'What has happened here?', since the risk of more damage is contained.

<sup>11</sup> The study I conducted in Free Town was ethnographic in nature. I visited the town frequently during half a year. I worked at a desk in the local bureaucracy, attended the weekly board meetings, and other political meetings in town. I also attended the debate on the crisis investigation. The crisis was one of the two issues that I focused on during my stay in Free City.

<sup>12</sup> According to some, the leader of the Socialists and the leader of the Christian Democrats had already decided to form a coalition before the elections and did not want the Liberals to play a role of importance.

<sup>13</sup> It is hard if not impossible to find out in retrospect what accounts were circulating at that time (there were many informal meetings in politics and administration, the high civil servants told their employees what had happened, etc.), but we can expect that what was in the press had reached all important actors. Throughout my fieldwork the actors working in town hall proved to be very aware of what the regional and local newspapers wrote. The newspaper articles, published in a weekly local newspaper and a daily regional newspaper, presented some first accounts. The newspapers also published articles on their websites. The local website stated on October 14 that it would keep its readers informed of the latest developments. In addition the board and the alderman gave their independent first-person accounts of what happened.

<sup>14</sup> The Dutch name for the national program of which this project is a local version is called ISV ('Investeringsbudget Stedelijke Vernieuwing').

<sup>15</sup> 'Reactions on Administrative crisis'. On October 18 the newspaper wrote about the night of the meeting, calling it a special meeting about the '[Labor alderman]-matter.' In the other newspaper it is called 'vertrouwsbreuk' on October 14 ('latest news on the 'break of confidence' will be posted at this website, as soon as it is made public').

<sup>16</sup> The letter was sent on October 22, the articles appeared on October 14, 15 and 20.

<sup>17</sup> The others were closely involved in the matter as members of the so-called 'Urban Restructuring-steering committee.'

<sup>18</sup> Translation of 'paniekvoetbal': a way of playing football that is based on the fear of the opponent making a goal. The meaning of this expression in this context could be that the alderman argued that the mayor's actions were driven by panic.

<sup>19</sup> The Urban Restructuring Program was an example, fighting the need for housing and improving safety in the city were others.

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<sup>20</sup> Although other parties express different opinions, it seems clear that they want the board members to give an explanation for their actions, not in the least place because they think it is the council that should have made a decision about whether an alderman should resign or not. In a reaction to the newspaper reports and Brinkhuis's testimony, the board sends a memo to the municipal council on October 26. The board's memo, a four-and-a-half-page document, tries to clarify a couple of things. First of all, concerning the question of whether the board could declare a loss of faith in one of its members, the board members argued that there were two separate relationships: one between the council and the board, and one among the members of the board. The second relationship was such that, formally, board members should account for their actions to each other. A second and the third part of the memo described what decisions were taken on relevant projects and what had 'factually' happened in the weeks before the board made its announcement. The members of board argue that they have done their best to make better arrangements at the time when things became problematic, and that in the last weeks the alderman had let his colleagues down on several occasions. What stands out in the testimony (memo) is that the members of the board draw attention to additional problematic expenditures on a project the alderman was responsible for that did not belong to the Urban Restructuring Program.

<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, I did not attend this meeting and have had to reconstruct it by reading the ('word-for-word') proceedings, listening to the audiotape that was made, talking to some 25 actors who were there that night, reading the newspaper reports and using the knowledge I gained attending other meetings. My reconstruction will probably be lacking on some points that my physical presence in the setting might have offered.

<sup>22</sup> In the words of the local newspaper: '[name new chairman] chairs this meeting, because mayor Slotenmaker is not independent in this matter'.

<sup>23</sup> In addition, there is a difference in the status of the meeting. This meeting officially is the continuation of the unfinished council meeting of October 13.

<sup>24</sup> At the end of her speech, when she says that Brinkhuis had sent them a mail saying that they had to go on alone because he had already said good-bye, she starts crying.

<sup>25</sup> In the very end of her account the mayor tells the audience that the process is about people who do their best for the local society and this was something that everybody should keep in mind for what follows. Interestingly enough the mayor later on gives a clear vision of how she thinks actors in situations like this should act when he talks about the way she has handled the last weeks: 'You should not just draw conclusions on the basis of your emotions, we should think about it and next week we will discuss them again. I think that is also your role as chair. Make certain that everybody has the time to think "what am I doing," and arrange it so that people also have the time to talk things through in another setting.'

<sup>26</sup> He ends his account saying that it is up to the council to pass a judgment on the total board. After the council members ask various questions, the alderman leaves the meeting. The account he gives partly repeats the way he thinks about the case in his letter to the council. He says he has missed direction in the process and negative energy started to flow through his body. After going into detail on the various meetings the board had on the case, he put forward a statement in which he argues that 'story after story is given'. His illness has created a distance from the subject and he got (figuratively speaking) sick of it all.

<sup>27</sup> According to the leader of Labor it will not surprise anyone that Labor introduces a motion of no-confidence. Nevertheless, to rebuild the confidence, Labor also wants to start an investigation that will offer the municipal administration, including the council, the opportunity to learn. The account goes on to reflect on the reasons why things went wrong in the Urban Restructuring Program. According to Labor the problems are because the municipal organization is not capable of handling projects, especially not of the experimental character the projects in the Urban Restructuring Program had. Things had gone wrong ever since the beginning of the fourth-year term, and the whole board is to blame for that.

<sup>28</sup> The leader of the Democrats argues that the board 'has a big internal problem with which they should not have bothered us [the council, MvH]'. Since it is the council who can fire an alderman, the evidence to do so is not yet convincing. If the member of board would have formed a team, which they did not, they could have come to the council and the Democrats would have told them to just finish the job.

<sup>29</sup> The Socialists still had faith in the board, especially in their own alderman. They wanted to go on with the same board, possibly enlarged with parties that supported the coalition program.

<sup>30</sup> The board, however, wants to ask the council to take two points into consideration. In the first place the board wants the investigation to take place on short notice. Secondly, the council should understand that the board will adjust its availability to a level that is possible to deliver. The working pressure has been too high. It will no longer be possible to make workdays of 12 to 14 hours.

<sup>31</sup> The chairman announces that the motion of no-confidence against the board will be dealt with first. The text of the motion of no-confidence contains three elements. First, the board together has made considerable mistakes in the steering of the developing plan for the Urban Restructuring Program and the accompanying plan for its execution. Second, the way three members of the board have subsequently dealt with these mistakes by announcing a loss of faith was a careless and totally arbitrary action. Finally, to gain authority for the board in the society of Free City, the council and the working organization are left with no other option than 'to make a fresh start.'

<sup>32</sup> At the end of the meeting, before the second vote, a member of the Christian Democrats gives a last statement: This week somebody told me that... reproached me, because I behaved like an ayatollah when it comes to ethics. That was because I was in favor of sending all people involved home, on the basis of what was said before, you do not send home an ill alderman. But talking to everybody and referring to the opening statement of the party leader [of his party: Panhuis],

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that sometimes events take hold of people, and listening to the individual members of the board, although I renounce what they have done, I think that they also in a certain way, have become victim of the whole story, that they do not deserve that we, again despite what I think of sending away alderman Brinkhuis, that we have spoken before research was done, that they are also victims, victims that sometimes take the wrong decisions [...]

<sup>33</sup> On the night of the meeting, but mostly in interviews, actors stressed that for quite some time Labor had not been supporting the board. Labor had been criticizing the board ever since the board presented its annual financial plans at the end of 2003 and especially in a 'traffic-discussion' earlier in May 2004. According to an article in the regional newspaper before the summer, these acts were partly meant to change a situation in which alderman De Groot was getting all the political attention and Labor none. Some interview respondents thought that Labor was planning to use the October presentation of 2004's annual financial plans of the board to send the board home. De facto, these actors said, the board had lost the institutional majority during 2004 and was no longer able to count on the support needed to win individual battles. The event that started the crisis for Labor was just a good opportunity to end the coalition. Panhuis was out to get rid of the coalition and it would happen sooner or later.

<sup>34</sup> The leader of the Socialist party even makes them 'scapegoats'.

<sup>35</sup> The portrait of the mayor in the regional newspaper just before the meeting had also worked to focus the attention in this way.