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Political Satire and the Counter-framing of Public Sector IT Project Escalation

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Abstract:

Despite significant research into why IT projects fail, the frequency and impact of failure remains high. Attention has shifted to understanding and guiding de-escalation (i.e., reversing failure). This major turnaround process initially benefits from negative feedback on the status quo and requires an organization to break its established frames and re-establish its legitimacy with stakeholders (Pan & Pan, 2011). We consider the role of satire as a lens to challenge dominant frames and better understand stakeholders during the shift towards de-escalation based on analyzing political cartoons about high-profile troubled public sector projects in New Zealand and Denmark. Drawing on the theories of technological frames of reference, legitimacy, and stakeholder salience, we show how cartoonists expose and critique the normative framing of dysfunctionality to act as field-level evaluators of legitimacy. Through counter-framing, exaggeration, and metaphor, they emphasize the urgency of citizen users' claims while undermining the legitimacy of powerful stakeholders. We extract lessons for stakeholder management and communication during project turnaround and suggest that satire could be a valuable addition to diagnostic and planning tools during de-escalation. We identify that sensitivity to framing of IT projects exists in the public realm, which reinforces calls for organizations to consider institutional framing.

Keywords: Political Satire, Cartoons, Escalation, De-escalation, Technological Frames of Reference.

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1 Introduction

We decided to conduct this study after observing two contemporary phenomena. First, governments and researchers have increasingly begun to express concern about successfully delivering big-budget public sector IT projects and services: such projects continue to exhibit a high rate of failure despite decades of research and documented lessons learned. Amid an alarming rate of continued IT failure, more research has begun to focus on how one may successfully de-escalate, or reverse, failing projects (Mähring & Keil, 2008; Pan, Pan, Newman, & Flynn, 2006; Pan & Pan, 2011). These studies highlight, among other things, the value of unequivocal negative feedback in promoting de-escalation and the need to challenge and reframe dominant views when embarking on reversing failure. Second, some researchers in the IS community have called on their peers to explore using alternative genres in their work. They have applied the term “alternative genres” to encompass innovation in epistemological perspectives, research methods, semantic framing, literary style, and/or media of expression (Avital & Matthiassen, 2012). Avital et al. (2012, p. 1305) describe using alternative genre as “a generative act that provides an opportunity to take a fresh look and to gain deeper understanding of the subject matter”.

Our exploration draws on the theoretical synergy between the alternative genre of satire and the de-escalation literature: their common concern with reframing dominant views of “reality”. Satire, as a genre, fundamentally focuses on breaking and countering frames and actively challenging and re-shaping dominant perceptions of events (Hill, 2013; Wiesman, 2011). We wondered: could satire about IT failure help play a role in facilitating the turnaround of troubled public sector projects? Although satire is outside of the standard corporate communication lexicon, our interest has precedent: Välikangas and Sevón (2010) argue that jesters can help IT managers let go of dominant ideas that prevent their organizations from obtaining success. We decided to investigate whether satire might play a similar role as an instrument to promote de-escalation and whether one could usefully employ satire to complement traditional means of understanding IT failure.

To do so, we focused on a highly accessible source of satire: cartoons that depict public sector IT failures in the news media. Cartoons can help viewers organize and interpret their political and social environments (Morrison & Isaac, 2012). As such, satirical cartoons appear to offer a natural synergy with the negative feedback and reframing that the early IT project de-escalation process requires. We set out to explore how political satire can serve as counter-framing of public sector IT project escalation.

Specifically, we examined how satirical cartoons portrayed the escalation of two high-profile, deeply troubled public sector IT projects: one in New Zealand and the other in Denmark. We employed technological frames of reference (TFR) theory (Orlikowski & Gash, 1994) as the main theoretical lens. TFR theory explains the institutional framing of technology, the role of framing as a normative force, and the results of frame alignment and divergence in relationship to information technology. The theory’s central concern with framing makes it a suitable candidate for studying satire.

We conducted two case studies in the interpretivist tradition. The initial case study focused on New Zealand and the second on Denmark, the latter of which we conducted to further explore emerging issues and themes. The paper proceeds as follows: in Section 2, we review background literature. In Section 3, we outline the study method. In Section 4, we present the two cases. In Section 5, we report our findings. In Section 6, we discuss our findings; specifically, we draw on additional literature to examine how satirical cartoons use counter-framing to challenge legitimacy in project escalation, and we extend the discussion to consider how satire might help promote the reframing required in the shift from escalation to de-escalation. Finally, in Section 7, we discuss the paper’s contributions to research, suggest implications for practice, highlight directions for future research, and conclude the paper.

2 Background

2.1 Public Sector IT Projects: The Importance of De-escalation Research

The risks involved in delivering large-budget IT projects are extraordinarily high. In studying 5,400 IT projects, McKinsey Institute and Oxford University identified a combined cost overrun of US\$66 billion (Bloch, Blumberg & Laartz, 2012); further, projects that had larger budgets and longer timelines fared worst of all. According to Gartner, global IT spending in public sector technology products and services will grow to US\$476 billion by 2020 (ETCIO, 2016). After a decade of “doing more with less”, the public sector remains under pressure to lead digital innovation while optimizing IT and business costs (ETCIO,

2016). With the emphasis moving to large-scale digital transformation to deliver efficiencies and create integrated citizen-centric services (Pollitt, 2003), government projects involve more concern for effectively managing and delivering value than ever before. Public sector IT outsourcing constitutes a particular area of concern, and that concern has increased greatly as governments have attempted to improve efficiency and value for money (Luna-Reyes & Gil-Garcia, 2012; Duhamel, Gutierrez-Martinez, Picazo-Vela, & Luna-Reyes, 2014).

Given the statistics above, researchers have unsurprisingly devoted considerable efforts to understanding how to prevent IT projects from failing and to increasing the chance that they will succeed. Many studies have focused on identifying categories of causes that underpin failure (Pinto & Mantel, 1990; Al-Ahmad et al., 2009; Dwivedi et al., 2015) and categories of mistakes (Nelson, 2007). However, researchers and organizations face the problem that the causes for IT projects' failure are complex, deep, and messy and not universal (Pinto & Mantel, 1990; Robertson & Williams, 2006). In reviewing the literature, Dwivedi et al. (2015) found that explanations for why some IT projects fail but others succeed are complex, multi-factorial, divergent, and contested because such projects involve different stakeholders and perspectives (pp. 143-145). For instance, e-government implementations typically impact multiple stakeholders simultaneously, and intentional and/or unintentional tradeoffs may occur among stakeholder groups (Dwivedi et al., 2015). Given the complexity of these issues, it is perhaps unsurprising that four decades of IS research into why IT projects fail has had no observable impact on practice—the failure rate remains “stubbornly high” (Dwivedi et al., 2015, p. 143).

Despite a significant extant body of research into IS success (and IS failure), many researchers agree that we need a broader view and that we particularly poorly understand IT success and failure in the public sector. Critics of success factor-based research argue that organizations cannot readily translate factors into actionable knowledge (Kieser & Nicolai, 2005) and that attempts to follow success factors may result in failure if they ignore the larger political and social context of IT implementation projects (Walsham & Han, 1993; Bussen & Myers, 1997; Lee & Myers, 2004; Dwivedi et al., 2015). Despite the magnitude of IT investment and recognition that IT outsourcing risks are “quite intimidating” in number (Lacity, Khan, & Willcocks, 2009, p. 135), the public sector and public sector IT outsourcing in particular (Duhamel et al., 2014) are notably under-represented in research into why IT projects succeed or not (Dwivedi et al., 2015).

Given organizations' apparent inability to prevent failure, researchers have increasingly begun to view the ability to recognize early warning signs of IT project failure and respond to them as critical (Kappelman, McKeeman, & Zhang, 2006). As such, de-escalation (i.e., reversing failing projects) has become a more important research issue in IS (Pan et al., 2006). Studies of de-escalation shift the emphasis from prescribing success and pre-empting failure to recognizing, acknowledging, and reversing failure. In particular, much research contends that organizations need to be able to recognize and address escalation of commitment (Mähring & Keil, 2008), which occurs when they continue to commit to a failing course of action because the forces that encourage persistence outweigh those that encourage abandonment (Brockner & Rubin, 1985; Pan et al., 2006). De-escalation does not begin at a clear point in time but is an emergent, dynamic process that unfolds over time (Montealegre & Keil, 2000, p. 428). Nonetheless, one must actively manage it (Montealegre & Keil, 2000; Mähring, Keil, Mathiassen, & Pries-Heje, 2008). De-escalation requires that one reframe the problem, embark on a new course of action, and regain legitimacy among stakeholders (Pan & Pan, 2011). As public sector IT projects typically have many stakeholders who have diverse and conflicting needs and varying degrees of influence (Lim, Harman, & Susi, 2013), one needs to consider these needs and impacts when reversing escalation.

Montealegre and Keil (2000) propose a de-escalation process model that comprises four phases: 1) recognize the problem, 2) re-examine the prior course of action, 3) search for an alternative course of action, and 4) implement an exit strategy. As it relates to our interest here in political satire, the first phase, problem recognition, can be facilitated by unambiguously negative feedback (Garland, Sandefur, & Rogers, 1990) and external pressure (Keil, 1995; Montealegre & Keil, 2000). Further, the second phase of de-escalation involves not only clarifying the magnitude of the problem but also fundamentally redefining and reframing it. This reframing is difficult and requires creativity and openness to new ideas (Montealegre & Keil, 2000, p. 434). Managers may face significant difficulty in breaking the escalation of commitment cycle and moving to de-escalation due to the need to change widespread, deeply embedded values and beliefs (Pan, Pan, & Flynn, 2004). They may need to introduce new organizational norms that promote suspicion against rationales for continuation, to counteract efforts to spin-doctor reporting, and to open the IT project to outside scrutiny by consultants (Mähring & Keil, 2008, p. 264). The third and fourth phases

occur after this reframing process has commenced: the third involves searching and having a creative process to generate possible alternative solutions, and the fourth involves implementing the chosen alternative while considering different stakeholders and their views.

A loss of legitimacy—the “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574)—often accompanies any significant escalation of major public sector IT projects. Recognizing the loss of legitimacy and working to regain it is a key aspect of public sector project de-escalation given citizens’ dual role as taxpayers and participants in government information systems. Legitimacy is not an inherent attribute but arises from the collective social evaluation of actors known as evaluators. These evaluators include individuals, groups, organizations, and field-level actors such as the media and regulators (Bitektine & Haack, 2015, p. 50). In assessing legitimacy, evaluators make judgments about 1) individual-level propriety (the desirability and appropriateness of an entity and its actions or practices) and 2) validity, the extent to which the collective of actors see that entity as appropriate for its social context (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Tost, 2011). These evaluative judgments can have a cumulative, mutually reinforcing impact: Bitektine and Haack (2015) explain how in noting: “as multiple evaluators express the same propriety judgment and observe others expressing it too, they gain greater reassurance of the validity of their judgement, in that it represents a consensus of opinion shared by others” (p. 51). Of relevance to this study, some societal institutions—media, government, and the judicial system—act as “critical sources of validity that fundamentally influence other evaluators’ judgements” (Bitektine & Haack, 2015, p. 51). In this paper, we focus on political satirists’ critical media-based commentary on prominent escalating public sector projects.

2.2 Satire, Cartoons, and Counter-framing of Dominant Views

Satire is a moral art (Griffin, 1994; Hall, 2014) used to “deflate, ridicule, and censure the perceived folly or immorality of what is represented” (Chandler & Munday, 2011). Individuals have used it throughout human history to critique current events and the way in which people in positions of influence exercise power. Originally a literary form, satire appears today in diverse forms, including drama, film, movies, song, cartoons, letters, and visual arts (Elliot, 2017). We adopt Elliot’s (2017) definition of satire as an artistic form “in which human or individual vices, follies, abuses, or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, parody, caricature, or other methods, sometimes with an intent to inspire social reform”.

Satirists challenge reason (logos) while using emotion (pathos or affect) as a tool of persuasion (Hall, 2014). Hall (2014, p. 12) notes that satirists:

Normally aim to make their audience laugh, if only sardonically: they do aim to elicit some joy. But satirists often also intend to make their audience angry, uncomfortable, discontented, restless or irritated with the subject of the satire. Joy at the satirizing of the wrongdoer is tinged with annoyance at the wrong being satirized and irritation at the knowledge that one might oneself be prone to the same follies.

Satire is underpinned by a set of implicit values against which satirists measure corruption and folly in order to arouse moral indignation (Kastan, 2006). Satire reframes events by providing a counter-narrative to dominant master narratives (Hill, 2013). Political satire involves an awareness of institutional frames and critiques such frames through frame-breaking or counter-framing (Hill, 2013; Wiseman, 2011). For example, The Daily Show uses framing to expose and parody the ways in which mainstream news media frame events (Wiesman, 2011). Counter-framing involves attempts “to rebut, undermine, or neutralize a person’s or groups’ myths, versions of reality, or interpretive framework” (Benford, 1987, p. 75, as cited by Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 626). By providing alternative ways of viewing events, satirists strive to subvert dominant views and their associated assumptions (Griffin, 1994; Hill, 2013). To do so, they employ devices such as irony, ridicule, sarcasm, wit, caricature, derision, burlesque, irony, parody, incongruity, double entendre, exaggeration, and distortion (Chandler & Munday, 2011; Elliot, 2004). The device of irony creates a deliberate discrepancy between the satirical information presented and the dominant view of a situation (Kreuz & Roberts, 1993).

Satire frequently manifests in the form of satirical political cartoons, which we focus on in this study. Political cartoons are a form of satirical journalism and visual opinion news discourse that “use comedic conventions to seize upon and reinforce common sense and thus enable the public to actively classify, organize and interpret in meaningful ways what they see or experience about the world at a given moment” (Greenburg, 2002, p. 181). Greenburg argues that, “in much the same way that newspaper

editorial writers attempt to pressure political decision-makers to act in a particular way, the claims embedded within political cartoons have the capacity of persuading readers toward attitudinal change” (p. 195).

We could not find prior work that has examined critiques of IT project escalation through political cartoons. However, information technology’s (IT) potential for disruptive change has provided rich fodder for cartoonists. For instance, the Dilbert strip cartoon appears in over 2,000 newspapers in 70 countries (Adams, 2015) and demonstrates the Dilbertian themes of office life, which often lampoon the uses and misuses of IT. In the late 20th century, the genre of “computer cartoons” attracted the attention of a small group of researchers. In analyzing computer cartoons, the U.S. publication *The Saturday Review* identified four major themes that had developed over a 30-year period: the computer as 1) a source of amusement, 2) an anthropomorphic appliance, 3) a source of malevolence, and 4) an entity in symbiosis with humankind (Mathews & Reifers, 1984, p. 1114). A larger study that examined more than 1,700 cartoons over a 55-year period identified the following themes: “an emerging society consisting of computers, computer hostility towards specific users, the programmer as a cartoon character, realistic problems in computer usage, animal characters as computer users” (Grupe, 1996, p. 59). Kendall (1997) explored the subject matter of cartoons from the perspective of the IS research literature and, in particular, the body of work that identifies the factors that to the use, success, or failure of information systems. Kendall identified several critical success factors as being present in the cartoons, and the author noted that cartoons can help identify gaps in expectations between systems analysts, users, and management.

The relationship between IS and satire is an emergent, underexplored area. We suggest that this area holds promise. Owing to its critical intent, satire has a natural synergy with the critical IS research tradition, which focuses on critiquing power relationships and restrictions of the status quo, explaining contradictions, and challenging prevailing assumptions (Myers, 1994; Myers & Klein, 2011). Satire’s role in invoking emotion (pathos or affect) to persuade others is also relevant to IS scholars: research has documented emotion’s ability to affect human cognition, decision making, and behavior, and interest in studying the role of affect in IS theory and research has begun to grow (Zhang, 2013).

2.3 Framing Theory as an Analytical Lens

Framing is a high-level theoretical construct of interest across several disciplines, such as media and political communication (Entman, 2004; Peifer, 2013; Wiesman, 2011), sociology (e.g., Morrison & Isaac, 2012), and IS. In IS, Orlikowski and Gash’s (1994) technological frames of reference (TFR) theory has been seminal (Davidson & Pai, 2004). Before we outline TFR theory, we briefly summarize research that uses frames and framing to study the media, political communication, and activism in social movements.

In media and political communication, studies of framing analyze how producers organize and their audiences make sense of meaning (Peifer, 2013). Frames guide the audience’s interpretation (Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Peifer, 2013): they organize ideas or storylines (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989) or symbolic and abstract principles that create structure and meaning (Reese, 2001). Framing involves selecting facets of events or issues and highlighting and making connections between these components in order to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, or solution (Entman, 2004, p. 5). Successful transmission, or activation, of a constructed frame depends its resonance or salience with how the audience understands the world (Wiesman, 2011). Making a frame more salient promotes “a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

A further body of research applies the frames and framing concepts in the context of activism in social movements (Benford & Snow, 2000; Cornelissen & Werner, 2014; Snow & Benford, 1988). Framing in this context involves actively producing meaning “for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 613). Actors do so by constructing interpretive collective action frames that simplify and condense aspects of the “world out there” in ways “intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 198; cited by Benford & Snow, 2000). Constructing such frames involves three core framing tasks: 1) diagnostic framing (identifying a problem and attributing it to a party), 2) prognostic framing (articulating a solution or plan of attack), and 3) motivational framing (providing a rationale to engage in ameliorative action (Benford & Snow, 2000, pp. 616-617). Activists may also use counter-factual framing to change old understandings and generate new ones (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 625.), and/or draw on *master frames* (i.e., enduring cultural themes) (Oliver & Johnston, 2000) to help create more targeted activist frames

(Conellissen & Werner, 2014). Master frames include concepts of civil rights, injustice, opposition, and hegemony (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 619).

We use TFR theory to examine how satirists portray public sector IT escalation. TFR provides “a systematic approach for examining the underlying assumptions, expectations, and knowledge that people have about technology” (Orlikowski & Gash, 1994, p. 174). A technological frame of reference refers to “the core set of assumptions, expectations, and knowledge of technology collectively held by a group or community” (p. 199). The TFR concept spans not only the nature and role of technology but also “the specific conditions, applications and consequences of that technology in particular contexts” (p. 178). User groups may share TFR or contest them, the latter of which can lead to political contests (Leonardi, 2011). Orlikowski and Gash (1994) identified three domains of TFR in studying a consulting firm that implemented groupware: 1) nature of technology (people’s images of the technology and their understandings of its capabilities and functionality), 2) technology strategy (people’s views of why their organization acquired and implemented a technology), and 3) technology in use (people’s understanding of how their organization will use a technology day to day and the conditions or consequences associated with its use) (pp. 183-184). They noted that these frame domains may apply to other contents and technologies but not likely to all others. Subsequent studies have identified context-specific technological frame domains (Barrett, 1999; Davidson, 2002; Khoo, 2001; Lin & Cornford, 2000; Olesen, 2014), including nature of technological change (Barrett, 1999), IT delivery strategies, IT capabilities and design, business value of IT, and IT-enabled work practices (Davidson, 2002).

Of significance to this study, when TFRs become institutionalized, the shared frames can produce cognitive inertia and, thus, reinforce the status quo and prevent an organization from adapting to a changing environment (Orlikowski & Gash, 1994, p. 200). Therefore, managers can find it useful to surface the shared, taken-for-granted expectations and assumptions that influence how groups of workers think about technology (p. 175). We suggest that TFR could be a valuable lens in studying the escalation of commitment in IT projects and subsequent de-escalation, a context in which managers need to challenge and reframe dominant views to facilitate project turn-around (Montealegre & Keil, 2000; Pan, Pan, & Flynn, 20014).

2.4 Background Summary

In this section, we emphasize the importance of de-escalation research given the problematic nature of developing and implementing government IT projects. We also make a case for stretching the boundaries of de-escalation research to consider the role of satire. Prior studies indicate that, in order for an organization to de-escalate an IT project, it needs a critical shift in views and opinions. Unanimous negative feedback can lay the groundwork for the de-escalation process, but such feedback alone cannot ensure de-escalation occurs. In addition to recognizing the problem, those involved in the project must reframe it—a difficult process that requires critical insight and creativity. When government projects “go bad”, they provide ready fodder for political satirists, a group of professionals who have particular expertise in the art of reframing. Satire is a well-established art built around critically and creatively reframing and counter-framing events. It focuses on entertaining while challenging the status quo and questioning the view of reality that those in power perpetuate. While we recognize that only a small minority of projects will end up in the public eye, it is nonetheless a valuable exercise to explore how political satire serves to counter-frame public sector IT project escalation. In doing so, we draw on technological frames of reference, a theoretical lens that researchers have used to analyze frames and identify conflicting views in frame domains in the context of information systems.

3 Research Method

In this study we focus on contemporary events over which we had no control (i.e., the way in which cartoonists used satire to critique problematic public sector projects, the events that surrounded the projects themselves, government endeavors to rectify problems, and the wider sector and media environments). We decided to conduct our initial case study due to the emergence of a large body of satire in the New Zealand media about a problematic IT project, and the New Zealand Government’s proactively publically releasing official documentation about the same project. Subsequently, we conducted a second case study of a similarly problematic IT project in Denmark to broaden the scope of data we collected and to add nuance to our findings. We determined that the best access to satirical data about public sector IT projects would involve projects of public interest (i.e., some kind of public service).

Such projects would need to be relatively large projects with a sufficient number of users to draw public interest and be targeted with satire.

The two public sector projects we chose received prominent negative attention. The first, the New Zealand Novopay project, was a deeply troubled nearshore outsourcing project that the Ministry of Education conducted to implement a new payroll system for New Zealand schools. Novopay was the subject of a 2013 ministerial review and a study on outsourcing failure (Clear, Raza, & Macdonell, 2013). The second, the Danish “Rejsekortet” (The Travel Card) project, was a project to implement a national smart card for public travel that the auditor general had released critical reports on twice in its 10-year lifespan. To provide a standardized approach to case descriptions, we created a timeline of events for each case by using a combination of news articles and official information such as ministerial inquiries.

Satirical cartoons about these projects formed our primary dataset. We conducted online image searches that confirmed that both projects had been the subject of substantial satirical commentary. For each of the projects, we gathered all the press items on the project, then sorted these items into two categories: 1) those that included satire and 2) that that did not. The satire group contained quite a large number of cartoons and a smaller amount of text- and television-based satire. In addition to the data from the press media, we identified examples of “home-grown” satire about the cases in publicly accessible social media pages. We excluded this material from our analysis but noted it as a potentially valuable source for identifying contested framing about projects among disaffected users. Next, we analyzed and synthesized what we found. In doing so, we found inspiration in chapter six about methods of exploring in Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2013). Furthermore, we used the retrospective process that Nelson (2005) and Kerth (2001) describe.

Analyzing the data involved several rounds of thematic coding in which we moved from a descriptive to a more theoretical approach. The first round of data analysis was inductive. We identified sets of codes at the level of individual cartoons based around 1) the use of satirical devices (e.g., visual metaphor, anthropomorphism, pun, exaggeration, irony) and 2) satirical inferences made through these means (e.g., unfair power imbalance, lack of care, malevolence, arrogance, runaway technology). Conducting inductive framing analysis is not straightforward because researchers must take into account the possibility that their own mental models may interfere with their identification of a frame (Van Gorp, 2010; Van Gorp & Vercruyse, 2012). We used a systematic approach to reduce such interference; that is, we scanned and compared data in parallel as themes emerged as Corbin and Strauss (2008) recommend. In this inductive round of coding, we merged and renamed codes, discussed the codes, and returned to our data to test and reapply any new codes we identified. In the New Zealand case, we were able to confirm interpretations of the intended messages by referencing the author commentaries that accompanied some cartoons in New Zealand’s national cartoon archive. After merging and revising these codes in several iterations, we identified common families of codes that occurred across both cases, which resulted in a set of six overarching satirical counter-frames.

In the second major round of coding, we revisited the cartoons and previously identified counter-frames using Orlikowski and Gash’s (1994) TFR as a lens. (We used the TFR frame domain categories, nature of technology, technology in use and technology strategy. We were open to identifying additional TFR frames but found that we did not need to because two of the three core TFR domains fitted well with the satirical counter-frames.) In this round, we each independently coded the data and resolved discrepancies via discussion (see Table 2 for the resulting codes and examples). To more deeply understand how the various cartoons framed and represented the troublesome projects, we then returned to the broader framing and legitimization literature in which we identified additional concepts of relevance to our emergent findings and to the transition from escalation to de-escalation. In our inductive coding round, we identified a significant emphasis on portraying citizen users as project victims while portraying project owners as misusing power and normalizing problems in a delusional, overconfident way, so we also applied stakeholder identification and salience theory. In this interpretive round of analysis, we focused on better understanding the employed counter-framing process (challenging official frames and appropriating master frames), mapping the moral intent of the cartoons in evaluating legitimacy, and examining their impact on legitimacy through manipulating stakeholder salience. In this stage, our sensitivity to the de-escalation literature informed our analysis, and we continued to engage in discussions both verbally and using document markup.

Finally, to better understand the factors that impact the topics political cartoonists choose, what motivates them to create political cartoons, and the process they use in creating and framing issues in their cartoons, we conducted exploratory interviews with four New Zealand political cartoonists. These

interviews provided rich data about satirical intent and framing processes to complement and enrich our primary cartoon dataset. All four interviewees had published cartoons critiquing the Novopay project, and three had done so multiple times. We were not able to recruit Danish cartoonists due to the legacy of terrorist attacks on a Danish newspaper office in response to religious satire, which had driven some cartoonists into hiding (see Webster et al., 2016) and, thus, increased the difficulty in reaching them. We found New Zealand's national cartoon archive¹ helpful to recruit the New Zealander cartoonists, but we could not use such an archive to recruit Danish cartoonists since the country lacked one. Two of the interviewees operated in an international arena (i.e., they published in other countries including the UK). Interviews were semi-structured and included questions about their treatment of public sector projects more generally. In order to avoid influencing interviews, we did not share the findings we obtained from analyzing the cartoons with interviewees. Table 1 summarizes the methods we used.

Table 1. Summary of Methods

Objective	Data	Collection method (time period)	Data reduction/analysis
Identify and describe public sector IT project escalation cases that were the subject of satire in mass media	Satirical cartoons and news articles from mass media Project documents (public release, NZ); ministerial inquiries (NZ & Denmark), report from auditor general (Denmark)	Search of media archives and publicly available government documentation (2007-2014) Google image search for cartoons that criticize projects (2013-2014)	Triangulation to identify projects that fitted objective: Novopay (NZ) and Rejsekortet (Denmark) Timelines of events created as basis to describe cases and to understand time-specific context of cartoons
Analyze how political satirists portray project escalation in cartoons	Body of satirical cartoons from mass media outlets	Search of Google images, media outlets, NZ's national cartoon archive (2013-2014)	Thematic coding (stage one: descriptive and inductive; stage two: TFR theory)
Understand frame construction from cartoonists' perspective	Exploratory interviews with cartoonists (NZ only)	Invitations sent to cartoonists on national cartoon archive mailing list (2017, NZ only)	Interpretive thematic analysis to identify the processes used in creating cartoons and factors that impact topic selection, motivation, and framing

4 Introduction to the Cases

4.1 Case 1: Novopay: A School Payroll System

In 2005, New Zealand's Ministry of Education began a project to replace its legacy payroll service for schools. It planned to develop a Web-based service to streamline and standardize payment processes across NZ's 2,457 self-managed schools. School-based administrators would use the service to pay around 110,000 teachers and non-teaching staff. After initially planning to run the new system in-house, the ministry elected to take a business process outsourcing (BPO) approach instead to reduce risk and improve cost-effectiveness. In 2008, the New Zealand Government signed a NZ\$80 million contract with an Australian provider. However, the system requirements proved far more complex than the ministry had anticipated, which led to significant delays. The new payroll service eventually went live in August, 2012, in a single, country-wide implementation (MoE, 2013a). It immediately experienced problems: a significant minority of staff across 90 percent of schools was overpaid, underpaid, or not paid at all (MoE, 2013a). Reported errors included payments made based on the wrong classification (qualified teachers vs. untrained staff), payments made for work at the wrong school, and wages calculated based on part-time instead of full-time employment (Barback, 2013).

Errors persisted over multiple pay periods as Novopay and Ministry staff attempted to resolve issues and as the problems between the ministry and the vendor escalated. In early 2013, the Minister of Economic Development, Steven Joyce, was appointed to oversee and resolve the Novopay project. Joyce rejected a

¹ <https://natlib.govt.nz/collections/a-z/new-zealand-cartoon-archive>

rollback to the legacy system in favor of a NZ\$5 million remediation plan to fix Novopay. A technical review and a ministerial inquiry into the project subsequently occurred (Ministry of Education, 2013b), and an upsurge in freedom of information requests from the public led the government to proactively release a comprehensive set of project documentation. During these events, Novopay-related events featured regularly in the news media: teachers across the country protested, several high-ranking ministry staff departed, the Post-Primary Teachers' Association initiated a group legal action. The government eventually announced a NZ\$6 million compensation package for affected schools and called off debt collectors who had been pursuing teachers who had been accidentally overpaid (Davidson, 2013).

A subsequent ministerial inquiry into Novopay found that the “state of affairs and the wider disruptions that were caused [by Novopay] were avoidable” (New Zealand Government, 2013, p. 1) and that the government had not learnt the lessons from previous problematic IT projects. It placed the blame firmly on the ministry in noting that, “In this case, the Ministry of Education failed to meet its obligations” (p. 1). It found that the outsourcing project had shifted away from implementing a configured package towards developing a strongly customized software solution and that weaknesses in project governance and leadership significantly contributed to Novopay going live with “a number of significant risks which the Ministry and its vendors were over-confident of managing” (p. 2). The inquiry also found that the government ministers with signoff responsibility for the project “were not always well served by the quality of advice about the project from the Ministry”.

4.2 Case 2: Rejsekortet: A Smart Card Travel System

Denmark has a state-owned train system, DSB, and numerous regional and municipal transport companies that run buses, local trains, and a metro in the capital Copenhagen. In 1998, Copenhagen's regional transport company fostered the idea that its customers should use a “smart card” to travel by bus, subway, or train (Pedersen, 2009). The public received this idea so well that, after four years of discussion, a group of organizations—the HUR (Copenhagen County development authority), Ørestadsselskabet (metro operating company, Copenhagen), DSB (national railway corporation), Storstrøm Trafikselskab, and Vestsjælland Trafikselskab, Vejle Amts Trafikselskab og Nordjyllands Trafikselskab (county traffic companies)—founded the limited liability company Rejsekortet A/S to oversee the development and operation of a smart travel card for all forms of public transport nationwide across Denmark (Harboe & Riis, 2015).

The original plan would introduce Rejsekortet (the travel card) in Copenhagen in 2006. When Rejsekortet A/S invited suppliers to bid on the project, it emphasized that it required a standard system and that they had to prove that their solution would work in an area the size of Denmark. In 2005, Rejsekortet A/S contracted the supplier consortium East-West Denmark (owned by French company Thales (80%) and Accenture (20%)) to develop and supply hardware, infrastructure and software. The contract called for Rejsekortet to be ready in 2009. In 2007, pilot tests began, but there were fewer than the contract stipulated. The supplier postponed delivery deadlines and, in 2008, entered into an additional agreement with Rejsekortet A/S. From 2009 to 2011, travel card terminals were installed to check in and out at stations, but further deadlines were postponed, and in late 2009, the parties negotiated another addition to the original contract. Once again, the development of Rejsekortet became more costly than expected. In 2010, customers began using Rejsekortet in two of the five regions of Denmark. In 2011, one region went full scale and completely abolished the old way of paying for travel.

In 2011, the auditor general published a critical report on the Rejsekortet project (Rigsrevisionen, 2011). At that point, the project was at least four years late and Rejsekortet A/S had entered into five additional agreements with the supplier (Harboe & Riis). The report found that Rejsekortet A/S had not prepared the project satisfactorily since it did not ensure that the supplier had fully understood its requirements for the system. Further, the supplier had failed to meet agreed deadlines, and the customer side had responded in a way to shore up its legal position instead of responding adequately and applying risk management to mitigate problems.

From 2012 to 2016, Rejsekortet A/S implemented the travel card in all five regions of Denmark. In March, 2015, the Danish broadcasting corporation DR publically compared prices between Rejsekortet and other ways of paying for travel (e.g., traditional paper tickets): it showed that over one million people had bought a Rejsekort but that the card would not always provide them with the cheapest travel on public transport. In fact, customers risked a more expensive journey if they used Rejsekortet (Clausen & Borch, 2015). In mid-April in 2015, when Rejsekortet had been delayed six years, a further report from the auditor general concluded that usability was still too low and that the cost had run up so high that the Rejsekortet

company approached bankruptcy (Østergaard, 2015). The report noted that: “The parties behind Rejsekortet has spent time and effort disagreeing instead of moving forward to resolve the problems”.

4.3 Comparative Commentary

Both Novopay and Rejsekortet were central government-funded projects designed to improve services. Both began with a user-centric vision to simplify and streamline use, but the inability to deliver on their visions delivered the reverse effect: delayed system launches inconvenienced customers to such a degree that the new problems far eclipsed those of the legacy systems. While the failure of any large taxpayer-funded IT project will likely draw critical scrutiny, one can see the nature and extent of failure in both these cases as particularly conducive to satire, which requires suitable subject matter for irony and incongruity: Novopay set out to improve and streamline the school payroll process, but resulted in incorrect (or absent) pay for teachers and principals for weeks, while Rejsekortet set out to make travel easier for Danish citizens but left citizens who forgot to log off unable to travel. The significant incongruity of these outcomes in relationship to the project goals provided ready fodder for satirists.

The two projects did have some key differences: whereas New Zealand’s Ministry of Education managed Novopay as an outsourcing project, a separate entity outside the government managed Rejsekortet. Further, the impacts of the two projects had different levels of scope and severity. Rejsekortet caused difficulties for all Danish travelers, but Novopay impacted a smaller subset of citizens: teachers and other school staff. Nonetheless, Novopay had a more significant impact on this citizen user group: while Danish travelers faced frustration and missed out on well-priced travel fares, they did not risk losing their pay. The Novopay business case noted that: “Payroll, like water and electricity, is a function or service that goes unnoticed when it runs as it should...but when it falters or fails it becomes the primary focus of management and employees alike” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 114). A further difference relates to the broader political context in which the problems unfolded: in New Zealand, problems with the new education payroll system came to light at a time when the government was embarking on closing schools, a move that created significant tension and unhappiness in the education sector. Denmark had no parallel sector problem.

5 Findings

One can see the satirists as field-level evaluators of the legitimacy of the failing technology projects and their stakeholders. We identified six overarching counter-frames that the satirists used to exaggerate, parody, and challenge the normative official framing of the failing projects. Two of these counter-frames relate to the TFR nature of technology frame domain: 1) the system broken, sick and/or useless; and 2) the system as dangerous and out of control. The other four relate to the TFR technology in use frame domain and critique the way in which the technology is used and the conditions and consequences of its use: 3) victimization of customer users, 4) incompetent control, 5) evasion of responsibility, and 6) normalization of the perverse (a counter-frame that recognized and overtly challenged the official normative framing of technology in use). Five of these counter-frames (all except the fourth) appeared in both cases of satire, while the fourth appeared only in the Novopay case. In combination, the counter-frames provide a powerful moral commentary on the projects: they highlight the suffering of low-power citizen users while critiquing the conduct and competence of those in power. In Section 5.1, we outline the six counter-frames. Subsequently, we report the findings we obtained from the interviews about how the satirists conducted the counter-frames and their motivations and influences in terms of framing approach. In Section 5.2, we draw on framing, legitimacy, and stakeholder salience theory to outline how the satirists deployed the counter-frames to question moral principles, challenge legitimacy, and change the salience of key stakeholders. Table 2 overviews how the counter-framing operates. In Section 6, we consider the implications of these findings.

5.1 Satirical Counter-frames

In analyzing the cartoons, we identified six key satirical counter-frames in the cases: two that relate to the nature of technology frame domain (NT) and four that relate to the technology in use frame domain (TU) of TFR. Some cartoons use these counter-frames individually, while others combine them such that they interact in various ways.

Satirists objectified both systems by using visual metaphors that address the nature of technology (NT) frame domain (Orlikowski & Gash, 1994) to critique the technology, its capabilities, and functionality.

While some cartoons show the systems as objects, others portray them as animate participants that have taken on lives of their own and are perpetuating problems. In these latter cases, the cartoons employ animal metaphors, anthropomorphism, and/or personification to portray the IT system as an animate participant in the creation of problems. The human or animal characteristics depicted range from immaturity, in the Rejsekortet case, to predation and malevolence, in the Novopay case.

The first counter-frame in the NT domain category portrays the system as broken, sick, and/or useless. For example, the cartoons show Novopay as a broken car (Parsons, 2013), a smashed humpty dumpty (Nisbet, 2013), a lemon (Hawkey, 2012), and a dying dog (Tremain, 2013)—depictions that contrast starkly to the statement that the new payroll system would have a significantly reduced risk of technology failure and improved accuracy and quality of output (Ministry of Education, 2007). Similarly, a Danish cartoon suggests that the Rejsekortet travel card is useful for scraping ice off a car. The NT counter-framing emphasizes that the systems have become a significant liability; they need to be abandoned, replaced, cared for, or repaired.

The second counter-frame in the NT domain goes further to present the system as dangerous, malevolent, and/or out of control. For example, one cartoon shows Rejsekortet as a set of stocks imprisoning a customer (Refn, 2013), while various cartoons portray Novopay as a virus, a bomb (Winter, 2014), marauding crocodiles (Doyle, 2013a; see Figure 1), a minotaur (Doyle, 2013b), a running headless chicken (Winter, 2013), and a gigantic head louse (Scott, 2014). Many of these visual metaphors invoke the runaway technology frame (Gamson, 1992, p. 152; Benford, 1997). This counter-frame challenges the official view that a system is neutral and reversible: once one has implemented a problematic system, it may take on a “life” of its own and produce a spiral of negative consequences that one cannot easily address. The frequent use of malevolent anthropomorphism in this category highlights the dangers that the problematic systems presented to stakeholders. This counter-frame also highlights the extreme difficulty and cost involved in bringing a problematic system under control.

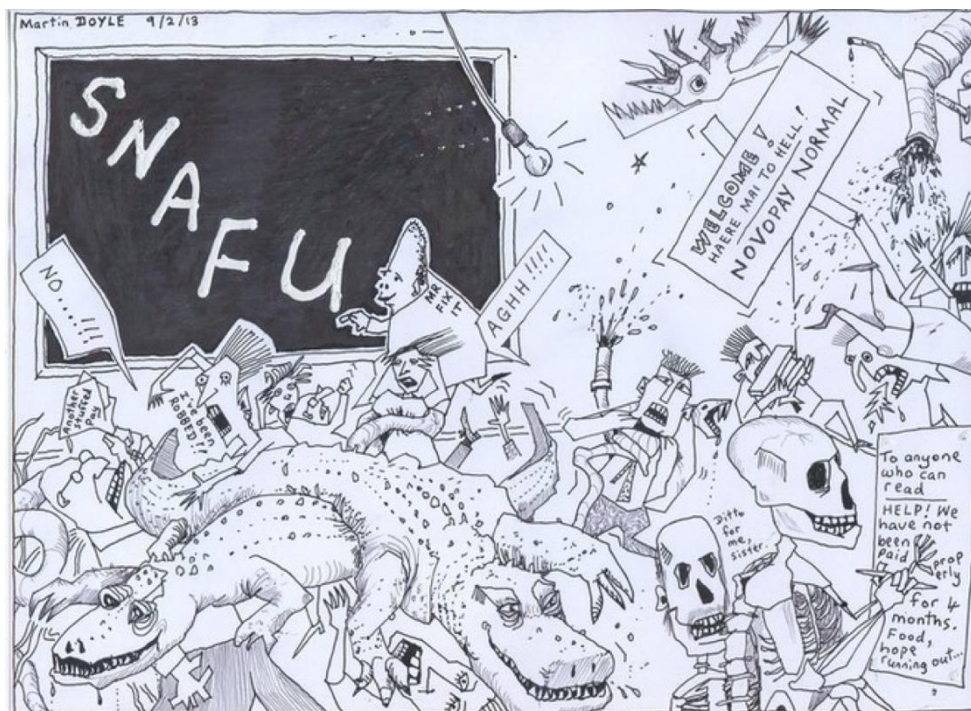


Figure 1. The New Normal (Doyle, 2013a)

The third to sixth counter-frames relate to the technology in use frame domain (TU), the ways in which technology is used and the consequences of use. Official, institutional frames for Novopay and Rejsekortet had anticipated diverse benefits from TU: Rejsekortet would make it easier for passengers to use public transport (Danish National Audit Office, as cited in Harboe & Rijs, 2015), while Novopay would create significant benefits of a strategic, process, and reputational nature (Ministry of Education, 2007). The satirical TU counter-frames present a strongly divergent view of the “reality” of outcomes.

The third counter-frame is the victimization of customer users. Both cases feature satirical portrayals of the systems' customers as innocent victims who have received unjust treatment. The Rejsekortet cartoons illustrate travelers' confusion, frustration, and inappropriate treatment as they interact with authoritarian ticket machines: one hapless customer is told he has been blacklisted for a year, while officials drag another away for forgetting to log out with her head and hands locked in a giant travel card (see Figure 2). In the Novopay case, the satirical focus falls not on users (school administrators) but on the plight of teachers, end customers, and system victims who have not been paid. For example, one cartoon shows teachers as malnourished skeletons pleading for help, while another cartoon shows a teacher arriving home while carrying a chicken and pig that Novopay has issued him with in lieu of pay. These cartoons combine exaggeration with humor, which invites the reader to empathize with the plight of powerless users and confirm the unfairness of their situation.



Figure 2. Did They Catch the Person Responsible? No, It's a Passenger Who Forgot to Log Out Three Times (Refn, 2013)

The fourth counter-frame, incompetent control, appeared only in the Novopay case. The Novopay satire is distinctive in that it also critiques the period in which the government made clear attempts to de-escalate the project. A cabinet reshuffle resulted in the Economic Develop Minister Steven Joyce's appointment to oversee the resolution of the troubled project. Throughout this period, as the impact of Novopay on teachers continued to feature prominently in the media, the incompetent control counter-frame appeared in several cartoons along with the themes of over-confidence and over-simplification of the problem. For example, cartoons portray Minister Joyce displaying confidence that he can fix a broken old car (Parsons, 2013), teach a dachshund to do a high jump (Hubbard, 2014), win a fight with a minotaur (Doyle, 2013b), glue together a broken humpty dumpty (Nisbet, 2013), and use a turtle to attack Novopay (Scott, 2013). Cartoons also show him as a surgeon confident that he can save an injured Frankenstein. A cartoon by Hubbard (2013) shows the government and ministry as talent show judges who are mesmerized by a clown's (the Novopay vendor) juggling performance. Apparently unaware that the clown has dropped his balls, the other judges (the government and the education ministry) are thinking "brilliant" and "wonderful", while the other judge, a teacher, looks away while grimacing. This cartoon portrays teachers as insightful critics who are sidelined and disempowered and those in power as the oppoite.

The fifth counter-frame is evasion of responsibility. In both cases, the satirical cartoons raise the question of who is to blame for the problems and highlight officials' evading responsibility. However, the cartoons treat this theme differently for the two cases. The Rejsekortet cartoons raise the question of who is responsible but does not attribute blame. For example, one cartoon shows a bystander who witnesses a passenger being carried away ask guards if they have found the person responsible. While the portrayal of an innocent user being punished evokes a sense of unfairness, the question about who is responsible remains hanging. Body (2013) takes a similar approach in his Novopay cartoon: the cartoon depicts a racing car with several drivers that has crashed on the beach and two bystanders talking. One bystander asks who the stig is (which references "the stig"—an unidentified character on the show Top Gear who

sets time laps), and the other replies that he does not know because “they all deny they were driving”. However, many of the Novopay cartoons clearly attribute blame. Separate cartoons show the Minister of Education, Hekia Parata, running from a flaming ministry building while holding a petrol and shouting, “I didn’t do it!” (Slane, 2013), and as having vanished as her clothes and boots walk past a sign saying “Teachers Novopay Shambles” (Hubbard, 2012b). In a similar vein, Doyle (2013c) portrays two ministers’ (Joyce and Parata) making the “huge admission” that it is all somebody else’s fault, while Hubbard (2013) features the government (as young George Washington) pointing at the Ministry of Education alongside a felled cherry tree. These examples strongly invoke the moral, emotive themes of betrayal and dishonesty by powerful stakeholders. One could also see the evasion of responsibility theme as a provocative counter-framing of the technology strategy frame domain. Governments positioned the motivation for both projects as advancing services. In the Novopay case, cartoons show the strategy that guided key stakeholders in the face of project escalation as systematic evasion.

The sixth counter-frame is normalization of the perverse: the framing of extraordinary problems as being normal by those in power. This counter-frame addresses the normative framing of technology in use and demonstrates external critics’ sensitivity to this aspect of TFR. In both the Rejsekortet and Novopay cases, cartoons show those in power perpetuating a dystopian “new normal” by framing a perverse situation as normal despite the systems’ significant and unfair impacts on customers. Significantly, the “new normal” theme shows authorities treating customer victims inappropriately in the course of their business as usual: New Zealand’s starving teachers plead for help in a crocodile-infested room but are told that everything is normal (the minister writes SNAFU on the blackboard), and guards drag off a Danish traveler who forgot to check out while the person responsible for the system problems remains at large. One can see this normalization as providing a provocative counter-frame to official views. Both projects had reached an advanced stage of escalation of commitment when they became satirical targets. Cartoons lampoon rationalized continuation, an advanced stage of escalation, where key players “go to great lengths to rationalize their continued support of a project that is visibly in dire straits” (Mähring & Keill, 2008, p. 260), via the “normalization of the perverse” frame while evoking pathos for the powerless victims.

5.2 Frame Construction from the Cartoonists’ Perspective

We interviewed four cartoonists to explore the process they used to select and frame topics and the factors that motivated them to do so. Although a small sample, it helped us identify common concerns that the satirists faced and the key practices they employed in selecting and building frames. Those we interviewed all reported basing their knowledge of project-related events on the reports of news media. They described synthesizing and reflecting on information from a range of news media sources and trusting quality sources more. (One cartoonist described placing a link back to the source with every cartoon to allow audiences to better understand the context). They had an overarching pragmatic goal to “entertain the troops” with a cartoon on an issue that resonated with a general audience and would remain relevant at the time of publication. They scanned and screened news sources while looking out for phrases, words, and turns of events that could provide a potential thematic source for a cartoon. They placed particular value on material that they could use to highlight the irony of a situation. The satirists described undertaking two broad screening processes in a concurrent, interdependent way: 1) selecting and evaluating an issue’s suitability (its resonance, relevance, durability, and appeal) and 2) determining how to portray (frame) that issue. This two-part process combined intuitive, creative work with analytical decision making, judgment, and combinatorial thinking. In selecting the cartoon topic, they made a rational judgment about an issue’s currency and latency. As there is a lag between conceiving a cartoon and its publication, the chosen issue needed to be durable enough to last in the public mind for a week. It also needed to take a novel spin.

In reviewing source news material, the Novopay satirists reported seeking out 1) irony in terms of outcomes versus professed intentions and 2) weaknesses such as incompetence, overconfidence, and/or insincerity on the part of politicians or senior public servants. This process included making judgments about the tenor, honesty, and transparency of governmental communications about an issue. One noted: “Public sector IT debacles often seem to involve government high-handedness, which is always tempting material for a cartoon”. Another noted: “We constantly heard from politicians who dominated the discourse all the time.... I found that really frustrating that these PR people just were controlling everything being said and we didn’t often hear from teachers”. They also perceived that the ministers smothered issues, which served as provocation for cartoons. For example, one said: “Once he’s got his hands on it, he’s an

expert at smothering; it's like he covers issues in chloroform and kills them silently". Further, they saw lack of explanation of Novopay's technical problems to the public as problematic. One satirist noted:

No one succeeded in explaining the technical issues involved in Novopay; why it was even happening and what were the key problems going on. No one got their head around that and no one was able to explain it [though the media].

The frame-construction process (determining how to frame and portray an issue conceptually, visually, and metaphorically) occurred interdependently with the process outlined above. The satirists described the value of being attuned to the multiple meanings of specific words, images, and metaphors used in the news that surrounded the failing projects for puns and visual imagery. They saw the name Novopay as a bonus in this respect. For example, one said

It was just the irony of the name..., the fact it was called "Novopay"; it sounds so good and wonderful, and it was just the irony of having such a modern, perfect sounding name and such a horrible result being delivered on the ground.

They saw identifying images as a source of metaphor for transmitting ideas as especially important given the challenge of portraying an IT project: "When you talk about something like Novopay it's not instantly obvious, like [choosing] a particular image—what do you have? People sitting at a computer or what? It doesn't immediately lend itself to imagery". One cartoon employed the term "dog" as source for visual lampooning. The cartoonist explained:

[The minister had] referred to Novopay as being a dog.... I didn't need any more. I just drew a dog.... I gave [the minister] the words, 'Novopay is a dog, it has big teeth, it's got rabies, and hates teachers, but hey, it's now up and running, and you're paying for its tucker'.. You know, taxpayers were going to have to pay for this dog.... Every cartoonist would use dogs in different ways. I just chose to use it as...one of those big revolting dogs which their owner loves.

One can see this use of the rabid dog metaphor as combining the NT counter-frame of dangerous, malevolent, out-of-control technology with the TU counter-frame of normalization of the perverse (by its owner) to provide a two-pronged critique of the state of technology (the Novopay system) and its ownership.

Simultaneously, the cartoonists described searching for loosely related or unrelated concurrent events (in the sector, news media, or popular media) that they could draw on to create unexpected synergies with the source issue and could combine to add deeper relevance/resonance with the audience. This combinatory step was particularly useful in the case of an IT project when the audience needed a visual metaphor. (Examples included reality and TV shows and news that schools would no longer use seclusion rooms. One cartoonist drew on the latter example to reflect the issue of Novopay being locked away.) Further, the satirists drew on a repertoire of perennial visual metaphors with popular meanings to provide critical commentary (e.g., a headless chicken, a baby, Frankenstein, a lemon). Affect/value judgments and the desire to sanction government's unfair use of power played a key part in what the satirists selected and how savagely they treated it. For example, perceptions that ministers were incompetent, high-handed, overconfident, and/or unfair or that they made unfair policy decisions seemed to influence the nature of satire. (Some interviewees revealed strong passion regarding Novopay authorities and their policies versus affection and empathy for teachers and children). The (perceived) climate in the relevant part of the public sector appears to set the scene for the way in which satirists react to and interpret events in creating humor. The satirists expressed strong judgments about the government's actions: both as it concerned policy decisions and powerful individuals' behavior. They discussed the perceived credibility, competence, and trustworthiness of powerful stakeholders but also expressed a strong level of empathy with the user victims. In the case of Novopay, the satirists linked the inequality of power with a moral opposition between the quality of powerful and weak stakeholders. One interviewee commented:

[The media] interviewed a whole lot of teachers, and I thought that they'd be all fuming angry... but they weren't; they were articulate about what the issues were...and I just thought, well, what a decent bunch of human beings, and that remained a permanent impression for me, that this was a decent bunch of human beings who were really badly...paid, or not paid...and then in contrast you've got people like...the loathsome [minister].

6 Discussion

In this section, we examine more closely the way in which the satirical counter-framing process operates; in particular we consider how the satirists' use of counter-frames implicitly critiques project legitimacy based on moral grounds. We draw on the concepts of collective action frames (Snow & Benford, 1990) and moral principles from stakeholder theory to gain further insight. Stakeholder theory rests on the tenet that organizations have equal responsibilities to their diverse stakeholders for moral reasons and that four key principles should guide them: 1) honoring agreements, 2) avoiding lying, 3) respecting the autonomy of others, and 4) avoiding harm to others (Gottschalk & Solli-Saether, 2005). We outline below how one can see the cartoonists' use of counter-frames as invoking these moral principles. Further, we consider how the cartoons portray the impacts of escalation by creating an exaggerated juxtaposition of the fortunes of two key stakeholder groups (i.e., powerless taxpaying citizen users and powerful managers and officials) alongside the role of out-of-control technology. Here we draw on Mitchell, Agle, and Wood's (1997) stakeholder salience framework, which classifies stakeholder salience according to criteria of power, legitimacy, and urgency (the degree to which the claims of a particular stakeholder group call for immediate attention).

In using counter-frames to critique the dramatic escalation of the Novopay and Rejsekortet projects, the political satirists employed both diagnostic and motivational framing (Snow & Benford, 1990, pp. 616-617). While diagnostic framing works to explain the situation (albeit in exaggerated terms), motivational framing goes further: it attempts to incite indignation and a desire for action. In both the Novopay and Rejsekortet cases, the satirical cartoons draw on the powerful master frames of hegemony and injustice. In doing so, they implicitly invite the audience to evaluate the legitimacy of those in power against moral principles while increasing the salience of the powerless stakeholders' needs, which we explain further below. Table 2 summarizes our analysis with examples.

The first and second NT counter-frames are both diagnostic and motivational in nature: at the diagnostic level, the cartoons that use these frames portray the system that has gone bad or out of control as perpetuating problems. As such, they invoke the implicit moral principle avoiding harm to others. The cartoons that draw on this frame emphasize the lack of power of people vis-à-vis technology, which serves to increase the urgency of needs of citizen taxpayers and system managers' need to act rapidly and effectively (see Table 2). These counter-frames also work to undermine the technology's legitimacy (its validity for the job) and, by extension, that of its owner managers. When combined with counter-frames from the TU domain in cartoons, the NT counter-frames help strengthen blame attribution; for example, Doyle (2013a) heightens the minister's appraisal of problems as being normal in his cartoon by portraying the out-of-control system as marauding crocodiles that are devouring teachers.

The third counter-frame, victimization of customer users, diagnoses the citizen/taxpayer/customer as being treated unfairly. By drawing on the master frame of injustice to invoke empathy and outrage, it provides a motivational frame. The frame undermines the legitimacy of owner managers by invoking the moral principles of respecting autonomy of others and avoiding harm to others. As a result, the counter-frame dramatically increases the urgency and salience of customer needs. Incompetent control (fourth counter-frame) diagnoses incompetence and overconfidence as being a contributing cause of problems. The master frames of hegemony and avoiding harm to others and become salient in the satire, and, through portraying powerful actors as misusing power, it undermines these actors' legitimacy. In doing so, the satire emphasizes the urgency of taxpayers' need for a better solution and for confidence in management. Evasion of responsibility (fifth counter-frame) diagnoses the behavior of powerful stakeholders (notably ministers) as a concurrent part of the problem. Here, the satire invokes the master frame of injustice to motivate sanctioning and a desire for justice. Again, it displays power as being misused, which undermines the legitimacy of powerful stakeholders while increasing the perceived urgency of the societal need for transparency. Finally, normalization of the perverse (sixth counter-frame) diagnoses the inappropriate framing of problems as a cause by drawing on the master frames of hegemony and injustice to invite a desire for justice. The satire emphasizes the extraordinarily low power of end users and undermines the legitimacy of those in power by drawing on the master frames of hegemony, respecting autonomy to others, and avoiding harm to others. It also heightens the urgency of customer needs for a fairer framing of problems through exaggeratedly depicting the situation.

Table 2. Overview of Findings with Examples of Counter-frames

TFR	Counter-frames and examples (N = Novopay; R = Rejsekortet)	Counter-framing strategy	Impact on stakeholder salience (and relevant moral principles)
Nature of technology	<i>Broken, sick, useless</i> : the system is broken, useless, sick or injured; a liability in need of termination/care/repair (e.g., broken car, dying dog (N); only useful for scraping ice off cars (R))	<i>Diagnostic</i> : system-gone-bad is perpetuating problems in absence of control or care	<i>Power</i> : people lack power vis-à-vis technology <i>Legitimacy</i> : undermines legitimacy of technology and, by extension, its owner managers (avoiding harm to others) <i>Urgency</i> : increased urgency needs of citizens as taxpayers and users at risk; system managers need to act
	<i>Dangerous, out of control</i> : the system is harmful, malevolent, out of control (e.g. Marauding crocodiles, minotaur, head louse (N); Authoritarian robot, medieval stocks (R))	<i>Motivational</i> : invokes concern, indignation, desire for solution	
Technology in use	<i>Victimization of customer users</i> : customer as innocent victim of the system who suffers extreme consequences (e.g., teachers as pleading, starving skeletons (N); user is blacklisted for a year (R))	<i>Diagnostic</i> : customer is victim being treated unfairly <i>Motivational</i> : uses injustice master frame to invoke empathy and a desire for a solution	<i>Power</i> : customers/citizen users have lower power <i>Legitimacy</i> : undermines legitimacy of technology and its owner managers (respecting autonomy of others, avoiding harm to others) <i>Urgency</i> : increased need for welfare of customer users
	<i>Incompetent control</i> : those in charge lack competence to fix the situation and/or are over-confident (e.g., minister unleashes attack turtle, uses glue to fix humpty dumpty, enters coliseum full of corpses (N))	<i>Diagnostic</i> : problem is attributed to ministerial ineptitude/ overconfidence <i>Motivational</i> : uses master frame of hegemony to invoke sanctioning and a desire for better management and proper solution	<i>Power</i> : overseeing minister's misuse and over-estimation of power <i>Legitimacy</i> : undermines legitimacy of those in power (hegemony, avoiding harm to others) <i>Urgency</i> : increased urgency of taxpayer stakeholder need for better system solution and better management
	<i>Evasion of responsibility</i> : those responsible are evading responsibility and/or blaming others (e.g., minister runs from burning building with gas can, crew of crashed car won't identify driver (N); Passenger seeing arrest of user asks, "Has the one responsible been caught?" (R))	<i>Diagnostic</i> : identifies problem and attributes blame to minister(s) <i>Motivational</i> : invokes master frame of injustice to invite sanctioning and a desire for truth and justice	<i>Power</i> : misuse of power through evasion of responsibility by overseeing ministers <i>Legitimacy</i> : undermines propriety and validity of those in power (honoring agreements, avoiding lying) <i>Urgency</i> : increased urgency of societal need for transparency
	<i>Normalization of the perverse</i> : extraordinary problems are framed as a perverse "new normal" by those in power (e.g., minister writes "SNAFU" on whiteboard amidst carnage (N); traveler is dragged away by guards for failing to log off (R))	<i>Diagnostic</i> : identifies problem as inappropriate framing; attributes blame to minister/authorities <i>Motivational</i> : master frames of hegemony and injustice invite desire for justice	<i>Power</i> : emphasizes low power of citizen end users <i>Legitimacy</i> : undermines the propriety and validity of those in power (honoring agreements, respecting autonomy of others, avoiding harm to others) <i>Urgency</i> : increased need of impacted users for fair problem framing

Organizations and citizens take on great risk when ideas that reinforce failure imprison managers. In response to the problem of letting go of existing ideas, Välikangas and Sevón (2010) argue for the role of jester; "a unique social mechanism that evolved to help humans cope with ideas that refuse to leave them" (p. 149). In medieval times, jesters had a rare freedom of speech that allowed them to ridicule dominant ideas by pointing out obvious or partly hidden problems, undressing masquerades, and reminding rulers of the fragility of their position (Välikangas & Sevón, 2010). We suggest that satire could perform a similar

mediating role in de-escalating failure—a high-stakes process that requires actors to reframe and challenge ideas. Satire as a genre promotes actors to critique power and reframe dominant values and beliefs. It uses irony and exaggeration to communicate fresh perspectives while using humor as a safety valve. It is also a subjective, biased medium of communication. This lack of objectivity may be beneficial as it concerns the theme of de-escalation. In the early stages of de-escalating commitment, key IT project players need to reframe their views, which is difficult. Creativity, consistent negative feedback, and external pressure—conditions that satire can reflect and help foster—promote this foundational reframing step (Mähring et al., 2008).

Visual images, analogy, and affect (calls on emotion) play important roles in using satire for counter-framing. Researchers have argued that visual images can be more effective than texts at implicitly conveying affective meanings (El Refaie, 2003; Hall, 1997) because, according to Hall, the visual mode often “engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer, at deeper levels than we can explain in a simple, common-sense way” (p. 226). In this study, we found that cartoonists commonly encapsulated issues in a single highly evocative image that combined several counter-frames in a powerful metaphor: for example, Doyle’s (2003a) “The New Normal” (see Figure 1) features a classroom with out-of-control crocodiles (NT) who are attacking helpless teachers (TU, victimization) while the minister responsible (shown as a teacher) is trying to normalize the situation by writing SNAFU on the blackboard (TU, normalization). Satirical cartoonists’ ability to skillfully synthesize issues and their impact in this way reflects a professional goal that one interviewee described as “crystallizing the issues into a single image”.

Organizational change theorists have identified the need for breaking taken-for-granted organizational schemas in order to succeed in change and noted the role of analogy as a potentially valuable source of new framing, insights, and inferences (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014; Cornelissen, Holt, & Zundel, 2014). With its powerful metaphors, satire is undoubtedly a rich and vivid source of analogy. Satire is also fundamentally associated with affect, or pathos as a tool of persuasion. Indeed, research has established that emotion can influence human cognition, decision making, and behavior (Zhang, 2013) and that it plays an important role in satire.

The political satirists in this study largely intuitively used counter-frames to challenge and interrogate escalation. Their skillful frame-building and exaggerated, humorous counter-reframing of normative TFR provide powerful collective commentaries on the normative framing of technology in two escalating public sector projects. In Section 7, we consider several questions that arise from our study, such as “Can organizations learn from and apply this process of critical, creative counter-framing to facilitate the move towards de-escalation?”, “Is there a role for satire and satirists in de-escalation?”, and “Can one draw on our findings to better diagnose and short-cut escalation?”. We also consider other implications from our findings.

7 Implications and Conclusion

The change process required to begin de-escalating failing IT projects involves the need for “cognitive redefinition” and the formulation of new attitudes based on new information (Pan et al., 2006). In this paper, we demonstrate that satire constitutes a rich source of frame-breaking arguments and opinions. In the cases we examine, satire provides a valuable lens to understand the advanced escalation of commitment post go-live in public sector projects and the peril involved in framing of user issues as a “new normal”. By using diagnostic framing and motivational framing to counter-frame the normative TFR that arise from escalation of commitment, drawing on moral principles to critique legitimacy, and evaluating stakeholder salience while simultaneously evoking affect (humor, empathy, indignation), the skilled, structured use of satire has the potential to act as a tipping point that challenges those who are involved in failing projects to reframe their views and, thus, facilitates de-escalation. The strong resonance of satire with de-escalation research, which has shown the importance of such reframing, suggests the potential to include satire in both the IS research agenda and the organizational toolkit.

In studying de-escalation in a Danish education sector project, Mähring et al. (2008) found that universities, media, and the general public played the role of exit catalysts. Exit catalysts help:

Focus attention on, and give significance to, events that indicate escalation. Through their observation, actions and reactions, exit catalysts contribute to increased emphasis on the problems and make the consequences of maintaining the existing course of action more visible, thus providing or strengthening the impetus for the exit champion to pursue de-escalation. (Mähring et al., 2008, p. 478)

The satirical cartoons in this study, with their powerful counter-frames about technology, operated in a similar way to an exit catalyst. However, few projects will receive the sustained attention of professional satirists, and we do not necessarily suggest that they should. Rather, we suggest that we can learn from the satirical tradition in order to apply this learning in organizational settings.

By taking on board and acknowledging the uncomfortable themes about power and powerlessness that satire embeds, those in charge of reversing public sector projects may build on this understanding to improve their chances of regaining legitimacy among stakeholders, which researchers have identified as necessary to successful reversal (Pan & Pan, 2011). However, we demonstrate that the use of satire to critique project escalation and failure via counter-framing is a highly sophisticated skill. Given that reframing is critical to de-escalation, we suggest that engaging professional satirists may have value in inspiring and guiding the reframing efforts that accompany this transition.

We also suggest that organizations could use the frameworks we employed to conduct our analyses (i.e., TFR, stakeholder salience, moral principles, and diagnostic, and motivational framing) in a structured way as part of an organizational toolkit to promote counter-framing and stakeholder needs analysis to examine normative frames (e.g., in a workshop setting). As a carefully deployed management tool, satirical counter-framing and the analysis of normative TFR could provide the discursive opportunity structures (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014; McCammon, 2013) that help challenge the institutional beliefs associated with the rationalization of commitment and, thus, help to facilitate frame-breaking and transformation. Similarly, Eisenhardt (1999) found that frame-breaking techniques and methods that encourage departure from obvious points of view are engaging and fun and can motivate executives to participate more fully in expansive strategic thinking. A key challenge would be to ensure that the satire evokes sufficiently customer-centric counter-frames. Another complementary approach might be to use crowdsourcing to evoke customer perspectives. (Our search for satirical images about Novopay identified several examples of satire from private, non-media sources, which demonstrates the potential of such an approach.) Further, we suggest that one may be able to apply prognostic frames (as used in social movement activism) in the reframing process. While outside the purview of professional satire, such frames could become part of a de-escalation toolkit. Certainly, these areas suggest value for future study. Design and action research could be a useful method for exploring the value and impact of such approaches and how to apply them.

This study has several further implications for practitioners in relationship to project communication and stakeholder-needs management. Our interviews with satirists noted a particular sensitivity to both the use of specific words and to the tenor and inclusiveness of corporate communications. Notably, the utopian name Novopay provided a source of endless derision for satirists, and they used words with visual connotations to satirical effect. Also, the satirists demonstrated sensitivity to the lack of attention to powerless stakeholders and the failure to explain technological problems. Thus, communications managers should consider the counter-framing opportunities that project names and official communications may inadvertently provide, encourage openness, and ensure that they give attention to the needs of powerless stakeholders and to explaining technological issues involved in failure.

The study also has methodological implications for studying IT satire. The lens of TFR provided an excellent fit for examining the counter-frames that the Novopay and Rejsekortet satirists employed and how they used them to question legitimacy. We suggest that one could usefully employ the lens of TFR counter-frames to examine IT satire generally in a structured way and, further, that one could draw on stakeholder theory and social activism (notably the concepts of diagnostic and motivational framing, moral principles, and stakeholder salience) to interrogate the operation and impact of satirical counter-framing in a similarly structured analytical approach to that the one we conducted. Because satire is a complex art, it seems there would also be value in more closely examining the interaction of TFR and how this interaction helps to condense and crystallize the meaning one typically finds in cartoons. Finally, interviews with satirists formed a small but important part of this study. From interviewing them, we came

to better understand the practice of satire. We suggest that future studies of IT satire use more interviews to flesh out this practice perspective.

We also note that we discovered the sensitivity of external critics (political cartoonists) to the existence of dominant frames in the context of technology projects and the consequent strong synergy of their work with TFR theory. We identified the satirical counter-frame normalization of the perverse in both cases. This counter-frame critiques the normative framing of technology in use (TU) by those in power, and, through exaggeration, portrays such framing as a misuse of power. In other words, in the cartoons, we see counter-framing (by the cartoonists) of and about the framing of technology by those in power. This counter-framing demonstrates how field-level actors (in this case, satirical cartoonists) may participate in contesting TFR through popular media. Our discovery of cartoonists' engagement with the technological frames involved by stakeholders in public sector projects suggests that research that extends the application of TFR theory outside of the organization has value.

We need further research in public sector and other industry contexts to build on the findings that we report here. Extending data collection beyond static cartoons to include written comment and audio-visual media (particularly on social media) would provide fertile ground for investigation. We found noticeable stylistic differences in the Danish and New Zealand cartoons, which one could explore from a cultural perspective. One cannot assume the acceptability, manifestations, and impact of satire to be the same in all cultural contexts; consequently, we need research in diverse settings.

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