Information politics: strategies and counterstrategies

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Abstract: Despite the increasing importance and pervasiveness of information systems, many of them fail to gain traction. We contend that information politics is a major cause of these failures and must be counteracted and managed. We focus on uncovering and delineating the covert political strategies that are often employed against information systems projects and the counterstrategies that are found to be most effective against them. We collect narrative descriptions of politics encountered in 141 information systems projects. Through an iterative analysis of the data, we profile five types of political behaviours: *pretending, toddling, hostage taking, stickling, and masterminding*, based on how the players choose to exhibit resistance. Political manoeuvring through each behaviour is illustrated. We then describe counterstrategies through which different political behaviours can be managed during the project as well as planned for ex ante. The article serves as a reality check for appreciating the role of information politics and applying pragmatic but simple ways in which IS projects could be kept on course.

Keywords: information politics; systems development and implementation management; implementation failure; information systems projects; political narratives; political behaviours.

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1 Introduction

Information systems (IS) project failures, caused by resistance to these projects, is a wide-spread problem facing organisations today (Chua, 2009; Iacovoc and Dexter, 2005; Keil, 1995; Schmidt et al., 2001). Whether drastic, involving all-out rejection by users (Iacovoc and Dexter, 2005; Kappelman et al., 2006), or more subtle, involving guised

forms of resistance, such as dragging of feet or superficial use of the system (Keil, 1995; Piderit, 2000), resistance-induced failures are a huge drain on organisational resources (Davidson and Chismar, 2007; Lapointe and Rivard, 2005). The 'Standish Group' reports that in 2006 the success rate of IS projects was barely 30%, producing estimated losses to the tune of almost US $55 billion. User resistance and the political environment surrounding IS implementation are prominent culprits, contributing to the ultimate failure of these projects (Grover et al., 1988; Jasperson et al., 2002; Kim and Kankahalli, 2009).

Political forces can arise due to various reasons. For example, power differentials between users and information technology (IT) staff could trigger political behaviours (Bjorn-Andersen and Markus, 1987). Multi-level factors within organisations, such as individuals' depth of involvement with information systems (i.e., their cognitive absorption), the socio-professional norms associated with their work roles and how these norms are affected either positively or negatively by IS, as well as organisations' structural configurations as bureaucracies, adhocracies, or team-oriented structures, can differentially shape people's views of information systems within organisations, thereby instigating political actions (Lapointe and Rivard, 2007). The social construction perspective suggests that information systems can, in parallel, be viewed as technological, social, or socio-technical, each with very different implications for how these systems are implemented and assimilated in organisations (Sillince and Mouakket, 1997; Jasperson et al., 2002). Differences in the self-interests of people spanning different work roles in an organisation can also impact their views towards the system and the political actions in which they engage with respect to an IS project (Bradshaw-Camball and Murray, 1991; Iacovou et al., 1995; Jasperson et al., 2002). People in a work role whose power position may be weakened by introduction of the new system may oppose the system while those in another role whose power position stands to gain from the system may support it (Barley, 1990; Brass and Burkhardt, 1993).

Information politics is a relatively less well-investigated dimension of organisational politics that is particularly relevant to the context of IS projects (Davenport et al., 1992; Sabherwal and Grover, 2010). Information politics may be defined as *the set of behaviours involving attempts by individuals to negotiate, use, and define information towards private ends* (Davenport et al., 1992; Grover et al., 1988). In the contemporary information economy, information is the basis of power and competitiveness for organisations as well as for employees within organisations. Information systems directly impact flow and accessibility of this information, posing asymmetric threats and advantages for different stakeholders (Davenport et al., 1992).

Both academics (e.g., Sillince and Mouakket, 1997) and practitioners (e.g., Davenport et al., 1992) acknowledge the role of information politics in derailing projects. Despite this, the study of information politics is complicated by the fact that political behaviours associated with information sharing and use are difficult to recognise, let alone interpret (Bjorn-Andersen and Markus, 1987; Piderit, 2000). Information politics may be motivated either by private concerns or concerns for organisational well-being. On the one hand, information politics represents situations where individuals who view information access or use as the basis of power resist attempts that require them to share their 'private' information (Davenport et al., 1992; Sillince and Mouakket, 1997). For instance, they might thwart information systems that promote greater transparency, while nurturing their parochially preferred systems. On the other hand, information politics may also be manifested by individuals who resist because they truly believe the change will adversely impact *organisational*, and not necessarily individual, interests (Davenport et

al., 1992; Jasperson et al., 2002). For instance, they might oppose design of systems that will not allow them and others to do their jobs efficiently, or systems that do not fit the organisational strategy. Regardless of whether the motives are good or bad, as information becomes an increasingly important organisational currency, IS projects become fertile ground for political manoeuvring and game playing (Davenport et al., 1992; Markus, 1983). If not managed well, information politics could doom many IS projects.

One cause of difficulty in controlling information politics is that individuals who play games, whether due to parochial reasons or due to genuine concerns about the system's adverse effects on the organisation, usually understand the adverse personal consequences if their political manoeuvres are recognised by others (Davenport et al., 1992). Rarely do they show their dissent in explicit acts of protest or rebellion. Instead, they manipulate information, use sarcastic humour, appear overworked, or feign innocence to cajole things their way – strategies that provide powerful camouflage in the unlikely event of getting exposed (Jasperson et al., 2002; Joshi, 1991). When individuals choose to tread lightly, it is often difficult for senior executives to uncover that political processes are at work, let alone manage and learn from them. The end result is that political manoeuvring goes undetected until so late that project failures are virtually assured. Furthermore, even if political behaviours are detected, the motives underlying these behaviours are typically hard to uncover, which aggravates the development of effective counterstrategies against them.

While frequent failures due to information politics may be real, the ability to identify political behaviour and alleviate its impact on project outcomes remains elusive (Davenport et al., 1992; Piderit, 2000). If political behaviours can be profiled and identified, understanding the motives underlying them can help managers to either restrain parochial actions or recognise how the proposed changes might be detrimental to the organisation. Towards this goal, we seek to uncover the hidden or covert strategies that employees use to express information politics behaviours as well as the counterstrategies that can be used to combat them. This study, therefore, addresses the following simple questions:

1 What covert information politics strategies do employees use to resist information systems projects?

2 What counterstrategies can organisations employ against each of these covert information politics strategies?

To address these questions, we draw on a set of 141 IS projects across diverse industries to foster understanding of the hidden aspects of information politics that often derail projects but are not visible in 'project documentation'.

In addressing these questions, this study contributes in several significant ways. First, while political and resisting behaviours have been studied, most extant studies do not focus specifically on covert camouflaged expressions of such behaviours. Yet, it is these types of behaviours that are the most difficult to tackle (Bjorn-Andersen and Markus, 1987). Extant literature, too, has recognised the importance of covert political tactics – such as, withholding support, delaying work, providing token contributions, acting confused, or addressing personal goals – in shaping resistance towards IS projects (Doolin, 2004; Sabherwal and Grover, 2010). By focusing specifically on delineating what these camouflages look like, this study plays an important step in unveiling the

hidden nature of these strategies so that management can detect them. Second, simply detecting political strategies may be a necessary, but is not a sufficient, step to managing them. Our work contributes to effective management of information politics by also elucidating the counterstrategies that are more suited for combating each political strategy outlined in this study. We hope our article serves as a valuable starting point to improve awareness of resistance through information politics on a timely basis (Piderit, 2000). This can yield a better understanding of causes, fostering of a productive dialogue between executives and resisting parties, and insight into appropriate actions that may be taken to alleviate negative outcomes (Joshi, 1991; Lapointe and Rivard, 2005).

2 Background

Existing literature on information politics delineates what it is and the role it plays in deciding the fate of IS projects (Davenport et al., 1992). A majority of this extant research tends to focus on the concept, causes, processes, and outcomes of organisational politics, identifying several theoretical lenses that have been used in the study of politics. Conceptually, information politics is a set of behaviours through which individuals appropriate information towards private ends (Davenport et al., 1992). IS create opportunities for the free sharing and flow of information in organisations. Researchers have often thought that simply having the right technologies in place would allow organisations to realise free and fair exchange of information (Davenport et al., 1992; Keen, 1991). However, as information becomes increasingly important for organisational survival and competitiveness, members of the organisation begin recognising information asymmetry as the basis of power (Dawson et al., 2010; Szulanski, 2000). As a result, they engage in political manoeuvres to hold on to their information rather than sharing it, thereby deepening the divide between the information haves versus have-nots (Davenport et al., 1992; Jasperson et al., 2002).

Grounded in a rich tradition of research on political behaviours in general, extant work has investigated the causes underlying information politics (Jermier et al., 1994; Markus, 1983; Joshi, 1991). One explanation of political behaviour stems from the equity-implementation model, where users evaluate any change effort in terms of equity in their own gains and losses resulting from the change compared to the gains and losses accruing to the employing organisation as well as to the gains and losses accruing to others in their own peer group (Joshi, 1991). When users find unfavourable inequity in their relative gains and losses on any of these levels they are likely to engage in political behaviour in attempts to resist the change. Various user groups within organisations can also have competing and conflicting interests, which would be differentially affected by the change (Bradshaw-Camball and Murray, 1991; Markus, 1983). Political behaviour can then ensue in efforts to influence the change agents and change processes in favour of one's own self-interests (Jasperson et al., 2002). As another explanation, the introduction of a change can adversely affect the power dynamics within an organisation such that user groups that were powerful prior to the change may lose power after the change (Barley, 1990; Burkhardt, 1994). For example, when an organisation switches to a new IS, employees who were experts in using the legacy system may now be out of depth while new hires, recently trained on the use of the new system, may be more attuned to it. When this happens, people who previously held powerful positions might resist the

change, employing political manoeuvres to jeopardise the information flows that would be necessary for successful implementation.

Extant research has also examined the processes of information politics. For example, Lapointe and Rivard (2005) provide an interesting description of how the process of resistance unfolds by elucidating how individual resistance transforms over time into group level resistance. Resistance itself, and therefore the political behaviours associated with resistance, has been shown to take on different forms. Researchers have shown that resistance and acceptance are two ends of a continuum separated by ambivalent intermediate states of partial/passive resistance and partial/passive acceptance (Coetsee, 1999).

In studies of the processes underlying information politics, many different types of political behaviour are recognised as emerging in systems development projects, including 'zero-sum power,' 'processual power,' 'organisational power,' and 'structurally constrained power' (Lapointe and Rivard, 2005; Sillince and Mouakket, 1997). 'Zero-sum power' occurs when political action is targeted to the ownership and control of resources. Second, political action can also arise out of the resource dependency relationships that exist among organisational members due to the complexity of work processes that are embedded into the systems being designed and implemented (Jasperson et al., 2002). For example, power differentials between users and IS professionals in an organisation have been shown to increase the dependency of one group over the other, creating fertile ground for IS politics (Bjorn-Andersen and Markus, 1987). This type of political behaviour is known as 'processual power.' A third type of political behaviour relates to differences in reputation and resources across organisational work roles, which can result in political conflict, conferring certain work roles with 'organisational power.' Finally, political conflict can also arise from the subjective interpretations of people in positions of varying levels of power and due to social perceptions and ideologies surrounding different work roles (Bradshaw-Camball and Murray, 1991; French and Raven, 1959; Jasperson et al., 2002). Proponents of this type of political behaviour in extant IS politics literature recognise that political conflict can be shaped by the social construction of people's perceptions towards IS (French and Raven, 1959; Jasperson et al., 2002; Sillince and Mouakket, 1997). For example, healthcare providers, such as physicians and nurses, have certain ideological beliefs about what it means to be a care giver, which can sometimes be in direct conflict with the way in which technologies such as electronic medical records systems are changing care provision in healthcare organisations (e.g., Baxter and Baxter, 2002; Davidson and Chismar, 2007). Healthcare providers with such subjective perceptions would engage in political behaviours aimed to prevent these systems from changing the way they provided patient care. This fourth type of political behaviour is recognised in the literature as 'structurally constrained power' (Joshi, 1991).

Extant research has also focused on the outcomes of information politics. Information politics directly undercuts the value-adding potential of IS with respect to closing the information divide between the information haves and the have-nots (Bjorn-Andersen and Markus, 1987; Davenport et al., 1992). From an information politics perspective, this is the prime reason why IS projects fail, as organisational members resist systems that threaten to democratise the ownership of information against their will (Keil, 1995; Lapointe and Rivard, 2005). Political behaviours that lead to resistance to systems implementation have also been considered as one among several multi-level forces that work interdependently to shape responses to systems implementation. For example, while

political behaviours underlying resistance are pertinent at the group-level in organisations, Lapointe and Rivard (2007) show that the usefulness and ease of use of the system also drives acceptance at the individual level, which, in turn, depends on individuals' levels of cognitive absorption towards the technology. Finally, departing from the traditional view that all politics is necessarily parochial, some of the studies in this extant body of work suggest that the outcomes of information politics could be either good or bad. For instance, in her review, Piderit (2000) provides interesting accounts of why people resist. Reasons include individual desires to act in accordance with their ethical principles or attempts to gain attention of top management to issues that must be resolved for the organisation to maintain high performance. Political behaviours stemming from these reasons are likely to benefit the organisation.

Several different lenses – including rational, pluralist, interpretive, and radical lenses – have also been applied to evaluate the varied political behaviours that are employed in response to IS projects (Bradshaw-Camball and Murray, 1991; French and Raven, 1959; Jasperson et al., 2002). Of these, the rational and pluralist lenses consider power as an objective reality that can be known and observed by everyone (Bradshaw-Camball and Murray, 1991). The rational lens considers political behaviours emerging in an environment where all stakeholders are driven by a common set of goals and self-interests (e.g., Brown and Magill, 1998; Kim and Umanath, 1993), while the pluralist lens assumes the existence of multiple conflicting self-interests and goals within an organisation (e.g., Clemons and Row, 1993; Hart and Saunders, 1998). In contrast, the interpretive and radical lenses assume that political behaviours arise from differences in subjective perceptions and social constructions of meaning associated with information systems and their roles in organisations (Bradshaw-Camball and Murray, 1991; Jasperson et al., 2002). The interpretive lens considers political behaviours associated with people's tendency to control the conversation, vocabulary, and dominant interpretation of the information system being developed (e.g., Nidumolu et al., 1996; Robey and Markus, 1984). The radical lens considers political behaviours as spurred by power structures and information asymmetries that exist in the larger social context within and outside the organisation. Political behaviours towards a specific information system are viewed within this lens as a way to either aggravate or undercut these more general power structures within the specific context of the technology (King et al., 1994; Robey and Boudreau, 1999).

In comparison, very few studies in extant literature directly deal with how political behaviours manifest in practice (Coetsee, 1999; DeSanctis and Courtney, 1983). One such study (Coetsee, 1999) is consistent with other work that has shown the ambivalent nature of political behaviour, where people can be in conflicting cognitive and emotional states regarding their views towards the technology (Piderit, 2000) leading to different behaviours towards the system. Other studies provide some ways to identify political resistance within the context of IT implementation and outline intervention techniques such as training (DeSanctis and Courtney, 1983). Perhaps one reason for the relatively thin extant understanding of how political behaviours manifest in practice is that people often disguise these behaviours. Individual apprehension about the adverse consequences of playing politics often forces people to use subtle means of derailing projects. This point has been well-documented in the work of Piderit (2000). This causes the actual expression of political behaviour to be camouflaged.

In this study, we seek to uncover this camouflage and reveal the covert information politics strategies that are often employed to resist IS projects in organisations, and

explain the underlying motivation that drives each of these covert strategies. Based on this understanding of the nature and underlying motives for each political strategy, we offer counterstrategies that would be the most effective against each of these strategies. To do so, we conducted an exploratory study that draws on a set of narrative accounts of 141 IS projects from a variety of industries. Next, we present the methods that we used to collect and analyse this data set.

3 Methods

We organised data collection and analysis in a qualitative design based on inductive analysis of case narratives. Careful evaluation of a variety of research methodologies led us to identify this as the most fitting design to our study. Since we were interested in uncovering covert political strategies that were employed during IS projects, traditional quantitative modes of data collection and analysis, such as survey-based methods, were not useful for a few reasons. First, the structured approach to data collection afforded by these methods precludes the richness of description that would be necessary to identify and delineate details on activities, circumstances, and contexts within which covert political strategies arose, the motives underlying these strategies, and the counterstrategies that were launched in response. Furthermore, survey-based methods rely on upfront identification of a research model with clearly defined variables and measurement items. These methods are therefore particularly valuable for deductive hypothesis testing grounded in prior research. Since covert political strategies have not been extensively studied in prior literature, we undertook this study as an exploratory venture to inductively identify and describe such strategies. Finally, covert political strategies could be perceived as socially undesirable by respondents. As such, even if structured questions regarding these strategies could be framed in a survey-based approach, responses to such questions would likely suffer from social desirability bias. Due to these considerations, a qualitative research design was chosen.

Within qualitative methods, Pentland (1999) identifies two ways of uncovering organisational phenomena: objective descriptions of events and individual narrative descriptions of events. Observational modes of data collection are conducive to collecting objective descriptions of events by allowing the researcher to observe first hand and in real-time the unfolding events of interest. In our context, however, due to the sensitive nature of the topic of covert political strategies, we felt that observational modes of data collection would be less effective. The very fact that they were being observed might put respondents on guard causing them to hide any political strategies in which they may have engaged. Moreover, experts on qualitative research methodologies have cautioned against the limitations of researchers, as outsiders in their research settings, to correctly grasp objective reality simply by observing this reality unfold (Mason, 2002; Miles and Huberman, 1994). This is because, while observations can unambiguously reveal what happened, they often provide only weak explanations for why it happened; these explanations are likely to be clouded by the researchers' own interpretive biases that may be far removed from empirical reality.

In contrast, qualitative methodology experts have recommended that when it comes to complex phenomena with many visible and invisible elements simply asking people to describe, in their own words, what happened or why they undertook certain actions can

often be much more illuminating than other approaches (Gabriel, 2000; Miles and Huberman, 1994). In our particular context, we felt that asking people to anonymously write narrative accounts of events in a slice-of-life storytelling mode would be much less threatening to them, and therefore, more conducive to the extraction of accurate and rich descriptions of their views of how covert political strategies and counterstrategies actually unfolded. Storytelling has been recognised as a powerful tool for the collection of rich data on complex phenomena (Boje, 1991; Pentland, 1999). Extant research also suggested that our respondent pool, comprised largely of non-researchers from the business workforce, would likely be familiar with the art of storytelling as they use storytelling as a communication tool in their own work (Barker and Gower, 2010). In our context, we expected that respondents' focus on anonymously telling the story in their own words would inspire a level of preservation of perceived facts that would be less likely to hide covert political strategies. Although this approach of data collection, based on narrative accounts from respondents, is limited by the fact that collected data reflect subjective interpretations of individuals, rather than objective reality, the issues inherent in other methods were found to be more severely limiting in our context due to the sensitive nature of our topic of study.

3.1 Data collection: collecting the narratives

Data were collected from eight classes of *full-time* executive IS students in a graduate programme ranked among the top ten in US in *ComputerWorld's* list of top techno-MBA schools. About 28% of the informants were in IS management, about 26% were analysts, and the rest were in network administration or support. The majority had over ten years of experience with IS related projects. The informants provided useful descriptions of 141 projects.

For consistency, we provided the informants a definition of politics similar to the one given earlier in this paper. In order to facilitate completeness and reliability, we asked them to write their responses instead of speaking about them; the latter may have led to biased descriptions, due to the other participants being in the audience. Informants were asked to provide enough information for the researcher to understand how the project unfolded, including the events leading up to the game playing, the description of political behaviour and its impact on the project, the context of the project (including rank and position of people involved), and the type and size of the organisation. There is no way of confirming whether the accounts provided are factually accurate. However, given the informants' experience with IS projects, the fact that they were encouraged to seek clarification, and the lack of incentive to provide anything but complete information on the project, we feel comfortable that the narratives are reliable.

3.2 Data reduction: unearthing covert political strategies and counterstrategies from narratives

In the eight classes conducted over a four year period, we obtained case data on a total of 190 projects. Forty nine of these cases were deleted for a variety of reasons such as incomplete information, informant's lack of first-hand knowledge of or involvement in the political process, unknown status of the project and so on. We retained a total of 141 projects for further examination.

A content analysis allowed us to identify an exhaustive list of strategies and counterstrategies used to derail or gain control of projects. Our first task involved identifying the participants in the political game. Two kinds of participants were given special attention. First, the party (individual, department or team) initiating the game was used to identify the 'moves' or 'strategies'. Second, the party which tried to negate the strategies was used to identify 'counterstrategies'. Our initial analysis of the cases revealed more than 30 behaviours (i.e., strategies) used to impede progress. We similarly identified several behaviours that stakeholders employed to negate the effect of information politics. Iterative readings of the cases enabled winnowing this exhaustive set of actions to nine distinct strategies and associated counterstrategies. The process of winnowing involved identifying 'commonalities' between actions, and then grouping similar actions under one label (abstraction). In abstracting behaviours we took care to avoid overlaps among strategies and loss of information. For example, behaviours such as keeping track of e-mails, referrals to points of contact, and minutes of meetings, were abstracted to reflect a common but distinct counterstrategy, called 'documentation' (see Table 3).

3.3 Data analysis: refining identities and descriptions of covert political strategies and counterstrategies

After forming the list of strategies and counterstrategies, we did another iteration of case readings and marked in each case the 'strategies and counterstrategies'. We next focused on identifying the archetypes that are typically encountered in any project. This is an important step since the effectiveness of a counterstrategy depends on the type of game being played. To classify the strategies into archetypes, we used a process called 'profiling' (Harrigan, 1985; Sabherwal and Grover, 2010). Among a host of options that every archetype had in derailing the project, they relied only on a particular kind of strategy: something similar to a signature move. Through the use of inductive reasoning and the facts of each case, we attempted to answer the central question: "Could the archetype have done things differently but chose not to do so?" In more than 90% of the time, the answer was in affirmative indicating that the behaviour could be identified distinctly without necessarily being tied to each case (and indeed, as shown in Table 2, every archetype used different strategies). By and large, profiling pointed to "generic and individual related behaviors" as opposed to pure context-sensitive strategies. Strategies change when things do not work out as expected, but in every case the signature move is invoked first, or more often than others. For example, a vice president opposed to one project chose to use guile to impede a project, although he could alternatively have used any other strategy (e.g., piling on) because he was a key stakeholder in the project and had considerable organisational influence. His behaviour showed concern for his self-image (especially, an awareness of the consequences of openly choosing not to cooperate), and the desire to hurt the project. Overt behaviour was thus not reflective of underlying intentions, hallmark of a person who is a classical 'pretender'. Using this technique we profiled five kinds of behaviours that derail projects in different but significant ways (see opening line for each behavioural archetype).

After identifying the archetypes, we split our cases by archetypes, and further by the project's outcome (i.e., successful or unsuccessful as stated under the label 'impact of games'). We did this to determine what counterstrategies were used in successful projects with a certain archetype, in contrast to counterstrategies used in unsuccessful ones with the same archetype. This helped us to understand if there was a certain key counterstrategy or a group of counterstrategies that could be used to successfully manage a particular archetype. We also did a simple frequency count of the number of times each counterstrategy was used, which enabled us to arrive at a 'dominant counterstrategy' for managing each archetype.

3.4 Coding reliability

To ensure reliability of our coding, we initially used a single coder to analyse the entire data. Once the archetypes, strategies, and counterstrategies were determined we used intra-rater and inter-rater reliabilities to examine the robustness of our analysis. For inter-rater reliability, we used two additional coders to analyse the data and identify the strategies, counterstrategies, and the archetypes involved for all 141 cases. The inter-rater reliability was found to be acceptable at 85%. For intra-rater reliability, the primary coder re-analysed the same cases three months after the initial coding. Additionally, the primary coder also analysed two sets of case data. The first data set contained three years of data from where the initial coding (identification of archetypes, strategies, and counterstrategies) was done. This same coding procedure was then applied to a new additional year of case data (the fourth year) to both determine the reliability and the stability of our codes. In both cases we observed an intra-rater reliability of 90%. This subsequent work reaffirms our belief that archetypes are not purely context dependent, i.e., signature moves are not entirely a response to the type of situation, but are rather internal and reflect individual traits.

4 Data and findings

We have profiled five archetypes of political behaviours based on 141 IS projects from a variety of industries. These behavioural archetypes represent different strategies individuals use to modify or delay IS projects in order to pursue personal agendas that may or may not be aligned with organisational interests. While it is not uncommon for players to adapt their strategies to changing conditions in a project, a 'dominant' strategy usually characterises each behavioural profile. We also observed counterstrategies that managers use to control the impact of information politics. The power various players held on the project influenced the kinds of strategies and counterstrategies, and how they unfolded. Nonetheless, we observed a dominant strategy and a dominant counterstrategy for each type of behavioural profile, which we describe and illustrate below.

4.1 Information politics strategies

Our data analysis revealed five types of covert political behaviour archetypes that were employed across the 141 IS projects in our data set. Table 1 provides a brief description of the key elements of each behavioural archetype, while Table 2 provides more detail on the set of strategies commonly employed within each archetype. Here, we provide a detailed description of each strategic archetype, along with descriptions of representative cases from our data set illustrating the archetype. In our case descriptions, all company names (in italics) were changed to protect the anonymity of participants. Any reference to actual company names is purely coincidental except where noted.

Table 1 Political behaviours and key characteristics

Behaviour archetype	*Bottom line*	*Key elements*
Pretending	You got my support...	Withhold and manipulate data. Explicitly offer support but surreptitious actions are used to impede the project.
Toddling	I just don't get it...	Express unhappiness with the project. Take issue with the way the project is designed, change stand frequently, and show an inability to comprehend anything associated with the project.
Hostage taking	If you don't do it my way...	Ignore the very purpose of the project and instead attempt to fulfil personal desires. Take unfair advantage of the lack of superiors' knowledge and threaten to call quits when provoked or approached.
Masterminding	I know best...	Outline issues usually with the technical aspects of the project to gain control of the situation. Steer resources towards personal ends, by citing prior technical accomplishments.
Stickling	It is not in the book...	Lack of skills, expertise, or confidence to control or execute a project. Point out rules and regulations in the organisation for gaining control and access to resources.

Notes: This table provides a list of the five information politics behaviour archetypes, the distinctive logic underlying each archetype, and brief descriptions of key elements of each archetype.

4.1.1 'Pretending'

"You got my support..."

Players are 'pretending' when they overtly support a project that they secretly hope to fail, although this may sometimes be due to their genuine belief that the project would have adverse organisational consequences. While they want to impede progress and see the project fail, they do not wish to be held responsible for the failure. 'Pretending' therefore involves offering covert resistance through the dominant strategy of withholding or manipulating information needed for the project. Of course, when 'Pretending' individuals are caught in this act, their usual response is to 'pass the buck' and feign innocence about the state of affairs. Their earlier superficial support for the project is useful for such self-defence.

Table 2 Strategies and dominant strategy for each archetype

Behavioural profile (archetype)	*Ride on prior accomplishment*	*Hide and seek*	*Pass the blame*	*Token contribute*	*Withhold/manipulate information*	*Appear busy*	*Outline problems/expand scope*	*Misinterpret/don't understand*	*Ignore/threaten*
Pretending		◆	◆	◆	◆ D	◆	◆		
Toddling		◆		◆	◆	◆	◆	◆ D	
Hostage taking	◆	◆			◆				◆ D
Stickling	◆					◆	◆ D		
Masterminding	◆ D					◆	◆		◆

Notes: This table provides a more detailed view of each political behaviour archetype, detailing all the specific political strategies (or behaviours) that were undertaken as part of each archetype. The table also identifies the one political strategy (or behaviour) that was the dominant one for each archetype and could be considered as representative of that archetype. This representative political strategy (or behaviour) was described earlier as the 'key elements' of each archetype in Table 1.

An illustrative case from our data set was provided by *HealthPro,* a large healthcare products provider with several subsidiaries. *HealthPro* was implementing an inventory/replenishment Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) module. This module was intended to improve inventory reporting and forecasting abilities at *HealthPro*. One *HealthPro* subsidiary had traditionally been using a standalone Microsoft Access-based system to maintain inventory information. This Access-based system allowed the *HealthPro* subsidiary to control its 'private' data and to 'smooth any bad news' before reporting to the headquarters. The subsidiary manager made covert attempts to halt implementation of the ERP module. He claimed that the system was slow, difficult to learn, and caused confusion during order staging and restocking. Problems in other modules (e.g., Purchasing) merely bolstered his position. Though he openly acknowledged the immense benefits that would be realised, he activated unnecessary features of the inventory control module, causing computational load and system slow-downs. He circumvented some necessary steps in receiving and put-away processes, introducing further errors in the system. He also set up storage location properties incorrectly, causing problems in the replenishment process. Furthermore, his reputation and golden handshakes ensured support from insiders and effectively blocked any 'misinformation' from being reported outside. Not realising the true nature of the problem, *HealthPro* management assumed that what transpired reflected problems with the ERP module, reversed its position, and allowed the subsidiary to continue to use the Access system.

Another example from our data set illustrating 'Pretending' is the local branch of a network solutions provider, *Agilent Networks*. Executive management decided to update the old legacy system with a new health-claims processing system that would diminish paperwork by 90% and provide electronic archival facilities. Developing the new system required representative documents from the enormous amount of legacy data (which was on paper), managed by one clerk in the local branch. The clerk did not endorse implementation of the processing system, and therefore withheld some of the sample documents from the development team. Since open non-cooperation might have meant losing his job, he did not object to the project; instead, he provided documents that were incomplete, confusing, or represented uncommon scenarios. When the development team consequently failed to meet milestones, the clerk attributed it to the team's and the vendor's incompetence, and tried to convince executives that the system was a waste of the company's resources. The system eventually rolled out over budget and over time (i.e., we classified it as a partial failure) due to the development team's persistent efforts in countering the clerk's moves. The clerk was finally fired after several failed attempts to help him learn the new system.

'Pretending' is a 'guerrilla warfare' approach, which targets critical aspects of the project and then subtly derails them. Information is distorted to make worthwhile projects look bad, negatives are highlighted, and positives are buried. When subtle strategies fail, 'Pretending' involves resorting to sabotage, entering inappropriate data, making token contributions or overloading the system. Executive management usually does not realise the presence of such behaviours until rather late into the project. 'Pretending' leads to delays or complete project failures with loss of time, money, resources, and opportunity costs.

4.1.2 'Toddling'

"I just don't get it..."

Like 'pretending', 'toddling' is intended to oppose the project. But, unlike 'pretending', 'toddling' behaviour involves a clear display of preferences by individuals who behave in this fashion. This type of behaviour involves showing signs of stubbornness, and a frequent changing of mind regarding what a project should include or exclude. 'Toddling' usually takes one of several forms – 'piling on' additional requirements that are not a part of the original plan; objecting to previously agreed-upon requirements; requesting frequent additional changes that are sometimes mutually conflicting; and emphasising inherently unattainable requirements (given the project resources and scope). Thus, 'Toddling' involves rebellion and dissatisfaction, regardless of what is offered. The dominant strategy employed under this type of behaviour is to chant the mantra: "I don't understand what the project is and how to make use of it." For instance, when a system is simply handed over to use by executive management, individuals who resort to 'Toddling' appeal to emotions by suggesting that they – and by implication, others – will be unable to comprehend this project of great complexity.

An illustrative example of 'toddling' from our data set is provided by *Macrosoft*, a software corporation with more than $500 million in annual revenues, where a project was initiated to consolidate several hundred disparate systems into a single customer relationship management (CRM) system supplied by either Siebel or PeopleSoft. The CRM selection committee included Linda, a vocal and highly placed supporter of the PeopleSoft system, and one of the few people who knew how to extract data from the system. During the meetings, Linda was openly confrontational and frequently argued with the Siebel sales team. Repeatedly identifying deficiencies within the Siebel solution, such as the inability to integrate with current systems, she demanded that PeopleSoft should be the CRM solution of choice. Consistent with 'Toddling,' she input incoherent data about Siebel in her cost/benefit analysis, and claimed an inability to understand the claims made by the Siebel sales team. Her passionate defence of PeopleSoft was accompanied by an onslaught of tears, making the selection committee and the Siebel team uncomfortable. Puzzled by Linda's emotional downpour, the selection committee made further inquiries and learned that she was the only one at ease with the PeopleSoft system. Realising that her resistance might have been due to apprehension about loss of control on the job than a perceived system problem, the committee signalled to Linda that she was still important, and would be the primary person handling data in the Siebel system. Further, the Siebel sales team's clarification of Linda's concerns and identification of certain issues with the PeopleSoft system led to an almost unanimous (except Linda) decision to acquire the Siebel CRM solution.

Another instance of 'Toddling' from our data set is provided by *SSA*, a large governmental agency. The CIO decreed a move from FileMaker Pro to Microsoft Access as the preferred database application. The upcoming change was communicated to all sections in the agency. Three sections, which used FileMaker programs, claimed ignorance of Microsoft Access on at least four occasions, each protesting that they could not perform their daily functions if FileMaker was removed from the network. When reminded of the points of contact, these sections claimed they were busy with more important issues and had forgotten about any communication concerning the change. Recognising that these sections were adamant, the CIO ordered removal of FileMaker, which resulted in an immediate halt of all computer-based operations from the three

sections. Unable to feign ignorance about a lack of communication, they argued that they could not understand the new database application, and lacked the time and help from IT to learn it. Consequently, FileMaker was temporarily reinstated on the network with the hope that things would improve. When a consultant was hired to train the sections, many 'trainees' turned openly hostile in the sessions and frequently undercut the instructors' lessons with snide remarks and argumentative questions, making learning rather difficult. Months into the training, IT realised that the sessions had turned more into a forum for outlining problems with Access and how it could be more like FileMaker. Unable to handle the financial loss that this political posturing was causing the agency, and more than a year into the entire process, the CIO allowed the resistant sections to buy their own server that ran FileMaker Pro, essentially creating a sub network within *SSA*.

Unlike 'pretending,' 'toddling' involves overt resistance, but because of a constant change of mind, 'toddling' usually features more diverse strategies for derailing projects than any of the other types of behaviours. Furthermore, causes for overt resistance are guised as rational arguments regarding defects or inadequacies of the system, rather than personal inconveniences or threats caused by the system. This makes 'toddling' a covert political strategy because the self-interests driving the resistance are guised in arguments that are of a rational technical nature. Also, the frequent changing of positions within this strategy makes this strategy difficult to detect. 'Toddling' may result from a variety of reasons such as hurt feelings, hostility towards new learning, apprehensions about job security, or a true belief that the system is not appropriate for the organisation. Consequently, it becomes critical to understand the rationality behind the behaviour before deciding on the counterstrategy to be used.

4.1.3 'Hostage taking'

"If you don't do it my way..."

Sometimes political players act as if they are the sole stakeholders on the project and they should have the final word. Not unduly concerned about the welfare of the others involved, they take hostages, and when provoked or questioned, threaten to call quits, terminate a contract, or take a counter-action that might be detrimental to the organisation and the other participants. The core argument under 'Hostage Taking' goes as follows: "This is the way, I believe, things are and should be, and you better agree. If you don't do it my way, my involvement in this matter is over, and this would seriously hurt the whole affair". As with 'Toddling,' here again, the logic for believing strongly about a certain way of doing things is couched overtly in rational principled arguments about the larger good, rather than in issues of personal convenience or preference.

An illustrative example of 'hostage taking' in our data set is provided by *Manugistics,* a Fortune 500 decentralised manufacturing organisation. Here, a project was undertaken to provide real-time plant data to line managers and other users. The project was considered challenging and crucial to the company's success. A special team was formed with system analysts and programmers from within the local IT group. Ample resources were assured and a non-technical plant manager was assigned to oversee the work of the development team. Over time, the perks, remunerations, and special treatment led to the IT group acting like a self-directed team. Ignoring the users' requests, and disregarding the plant manager's authority, the IT group began making its own decisions on what the project will and will not do. Knowing that there was nobody else within the local branch

that could develop the system, the IT team threatened the plant manager to leave the organisation if its arguments were challenged. Eventually the project was handed over to the line personnel and other end users who refused to use it because it lacked the required features and included some that seemed irrelevant.

As another example, a major automotive retailer in our data set, *AutoMart,* was working with a small start-up software vendor. It requested from the vendor frequent updates on an inventory management application. *AutoMart*, which had enormous clout in the area where the vendor wanted to expand, threatened to call it quits and hurt the vendor's future business if all the "asked for minor updates and modifications" were not delivered gratis. Using the vendor to serve its own ends, *AutoMart* took advantage of the vendor's need. Eventually, although the vendor caved in to these demands, attempts were made to establish other relationships independent of the retailer's knowledge. However, the pursuit of such opportunities was inhibited by a majority of resources being spent satisfying *AutoMart*'s demands.

Despite pretenses to the contrary, 'Hostage Taking' is not concerned about the project itself. In fact, 'Hostage Taking' usually has little to do with the project. Rather 'Hostage Taking' arises out of issues that are external to the project but related to it, such as fulfilling personal desires about an 'ideal dream application.' These desires are showcased in an air of: "I know what's best for you (the organization), so if you don't do it my way, I don't want to have anything to do with it." 'Hostage Taking' is intended to seek special treatment, and individuals behaving in this fashion might honestly believe they deserve preferential treatment because they are indispensable and because "they know best." Because organisations, and other individuals, are often actually dependent upon these individuals, this behaviour presents a significant risk to the project, with time being lost and resources being spent on nurturing egos. However, the adverse effects of 'Hostage Taking' go beyond projects and beyond monetary losses; a potential by-product is the sapped morale and resentment among other individuals who do not see the rationale for the ideas of some people of a similar stature receiving better recognition.

4.1.4 'Stickling'

"It is not in the book ..."

'Stickling' involves situations where individuals (or units within the organisation) use defined roles and responsibilities as instruments to gain access and control of projects. It often results when executives do not place confidence in their individuals or units; as a consequence, executives often outsource work that these individuals or units are otherwise formally expected to do. Unlike 'Pretending,' 'Toddling,' or 'Hostage Taking,' 'Stickling' behaviour is undertaken by individuals when they are not involved in important projects. 'Stickling' behaviour often occurs when certain individuals lack the skills, resources, or competence needed to execute projects in a fashion consistent with management expectations, and thereby end up losing the confidence of senior executives and other members who then seek other avenues (e.g., hiring external consultants) to get their work done. The sidelined individuals resist such moves through 'stickling.'

As an illustrative example from our data set, *AmeriStates*, a mid-size real estate firm, initiated a project to build an IS that would generate various reports and run what-if scenarios. The internal IT function was over-worked and under-staffed. Senior management did not have a very high opinion about the IT function's ability to undertake

challenging projects. Therefore, an external consultant was contracted to design major parts of the IS with the minor elements delegated to internal IT. Frustrated IT managers claimed that organisational rules indicated IT as the sole owner of corporate data and of the processes for handling and maintaining it. IT managers asked their subordinates to slow down and delay deliverables as much as possible. The most popular of the several strategies employed to delay deliverables was to appear busy with other work and withhold cooperation, so that the consultant would appear to be incompetent. Later, during a status review, the consultant complained to executive management about the "dot every i and cross every t before we talk" attitude of IT. IT managers admitted they did not have the resources and the confidence to build up an entire IS from scratch, but were nonetheless dissatisfied with the decision to hire an external consultant. They insisted that the system should be owned and maintained by IT as mandated by the organisational rules, norms, and procedures. However, executive management, which lacked confidence in the IT department's ability to deliver, decided to assign the entire IS design to the consultant, thereby preventing IT from having any say in the matter.

As another example, at *Advanced Devices,* a Fortune 500 chip designer, the quality analyst (QA) opposed the way in which upgrades were made to an executive information system. First identifying issues related to the upgrade, and then the process through which these were done, the QA rejected the chief system analyst's approach of abandoning the traditional waterfall design in favour of an incremental design. A true 'stickler,' the QA argued that systems that were not designed or upgraded according to the company policies or change control procedures would be rejected unless specifically directed by executive management. The Chief Analyst argued that an incremental design was necessary given the project's time frame and resources. Despite respecting the Chief Analyst's expertise, the QA was unwilling to do anything outside the book and jeopardise her career or status within the organisation. This led to discussion among the QA, Chief Analyst, and management to begin an inter-disciplinary effort to identify effective change control mechanisms that will be flexible in handling different situations. The overall outcome was positive, and to the satisfaction of both the QA, and Chief Analyst. The QA got the much needed attention she was looking for and assurance that she "would not be on the hook" when exceptions occurred, while the Chief Analyst got permission to digress from the rigid rules when needed.

'Stickling' is a more palatable behaviour when it comes to information politics, primarily because individuals behaving in this fashion generally respect the organisational systems in place. Politics here is more an outcome of a lack of skills, resources, or at times the confidence to accomplish things. Like others, individuals who resort to 'Stickling' seek to be accepted within the organisation. When they are sidelined (e.g., the QA whose skills were not warranted during design; and the IT department that did not have the confidence of executive management), they resent it and resort to politics to the detriment of the project.

4.1.5 'Masterminding'

"We know best..."

Individuals often adopt 'Masterminding' to take charge of projects and steer them towards parochial goals. 'Masterminding' arises because these individuals contend that their immense project knowledge entitles them to be the sole authority on how to

accomplish things. However, organisations are not at the mercy of individuals resorting to this behaviour, unlike individuals who use 'hostage taking,' because there are other avenues (resources, outlets) for completing the task. Typically, seeking to direct resources towards personal ends, individuals use 'masterminding' to identify technical flaws within the project and cite their own previous accomplishments. These individuals are sometimes right in helping prevent bad projects from consuming scarce capital resources. However, things can go awry due to their intense belief that "I know what is best for the project to be a success," which leads them to quickly reject others' suggestions. 'Masterminding' is often used by individuals who are technocratic in their thinking and focus on small details rather than the bigger picture – e.g., they often overlook the business logic behind the project.

As an illustrative example from our data set, at *Syscorp,* a Fortune 500 IS solutions company, executive management initiated a project to create a data warehouse. They assembled a team including specialists from various areas. Since an important issue was selecting the right database architecture for the warehouse, the team included a database manager. The database manager, who considered himself an expert in these matters, recommended a 'hub-and-spoke' architecture for the warehouse. When other members disagreed, citing that the data across various departments was too interrelated to support a hub-and-spoke schema, the manager reacted strongly. Instead of providing sound business reasoning about why he wanted to use a hub-and-spoke architecture, he dug his heels, repeatedly mentioning his technical know-how and good performance, and the company's current database standards. He lashed out at those who appeared to oppose his ideas, and twice invited consultants. But, to his utter dismay, the consultants disagreed with him! Frustrated, the database manager suggested that he would use his technical know-how and consultants' suggestions to make an informed decision on the database architecture. But his final choice was the same as the one he preferred earlier! Believing that alternative suggestions were at odds with his desire to gain control, he did not listen to comments about the adverse impacts this architecture might have on the business. Eventually, although the data warehouse was built around a hub-and-spoke architecture, it was of little use to executive management. Satisfying barely 20% of the expectations, the warehouse was abandoned after a few years.

At *Petromax,* a large petroleum manufacturer, and another illustrative example from our data set, IT and operations research (OR) groups were involved in a tussle over gaining control of corporate geographic information mapping systems (GIMS). As corporate interest in GIMS grew, OR saw it as an opportunity to increase its importance within the organisation. As a first step, OR developed a quick prototype with assistance from two software vendors, and suggested to *Petromax* management that the complete design could be quickly implemented by the IT group. Feeling blindsided by these events and knowing that the suggested design could not be implemented within the stated duration, IT executives argued against it. OR immediately started pushing for a rapid implementation to avoid changes in plans if the project stretched for too long. OR argued that the IT group was complaining because they had not developed the system. Pointing to their own long previous experience with GIMS, the successful demonstration of the prototype, and IT's lack of expertise with GIMS, OR argued that they were best equipped to decide which GIMS ought to be implemented. In response, IT outlined reliability and capability issues with the OR design, and presented their own version of GIMS, which they successfully lobbied as the corporate standard for GIMS systems. When OR presented its complete design version to executive management, IT executives intervened

arguing that the software used by OR was inferior since it lacked many features available in the version proposed by IT, and was also misaligned with *Petromax's* strategic plans. They also argued that all development should follow the corporate GIMS standard, thereby seizing all rights for future GIMS development.

Rarely are people equipped with expertise in both business and technical arenas. Business and technical experts usually talk past each other. Even within the technical domain, individuals who use 'masterminding' possess knowledge of only those areas with which they have earlier been involved, which constrains their thinking about other alternatives. These individuals can halt progress in an attempt to gain control. In addition to monetary and time losses, this can create long-term resentment among others.

4.2 Counterstrategies against information politics strategies: managing information politics

No matter how well designed the organisation, information politics is inevitable. If players find something amiss about a project, they would seek to subvert it. How can executives reduce the negative impact of politics on project outcomes? We observed that executives successful in managing IS projects used some key counterstrategies, including one dominant counterstrategy for each archetype.

While multiple counterstrategies may be used to alleviate the impact of political games, senior management needs to make a judicious choice based on an understanding of the rationale behind political behaviour. As we note earlier, information politics can result from genuine concerns about the long term impacts associated with a proposed change. A blind adherence to any of these counterstrategies may turn out to be counterproductive. For example, users at a medium sized accounting firm in our data set resisted automation because use of the new system, which lacked certain key features and included others that were considered irrelevant, would have hampered their productivity. Senior management's awareness about the reasons behind this resistance led to more positive learning experiences about the deficiencies in the system. On the contrary, at *SysCorp,* executives failed to acknowledge political behaviour. Inability to realise that the hub and spoke architecture was not a good fit for the company led to a barely functional warehouse that was abandoned only a couple of years later. Understanding the causes behind the resistance could have helped *SysCorp* executives learn more about how the IS fulfilled strategic needs of the organisation and capitalise on opportunities that a functional data warehouse would have revealed.

Table 3 outlines the counterstrategies and the dominant counterstrategy (D) by archetype. Regardless of the political archetype and the counterstrategy used, acting decisively and on time is critical. Failure of a project does not depend upon one isolated event. Much like the game of chess, it involves a chain of strategies that build upon each other to determine who wins and who loses in the final run. If a 'pretending' individual is allowed to get away once for manipulating information, this behaviour will continue, by the same as well as other individuals, until checked. If such behaviour is checked late, it could severely hurt the project and the bottom-line.

Table 3 Observed counterstrategies for managing information politics

Behavioural profile (archetype)	*Slash and burn*	*Get it on the table*	*Executive sponsorship*	*Bypass/shift locus of control*	*Rational counter argument*	*Document/reporting*	*Backup resources*	*Cuddle*
Pretending	†	◆	◆	◆		◆D	◆	◆
Toddling	†	◆D	◆	◆	◆	◆		◆
Hostage Taking			◆	◆D	◆		◆	
Stickling					◆			◆D
Masterminding			◆	◆	◆D			◆

Notes: †Indicates that players were at lower power levels.
This table lists the set of counterstrategies that are used to tackle each of the political behaviour archetypes, identifying the dominant counterstrategy that is used against each of the five political archetypes.

4.2.1 Management of 'pretending'

'Pretending' takes advantage of cracks in the organisational communication structure. In most projects, no single individual had a complete overview of the project and its objectives. Instead, most organisations segregated responsibilities such that each individual had control over his or her small part, but was unaware of other parts and how the various parts fit into the whole project. Consequently, if information was manipulated it was difficult to ascertain this. Moreover, information was easily withheld because there was no easily understood and broadly accessible documentation. Finally, when individuals were given a free hand to execute their duties, few organisations established a feedback system, providing the 'Pretending' individuals with numerous opportunities to tweak the project toward parochial ends.

We came across stories where the 'pretending' individuals manoeuvred the project to their advantage, and others where their moves failed. Why did this happen given that 'pretending' usually occurs behind the scenes through strategies such as manipulating information? In both *HealthPro* and *Agilent Networks*, our case narratives revealed that managers had only partial or no information about the 'Pretending' individuals when the projects started. Clearly, the difference suggests an ignorance of the power of information (POI). In trying to create an information-rich organisation, *HealthPro* did not realise that the information it sought to improve its market power also gave power to the subsidiaries. Nor did it attempt to investigate the reasons behind the failure, instead relying on the manager's words. By contrast, at *Agilent Networks* managers consistently demonstrated 'situational awareness' of the project's broader implications, and maintained project documentation (e.g., requirements, sample documents, points of contact). When the 'Pretending' individual attempted to pass the buck on the development team, they could counter his every move by relying on the detailed documentation. Managers at *Agilent Networks* also verified information from multiple sources in other branches, which allowed them to detect the presence of the 'pretending' behaviour early on in the process, and then closely monitor actions and behaviours – something *HealthPro* failed to do.

Actions of *Agilent* executives alert us to the dangers of ignoring detailed and timely documentation. Consider what happened at a financially shaky *Interstate Movers*, another example from our data set, when executives hired a self-professed guru to single handedly develop an accounting package for the trucking industry, gave him a free hand on the development, and did not monitor his progress, although "things were going really slow." The result was that after two years of 'development,' *Interstate* realised during a product demo that the guru did not have any programming knowledge, and the package was far from ready. The guru was fired and *interstate movers* filed for bankruptcy later that year.

Documentation of the project activities (e.g., points of contact, minutes of meetings, details of test procedures) provides several benefits. First, cracks in reporting cannot be exploited to delay progress. Second, the 'Pretending' individuals cannot 'pass the buck' if and when they indeed get caught. Thus, good documentation helps to expose 'Pretending.' Third, when managers have an overall idea about the project, it becomes easier to detect and counter 'Pretending.'

Unrealistic expectations and a rigid vertical managerial system at *Interstate Movers* prevented early recognition of 'Pretending.' If *Interstate* executives had done frequent checks, and shared the progress of the guru with other stakeholders (such as the IT or Accounting departments), the 'Pretending' behaviour would have been exposed much

earlier and bankruptcy could have been prevented; indeed, it was an accountant within the company who noticed that the software allegedly *developed* by the guru was actually a well-known accounting package.

4.2.2 Management of 'toddling'

An open and light hearted discussion can be a powerful deterrent for 'toddling.' Getting things on the table helps in dealing with 'toddling' because, although interested in 'benefit maximising,' individuals who perform this behaviour are not necessarily in discord with the organisation's goals. The diverse strategies and frequent changing of positions that are likely within the 'toddling' approach increases the potency of candid discussion with 'toddling' individuals to counteract this strategy on a holistic basis instead of piecemeal attempts to counteract each position taken within this strategy.

In our examples, successful managers were much more likely to deploy an inquisitive and systematic approach to deal with 'toddling.' They would usually attempt to talk to the involved parties, seek additional information, and identify the underlying issues. The issues included concerns about the project's impact, a clash of egos, attempts to maximise personal benefit from the project (such as additional desirable features), apprehensions about job security, an unwillingness to learn, and a desire to enjoy an easy life. Based on the understanding of the 'rationality' behind this behaviour, successful managers selected appropriate counterstrategies, ranging from drastic slash-and-burn to more subtle moves such as posing counterarguments from the perspective of the individual who is 'toddling,' documenting additional demands, and cuddling (e.g., giving the spotlight to) that individual. In stark contrast, executives who were unsuccessful in dealing with 'toddling' often reacted passively to their every move, treating each move as an isolated event that could be fixed. In almost every case when issues are brought to the table, an amicable solution can be reached.

Consider why things went awry at *SSA* where the stubborn sections succeeded in having things their way. Unlike *Macrosoft,* executives at *SSA* attempted to counter 'toddling' on a one-on-one basis. When the 'toddlers' feigned ignorance about communication, executives reacted passively by showing points of contact, and when the 'toddlers' argued that access was complicated compared to FileMaker, executives arranged for Access training sessions. *SSA* executives lacked a systematic process to get to the root of the problem. They failed to realise that meeting one demand by the 'toddler' might solve that particular problem but lead to a new one. Since the rationale behind the episode was the 'toddler's' desire for an easier life, *SSA* executives might have been better off in using a firm approach – asserting that players are substitutable, and stubborn behaviour would be penalised.

Once executives determine the rationale behind 'toddling' behaviour, several options can be exercised based on the 'toddler's' influence in the organisation, and the specifics of the situation. When the 'toddler' is a key stakeholder in the project, resistance could be reduced by delicately providing cogent counterarguments. It is also useful to document each request made by 'toddlers,' to prevent them from later turning back on their words. Another way to restrain influential 'toddlers' is to cuddle them, and make them an 'insider' or 'part of a clan' as opposed to an outsider dictating what needs to be done. Such counter moves could be energy sapping, so it is important to get top executives involved early in the resolution process. Many organisations in our data set that eventually succeeded with counterstrategies handled things at the project level, and the

process endured long resolution cycles. Had executive involvement been obtained earlier, the process could have been expedited.

A final approach to address 'toddling' is slash-and-burn, which essentially involves firing the problematic individuals or departments, and replacing them with new ones. Thus, 'slash-and-burn' is akin to removing the cancerous cells in an organisation. While this strategy was common, successful organisations used it carefully; it might result in loss of otherwise competent individuals who have contributed to the organisation's success, which leads to costly mistakes. For example, at one of the firms in our data set, *Freedom Avionics,* an avionics contractor with over $40 million in annual revenues, five executives started politicking to prevent adverse business impacts of some questionable moves by a newly hired senior VP (business development). Without trying to understand the rationale behind the politicking, the chairman agreed with the senior VP and replaced the entire executive team. The consequence of losing these executives with years of industry experience and insider knowledge was that *Freedom Avionics* went from a $40 million to a $15 million company virtually over a fortnight. It struggles to this day. Also, as we observed in many cases, 'slash-and-burn' creates internal tension, especially if the player is liked or well respected. Finally, replacing people is a short-term fix; it removes the cancer, but not the underlying cause. When longer-term solutions are required, a systematic inquiry process should be used.

4.2.3 Management of 'hostage taking'

'Hostage taking' is any organisation's nightmare, and can make the management of projects extremely difficult. Because individuals who resort to 'Hostage Taking' are often the organisations' sole means of achieving their objectives (e.g., executing projects), there isn't much one can do about them except to plan upfront. Most counterstrategies fail when dealing with 'Hostage Taking' because the dependency is often unilateral (the organisation depends on the concerned individuals much more than the other way around), and their behaviours are often geared towards *'zero sum game'* mentality instead of a win-win scenario.

One approach to handle 'Hostage taking' is to 'bypass' the concerned individuals by creating other avenues for achieving similar objectives. For instance, executives in an organisation trying to capture the market may rely on a charismatic leader. Executives in another organisation that has a leader who might indulge in 'Hostage Taking' may develop a formal strategic planning process to achieve the same objective while bypassing that individual. An alternative approach to manage 'Hostage Taking' is imitation. For example, the software firm successfully managed the hostage-taking behaviour of *AutoMart* by independently establishing other relationships, creating alternatives through direct and indirect networking, and thereby avoiding being at the mercy of one organisation. Contrast this with the case of *Manugistics*, where managers showed an inability to think beyond the IT team, failed to indicate that alternatives were available and autocratic behaviour might cost the team a place in the organisation, and thus sowed the seeds for further 'Hostage Taking.'

To avoid 'Hostage Taking,' managers must invest in opportunistic networking and initiatives that reduce dependencies. One way to achieve this is to maintain skill inventories of all individuals within the organisation. Some redundancy or skill overlap within the organisation helps as well. Specialisation can foster information politics and

also accentuate 'Hostage Taking.' When project participants know that they are replaceable, the foundation for 'Hostage Taking' disappears.

Another approach to address 'Hostage Taking' is to create 'bilateral dependencies', by trying to ensure that both parties need each other to succeed. Consider another example from our data set, the case of *VectorLink,* a system integration company that provides advanced facility management systems (FMS) worldwide. *VectorLink's* business is intensely competitive, requiring engineers who commission FMS systems to have highly specialised skills, and involves months of intense training for new hires. *VectorLink* keeps costs low by only hiring the minimum number of people. Such an environment is a fertile ground for 'Hostage Takers'. *VectorLink* has managed to reduce 'Hostage Taking' by using the bypass technique and creating bilateral dependencies. Given the focus on cost savings, the company does not create redundant skills. Instead, by creating extra resources at one location (e.g., Singapore, its Asian headquarters) while cutting down on other locations (e.g., Mumbai, India), it creates perceptions among engineers that they are tradable. If engineers in Mumbai wish to play 'Hostage Takers', they are informed that they are free to leave, since the slack can be filled in by acquiring excess resources from Singapore on a temporary basis. In reality, however, the 'excess stock' at Singapore is inadequate to address such departures, and bringing in expertise is prohibitively expensive; engineers from Singapore not only have to train local staff in Mumbai, which increases training durations, but they also have to be compensated at international standards.

Another technique, also employed by *VectorLink,* relies on creating bilateral dependencies through excessive specialisation. The highly proprietary systems made the knowledge of engineers so specialised that it became a source of liability for the engineer – in terms of moving to another firm – rather than a source of power to take hostages. Knowledge of the FMS systems at *VectorLink* is so proprietary that it is useless to a competitor. If an engineer chooses to leave, he has to be retrained entirely by his new employer. Thus both parties (the engineers and *VectorLink* executives) are mutually interdependent, and the cost of exiting the relationship is prohibitive for either party.

Due to trends such as outsourcing, 'Hostage Taking' would occur infrequently in the context of standard IT projects. In our sample, either because the projects may have been less important or because the managers were able to prevent this behaviour, only limited instances of 'Hostage Taking' behaviour were noted. Nonetheless, organisations need to be alert to the possibility of such behaviour, and should continuously be alert by pre-emptively scanning the environment for possible alternatives.

4.2.4 Management of 'stickling'

Of the five archetypes, 'Stickling' might be the easiest to manage, but it was rarely well managed in our sample. Executives who unsuccessfully handled 'Stickling' were more likely to see them as incompetent and their behaviour as impediments to getting the work done. This belief can prove dangerous because 'Stickling' is a permanent aspect of many organisations. Although they may not cause immediate damage, they can potentially cause harm in the long run. For instance, at the real estate firm, managers dismissed the IT department as ineffective. They did not realise that, by doing so, they created bad feelings, and also signalled downstream system maintenance issues once the consultant left the scene.

Based on our observations, to deal with 'stickling,' executives need to shift their role from being 'orchestra conductors' to 'humble persuaders' (http://www.glossika.com /articles/0068.php). Executives who successfully handled 'Stickling' were more likely to view them as opportunities to build relationships. For example, successful managers such as the Chief Analyst involved the QA and executive management, built trustworthy relationships, emphasised the value of collaboration, and made cogent arguments in support of a scenario that would benefit all involved parties.

The appropriate type of 'cuddling' – a counterstrategy that takes various forms, including providing the spotlight, persuading, building trust and relationships – depends on the specifics of the situation. We suggest a three-step process for cuddling to succeed. The first step is to modify behaviour to move it closer to that of those who are 'stickling.' Executives should exercise delicate authority and appeal positively to 'sticklers.' Understanding their 'sub-culture' and behaving accordingly is critical. Examples include discussing issues at the coffee shop instead of in a formal executive suite, and dressing the way 'they' do. Second, it is important to shed the 'executive persona,' and instead adopt a light-hearted, humble approach of "someone who is around to understand and help with the issues." Individuals who use 'stickling' are smart enough to discern manipulative actions, which merely aggravate the situation. Finally, positive and negative outcomes of the discussion should be presented in small chunks, allowing people the time to digest them. If executives and 'sticklers' agree on a common ground, and identify approaches that can create win-win scenarios, the energy-sapping exercises can be avoided and attention focused on more important issues.

4.2.5 Management of 'masterminding'

Like 'stickling,' 'masterminding' is not intrinsically negative; their personal agendas may not conflict with organisational objectives. Unlike 'stickling' however, 'masterminding' involves a lack of understanding of the project's business aspects. Being creative and also exceptional problem solvers, individuals who perform 'masterminding' are obsessed about the technology that drives the project – often at the cost of relating to colleagues outside of IT. Consequently, their arguments for gaining control are also narrowly framed. Their logic is simple: "the world revolves around IT, and since we are the IT experts, we know best how to tackle the problem." To deal effectively with individuals behaving in this fashion, executives need to provide them rational counterarguments for being more business-oriented and customer-driven.

In our examples, managers who successfully dealt with 'Masterminding' asked the concerned individuals to demonstrate the business value for their choices. For instance, in the GIMS tussle, IT executives – the 'masterminds' – demonstrated that features in the GIMS proposed by the OR group were incompatible and would not fulfil the organisation's strategic objectives. Successful managers stressed the strategic direction, and the business implications of their choice. Their role was refocusing the 'Mastermind's' work from one driven by internal/technical passion to one driven by customer needs. In contrast, in the unsuccessful data warehouse project, the teams approached the problem from a narrow perspective without considering the effects on business value. Further, unsuccessful managers rarely sought support from executive management, and instead got involved in over-debating technical issues.

To address 'Masterminding,' executives should ensure that technology takes a back seat to business needs. Subtle arguments to convey this message to the concerned

individuals is key to successfully handling the situation. As the Vice President and CIO of *Documentum,* one of the companies in our data set, George Lin suggests, "I keep business needs at the forefront by banning technology talk with my IT employees. I never talk technology to my own people; instead talk about how their work is related to the business." Lin's sentiments are echoed by other high ranking IT executives such as Tim Buckley (Managing Director of IT, *Vanguard)* and Terese Butler (Deputy Director of IT, *California Employment Development Department*). Terese Butler, for example, notes, "It comes down to communicating overall organizational goals and showing employees what their roles are in fulfilling those" (Santosus 2003). In this spirit, Terese regularly invites developers to showcase project demos to executives, and how they contribute to bottom line productivity, while Lin has initiated cross training programmes (in areas such as customer service, and negotiation skills) for individuals who could resort to 'masterminding.'

5 Discussion

Information politics is a common cause underlying resistance to IS projects, and ultimately, failure of these projects (Davenport et al., 1992; Grover et al., 1988; Sabherwal and Grover, 2010). A key challenge to managing information politics is that many political behaviours in organisations tend to be covert because people engaging in these behaviours are often fearful of getting exposed (Jasperson et al., 2002; Joshi, 1991). This makes political strategies difficult to detect; poor understanding of covert political strategies, in turn, makes it difficult for managers to launch effective counterstrategies against them (Davenport et al., 1992; Grover et al., 1988). Therefore, in this study, we sought to address two questions:

1 What covert information politics strategies do employees use to resist IS projects?

2 What counterstrategies can organisations employ against each of these covert information politics strategies?

We addressed these questions by presenting descriptive findings from an exploratory study of 141 IS projects that uncovered the set of covert information politics strategies that are used by employees as they deal with IS projects. We also presented the set of counterstrategies that our data showed to be the most productive against each of these political strategies. While we presented these political strategies by profiling the individuals who enacted them, care should be taken in interpreting our analysis. Since the political strategy archetypes are based purely on the observed behaviours, it would be unproductive to search, identify, or label individuals with these archetypes. We recommend classifying behaviours and *not* individuals into these strategic archetypes, and therefore our effort focuses on what kind of behaviours are observed and how they can be best managed. Thus, it is important to recognise and understand behaviours such as 'pretending,' 'toddling,' and so on. For simplicity of presentation, we have occasionally used terms such as 'pretenders' and 'toddlers,' but this is only to indicate individuals who performed 'pretending' or 'toddling' behaviour during this period, and not to classify individuals or to imply that those individuals would perform similar behaviour under other circumstances as well.

The results of our research need to be viewed with some caution. As mentioned in our 'Methods' section, we collected data from only a single respondent. This inevitably biases the picture based on perceptions of the situation that might be idiosyncratic to that respondent. It is possible that a different perspective would come forth had we collected data from multiple individuals involved in each project. While we cannot completely overcome this limitation, we took certain measures to maintain the validity of our analysis. First, we cleaned our data, and included only those individuals in our sample who had first-hand experience with information politics on the project (or they were the ones engaging in political behaviour). Second we focused on behaviours. Given the fair amount of research behind causes of resistance, our primary interest was in behavioural manifestations of resistance (rather than why resistance occurred, we were interested in how it is implemented and whether there are patterns in this implementation). While causes may not be directly observable and evident to some third party, the actions and the results often are. That someone has caused a system to shut down by overloading it, we thought was more objective for a third party than asking why someone caused the system to overload. Thus by shifting the focus of the article from 'causes to manifestations' we were able to limit bias in the accounts. Third, we aggregated observations across a reasonably large sample of cases. Thus our findings are a result of observing clear patterns rather than the specifics of any one case.

Caution is also necessary in generalising the results of our research. Project environments are highly complex involving multiple stakeholders, complex architectural standards, legal restrictions and the like. Our case data, although reflective of this complexity, mostly dealt with in-house development and deployment of packaged solutions where interactions were for the most part limited between two parties (individuals or groups). While we believe that we have covered considerable ground in terms of the diversity of the cases, we were limited by the amount and type of project information provided by our informants. Our case data does however reveal the presence of a wide variety of projects ranging from analysis to maintenance. Further, we also have data from both public and private sector organisations. Thus we believe that while our counterstrategies may not cover the entire spectrum of IT project issues, particularly those involving multiple stakeholders, we do believe the implications can be fruitfully employed to manage information politics.

Notwithstanding these limitations, our study makes several contributions to research and practice. For example, the findings from our study raise the interesting question of why IS politics runs rampant in projects; a question with significant implications for existing research on the related topics of IS politics, power, and resistance. It is one thing to identify the political behaviours used in derailing projects, but quite another to understand the rationale behind them. Each of the behavioural profiles identified in our study reflects individual or organisational shortcomings – be it a misalignment in ambition, poor incentives, poor decision making at the executive level, or lack of a supportive organisational culture. Consequently, researchers need to exercise caution in labelling the behaviours as 'organisational roadblocks' or worse, associating these behaviours to the individuals who enact them, and labelling them as 'organisational incompetencies.'

Our study further contributes by revealing the importance of understanding the rationale behind information politics before reacting to political behaviours that seem more disruptive than they actually are. In our dataset, many of the covert political

strategies could, at first glance, be assumed to be opportunistic behaviour. However, deeper analysis revealed that some of these strategies were employed by well-meaning individuals who saw political behaviour as the only way to protect their organisation against impending problems from the systems being implemented. On the other hand, many other strategies were intended to maximise personal gains at the expense of organisational interest.

Our findings highlight several reasons underlying the manifestation of political behaviour. First, disruptive behaviour is sometimes a matter of deep rooted flaws. Some individuals tend to harbour Machiavellian intentions and know well the personal benefits of doing so. Their interest in playing the system may range from nepotism, personal advancement at the expense of others, to golden handshakes with competitors. These deficiencies need to be dealt with a firm hand.

Second, information politics may result from a lack of skills and distrust of senior management. Individuals in these cases do not harbour Machiavellian intentions. Some individuals are weak thinkers, may be inexperienced in their roles, or may simply lack the ability to showcase their work to senior management. Instead of showing distrust in their abilities, and inviting political manoeuvring, management should take steps towards building confidence – they should introduce training and other forms of management education and promote the feeling of belongingness.

Third, attempts to play politics may often be a result of organisational environment – culture and values that shape the workplace. Organisational practices are often segregated to the extent that individuals working in one area often fail to recognise how their work fits and helps individuals working in other parts of the organisation. Inappropriate reward systems that encourage individuals to do the best job within their area merely reinforce the practice of thinking inside a black box. The result often is that individuals tend to display hedonistic attitudes, design systems that satisfy personal desires, keep piling on additional needs, and end up being labelled as political warhorses trying to 'get things their way.' While the problem of silos may be difficult to overcome, senior management needs to be aware of this possibility and get things out on the table to minimise inefficient behaviour.

Finally, information politics may be a response to organisational shortcomings – be it inadequate communication, or poor decisions on the part of senior management that fosters concerns about the organisation's future and individual insecurity. For example, if an organisation attempts to automate a process within accounting without adequately communicating the purpose behind automation, it will create fertile ground for a variety of archetypes such as 'toddling' and 'pretending.' Similarly, if senior management comes up with plans for change [such as restructuring a function] without adequate thought or consultation with those directly affected, it may find itself in the midst of politicking. Often individuals who resist do so for genuine concerns about the long-term impact of the change for the organisation. Labelling the players as 'evil,' without understanding the causes behind their behaviour can not only lead to loss of otherwise committed individuals, but also result in irreversible consequences – as observed in the case of *Freedom Avionics*.

The counterstrategies that we elucidate in this study are effective tools that organisational leaders could use for managing different political behaviour archetypes after they arise. Additionally, we also offer several proactive ways in which organisations can minimise the occurrence of information politics in the first place:

5.1 Know the organisational culture

It is important to understand the organisational culture, and utilise this understanding to take actions that reduce information politics. For example: Do people like working together? Do different units interact frequently? Are units dispersed across different cultural zones? Are there tensions among units? And so on. At a state agency in our data set, the IS function was divided between a central information centre (IS-HQ) and independent divisional IS units. The agency wanted to integrate all divisions so that all data could be monitored and brought into IS-HQ. Knowing well the culture within the agency, especially the presence of the little IT kingdoms, the CIO of IS-HQ hired an external consultant to gather needed information from the divisional IS units. Hiring a consultant instead of requesting people from IS-HQ to conduct the data collection avoided potential future resistance from the divisional units reluctant to cede control of their data.

5.2 Foster open environments

An open environment would, over time, make people more receptive to documentation, and rigid reporting can help protect projects from 'pretending.' Development of an open environment reduces politics, as people feel free to discuss their concerns. Google has used this approach effectively; by having no cubicles, using lava lamps to indicate progress of projects to everyone in the organisation, and allowing an informal party-like environment. The benefits are clear: low internal competition, feelings of 'one world' and camaraderie, successful projects, and a successful company [http://www.google.com/corporate/culture.html (accessed 13 October 2006)]. An open environment also helps realise that humans may twist information to their own advantage, but this is not necessarily bad. Managers often have the best interests of the organisation in mind; from experience they know what changes might and might not work. When change is introduced without consultation and communication with managers and other stakeholders, it could cause political behaviour that is seen as evil but might simply reflect human nature.

5.3 Provide incentives for information sharing

When an individual's power within the organisation depends on her being the only one having some important information, there is a strong motivation not to share that information (Davenport et al., 1992). This eventually leads to information politics, as discussed earlier. In order to avoid such information politics, management should provide strong incentives for sharing information with others in the organisation. To the extent that such incentives are clearly greater for more important information (e.g., through mechanisms such as 'hit rate' or through the number of times that information is accessed), they would help overcome the intrinsic motivation not to share information. In the long run, the costs that are associated with such incentives would be more than justified by the reduction in information politics.

5.4 Build valuable redundancies

Numerous opportunities for information politics arise from one individual or group having the sole control over important information or tasks. Although specialisation is necessary for organisational efficiency, the short-term inefficiency is justified by long-term benefits from the careful incorporation of redundancy – in terms of distribution of information and development of skills – in critical areas of the organisation. Such targeted redundancies can help prevent 'Pretending' and 'Hostage Taking', and also enable the use, if necessary, of counterstrategies such as 'slash and burn' and shifting the locus of control.

5.5 Develop and deploy 'POI' profiles

Information politics results in failures of otherwise meticulously planned projects. Executives do not develop plans for managing politics. The greater the POI, however, the more the need to deal with politics, and redefine projects, tasks, or outcomes in mid-course. Alternatively, it is easier to begin with the assumption that politics is real and common, and draft plans on how to manage it. A possible means through which politics may be managed is the *power of information or POI profile.* This is a qualitative assessment of the stakeholders that may be the most damaging, and therefore need attention. To build the POI profile, executives should think differently: instead of identifying the potential beneficiaries, identify the parties that stand to *lose* the most from the project, and the possible reasons for their losses. This can be based on a variety of sources: hunches based on previous projects, scenario (what-if) planning, assessing whether the stakeholders work independently (staking territory), and so on. More aggressive techniques such as tracking behaviours, body language, and level of enthusiasm during initial stages may also help peek into the future. The specific form of the POI (e.g., the level of detail, and the number of aspects covered) is less important than its fundamental purpose: to ensure that executives understand the sources, rationale, and instruments of managing the information game. A POI profile can be used to build a plan of action for each likely strategy. For instance, if only unit X can perform task A, then executives need a backup plan if X refuses to execute A. Can any other units inside or outside the organisation help with A? The POI can also be used to identify the form in which value should best be communicated to each stakeholder.

6 Concluding remarks

We have identified a parsimonious set of strategies and counterstrategies related to information politics, and some ways in which such politics could be prevented. In an era where information has been equated with power and prestige, information politics will increasingly come into play: it is the norm, not an exception. Organisations that recognise this have the greatest chance to reduce failure rates of IS projects. This article has hopefully served as a reality check for appreciating the role of information politics and applying simple but pragmatic ways in which IS projects could be kept on course. When archetypes are covert about the way they choose to express their dissent and forward private goals, it is imperative for senior executives to both recognise and understand ways in which dissent is expressed. Knowing that political resistance is happening is the first

step towards understanding the motives behind politicking and appropriate ways to manage it. We reiterate that while political behaviours may be observable, the underlying motives behind these often remain uncovered. To the extent that this is true, executives should exercise caution in interpreting our analysis and findings. While our research centred on a more objective theme of information politics – how to identify and recognise politics at work -- by necessity we relied to some extent on inferring motives since these were not directly, objectively, or readily observable. We therefore urge executives to make their own judgment concerning the motives inferred in this research. It may well be true that beneficial feelings and concern for the welfare of the organisation carry significant weight in display of information politics. Unfortunately, given our data, it was not possible to either affirm or disconfirm this possibility.

'Pretending,' 'toddling,' 'hostage taking,' 'masterminding,' and 'stickling' behaviours are all around IS projects involving their distinct forms of resistance. Identification and appropriate management of these behaviours is critical to the success of these projects, and ultimately the organisational bottom line.

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