

YES, MINISTER: SATIRE IN INFORMATION SYSTEMS RESEARCH

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Jocelyn Cranefield and Gillian Oliver, 2014, "YES, MINISTER: SATIRE IN INFORMATION SYSTEMS RESEARCH", Proceedings of the European Conference on Information Systems (ECIS) 2014, Tel Aviv, Israel, June 9-11, 2014, ISBN 978-0-9915567-0-0 <http://aisel.aisnet.org/ecis2014/proceedings/track03/3>

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Completed Research

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of the alternative genre of satire in conjunction with conventional academic discourse in order to provide insight into information systems development and implementation in government. An outsourcing project for the development and implementation of a new payroll system for the New Zealand education sector provides the focus; this project was just one of a series of problematic IT implementations that have occurred in recent years in New Zealand's public sector. The public availability of documentation relating to the payroll project provides a rich dataset for analysis. However, it is evident that this documentation only provides partial insight into the political tensions and influences at play. Satire has developed as the genre of choice in non-academic discourse as a means of critically commenting on political decision making, the question considered in this paper is whether it can be usefully used in conjunction with other, more conventional academic genres. To explore this question, and demonstrate the potential value of satire, a body of satirical data relating to the outsourcing case is combined with stakeholder theory to reveal critical insights about the case.

Keywords: ICT Failure, Satire, Critical IS Research, Stakeholder theory

1 Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the use of the alternative genre of satire in order to provide insight into information systems development and implementation in government. A specific case of an outsourcing project for the development and implementation of a payroll system (Novopay) for the New Zealand education sector provides the focus. The problems experienced with Novopay and resulting public outcry were such that the Ministry responsible has made a large body of related official documentation freely accessible. However, it is clear that the Novopay project was just one of a series of problematic IT implementations that have occurred in recent years in New Zealand's public sector. The challenge therefore is not simply analysing the rich data source that has been made available, but to make sure that the nature of roles played and the range of stakeholder impacts are identified, and furthermore to communicate the findings effectively to researchers and practitioners, while navigating political sensitivities. Satire has developed as the genre of choice in non-academic discourse as a means of commenting on political decision making. The question considered by this paper is whether it can be

usefully used in conjunction with other, more conventional academic genres in information systems. In particular, we consider the potential use of satire in parallel with the theoretical model or framework.

The paper begins by providing the context to the development and implementation of Novopay, and events leading up to the proactive release of relevant documentation. The next section describes the main features of the alternative genre of satire, and considers the possibility of using satire as a sensitising device in information systems research. We then explore how a satirical dataset can be combined with stakeholder theory to illuminate issues relating to the Novopay project and the official documentation. Using examples of satire, we examine and compare the way in which how powerless stakeholders (teachers) and powerful stakeholders (government ministers) were represented by political satirists, identifying prominent themes relating to power and morality. We then examine the issues raised in relationship to the available official record.

1.1 The New Zealand government environment

The failure of information systems has long been considered worthy of attention in the IS discipline. New Zealand has not been immune from this globally acknowledged phenomenon (studies conducted in the UK and USA indicated failures of some sort in greater than 60% of projects (Goldfinch, 2009, p.121)). The implementation of e-government in New Zealand has been marked by a succession of failed ICT projects. The most high profile of these projects have been analysed by Gauld and Goldfinch (2006), who attribute failure to four factors or enthusiasms. These factors (idolisation of technology by public servants, technophilia, managerial faddism and 'lomanism' or over-selling) mutually reinforce and feed off each other in a vicious cycle (Gauld and Goldfinch, p.19). The Ministerial Inquiry investigating the Novopay project noted that the failures associated with it were avoidable, given these previous experiences (New Zealand Government, 2013).

A further contributing factor has also been identified. The Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor conducted a study on the use of evidence in policy making in New Zealand's public sector, concluding that there is "... a high degree of variability across the New Zealand public service with respect to the understanding and application of robust evidence for policy formation and the evaluation of policy implementation" (Gluckman, 2013, p.6). The report notes serious concerns about the practices of certain government departments:

"Given that many of the most important decisions that must be taken by any government will relate to matters of resource allocation and risk assessment, the current lack of protocols for commissioning or generating evidence-informed advice across government is of concern and runs contrary to best practices internationally" (pp 18-19).

Gluckman also suggests that the relatively short New Zealand electoral period (governments are in office for just three years) encourages a focus on short term thinking, therefore contributing to "...minimal horizon scanning, technology forecasting and broader risk assessment capabilities" (p.19).

Together, these findings highlight significant barriers to government agencies making strong evidence based decisions, suggesting that the environment is receptive to yet another large-scale ICT failure. The Novopay debacle is just the latest in the series, and it is of concern that this pattern keeps being repeated.

1.2 Novopay

Novopay is a web-based service used to pay around 110,000 teaching and support staff at 2,457 schools in New Zealand. Developed by an offshore vendor for the Ministry of Education, the goal of the Novopay project was to replace an aging payroll system with an online service that streamlined processes. However, when the new system went live in August 2012, two years behind schedule, it was beset with problems: a significant minority of staff across 90% of schools were overpaid, underpaid, or not paid at all (Ministry of Education, 2013a). As errors persisted over multiple fortnightly pay periods, the troubled \$182 million project received prominent media attention. It was referred, with increasing derision, to as the “Novopay debacle”, the “No pay” service, “Novopain” (Thomas, 2013), and even an “omnishambles”, (The Press, 2013) – Oxford English Dictionary’s 2012 Word of the Year, a newly coined word (invented by political satirists) meaning “a situation that has been comprehensively mismanaged, characterized by a string of blunders and miscalculations” (Oxford Words Blog, 2013).

In early 2013, the Minister of Economic Development, Steven Joyce, was appointed to oversee the Novopay service and address what was by then a politically embarrassing issue. After considering the option of rolling back to the legacy payroll system, the government made the decision to retain Novopay and resolve the errors through a \$5 million remediation plan. A technical review and a Ministerial Inquiry into the project were also conducted (Ministry of Education, 2013b). Further outcomes of the Novopay failures included a national protest by teachers, the resignation of several high-level Ministry staff, vendor penalties, initiation of group legal action by the Post-Primary Teachers’ Association, release of a \$6 million government compensation package for affected schools, and the Ministry’s eventual pursuit of 11643 teachers who had been overpaid a combined total of over \$3 million (Jones, 2013).

The Ministerial report, released in June 2013, noted that the “state of affairs and the wider disruptions that were caused were avoidable” (New Zealand Government, 2013 p.1). It found that the outsourcing project had shifted away from the original strategy to implement a configured package solution, towards developing a strongly customised software solution. The report also identified weaknesses in project governance and leadership as a key factor, resulting in the service going live with “a number of significant risks which the Ministry and its vendors were over-confident of managing” (p.2).

One clear manifestation of the level of public concern was the sheer volume of freedom of information requests about Novopay received by the Ministry of Education. This led to the Ministry proactively making available a comprehensive set of related documentation, dating from the inception of the project (Ministry of Education, 2013c). The proactive release of government information that is seen as being in the public interest is permitted under New Zealand’s freedom of information legislation, the 1982 Official Information Act (OIA); proactive release reduces the burden on citizens and officials of making and servicing one-off OIA requests (New Zealand Cabinet Office, 2008). The documents that were released relating to Novopay will be referred to in this paper as the OIA dataset. Documents in the dataset range from emails to formal reports, sometimes redacted in parts but nevertheless a rich source of data easily accessible, which seems to offer the potential to identify influences on decision-making at ICT project initiation and implementation stages. However, the extent to which it can be assumed that the dataset can be relied upon to reveal all the complexity and nuances of those influences is open to question.

In stark contrast to this official record of the project, another set of public data relating to the project had been accumulating: a body of biting, satirical commentary. Unlike the objective OIA records this material was openly biased, subjective, political, opinionated and entertaining. Piqued by the difference between these data sets and their nature, and motivated by the IS field’s emerging interest in alternative genres, we set out to explore the potential of satire to illuminate the case.

2 Satire

Satire has a very long history and tradition of providing a means of critically commenting on those in positions of power. Its use has been evident since Greek and Roman times (an instance of satire has even survived from Ancient Egypt (Bard, 1999 p.886)) and its full history is too rich and complex to recount here. Originally a literary form, satire has been manifested in many other forms such as drama, film, movies, song, cartoons, letters and visual arts (Elliot, 2004; Kastan, 2006). It is used to “deflate, ridicule, and censure the perceived folly or immorality of what is represented” (Chandler and Munday, 2011). Satire is strongly associated with the critique of hypocrisy and social power, and is underpinned by a set of implicit values against which corruption and folly are measured, with the aim of arousing moral indignation (Kastan, 2006). Satirists, however, take no particular political position, and may be “reactionary, progressive, anarchistic or revolutionary” in orientation (Phiddian, 2013: 52). We adopt Elliot’s (2004) definition of satire as an artistic form “...in which human or individual vices, follies, abuses, or shortcomings are held up to censure... with an intent to inspire social reform”. Satirists employ a variety of devices to achieve their ends, such as irony, ridicule, sarcasm, wit, caricature, derision, burlesque, irony, parody, incongruity, double entendre, exaggeration and distortion (Chandler and Munday, 2011; Elliot, 2004). Perhaps most significant is the device of irony, which introduces a deliberate discrepancy between the information or mental model presented and the actual state of affairs (Kreuz & Roberts, 1993).

We suggest that there is a potentially useful role for the application of satire as a sensitising device in critical IS research; particularly in cases where IS projects have a political dimension. Owing to its critical intent, satire can be seen as having a natural synergy with the critical IS research tradition, which is concerned with critiquing power relationships and restrictions of the status quo, explaining contradictions and challenging prevailing assumptions (Myers 1994; Myers and Klein, 2011). The critical paradigm has previously informed the analysis of failed software development projects, with a remarkably relevant example being a study by Myers (1994) who used critical hermeneutics to analyse the 1989 failure and abandonment of a centralized payroll project by the New Zealand Education Department. Kvasny and Richardson (2006) have noted a need for more empirical critical studies in IS, to help reveal issues including hidden agendas, “the continuation of silencing voices often unheard”, and “underlying assumptions in IS development projects” (p.198). (We later discuss the issue of bias in satire, in relationship to the principles of suspicion and multiple meanings in interpretive research (Klein and Myers, 1990.)

Social researchers are accustomed to use *sensitising concepts* as interpretive concepts at the start of qualitative studies (Bowen, 2006; Charmaz, 2003; Glaser, 1978; Padgett, 2004). Sensitising concepts provide the researcher with particular ways of seeing, organizing and understanding experience, and thereby may help to deepen perception, but they should be used only as starting points if one is using an inductive analysis process (Charmaz, p.259). Satirical artifacts, when used as a sensitizing device, would aid researchers with analysis in a somewhat different way: Satirists tend to profoundly simplify situations in order to make their point (Phiddian, 2013). By focusing attention on discrepancies and contradictions, satire has potential to facilitate the third of Myers and Klein’s (2011) six principles for conducting critical IS research; the *principle of revealing and challenging prevailing beliefs and social practices* (p.25). This principle is underpinned by the Foucaultian ideas that knowledge is conditioned by the exercise of power, and can be used as a tool of power once it has been acquired. Critical IS researchers are therefore charged with identifying important beliefs and social practices and challenging these with potentially conflicting

arguments and evidence (Myers and Klein, 2011, p.25). By bringing a simple, critical agenda into stark focus, and by creating humorous incongruity, satire can stimulate the researcher to apply this principle.

While satire could be used as a sensitising lens on its own, for the purposes of this exploratory study we made the decision to use satire in combination with an existing IS theory, in order to clearly demonstrate the applicability of this alternative genre to the IS discipline. By identifying a theory that had synergy with both the case (the Novopay project and associated body of satire) and the critical perspective, we sought to deepen and sharpen our interpretive focus, while exploring and demonstrating the potential relevance of satire's interpretive power.

3 Method

Through Internet searching (using Google's web and image search tools) and a library database search we identified 48 satirical items featuring the Novopay case. These were strongly weighted towards visual media, with 40 cartoons, one video sketch from a political television show, a brewery's billboard advertisement, and six magazine items (five spoof news stories and an article that made ironic use of content from the vendor's website). This dataset represented the diverse views of professional political writers, cartoonists and scriptwriters, but we note the existence of a larger dataset distributed amongst social networks of private commentators. We excluded data from social networks such as Twitter and Facebook for reasons of convenience and privacy. (One Facebook community called "Pay Politicians through Novopay" had 528 members).

We considered a number of outsourcing theories and frameworks for use in conjunction with this data in examining the Novopay case. As our study sought to illustrate the potential of the alternative genre of satire to inform analysis, we did not aim to identify all possible suitable theories, nor to analyse all of the satirical data in depth. Rather, we sought to select a theory which provided good potential for illuminating the case; one that had synergy with the critical perspective, the satirical dataset, and IS outsourcing problems as a theme, which would allow us to demonstrate the potential sensitising value of satire through analysis of selected examples from the dataset. There is a vast literature on outsourcing (Lacity et al, 2010). We reviewed the six theories that received the highest rankings in Gottschalk and Solli-Saether's (2005) ranking of eleven theories for their power in identifying critical success factors for outsourcing: theory of core competencies, stakeholder theory, neoclassical economic theory, social exchange theory, transaction costs theory, and resource-based theory.

We identified stakeholder theory as suitable as it is of particular relevance to large IS outsourcing projects, which have many stakeholders with diverse, even conflicting, needs, and varying degrees of influence (Lim, Harman and Susi, 2013). In an examination of eleven theoretical management perspectives on outsourcing, Gottschalk and Solli-Saether (2005) identified stakeholder theory as the second most critical (after the theory of core competencies). Respecting and balancing the interests of stakeholders in outsourcing projects were found to be important success factors. Like critical research and satire, stakeholder theory has normative associations: critical research aims to reveal restrictive and alienating conditions of the status quo, underpinned by an emancipatory goal (Myers, 1997); satirists expose societal issues with the aim of provoking positive change, and stakeholder theory is concerned with recognising and reconciling the needs of stakeholders, individuals or groups who may have differing degrees of power. Unlike views of outsourcing that use a principal-agent lens (Gottschalk and Solli-Saether, 2005), using stakeholder theory requires recognition of a larger number of stakeholder groups impacted on by outsourcing. The central theme of stakeholder theory is that organisations should consider the interests of

all their stakeholders; not only the interests of shareholders (Freeman 1984; Laplume, Karan and Litz, 2008). A stakeholder is a group or individual who is affected by the achievement of an organisation's objectives (Freeman, 1984: 46).

Stakeholder theory was originally associated with a strategic focus (Freeman, 1984) but later took on an additional moral imperative (e.g. Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman & Gilbert, 1988) emphasising themes such as corporate ethics and social responsibility (Laplume, Karan and Litz, 2008). The theory is informed by an interpretation of four moral principles: (1) honouring agreements, (2) avoiding lying, (3) respecting the autonomy of others, and (4) avoiding harm to others (Gottschalk and Solli-Saether, 2005). In the case of government projects there is an acknowledgement that the general public (taxpayers) are stakeholders, accompanied by a need for public accountability on the part of government.

The satirical data was strongly infused with implied criticism of the power imbalance between those in controlling positions in relation to Novopay (notably government Ministers) and those who had been negatively impacted on by the flawed system. Although Novopay was designed for use by school administrators, the body of satire was largely concerned with powerless parties (school employees (mainly teachers) who had been underpaid or overpaid), portraying them as victims, and/or powerful officials, whose integrity was implicitly disputed. Using selected examples from the satirical dataset we explored and compared the way in which these weak and powerful stakeholders were represented by satirists. We scrutinised and coded these manually identifying the stakeholders, the underlying moral themes involved (items 1-4 listed above), the satirical devices used (irony, ridicule, sarcasm, wit, caricature, derision, burlesque, irony, parody, incongruity, exaggeration and distortion), and the ways in which these devices contributed to the framing of stakeholder roles. Informed by this analysis we then returned to the OIA dataset to consider the themes, questions and contradictions raised.

4 Findings

In the satire, teachers' powerlessness as stakeholders is emphasised by exaggeration of the nature and extent of harm, and by the themes of victimisation (teachers are under attack by a personified or animalized system) and alienation (those in power shown as being disengaged or unaware of the plight of teachers). For example, a video sketch from a satirical news and entertainment show (Jono and Ben at Ten, 2013) uses parody of the movie *The Terminator* to emphasise the theme of harm. It is set in "the near" future when "children have become stupid and teachers have become desperate". In the opening scene, two hungry unpaid teachers demand lunch money from a boy called Travis who is poking a crayon up his nose while reading a book upside-down. Aiming to prevent such a situation, the school terminator goes to the past to confront Novopay, an evil machine incongruously played by an actor wearing a sign. Jeering, the machine grabs at teachers, reeling in screeds of dollar bills. The sketch ends with anticlimax: the leader of a minority political party enters to the sound of the national anthem, offering to help if people vote for him in the next election.

The sketch exaggerates the plight of teachers and students through exaggeration, incongruity, puns, and personification. It can be seen as highlighting two of the moral principles: teachers' autonomy is compromised (they have no pay and they cannot afford to buy their lunch, let alone teach properly), and they are being harmed (Novopay has taken their money and children's education and welfare have been compromised).

In another cartoon (Doyle, 2013a) the themes of harm, autonomy and powerlessness are strengthened by the suggestion that teachers' voices are not being heard by the Minister in charge. A classroom full of

panicking, injured and starving teachers are being eaten alive by crocodiles. While a skeletal teacher writes a rescue note saying that food and hope is running out, an apparently oblivious Minister (“Mr Fixit”) reframes the crisis as normal by writing SNAFU on the whiteboard (this is a military acronym that normalises a situation of chaos). This cartoon also suggests that the moral principles of avoiding harm and respecting autonomy are being breached by the payroll system, blame is also placed on those in power.

This theme is echoed a cartoon by Hubbard (2013), in which the government and Ministry are shown as judges, mesmerised by the vendor’s performance in a talent show as a juggling unicycle-riding clown. (Here pun and parody exploit the similarity between the name of the outsourcing vendor, Talent 2 and the talent quest, New Zealand’s Got Talent.) The third judge is a teacher. He has marked an X on his marking sheet and looks away from the other judges, grimacing. Oblivious to his reaction, and apparently unaware that the clown has dropped all his balls, the other two judges (Government and Education Ministry) have given the contestant ticks. They are thinking “brilliant” and “wonderful”. In this example, teachers are portrayed not as victims but as insightful critics who are sidelined and disempowered. Stakeholder theory suggests there should be balancing of interests, but in a talent show the majority vote will prevail.

Several further themes are introduced with respect to those in power, with an unrelenting focus on the role of the Minister appointed to oversee the so-called Novopay debacle. The following examples reference and lampoon the power of the Minister, questioning his competence, ability and commitment to tackle Novopay issues. In a cartoon by Scott (2013) the Minister, dressed as a police officer, unleashes a turtle, shouting “Atta Boy, Attack!”. The turtle stands still, looking daunted.

In another cartoon (see Figure 1) the Minister is shown expressing confidence he can fix Novopay, which is shown as an old car that has fallen apart. The visual metaphor creates incongruity at two levels: juxtaposing a dilapidated car with the prefix novo (‘to make anew’) critiques the quality of the payroll system, while seeing a smiling, suited Minister in the wrecked car undermines confidence in his ability: the suit is incongruous when a mechanic is needed, and the Minister appears oblivious to the car’s state. The theme of overconfidence is reinforced in another example where the Minister is portrayed as a gladiator entering the Colosseum to face a fearsome Minotaur alone. The ground is strewn with the bodies of his political predecessors, who cannot assist him (Doyle, 2013b).

Triangulation, or side-by-side reading of several satirical examples, raises two key questions. While the need for a terminator to attack a flawed payroll system (Jono and Ben at Ten, 2013) seems ludicrous, such as extreme self-help measure seems more appropriate when compared with satirists’ portrayals of the attempts of officials to intervene. The two questions that arise here are: (a) is enough being done by powerful stakeholders to protect weak stakeholders from the damage being caused? and (b) do those in power have competence and skills to solve the problem by reintermediation project and continuing with the system?

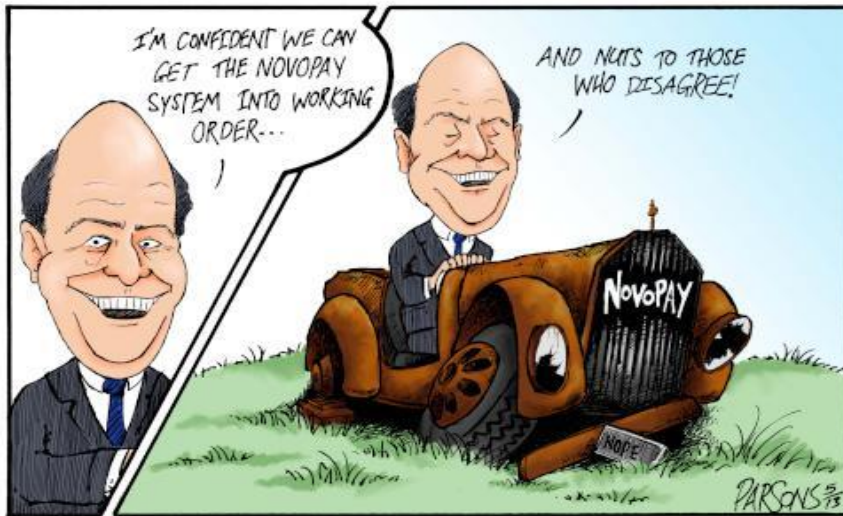


Figure 1. *The Minister as mechanic (Parsons, 2013)*

A further major theme introduced through the body of satire is Ministerial avoidance of blame. This is shown, for example, in Doyle's (2013c) portrayal of the two Ministers with responsibility making the "huge admission" that it is all somebody else's fault (see Figure 2), Slane's (2013) illustration of Minister Parata racing from a flaming Ministry of Education with a gas can in her hand, shouting "I didn't do it", and Hubbard's cartoon (2013a) showing Government personified as George Washington telling his father "I cannot tell a lie father, I watched them do it" as he points at the Ministry. An axe and fallen tree lies on the ground. This cartoon makes ironic reference to the myth that Washington earned the respect of his father by owning up to chopping down a cherry tree. These examples can be seen as invoking another key moral principle of stakeholder theory – that of honesty. It is widely known that politicians do their utmost to avoid blame. As two of these cartoons (Doyle and Hubbard) appeared shortly after the Ministerial Inquiry into Novopay was released, they might be seen as questioning its integrity.



Figure 2. *"Huge" admission by the key ministers involved Doyle (2013)*

To what degree do these views reflect those of the official record? Examination of the OIA dataset revealed many points of evidence supporting the themes raised in the satire about teachers, making it clear

that the needs of this stakeholder group were not adequately considered in the project. The Ministerial inquiry (p. 36) found that customers' perspectives were poorly considered in the business case and although a reference group was set up for engagement with the sector as a whole, this group played a limited part in the requirements' definition. It also notes that levels of trust between the Ministry and the sector that were necessary to ensure the success of the project were not always evident. (In the discussion, we consider possible reasons for these oversights.)

However, when we examined the record regarding the Ministers as stakeholders we found more complex tensions and inconsistencies. Notably we found that the level of risk presented to the Minister as stakeholder appears to have been underestimated. For example, in the risk analysis presented in the part two business case, the Minister is shown to be one of the least impacted stakeholders, in comparison to school employees (Ministry of Education, 2007a p. 115).

In other documents, there is hardly any mention of the Minister as stakeholder. Why, when the Minister is arguably the most powerful player in the project, is there minimal recognition of this, and apparent underestimation of the risk in the project documentation? Does this represent incompetence or management of political impressions? Are there gaps in the record? It seems highly unlikely that political risk was not considered in more depth, but if so, this does not form part of the accessible written record.

What this highlights is an inherent tension between the view of Minister as owner accountable to the public (which dominates in the satirical record) and the Minister as a project stakeholder. When stakeholders are also project owners can we expect the documentation to be fully transparent? Can the documentation afford to risk showing concern with Ministers' interests? (We explore this question further in the discussion.) We cannot definitively answer any of these questions, but note from the OIA dataset that the profile of the Minister as stakeholder increases as the project moves closer to go-live, as the Ministry commits to more frequent briefings. This is unsurprising, and highlights the increased political risk at this stage. The Minister's role as a potentially vulnerable stakeholder comes fully into the official spotlight only once the Ministerial review is released. The review serves to distance the Ministers by clearly attributing blame to the Ministry and noting that the Ministers were "not always well served" by the quality of advice provided. The theme of harm (from stakeholder theory) is thereby invoked in a way that directly inverts the view of satirists:

"The 5 June 2012 paper to [the three Ministers then involved] ... misrepresented the state of the project. The description of the criteria was confusing and gave an unduly optimistic view of the number of defects ... The paper did not explain that testing was incomplete and that significant further defects were highly likely. It also misrepresented the views of the independent advisers from the ICT Council." (New Zealand Government, 2013 p. 51)

5 Discussion

Reflecting on the combination of satire and stakeholder theory we consider the question of why the respective roles of teachers and Ministers as stakeholders are apparently so dramatically underplayed in the OIA dataset, highlighting possible lines for investigation. We then discuss the benefits and drawbacks of using satire in as a sensitising device.

There are many reasons which can be seen as having combined to contribute to the poor recognition of teachers' interests. These range from early rose-tinted views about how "state of the art technology" will enable improve accuracy, to later hints of power- and culture-related tensions within the Ministry, combined with the project's gradual (and eventually catastrophic) slippage from being an out-of-the box solution to a complex development project. Issues noted in the Ministerial review include timeline

pressures, shortcuts in testing, pressure for delivery, shortcomings in governance and the turnover of key staff and issues in ownership and accountability: in such a situation, there are clearly insurmountable barriers to gaining a shared organisational view of the current state of stakeholder impacts. A report assessing the culture of the project by Anderson (2011) notes tensions between the teams on two floors within the Ministry.

Deeper analysis of the OIA dataset revealed an unexpected possible explanation for the (apparent) underestimation of the risks of Novopay to government and the Minister: a major barrier was presented by the official rationale provided for the initiation of the outsourcing project. Serious risks to the government, arising from the old payroll system, were positioned as a key driver of the need for a fully outsourced payroll system. In the project initiation documents (for example, a memo to the Leadership Team from the Deputy Secretary Schooling (Ministry of Education 2007b), retention of the existing payroll system is cited as presenting a "significant operational and reputational risk to the ministry and to government" (p.10). The need to reduce this risk is noted as matter of urgency and underpins the argument for a business process outsourcing approach. The fact that risk forms the primary rationale for undertaking the Novopay project provides a possible (perhaps partial) explanation as to why the impact of the project on government and the Minister as stakeholder is initially significantly understated. In other words, framing the existing system as presenting such a significant risk to government that it is driving the need for a new solution makes it extremely unlikely (both at this stage of the project and for some time afterwards) that the new project could be framed as posing a similar risk to government.

Although this explanation is at odds with the blame avoidance theme (and its implications of guilt), the possibility that the Minister's interests could not be openly outlined in the early project documentation owing to the project rationale reinforces a key overarching theme that we see in the satire dataset: the critique of control. According to this theme, the Minister only thinks he is in control - he lacks required knowledge and does not see reality (he is oblivious to the clown dropping his balls, the crocodiles eating teachers, and the crumbling car, and he chooses a turtle as an attack weapon). It is necessary to ask, just how profound was the (then) Minister's lack of knowledge about risk during the project's early stages? And if knowledge is power, just how powerful was this powerful stakeholder?

By raising the significance of stakeholder issues, the combination of satire and stakeholder theory also led us to identify a dominance of a principal-agent lens (Gottschalk and Solli-Saether, 2005) in the project documentation, which gives priority to the Ministry-vendor relationship. A memo (Ministry of Education, 2008) which predates the signing of a revised vendor contract for business process outsourcing raises four risks, only two of which relate to schools. These risks are identified as getting schools to understand their responsibilities as employers and getting a high degree of online uptake. "Communications strategy" is the main recommended action to address the two risks. Stakeholder theory would suggest that relationship management is also important for those heavily impacted by the project. While the early omissions can be attributed to over-optimistic assessment of technological system impacts, this cannot be said for later documentation.

An 18-page analysis of impacts on stakeholder clusters including school employees (Ministry of Education, 2011) identifies a large number of potential impacts on teachers. A bullet-point analysis includes the comments that there may be "stark differences in pay amounts for the pay period" and "impact may be huge if the numbers of affected recipients is huge" (p.17). Despite this, the implications drawn are restricted to (a) the need for the Schools Payroll Administration group to "focus on the expectations, outcome and the consequences of changes to the payslips; Communications should focus on the benefits Novopay will provide to the visibility of pay veracity..." and (b) the Ministry's own

reputation management: “consideration should be given to how prepared the Ministry of Education is for objection, unrest and media interest” (p.18).

A further question raised by our analysis is, why has the theme of teachers as victims continued despite the re-intermediation project? (Cynicism about their prospects is embodied in the advertisement from a local brewery, see Figure 3 below.) Does this concern arise from the level of public interest that makes Novopay a target for sustained attack, or are there also underlying relationship issues? The satirical themes, when combined with stakeholder theory, can be seen as fostering a focused sensitivity to this and other potential power-related themes for future investigation.



Figure 3. Outdoor billboard advertisement for Tui Beer, bringing Novopay into the brewery's satirical "Yeah Right." Campaign

The imbalance in power of the teachers and Minister(s) as stakeholder groups is strikingly conveyed through the satirical data, which has an obvious systematic bias in seeking us to identify with the powerless stakeholder group only. This is a tradition of political satire, which takes a view of the audience role as stakeholders - taxpayers who expect accountability from those in power. Furthermore, the vast majority of the audience are unlikely to identify with the needs of politicians. It is therefore important to examine how these parties are portrayed in the official record, and consider this data in the light of the questions and issues raised above.

Political satirists can rely on the fact that most of their audience will more readily identify with the plight of injured parties than that of government Ministers. There is an inbuilt bias in the genre that needs to be recognised and taken into account in any analysis. Furthermore, it is well recognised that the meaning of a satirical artifact in the eyes of the recipient (the reader or viewer) may be strongly contested. Phiddian (2013) reports contradictory opinions of the meaning of Australian satirical cartoons amongst politically informed individuals, while LaMarre, Lanreville and Beam (2009) found that people's political ideology significantly impacted on their perceptions of the television show, *The Colbert Report*.

While cartoons may be easily recognised as forms of satire, their meaning may be subject to divergent readings (Phiddian, 2013). More sophisticated or subtle manifestations may present additional challenges for the audience, in terms of identifying the satirical nature of the message. For instance, one of us was contacted by a third year student who was convinced that the cause of the Novopay issues had been addressed after a cursory reading of a spoof news article reporting that the Minister had fixed the problems

by restarting the computer. In this example (The Civilian, 2013) recognition of satire requires the reader to combine several incongruous cues: the idea of a Minister restarting a computer, the suggestion that this was the prime minister's ("John's") idea and the reported remark that the solution was "fairly simple".

There are therefore potential problems to be aware of in using satire as an interpretive tool, and careful judgement should be exercised in order to assess the level of understanding and knowledge of the intended audience. Of course, careful judgment is part of the rigour that is required in all IS research: the role of satirists is to provoke, but researchers who interpret must convince and build credibility through sound argument and evidence. Our exploration of the use of satire shows that particular attention should be placed on the principles of multiple interpretation and suspicion (Klein and Myers, 1999). Notably, suspicion must be applied to, as well as through, satire.

Another potential issue highlighted relates to the OIA, New Zealand's freedom of information legislation. Despite the general plaudits accorded to the purpose and aims of the OIA, concerns about its effectiveness have also been raised. The sincerity of intent has been questioned, given the dismantling of organisational information infrastructures that accompanied its enactment (Oliver and Kurmo, 2012). Similarly, there have been acknowledgements that in practice, the OIA cannot provide full transparency of government information. In a 2005 conference address, Privacy Commissioner Marie Shroff acknowledged that despite the many benefits of the Act, "*Many in the media believe that officials and Ministers shift the ground, dodge and delay – and that getting the information you want is like a blindfolded man trying to pin the tail on the donkey*" (Shroff, 2005). In a televised panel interview on the current affairs show Media 7, Haydon Dewes, Chief Reporter of the Dominion Post (the daily newspaper in New Zealand's capital) went further, stating that, "*It's not them [public servants] who are pulling the strings; it's the people further up the line and if they decide they don't want information to get out, our job is incredibly tough to get that, unless we've got deep throats or sources very close..*" (Media 7, 2009). The second panellist, political activist and author, Nicky Hager stated that "*without an inside source a story will never come out*", while the third, Brenda Pilott, Secretary of the Public Service Association, noted that "*increasingly people are charged with not putting information down on paper*" leading to more verbal briefings. Factors cited in the interview as impeding the full and free release of information included inefficiency, lack of resources, stonewalling, delaying tactics, and balancing the spirit of the Act with concern with the issues of embarrassment and reputational damage to Ministers and officials.

A full record of activities leading to decision-making may only therefore come to light incidentally, or by whistle blowing. An example arose in relationship to the Department of Conservation (DOC) with a leaked email referring to a draft identifying multiple issues which did not appear in formal Ministerial correspondence (Bennett, 2013; Vance, 2013). Such events raise the kind of awareness that would help a researcher to interpret the Novopay data in terms of the power relations inherent in the critical IS research paradigm: Ministers are more powerful than Ministry officials and this is readily reflected in the information trail; or rather, what is not in the information trail. Without satire as a sensitising device, it would be easier to take the documentation at face value. Awareness of silences or gaps in the narrative raises the question "if the absent voices could speak, what might they say?"

6 Conclusions

The failure of government large-scale ICT projects is not a new phenomenon, and indeed seems to re-occur at regular intervals in New Zealand. Factors that contribute to failure have been identified in previous research, and clearly related to the local context (Gauld and Goldfinch, 2006). However, the ongoing cycle of systems failure suggests that research findings have not had sufficient impact or influence on decision-making.

In this paper we have outlined the detail relating to an outsourcing project for the development and implementation of Novopay, a payroll system for New Zealand schools. The problems associated with the project after go-live generated intense media and public interest. The extensive documentation released in response to public concern about the Novopay debacle presented an opportunity for analysis of data relating to a much longer time span than is normally considered in post-hoc investigation of implementation failure. The absence of voices and conversations in the dataset however indicate that despite the depth and coverage of this dataset, certain tensions and constraints would not be apparent from content analysis of the formal documentation alone.

We were able to detect the absences by utilising another distinct dataset relating to Novopay: satirical comment consisting of cartoons and caricatures. Analysis of the satirical dataset in conjunction with stakeholder theory enabled the identification of two critical stakeholder roles, consideration of which were grossly under- or mis-represented in the official government record. The Ministerial Inquiry provided some evidence in support of the claims made by the satirists about the teachers, but clearly shifted any blame from the Ministers by pointing to inadequate advice being provided by their officials. It was left to the satirists to identify the Ministers as key stakeholders, and to emphasise the power differential between teachers and Ministers. The disconnects between the OIA dataset and the satirical dataset illuminated critical areas which are likely to have contributed to project failure, in particular the identification of risks and strategies proposed to address those risks. Using satire as a sensitising device enabled us to identify the political dimensions of decisions that were made.

The inclusion of the manifestations of satirical comment as a sensitising device has been demonstrated to compensate for the silences in the official record, thereby facilitating one of Myers and Klein's principles for conducting critical IS research, that of 'revealing and challenging prevailing beliefs and social practices' (2011, p.25). Traditional academic methods and approaches used in research may only provide partial insight into problems areas where politics and power are significant. However, the use of satire to assist interpretation should be strongly informed by the principle of suspicion (Klein and Myers, 1999), turned inwards as well as outwards. With this in mind, we suggest that using information systems theory in conjunction with the alternative genre of satire may support the development of a richer picture. Future work should also consider the potential to use satire to impact on practice (for instance, using satirical artefacts to help communicate research findings to the Government ICT community). The consequences of government ICT failure can have far-reaching social ramifications, thus this problem area is worthy of attention. Awareness of satirical perspectives clearly demonstrates considerable potential for identifying relevant, challenging and interesting research questions as well as contributing to analysis of findings.

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