

The Narration of Success or Failure in Large IT Projects in UK Government

20 June 2021

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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[Declaration of Authorship](#)

I, Christopher Douglas Hall hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: 

Date: 12 December 2020

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my two amazing supervisors, Professors Gillian Symon and Chris Grey who have provided encouragement, guidance and friendship on what has been a long journey!

And to my wonderful partner, Sali for her unfailing support.

I'd also like to thank my interviewees for their time and openness, my examiners for their constructive challenge and feedback, my managers in the Cabinet Office for enabling the research and encouraging me to complete it and my many dedicated colleagues in the Civil Service with whom it has been a privilege and a pleasure to work.

Chris Hall

Bourn, Cambs, 18 September 2020

Abstract

My thesis is about the success and failure of IT projects in UK Government, and the role of audit and review organizations such as the Major Projects Authority and the National Audit Office in ascribing success and failure. This role is examined by analysing the narratives of a number of actors in this system: project managers and project owners; reviewers; auditors; and politicians who hold civil servants to account for the overall system of project delivery, including the systems of review and audit that are intended to decrease the probability of failure.

Following Fincham (2002), whether a project is considered a success or failure is a result of the power relations present in this system, of which project review and audit are a part. Examination of the narratives present in this system generates insights into the political struggles taking place around each project and how a narrative of success or failure became dominant.

Analysis of the narratives of actors also suggests that while in public they attributed failure to the management approach adopted (which in turn led to people or process failures), their private narratives often attributed failure to political activity generated by the system of power relations within which the projects were executed. Analysis of conflicting narratives suggests that discussion of such political activity was largely excluded from public accounts because of constraints placed on the authors via the system of power relations.

There is also evidence in the narratives that the rationalist paradigm of the system of review and audit reinforced the message to project managers to keep going with the same management approach, only *next time try harder*. Reviewers and auditors did not challenge the status quo by highlighting those

characteristics of the system of power relations that generated and sustained narratives of project failure.

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1 Introduction - The Subject Matter and Underlying Philosophy of this Thesis

1.1 Background to the Thesis

1.1.1 Introduction – how did the thesis come to be written?

The thesis seeks to answer the research question – what do the narratives of project managers, reviewers and auditors reveal about the ascription of success and failure to large IT projects in UK Government? It explores the world of project managers, politicians, IT suppliers, project evaluation, parliamentary oversight, civil servants, technologists, auditors, journalists and the many talented academics who have tried to make sense of this complex topic before me. The reason I wrote the thesis was because I found some paradoxes in this area both intriguing and puzzling, and my background and academic interests gave me a special opportunity to analyse them.

I am a computer scientist by training, and spent the early years of my career initially building IT systems and then managing IT project teams. This introduced me to the discipline of project management, which initially seemed to me a primarily bureaucratic exercise with endless documents to write and forms to fill in. Even with this documentation, it was clear that some of the projects that I worked on were challenged; delivered late, over budget and to disappointed users. The disappointment appeared to flow from a lack of user involvement, so mid-career I worked on a number of ‘change management’ projects, which sought to engage these users in designing and implementing changes to their ways of working, often in response to the introduction of new IT.

The theory behind this ‘change management’ work was sparse, and engagement conducted using an ever-changing toolkit which was often

inspired by the latest management fad. This experience echoed Caldwell's (2005, p. 105) observation that change management practitioners:

....use a curious mix of uncodified knowledge, instrumental expertise, project management techniques, practical know-how and political skills to effect change.

In search of something more rigorous, I enrolled for a Masters' course in Organizational Behaviour at Birkbeck College, University of London.

The course surprised and challenged me. Much of the teaching questioned the idea of whether Organizational Behaviour could even be understood, let alone changed in any meaningful way. But I did get intellectual stimulation, exposure to new (and old) ideas, and fresh perspectives on a number of challenging problems. One day I was discussing something topical – the perceived failure of a large IT project – and a member of faculty suggested I read Fincham's (2002) paper on the subject. Fincham wrote convincingly on the subjective nature of IT project success and failure, and the way in which narratives condition our view of project outcomes. I found Fincham's paper fascinating, plausible and congruent with my personal experience. Soon afterwards I found myself working as a civil servant in the centre of Government, with access to some of the largest and most challenging IT projects in the UK. I also had visibility of the efforts made to ensure that these projects, spending hundreds of millions of pounds and affecting the lives of many citizens, delivered as promised; and yet many of them did not. I wanted to investigate whether Fincham's thesis applied in this new environment, and writing a PhD thesis of my own was one way (although perhaps a more arduous way than absolutely necessary) to find out.

Others were of course interested in IT project success or failure, one of whom was Francis Maude, Minister for the Cabinet Office during the Coalition Government of 2010-15. To change the way Government addressed such projects and thus reduce the failure rate, Maude introduced two major initiatives; the introduction of a mandatory system of project review and the establishment of a central IT development unit, the Government Digital Service. Both initiatives had a big part to play in my field of study.

The success and failure of IT projects was not just an interesting academic topic. David Freud was a Minister in the Coalition Government, directly responsible for Welfare Reform and the largest IT project in Government at the time, Universal Credit. As will be described later in the thesis, he and his fellow DWP Ministers came into conflict with Maude regarding the execution of this project, and he later reflected (Timmins, 2016):

Francis [Maude] ... wanted to kill it [the live system]. But I knew that if you killed the live system, you killed Universal Credit. If we did not get something out there working in the real world, with all these enemies circling, it would be labelled a failed project and would be all too easy to stop.

The determination of success and failure is thus of the highest importance to Government. Very few policy changes can be implemented without the parallel development of a new or substantially changed IT system; thus the success or failure of these IT projects determines whether the Government can deliver its policy agenda; and to some extent, whether the Government succeeds or fails.

1.1.2 Researching success and failure

It's difficult to approach a project manager and say 'why did your project fail'? A large amount of a project manager's professional identity is linked to the 'success' of the projects that he or she has worked on (Hodgson and Paton, 2016). In addition the project manager is, on any sizeable IT project, just one of hundreds of people directly or indirectly engaged in working on it; so their account is likely to be one distinctive viewpoint among many. Each of the people engaged has their own incomplete and partial view of the project, biased by their preconceptions and self-interest. There can be no single comprehensive account of a project, as many confusing things are happening simultaneously, all capable of multiple interpretations, and each of the many actors will have their own subjective viewpoint.

In an attempt to reduce this subjectivity and ambiguity, much project management activity is driven by the search for "one version of the truth". However as one senior civil servant confided to me, "there are many versions of 'the truth'", quoting Durrell's (1962) *Alexandria Quartet* as an example¹. Research confirms that there is a lot of risk and uncertainty in project work, and that one job of project managers is to try and reduce its effects through risk management – itself an inherently subjective activity (Smithson and Hirschheim, 1998). Unfortunately no amount of risk management could prepare my own project for the day when two team members fell in love and ran away to Cyprus together, leaving their partners and an incomplete integration test behind. Projects, therefore, are difficult to describe and

¹ Durrell's four novels each tell the story of overlapping events from the point of view of a different protagonist

susceptible to chance, and narrative accounts of projects and project failure are likely to be subjective, incomplete, and open to bias and partiality.

So why use narrative accounts, with these many acknowledged shortcomings, as a way to study projects and project failure? Czarniawska (1998) offers some clues. In her analysis of organizational narratives, she points out their special characteristics. A narrative connects a set of events through a plot; and the plot offers an explanation. Whether the explanation is 'true' or not is not material. The narrative is offered as an explanation that the audience may accept or reject. It is up to the researcher to interpret that explanation, and come to conclusions about how the explanation was formulated and why it was offered. In the case of IT projects, Fincham's (2002) premise was that project failure was a term in a narrative about the project, and whether the project was considered a failure or not was an act of intersubjectivity – the failure narrative had somehow gained enough currency that it had achieved an unquestioned dominance. But how had this state of hegemony come about? And in the context of Government projects, were there some special circumstances that made it more or less likely for a failure narrative to be initiated and, importantly, to take root?

One possibly line of enquiry was to look at narratives whose primary purpose was explicitly evaluative. In the Government context, many of these narratives were written by professional evaluators and were associated with two processes: project review and project audit. Both of these processes can be seen as risk management mechanisms. In the case of project review, the process is intended to catch incipient failure, i.e. detect projects that run the risk of failing in time to arrange for preventative measures to be taken. In the case of audit, the risks under consideration are systemic; and if an audited

project is seen as a failure, the audit process should say what actions can be taken, across the system, so that similar projects do not suffer the same fate. As the audit is performed on behalf of Parliament, it also serves important purposes of transparency and public accountability. I had the opportunity to talk to reviewers and auditors about what they did and how they reached these evaluative judgements on very large, complex IT projects.

As part of my analysis I also reviewed formal reports of evaluations. These appeared to follow certain conventions, some explicit and some implicit. As an example, they rarely made direct criticisms of individuals, although in private both reviewers and auditors were happy to do so on an anonymous basis. The reports also appeared to refer to a baseline, an inbuilt model of how projects in Government 'ought' to be executed, with a high degree of process compliance, internal coherence, complete resolution of all conflicting stakeholder requirements, budgetary rigour and rigid adherence to timetable. I had the opportunity to ask the authors how these reports were written, and what constrained their construction.

These highly experienced people had many opinions and insights into the phenomenon of project failure. To the best of my knowledge few researchers have had had the opportunity to interview them before or examine their private accounts. I set out to construct my own narrative, a thesis that would analyse these accounts and generate some insights into how IT project success and failure were constructed in this environment.

1.1.3 Key concepts used in the thesis

To help frame my narrative, I offer some definitions of my key concepts; Narrative, Success and Failure, Agile (the development method), project, project actors, project ecosystem and the system of power relations.

These definitions are expanded later in the thesis.

Narrative

A narrative, conveyed orally or in text, is an account of events with some linking, evaluative, causal information, that may be in the form of a plot (Czarniawska, 1998, p. 5) (see section 3.5).

Success and failure

Success and failure are descriptive terms within a narrative (Fincham, 2002) ascribed through the exercise of power relations and with certain rhetorical effects that in the case of 'failure' may include abandonment of the project (see section 2.6).

System of Power Relations

Power is relational. It is not 'possessed' by an individual, but is created, exercised maintained and diminished in the context of relationships with others (Pettigrew and McNulty, 1995). The system of power relations is the sum of many force relations within a particular context. In the thesis, this context is the environment within which the IT project is conceived, executed and evaluated. This system is constitutive and establishes the project and the other organizations and institutions within the context. It is non-deterministic and inherently unstable, thus in a continual state of flux or struggle (Foucault, 1976, p. 92) (see section 3.7).

Agile

Agile is an approach to software development and project management using iterative development and fast deployment, as summarised in the Agile manifesto (Beck *et al.*, 2001) (see section 4.3).

Project

The definition of project that I use in the thesis is the one in use in Government at the time of the study – a project is a temporary organization set up to achieve a unique goal (Packendorff, 1995) (see section 2.6).

Network of Project actors

Project actors are individuals and groups who have a role within a project narrative (Drevin and Dalcher, 2011) or who are involved in creating, performing, consuming or critiquing such narratives. Their interaction with other actors in formal and informal networks takes place within and is governed by the *system of power relations* described above (see section 2.6 and Chapter 5).

Project Ecosystem

I use the term ‘project ecosystem’ to describe the collective set of organizations within the projects’ context including sponsors, users, sources of funding, evaluators, other projects and other relevant bodies. The ecosystem includes the formal and informal networks of members of these organizations and the power relations between them (see section 4.2).

1.1.4 Summary of the thesis

I chose to look at why some Government IT projects came to be considered as failures, in contrast to others that were claimed to be successful. My professional training and background gave me some insights into this issue, but the thesis draws far more on my academic journey in organizational behaviour. This journey introduced me to writing on interpretive viewpoints; so while project managers (and their customers) might speak about project success and failure as absolute, dichotomous, objective states, researchers taking an interpretive view would be more cautious. The empirical evidence shows that

success and failure can and will be described differently by different actors with each actor seeing the project through the prism of their own subjectivity.

In the context studied, two groups of actors were each charged with producing a formal evaluation – reviewers and auditors. One empirical contribution of the thesis is an in-depth analysis of the narratives produced by these groups, which differ from the narratives produced by other project actors. In addition, actors in these groups express different opinions in their private narratives to those expressed in the formal evaluations that they produce for public consumption. My work background gave me the contacts and the vocabulary to access these narratives and my academic training gave me the techniques and concepts to analyse them.

None of these narratives give the ‘truth’ about a project, which might in Dawson and Buchanan’s (2005, p. 845) terms convey “the way it really happened”, but through analysis it is possible to explain how a narrative might emerge that becomes dominant and thus held up as ‘truth’. My submission, backed by my analysis of the empirical material, is that power relations, as enacted by the micro-politics of Government organizations and the macro-politics of national party political discourse determine what can be said and how regarding the success or failure of a Government IT project.

The conclusions of the thesis are summarised thus. Whether an IT project is deemed a success or failure depends on the interpretation of the dominant narrative by the relevant audience. Dominance is achieved as a result of power relations between actors in the project’s environment, including reviewers and auditors. Because the system of power relations surrounding every major project is unique to that project, prescriptive generalised recipes for success are unlikely to be sustainable, but analysis of project narratives can

generate insights into how and why labels of failure originate and persist. Evidence of power relations within these narratives can produce explanations of how certain narratives become dominant while others are suppressed. In addition, there is some evidence within the narratives that the system of power relations sustains a paradigm where project failure is almost normalised and expected.

There are many case studies of the evaluation of individual IT projects and subsequent attributions of success or failure. No studies, however, have looked at a complete system of review and evaluation and few examine the system of parliamentary audit. This thesis seeks to fill this gap. It contributes principally to the empirical study of IT project failure but there are also contributions to research into project management, project review and evaluation and to the management of public sector organizations. Specifically, the thesis seeks to contribute to interpretive research that analyses: project narratives as the enactment of power relations; the effect of power relations in systems of project management, evaluation and audit; and the review and management of large public sector IT projects. These contributions are discussed further in Chapter 8 of the thesis.

1.2 Motivations – why is project failure interesting?

I earlier said that I found many aspects of projects both paradoxical and intriguing. This section describes my motivation and justification for pursuing the research, looking at the characteristics of projects, failure and narratives that interest me and make the topic of value to society and organizational researchers.

1.2.1 Projects are interesting

Many aspects of project work are of interest to the management researcher, as witnessed by the large volume of relevant scholarship, some of which is reviewed in Chapter 2. The project, as a “temporary organization” (Packendorff, 1995, p. 319) contains most of the features of larger, less temporary organizations but in sharper focus. The project is by definition a relatively new organization, and though some of the context and history of the host organization will be inherited. Frequently a project will also be staffed with a large number of ‘immigrants’, consultants and experts whose employment is tied to the project and who have less awareness of or investment in the institutional context than permanent employees. The project’s systems of management and coherence will be recently and sometimes imperfectly formed, and while informal structures will also be present they will have had less time to coalesce than in permanent organizations, and the consequent organizational ‘culture’ will differ from that of the host organization (van Marrewijk, 2007). Although projects can employ hundreds and occasionally thousands of people, they are generally smaller than the host organization. Consequently, the impact of individuals is proportionately larger, as, for example, the project manager interacts directly with a far greater proportion of his or her workforce than a CEO or Permanent Secretary. The theatre of action is thus compressed. Time is also compressed (Dille and Söderlund, 2011), as project organizations have to be constructed, matured and dismantled in far a shorter period than is customary for other organizational entities. With compression comes stress, and consequent breakdowns in relationships, unusual behaviours and emotional tension (Lindgren, Packendorff and Sergi, 2014) that, while analogous to other organizational situations, are particularly evident within the concentrated

context of a project. Even more stress comes with the possibility that the project will be labelled a failure. A project is thus a special entity, less bound by established organizational history and norms, with a shorter lifetime, smaller workforce and considerable possibilities for conflictual interactions.

The project is also theoretically interesting, as summarised by Pinto and Winch (Pinto and Winch, 2016), in that it offers opportunities for the study of organizations as networks (Maaninen-Olsson and Müllern, 2009), as flows of information or knowledge (Sydow, Lindkvist and DeFillippi, 2004), as institutions (Morris and Geraldi, 2011) and as sites of struggle (Clegg and Courpasson, 2004). Pinto and Winch also note that projects have provided a rich source for Critical researchers (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006a), and this writing is explored in more depth in Chapter 2, section 2.5.

1.2.2 Failure is interesting, especially of Government IT projects

A large IT project is a one-off investment of time, sometimes considerable sums of money, and the social and political capital of its sponsors. Although a high degree of scepticism exists about the capability of the civil service to deliver such projects (Hodge, 2016, p. 221), in the early years of a new parliament each new Government starts many. Politicians need to implement new policies to demonstrate to the voters that they are making a difference by actively making the system better, whether that is the system of benefits, of farm subsidies, of childcare support, of healthcare or of national defence. Such is the dependence of modern government on IT that all of these changes need significant investments in new or changed IT systems – hence major IT projects.

Failure is socially, politically and economically problematic. Failure of the IT project can mean failure of the policy implementation and thus failure of the

political initiative. Government IT projects are large – the 27 ICT projects in the Major Projects Portfolio in 2020 had a whole life cost of £8 Bn. In addition, the benefits foregone or delayed if a major IT project is abandoned are considerable. One IT project (Universal Credit) promised benefits in steady state of £8 Bn per annum, mostly through encouraging extra employment (DWP, 2018). If that project was delayed (as it was), not only were these benefits lost to the economy, but 200,000 extra people would be on the jobless register.

1.2.3 Projects are sites for the exercise of power and politics

Projects are the main organizational vehicle for achieving change (Mir and Pinnington, 2014), and as Buchanan and Badham (2020, p. 6) point out, “Change is.... One of the key triggers and intensifiers of political behaviour”. Projects are often concerned with high-risk investments and attract large amounts of the organization’s money, management time and emotional effort. Failure is an extreme assessment of performance, and if a project attracts the label ‘failure’ then some pointed conversations, and in all likelihood an intense struggle for meaning will have taken place.

In Government, changes associated with new policy initiatives also attract political attention, in some cases because this is what the ‘conviction politicians’ came into Government to do, and more mundanely, this is what will get them press coverage, either positive or, in the case of failure, negative. There is thus more scope for political behaviour in and around major projects (Clegg *et al.*, 2016). IT projects are no different, as here an additional constituency, the technologists, is engaged. The choice of supplier, underlying hardware and software technologies, design methodologies, outsourced or insourced organization and many other decisions are contested. Projects must

attract and retain resources, convince users and other stakeholders, and maintain confidence by achieving milestones. The incidence (or anticipation) of project failure is a special circumstance for the observation of such political behaviour. There is more at stake for the participants (including jobs and reputations) at such times and considerable efforts will be made to resist such a failure outcome. Projects require the exercise of political skill. The exercise of power relations will be particularly evident within the accounts of project actors in the compressed environment of a high-visibility project.

1.2.4 Projects are a rich source of narratives

Projects are a rich source of narratives as they have all the ingredients for a good story; unusual one-off events, tension, a rich cast of characters and the potential for conflictual behaviour mentioned above. The narratives of project participants and observers serve a wide range of purposes. Colourful narratives promising considerable benefits from the project will be used to support the initial business case, formalised narratives will be written during execution to give an impression of order and control, and evaluative narratives will be written during the project and after completion to confirm whether all that effort was worthwhile. The personal narratives of project participants will be part of their credentials for securing the next job and the next project. All of this material forms a rich source of data for the organizational researcher, and many have chosen to base studies of projects on its analysis (Aaltio-Marjosola, 1994; Dawson and Buchanan, 2003; Boddy and Paton, 2004; Veenswijk and Berendse, 2008; Rogers, 2013; Havermans, Keegan and Den Hartog, 2015).

Narratives of success and failure are also interesting sources for the researcher, and a number of insightful papers have taken them as a start point

(Brown and Jones, 1998; Bartis and Mitev, 2008; Wagner, Newell and Piccoli, 2010; Marshall and Bresnen, 2013). The analysis techniques used by these authors vary and include ANT (Latour, 1999), analysing frameworks of resistance (Pickering, 1995) and grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Metanarratives are also present within the project environment, some of which are specific to IT projects. Particularly evident in this study were the narratives of professionalism covering IT and project management. Both of these management metanarratives have isomorphic effects, and by 2010 both had achieved a measure of hegemony, reflecting with little contestation ‘the way things ought to be done’. However, as will be discussed later in the thesis, a competitive counternarrative, ‘Agile’ development was emerging in Government as a challenger both to conventional project management and to IT orthodoxy.

Narratives reflect the system of power relations in which they were constructed, and also form part of the enactment of those power relations. A compelling narrative will be used to suppress alternatives and justify decisions and thus enact change (Dawson and Buchanan, 2005). Law’s (1994) thesis was that narratives are a primary organising device, and that through enactment of these organizing narratives, people within the organization were told what to do and how. In addition, multiple narratives are in existence in the organization at any one time, each being used to deliver part of these instructions. The existence of competing narratives is evidence of power relations at play. Narratives are by nature subjective, and the ways in which subjectivity is exercised – for example what is included and what is excluded is revealing. In analysis these differences should not be “triangulated” away (Dawson and Buchanan, 2005, p. 846) in the sense that the analyst should not

seek a 'single version of the truth', but rather, by postulating where and why differences occurred, the researcher can build a richer picture of the environment under study.

1.2.5 Summary, conclusion and research question

In conclusion, projects present special opportunities for observation of organizational phenomena. They are organizational theatres, where individuals and groups compete for resources, fame and influence. This impact can be seen clearly in narratives of project success or failure, where competing narratives show evidence of political behaviour and the exercise of power relations. Power relations have shaped these narratives, and in turn, these narratives have shaped the project.

So, my source material is the narratives of project actors, and within these narratives I wish to understand how success and failure were constructed and ascribed to the large IT projects that I studied. The research question of the thesis is thus:

What do the narratives of project managers, reviewers and auditors reveal about the ascription of success and failure to large IT projects in UK Government?

Within this question, I address some subsidiary questions including:

- How does the system of power relations in and around the project impact the consideration of success and failure?
- What organization-level agendas are being pursued?
- What is the place of review and audit functions within the system of power relations? How do the evaluators relate to the evaluated?
- How do reviewers and auditors achieve and maintain legitimacy?

- What is the paradigm of failure, and how does this achieve hegemony?

1.3 Where am I coming from? Philosophical tenets

It would be normal for someone with an engineering background to start from a positivist viewpoint. My technical education and working experience were grounded on a positivist scientific method in which physical (and social) phenomena have logical explanations, cause and effect are linked and problems have solutions; and the job of the engineer is to find these solutions.

1.3.1 Ontology, Epistemology, Power and Critical thinking

Once I started to study organizational behaviour seriously, I was introduced to four ideas which challenged my positivist viewpoint. These ideas concerned ontology, epistemology, theories of power and the nature of critique.

The first idea is constructionism, that the social world is enacted through discourse. The second is interpretivism, that there is no fixed reality 'out there' discoverable by any kind of scientific method or observation. The third is the relativist conception of power and agency, as described by Foucault (1977), and the fourth is that the social world doesn't have to be constructed this way, and its inadequacies and inequalities deserve critique.

Constructionism

The first idea is that 'social reality' is socially constructed through discourse, and continuously needs reconstruction by maintenance of that discourse (Chia, 2000). In interpreting this social reality, I follow the arguments of Barnes and Bloor (1982) that I am adopting a form of relativism. This relativism does not suggest that all beliefs about 'social reality' are equally true or equally false, but all such beliefs rely on local causes of credibility – which are social, cultural, institutional and driven by prevalent power relations. I reject the idea that there are absolute standards of 'true' or 'false' which have relevance in the

discussion in the thesis of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ – these terms are contextual, and in particular are cultural references.

If beliefs rest on credibility, then whether or not beliefs are also considered valid depends on whether or not they are socially useful. I do not believe that there is an absolute standard for validity, as this would imply that there is some core set of ‘absolute’ universally true beliefs; and this belief was undermined by my early exposure to Gödel’s theorems (Bezboruah and Shepherdson, 1976). So, while we may inhabit a shared environment, our differences of interpretation will lead us to internalise ‘facts’ about this environment which we then express linguistically. These linguistic expressions are individual but socially conditioned. Our shared material world may thus lead us to a more-or-less common verbal description that we share with similarly acculturated individuals, thus achieving a level of intersubjectivity or shared meaning allowing us to act cooperatively. In adopting this social constructionist approach I therefore recognise the possibility of multiple social constructed realities, which is a relativist viewpoint (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 24).

Interpretive epistemology

The second idea is that of interpretation in research. Some assert that *all* research is interpretive, including that using quantitative methods (Gummesson, 2003). I want to understand something of the social phenomena that I am investigating but cannot pretend to see inside the heads of relevant actors, and in any event there is no absolute, objective social reality ‘out there’ for me to discover. The only thing I can present is my interpretation of the data, which is a personal account and no more ‘real’ than the accounts of interviewees or their formal reports. I claim, however, special status as an

academic observer, in that I have followed some specific methodological steps in interpreting the data and made these steps explicit to the reader. In the thesis I present the evidence that would allow the reader to test my claims for credibility.

Power Relations

The third idea is that power relations are pervasive and constituted through discourse (Foucault, 1982). Foucault suggests that discourse can be evidence of the exercise of power, and also a medium through which power is exercised – an example of the latter would be a list of rules. Power itself is *relational* in character and apparent only when exercised. The impact of power relations is not restricted to episodic exercises of power but is continuous. The way that Governments and institutions exercise disciplinary power over individuals is to set and maintain norms of behaviour.

Foucault's ideas, though clearly highly influential, are complex and within the context of organizational studies, open to interpretation (for a review of relevant organizational writing see Valikangas and Seeck, 2011). Foucault has many critics (including Caldwell, 2005); nonetheless a particular reading of Foucault gives an exposition of power and power relations that to me feels consonant with the other positions I take in this thesis, as will be explained in a later section.

Critical approaches to management science

The fourth idea is the nature of critique as embodied in Critical Management Studies. This school of thought says that the taken-for-granted assumptions behind much conventional management science can and should be challenged (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). I found it strange to think that researchers should avoid such challenge; however Prasad and Prasad (2002) talk about a

tradition in interpretive research that tried to surface what organizational systems did, rather than critique why they did it. 30 or 40 years ago such a critique would have been primarily Marxist (Braverman, 1998), but today the writing of 'Critical' management scholars covers a much wider range of viewpoints (Grey, 2004). Once I would have been unsympathetic to critique that did not offer prescriptive advice, but now I would question the general applicability of any such advice, given the contingent and contextualised nature of many management 'issues'.

1.3.2 Power and Narratives

Given these perspectives, I needed to find a suitable analytical path between the data that I was planning to obtain and the research question. The starting point for the research question was in Fincham's (2002) paper – that a narrative explanation of project failure was more convincing than others built on, for example, process failure or absence of one of a number of 'critical success factors'. Narratives, as discussed earlier, are common in project settings; but why are some narratives supported while others are suppressed or forgotten? Buchanan and Dawson (2007, p. 670) gave reasons why a particular narrative might come to dominate including:

a combination of fact, narrator credibility and influence, political tactics, skilled 'storytelling performances', and the symbolic influence that arises from the manner in which accounts are articulated and presented

Competing, oppositional narratives present an opportunity to understand how and where power is being exercised within the project setting. If the researcher can see evidence of resistance, as shown in alternative framings of events or characterisations of personalities or motives, then this is evidence of a reaction to power being exercised. Further work can be performed to

understand who is seeking to exercise power and to what effect. Alternative narratives (Buchanan and Dawson, 2007) can compete on four bases – attribution, audience, assessment and interpretation. All are relevant to the understanding of failure narratives. Narratives will compete on *attribution* (what was the cause of X?), be constructed for different *audiences* (and thus tailored to meet different expectations), offer contrasting *assessment* (mobilising formal or informal evaluation processes) and be subject to differences in *interpretation* (driven by political or other interests). Analysis can look at these instances of competition and decide where power relations are being exercised.

1.3.3 Narratives and Discourse

As stated above, I adopt the position that social reality is constituted through discourse, and that a particular form of discourse – the narrative – offers special opportunities to study the social constructions of interest to the thesis: IT projects and IT project failure. Some of the narratives that I have chosen to study were personally created by project actors to explain themselves and their work, to retrospectively give meaning to events and to reinforce their professional identities – among other purposes. Other narratives have broader institutional functions; for example to structure discourse, effect change and otherwise enact power relations.

Power relations pervade all these narratives. The narratives were created because of power relations and through their narration, power effects are generated with direct and indirect audiences. The thesis is an effort to collect, analyse and interpret narratives of relevance to the research question, and within these narratives to detect and comment on the impact of power

relations. There are possible alternative ways in which to analyse these texts, including thematic analysis, sensemaking and critical discourse analysis.

Thematic analysis is a well-established technique that has been used in the examination of power relationships within discourses including narratives (Hardy and Thomas, 2014; Hickson, 2016) but while thematic analysis groups narrative segments by content, further work is needed to identify where and how these segments are in conflict with other narratives, and what is done to resolve these conflicts.

Sensemaking has frequently been used as an overall framework for the examination of narratives (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010), but sensemaking as described by Weick (1995) does not appear to attempt a comprehensive interpretation of power relations (Helms Mills, Thurlow and Mills, 2010).

Fairclough's (2003, 2013) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides some techniques for the analysis of power relations in discourses, and Fairclough (e.g. 2013, p. 51,58) makes extensive reference to Foucault's conception of power relations. Fairclough's exposition of CDA has been critiqued (Hardy and Thomas, 2015) as epistemologically inconsistent with social constructionism because of Fairclough's (2005) adherence to critical realism. The thesis uses CDA as an analysis method while *not* adopting Fairclough's ontological stance. CDA, however, in Wodak's (2011, p. 53) words

....might thus be defined as being fundamentally interested in analyzing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control when these are manifested in language.

As stated earlier, the thesis (in common with much social constructionist writing) adopts a relativist ontology and also asserts that ‘reality’ is constructed in the interaction between the researcher and the project actors who offered their narratives.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

The structure of the thesis follows a conventional layout for presenting research in the social sciences. This introduction is followed by two chapters reviewing relevant literature. The first chapter of literature review (Chapter 2) covers writing on projects in general, IT projects specifically and the impact of technology, project management and project failure. This literature embraces a range of different ontological and epistemological viewpoints, and the review contrasts the strengths and weaknesses of these different approaches. It categorises this literature under four headings: normative, processual, interpretive and Critical. It examines the contribution that researchers working in each of these traditions have made to our understanding of projects and project failure, and how alternative traditions have sought to close gaps in that understanding by adopting different viewpoints. It finishes by justifying the decision to adopt an interpretive approach for the thesis using elements of the Critical viewpoint to allow examination of the impact of power relations on narratives of project success and failure.

Chapter 3 of the thesis reviews literature on narrative, considering how researchers view narratives of projects, and looking specifically at what the thesis means by a narrative, how narratives of projects and organizational change are constructed, what impact technology has on these narratives, how narratives of audit and project evaluation are constructed, and on the subject positions of different actors that might contribute to the building of these

narratives. It argues that project reviewers and project auditors have a special contribution to make in the construction of narratives of project failure, and that this is an underexamined area of study.

The Methods and Research Approach chapter (Chapter 4) contains a description of the methods used to collect and analyse data and the sources of the narratives analysed, putting these sources in a wider context. The specific analytical techniques used to examine and interpret the narratives are explained and justified here. In addition, the chapter describes the research site, in UK central Government, and the characteristics of an IT development method, Agile, of relevance to the case studies.

There then follow three Analysis chapters (Chapters 5, 6 and 7) which show how I have chosen to interpret the narratives that I collected. The narratives of interviewees discussed project failure and success, leadership and the review and audit task in the abstract, sometimes describing events in specific projects in support of their arguments. The first Analysis chapter (Chapter 5) thus examines the personal narratives of project managers, reviewers and auditors, with a particular emphasis on how they discuss failure in a 'didactic' manner, seeking to instruct their audience.

Two major projects were cited repeatedly by the project actors, and since both of these projects had been widely publicised and were the subject of in-depth review and audit reports, I could examine what 'official' narratives had been generated and how these compared to the personal narratives that I had already collected. The second and third Analysis chapters (Chapters 6 and 7) thus each discuss a case study on a recent UK Government IT project. The first of these is the computerisation of Universal Credit (UC), a multi-billion pound project to support the introduction of a new benefit. The second concerns

Common Agricultural Policy – Delivery (CAP-D), a £150m project which implemented changes in the way that EU funds for farm support were distributed to landowners. In these case studies alternative narratives of success and failure are identified and contrasted.

The Discussion chapter (Chapter 8) synthesises the outputs of the analysis and frames a response to the research question, followed by a conclusion that includes the contribution of the thesis to the literature and reflects on what other strands of research would increase knowledge of these phenomena.

1.5 Conclusions and contribution of the thesis

The thesis thus looks at a challenging organizational problem in a complex and interesting context. The failure of major IT projects within Government has inspired several books (e.g. Bacon and Hope, 2013; King and Crewe, 2013), major reports (POST, 2003; NAO, 2013a; PAC, 2019), many column inches in newspapers and the trade press (e.g. Hall, 2012; Daily Telegraph, 2014) and numerous academic papers (reviewed in Gupta *et al.*, 2019). By collecting, analysing and interpreting the narratives of project managers, reviewers and auditors, I seek to show that there are aspects of the system of power relations surrounding these projects which serve to perpetuate narratives of their failure, and few pressures on this system that will provoke change. The thesis contributes to research by looking at a complete system of project review and audit in a Government setting, during the unusual circumstances of a Coalition government following a programme of 'Austerity'. It adds to the relatively small body of empirical research on project evaluation that uses interpretive methods, and through a detailed narrative analysis of two case studies explores the impact of power relations on such systems. It makes a methodological contribution by combining structural analysis with a discourse-

analytic technique (CDA) to conduct such an exploration. Finally it makes a practical contribution by linking reported failure with political action and questioning why political action is not mentioned in formal reports – thus both illustrating why project failure in Government may be treated differently to failure in the private sector, and implying that the system of review and audit may act to reinforce this failure narrative and ultimately perpetuate it.

The next chapter starts the Literature review by considering what some of the different schools of writing on project management (Turner, Anbari and Bredillet, 2013) have to say that is relevant to the subject of this thesis.

2 Literature Review I – Projects, IT Projects and Project Failure

2.1 Introduction and structure of the Literature Review

The subject of this thesis is the failure of IT projects, as constructed by project reviewers and auditors. This subject has been addressed from many theoretical viewpoints, and relevant literature on project management, information systems assessment and project review and audit mirrors the wider evolution of writing on organisations over the last forty years. While early writers viewed successful project management as the result of the correct application of a set of engineering disciplines, more recent writing has conceptualised the project as a social construction involving a complex set of social interactions.

As the literature is broad and extensive, there are challenges in selecting which of these many contributions to acknowledge and how to organise them into a coherent discussion of the scholarship. The literature review is thus in two chapters: this chapter, Chapter 2, looks at writing on IT projects and failure, and justifies the ontological and epistemological stance taken in the thesis; Chapter 3 explores the insights that a narrative approach offers to understanding the execution and review of projects. It argues that the narrative viewpoint affords a special opportunity to examine the subject of project failure, and the study of *competing narratives* (Dawson and Buchanan, 2005, p. 845) provides a means of “understanding the political process of technological change”.

2.2 Introduction to the first chapter – many viewpoints

According to Svejvig and Andersen(2015), ‘classical’ project management literature treats the project as a tool of management. It is written from a normative or processual viewpoint and is execution or task-oriented. An

alternative school, which Svejvig and Andersen term ‘rethinking’ project management literature, describes the project as a ‘temporary organization’ (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995). Svejvig and Anderson assert that this concept enables a more holistic examination of context, social factors and politics. Writers in this school have adopted a primarily interpretivist and in some cases ‘Critical’ viewpoint in the tradition of Alvesson and Willmott (1992).

This chapter explores the differences between these viewpoints by looking at literature drawn from different epistemological and ontological perspectives. Following Cicmil and Hodgson (2006b) and as summarised in Table 2.1, this chapter labels these perspectives normative, processual, interpretive and Critical.

TABLE 2.1 - PERSPECTIVES ON PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND PROJECT SUCCESS AND FAILURE

(Adapted from Fincham (2002) and Cicmil and Hodgson (2006b))

Perspective	Form of Organizational Behaviour and Action	Methodological Focus	Success and Failure seen as
Rational/ Normative	Simple cause and effect	Organizational goals; managerial and organizational structures surrounding the project	Objective and polarized states

Processual	Socio-technical interaction	Organisational and socio-political processes; projects result of decisions	Outcomes of organizational processes
Interpretivist	Interpretation and sensemaking; rhetoric and persuasion; critical/hermeneutics	Organisational and socio-political processes; symbolic action; themes	Social constructs; paradigms
Critical	Project management as colonising discourse	Analysis of power relations	History as written by the dominant group

These are not mutually exclusive positions; for example writers who would consider themselves Critical and/or Interpretivist acknowledge the value of a processual approach in explaining some project phenomena (Cicmil and Marshall, 2005; Cicmil, 2014). Many Critical writers would consider themselves interpretivist (Gleadle, Hodgson and Storey, 2012) but seek to go beyond this perspective to explain, through surfacing otherwise concealed power relations, how certain interpretations become privileged over others.

The following sections discuss the views of researchers who adopt different ontological and epistemological perspectives on three topics: project management; the special nature of IT projects; and project failure. The final section of this chapter contrasts these viewpoints and outlines the specific

opportunities offered by an interpretivist, critical viewpoint in exploring the phenomenon of project failure.

2.3 Normative - the project as an organizational tool

Normative literature on project management adopts an objectivist ontology and positivist epistemology. This literature assumes that there is a normative or 'right' way to manage projects (Bredillet, Tywoniak and Dwivedula, 2014), usually based around a cybernetic model of trying to minimise deviance from a plan (Daniel and Daniel, 2018). Project and project management literature adopting this viewpoint has a long history and practice is still almost exclusively influenced by this school of academic writing. This section examines the antecedents of this school, and then looks at how these researchers have addressed the special challenges presented by information technology (IT) projects (as opposed to non-IT projects), and the topic of project failure. It ends with a short critique of the viewpoint and discusses how this critique may have encouraged the development of alternative ways of looking at projects and project management.

This perspective considers the IT project as a bounded entity and 'IT project failure' as a discrete, measurable state (Baghizadeh, Cecez-Kecmanovic and Schlagwein, 2019). Research studies that look at project failure are dominated by a search for Critical Success Factors, which identify particular management actions that can be taken to avoid project failure (Cule *et al.*, 2000).

Early theories of project management drew from two principal sources: Fayol (1909, in Wren *et al.*, 1964) and his theories of management organization and Gantt (in Wilson, 2003, p. 1903), inventor of the eponymous chart and collaborator of Frederick Taylor. These theories treat the management of projects as a linear, rational engineering activity, and like other engineering

disciplines, an activity that relies on precision and efficiency to produce successful results. Outcomes depend on the ability of the project manager to organise and coordinate the work of many others. It is the job of the project manager to identify sources of uncertainty and find strategies to reduce and control them. There is no risk that cannot be analysed and either mitigated, transferred, eliminated or tolerated.

Many normative writers define a project as a set of activities with a bounded scope, fixed budget, a pre-set completion date and a set of goals for the outputs (such as quality or performance thresholds) (Cleland and Kerzner, 1985). A project that reaches its goals while staying within the set of constraints is deemed to have succeeded.

Technology is usually defined by these writers by reference to its physical characteristics; for example, Yeo (2002) defined information systems as collections of hardware and software designed to support business processes. Many projects adopt information systems as tools to support the management task, helping to plan, schedule, track and report progress. I do not discuss the use of such tools in the thesis, though I recognise that these tools have an impact on the project's narrative (in particular in their claim to contain 'one version of the truth'). The thesis is, however, concerned with IT projects which have as their primary aim building new IT artefacts or adapting existing assets to support new or changed business processes, and, in the Government context, to deliver policy outcomes.

Normative writers often take a rationalist view of the use of technology. If instrumental reasoning leads the project manager to use the 'right' technology in the 'right' way then the project will be a success (Hirschheim and Klein, 1989). Any unknowns associated with the use of technology are risks that

must be managed by the project manager (Ramasesh and Browning, 2014). Technology is both an input to the project (in component form) and an output or outcome - a new IT asset is created and brought into use. The outcome, however, may not meet all the objectives set out for the project. Lytinen and Hirschheim (1987) classified information technology (IT) project failure as either *correspondence failure* where design objectives are not met, *process failure* where schedule or budget are exceeded, *interaction failure* where intended end users reject the delivered system or *expectation failure* where stakeholders are unsatisfied with the outcome of the project. In Yeo's (2002) survey of project stakeholders the most commonly attributed reason for failure was poor project planning.

Deterministic writers (e.g. Dewett and Jones, 2001) suggest that the way that IT is built and used flows naturally from the characteristics of the technology itself. They see IT as a moderator between organizational characteristics and organizational outcomes – thus data is shared, messages communicated, information synthesized and innovation disseminated using technology. The IT is a given; it comes ready-formed and variability (and the possibility of failure) arises from how it is 'fitted' to its environment (Dewett and Jones, 2001). Project success or failure depends on the skill of the project manager in choosing the right technological components and deploying them effectively. In discussing the outcomes of IT projects, normative writers see success and failure as objectively determined states, which are mutually exclusive. The contribution of IT to this state is that the technology either 'works' or 'does not work'.

The concept of the IT project as a closed system led researchers to try to isolate the factors that lead to success by examining the characteristics of

‘successful’ projects and contrasting them with ‘unsuccessful’ projects (Cooke-Davies, 2002). There is an extensive literature that attempts to synthesize the ‘master list’ of prescriptive ‘must-dos’ for the successful project manager, or alternatively the lists of key risks that must be avoided (Cule *et al.*, 2000). It is asserted by the authors that these lists apply to the management of *any* large project.

One of the most widely cited lists of such Critical Success Factors was drawn up by Schultz, Slevin and Pinto (1987). These factors, which are also said to apply to IT projects (e.g. Finch, 2003), address matters external to the project as well as matters pertaining to the management and organization of the project itself. Schultz, Slevin and Pinto’s factors are asserted to be universal and independent of the nature of the project or the project’s context. They include (my paraphrasing):

- Project Mission – clearly defined goals spelled out at the beginning
- Top Management Support – top managers visibly behind the project
- Project Plan – plan of the required steps to complete
- Client Consultation – ultimate customers consulted on specific needs
- Personnel – right people in project team
- Technical tasks – adequate technical skills and tools available
- Client acceptance – final product ‘sold’ to intended users
- Monitoring and Feedback – at each stage comparison made to original expectations
- Communications – good comms inside and outside project team
- Troubleshooting – adequate preparation for fixing problems

Similar lists, showing a high degree of overlap with the above, have been drawn up specifically for IT projects (e.g. Yeo, 2002). The universal application

of such prescriptions has been challenged by Shenhar (2001), who argues that projects are, by definition, unique undertakings within often very different contexts. In addition, in the seemingly objective list above lie several strongly subjective judgements. Who, for example, judges that the plan is complete, and that the right people are employed on the team? Have the right clients been consulted, and do their views represent those of all potential users?

Hodgson (2002) suggests that normative writing on project management drew on the world-view of Fayol where projects were portrayed as closed or semi-closed systems, causes led inexorably to effects and actors were described as rational, predictable agents within these systems (a view echoed by Clegg *et al.*, 2016). Pollack (2007), for example, describes a 'hard paradigm' of project management, characterised by structures, expert-led delivery and control loops tuned to achieve predetermined goals. Williams (2005, p. 506) looked at the predominant project management discourse and found that:

the methods used are rationalist, self-evidentially correct, and normative; a positivist view of ontology is taken; project management is about dividing, particularly, the scope of work into smaller pieces ...

Hodgson (2002) and Cicmil *et al.* (2016) see this as a colonising discourse, promoting a particular ontology and suppressing others. By dividing activity into small, easily monitored 'work packages', project management, according to Hodgson, is a system of Foucauldian discipline and control, restricting the autonomy of project workers. In such a system the work of individuals can become 'calculable' as the rate of production, for example of software, can be tracked on a daily basis; and thus, schedule adherence can be measured. In addition, and as discussed later, this discourse has isomorphic effects, setting a

standard against which projects are evaluated – either they conform to this ‘standard’ model or they do not.

The normative school of writing has made many contributions to the field of project management and the discussion of project failure, and it continues to dominate published work today. It has identified many of the challenges that project managers and project management researchers must address, such as the relative importance of what goes on ‘inside’ the project and how that relates to activity ‘outside’ the project boundary, how risks are identified and ‘managed’ and how the many different interests of stakeholders can be reconciled.

Critics of the normative school suggest that the use of “simple, linear cause-and-effect models” to explain IT project failures (Baghizadeh, Cecez-Kecmanovic and Schlagwein, 2019, p. 5) is inherently flawed. At the heart of the normative approach is the assumption that causes for failure can be extracted from case studies of failed projects in very different contexts and situations, and this premise appears simplistic in contrast to other approaches. Sauer and his collaborators (e.g. Sauer and Reich, 2007) recognise the value of ‘normative’ theories of projects and project failure that are accessible to practitioners, but argue that there is more value in ‘positive’ theories that are based on actual, observable behaviour – such as those described in the next section.

2.4 Processual Theories – the project as the outcome of management processes

Following models of organizational behaviour popularised by Pettigrew (1997) and Ferlie et al. (1996), many researchers have adopted a processual approach to describing and understanding projects. This section examines the

relationship of this school of writing to practitioner literature and how it addresses the topic of project failure. It ends with a short critique of the viewpoint and links to interpretivist alternatives.

‘Processual’ approaches as put forward by Sauer (1993b) frame projects as a set of socio-technical processes, and failure flows from the failure of these emergent and dynamic processes (Pryke and Smyth, 2012, p. 22). These management processes are used to interpret and transfer information. Academic writers using this perspective include the PMPerspectives group (SBS, 2020) centred on Saïd Business School in Oxford, and led by Sauer, Reich and Gemini. The Major Projects Leadership Academy, a Government educational initiative of the MPA, was run in partnership with Saïd Business School from 2012 (Marrs, 2015).

In this ‘processual’ perspective, project failure is process failure, i.e. a failure of processes to deliver the right outputs at the required time, to the required quality and within budget (Gemino, Reich and Sauer, 2008a). Sauer (1993b, p. 22) frames failure using the model proposed by Lyytinen and Hirschheim (1987) with a particular emphasis on *expectation* failure; the IT project fails because stakeholder’s expectations are not met. Sauer concentrates particularly on the project’s supporters (Ewusi-Mensah and Przasnyski, 1991). When support is no longer forthcoming, the project is deemed to have failed and as development work stops, it will be *abandoned*. Most researchers using these theories in relation to the study of projects adopt a normative ontology and a positivist epistemological stance (Smyth and Morris, 2007).

Structured methodologies used extensively by practitioners e.g. PMBOK (PMI, 2012) and Prince 2 (HMG, 2010) also adopt a processual viewpoint (Pinto and Winch, 2016), conceptualising projects as a combination of management

processes such as planning and organizing. These processes transform raw inputs, labour and knowledge into increasingly more complex deliverables. The project manager is one of several actors working within this system. The process perspective goes beyond the 'project boundary' and looks at a wider repertoire of processes that may be operating across the organization including decision making processes that develop and sustain 'support' for a particular project (Sauer, 1993a) by continuing the flow of resources and smoothing the barriers to implementation.

Beynon-Davies (1999) analysed the failure of a Government IT system using a process model advanced by Sauer (1993b, p. 320). This analysed an IT project as a set of 'innovation' processes reliant on interaction between three components: the project organization; the information system; and its supporters. Flaws within the process may inconvenience supporters to the extent that they remove that support – and thus the project 'fails'.

According to Fincham (2002) this perspective appears to be predominantly rationalist. Sauer (1993b, p. 4) sees project success and failure in terms of a Darwinist struggle for survival. Successful projects continue to attract resources and thus 'survive' whereas others fail and are terminated. Sauer himself rejects 'normative' language, (Sauer and Reich, 2007) suggesting that project outcomes flow from behavioural and social causes rather than technical ones (Sauer, 1999, p. 289). In the processual viewpoint the success or failure of the project are linked to the appropriate operation of the necessary processes. The failure of projects can be the result of a failure of: *risk management processes* (Sauer, 1999) because contingencies were not foreseen and mitigated; *knowledge management processes* (Reich, Gemino and Sauer, 2012) because organizational learning did not take place; or

strategic processes (Sauer, Southon and Dampney, 1997) because the project did not fit with a top-down strategy espoused by (some in) the organization and thus did not retain support.

The thesis of these and other researchers (e.g. Robey and Newman, 1996; Lam and Chua, 2005; Sauser, Reilly and Shenhar, 2009) is that process failure leads to project failure. This is claimed to be a more holistic explanation than that given by normative writers, as Sauer and Reich (2009) argue that their inclusion of 'social' processes significantly broadens the traditional, normative 'technical' view of projects. They assert that successful project managers need to be socially aware, and for the project to succeed they must harness diverse resources by working in coordination with others. Projects, they say, are more than just the instrumentalist execution of 'Action' processes according to some set of physical and presumably logical rules; they also require autonomous human actors to work together, to agree and to contribute their efforts to the group activity of the project.

Critics of this approach (e.g. Fincham, 2002) suggest that it has more explanatory power than alternative approaches but still assumes that actors' behaviour is driven by rationality and goal optimisation. The inclusion of 'social' processes may broaden the analyst's view from purely technocratic matters, but project failure is still an objectively defined, binary state. Knights and McCabe (2002, p. 241) state that while processual writers acknowledge the 'messy' reality of organizational life, when confronted with an organizational breakdown, they fall back on what they call a 'functionalist' tendency to 'fix' the process, for example by improving information flows. This, say Knights and McCabe, ignores the possible internal conflicts that may

have disrupted these flows in the first place, and those conflicts and their impacts may be better explained by a more critical approach.

Sauer himself, as Fincham (2002) points out, explicitly rejects an ‘interpretivist’ approach to examining project failure (Sauer, 1993b, p. 36), preferring to rely on ‘mainstream objective’ theories. For Sauer, project failure is not a matter of contestable opinion, but is a more concrete, incontestable ‘fact’. In order to be considered ‘failed’, the project will be in an irrevocable state of ‘abandonment’ and no amount of clever rhetoric can breathe life into it.

The processual researchers have a seemingly more sophisticated explanation of project failure that acknowledges that projects are an essentially social activity and that explanations of project failure are contingent and contextual. There is an assumption, however, in much of this writing that project failure can be avoided by detecting deviations from process norms and adapting processes or their execution to keep the project ‘on track’ (Robey and Newman, 1996). As Lindahl and Rehn (2007, p. 252) suggest, researchers using a normative paradigm appear still constrained by a wish to find a locus of control, driven by the ‘utopian thrust’ of much project management theory. Lindahl and Rehn’s advice is that we need to examine the “social science of the temporary organization” in order to understand the complex phenomenon of project failure, using the interpretivist approach examined in the next section.

2.5 Interpretivist - the project as a construction of discourse

In the interpretivist tradition the ‘project’ is a socially constructed artefact, a ‘temporary organization’ (Packendorff, 1995) that may help to construct other social artefacts. A ‘project’ exists through a set of shared meanings; some actors choose to label a group of people and/or a set of activities as a project.

Researchers identify the project as a ‘special’ organizational context, defined by task, team, time and transition (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995).

The project in this perspective is a much more fluid and dynamic concept than is portrayed by normative researchers. The boundary of the project may be contested and the aims and objectives of the project will almost certainly vary at some point in its existence. The assessment of the project is subjective, dynamic, interpretive and political (Baghizadeh, Cecez-Kecmanovic and Schlagwein, 2019) and success and failure are contestable terms (Fincham, 2002).

IT projects provide even greater scope for interpretation. Each technological artefact cannot be regarded as a static, given object, but as an evolved and evolving social construction (Orlikowski and Iacono, 2001). The way that the artefact is built, deployed, changed and adapted, used and ultimately retired produces new opportunities for discourse and debate (Leonardi, 2011).

In the rest of this section only a subset of the very wide range of writing that adopts this position will be examined, addressing three main areas that are directly relevant to this thesis:

- The project as a temporary organization as explored by writers of the ‘Scandinavian School’ and their conceptualization of project failure (Lindahl and Rehn, 2007);
- Actor-Network Theory and its use in the analysis of IT projects and project failure (Mitev, 1996); and
- Social constructionist explanations of the interaction between people and technology, and the implications that these explanations have for IT project failure (Doherty, 2014);

Each of these subsections explores how researchers have conceptualised the IT project and IT project failure. The section ends with a view of the contribution of this school, and a short critique of the ‘uncritical’ stance of many writers with an interpretivist perspective.

2.5.1 The ‘temporary organization’ and the ‘Scandinavian School’

Members of the ‘Scandinavian School’ (Kozarkiewicz, Lada and Soderholm, 2008) mainly adopt an interpretivist viewpoint in their writings on projects. These writers conceptualise the project as a ‘temporary organisation’ (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995; Packendorff, 1995). Packendorff offered this concept as an antidote to the then-prevalent, normative view of the project as a tool, or mechanistic system for obtaining organizational outcomes.

The Scandinavian School seeks to address some of Shenhar and Dvir's (1996) criticisms of previous project management research. It gives up the search for an all embracing ‘grand theory’ of project management in favour of more modest middle-range theories (Söderlund, 2004), and thus researchers in this school concentrate on the behaviour of cooperating individuals who are engaged with the project. They assert that practice-based research, based on in-depth qualitative examination of case studies, is more likely to lead to deeper understanding of project phenomena (Kozarkiewicz, Lada and Soderholm, 2008).

In this viewpoint, what defines a project is not a charter or some other artefact; it is that a number of people have negotiated a mutually shared view of what activities should happen when (and possibly recorded that agreement in a ‘project charter’). It is clearly in the nature of such negotiations that views may change, and similarly that one person’s understanding may in practice differ from another’s. Projects are also shaped by an external, pre-existing

‘project management discourse’ (Packendorff and Lindgren, 2014; Cicmil, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2016), which sets societal expectations for what a project ‘is’ and what it should feel like to work in one.

Success and failure in normative approaches are defined by the meeting (or otherwise) of certain success criteria set down at the beginning of the project. Interpretive writers draw attention to the political nature of such criteria and how they are negotiated to suit the purposes of particular actors (Sage, Dainty and Brookes, 2013). Success and failure are alternative narratives which may even compete in reference to the same project (Fincham, 2002). These narratives also serve to promote particular identities (Havermans, Keegan and Den Hartog, 2015) and have a role within the enactment of power relations (Bartis and Mitev, 2008). For example, Bartis and Mitev (ibid) describe an information system that was not used by the intended user group and did not meet pre-published goals, yet was heralded by the dominant group in the organization as a ‘success’. In this case the steering group in charge of the project was keen to avoid spending further time and investment in fixing ‘problems’, so the ‘official’ report labelled the project a success and further user complaints were ignored. Labelling, however, may not be enough to embed the concept of success and failure. It is also important to observe how actors *behave* in respect to the project and its outputs. According to Ika (2009, p. 15):

Success and failure are not only subjectively perceived and constructed by people, they are entwined in meaning and action.

Ika discusses stakeholder acceptance as one key underlying component of success or failure. If users behave as if the IT does not meet their needs – a

fundamentally subjective assessment – then it will be difficult for sponsors and project managers to continue to assert that their project was successful.

Critics of the Scandinavian School, while recognising its contributions, suggest that it is insufficiently critical of managerialist and performative views of projects and organizational life (Cicmil *et al.*, 2009). The concept of project success may have been expanded beyond the normative ‘iron triangle’ of cost, time and quality, and it is clear that success and failure are also socially constructed (Geraldi and Söderlund, 2016). Critics however say that researchers in the Scandinavian School do not sufficiently challenge the basic ‘rationalist’ assumptions that lie behind the ‘project management discourse’ (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2008), with its principal project aims of ‘efficiency and effectiveness’ (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006b). Critical researchers also question the negative effects on those subject to the controlling effects of the ‘professionalization’ of project management (Hodgson, 2002). While the Scandinavian school looks at social factors such as ‘politics’ or ‘stakeholder management’, approaches such as Actor-Network Theory (ANT), first proposed by Callon and Latour (1981) offer an alternative interpretivist way of looking at the ‘temporary organization’.

2.5.2 Actor-Network Theory

ANT seeks to understand the dynamic behaviour of social systems by analysing them as networks of autonomous ‘actors’. Actors can either be human (individuals or groups) or non-human (technological artefacts, natural systems, plants and animals). A key feature of ANT is that human and non-human actors need not be differentiated by their degree of agency. Once the IT system has been built by the project, it will form part of a wider social system consisting of people, IT and perhaps other non-human artefacts – trains,

offices, warehouses, and the internet for example. ANT thus positions the IT elements of a social system as equivalent players with the people in the system. If the technology does not 'behave', then the social system will not work as intended. From the viewpoint of the project, if the technological agents are configured 'incorrectly', then unintended and undesired outcomes will result, including some that might be construed as 'failure'.

New ideas (for example, generated by a project team) are disseminated through the network of involved actors through a process called *Translation*. At each step these new ideas are mixed with others including preconceptions, local organizational realities and fashions, in a process that has been compared to osmosis (Doorewaard and van Bijsterveld, 2001). The aim is through *Enrolment* to embed these new ideas in a more-or-less stable social structure in the host organization. If this embedding does not happen, then the project will be deemed to have failed.

Mitev used ANT in her thesis (2000a) and in a number of papers (1996b, 1996a, 2000b, 2004) to describe a failed IT project, *Socrate*, the computerization of the SNCF (French railways) ticketing system. The project resulted in considerable dissatisfaction, resulting in demonstrations from aggrieved customers and industrial action by staff. Mitev's analysis was that certain *translations* required by the project had failed. For example, because the translation of staff into ticketing agents failed, they were unable to explain the seemingly arbitrary pricing decisions of the *Socrate* system to dissatisfied customers. The public resisted the introduction of the new system and in some cases blamed the technology itself for the problems that they perceived (Mitev, 2000a, p. 90):

They [SNCF] say it simplifies matters, but as soon as you do things with such a tool, everything becomes more complicated....Some things could not be done before, it is not neutral.

Some of the blame for failure was thus placed on a technological artefact rather than the SNCF management that had chosen to introduce it.

In another case study, the controversial implementation of a system in an insurance company was analysed as a set of actor-networks (Cecez-Kecmanovic, Kautz and Abrahall, 2014). These actor-networks included technologies, documents, methodologies and other non-human actors. The case study project was considered both a success and failure at the same time. The actor-network split as part of a conflict over the future of the system, and one part of the network proceeded as if the project had been a success while the other proceeded as if it had been a failure, an outcome the researchers describe as the result of 'ontological politics' (Mol, 1999). This concept suggests that there is more than one way of accomplishing a task, and that labelling a particular way as the 'right' way is a political act and contestable (Law and Singleton, 2000). In Cecez-Kecmanovic et al.'s case study, the researchers assert that success and failure were 'performed' by the networks in and around the IT project. Success is viewed as a "performative accomplishment" (Cecez-Kecmanovic *et al.*, 2014, p. 820) because an actor or actors have done work and enrolled others into treating the project as a success. It is thus possible that within one local actor-network (such as a steering committee) the project is 'performed' as a success while within a different, and possibly overlapping actor-network (for example involving the user base) this performative accomplishment is not possible.

ANT has been criticized as being insufficiently concerned with power and domination (Whittle and Spicer, 2008), adopting a ‘conservative’ political analysis that favours the status quo. Since ANT portrays politics as a property of the network then it follows that only the dominant political voice that shaped the network is evident in the analysis, as alternatives have been suppressed. Sayes (2014) summarises defenders of ANT by saying that critics misunderstand the philosophical standpoint put forward by Latour; and that as ANT is primarily a method it is neutral to many of the criticisms levelled at it. In her overview of ANT, Mifsud (2014, p. 14) expresses the view that while ANT attempts to map the “hidden geographies” of the system of power relations, it does not offer an explanation of how those relations came into being (Amsterdamska, 1990). Even proponents of ANT (Mitev, 2000a) acknowledge that ANT is stronger at description rather than explanation, and complement ANT with other methods to explain the effect of power relations within the network. For example, Mitev (2005) suggests the use of Foucault's concept of governmentality (Rose, O’Malley and Valverde, 2006) as a mechanism for addressing the use of power within networks.

2.5.3 Socially constructed technology

To understand the interpretivist view of IT projects it is necessary to review explanations of the way that technology and technological artefacts interact with people in social systems, including social constructionism and sociomateriality. These explanations are relevant to the understanding of IT projects and their failure as they position the role of technology within the social system that *constructs* the attribution of failure. The interpretivist view of IT stresses its ‘interpretive flexibility’ which also means that assessments of the effectiveness of IT are contingent and subjective. This implies that the

contribution of IT to the success or failure of an IT project cannot be 'measured' or 'evaluated' in a neutral, objective fashion.

Social constructionist writers assert that the nature of technology is not 'given' but is interpretively flexible as the technology itself has been constructed by social processes and interactions (Mackenzie and Wajcman, 1999). This position is summarised by Pinch and Bijker (1984, p. 421):

Technological artefacts are culturally constructed and interpreted ... By this we mean not only that there is flexibility in how people think of or interpret artefacts but also that there is flexibility in how artefacts are designed.

Technological artefacts are (Orlikowski and Iacono, 2001, p. 131) "not natural, neutral, universal or given" but were developed by some person or persons for some purpose; "embedded in some time, place, discourse or community" and thus situated, not least within a specific culture; "fragmentary collections" of many different and often changing components, all of which need to be integrated together; "not fixed nor independent" but evolving as the needs and wishes of the social groups that own and use the technology evolve ; and "not static or unchanging"; but dynamic for many reasons; indeed there may never be a truly 'stable' state.

IT projects can be seen as organizing acts of social co-creation. The act of building new technological artefacts also gives rise to new socio-technical systems (a viewpoint shared with ANT). Where a new technology is adopted by a social group, meaning and form is negotiated and eventually stabilised. Eventually the technology is assimilated into the everyday social vocabulary of the group (Pinch and Bijker, 1984).

As an example, this process can be illustrated by the development of the personal computer (Metcalf and Miles, 1994). When microprocessors were first introduced in the 1970s, they were primarily a specialist tool for ‘embedded’ applications, such as telemetry or sophisticated control. Pioneers and hobbyists combined them with cathode ray tube screens, keyboards and the then-cheapest form of mass storage, the floppy disk, to offer ‘personal’ general purpose computers. These were initially of low capability and high price, but successive generations of innovation driven by demand increased capability and volume lowered price.

Eventually, in 1981 an established computer company entered the market with the IBM PC, sold as a tool for business. IBM published specifications for how the PC was put together, and other manufacturers built ‘clones’ that would run the same operating system (Microsoft’s MS-DOS) and thus the same application packages. Sales took off; almost all PCs (including the one on which this thesis was typed) are descended from IBM’s original model. In 2020 the PC, the architecture, the keyboard and attached screen configuration are all taken for granted attributes of ‘the personal computer’. The technology has stabilised around this de-facto standard.

The social constructionist model suggests that the role of technology in change projects is constrained by what the people engaged in the change project are capable of or are willing to do. Technology can be used to stabilise existing organisational structures and practices, or the same technology can be used as a disruptive, revolutionary force. Success or failure in this model flows primarily from the forces driving social change, and although technology may be a catalyst, it is only one factor amongst many that influence perceptions of an IT project. Just as the technology is “interpretively flexible”, so success and

failure are not inherent properties of the artefact but social interpretations (Bijker, 2001, p. 26).

Orlikowski and Scott's (2008) argument is that all activities are sociomaterial, and that reality is enacted by the interaction of people and things, including information technology. Orlikowski and Scott reference the work of Barad (2003, p. 816) and her concept of agential realism. Barad discusses the role of scientific apparatus in the examination of scientific phenomena and argues that the boundary between scientist and apparatus is artificial. The apparatus is configured by the scientist to make the examination; therefore, any observation is the result of a set of *agential practices* involving both the human and the technological. The sociomaterial position is that reality is created at the point of interaction, and for technological interactions you need both people and technology. What is social and what is material emerges from the interaction. In considering failure, an assessment can only be made at the point of interaction between a technological system and the intended users.

Critics of the social constructionist approach to technology usually address research practices rather than fundamental theoretical differences. Hysalo et al. (2018) point out that technological innovation often occurs in many places simultaneously and over a period of decades. Empirical work researching such phenomena is usually of necessity single-site and completed over a period of months. In the study of failure, the possibility of impacts from actors far from the core 'scope' of the project and events far in the past cannot be ignored but are challenging to identify.

2.5.4 Critique of interpretive approaches

Cicmil (2006) in a case study of project manager practices compared two approaches to her topic: an interpretive and a critical approach. She studied

the descriptions that experienced project managers gave of the combination of rational and intuitive practices that they felt constituted their expertise, using a framework proposed by Flyvbjerg (2001, p. 110). The interpretive approach uses hermeneutics to look at how these practices are described, thus framing project management as a communicative practice. This Critical approach draws on Habermas (1972) to conduct a reflexive analysis of the knowledge practices involved, which Cicmil suggests gives a richer picture. By 'actively' interviewing her contacts she co-created an account which included ethics, morals and the emotions of project management, issues that she suggests are sometime sublimated in the pursuit of efficiency.

Some researchers question whether interpretive, social constructionist approaches can be used to examine IT cases in a Critical way; however, Mitev (2003) said that social constructivism was epistemologically and ontologically compatible with a Critical approach, and also inherently Critical in that it questioned the normative assumptions behind much IS research. She also says that (2003, p. 3);

It is important to adopt a critical and reflective stance in relation to the role that technology plays in maintaining social orders and power relations in organisations

The Critical literature on projects and project management is explored in the section below.

2.5 Critical – the project as a device for managerial control

This section gives a brief summary of writing related to 'Critical Management Studies' on projects, project failure and technology. It concludes by examining criticisms of this work and possible responses to this criticism.

Critical management researchers examine issues of identity, power and emancipation, and project management has proved a rich field of enquiry. Projects are used as an increasingly common way of organizing work, and Critical researchers claim that this is driven by the success of the technique in making people work harder and in reducing resistance to change, often to the detriment of project participants (Cicmil, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2016). Critical (and other) writers also debate the role of formalised project control techniques as compared with the ‘practical wisdom’ of much unformalized project management practice (Cicmil, 2006).

Influenced by the writing of Habermas (1972), Critical researchers (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992) challenge established ways of looking at management. This school of thought arose partly in reaction to the perception that much teaching in business and management schools from the 1950s onwards promoted a ‘progressive, rationalist’ view (Clegg and Ross-Smith, 2003), and that alternative voices promoting a more ethical, emancipatory view of business were not being heard. Taking their title from Alvesson and Willmott’s (1992) edited collection of essays, members of this group do not claim to speak with a singular voice. Most, however, share a concern that the pursuit of profit is seen in many cases to override wider societal priorities such as environmental protection, equality, social cohesion, and individual rights.

The Critical school of writing about projects and project management follows the interpretivist school in asserting that projects are social constructions, but it stresses more strongly that they are artefacts of power relations between different groups (Winter *et al.*, 2006). The thesis of these writers is that project success is not just about achievement of organizational goals of time, cost and quality, but also who is defining these criteria and why. The ethical

and emancipatory dimensions of projects must also be considered; if a project is delivered on time yet damages the people responsible for its delivery, can it be considered a success?

The call of these writers is to research the ‘actuality’ of projects (Cicmil *et al.*, 2006) rather than derive yet more abstract theories about what ought to or might be going on inside and around projects. Critical scholars use qualitative methods to identify examples of social domination in the interactions that they study, and from these draw broader lessons about the societal and organizational phenomena at work. As an example, Critical writers point to the ‘phronesis’ (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 2) or practical wisdom of all social actors, and the examples that project managers give of this in their day-to-day work (Cicmil, 2006).

There appear to be several different ways in which projects and project management can be analysed as instruments of control. The ‘professionalisation’ of project management work can be framed as using various forms of discipline to reproduce a “technicist form of rationality” within projects (Hodgson, 2002, p. 818). The ‘projectification’ of society captures an increasing number of work activities within the “iron cage of project rationality” (Maylor *et al.*, 2006, p. 664). This may form part of the ‘responsibilisation’ of work (Grey, 1997), where the onus to achieve outcomes is transferred from managers to individual workers. Projects can be seen as a more-or-less formal method of disciplining involved individuals, following a Foucauldian thesis of control by observation (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2007).

According to this viewpoint, projects are constructed via a “complex relational process” of meaning-making and sense-making which involves discourse (Cicmil, 2014). In this process actors manipulate the symbols of the ‘project’

world; plans, objectives, and other project artefacts to create a 'local social setting' – the project. The use of project symbols gives the discourse between managers and the managed a 'situational' or 'institutionalised' rationality (Cicmil and Marshall, 2005) and shuts down other discourses that lack these 'rationalist' trappings. This Critical 'processual-relational' approach is distinct from the more ontologically rationalist stance taken by processual writers such as Sauer (1993b), and also puts more emphasis on the hegemonic and possibly repressive effects of power relations than other interpretive or constructionist writers.

Critical perspectives on the use of technology focus on its use to establish or sustain power relations. Many organizations (McLoughlin, 1999) can be said to use technology to gain control of the labour process. Looking back to Braverman's (1998) Labour Process Theory, Knights and McCabe (2002, p. 238) remark on the "panopticon-like" power of surveillance that technological systems give managers. Technology gives new opportunities to control workflows, displace work to lower cost labour pools and substitute machines for people. Controllable, biddable technology can be seen as a managerial tool which eliminates risk from the accumulation of capital; however Critical writers differentiate themselves from labour process theorists by suggesting that they do not have a 'deterministic' approach to the impacts of technology (Leonardi and Barley, 2010). They describe a more nuanced picture where the interaction between workers and management has not evolved in the linear ways predicted by earlier writers (Holtgrewe, 2014; Howcroft and Taylor, 2014).

Case studies and theoretical work all highlight the presence of power relations within the IT project. The technologists whose job is to write the software

struggle with the project managers whose aim is to meet the perceived needs of business stakeholders (Case and Pineiro, 2009). The stakeholders who need to authorise parallel business changes may be different from the people who originally endorsed the project (Coombs, 2015). Power asymmetries within projects create unsustainable pressures on managers and workers alike to 'perform' by meeting unreachable deadlines (Peticca-Harris, Weststar and McKenna, 2015; Cicmil, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2016).

Critical writers share with interpretivist writers such as Fincham (2002) scepticism about the 'objective' definability of failure itself and also speculate that the nature of conventional project management itself may be at the root of many of the problems encountered in project execution. Faced with deviations from predetermined plans, project managers apply simple corrective control techniques to what are complex systems with multiple feedback loops, including social interactions (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006b). Rigid adherence to rational processes, in the view of these researchers, is unlikely to produce acceptable solutions to what are in essence non-rational problems (Thomas, Cicmil and George, 2012) examples of which are stakeholder acceptance and resolving ambiguous objectives. In addition, the 'discipline' and processes of project management seem insufficiently concerned with the many less structured interactions that take place in and around projects.

The labelling of a project as a success or a failure is an outcome of power relations between competing groups (Sage, Dainty and Brookes, 2014). This labelling can never be a neutral event, even if it is the result of an organizationally-sanctioned process of evaluation (Cicmil, 2006). If it serves the interests of the dominant group for the project to be a success, then it will be

labelled a success (Fincham, 2002). The success or failure of the project will be performed in the interactions of different stakeholder groups with the project and its outputs (Cecez-Kecmanovic, Kautz and Abrahall, 2014).

A critique of the Critical stance is that it fails to engage with real-world problems by adopting a “non-performative intent” (Fournier and Grey, 2000, p. 17), which was defined (following Lyotard (1984, p. 11)) as the antithesis of:

the intent to develop and celebrate knowledge which contributes to the production of maximum output for minimum input.

A contrast is drawn between ‘positivist’ writing which can be caricatured as only stressing this form of optimisation – the end point justifies whatever means are employed – and ‘Critical’ writing that speaks up against the exploitation of various workforces and the despoliation of the environment. Critical researchers are chided for saying what they do not like about prevalent management practices without putting forward coherent programmes of their own (Thompson, 2004, p. 61). Grey rejects this critique as a misinterpretation of what CMS sees as ‘performativity’. In his view “non-performative intent” was never intended to imply scholarship that did not engage with real world problems or proposed criticisms but not solutions. Rather, it meant seeing means-end performativity as the problem and framing solutions in terms that are not imbued with that form of rationality².

Another possible riposte to this challenge is “Critical Performativity” (Spicer, Alvesson and Karreman, 2009, 2016), where through various tactics Critical researchers are encouraged to, at a minimum, influence managers towards more emancipatory outcomes. Society needs highways to be built and IT

² Private correspondence 2018

systems developed, and the way in which such assets are created can add to or detract from wider societal value.

2.6 The approach of the thesis to the conceptualisation and analysis of projects and project failure

This section summarises the approach that I take in the thesis to conceptualising projects and project failure, showing what literature I draw on and indicating where the thesis explores gaps in that literature. In this summary, I address the nature of the project itself, how success and failure come to be produced and enacted, the dynamic nature of success and failure, the link to power relations within and around the project, any special considerations that relate to IT projects and the implications of this stance for the thesis and the research question.

I view the project as a social construction, existing within a socially constructed world. The project is a collaborative, continuously negotiated set of actions as people pool their efforts in pursuing a wider goal – although the definition of that goal may itself be contested and subject to a similar set of negotiations (Cicmil and Marshall, 2005). The ‘reality’ of the project will result from the interaction of the people involved in it, with their shared (and conflicting) assumptions of what that goal is, what work is needed to achieve it and how that work should be organised. The execution of the project will result in a set of narratives that will evolve as the project progresses (Veenswijk and Berendse, 2008), and those narratives will reflect the background and acculturations of those involved. This acculturation is likely to involve long exposure to, and often formal training in a set of historically based narratives concerning what the ‘standard’ model of a project is and how one should be expected to manage and evaluate it (Hodgson, 2005a).

Some narratives of the project will be evaluative, and contain assessments of its success or failure. These judgments are themselves subjective, although many will be cloaked in the 'objective' language of evaluation, review or audit (Wilson and Howcroft, 2005). Evaluation can be formal or informal, but in all cases will not be a neutral process, as the evaluators are also actors in the context in which the project is executed and bring their own subjectivities to the process; including their views on how a project 'should' be managed. The implication that project 'success' and 'failure' is merely a matter of interpretation has been critiqued (Sage, Dainty and Brookes, 2013), as success and failure can be performed as well as perceived, and thus is produced in the interaction between project stakeholders and the products of the project (Cecez-Kecmanovic, Kautz and Abrahall, 2014).

Critical researchers (Cicmil *et al.*, 2006, 2009; Hodgson and Cicmil, 2008; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009) have turned their attention to projects and project management as an instrument of management control. I share the viewpoint of these Critical writers that see the project, and the process of 'projectification' as a strategy to achieve control by one group, managers, over another, the managed (Deetz, 1996). I also accept the view of project management as a 'colonising discourse' (Cicmil, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2016). In addition, this discourse is contested as different voices vie over the 'correct' way to manage projects, and the professionalisation of project management with its accompanying artefacts of bodies of knowledge and accreditation is a manifestation of that struggle (Marshall and Bresnen, 2013).

The terms success and failure are dynamic. Both terms can be applied to the same project at the same time (Wilson and Howcroft, 2002), and over time a project can be referred to as a success, then a failure, then a success again.

Many different narratives can exist simultaneously (Dawson and Buchanan, 2005), each of them referring to the outcome of the project in different ways. Which of them becomes dominant is a function of the power relations surrounding the project, and the literature relevant to this topic is explored in the next chapter, Chapter 3.

The literature also indicates that there are some special considerations that relate to IT projects. In common with other project artefacts, I treat technology as a social construction. The project actors interact with the technology and construct new meanings and interpretations as a result. Although any technology can be described as ‘interpretively flexible’, the malleability of software produces even more scope for interpretation and misinterpretation, and project managers react to this flexibility by calling for greater control. In addition, the algorithmic sophistication possible with software gives scope for anthropomorphic description on the part of other actors, and Latour’s (1999) ANT is but one way of characterising the interactions and subsequent storytelling that result. The idea that the technology can fail – independently of the people choosing and deploying that technology – is in common parlance (Mitev, 2005). These fresh possibilities – and others – find their way into the accounts of project actors, and a new language of failure (‘the software crashed – it was full of bugs’) is the result. In considering possible gaps in the literature, my starting point is Fincham’s (2002) proposal that the success and failure of IT projects are terms within relevant narratives. ANT studies (Mitev, 2000b; Mähring *et al.*, 2004) explore how through the failure of *translation* these terms can be attributed, but these studies are often descriptive and do not address underlying power relations. Mitev (2003) complemented her ANT analysis of project failure by applying

Clegg's 'circuits of power' theories although the challenge of capturing dynamic external circumstances required the addition of a fresh concept - "exogenous contingencies". One way in which failure can be attributed is through evaluation activities (in this thesis, a role fulfilled by review and audit). This activity has been extensively explored in the literature, and it is commonly remarked that evaluation is a political process (Sauer, 1993b, p. 91). Wilson and Howcroft (2005) observe contestation between 'relevant social groups' (Pinch and Bijker, 1986) in an evaluation case study and suggest that the different interpretations of these groups led to an attribution of failure. Cecez-Kecmanovic et al. (2014) also remark on the subjectivity of evaluation but say that this is the result of different realities ('ontological politics') rather than different interpretations of a singular reality. Finally Baghizadeh et al. (2019) suggest that we abandon the examination of IS project failure- a fleeting 'endpoint' - altogether, and concentrate on looking at 'IS project distress', a state that shows the project has the potential for failure at some future point. This suggests that many authors agree that IS project failure is subjective and a politically driven ascription, and that the processes of evaluation have a part to play in those politics; however there does not appear to have been a systematic examination of those processes, and of the part that power relations play in generating one ascription or another. In addition the isomorphic effects of the dominant 'project management' paradigm – what Cicmil et al. (2016) call the 'colonising discourse' – impact what is evaluated and how. An exploration of narratives of success and failure in this evaluation context thus appears valuable, combined with a detailed analysis of how and why power relations can be seen within them, and how these narratives are used to effect power relations in the context of the project and beyond. These questions are further explored in the next chapter.

The thesis thus combines a relativist ontology with an interpretive epistemology to examine the subject of IT project failure through the accounts of project managers, reviewers and auditors. It seeks to analyse how project actors use the term 'failure' in the context of particular IT projects and how they and others interpret this usage. The next chapter (Chapter 3) of the literature review will justify the choice to examine these accounts as interlinking and competing *narratives* (Dawson and Buchanan, 2005) by looking at how researchers have theorized the examination of narrative accounts.

3. Literature Review II – Narratives, Project Narratives and Power Relations

3.1 Introduction and structure of this chapter

The first chapter of the literature review examined the topic of the research, the IT project. It looked at a broad range of writing on projects, project management, technology and project failure contrasting different epistemological and ontological views of projects. This second chapter of literature review examines the mode of analysis, i.e. narrative analysis, and what insights can be gained through narrative analysis into power relations within and around the IT project. Drawing on the rich literature of narrative analysis it defines some of the terms used in the thesis and reviews how researchers have used narratives to examine projects, technology, change and related phenomena. In so doing it also looks at previous writing on how narratives of project success and failure are constructed, including as part of the processes of project evaluation, review and audit. It also examines writing on the role of narratives in power relations and what examination of narratives reveals about the nature of these relations. The chapter ends with a explanation of how the thesis intends to use narrative analysis to examine and present the accounts of project actors to address the research question.

3.2 What is a narrative and why use narrative analysis to look at projects?

This section discusses what I mean by the term ‘narrative’ in the thesis and describes why narrative analysis is appropriate to project settings.

The use of narrative analysis within the social sciences builds on work undertaken in anthropology, linguistic and literary studies. Early analysts such as Propp (1928) and Colby (1973) revealed the rich structure and complex

informational content of folk tales in different traditions. More recently sociologists and psychologists described and analysed accounts of life experience as narratives. Organizational researchers started using personal accounts of organizational life as a valuable extra source of data from the 1970s (Clark, 1972). By the 1990s, with the emergence of the 'linguistic turn' in organizational studies (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000), these accounts were seen as interesting objects of study in their own right, and authors vied to advise researchers on how to exploit these new sources (Riessman, 1993; Boje, 1995; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

The range of material that could be described as 'narrative' is very broad. As Buchanan and Dawson (2007, p. 672) summarise:

Confronted with such diverse usage, the term narrative is perhaps better regarded as a category label. From this standpoint, stories, scripts, anecdotes, legends, sagas, histories, myths, reports and other discursive accounts are categorically narratives.

Several of the texts examined in the thesis could be described as 'stories'. The short descriptions extracted from interview transcripts would be recognised by Gabriel (2004a) as stories, and he would distinguish between these and longer pieces of text such as formal reports. For Gabriel, a story is performative and implies a pact between the teller and the audience, in which conventions are followed and accuracy sacrificed for impact; a context that might apply to anecdotes told in research interviews. To avoid confusion, all the empirical material used will be referred to as *narratives* for the purposes of the thesis.

Czarniawska (1998) states that a narrative describes a set of pre-existing circumstances, an event that impacted these circumstances, and the post-event state of affairs. She considers a 'plot' essential if such a temporal

description is to become a narrative, as the plot gives causal linkages between narrative segments. The plot is an authorial device and one way in which the author ascribes meaning to the events of the narrative and attributes causality. This attribution is seen by Buchanan and Dawson (2007) as a key feature of a narrative and because a reason is offered for why events turned out the way they did, the narrative becomes 'theory-laden'. This feature will be explored later in this chapter in connection with the role of narratives in power relations.

Many writers, particularly those with an interpretive stance have chosen to analyse the social construction of projects through a narrative lens. There is a strong match between the classical view of narratives as time-ordered discourses (Riessman, 2005) and the enactment of a time-ordered set of activities within the temporary organization of the project; indeed, some would say that the project *is* a narrative (Uotila, 2012).

In addition, there is a link between the transience of the 'temporary' project organization and the value of information to be gained from narrative accounts. In a well-established 'permanent' organization, ways of working are documented (for example in 'standard operating procedures') and knowledge similarly codified. The history of the organization can be read in induction material and stances on key issues such as ethics and propriety gleaned from standing policies. These data sources may not all exist in a project setting and thus informal ways of acculturation become interesting and important.

Czarniawska (1998, p. 10) points out that we are only a few decades away from a largely illiterate society, when organizational memory was primarily embedded in the stories told orally by older members of the group to new members. In addition, project practice may diverge frequently from

documented ‘reality’, and thus the contemporaneous accounts of practitioners have always had value to the organizational researcher (whether ‘accurate’ or not). Czarniawska suggests that modern institutions rely on ‘organizational fictions’ and it is the job of the researcher to surface these and understand their effect.

Narrative methods have been used to examine subjects such as project manager identities (Smith, 2011), project leadership (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009), project knowledge and professionalisation (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2007; Hodgson, Paton and Cicmil, 2011), historical projects (Hughes, 2013; Marshall and Bresnen, 2013), and power and politics in project settings (Dawson and Buchanan, 2003; Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Ye, Marshall and Mckay, 2012; Rogers, 2013). In addition, project success and failure has been studied using narrative techniques by several authors, including Fincham’s (2002) definitional study, Bartis and Mitev’s (2008) case study, Brown’s study of politics and legitimacy (Brown and Jones, 1998), Drevin and Dalcher’s (2011) use of Boje’s (2004) antenarratives and Lindgren et al.’s (2014) study of emotions. Narrative analysis has provided powerful explanations of the way that projects are constituted, executed and evaluated.

3.3 Narrative Research

This section talks about the many ways in which researchers have chosen to research narratives. Following Squire (2008), the following subsections discuss literature on narrative research under three headings: those that address *structure* or syntax; those that address *content* or semantics; and those that discuss *context*, with an emphasis on how the narrative is situated within a wider set of discourses.

3.3.1 Structural and Syntactical Research

Structural analysis seeks to understand *how* the message of the narrative is conveyed by looking at the way that the text is put together. One of the most long-established (and widely used) forms of structural analysis was proposed by Labov and Waletzky (1967), who defined a narrative as a discourse with a temporal structure, containing both referential elements that describe the event-sequence and evaluative elements that ascribe meaning. This definition has strong similarities to those put forward by Czarniawska (1998) and Riessman (1993). Labov (1972) proposed a specific structure for such narratives starting with an abstract and ending optionally with a coda. Not all structural elements need to be present for the narrative to be recognisable as such, but a narrative-like text with few such elements might attract the label *narrative fragment*. Labov's model continues to be used by researchers in the analysis of narrative texts (e.g. Pilkington, 2018).

Researchers debate whether structure is necessary to distinguish a narrative from other forms of text or discourse. One subject of Labov's research was a set of personal accounts given by African-Americans in an urban setting, and his approach has been criticised (Langellier, 1989) as being too specific to this context. Langellier points out that other discourses have different structures and none, yet also might be recognised by their audiences as narratives, for example by the performative context in which they are delivered. Labov (2006) later clarified that his analysis schema was intended to apply to individual adult accounts of personal experience. Gimenez (2010) broadened Labov's approach by situating the individual account within a network of other contextual material, some of which may be corroborating or contradictory narratives. According to Gimenez, the function and meaning of the individual

account (for example, as obtained in a research interview) can be more readily analysed when placed in this wider context.

Other ways of analysing narratives include examining plot and the use of character. Gabriel's (Gabriel, 2000) plot types, termed 'poetic modes' – tragedy, comedy, epic and romantic – define a patterned format for an organizational story in which certain types of characters should appear, and the plot should relate the actions of these characters in a predictable format with a recognisable conclusion. The character is an authorial device for communication with the audience. If a character is labelled a hero, the audience will expect 'heroic' behaviour from that person, and be surprised and possibly intrigued when other behaviours are portrayed. Propp (1928) identified eight character types within his analysis of Russian folktales, including the Hero, the Wizard and the Villain. These character types have been used to analyse the roles of actors within organizational narratives (Rostron, 2015).

3.3.2 Content and Semantic Research

The content of a narrative contains semantic information; for example, on *what* the narrative is about. If the narrative is a personal narrative it also contains information about the person narrating i.e. *who* that person is, how they are culturally situated and what the narrative means for them.

Thematic analysis can be carried out on organizational narratives as for other forms of text. As an example, in McLeod et al.'s (2012) investigation of project success, a 'case study' narrative was constructed following document inspection and interviews with project participants. The researchers wanted to understand how 'project success' was constructed, and identified themes in their data including multidimensionality (many criteria beyond time, cost and

quality), scope (wider than expected), temporality (success is measured over varying periods), perspective (stakeholder perceptions vary) and context (the organizational setting conditions the view of 'success').

Personal narratives offer wider possibilities. Narrative construction has long been identified as a type of identity work, both for individual identities (Smith, 2011) and, importantly in the context of transient bodies like projects, organisational identities (Brown, 2006). Narratives are also held out as evidence of sensemaking, and where the ambiguous nature of a project generates uncertainty, the explanatory power of a narrative can provide an antidote (Søderberg, 2003). The importance of the narrative to the individual may come out in the way that the narrative is co-created with the audience (Ricoeur, 1991) or in the transformative nature of the outcome or resolution (Bruner, 1990).

3.3.3 Contextual Research

Researchers also analyse the context of the narration, the performance and the relationship between narrators and their audiences, as analysis of the act of narrating can be as informative as analysis of narrative content (Peterson and Langellier, 2006). Performative analysis may give insights into the effectiveness of the narrative as a communicative act. In the context of the thesis, the context in which the narrative is delivered – during a private and confidential interview, a public televised hearing or in an officially sanctioned and published report – has relevance to the meaning attached to the content; for example, just how plausible is it? Under what constraints was it prepared?

Interactive analysis is of particular interest when considering interview material. Frost (2009) describes her reflexive analysis of such material, considering places where she 'shut down' the interviewee's narrative and

other places where she encouraged discussion of a particular topic. The co-creation of interview data has been written about at length (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001) and the shortcomings of interview data as a means of producing knowledge have been critiqued (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012).

In addition, a narrative could reflect values and assumptions from a wider discourse. Such a 'local' narrative would be positioned within a particular worldview as portrayed by a metanarrative (or 'grand narrative') such as Marxism or Neo-liberalism. Critical scholars (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992) are particularly concerned with identifying and challenging metanarratives and their assumptions, as these may condition and constrain the view of both the narrator and the audience. Within an IT project setting, an example metanarrative may be the unquestioned benefit to be obtained from 'modern' technology (Gaskell *et al.*, 2005).

3.3.4 Summary

In summary, narrative texts have certain attributes; for example a plot to allow the audience to infer causal links between action segments; characters who fulfil recognizable roles in the narrative; and possibly a link to a metanarrative that informs the narrative's worldview (Czarniawska, 1997).

The researcher must use analytical techniques appropriate to the material and the research question to extract meaning from narrative texts and thus generate findings. In Chapter 4, Methods and Research Approach, I justify my use of structural, content and contextual analysis techniques to examine the research material and build my understanding of the social world that my interviewees and their collaborators have constructed.

The following sections look more closely at the specific role of narratives in projects, the depiction of success and failure through narratives and the part that narratives play in power relations.

3.4 What part do narratives play in projects?

Narratives have been associated with projects since the author of Genesis described how Noah built the ark (for a deconstruction of this see Matthiessen, 2009). Narratives have “causal functions and intent” (Buchanan and Dawson, 2007, p. 669) which means that they not only offer a tailored account of past events, but that they are also an attempt to shape future events. They thus have a place in the ongoing enactment of the project (Uotila, 2012). Narratives serve different roles within the project, such as: coded instructions for those who would repeat this or similar projects; celebrations of success; lessons learned to prevent repetition of mistakes; and legitimation of the roles of all involved. Narratives are not merely descriptive, but also constitutive and actors “do not merely tell stories – they enact them” (Pentland, 1999, p. 711).

There is an established body of literature which looks at the incidence and application of narratives in project settings, and/or uses narrative methods to analyse these settings (Aaltio-Marjosola, 1994; Brown, 1998; Dawson, 2000; Boddy and Paton, 2004; Cicmil *et al.*, 2009; Clegg *et al.*, 2016). This section examines the descriptive function and the organising function of narratives in projects. It starts by reviewing how project management can be seen as a process of narrating, then reviews how internal narratives of plans, reporting and risk management constitute important mechanisms to maintain the coherence of the temporary organization (Yakura, 2002). It concludes by looking at how narratives sustain individual and collective identities, and thus play a part in sustaining project teams.

3.4.1 Organising by narrating

Narrating can be seen as an organizing process (Herrmann, 2011). Narratives are used to attract resources, motivate stakeholders and provide a context for decision making and action. The ability to assemble a convincing narrative is thus a key skill of the effective project leader (Havermans, Keegan and Den Hartog, 2015). Good storytelling skills thus create a power base for the leader (Dawson and Buchanan, 2005). Project managers may use evocative narratives to set the 'tone' of the project (Hekkala, Stein and Rossi, 2018), using metaphors to package discourses and influence the sensemaking and actions of others. One common narrative portrayal of the project is as a quest (analogous to the hero's journey (Campbell, 1949)), where the heroic team leader assembles allies and wins through in spite of adversity (Kendall and Kendall, 2012) and battles (Hirschheim and Newman, 1991).

Particular "patterned themes of conversations" (Cooke-Davies *et al.*, 2007, p. 57) are common in project situations, including regular discussions at the governance board of the progress report and the risk register. These conversations, according to Cooke-Davies *et al.* are both constituted by and constitute power relations within the project. Who is on the governance board, and thus party to the conversation is a very direct outcome of these power relations. Project leaders exercise power relations through these conversations which have a role in problem resolution, because whether leaders frame a particular issue as an opportunity or a threat will influence the way that project team members and stakeholders address it (Havermans, Keegan and Den Hartog, 2015).

3.4.2 Project Artefacts as narratives

Many outputs and artefacts of the project can themselves be seen as narratives. These include formal documents such as business cases, strategies and reports (that might normally be considered to 'tell a story') and working documents such as plans, progress reports and risk registers.

Plans are one of the key symbolic artefacts that define projects and project management. On complex projects, plans consist of more than a chart, as they commonly come with commentary justifying the choices that the planners have made. Plans contain a representation of the future sequence of activities and the postulated timescale (Yakura, 2002) and can thus be considered 'narrative' in that they relate the event sequence. Plans are representational and a simplification of the project's activities and their interdependencies. In response to the increasing complexity of projects, more sophisticated plans such the 'Integrated Master Schedule' (Chang, Hatcher and Kim, 2013) are created as 'boundary objects' (Star and Griesemer, 1989) to convey information, in narrative form, between different groups, each of whom may be working to their own local plan. Plans are not just used for communication, but also for negotiation and cementing agreements. The plan suggests that certain outcomes will be reached on a certain date, and the recipients of those outcomes rely on the plan as an undertaking that the outcomes will be delivered on time. As social constructions, plans are subject to interpretation, and wide differences in interpretation of plans by project stakeholders will likely have adverse consequences.

Progress reports also promulgate a narrative regarding the project. These reports use a specialised language to record the achievements of the project and to predict future performance. They can be used as a control tool (e.g. by

sponsors, or oversight boards) to manage the behaviour of project managers (Kirsch, 1997). Reports also often contain forward-looking information regarding, for example, Risks, Assumptions, Issues and Dependencies (RAID) which attempt to convey analytically and objectively the project manager's hopes for the future – put simply, if this finite set of uncertainties are resolved, then the project will deliver the promised outcomes and be a success.

3.4.3 Narratives as drivers of identity

Narratives also serve important social functions for projects. A common narrative history or organizational folklore is a driver of organizational belonging (Gabriel, 2014). Narratives can express individual identities (Somers, 1994), and also 'team' or 'project' identities. As individuals yearn for attachment and acceptance, they align their narratives with others in the project to suit group norms (Nocker, 2009). The boundaries of the group are defined by the way individuals choose to tell their stories, and who they tell them to, and so narratives form and reinforce bonds between organizational members. Individuals thus signal attachment to a group or team in an act of 'belonging'.

In a similar way, organizational members can communicate a shared backstory through story fragments, and the consequent taken-for-granted assumptions are part of what binds organizational members together. In Boje's (1991) example, company executives talk about a time before the 'fall', a takeover of their family-owned business by a large conglomerate. They hark back to a simpler era with fewer rules but less efficiency and effectiveness. In doing so they reaffirm their common history, and show their alignment on values and courses of action that they collectively believe to be 'right'.

Narratives thus have many functions within projects, both descriptive and constitutive. Narratives are used to shape the project, sell the project to investors, organize work, motivate and bind together the project team, and, as will be shown below, deliver a verdict on the success or failure of the project.

3.4.4 Narratives of Technology within Projects

In Chapter 2 I discussed the special nature of IT projects, and factors that impact descriptions of success and failure in these projects. In this subsection I will discuss how some of those factors are reflected in project narratives, and how they offer additional lines of enquiry and exploration. These include technological affordances, specialist technological roles, the technology as an actor in its own right and new development methods.

Zammuto et al. (2007) suggest that certain technological affordances, for example the ability for virtual collaboration, have led to most of the innovations in organizing that have taken place over the last few decades. Researchers suggest these affordances allow fresh organizational narratives to be constructed and performed (Pentland and Feldman, 2007), and that the modular nature of many technologies allows narratives to be combined in 'narrative networks' that describe and enact new organizational arrangements. As an example, Pritchard and Symon (2014) described the use of smartphones by railway engineers. Acting on the principle that 'a picture is worth a thousand', pictures taken at trackside were sent back to a control room to illustrate status, ask for advice and show location. In this case the use of technology reshaped some narratives and introduced new ones. Pictures were seen to establish a new narrative of 'incontrovertible truth' which suppressed previous debates about where something was or what state it was in.

Certain project actors claim privileged roles because of their technical expertise. Information technology has always required specialists to design, implement and run systems. These specialisms were celebrated in a narrative of 'professionalisation' analogous to that constructed by project managers (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2008), with entry qualifications, a recognized body of knowledge and professional bodies (e.g. the British Computer Society). The existence of these two, competing professional narratives may create tensions between project managers and IT specialists (Hodgson, Paton and Cicmil, 2011). IT specialists suggest that project decisions are taken in ignorance of technical constraints, as project managers do not understand the technology that their projects rely on (Paton and Hodgson, 2016). Technological expertise also is used to attribute causality to particular features of the IT and undermine alternative accounts (Dawson and Buchanan, 2005).

Other narratives position the technology as an actor, and an actor with agency, emotions and on occasion malice. Technology can be an awkward actor, that fails to interact well with other system components. People commonly anthropomorphise the technology that they deal with every day (Kim and Sundar, 2012), and 'Computer says no' has entered the language (Walliams, 2004). As Bloomfield (1989) pointed out, our verbal habits attribute agency to IT. Many users see the computer as an equivalent social actor that they must 'trust' to achieve the outcomes they desire (Lankton, Mcknight and Tripp, 2015). In a failing project, the cause of failure may be attributed to the technology itself, rather than the people who constructed it (Whittle, Mueller and Mangan, 2009). The technological artefact thus becomes a villain in the emplotted narrative of project actors. This may be part of these actors' self-positioning as 'victims' in the narrative and a way of avoiding personal liability for their actions or inactions.

As described in Section 4.6, much of the innovation in project management methods over the last 20 years has come from the field of IT projects. What Davies et al. (2018) call the ‘adaptive’ school of project management has adopted incremental development methods from software writing, and ‘Agile’ methods have been applied to fields as different as new product innovation and the development of radio news programmes (Phelps, 2012). ‘Agile’, as defined by the Agile manifesto (Beck *et al.*, 2001) is a disruptive narrative because it challenges many of the hitherto dominant assumptions regarding how software should be developed and tested (Cockburn, 2000). Such was the contrast between Agile and pre-existing, traditional models (such as those proposed by the Software Engineering Institute) that the ensuing debates were deemed ‘Religious Wars’ (Williams, 2012). Agile was offered as a counter-narrative to ‘waterfall’ method of development, where requirements were fully collected, then design was fully completed, and then and only then development work was undertaken (Royce, 1970). The ‘Agile narrative’ (Martin, 2017) offers an alternative where small teams incrementally accomplish the project’s mission.

In conclusion, the narrative of an IT project will have some extra features that are not necessarily found in narratives of other types of project, such as construction, or research and development. The pace of innovation in IT accentuates the role of ‘experts’, who can differentiate themselves from other actors through adroit use of neologisms and embracing new techniques such as ‘Agile’. Technological artefacts may themselves be portrayed as actors and new technological affordances can enable (or inflict) massive impacts on the organization receiving the outputs of the project. All these factors can be seen in the role that narratives play in the system of power relations surrounding the project.

3.5 How are success and failure narrated?

The previous chapter of literature review looked at different epistemological and ontological viewpoints of projects and project failure. It concluded that an interpretive view of failure had explanatory power, citing Fincham's (2002) assertion that success and failure were alternative narratives used as rhetorical devices to justify particular courses of action. This section reviews literature that explores this concept and its possible limitations, looking first at the way that 'success' and 'failure' are narrated and then at the emergence of counternarratives.

Several studies have identified the powerful role that narrative plays in shaping perceptions of an IT project (Fincham, 2002; Dalcher, 2003; Bartis and Mitev, 2008; Cecez-Kecmanovic, Kautz and Abrahall, 2014). Fincham (2002) for example, compared two projects with seemingly identical outcomes; yet one was labelled a failure and the other a success. Project failure itself can be construed as a narrative construction, and the terms 'project failure' and 'project success' as "conventional labels" (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006b, p. 111). Different groups may seek to apply and justify these labels as part of political action, as justification for engagement or withdrawal from the project and as post-hoc sensemaking of a challenging activity. Sage et al. (2014) point out the frequency with which, following a change of leadership, new project managers construct a narrative of historic project failure to justify their own appointment and 'other' the past. Smith (2006, p. 191) says that success and failure are not objective assessments of an end-state, but rhetorical resources in a "serial reinterpretation" of the project's narrative.

Drevin and Dalcher (2011) presented a case study which analysed 'story fragments' from users, IT administrators, developers and managers to

understand why an IT project had been perceived as a failure (at least by some). Story fragments suggested that users were disappointed for various reasons including “instability”, “inflexibility” and “lack of performance” of the delivered system. However, because success has many fathers, but defeat is an orphan, narratives giving causal accounts of failures are likely to be self-serving (Brown and Jones, 1998). These accounts will minimise the role of the narrator in actions or decisions seen as contributing to failure.

Some researchers critique the principle that project success and failure are purely subjective, suggesting that there are projects which are in such a bad state that they could never be construed as ‘successes’ (Nelson, 2007). In contrast, some IT projects that were widely considered to be disastrous failures, in terms that would be understood by Nelson, have, in whole or in part, continued in use. This includes the infamous *SOCRATE* reservations system, which continued to be used to sell Eurostar tickets for nearly a decade after SNCF stopped using it for the main intercity network in France (Mitev, 2003). Others suggest that the narrative perspective is insufficiently action-focused (Baghizadeh, Cecez-Kecmanovic and Schlagwein, 2019), and concentrates on the end-state rather than enabling some anticipation of future failure.

Success and failure are binary framing concepts, and may present a false dichotomy as they do not acknowledge the existence of any middle ground assessment of the outcome of the project. Marshall and Bresnen (2013) discuss the difficulty of assessing the outcome of any but the simplest of projects. Their analysis of the construction of the first Thames tunnel contrasts several conflicting yet overlapping narratives of this unique enterprise. The narrative of the project that has found its way into history books describes the

tunnel as an engineering feat, as a tunnelling shield was used for the first time to drive a passage under a significant body of water. Marshall and Bresnen contrast this epic narrative of achievement with a second, parallel narrative that shows the enterprise to be an economic failure, frequently halted through lack of funds and failing to provide a return to its investors.

A project that 'succeeds' in one narrative accepted by some stakeholders may be deemed a 'failure' in a counter-narrative accepted by others (Grainger, Mckay and Marshall, 2009). Competing narratives may emerge regarding IT projects, some of which are positive about its process and outcomes and others which are not (Boddy and Paton, 2004). Boddy and Paton suggest that these competing narratives emerge because of differing interpretations of what the project is, and what it has achieved; and because of potential threats to different interests. In their list of threatened interests, they include the organizational culture or sub-culture, the organizational unit itself (which may disappear in a reorganization), the political interests of individuals and the career prospects of individuals. Boddy and Paton's proposition is that narratives can actively be managed to the project's benefit by matching benefits to stakeholder interests; and that this management of narratives is a legitimate role for the project manager and supporters of the project. Cicmil and Hodgson (2006b, p. 112) suggest that this proposition is just one facet of a fruitless search for perfectibility and the "ideal project".

Internal resistance to the project will often result in the production of counter-narratives to the dominant narrative (Veenswijk and Berendse, 2008).

Resistance itself may be evidence of a political contest over meanings (Vaara, Sonenshein and Boje, 2016), and may also be related to identity work (Thomas, 2005). Resistance may be a reaction to a narrative that creates a privileged

position for one group in relation to the resisters (Ivory and Alderman, 2009) or a reaction to an attempt to extend control and discipline to others (Ye, Marshall and McKay, 2012).

The narrative perspective of project success and failure acknowledges the socially constructed nature both of projects and perceptions of their outcomes. It also encompasses the subjective nature of success and failure and admits the possibility of wide differences in the perception of stakeholders (Baccarini, 1999). Narratives of success and failure reflect wider political activity surrounding the project and for any complex or controversial project, multiple competing narratives will be present (Dawson and Buchanan, 2005). Whether any project is deemed a success or failure depends on which narratives come to dominate; and this dominance will be a result of power relations (Bartis and Mitev, 2008). The advantages of using a narrative perspective to look at project success and failure were summarised in Cicmil and Hodgson's (2006b) analysis of Fincham's (2002) paper. Firstly, the narrative approach brings an analysis of political discourse to the interpretation of project performance. Secondly, the terms, success and failure, are implicated in other narratives concerning change in the organization, including the necessity of applying a "gloss of success" (Fincham, 2002, p. 1) to an expensive, risky project to retain support for it. Thirdly narratives link the management of projects to the management of meaning (Smircich and Morgan, 1982) and narratives of success and failure are implicated deeply in the exercise of power relations because they can either legitimise or stigmatise courses of action, groups or individuals. Because success and failure are dichotomous extremes, analysis of *why* a project came to be regarded as a success or failure can provide deep insights into the nature of power relations within an organization.

3.6 What is the role of evaluation and audit in constructing narratives of success and failure?

Reviewers and auditors have a special place in the determination of success or failure, as their narratives are privileged by their organizational role and their relationships with other project actors. There is an established literature on the evaluation of IT projects and investments and a related literature that examines the function of audit. This literature is relevant in considering the processes of evaluation and audit of IT projects and the relationship between the evaluators and the evaluated. This section discusses how the evaluation of IT projects has been researched and how this links to theories on management audit.

Narratives of project success and failure may be constructed by direct participants in the execution of the project or by other actors with indirect roles. These actors – stakeholders - include investors, accreditors, and, in the environment that is the subject of the thesis, elected politicians. If the ‘success’ of a project is called into question, one possible reaction of these stakeholders (e.g. to safeguard their interests) is to commission a review by a third party. The reviewers may be labelled as auditors, evaluators or critical friends, but in all cases the premise is the same – an independent, ‘objective’ and ‘disinterested’ party assesses the project and produces a narrative, often in the form of a review report. If the project is complete at the time of assessment, did it justify the investments made by delivering ‘benefits’? If not complete, will it justify these investments when and if it delivers? The review generates a fresh narrative that is ‘about’ the project but not ‘of’ the project; one that seeks legitimacy by claiming that elusive (and ontologically unobtainable) quality, objectivity.

Two related sets of literature are relevant to this situation. Firstly, there is an extensive literature on IS evaluation. This discusses, primarily, the challenges in assessing the monetary value of IS assets. Secondly there is a literature on the phenomenon of management audit centred on the writing of Michael Power (1994, 1997, 2003a, 2004, 2009). This literature reflects on the role of audit within New Public Management (Hood, 1991) and considers the structural and societal impacts of this purported extension of control. This brief review will look at both literatures in turn.

3.6.1 IS Evaluation

This section examines how literature has addressed the subject of IS evaluation over time, initially taking a normative viewpoint but latterly, in seeking to fill identified weaknesses in the evaluation process, including interpretivist and narrative viewpoints as well.

According to Baghizadeh et al.(2019, p. 2), prior to 1990 the majority of the published literature regarding IS evaluation took a normative, “rationalist” viewpoint (King and Rodriguez, 1978; Hamilton and Chervany, 1981; Chandler, 1982) and asserted that failure was “causally linked to technological, social and organizational factors”. Technology was uncritically ‘a good thing’, and investment in technology was clearly positive for the investing entity and for society more generally. A challenge addressed by a number of these authors was that the techniques of investment appraisal current at the time often failed to justify the effort expended in building the IS asset. The objectively measurable ‘benefits’ were outweighed by the financial costs. One response to this problem was to look elsewhere for ‘hidden’ benefits which could not be assessed using normal, ‘objective’ methods but required additional ‘subjective’ (Powell, 1992) assessment. These ‘soft’ or ‘intangible’ benefits were, almost by

definition, impossible to quantify and consequently difficult to value. 'Soft' benefits considered included improved customer perceptions, competitive advantage in specific markets, improved user satisfaction and access to information that drove 'better' decision making.

Researchers attempted to enhance evaluation methodologies to cover these 'soft' benefits. Evaluators were asked to consider the 'strategic' implications of not making an investment (Clemons, 1991), including permanent losses in competitive position. Other methods such as user attitude surveys (Hamilton and Chervany, 1981) and Delphi surveys of experts (Saunders and Jones, 1992) were proposed. Managers however questioned the validity of mixing the objective quantification of 'hard' benefits and the subjective, pseudo-quantification of 'soft' benefits (Serafeimidis and Smithson, 2000). In addition it was suggested that the notional value of 'soft' benefits was loaded into business cases to help justify marginal investments to the advantage of one group of managers (Powell, 1992) and thus political tactics impacted the outcome of seemingly rational evaluation processes (Berghout, Nijland and Grant, 2005). Others argued that purely technical or economic evaluation of new technology was too limiting a frame, and that an evaluation that missed out social or psychological factors was flawed (Blackler, 1985). Evaluators had to recognise the political and social environment within which the evaluation was being conducted. By widening the scope of evaluation, a holistic approach could be taken that retained accuracy and objectivity. This view was contested by those who said that evaluation could not be considered as a separate, unbiased and objective process divorced from other organisational processes (Smithson and Hirschheim, 1998). According to these researchers, evaluation is both a social and a political activity and is deeply embedded in other organizational practices (Klecun and Cornford, 2005).

In summary, normative approaches to evaluation were seen to fall short because they dealt primarily with overt, directly observable and measurable costs and benefits, and imperfectly with hidden costs (such as management time) and hidden benefits (such as improved employee morale). An IS investment whose costs are justified by ‘hard’ benefits may suffer organisational rejection because it is difficult to use; and another IS investment whose costs appear to exceed the ‘hard’ benefits available may gain acceptance because it embodies the ideas of important stakeholders (Irani and Love, 2001).

In response to these shortcomings researchers proposed the use of interpretive methods for evaluation (Hirschheim and Smithson, 1986; Klein and Myers, 1999; Irani and Love, 2001; Stockdale and Standing, 2006; Babaheidari, 2007). Evaluation, in this paradigm, is concerned with how various stakeholders interpret the “evaluation phenomena” (Serafeimidis and Smithson, 2000, p. 94). The resulting evaluation should therefore be more attuned to the context and needs of the organization; however the case studies that Serafeimidis and Smithson (2003) investigated showed dissatisfaction with the results of the evaluation, with one suggestion being that the introduction of non-financial evaluation challenged the power base of finance professionals in the organizations concerned.

There seems to be some irony in these tensions – a widespread acceptance that ‘objective’ evaluation is an inadequate assessment tool (if indeed ‘objective’ evaluation was ever possible) and a dissatisfaction with ‘subjective’, interpretive methods. Stakeholders were satisfied with subjective evaluation processes if the outcomes agreed with their own subjective judgments. The relationship of the evaluators to the project, the time at which the evaluation

is performed and the methods used all condition the language of evaluation and the perception of the results (Symons, 1991). Evaluation has a political nature as 'data' can be adapted depending on who is asking what question (Smithson and Hirschheim, 1998). The resulting evaluation may or may not be accepted by the different stakeholder groups (Walsham, 1998).

The solution to this challenge is not evident. Researchers have proposed using narrative analysis (Hedman and Borell, 2005) and action research techniques (Lannon, 2016) for post-implementation evaluation, to try and surface the 'lived experience' of users as generated by the 'system-in-use', and thus drive improvement actions. This does not, however, change the fact that the output of the evaluation exercise is also a narrative and subject to the same political and contextual constraints as any other organizational narrative. Any claims for objectivity must answer the challenge (Whittaker, 2001, p. 20) that:

Evaluation is an essentially political process that allows for objectivity only for the purpose of ritual in the service of political ends.

Different assessments of the same project may be performed by different actors for different political purposes (Cecez-Kecmanovic, Kautz and Abrahall, 2014). If evaluations are social and political acts the outcome of an evaluation will reflect different acts of interpretation by project actors and by the reviewers themselves (Wilson and Howcroft, 2005).

Others call for a 'Critical' approach which considers a wider set of constraints, including the social and political environment in which the system is built and used. Such an evaluation (Klecun and Cornford, 2005, p. p137):

acknowledges too that vested interests are active in constraining the evaluation process itself, since evaluation, potentially, redistributes power

This 'Critical' approach considers the emancipatory intent of the evaluated system, is alive to the social context, uses critically informed methods, considers enactment and is reflexive. Yet there still seem to be ontological challenges within the evaluation process. The same authors described an evaluation of the well-known National Programme for IT (NPfIT) project to computerise the NHS, where some of the review team espoused Critical Realism (CR) and others Social Constructionism (SC) (Klecun *et al.*, 2014). With a system that was implemented in many different hospitals, one challenge was to generalise the results of the evaluation. The CR evaluators considered the software system to be 'real', and the results of user interviews as 'facts', and thus felt able to make specific, global recommendations. The SC evaluators, however, felt unable to divorce the results from the context, and thus would not prioritise the evidence from one group of users over another.

In summary, the literature exposes a widespread dissatisfaction with 'hard' cost-benefit approaches to IS evaluation; but interpretive approaches produce contestable results. Alternative approaches may consider the emancipatory impacts of the evaluated systems, but still face ontological challenges. The idea that an IT Project can be claimed to be a success because evaluation has deemed it so is thus easily problematised. The evaluation process is subjective (even when it is claimed to produce 'objective' results), and as open to political influence as any other organizational process. An IT Project can receive a positive or a negative evaluation because the people conducting the evaluation and writing the report deem that to be the 'right' result.

3.6.2 Management Audit of Projects

This section examines literature on auditors and the audit activity, noting the rise of audit as an exercise in management control, the search for legitimacy of auditors, the role of auditors in examining projects and audit as a risk management strategy.

Power (2003b) positions audit as a key tool in the implementation of New Public Management (Thomas, 2005). Audit produces “customised and extensive narratives” (Power, 2003b, p. 196) that seek to encapsulate learnings to prevent failures in the future while criticising organizations responsible for the failures today. The system of reviews that is the central focus of this thesis has been portrayed as part of a more general ‘audit culture’ where managers and politicians respond to greater uncertainty and perceived risk by attempting to exert control through increased measurement and regular scrutiny of results (Shore and Wright, 2015). Audit, in this conceptualisation, is a means of extending management control and promoting a specific kind of management discourse. This is based on the use of standardisation and a control feedback loop as a way of enforcing a ‘preferred’ method of delivering services (Power, 2003b).

Such was the importance of ‘audit’ within the scheme of New Public Management that the phenomenon was described as an ‘audit explosion’ (Power, 1994, 2003b). Practically every public service delivery activity could be subject to audit – from the environmental impact of policies to the quality of classroom teaching. Power’s characterisation of the ‘audit society’ described what he saw as a major shift in the way that public services were managed, driven by the perceived movement from an ‘industrial’ age of certainty, with well understood links between cause and effect, to a ‘post-industrial’ age. In

this post-industrial age organizations and societies were aware of new and as-yet ill-understood risks and built structures to manage these risks (Power, 1994).

Power (2004, p. 58) suggests that much public sector audit is driven by the state's perceived need to mitigate these societal risks – the “risk management of everything”. Audits are no longer confined to financial accounts, but may extend to process compliance, health and safety, ethical behaviour, security and most relevantly for this thesis, projects. Risk management has long been a tool of project management (for a literature review see Williams, 1995) and it is common for corporate internal audit teams to examine projects for ‘risks’ (Beasley, Clune and Hermanson, 2005). Audit can therefore be portrayed as fulfilling the need for senior managers and politicians to ‘be in control’ (Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Lapsley, 2009), although audit may generate an illusion of control that is not always well founded.

There is an alternative interpretation of risk that challenges the rationalist analysis of risk management. Lim (2011) asserts that risk itself is a social construction, and that ‘risk management’ is a manifestation of a social discourse. Risks are defined, perhaps ‘invented’ and then social groups negotiate between themselves on whose view of risk has primacy – which risks require and deserve priority management, and which do not. Internal struggles for power and legitimacy impact all forms of risk analysis, which is thus not an objective management process. If audit is a risk management discipline, then it too cannot be objective.

As Power (2003a) notes, when public employees are ‘audited’ (Barton and Barton, 2011; Mather and Seifert, 2011; Craig, Amernic and Tourish, 2014) they may challenge the legitimacy of the auditing activity. Auditors react to

this challenge by creating narratives that establish and reinforce the legitimacy of their trade (Kouakou, Boiral and Gendron, 2013), which may include distancing (from negative narratives), giving examples (e.g. regarding examples of independence), and describing procedural mechanisms (such as disciplinary measures to maintain standards). Just as project managers are expected to adopt a ‘professional’ attitude (Paton and Hodgson, 2016), so auditors are expected to maintain a detached stance of ‘professional’ independence from the projects that they audit.

Even the word ‘audit’, which has been used to describe a wide range of inspection and quality assurance methods, is part of the narrative of legitimacy (Power, 2003a). The practice of financial audit is intended to verify that a ‘true and fair’ view of financial accounts has been given and thus has associations of procedural justice and scientific objectivity that may or may not be reflected in all evaluative activity (Holm and Zaman, 2012). Power also asserts that ‘audit’ expresses the need by stakeholders to believe that a form of industrial-style control is being asserted. It is more likely that an assessment of risk is being performed using a high degree of subjectivity, as the activities being assessed may be novel and the risks rarely encountered before.

Audit activity may also satisfy a need for accountability and transparency in publicly funded activity (Dye and Stapenhurst, 1997). Audit is a key component of the governance of such activities in most western-style democracies, and in some cases may be seen as part of a wider search for legitimacy – helping to ensure that “political social and economic priorities are based on a broad consensus in society” (Dye and Stapenhurst, 1997, p. 1). Audit also may be a substitute for trust in the competence and benevolence of professions and institutions (Brown and Calnan, 2010).

20 years after his initial publications, many of the interventions that Power considered novel and intrusive are now taken for granted. The state now sponsors and legitimises professions whose role it is to audit others (Clegg, 2010). In some areas there has been an attempt to problematize the ‘audit culture’ and push back the tide of management as the increased bureaucratic overhead of management and reporting is seen as distracting from ‘real’ work (Arnaboldi, Lapsley and Steccolini, 2015). In addition the management dictum that ‘you get what you measure’ expresses the concern that commissioners are getting the outcome that is measured rather than what is actually desired (Wallace, 1997; Lapsley, 2009). Despite these reactions, internal audit remains a key function in many organisations and a powerful and independent Supreme Audit Institution (such as the National Audit Office (NAO) in the UK or the Court of Auditors in the EU) is seen as an essential feature of a functioning democracy (Put, 2018) and a ‘mature’ evaluation culture (Jacob, Speer and Furobo, 2015).

The National Audit Office (NAO) has carried out formal evaluations of UK Government projects since the 1980s. Such evaluations are labelled ‘value for money surveys’ by the NAO but in other countries are labelled as ‘audits’ (Jacob, Speer and Furobo, 2015). In these evaluations the NAO comments on the efficiency, economy and effective use of public money (Dye and Staphenurst, 1997), and the majority of the NAO reports that Put (2011) analysed were in this latter category. Put suggests that norms in this area can come from comparable projects, from general ‘good practice’ and from published guidance. In addition Put says that while shortcomings are often identified, it is relatively rare for the auditors to write down why they thought these occurred.

Auditors have a special role in the evaluation of projects, and thus in the construction of narratives that give a verdict of project success or failure. The supposed objectivity and accuracy of audit activity lends weight to any subsequently constructed narrative. However, as discussed above, the legitimacy of audit activity and its effectiveness as a risk management or a control measure has been disputed.

3.6.3 Conclusions on Audit and Evaluation

The literature on IS evaluation suggests that evaluation can be viewed as a process of narrative creation, and while the proponents of that narrative may claim legitimacy by right of institutional independence or objectivity of process, this claim is easily problematised. There is no accepted, objective way of evaluating an IS investment (and thus objectively determining ‘success’ or ‘failure’). Evaluation of IT projects can be analysed as a political activity and thus should be viewed alongside other struggles for dominance within the evaluated or evaluating organisation.

Power (2003b) positions evaluation within a more general ‘audit culture’ where managers and politicians respond to greater uncertainty and perceived risk. Audit is a means of centralising control and normalising activity. Applied as a panacea, it has generated reactions as different stakeholder groups challenge the legitimacy of the auditing activity, the benefits achieved from improved outcomes set against the costs of the auditing overhead and the Taylorist principle that targets and performance audit are an appropriate way to manage professional output.

Auditors of public sector projects seek to reinforce norms of conduct among project managers and sponsors. These norms are set using a specific perspective of project management; that it is a normative, rationalist activity

where defined outcomes are achieved through diligent application of well-understood and common tools. The 'universality' of project management methods and knowledge is also legitimised through the mechanism of audit. The project manager is assessed by demonstrated conformance to a set of common standards, as monitored by project audit or evaluative review.

The role of the evaluator, whether internal or external, also raises some questions. While evaluators from outside the organization may be unlikely to participate in intra-organizational power struggles, can the evaluators be positioned as 'truly' independent? Are evaluators' reports coloured by preconceptions of how accounts should be prepared, how security measures should be implemented, how a project 'ought' to be run? Are evaluators also searching for personal or organizational legitimacy? What is the role of the evaluating organization vis-a-vis the evaluated? What organizational level agendas are being pursued? These are potential gaps in the research that have yet to be fully explored.

3.7 How do narratives reveal and enact power relations in the environment of the project?

This section examines writing about narratives and power relations in a project context. Comparing competing accounts of the project can reveal the effect of power relations within the sponsoring organization (Bartis and Mitev, 2008).

Narratives are not only reflective of these power relations, but also constitutive. Narratives are used in the exercise of power relations, for example to legitimise a particular version of events (Brown, 1998). Power relations can lead to the portrayal of one particular course of action as rational (Rogers, 2013) and by implication, alternatives as irrational. The impact of a particular narrative can be increased by using devices such as framing (Clair,

1993) and selective editing. The construction and deployment of ‘compelling’ narratives are one way in which power is exercised as narratives aim for plausibility and influence rather than accuracy (Dawson and Buchanan, 2005). The definition of a ‘compelling’ narrative is in some ways circular; the ‘compelling’ narrative will convince the audience that it is authentic; that it reflects the ‘one true version’ of events; and by virtue of its monopoly of the ‘truth’, it will become the dominant narrative. Narratives can reveal who prevailed in a political battle (‘History is written by the victor’) and consequently narratives not told are as revealing of power relations as those that are (Pasupathi, McLean and Weeks, 2009). The power relations that privileged the dominant narrative at the same time suppressed accounts that might challenge it (Czarniawska and Sevon, 2011).

Foucault’s conceptualisation of power relations has been quoted in writing about political activity and projects, particularly by Critical researchers (Hodgson, 2002; Cicmil *et al.*, 2009). Foucault did not claim to write a comprehensive explanation of what power was and how it worked but rather challenged existing notions of power as a commodity (Hodgson, 2018). Foucault’s conceptualisation was that power is exercised in every relationship between individuals, and that power is thus universal. Foucault’s conceptualisation is value neutral; power is not good or bad, it just is. Power controls what individuals ‘know’ as well as what they do. Power is expressed not just in discourse but also in action.

Narratives are a specific kind of discourse which have a place in the enactment of these power relations. Buchanan and Dawson (2007, p. 673) argue that in situations of organisational change:

narratives shape meanings and can act as counters in the game of organisational power and politics

Mumby (1987) described narratives as products of power structures which work to enact and maintain these structures. This is accomplished by legitimising certain forms of organizational 'reality' and shutting down others, for example those which are not congruent with the dominant group's view of the organisation. Narrative creation and dissemination are thus political acts, and narrative is an ideological force. Managers have an interest in portraying their decisions as rational, which in many organisations means 'congruent with the rules'. These 'deep structure rules' are reproduced and legitimised in organizational narratives.

Mumby (2019) later argued that Foucault's conception of power is about the management of free will, and that in a neo-liberal society, individuals will be encouraged to behave entrepreneurially – within certain constraints. These constraints will encourage entrepreneurship that optimises the usefulness of these individuals to the political aims of the dominant group. Translating this into the IT project context, the discipline of project management has been identified as providing the constraints within which 'knowledge workers' can channel their energies towards achieving project goals (Hodgson, 2018). In the public sector context Grey³ suggests that entrepreneurialism exposes a paradox at the heart of New Public Management (NPM) (Lapsley, 2009); that NPM fosters an entrepreneurial spirit of risk-taking, which proliferates risks, which then need, especially in the context of public services, to be managed and mitigated.

³ Private correspondence, May 3 2020

In summary, narratives, produced and constrained by power relations, both shape and enact projects. While in consequence dominant narratives must portray a rational, linear approach to project management (Dawson and Buchanan, 2005) alternatives may reveal the political struggles taking place for control of meaning and direction of resources. Since a narrative consists primarily of the description of an event series and an explanation of the causal links between those events, every narrative is “theory-laden” (Dawson and Buchanan, 2005, p. 850) and this “embedded theory” (Buchanan and Dawson, 2007, p. 672) may be amenable to inductive analysis. Such an analysis will reveal the impact of power relations in the construction of the narrative.

3.8 What is the role of narratives in the thesis?

Narratives, as this literature review has explored, have been used to explain many phenomena related to projects: project artefacts such as plans and reports; the process of evaluation or audit; the process of change; the impacts of information technology; and the interplay of power relations that leads to dominance of certain narratives. Many different kinds of narratives can be associated with IT projects ranging from grand political and social narratives to micro-narratives associated with specific disciplines or technologies.

These narratives serve different purposes including identity formation and affirmation, individual and collective sensemaking, political justification and promulgation of a vision of the future. The narratives vary in form from traditional storytelling, with heroes, villains, and a worthwhile quest for a precious outcome, to more mundane narratives of personal endeavour and creativity. Narratives can incorporate the codified knowledge of project management (plans, business cases, risk registers, reports) and the informal language and spontaneity of corridor talk (anecdotes, rumours, war stories).

Project narratives are, however, not merely retrospective; they also predict future success and future benefits in order to attract support and funding (Dawson and Buchanan, 2005)

Narrative analysis is thus a valuable and appropriate lens through which to examine the success and failure of IT projects. The empirical material that the thesis draws on consists of review and audit reports, accounts of public hearings and transcripts of interviews carried out with project actors including politicians, project managers, project reviewers (evaluators) and project auditors. All this material can readily be construed as narrative accounts. It can be analysed for structure, content or context, and as discussed in Chapter 4 (Methods and Research Approach) I choose to combine each of these in my analysis of the research material.

The success or failure of projects is constructed through narratives (Vaara, 2002), including auditors or evaluators' narratives (Wilson and Howcroft, 2005). Project failure may constitute a narrative device to legitimise further managerial action, such as cancellation of the project (Brown and Jones, 1998; Law, 2000). Success and failure are not objective states, but terms within project narratives, that can be deployed as rhetorical devices as a result of power relations (Fincham, 2002). Alternative narratives of project success and failure are shaped by powerful groups (Cecez-Kecmanovic, Kautz and Abrahall, 2014), and power relations determine which alternative becomes dominant.

This thesis is itself a narrative, and subject to authorial bias. Certain matters and material have been included and others left out. Events have been interpreted and individuals characterised according to choices I made. Although the structure has been chosen to meet conventional academic requirements, the plotting reflects my personal journey as I attempt to shed

many years of engineering training and embrace the rigorous uncertainty of social science. Authorial power (in relation to the audience) is used to make certain arguments and legitimise the author's viewpoint. The resulting narrative, this thesis, aspires to plausibility (and some level of internal consistency) rather than objective truth.

In summary, narratives offer a powerful lens through which to understand project execution and evaluation. The narratives produced by project actors may explain the past, legitimise or criticise the present and predict the future. In studies of projects and project failure, narrative analysis can reveal the meaning that has been associated with events and the power relations that has enabled these interpretations to 'stick'. In this thesis the narratives of project managers, reviewers and auditors are examined in depth to generate insights into what is seen as a continuing and societally important challenge, the perceived failure of Government IT projects.

4. Methods, Research Approach, Data and Analysis

4.1 Introduction and structure

Working within an interpretive research paradigm, the research approach seeks to address the research question of the thesis:

What do the narratives of project managers, reviewers and auditors reveal about the ascription of success and failure to large IT Projects in UK Government?

The research utilised a unique site, Central Government in the UK, with access to experienced managers, reviewers and auditors of some of the largest and most complex IT projects undertaken in Europe. The core research data are the spoken and written words of these actors, collected from interviews, from inspection of published documents and from transcripts of parliamentary hearings relating to specific projects and to the system of review. I also analysed contemporary accounts in newspapers, research reports and trade journals, looking for quoted and anonymous sources whose accounts either corroborated or contradicted the published sources.

Within these data I identified a set of narratives that include accounts of specific projects, accounts of project management and reviewing technique, and descriptions of the system of oversight, review and assurance of these large projects. From these narratives I draw some insight into the review and audit activity, including how reviewers and auditors justify their ascription of success or failure to a project. I also examine the interplay between the narratives of the actors involved and broader narratives on how major projects 'ought' to be managed and executed.

There are strong advantages in using narrative analysis to address this research question. Narratives are by nature evaluative and thus surface the interpretations that narrators make of events. The narrative form has close affinities with the ‘temporary organization’ of the project and many narratives, formal and informal, can be identified and analysed in this arena. In addition the imprint of power relations can be found in the narratives, and the narratives themselves are instruments in enacting power relations. While there are advantages there are also constraints: other forms of discourse that cannot be shaped into the narrative form may not be as amenable to analysis, for example ‘narrative fragments’ (Gabriel, 2004b) where causality appears to be absent. These fragments are used in the analysis where they support (or contradict) wider themes detected within the narratives themselves.

This chapter describes the research site, the research approach adopted, the methods and techniques used, the nature of the data collected and the analysis approach including the techniques used. It finishes with some remarks on reflexivity and a summary of why the approach was taken, stating what advantages and constraints this implies for the research.

4.2 Research Site

The primary research site is UK Central Government, which consisted (at the time of the study) of nineteen Ministerial Departments of State and twenty non-Ministerial Departments, together with their Agencies and Arms-Length Bodies. All these entities were classified as being part of ‘Central Government’ by the Office of National Statistics (ONS, 2020). The objects of study are the large IT projects that were undertaken by these entities, and the system of review and audit that examined these projects and pronounced on how well

they had used public money to achieve their published objectives, and, by extension, whether they had succeeded or failed.

The system of project review was managed by the UK Government's Major Projects Authority (MPA, since 2016 part of the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA)). At the time that the bulk of the data was gathered (2014-15) this body was part of the Efficiency and Reform Group within the Cabinet Office and had responsibility for monitoring the Government's portfolio of Major Projects. These ~200 projects spanned almost all Government Departments and a range of different disciplines, including the development of IT systems and the design and construction of new infrastructure. The MPA was founded in 2011, taking on some of the personnel and functions of the Office of Government Commerce (OGC, part of HM Treasury). The OGC's work to regulate and improve the performance of major projects had started as a response to previous high-profile failures of Government IT projects (POST, 2003) and subsequent criticism by the National Audit Office (NAO, 2004, 2010) and the Public Accounts Committee (PAC, 2004). Engagement with these bodies offered a direct opportunity to address the research question, as they worked with the largest and most critical IT projects in Government and their formal task was to ascribe success and failure to these projects.

The MPA spent £6 million in 2014/15 reviewing and reporting on projects. While it reportedly had stronger powers than its predecessor, the OGC, it had less money and hence its published strategy (MPA, 2013a) was to focus its resources on the projects of highest cost and risk. Its activities were intended to complement assurance work done by spending departments (such as the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)), which had direct accountability

for the projects. MPA project review reports informed HM Treasury's decisions on project funding, and adverse reports could lead to project funding being stopped or significantly reduced. As examples, following critical MPA reports the NHS National Programme for IT was considerably reduced in scope (PAC, 2013a), and the first Carbon Capture and Storage scheme (NAO, 2012) was cancelled.

The MPA conducted 'Gateway' Reviews at each of several stages in the lifecycle of a project, to give assurance that projects were well-run and would deliver the promised benefits. Each 'gate' marked a change in the nature of work undertaken on the project, such as moving from Design to Build. A gate was also a decision point for the commitment of further expenditure. The MPA review looked at the work conducted to date and the plan for the next stage of the lifecycle. The reviews were conducted by small teams of between 3 and 7 experts who were either civil servants with relevant experience or external consultants. The reviewers interviewed project managers, project members and other stakeholders, examined documents and where available inspected part-built or complete assets. The review team then produced a report with recommendations and a Delivery Confidence Assessment, using a Red-Amber-Green (RAG) rating scale. The RAG rating described the review team's confidence in the ability of the project to deliver benefits as promised. This rating ranged from Green (no problems) to Red (in serious trouble) as shown below in Table 4.1.

TABLE 4.1 – MPA RATINGS (SOURCE MPA ANNUAL REPORT 2013)

Rating	Description
Green	Successful delivery of the project to time, cost and quality appears highly likely and there are no major outstanding issues that at this stage appear to threaten delivery significantly.
Green/Amber	Successful delivery appears probable; however, constant attention will be needed to ensure risks do not materialise into major issues threatening delivery.
Amber	Successful delivery appears feasible but significant issues already exist, requiring management attention. These appear resolvable at this stage and, if addressed promptly, should not present a cost/schedule overrun.
Amber/Red	Successful delivery of the project is in doubt, with major risks or issues apparent in a number of key areas. Urgent action is needed to ensure these are addressed, and whether resolution is feasible.
Red	Successful delivery of the project appears to be unachievable. There are major issues on project definition, schedule, budget, quality and/or benefits delivery, which at this stage do not appear to be manageable or resolvable. The project may need re-scoping and/or its overall viability reassessed.

In 2012-13, 191 projects were reviewed as part of the Major Projects Portfolio. Of these, 8 projects received a Red rating, and a further 23 were rated Amber/Red. The ratings of 11 projects were not disclosed for security reasons.

MPA reports that cast doubt on the viability of high-cost, high-criticality projects were discussed by a board of senior officials, jointly chaired by HM Treasury and the Cabinet Office (HM Treasury, 2016). This board, the Major Projects Review Group (MPRG) also included non-executive members from outside Government. The board could make recommendations to Ministers that the project either proceeded (with or without conditions) or was halted.

Each project in the Major Projects Portfolio had a formal management structure and was governed by a project board, chaired by a senior sponsor or 'Senior Responsible Owner' (SRO). The SRO could be called in front of a Parliamentary Select Committee to account for the expenditure on the project, and ultimately to explain its success or failure. SROs often had another demanding full-time job, as will be discussed in the case studies. The project was usually managed on a day-to-day basis by a full-time project manager, supported by a management team including a Project Management Office (PMO). This team would undertake planning, assemble reports, run risk assessment and mitigation and perform other project management tasks such as budgeting and staffing.

Other bodies are relevant to this study, as they formed part of the system by which Parliament scrutinised these large projects. The National Audit Office (NAO) is and was the supreme audit institution of the UK. It is a statutory body under the management of the Comptroller and Auditor General, who is an official of Parliament and thus independent of Government. In 2015-16, the time of the study, the NAO had 820 employees and an annual budget of

£65.1m (NAO, 2016a). The NAO was responsible for auditing central government departments, government agencies and non-departmental public bodies. The NAO also carried out value for money (VFM) studies into certain aspects of how policy is implemented, which included looking at major projects. The NAO carried out between 50 and 60 VFM studies each year, often at the request of Parliamentary Select Committees.

The system of Parliamentary Select Committees has been in place since Tudor times, but the current arrangements for Select Committees of the House of Commons date from 1979. Most Government Departments were scrutinised by a dedicated Select Committee of backbench MPs, and the committees relevant to this thesis include the Work and Pensions Select Committee (WPSC) and the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee (EFRASC). One of the longest established Select Committees was the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), which has been in place since the 1860s. This committee looked at public expenditure as a whole and could address the work of any Department. Its remit was not to examine policy, but to examine how effectively public funds had been used in the delivery of that policy. In executing this task, it had a synergistic partnership with the NAO, sometimes called the “Public Audit Circle” and shown below in Table 4.2

TABLE 4.2 – PUBLIC AUDIT CIRCLE

Step	Lead Body	Action
1	PAC	Requests NAO to undertake a Value for Money study
2	NAO	Publishes report on Value for Money study
3	PAC	Calls for further written evidence
4	PAC	Takes oral evidence in public hearing

5	PAC	Publishes own report and makes recommendations for change
6	Government	Replies to recommendations in a Treasury Minute
7	PAC/NAO	Follows up

In summary, the research site is a project ‘ecosystem’ embracing the projects themselves together with their sponsoring bodies, the main reviewing body (the MPA) and the auditing bodies (NAO and Select Committees). These together constituted a system of project execution and evaluation from which narratives of project success and failure emerged, were contested and either achieved hegemony or were rejected.

4.3 Agile methods of Information Systems development

This thesis examines major IT projects that were reviewed by the MPA, all of which required significant amounts of software to be developed. At the time of the study, a number of Government Departments were introducing ‘user-centric’ iterative and incremental methods of software development, termed ‘Agile’ methods. Agile methods were becoming increasingly important in Government IT projects during the period studied, including in the two case study projects of Chapters 6 and 7. This section discusses these methods, explaining how researchers have described them, how they contrast with predecessor methods, criticisms of their use and the potential impact on IT projects.

Agile projects have a different lifecycle to traditional development methods. They rely on continuous collection of requirements, often through showing users early prototypes of the finished system and asking for critique. This places a special emphasis on the user, who represents a primary source of

knowledge (and legitimacy) and who must be able to devote considerable time over a long period to the development activity. Agile projects are light on planning, organizing activity in short bursts which add incrementally to a body of working software. The working style involves workshopping problems and solutions rather than the traditional top-down, paper-based engineering approach to software design.

Agile development methods (as framed in the 'Agile Manifesto' (Beck *et al.*, 2001)) have their roots in dissatisfaction with the serial 'waterfall' method of development, with its traditional lifecycle of design, build, test, deploy (Royce, 1970). The main challenge in 'waterfall' methods that Agile proponents wanted to address was the temporal and organizational distance between 'real' users and the processes of development. User requirements under 'waterfall' might be captured years before systems were put into use, opening possibilities for error and outdatedness. Cohn, Sim and Dourish (2010) frame Agile as a discourse that establishes an ontology, legitimises certain practices and authorises some voices. To these authors, the Agile discourse establishes a relationship between the producer and the artefact; so, the product must be 'correct' because of the process followed and the direct involvement of end users. Some describe Agile as "managed sensemaking" (Ehlers, 2011, p. i) and although the project management process is defined (by the particular flavour of Agile being followed) participants must use intuition and improvisation to invent practice and actually develop software, solving engineering problems as they go (Tanner and Wallace, 2012).

The legitimacy of the Agile method has been contested. As user involvement is so critical to the progress of a project using Agile methods, the historical challenges of identifying the 'right' or 'real' users and retaining their attention

assume importance (Ivory and Alderman, 2009). Agile, however, offers a fresh approach in the already crowded field of IT development methods. It is suggested that Agile proponents have an evangelical belief (Hoda *et al.*, 2010) in the “new paradigm” (Rajlich, 2006, p. 69) and are deliberately provocative and revolutionary in their promotion of the method, denigrating the old, claiming moral high ground by representing the user and excluding and replacing ‘legacy’ methods where they can. There is also a new priestly class, the ‘Agile evangelist’ with a job title such as ‘scrum master’ or ‘sprint planner’, although two thirds of Agile projects still have an explicit role for the project manager (Shastri, Hoda and Amor, 2016). Agile critics say that the method pays insufficient attention to architectural considerations leading to problems later (when, for instance, it is necessary to scale up the system) and that Agile methods are only appropriate for small teams (Dybå and Dingsøy, 2008). The introduction of Agile methods to a project opens fresh opportunities for political behaviour, conflict and dissension, as will be discussed later within the case studies of the thesis.

4.4 Research Approach

As stated in Chapter 1, I chose to write the thesis within a broadly interpretive ‘sociological paradigm’ (Burrell and Morgan, 1979), which views the objects that I write about; projects, organizations, plans, reports, committees; as social constructions. This paradigm implies a relativist ontological stance and an inter-subjectivist, interpretive epistemology in the sense described by Hay (2017). This suggests that the phenomena that I write about have ‘social reality’ because an inter-subjective consensus exists that includes me, the reader, the people that I interviewed and many if not all of the people with whom they work. The thesis thus seeks to examine the social realities described by the actors involved in the research site. Some of the social

systems that they work within, review or audit are labelled ‘projects’ and have features in common with other similar systems. I view these social systems as being produced and enacted every day by the roles, rituals and rules (Powell and DiMaggio, 1992) of what Willmott (2010) calls ‘institutional work’. The actors enact their rituals and reconstruct their roles continuously, and by doing this reproduce the rules and isomorphic forces that constrain their behaviour and that of others around them.

The research approach adopted seeks to extract insights regarding these ‘social realities’ from a special class of texts – narratives – produced by project actors in Government using a mix of qualitative analysis methods. I wish to shed some light on how these project actors ascribe success or failure to large IT projects. This section justifies the selection of this research approach. I discuss here two groups of issues: the first of which concerns the sourcing and construction of ‘narratives’ – texts which represented the voices of the project actors. The second group of issues concern analysis, and what models of interpretation were available to extract the meanings that would address the research question.

4.4.1 Finding and building narratives of project actors

I initially considered two methods; semi-structured interviews with individuals and workshops with several actors present, run as a focus group. I ran a trial of the group method and, although it generated some interesting interchanges, I eventually abandoned this idea because of the difficulty in obtaining informed consent and, as a sole researcher, accurately recording the content.

I subsequently conducted a number of interviews with project actors as described in section 4.6.1, either individually or in pairs. All of the interview transcripts contained sections of text which addressed a single topic area,

either a project or some observations on an area of practice. These sections fitted Czarniawska's (1998) definition of 'narrative', with a description of a prior state, a sequence of events and a subsequent state with some ascription of causality. The interview sections could clearly be compared with each other to detect key differences in the way that events were described or causality attributed. In looking at the context of the events I examined official, published reports which were the main output of the system of review and audit. These described the projects that I was studying and assessed their state of 'health'. Some of the actors that I interviewed had contributed to these reports, reportedly through a process that restricted what they could or could not say. Other actors that I had not been able to interview had made witness statements in public hearings about the projects. All these sources offered opportunity for triangulation – not in a search for some kind of consensus 'truth' about "the way it really happened" (Dawson and Buchanan, 2005, p. 861) but a chance to explore differences of expression and interpretation. These reports also were important narratives of the projects, and I started analysing NAO reports, MPA Project Assessment Review (PAR) reports, and PAC and other Select Committee evidence hearings and reports as part of my core source material.

These reports and the narratives drawn from interview material each tell only part of the story and rely on a common understanding of the background context. To give a fuller picture in an understandable way I used a technique adopted by other researchers when reporting case studies. This technique is to 'synthesise' a narrative, using some declared rules, and produce a simplified, focused account of the project that reflects the source material. The use of synthesised narratives has been critiqued by Buchanan and Dawson (2007) as clearly subject to authorial bias (by the researcher) and with a tendency to

reflect the dominant managerial narrative of the project's execution rather than alternatives. Since these challenges must be acknowledged (and embraced) within the research approach, Buchanan and Dawson refer to an earlier framework proposed by Deetz (Deetz, 1996, p. 198) that divides this kind of research writing into four broad discursive groups, depending where they stand on examining either consensus or dissensus between voices, and whether they are concerned with 'elite', top-down, a priori practices or 'bottom-up' emergent practices. Deetz's framework is summarised in Figure 4.1 below.

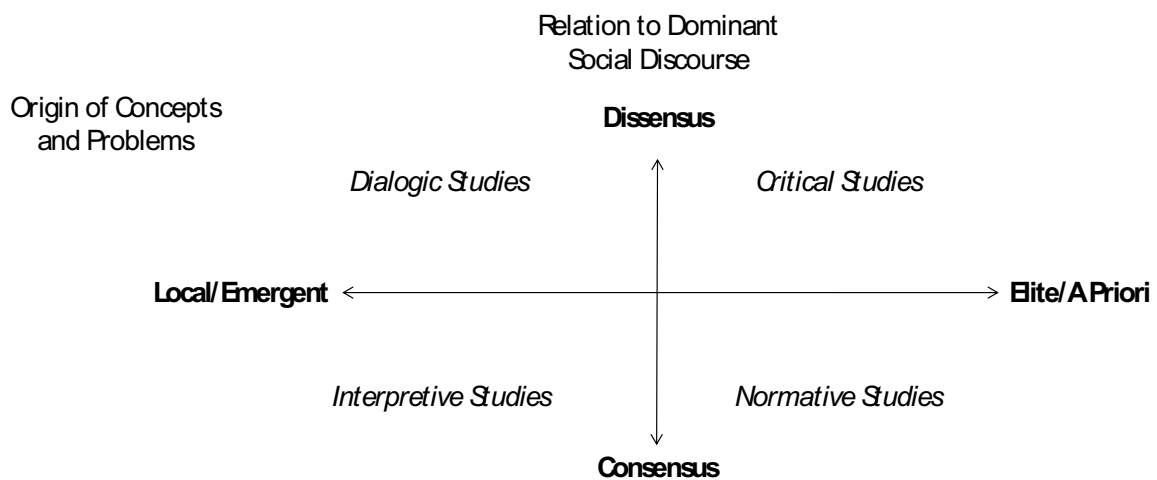


Figure 4.1 – Alternative research discourses (Deetz, 1996, p. 198)

While Deetz identifies these alternatives as contrasting extremes (and thus to some extent 'caricatures'), the structure provides guidance on how to bring consistency to a research narrative. In Deetz's terms, according to Buchanan and Dawson, my research narrative is *Critical*, formulated to foreground the political struggles that have privileged some voices in the accounts of these projects while suppressing others. I present alternative, synthesised narratives to highlight points of difference (*dissensus*) in the accounts of actors, for example on their attribution of cause for project success or failure. The

synthesised narratives also show the impact on local initiatives of wider *elite* narratives regarding how these projects should be executed. The analysis uses interpretive techniques, as do many Critical researchers, and describes emergent practice as revealed in the narratives of the practitioners that I interviewed; however, I am not presenting a purely *interpretive* study in the terms discussed by Deetz, as my primary research objective is not to document this research site in some ethnographic fashion. I am interested in the nature of the structures and relationships within which my project actors worked, but primarily so I can understand the characteristics of the site within which dissensus occurred and the related political struggles took place. In the next subsection I discuss how my chosen analytical techniques helped to isolate these struggles and to identify features of the system of power relations within which they occur.

4.4.2 Analysing the narratives of project actors for power effects

Following Squire (2008) I divide narrative analytical methods into those that examine structure and syntax, those that examine content and those that examine context. These different perspectives on narratives were discussed earlier in section 3.3. In analysing the narrative material, I am seeking to perform three tasks. The first is to delineate the narrative, and isolate text which is 'part of' the narrative from other text that is not, or is part of a different narrative. I also want to attribute some form of functional intent to different parts of the text, for example to show which parts are descriptive and which parts evaluative. Given that these actions are a matter of interpretation, I wish to demonstrate that I have been consistent in applying this interpretation to the material. I use Labov's (1972) methods of *structural* analysis to guide both extraction of narrative from source texts and synthesis

of new summary narratives. These methods and their use are described in more detail in subsection 4.5.1 below.

The second task is to examine the content, and compare and contrast how different narratives address similar topics; for example the role of individuals and groups in a project and the process of project evaluation. Here also the segmentation proposed by Labov proved helpful. The synthesised narratives that are described in the thesis follow Labov's structure and present the narratives in a series of functionally-defined elements. By comparing and contrasting the content of narratives at a narrative element level, I obtain a finer grained view of differences and similarities. The narrative presentation is also consistent with the data extraction method used on interview transcripts. This part of the analysis is described in more detail in section 4.7.6.

The third task is perhaps the most challenging, which is to infer something about the system of power relations from the narratives. This is a *contextual* analysis in Squire's terms, as the narrative is formed within and helps constitute a system of power relations that defines and pervades the context. I initially attempted to use an analysis method proposed by Dailey and Browning (2014) for this task, where I looked at short segments of narrative and tried to identify whether they performed one of three functions:

- Power/Resistance – does the narrative reinforce an existing power relationship or seek to undermine it?
- Differentiation/Integration – does the narrative construct a distinct identity (for an individual or group) or seek to establish a common identity?
- Stability/Change – does the narrative reinforce the status quo or seek to undermine it?

I found this form of analysis gave me some new insights but these were primarily about the individual being interviewed and their personal role within the system. I found it more challenging to draw conclusions about the nature of the system within which the individual interviewees were working. After looking at a number of published papers and theses that used narrative analysis, I read Souto-Manning's (2014) discussion of the relationship between discourse analytic techniques and narratives. She asserts that the macro-analytical techniques of CDA (Fairclough, 2013; Teun van Dijk, 2015; Wodak and Meyer, 2015) can be applied to the micro-contexts of narrative texts, and that the impact of wider power relations can thus be identified within these texts. Philips and Hardy (2002, p. 25) say that Critical Discourse Analysis should identify "the role of discursive activity in constituting and sustaining unequal power relations", and mention the use of discourse analysis in analysing narrative material. Souto-Manning's research subjects gave accounts of personal experience, which were thus more 'micro' than some of the organizational narratives that are the subject of the thesis, but nonetheless she sought to identify the impact of prevalent metanarratives within these personal narratives. Separately, Hickson (2016) demonstrates how Critical analysis can be used on narrative material as a reflective, deconstructive approach to identify how power influences a particular situation. In order to describe the impact of these power relations on the narrative material studied, I used some analysis techniques from Fairclough's (2013) conceptualisation of CDA as described in section 4.5.2 below.

4.5 Analysis Methods and techniques

This section discusses the methods and techniques used in data analysis, starting with a description of how I used Labov's (1972) structural analysis and

continuing by setting out specific techniques from Fairclough’s (2013) CDA used to analyse power relations evident within the narrative material.

4.5.1 Structural Analysis of accounts of personal experience

Labov offers a method for qualitative analysis of narrative texts that attributes a function to certain clauses (Johnstone, 2016). The structural elements of a narrative as described by Labov (1972) are shown in Table 4.3 below.

TABLE 4.3 - STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS OF A NARRATIVE (FROM LABOV (1972, P. 364))

#	Element Name	Purpose
1	Abstract	An introduction that encapsulates the complete narrative
2	Orientation	Setting place, character, location and situation
3	Complicating Action	The sequence of events, with some crisis or precipitating event
4	Evaluation	A commentary by the narrator on the meaning or significance of the narrative
5	Result, or resolution	The outcome of the narrative
6	Coda	A reflection by the narrator that brings the narrative into the present day

Labov’s definition of these structural ‘elements’ implies that the narrator has used each section of text for a functional purpose, for example to set the scene, or to describe the event that perturbs the initial state; however this

structural analysis has been critiqued as being normative, culturally specific and acontextual.

Labov's approach has been said to be normative and too limiting (Bruner, 1997; Langellier, 1999), as it excludes many less structured texts that might reasonably be called narratives. These texts include antenarratives (Boje *et al.*, 2004), and story fragments (Gabriel, 1998; Whittle, Mueller and Mangan, 2009). This criticism suggests that Labov is asserting that only texts structured according to his model meet the definition of narratives. In fact Labov considered that his scheme was primarily appropriate for orally related narratives of personal experience (Labov and Waletzky, 1967, p. 12), and he recommended other forms of analysis for other kinds of text (Labov, 1997). Georgeakopolou (2006) asserts that the research interview, with an attentive listener and (usually) a single narrator, can be analysed successfully using Labov's framework. Labov (1997) confirms that text that records a dispute with multiple participants and many interruptions (for example, transcripts of oral evidence hearings of Select Committees) may not display the kind of ordered progression implied by his (1972) framework.

Riessman (1993) argues that Labov's approach demands that Western norms of sequential, logical ordering are applied to accounts before they can be considered narratives, thus excluding other accounts that may be structured according to a different paradigm. In addition, Emerson and Frosh (2004) say that a purely structural analysis removes contextual information drawn from the situation in which the narrating occurred – for example in a research interview, or a formal committee hearing.

Given these criticisms, why should an organizational researcher make use of Labov's (1972) model? My argument is that my core data sources were stories

of personal experience, collected in interviews with subjects who might be expected to understand and follow ‘Western’ norms. The other material that I have used describes the context in which these stories were told in some detail. With these mitigations I defend my use of a well-established analytical model which has been extensively explored in the literature (Johnstone, 2016). Labov’s model helps me delineate and then parse the interview data as a first stage in extracting meaning.

A structural analysis analyses the syntax of the accounts, breaking the narrative into elements that have specific purpose and comparing the structure with similar and archetypal narratives. Labov’s structure, helpfully for my analysis, concentrates on identifying the temporal flow of the events covered by the narrative, and, importantly in an examination of failure, an evaluation of why, according to the narrative, these events happened. In order to dig deeper into this evaluation, and try and understand why these events were thus explained in the narrative, I chose to use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the language used in the narrative elements, as described below.

4.5.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

It is commonly asserted that all narratives have a political function (Mumby, 1987; Langellier, 1999) but what kind of function is it and how is it accomplished? To understand the political purpose of the examined narratives, a finer-grained view is needed – and I chose to gain this view by using discourse analytical techniques described by Fairclough (2013). As discussed earlier, a similar approach has been taken to the analysis of narrative material by Souto-Manning (2014), an approach she describes as “critical narrative analysis”. Using the techniques described below I identified certain

texts within the narratives that, in my interpretation, demonstrated the impact of power relations in the formation of the narratives and the impact of the narratives in the subsequent exercise of power relations.

My justification for using a discourse-analytic technique on narrative material is that narrative is a discursive practise involving the dissemination of texts. CDA describes techniques for the analysis of similar textual material. CDA has its origins in work done by the ‘Lancaster’ school of linguists led by Fairclough (1989), although antecedents can be seen in ‘critical linguistics’ (Fowler *et al.*, 1979) and other writing. Prominent authors in this school include Ruth Wodak (Wodak and Meyer, 2015) and Teun Van Dijk (2015). CDA claims to be a broad approach to discourse analysis rather than a coherent method. It seeks to be critical in the sense of critiquing the ‘taken for grantedness’ of certain discourses; for example much of Fairclough’s work critiques neo-liberalism and its offspring New Public Management, which he says is an example of an ‘ideology’ (defined as “meaning in the service of power” (Thompson, 1990)). The language which defines and operationalises an ideology is the product of power relations, and contains representations which promote or sustain inequalities of power (Fairclough, 2013, p. 8). One of the linguistic formations that promotes, or in some cases opposes such ideologies is the narrative (Veenswijk and Berendse, 2008). It thus seems to me appropriate to use an analysis technique intended for use with ideologically-influenced text on the narratives that I collected for the study, which play a part in ‘ideological’ and other struggles. Fairclough (2013, p. 19) writes about analysing discourses to examine “how they narrate past and present events and actions”, which is precisely what this thesis sets out to do.

Fairclough (1985) critiques purely structural approaches to analysis, including that of Labov, as being 'descriptive' and lacking explanatory power. While a structural analysis might rationalise *how* a piece of language performed a particular function within a text, it gives little indication of *why*. For Fairclough, an explanation can come from understanding of the underlying system of power relations. To help build this explanation, Fairclough (2013, p. 19) identifies four areas of enquiry for the researcher, regarding the *emergence* of certain discourses, how these discourses achieve *hegemony* through struggle and contestation, the *recontextualization* performed by actors to adapt external discourses to their situation and finally the *operationalisation* that enacts these discourses within the context of study. The sections below describe how I performed this analysis on narrative material.

Emergence

Once the narratives were identified, I examined how and why they came into being within this context. What were the precursors of this narrative? Noting the link to *recontextualization*, if a narrative has been introduced into this context, how, why and who by? As an example, the concept of 'gated reviews' of projects as used by the MPA was adopted by NASA in the 1950s (Stratton, 2003), developed by the Oil and Gas industries for large capital developments in the 1980s (Sabri *et al.*, 2015) and introduced to UK Government in 2002 by the Office of Government Commerce (OGC) in response to a series of failed IT projects in the late 1990s, including the computerisation of the Passport Office.

Hegemony

Fairclough is concerned with challenging the 'taken for grantedness' of certain discourses. I am interested in the processes of struggle by which some narratives achieve hegemony, i.e. general, unquestioned acceptance within my

field of study. CDA describes hegemony in terms defined by Gramsci (Donoghue, 2018) whereby a controlling elite imposes its cultural assumptions on others. Such hegemony can only be achieved by contestation between discourses resulting in the ultimate domination of one. In the context of projects, the presence of conflicting accounts is a common occurrence (Buchanan and Dawson, 2007). Examination of how one account becomes dominant and how others are suppressed reveals something about the power relations between the groups promoting and promulgating certain narratives. Multiple overlapping and contradictory narratives were identified in connection with both the large projects that were studied in depth. In analysis I identify where certain narratives came into conflict with others and how they related to, reflected and were implicated in struggles between individuals and groups. This includes understanding how dominance is achieved for certain narratives and lost for others. As Dawson (2003, p. 38) says:

...competing stories on change reflect the power relationships between certain individuals and groups, and the political process by which certain 'voices' get heard and others remain hidden and/or are silenced.

Recontextualisation

In the analysis I identify some overarching narratives that had impact on the specific environment that I was analysing. I examine how these had been adapted for the context and what these adaptations revealed about power relations, both by the nature of the adaptations and who, purportedly, was making them. Hickson (2016) calls for an understanding of the 'colonialising' assumptions that condition the contents of a narrative. These assumptions may already be coded in a metanarrative (or what Lyotard (1984, p. xiii) would call a "grand narrative"). One metanarrative underlying many of the

discussions on audit in this study is that of New Public Management (Hood, 1991). The assumptions underlying this narrative have been challenged by many authors (Lapsley, 2009; De Vries and Nemec, 2013). It is of interest to examine how these metanarratives are reflected in local contexts, and also how narratives cross from domain to domain. As an example the project management narrative started as call for engineering discipline and now covers many other aspects of organizational life (Packendorff and Lindgren, 2014). In the context of this study, the dominant narrative of 'professional' project management overlays the language of the technologists, politicians and generalist civil servants who are the principal actors in the thesis.

Operationalisation

At some point the imagined futures (Rhodes, Pullen and Clegg, 2010) expressed in narratives become actual change initiatives and thus enacted (Fairclough, 2013). For the purpose of the thesis, the effects of operationalisation are demonstrated in the actions taken by the actors and in their interactions with other actors. These changes may be subject to constraints not apparent in the original narratives of change but flowing from other stipulations regarding how that change should be enacted (for example legislation, competing narratives or technological 'affordances').

Summary

In summary, I use some of Fairclough's (2013) techniques to reveal aspects of the system of power relations underpinning the context in which the narratives were produced; in this case the system of project enactment, review and audit. Identifying *how* a new narrative came into currency (*emergence*) reveals power being enacted. That narrative may contain descriptions of power being exercised (to achieve *hegemony* for a narrative). Seeing how a pre-existing

narrative has been *recontextualised* into the area being studied allows comparison with the use of that narrative in other areas. Finally *operationalisation* of a narrative demonstrates the strength and reach of its proponents. Observed (or reported) behaviours may reveal more about power relations than claimed intent.

4.6 Research data

The data for the study includes interview transcripts, reports written by the MPA, the National Audit Office (NAO) and parliamentary select committees, transcripts of hearings held by those committees and other documents.

4.6.1 Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 21 individuals connected with this area. A list of interviewees is included as Appendix A. Interviewees included politicians with an interest in projects and project management, MPA managers, project reviewers, project managers of reviewed projects and NAO auditors who reviewed these and other projects. Interviews took place between 2013 and 2017 and were held in private, either at my workplace (HM Treasury Building) or at the interviewee's workplace. Two interviews were 'joint' interviews where two interviewees participated. Each interview lasted between 30 and 70 minutes.

I secured permission to carry out the research from the head of the MPA, from my immediate superior and from the Permanent Secretary of the Cabinet Office. I wrote to each interviewee explaining the nature of the research and clarifying that it was completely separate from my day-to-day work in Government. Participation in interviews was entirely voluntary. Many of the participants were used to being interviewed 'on the record', but I wanted to have a freer conversation than this would permit and thus promised

anonymity in any material used (e.g. for papers or in the thesis). This is the main ethical issue in the research as some relationship or reputational damage might be suffered by interviewees if they were directly associated with quoted remarks.

Individuals signed a consent form acknowledging that they had read the information sheet and understood these arrangements, which were approved by the ethics committee of the College. The college ethics form is attached as Appendix B and the consent form as Appendix C.

The interviewees were chosen to give a cross section of respondents with different experiences, so that the interview material contained accounts from project managers, reviewers, auditors and politicians. The interviewees were in senior positions, mostly current or former civil servants, predominantly male (which reflects the demographic of senior civil servants involved in IT projects) and mostly from a white British background. Since I am from the same demographic (being a white, male, senior civil servant) I might have expected this group to reflect many of my own views on the topic of IT project failure, though in fact I was surprised at the diversity of views expressed. As an example, I thought that all this group would hold normative views on cause and effect; whereas some were more relativist in the way they described, for example, the possibility of divergent views on project status. Interviewees were selected in part using 'snowball' techniques ("Who else should I talk to about this topic? Who would you recommend?") and in part through personal networking, as I was acquainted with them in other work contexts and they were interested in the topic and kind enough to give their time. Some interviewees were invited but declined to participate or could not schedule a meeting. The sample is thus at least in part a convenience sample, though the

interviews took place over a period of nearly four years. It is challenging to secure access to this particular group, and one factor that may have helped me was that because of our prior acquaintance the interviewees appeared happy to discuss the topics in what I interpreted as an open manner. If I had been a completely external researcher (for example a full-time academic) I consider it unlikely that I would have gained that level of access, or had some of the conversations that resulted. The negative side of this access is that clearly, I could be the recipient of some impression management by the interviewee.

This is a relatively small group, but it should be stressed that I was not seeking statistical validity for the views expressed by participants. I selected the participants because I thought they had something interesting to say on the topic studied, whether from their depth and breadth of experience or their unique perspective on the audit and review system. The views expressed in their personal narratives were complemented by other voices in written material, such as review and audit reports and the transcripts of Parliamentary hearings (see section 4.6.2 below). All of the interviewees had interesting things to say, and I am grateful to all for their time and insights. The quotations I have selected are not spread evenly across all interviewees but consciously concentrate on text segments that ‘move the story along’; however, all the interviews were analysed and contributed to the findings. The narrative that I have chosen to write in the thesis deliberately concentrates on just a small part of the subject matter; two ‘case study’ projects out of the twenty mentioned and some reflections about the lived experience of managing, reviewing and auditing projects. Some interviewees were directly involved in the case study projects, while others observed them from a distance. The research thus has commonality with many other qualitative studies, allowing in-depth inspection of a concentrated and rich set of sources with the

acknowledged limitation that the views found in these sources may not have been shared by a wider population.

I prepared an interview guide with suggested topics for discussion, as shown in Appendix D. The interviews were conducted as a dialogue on the general topic of failure in Government IT projects. While some of these interview questions might be criticised as ‘leading the witness’, in practice most of the interviews did not follow this structure closely. After some early exchanges during which interviewees typically explained their experience and thus qualified their right to speak as experts, almost all the interviewees drew from that experience to explain why they thought that it was extraordinarily difficult to manage, review or audit a large IT project in Government and why so many such projects ran into trouble.

Several of the interviewees had been involved in one of two large IT projects; Universal Credit, the introduction of a new benefit by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and CAP-D, the delivery of a new system of farm subsidies under the Common Agricultural Policy of the EU by the Rural Payments Agency, an Arms-Length Body of the Department for the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). Both projects involved the development of significant new IT systems. Both also involved cross-government cooperation and as will be shown later in the thesis, some controversy and conflict. I thus chose to treat these projects as case studies as described in Chapter 6 and 7. UC was a very large ‘mega-project’ involving thousands of people, and consequently several of my interviewees had played a direct role. CAP-D was still large in Government terms (involving hundreds of project members) and had been the subject of several Select Committee

hearings. I used this rich material complemented by the views of four interviewees to build detailed narratives of this contentious project.

Interview data was appropriate for answering the research question as the process invited storytelling by the respondents, and they used case study examples and vignettes to illustrate viewpoints, opinions and explanations. As was expected, descriptions of events were often simplified to help illustrate the point at issue. Sometimes this simplification assumed that the interviewer had some familiarity with personalities or knowledge of public events.

All interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed personally by me using *Express Scribe* transcription software.

4.6.2 Documentation

I also accessed many documentary sources, as listed in Appendix E. All these documents were published, although some were not originally intended for publication. I started gathering these documents to extract general background information that helped me understand the context in which projects were executed, reviewed or audited. Many of these documents, however, contain narratives relevant to the area of study, and often these narratives contrast strongly with the narratives present within interview data. After starting the analysis of interview data, I decided that the narratives contained in some of these 'background' documents were valuable source material in their own right.

This summary of documentation examined concentrates on five groups of documents: MPA Project Assessment Reviews, NAO Reports, transcripts of Parliamentary Select Committee hearings (and the subsequent reports), web material (such as blog postings) and contemporary newspaper reports.

MPA Reports

At the end of each review, and typically before leaving the review site, the MPA review team produced a confidential Project Assessment Review (PAR) report for the SRO. At the time of data gathering, a very small number of these reports had been released following successful requests under the Freedom of Information Act. Uniquely, a motion in the House of Commons in 2017 led to the release of a group of MPA project review reports on one large project, Universal Credit, to a Select Committee (WPSC, 2018). The reports themselves were subsequently made available in the House of Commons Library.

The released MPA reports vary in size between 13 and 34 pages. They contain an executive summary, giving the principal observations of the review team and a Delivery Confidence Assessment (see table 4.2). These observations are then expanded in subsequent sections which justify the recommendations made to the SRO about the project. The report ends with a response from the SRO. The WPSC described the language used as ‘technocratic’ (WPSC, 2018) as the reports are framed in the specialist language of project management.

NAO VFM Reports

‘Value for Money’ NAO reports (Roberts and Pollitt, 1994) on selected projects were analysed. These reports were in some cases commissioned by Select Committees. The reports studied for the thesis were about 50 pages long, and were usually written by a team of three or four auditors over about six months. The NAO produced between 50 and 60 such reports each year. The VFM reports were generally presented as ‘non-judgemental’, in that they concentrated on presenting the facts and figures of project performance as reflected in the documents examined and interviews with project members. They did not typically seek to attribute cause or apportion blame for failures

(Dunleavy *et al.*, 2009). The quoted aim of these NAO reports was to establish an uncontested ‘fact base’ for subsequent Select Committee inquiries.

Select Committee transcripts and reports

Select Committees regularly examine the system of project execution and review. Departmental Select Committees such as the Work and Pensions Select Committee (WPSC) and the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee (EFRASC) conduct inquiries into projects that were implementing policy initiatives in their areas. In addition, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) also examine many of the same projects, and for example commented on the effectiveness of the MPA as a project review body. Select Committees hold set-piece oral hearings to which they summon senior civil servants and Ministers. The transcripts of these oral hearings provided a rich source of quotations for the analysis. The Select Committees are political bodies and did not appear to hold back from expressing strong opinions, both during oral hearings and in the subsequently published reports. These texts thus form the basis for the ‘official’ narrative of the projects studied.

Other Documents

Other documents were used as primary sources for the research including the annual reports of the MPA and NAO, relevant newspaper reports, Hansard, reports written by think-tanks, blogposts, websites and speeches by politicians and senior civil servants.

4.7 Data Analysis

The methodology of narrative analysis that is used in the research draws on Boje (1991), Czarniawska (1997) and Gabriel’s (2000) ideas (explored in Chapter 3) of how narratives occur in and impact on organisational settings. The analysis, as described in section 4.5.1, also uses Labov’s (1972) structural

analysis of personal narratives. The analysis extracts narratives from interviews and from written texts created by actors in this system: project managers, reviewers, auditors and politicians. Other narratives relevant to the topic are assembled from contemporary documents listed above, notably formal reports. This section describes in detail the steps taken to analyse texts, building on the theoretical background set out in Chapter 3 and the sections above. It includes the approach taken to understanding the power relations present in this system using techniques from Fairclough's (2013) interpretation of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

4.7.1 Steps in the Analysis

The analytical process that I followed is described in Table 4.4 below. The interview texts were examined for candidate narratives and then between 4 and 10 such narratives were coded within each transcript, using Labov's 'element' structure. The formal reports, however, largely addressed a single subject and did not need to be split into multiple narratives or coded for structure, since they were already structured by the authors. These reports were coded for subject, source and organizations mentioned.

Coded narratives addressing the same subject – for example the same project, or the same didactic theme were then combined together into synthesised narratives for presentation and further analysis. For the case studies, interview material contributed the bulk of content for an 'insider' narrative while formal reports and other published material was used to synthesise an 'official' narrative.

Finally all the synthesised narratives were examined using techniques from Fairclough's (2013) CDA. The resulting findings from 'structural' and 'discourse' analysis were then summarised as the principal outputs of the

analysis. These analysis steps are described in more detail below, in subsections covering the analysis ‘Stages’.

TABLE 4.4 – ANALYTICAL STEPS

Stage	Step	Action
A: Load into nVivo	1	Import text (e.g. Interview Transcript) into nVivo as ‘internal’ file
	2	Identify text as one of four cases – Interview, NAO report, Select Committee hearing/Report, MPA report
	3	Add demographic information on provenance of text, e.g. interviewee
B: Look for candidate narratives in interview transcripts	4	Scan interview text for range of topics covered; e.g. details of particular projects, processes of project review; postulate topic is structured as narrative
	5	Create subcase for each new identified narrative
C: Code narrative elements	6	Code sections of text as ‘elements’ of the narrative, following Labov’s structural model
	7	Repeat for next narrative
	8	Check text for uncoded elements
D: Build relationship map	9	For each new narrative identified, create relationships to other entities in coding network – overarching themes, projects, organizations

	10	Examine coding network map for groups of linked narratives
E: Build Synthesised narratives	11	Build synthesised narrative on particular topic for study (e.g. Official Verdict on Project X)
	12	Analyse language used within narrative and compare with related narratives (e.g. Inside View of Project X)
F: CDA analysis	13	Analyse language used for evidence of power relations in play using techniques drawn from CDA
G: List findings	14	Produce overall findings of how narratives of success and failure of projects are produced and sustained

4.7.2 Analysis Stage A – Loading into nVivo

NVivo 11 is a software package that is used widely for the analysis of unstructured text (and other information including video, graphics and audio). I used nVivo as my main repository of source material because of its extensive features for coding, searching, cataloguing and linking this material as my analysis progressed. Once loaded into nVivo (step 1), I identified each section of text as an interview transcript, NAO report, MPA report or Select Committee hearing / report (step 2). The next task (step 3) was to record metadata for the text; for example, for an interview, the date and place of the interview and the identity and role(s) of the interviewee.

4.7.3 Analysis Stage B – Looking for candidate narratives

Each interview contained a number of different candidate narratives. Czarniawska (1998) describes a narrative as an account with an original state, an event, and a resultant state, linked by a *plot* which contains some

information to link the different elements of the narrative; for example, some way of explaining why the event led to the resultant state. The process of identifying narratives, especially within informal, personal accounts such as interview transcripts is thus an act of assignment or labelling by the analyst. I choose to interpret certain pieces of text as collectively forming a *narrative*. These pieces of text appear to me to describe before and after states and an event, and the way in which these elements are described conveys some extra information which I interpreted as a *plot*.

My initial scan of the texts (step 4) thus looked for clues regarding the states and events in question. Since the interviewees were all actors in project settings, it was common to find descriptions of projects or of particular events within projects, such as a review. Czarniawska goes further in her description of narrative to say that many aim to make an instructive point, and thus can be interpreted as a moral tale. Many of the interviewees chose to make such points, often illustrated by examples from projects that they had worked on, and as discussed earlier, I describe these as ‘didactic’ narratives. An example was a narrative that discussed the role of the individual project manager in the success or failure of an IT project.

The interview questions proved helpful in segmenting the interview texts. The interviews were semi-structured, and while initial questions introduced new topic areas, follow-up questions broadened the scope of the discussion and invited the interviewee to develop themes or enlarge on anecdotes. Structures for each of the ‘candidate’ narratives were set up within nVivo (step 5).

4.7.4 Analysis Stage C – Coding narrative elements

In step 6 the texts were coded as narrative ‘elements’, following a structure proposed by Labov (1972) and described in more detail in Table 4.3.

Some narratives were not contiguous. Interviewees switched into a different topic partway through a story, on occasion to develop a point more deeply. They sometimes abandoned the original narrative, or came back to it later either voluntarily or after prompting by the interviewer.

I could not identify all of the structural elements within every narrative taken from interview transcripts; for example, the *Coda* was frequently not present. I also found it challenging in some cases to distinguish between the *Evaluation* and the *Resolution*, as in some narratives the boundary between these two elements did not appear distinct, and the way that the *Resolution* was recounted appeared evaluative. In these cases, I split the text between these elements based on how strongly evaluative I felt that part of the account to be.

The research interviews of 21 individuals were coded into 140 separate narratives (Step 7). The uncoded portions of the narratives amounted to between 5 and 10% of the transcribed text (step 8).

4.7.5 Analysis Stage D – Building a relationship map

Each narrative was then linked, in a network, to other nodes that I identified as relevant to the analysis in the initial scan (step 9). These included references to several larger IT projects such as Universal Credit, references to organizational entities such as MPA and references to particular themes, such as the attributes of a ‘good’ project manager. This allowed a network map to be constructed (step 10). The value of the network map was that it allowed me to consider all relevant source material when looking at a specific project or a particular thematic area, for example when constructing the synthesised narratives.

4.7.6 Analysis Stage E- Synthesizing narratives

The interview material yielded many narratives which covered a range of different subjects. After considering the themes covered by these narratives, I decided to present the analysis across three chapters. The first chapter deals with 'didactic' material and the remaining two each deal with a specific large project as a case study.

The method of presentation for the case studies that I chose was to compress the material as 'synthesised' narratives, following Labov's narrative element structure from abstract to coda. Similar case study material is often presented as a synthesized narrative (Brown, 1998; Avgerou and Mcgrath, 2007; Bartis and Mitev, 2008). After some consideration (and a couple of mis-starts) I decided to use a similar presentation for the 'didactic' material as well, using a slightly shorter element structure which highlighted the orientation, complication and evaluation elements of the narrative. One such narrative was synthesized for each of the major groups of project actors; managers, reviewers and auditors. Step 11 was thus completed for the interview transcripts.

One of the criticisms of synthesized narratives (Dawson and Buchanan, 2003) is that they can privilege the voices of only one group of interviewees – depending on the access gained by the researcher, either the management or the workers. In these case studies I used material from the NAO, MPA and PAC reports that put forward a 'managerial' account of the projects; and material from insiders which undermined the 'managerial' account. I decided to present both sets of material as discrete alternatives. The structured nature of the synthesized narratives divided the text into functional segments and offered an opportunity for comparison (step 12). With the 'didactic' narratives

I could compare between groups of actors. The case study narratives could be compared with each other, but on reading the formal accounts of the same projects I realized that there was a stronger opportunity to compare the interview accounts, given by project ‘insiders’, with the formal accounts written on behalf of reviewers and auditors, and thus seek to understand something of the system of power relations surrounding the projects.

The synthesised narratives of these formal accounts drew from all three types of report and from less formal sources. The NAO reports seek to provide neutral, factual background and thus were natural candidates to provide much of the *abstract* and *orientation* elements. The MPA reports deal primarily with risk, and thus concentrate on what could go wrong and on occasions what, in the opinion of the reviewers, had gone wrong. The MPA reports thus provided material for the *complication* element. Where the MPA report was not directly available, references to MPA reports from both NAO and Select Committee sources were used.

Unlike the NAO ‘VFM’ reports, the reports of Parliamentary Select Committees do not seek to be neutral. The reports themselves are often highly critical of the Departments and officials concerned, and the transcripts of the oral hearings are often even more judgemental; hence the *evaluation* was taken primarily from these sources. The NAO and MPA usually conducted further audit and review work after the ‘moment of crisis’ for the project, so the *resolution* and *coda* sections were taken from later NAO reports. These sources are identified in more detail in the relevant analysis chapters (6 and 7).

The resulting synthesised narratives were termed the ‘Official Verdict’, since the texts from which they were drawn constituted the outcome of the officially-prescribed processes of evaluation and audit. I synthesised the

alternative project narratives primarily from the interview material. Since these narratives gave voice to these interview participants, and were not published or publishable, they were termed the ‘Inside View’.

The ‘Inside View’ narratives quote extensively from interview texts, and the reader will observe that some interviewees figure in these quotations more frequently than others. While all the interview texts were analysed closely, some interviews stood out for their relevance to the key topics of the thesis – failure, narratives, evaluation and power relations – and other for the vividness of their language and the emotional content of the descriptions of project events. These interview segments were used more frequently than others for narrative reasons, such as characterisation, impact, clarity of plot exposition and engagement of the reader.

I also added a smaller amount of material from other sources. This material included newspaper reports and online journalism – blog posts – to include the views of other stakeholders. As an example, one of the architects of Universal Credit was Lord David Freud, who for six years was the junior DWP minister in charge of the project. Lord Freud gave an on-the-record interview to Nick Timmins of the Institute for Government think tank, extracts of which were subsequently published in Timmins’ report (IFG, 2016). These quotations, from a highly involved insider, give interesting insights into relationships between ministers at a critical point in the project.

4.7.7 Analysis Stage F – Analysing with CDA techniques

CDA, as described earlier, provides a set of discourse analysis techniques for examination of these interactions within the texts. This analysis was performed on the synthesised narratives, to examine how they were shaped by power effects and how they were used to exercise power relations.

Reflexively, I recognise that these narratives were synthesised by me as part of the analysis process, and thus the CDA analysis is subject to my authorship process – it can only find what I chose to put into the synthesised narratives. To mitigate this to some extent, I chose to use specific, quoted abstracts from transcripts or documents for the majority of my analysis. Although I chose these quotations (and often for space reasons have edited them down), they are expressed in the language of the actors concerned and my decision to highlight them, as part of my analysis process, is part of my interpretation of the research material.

The next stage of analysis was to identify certain clauses within the narratives as representative of one of four processes: emergence, hegemony, recontextualization and operationalisation. As Fairclough (2013, p. 19) proposes, this enables a discussion on what evidence is present for the effects of power relations within the system. To illustrate this process, I have selected one narrative taken from the transcript of an interview with S, an experienced MPA project reviewer. Appendix F shows an extract of her narrative, segmented into Labov's elements. In this narrative, she describes her participation in the review of a major IT project. Detailed analysis of this narrative suggests that power was exercised in setting up the review, choosing the leader and the team members and predetermining the conclusions. The review's conclusions were later reportedly used in an attempt by a politician to remove a senior civil servant from office.

4.3.6 Analysis Stage G – Findings

Findings are thus generated from detailed analysis of the narrative text, within a context derived from supporting documents and from other narratives (such as metanarratives). The structural analysis helps delineate the narrative within

the broader source text and gives insights into how the story is put together. Discourse analysis identifies the impacts of power relations within the narratives and the place of the narratives themselves in the enactment of power relations. The project is revealed as a site of struggle, sometimes heightened by the colourful language of the narrator, or suppressed in the formal tones of an official report. The role of the narratives in ascribing project success or failure is inferred from all the elements above. Who is talking to whom, and by implication why? Is this supported by the structure of the narrative constructed? Is the language used compatible with this explanation? The findings of the analysis can include *in whose interests* it might be for the project to be deemed a success or failure, and what wider processes of struggle are implicated.

4.8 Reflexivity

I note Alvesson's (1996, p. 496) guidance on reflexivity:

Reflexivity involves the self-critical consideration of one's own assumptions and consistent consideration of alternative interpretative lines and the use of different research vocabularies

I bring my own biases and preconceptions to the work but wish to be transparent in bringing that to the attention of the reader. I justify the lines of enquiry that I followed and the interpretations I imposed upon the data. I am also the interviewer, and interviewing is not an anonymous, value-free data gathering technique (Alvesson and Skoldbjerg, 2018). The interviewer is in a discourse with the interviewee and should not imagine that the words uttered represent some form of objective 'truth'. In addition, I had a particular role within the social system studied, and a professional and in some cases friendship relationship with some of the interviewees, and this must impact on

the interview content. Some degree of impression management conditions the narratives advanced by the interviewees, which should promote a degree of scepticism regarding their attributions of blame for project failure.

My acquaintance with some of the interviewees enabled access and engendered a degree of trust. Similarly, I was assumed to know more context and 'speak the language', so the interview texts contain many shorthand references based on an assumption of shared understanding. Where these occur, the analysis spells out the context for other analysts and for the reader.

Two of the organizations involved in the study, the MPA and GDS, were at the time organisational units within the Cabinet Office, the nearest thing that the UK Government has to a corporate Head Office. I was a civil servant in a different unit of the Cabinet Office. I worked on projects that were reviewed by the MPA and was interviewed and present when the reviewers' conclusions and feedback are discussed. I was also a member of one MPA review team (though not one that figures in the research). I thus have direct experience of the review process and some personal views on its efficacy. I have also worked with colleagues in GDS on joint initiatives and investigations.

In conclusion, and in spite of these prior relationships, I try to follow Alvesson's (1996) advice on reflexivity: by maintaining a distance from the subjects and the topic; by questioning any statement or direction that feels like a hypothesis; by trying to let the data (i.e. the actors) speak with their own voice; and by being aware of how my preconceptions influence my interpretation of the data. It is also relevant to note Alvesson et al.'s (2008) problematisation of reflexivity. This points out the limitations of four commonly adopted strategies; multi-perspective practices, multi-voicing practices, positioning practices and destabilizing practices. None of these mitigate the basic tenet of

the interpretive viewpoint; that there is no such thing as value-free data, no ‘fact’ that is not coloured by interpretation or prior theory, and no research process that is not embedded in a linguistic and cultural tradition. Alvesson et al.’s conclusion is that reflexivity remains important, even if problematic. For Critical researchers, the ability to challenge settled conceptions and ‘taken-for-granted’ assumptions is weakened if one then replaces them with different but equally problematic fallacies from the researcher’s own repertoire.

Tietze (2012, p. 67) made five recommendation on researching your own organization which resonated with me and which I tried to follow:

- *Be aware of your own role* – I was close to the projects and organizations studied although not directly a project actor. My role as a researcher was made clear to research participants and the research formed no part of my own day-to-day civil service role;
- *Be aware that what is written has permanence-* and thus I have chosen what it is hoped to be an appropriate authorial voice; generating one research narrative among many, while observing ethical stipulations and protecting the anonymity of sources;
- *Be aware of the author’s (blurred) identity* – thus trying to make clear to colleagues when I was acting as ‘researcher’ (essentially only in interviews) and when as ‘co-worker’
- *Be aware of Emotions* – both mine and those of the research participants, both of which impact the research material; and
- *Respect the role of Theory* – and use this to distance my ‘practitioner’ self and everyday interpretations from the data and the conclusions.

4.9 Summary

I had a special opportunity to access a rich research site for the study of projects, which was at the time the predominant source of UK government expertise on the review and management of large projects. My training and background as an IT professional and a project manager led me to study IT projects. I was an 'insider', speaking the language, knowing some of the people, being trained in many of the techniques and understanding some of the historical performance of big IT projects in the UK. More recent training in social sciences made me wary of all these 'advantages' in that they may blind the researcher to unanticipated patterns in the data. What is more, they enable a unique ability to 'lead the witness' and interact with informants in a way that imposes the author's biases and preconceptions on them. I was aware of these issues and list some mitigations as identified by Tietze above.

The research method chosen for the thesis is narrative analysis. This gives pre-eminence to the words spoken and written by actors. It forces me, the researcher, to look for specific patterns in these words, as the actors tell stories about projects, about organizations, and about their experiences. As these stories are collected, compared and contrasted, the research seeks to discover something about how these actors represent their world, and in particular how they conduct their primary function, the execution and assurance of big IT projects. The narratives also contain evidence of power relations, as revealed by analysis using CDA. The narratives are shaped by these power relations and themselves become knowledge and communicative assets, used by protagonists in the exercise of power relations.

Guba and Lincoln (1989) set out a list of criteria for 'good' qualitative research. While this list has been debated, contextualised and amended by several

researchers, not least Guba and Lincoln themselves (for a summary see Symon and Cassell, 2012), it represents a starting point for a discussion on the methodological integrity of the study. Table 4.5 lists these criteria and my justification for their fulfilment.

TABLE 4.5 - CRITERIA FOR VALID QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Criterion	Justification
<i>Credibility</i> - do the results make sense to the reader, and do the interpretations relate to the data presented?	In this chapter I have justified that the analytical techniques used are congruent with my epistemological and ontological stance and that the interpretations I have made are grounded in the data.
<i>Transferability</i> – could the insights drawn from this study reasonably be related to other similar situations?	In Chapter 8, Discussion and Conclusions I discuss how the findings on specific projects are limited to their context, and whether there is a credible read-across to other projects in similar contexts.
<i>Dependability</i> – is there an audit trail that links the data to its sources?	The Analysis (5, 6 and 7) chapters quote extensively from the sources and the analysis process is documented in detail in this chapter

Criterion	Justification
<p><i>Confirmability</i> – without getting drawn towards claims of ‘post-positivism’ (Denzin, 2009), how ‘trustworthy’ are the findings?</p>	<p>While the analysis method structures the interpretations I make of the data, I acknowledge that the findings are my interpretations and thus shaped by my biases. The commentary on reflexivity exposes some of these biases to the reader.</p>

Ultimately the assessment of ‘good’ research is an assessment of the researcher. This is my narrative on this topic – does the reader accept my contention that it offers some valid and novel insights in a well-explored field? To repeat the objectives set out in chapter 1, do the findings and conclusions of the thesis appear socially useful? The credibility of these findings (echoing Barnes and Bloor (1982, p. 23)):

must be accounted for by finding the specific, local causes of this credibility

Credibility thus depends on the trust the reader can place in my competence, rigour and reflexivity. By detailing what I did and how, I hope to give the reader confidence that that findings are, in Alvesson’s (2012) terms *interesting* as they challenge prior assumptions and add to the relevant literature.

5. Analysis I – Didactic Narratives – How Project Actors discuss project failure

5.1 Introduction and structure of this chapter

This chapter contains analysis of the ‘didactic’ narratives obtained from interviewees. These narratives contain their explanations of why some Government IT projects ‘fail’. The narratives are taken from interview transcripts. The interviewees are listed in Appendix F. As stated in the method description in Chapter 4, each interview was examined to identify distinct narratives within the transcripts. A single interview yielded between two and ten separate narratives on related, but different topics. I labelled some of these narratives as ‘didactic’ (Gabriel, 1998, p. 88) because within them I could recognise a moral or point. For space and clarity I have not presented each such narrative separately, but instead broken them into three groups by role, namely project managers, project reviewers, and people involved in the system of audit and parliamentary scrutiny, titled here project auditors. There was some overlap between these groups. All the reviewers, and some of the auditors had experience in project management before they took up their then-current roles. In many cases it was possible to tell from the context of the narrative whether they were telling a story about their experience in project management or their experience as a project reviewer or auditor.

Three ‘synthesised’ narratives of project failure were thus constructed from the accounts of interviewees, one for project managers, a second for project reviewers and a third for project auditors. The sources for each of the three narratives are described in the sections below. The three groups are not completely homogeneous, and some dissenting opinions were expressed by group members, for example on the validity of ‘political’ behaviour in the

project environment. Where relevant, these differences are exposed in the synthesized narratives.

The interviewees expressed opinions on project failure and the system of review and audit which they often illustrated by reference to projects that they had worked on or reviewed. Analysis of the narratives considers why certain positions might have been adopted by each group and contrasts them with the positions espoused by those in other groups. A common topic within all three narratives was the need to construct a 'project narrative'. This included formal project artefacts (such as plans and risk registers) and less formal communications including verbal accounts of project status. The task of the reviewers and auditors was to test these 'project narratives' for internal consistency and consistency with other narratives, such as Government IT policies or Departmental strategies.

The analysis also looks at the narratives for evidence of the system of power relations that links these different groups. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) this analysis examines: how the narratives put forward by the project actors might have emerged; how narratives strive for or achieve hegemony; whether there is evidence of restatement of broader narratives within local contexts; and what behaviour was driven by operationalisation of any of these narratives.

All groups identified similar reasons for why certain Government IT projects attracted the label 'failure'. While extensive taxonomies for such reasons for failure have been produced by other authors (e.g. Pinto and Slevin, 1988), the reasons discussed by interviewees fall under three broad headings – people, process and politics. The way in which such reasons for failure are expressed (or in some cases not expressed) are linked to the system of power relations

underpinning the whole project ecosystem, which includes the system of review and audit. Elements of these power relations are revealed in the narratives, especially the absence in formal accounts of 'politics' as a reason for failure. This is the principal finding of the analysis of this section of the empirical material.

5.2 Project Managers – Projects fail because of factors beyond my control

5.2.1 Introduction

This section analyses a narrative which was synthesised from the interview accounts of several project managers. Each had responsibility for significant Government IT projects. Some were specialists, who had come from a systems engineering or other IT background into IT project management. Others had no IT background but were specialised project managers who had been given responsibility for significant IT developments. Some of the managers were also project reviewers or auditors, and the material presented here was drawn specifically from those parts of their interviews which were concerned with their experiences as project managers.

The narrative is analysed in three subsections following elements of the narrative structure put forward by Labov (1972): an orientation element describing the skillset of the ideal project manager, a complication element giving some challenges that would test these skills and an evaluation element with some explanations of why projects might go wrong, even in spite of the skillset of the project manager.

5.2.2 Orientation – the ideal project manager

This narrative section gives the views of project managers on the 'ideal' project manager – what makes one, what undermines one and how do they survive?

The project managers considered themselves to be key individuals in the execution of their projects and portrayed their actions and omissions as strongly impacting success or failure.

The accounts of these project managers reference a small number of themes, following the broad taxonomy of people, process and politics. Echoing contemporary normative thinking (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2014), these accounts suggest that the job of the project manager is to assemble the right *people* in a coherent team, direct it to undertake the right work by executing the right organizational *processes* and use *political* skills to motivate the team and to maintain a coalition of support for the project through its life. Many project managers described the assembly of a convincing project narrative as a key task in this last, *political* dimension of their work.

Project Manager – Orientation

According to the project managers who were interviewed, several attributes were required to be an effective IT project manager in Government.

Interviewees suggested that, in addition to competent process skills, an effective IT project manager needed a high degree of personal resilience and political awareness.

Several of the project managers interviewed considered themselves to be highly skilled ‘professionals’, a way of distinguishing and privileging this group of employees above others in the organization. Only ‘professional’ project managers with suitable qualifications should be trusted with large, complex mission-critical projects; however, Delilah, an experienced project manager, asserted that professional qualifications were not enough. She also stated that good project managers needed the experience and ‘common sense’ to know when and how to apply what they had been taught:

*People.... people explain their deficiency in XYZ capability by the fact that they haven't done this or that [or] the other in terms of training or job or something and you say but isn't it relatively just ... applying logic?
There's an awful lot of common sense involved*

Delilah said that project managers needed “logic” and “common sense” to improvise solutions in situations not covered by their formal training and where formal project management processes such as planning, or risk analysis did not produce the right results. Process discipline was still, however, necessary. Project processes were followed to collect needs, turn them into requirements, assemble resources, translate time estimates into plans and test the quality of outputs. Even with good process discipline, Harold, the project manager of the largest IT project in Government considered that his challenging project had only “half a chance” of succeeding. Harold’s project was working in a complex political situation which required that consensus be built between several different Government entities on a way forward:

What we need to do now is collectively, [my Department], GDS, Cabinet Office, whoever else, Treasury we need to say right now; what are we going to do to get....all this to an effective programme that will deliver a proper thing for the coalition government.... we have to form a collective view

To build this consensus, project managers needed the skills to be effective within a political environment, such as the ability to influence others where they did not have recourse to hierarchical relationships. Hanniyyah said that influencing skills should be in the skillset of the project manager:

In your kit bag you should be able to influence and use charm you can use shock and awe tactics you can use emotional discourse; depends

on your audience and sometimes you just keep quiet.... and let others come to the decision and make them think that it was their idea in the first place.

Hanniyyah stressed the value of these skills and the legitimacy of influencing tactics more strongly than some other project managers. She portrayed herself as highly adept at the use of these techniques, and conceptualised her catalogue of skills as a toolkit, from which she could select the appropriate tactic almost at will. The toolkit included 'emotional discourse' which allowed her to appeal to the feelings of her counterparties rather than relying on 'logic' and 'facts'. These are skills defined by other authors as 'political' (e.g. Buchanan, 2008).

In summary, the project managers positioned themselves as skilled professional people, flexible in the face of unusual challenges, skilled at deploying disciplined processes and politically adept. In their accounts the project managers make affirmative statements about their own personal value to the organization, referencing the difficulties they face in their jobs and the skills and personal attributes that they need in order to overcome these difficulties. These affirmations are also present in the next section of the project managers' narrative, that describes the complicating events that lead to the labelling of projects as failures.

5.2.3 Complication – what could go wrong?

In this narrative section project managers give their theories for why projects might 'fail'. Three main theories were advanced, covering lack of adherence to *processes*, having insufficient suitably qualified and experienced *people* and experiencing unsupportive *politics*. These failure factors were said to be

exacerbated by situational constraints peculiar to the Government environment.

Project Managers – Complication

The project managers described some special features of the public sector environment that made implementing effective processes, securing good people and navigating political barriers more challenging for them.

As well as the ‘standard’ project management disciplines of planning, reporting and risk management, working in the public sector added additional processes for budget approvals and governance. These sometimes came as a shock to project managers used to working in the private sector. As Delilah, the project manager and reviewer put it:

There are loads of shackles that come with working in government, most of which are right and proper; but we do tend to make them slightly... somewhat more laborious than they probably need to be and it's that kind of treacly, slow progress that frustrates....

Delilah implied that successful managers had the skills and resilience to, as she put it “wade through the treacle”. Her metaphor conveys both the difficulty of navigating these processes and her reaction to their imposition.

Project managers also described barriers in the public sector that impacted the ability to attract the right personnel into IT projects such as pay and location. Angela, a manager with experience in private and public sector projects, described the challenges of staffing her project. Angela’s verdict on some of the staff that she had been given to manage was direct:

[It was] really, really difficult to get....[people because of the].... level of reward.... when you're paying people whatever.... anybody really worth

their salt would actually command a lot more than that... The commercial side was woefully poor; woefully poor.... I don't think the right skills and capabilities [are] put on soon enough on to major programmes and that.... they put people on who are available, not necessarily who are the right people...

Angela described projects that were staffed with people who *could* be recruited rather than those who *should* have been recruited. Another interviewee commented (ironically) “availability is not a skill” while others blamed civil service pay, onerous recruitment processes and the perception of the ‘unexciting’ public sector as reasons why suitably qualified staff could not be sourced.

In addition to the challenges of process and people, managers cited political tensions between people and organizations as a reason for failure. Angela described the relationship between her agency and the technical authority, the Government Digital Service (GDS, part of the Cabinet Office), which was made worse by organizational and physical distance:

[The] relationship between [agency] and the Cabinet Office was not particularly constructive... and there was a feeling.... just a lack of trust as much as anything else in that if they [GDS] find out about it [the project] or get their hands on it, we will lose control and we will not have control over our own destiny and.... what's it got to do with them?

Angela described the attempts made by her predecessors to ‘hide’ her billion-pound project from GDS, who would otherwise assume control and insist on the project being executed in full compliance with Government IT policies (that they had just defined). Political tensions were not confined to the relationship between the periphery and the centre. Hanniyah, an IT project manager,

described political challenges flowing from a struggle between different Government Departments. Hanniyah had been told that another Department would build a register of all UK citizens, a component that was key to her project:

...and it was highly political because Ministers had decreed that this is the system we need to use.

Hanniyah's language describes the magnitude of the 'political' barrier that she had to overcome. The Department with which she reported conflict had obtained a 'ministerial decree'. She needed to find a reason, either technical, financial or political, why the minister's reported instructions should not be carried out. In addition, Hanniyah described conflicts with senior staff inside her own Department:

We work in silos, we don't communicate and... it's a power struggle between who's got the bigger boots

Her allusion to "bigger boots" refers to the power relations between her and these colleagues. Those more able and willing to exert political influence (in her metaphor, those with "bigger boots") were, in her account, favoured.

The challenges of completing work with an inadequate team, while observing onerous processes and coping with a difficult political environment were described as being particularly annoying and burdensome for project managers coming "in from the outside", i.e. with no previous experience of working in the public sector. The implication made by interviewees is that those who had come from the 'outside' (such as Delilah) and survived had superior qualities of adaptability and resilience, increasing their scarcity value. Interviewees suggested that the 'treacly' public sector environment discouraged entrants

used to working in less trammelled circumstances. Angela hypothesised that the level of reward available in the civil service meant that staff who could attract higher salaries elsewhere – who were, in the Roman way, “worth their salt” – would go and work in the private sector. I interpret the language used by Angela and others as an expression of frustration at having to achieve project objectives in spite of these constraints. In their accounts, any or all of these could present insurmountable barriers and lead to failure of the project, a subject discussed in the next section.

5.2.4 Evaluation – in spite of the manager’s efforts, the project is labelled a failure

In this section project managers relate the most critical point in their narratives; the point at which their project was labelled as a failure. This point of termination or ‘project death’ was described in terms resembling a bereavement. Someone had assessed the viability of continuing with the project, and then made the decision to bring the project to an end. In some accounts the project manager made this assessment themselves. Efforts to portray the project as a ‘success’ ceased, and focus shifted to explaining the change in management direction. The narrative frame is one of evaluation, “where the narrator steps back from the action to comment on meaning and communicate emotion” (Riessman, 2005, p. 3).

Project Managers - Evaluation

Where projects were deemed to have failed, the project manager had to explain the causes of failure and their personal role in that failure.

Colin was the project manager of a large IT implementation for a police service. After several years of development work the project was two years late and significantly over budget. In addition, technology had moved on and police

officers could obtain a solution to their operational problem more cheaply and quickly using their mobile phones. Colin said team members could detect that the end was coming:

People knew it... [the project was a failure]... this isn't working, it's never going to work and [they had lost confidence]....I think they could see that they just weren't making.... progress.... the code delivery drops either weren't happening on time or when they did happen the testing.... didn't work or there was missing functionality and they could.... see it and.... there's real fear for people to stand up [and speak] loud enough and say (laughs) this is broken and I really feel it's never going to work.

Colin describes a sort of collective depression affecting the project team and its management. He also described a culture where staff were afraid to voice such negative opinions. He said that the IT team had stopped trying to make the project 'succeed' and had decided that the problems lay with someone else:

*I think the IT team had put their heads in the sand and it became somebody else's problem. It's that attitude of it becomes '**they**', I don't think **they're going to be able to do** this I think it's all **their issues** [my emphases]*

Colin said that the IT team was seeking to detach itself from the project and 'other' the causes of failure.

Angela's project, to replace all IT contracts at a Government Agency, was also cancelled after two years of effort. She described a similar moment of epiphany when she said that it became clear to her and others that the project could not continue.

So what became clear.... so I work with [SRO] and I said “you do realise this is a basket case?” and he said, “yeah, I do now” and I said... “there are not the capabilities and the skills within the organisation to do [this project]; this is a serious piece of work.... and look at the value of this contract which over a 10 year period was in excess of a billion [pounds] potentially”.

Angela’s “basket case” is a metaphor of incapacity, implying that the patient will never recover. Angela also stated that her project had been impacted by what she and others had originally feared; ‘political’ attention from the centre of Government, led by GDS. This attention, in her account, led to her project being stopped, her team being dissolved and soon afterwards Angela leaving the organization.

.... (laughs) and you can't do nothing about it; it's the kind of political piece.... well I suppose it's the Cabinet Office more than anywhere else.... certain bodies.... assume a greater level of power and influence at different times. They have a rise, they have a fall and at that particular time GDS were particularly in the ascendancy and.... it was almost; you couldn't argue with it; it was just, this is what's going to happen.... so what can I say (laughs).... it went through hoops.... it was then the Cabinet Office.... [who killed it]

In this case the demise of the project is described in terms of a political assassination. According to Angela, GDS’s hand was on the dagger. Her own Department had given the project the go-ahead, but financial approval was withheld by the centre, and the project ‘died’.

These two project managers describe the failure of their projects in very similar terms. The project is reified, and described as a living thing which is

mortal. Similar metaphors are not uncommon in the world of IT projects; for example a never-ending software development is frequently described as a 'death march' (Yourdon, 2004). Angela's project is sufficiently incapacitated to be described as a "basket case" and Colin's project had the "smell of death" about it. Recovery is no longer feasible. The project will end in failure, and the project managers appear to have altruistically volunteered their projects for the axe.

The accounts also describe a collective loss of confidence by the project team and key stakeholders. Each project's narrative originally stated that continued effort would deliver the desired objectives, but that narrative can no longer be sustained in the face of counternarratives that give alternative predictions. The narrative falls apart as the effort to maintain it is too great. Both project managers describe a cathartic moment, when they agreed with the project sponsor that the project could not continue, and this is a moment of release – the effort of maintaining the façade of progress is lifted from their shoulders.

This depiction of project failure could be construed as identity work. In the context of a project failure, which can only detract from the project managers' reputation, the personal sacrifice made by volunteering their own project for termination presents them in a better light, as people who put the organization's interests above their own. There is also an element of post-hoc justification within these retrospective, evaluative accounts ("of course I knew all along that it was impossible to deliver this project"). Blame is either attributed to others, or at a minimum shared ("the skills [are] not there").

To summarise, the project managers describe their role in avoiding project failure as central; they must have a full portfolio of 'hard' skills to manage complex processes, 'soft' skills to manage people and 'political' nous to win the

power struggles that will ensue. When challenges arise, they deploy these personal skills in order to navigate approval processes, motivate people and build coalitions to win what they characterise as power struggles; but when personal efforts are not enough, project managers attribute failure to external causes rather than their lack of personal competence. They describe external forces that prevent the 'right' people being recruited and retained, mandate compliance with 'treachery' processes and lead to political struggles within Government organizations and between different Government organizations. All these factors were argued to have made the job of the project manager impossible, and individually or collectively to have led to project failure.

5.3 Project Reviewer – Detecting the signs of failure

5.3.1 Introduction

Project reviewers, most of whom were experienced project managers, voiced similar views of why projects might be deemed to have failed by attributing failure to process, people and political reasons. Reviewers' accounts adopt a different viewpoint to those of project managers. Reviewers have no or little ownership of the projects that they review and thus less emotional and personal attachment to the project and its aims.

This section also presents a synthesised narrative, with an *orientation* element looking at what the reviewers consider to be the key attributes of a good reviewer, then in a *complication* element the reviewers describe circumstances where they have had to apply these attributes to understand projects in difficulty. These situations include some where the reviewers collectively feel that there is the potential for project failure, owing to either lack of suitable people, process failures or political constraints within and around the project and the sponsoring organization. In the last part of this section in an

evaluation element, reviewers describe situations where a review has led to a significant change in status for a project, including project termination.

5.3.2 Orientation – what makes a good reviewer

Reviewers and reviewer managers were asked to comment on what they felt were the characteristics of a good reviewer. In their accounts they state that, in addition to experience and expertise, a reviewer needed an instinctive understanding of when a situation ‘feels wrong’ or when an interviewee is not giving an ‘accurate’ account. To be a successful reviewer it is necessary to be able to evaluate and critique the narratives associated with the project.

Project Reviewer – Orientation

The ideal reviewer, according to interviewees, is quite a special person, possessing excellent interpersonal skills and apparently, an acute sense of smell. Tim (MPA manager) said:

What makes a good reviewer, I think.... is.... somebody with the right technical knowledge, the right background but also with.... really good instincts, smell bullshit.... they need to be able to tell when they are being bullshitted so that requires a certain sensitivity and awareness.

Damien (MPA manager) agreed:

This is tricky; you kind of have to have a nose for it which you develop over time; and sometimes it's the gaps you know and when you say “and how has this been managed, how's that being controlled and what's the relationship here” and you don't get the solid response

Christian, an experienced project manager and MPA reviewer explained further:

Part of it is what they call the sniff test; it was just experience but then that really tells you where to [look] and then you pick up the things that don't look solid; there's no rocket science to it

These interviewees positioned intuition to be an important factor, as, in the limited time allowed, the reviewer could not examine every aspect of the project's management. Their use of olfactory metaphor is not unusual, as evidenced judgements are commonly described as having been 'seen' whereas judgements formed intuitively attract other sensory metaphors such as 'felt' or in this case 'smelt' (Fischer, 2014).

While some reviewers described using systematic methods such as checklists, sometimes they claimed that their enquiries were driven by more dynamic cues such as the body language of the people that they interviewed, saying that a 'sixth sense' was needed to detect inconsistencies or untruthfulness from those being reviewed. Mark, an experienced MPA reviewer, described his reaction to meeting one project member:

And I know I'm not being very scientific about it and I.... can't tell you exactly why it is that I simply could not believe what the individual was telling me.... but actually when.... [we] opened the cupboard.... the cupboard was entirely bare.... It was actually about.... non-verbal communication because he'd just been quite confident, and he had no reason to be confident....

Mark placed reliance on his reading of body language, which he admitted was 'not scientific', and spoke as if this reliance was in some way illegitimate. He said that he was able to detect when someone had something to hide and used dramatic language to illustrate his processes of deduction. He expressed satisfaction at uncovering a lack of candour in the individual that he was

interviewing. Another reviewer, Delilah, said that she placed reliance on similar cues to Mark:

As an outsider you look in and you just apply, both your.... experience, your intuition.... and some logic.... a bit of emotional intelligence.... because there's often the little bits you can pick up on, the nuances.... often those are the little nuggets at the end of that thread

Delilah's intuition led her to 'little nuggets' of golden information, that would allow her and the other reviewers insights into the 'true' status of the project.

Mark, Delilah and the other reviewers also described more traditional techniques of hypothesis building and testing, including checking that project artefacts such as plans and risk registers were in place, consistent and up to date. Their methods examined the narratives constructed by project actors and tested the plausibility of the stories that they were told. Not all reviewers thought that absolute consistency was essential between interviewees, or even possible. Tim, the MPA manager said:

I believe everybody can look at the same picture and see a different story.... I think that you have to.... use those different images to paint a three-dimensional picture. Have you ever read the Alexandria Quartet?⁴ Because that is exactly that; it's the same story in four dimensions and it's absolutely brilliant and when you see them, where they connect up and then diverge again.... but it's the same story and everybody has their version of the truth. And.... we like to say in projects 'a single version of the truth'.... you can do that in some things but if you want to know the

⁴ A set of four novels by Gerald Durrell, set in Alexandria in the 1940's. Each novel narrates the same events from the perspective of a different character.

*softer aspects and **how it's really working** and how the organisation is functioning and so on, then there are many versions of the truth [my emphasis].*

Tim's analysis included looking at divergences, which he said contributed to his understanding of how the organization is "really working" and did not just flow from confusion or attempts at concealment by interviewees. In summary, the analysis described by project reviewers included more than just a painstaking, logical analysis of the way that the project's narrative had been constructed. Reviewers also relied on their interpretation of the way that the narrative was performed for them.

The Project reviewers' descriptions made reviews sound more like detective stories, involving a search for clues (some of which might be misleading), an interrogation of witnesses and an inspection of evidential documents. The process required a willingness to follow intuition and trust 'hunches' about what might be going wrong. Eventually the guilty party would be unearthed because of evidence or a confession that all was not quite right. The multi-day process of review, with its set-piece interviews and examination of many items of evidence had more in common with a country house murder mystery than its protagonists might choose to admit. The gathering of amateur sleuths was faced with a body, several suspects (some with alibis) and a need to find the guilty person before the last train returned to London. Of course, the tidy, tightly plotted nature of the detective story (Ong, 2013, p. 147) with its precise resolution may not be mirrored precisely in the messier reality of a difficult project review.

5.3.3 Complication – how do reviewers say that they detect failure?

Reviewers identified similar themes to project managers in their discussion of project failure – people, process and politics. The people most frequently mentioned were the project manager and the SRO. Their ability to create and follow management and governance processes, and thus regulate the execution of the project, was discussed by the reviewers. Finally, reviewers gave accounts of political behaviour but in written reports did not attribute project failure directly to the impact of political action.

Project Reviewers – Complication

Reviewers described several reasons why the projects that they had reviewed were not proceeding as they would have expected, including inadequate leadership and poor process discipline. Reviewers identified that ‘political’ action was on occasion detrimental to projects but did not explicitly identify this activity as the cause of failure. In addition, the relative power of reviewers and the reviewed sometimes prevented the adoption of controversial recommendations.

According to reviewers, sometimes projects failed because they were not run by the right people. Tim painted a vivid picture of those he considered to be the best project leaders in Government:

You’ve got to be very sure of yourself.... but frankly those are the people who make good project leaders right? it's the quality of.... being able to stand up to all the bullshit and tell the truth and those are.... some of the characteristics of great project leaders

Note that Tim is describing project ‘leaders’ rather than project managers. His ‘leaders’ have an ability to “stand up to the bullshit” which may mean an ability to stand apart from local political disputes relating to the project. There was a

drive to bring in experienced ‘leaders’ with relevant private sector credentials, but this approach was not accepted by all interviewees because of the special features of the public sector environment, as Hanniyyah pointed out:

You also need to understand policy, legislation and politics and often people coming in from the outside come a cropper because they don't get that bit....

Hanniyyah stated that lack of experience of the ‘special’ public sector environment would outweigh the technical, commercial and operational experience that the new private sector entrants would bring. But even if suitably qualified people were selected to be project managers they might struggle if either the team supporting them or the processes of management and governance were ineffective. Christian (reviewer) talked about examples:

Now I've seen people who are good programme directors.... and then they lose control of what's going [on].... unless they are working very well and have good process tiers and it's a well-established team that works well, a lot of issues don't come up [to the project manager]

The managers on the project that Christian was reviewing had, in his opinion, too much of their time taken up by bureaucracy and thus had not detected the issues that he believed led to subsequent failure. Tim (MPA manager) stated that it was the reviewer’s job to check these ‘information flow’ processes rather than second guess the strategic decisions made by project managers:

To some extent it [the review] is a process evaluation and I think content evaluation is something different; certainly something different from what we [the MPA] do.

Reviewers also said that they saw political behaviour in reviewed projects. Sometimes that behaviour was explicitly called out; for example, George, an MPA manager, described an occasion on the project he was reviewing where the SRO:

Stuck his neck above the parapet and went and played a few political games....

Tristan, an experienced review team leader commented on a different project where decisions had not been made:

it is organisational politics; you've got a programme director who [is] in a different line of the business [and] wouldn't work for the SRO of the IT [services organization]; they have a personality clash the chief exec. was really the only person in a position to call the shots because of the two different factions on his leadership team.

Tristan said that the CEO had to resolve political conflicts between these two people who would not work together because they did not like each other.

An added complication for other reviewers was the power imbalance between the review team and the sponsors of large projects, often very senior civil servants. The reviewers would be less senior in grade and lack the status of the project sponsor. This might make the evidence for an accurate diagnosis hard to obtain as Tim, the MPA manager commented:

..... under those circumstances the truth can be hard to obtain because there are sort of enormous political barriers

and Tim also said that recommendations might be ignored:

The project sponsor in particular has so much more authority than.... the reviewer.... they can effectively ignore.... those [review] recommendations

While Tim defended this state of affairs as appropriate, Angela, another reviewer expressed frustration that there was little political pressure to implement recommendations:

We did.... a review.... and it wasn't good.... I would put it in red frankly. I think the review process was very good; where I think the problem is, is that I don't think the MPA [reviewing organization] have sufficient teeth to able to actually say, "you stop this, and you stop this now....and we bring in people then to actually sort this out"

These accounts reveal something of the system of power relations within which the reviews were conducted. While political activity was observed within reviewed projects, a different set of power relations impacted the way that the review was conducted and the recommendations implemented. On occasion the reviewed organization could choose to conceal 'facts' and ignore such recommendations. Angela portrayed this circumstance as the MPA not having "sufficient teeth" to influence the reviewed organization.

5.3.3 Evaluation – is review effective?

The reviewers' task was to identify risks that would lead to project failure if unaddressed. Very occasionally they came across situations where they concluded that a project needed to be stopped, as in their view there was no realistic chance of the project leading to outcomes that would meet the expectations of stakeholders. An adverse review finding might persuade HM Treasury to withdraw funding or impose conditions on the host Department that would require radical restructuring of the project – effectively stopping

and starting again. In the period studied, this happened to a small number of projects including Universal Credit, which is examined in more depth in Chapter 6. The reviewers discussed the steps that they had to take to get their recommendation adopted to stop the project.

Evaluation – Project Reviewers stop the project

In the previous subsection we saw evidence that power relations between the reviewed – the Departments and other public bodies that owned the projects – and the reviewers – the MPA, part of the Cabinet Office – impacted the effectiveness of review. The MPA was formed by the Cabinet Office in 2011 with the mission to increase the level of scrutiny of all large projects, including IT projects. For Frederick (politician) this included changing the balance of responsibilities between the Departments and the centre of Government – the establishment of the MPA was a political act and:

..... was really about getting some consistency in the way we assured.... because we had this ridiculous thing, where every Department was allowed to.... mark its own homework.... there wasn't the capability in the Departments to know whether things were going wrong how do you stop when something's going wrong? And.... we have this tendency in Government, and you will have seen this time and time again, just to ignore something that you're not comfortable with.... Nobody wants to admit that something's gone wrong.

Frederick acknowledged the difficulty of this task; as shown in previous extracts, Departments would push back on review and oversight by 'the centre'. Frederick also thought Departments equally found it difficult to admit failure, for in an adversarial political system, criticism by opposition politicians (including those on the PAC) and antagonistic media headlines damaged

careers. Simon (project manager) described the difficulty of telling Ministers and his Permanent Secretary that all was not going well with their flagship project:

I would say to you that's one of the hardest things in running these big programmes is explaining to people.... the status of what is actually going on.... people just want to be told good newsI felt nobody wants to have an adult conversation with you.

Simon reinforces Frederick's suggestion that people did not want to hear news of potential failure. His language – that people wanted to avoid “an adult conversation” about “what is actually going on” suggests his colleagues preferred to maintain a project narrative of continued, positive progress. However, projects occasionally were stopped or reset after critical reviews, though reviewers said that this took persistence on their behalf. Damien (MPA manager) described his attempts to have a major project halted:

In 2010 when I first started on [big project] and tried to shut it down.... so what does the government do on the back of my recommendation? They reduce it [the project's budget].... where's that going to go? the answer is it's a plain failure; and so it took me 9 months to shut it down from there

The reviewers' task was to provide constructive recommendations that would help the project manager and the sponsor to deliver the project as specified. Occasionally their task was to deliver bad news – as one put it, to tell the project sponsor that “your baby is ugly” when “everyone thinks they have the cleverest baby”. In Damien's case his labelling of the project as a “plain failure” leaves little room for interpretation - his recommendation was that the project should be stopped.

In summary, reviewers had limited time and access to develop an understanding of the project and the people that worked on it. As deliverables were usually intangible or in many cases yet to be produced, the reviewers were looking at the process of design and production rather than the outputs. Their focus was on a project's 'narrative', consisting of the formal documents that said what the project was attempting to achieve and how, and the informal accounts of project actors where the project 'sold' itself to the outside world; to reviewers, sponsors, stakeholders, its own project workers and staff impacted by the project's outcomes. Some reviewers might take a negative view if there were inconsistencies in the accounts of different project actors whereas others would expect subjective differences to be apparent in these accounts.

There was a risk that 'political' action could present a barrier to the project's progress. Resources might be withheld, or approval processes applied in a way that made it impossible for the project to comply with approval conditions. Reviewers had challenges in identifying such risks and occasionally used terms such as 'alignment' for behaviour that might otherwise be termed 'political' (possibly as 'political' would be equated with 'illegitimate'). There was also a risk that the review itself would be subject to 'political' action, and recommendations downplayed, exploited or ignored by other players in the system of power relations.

There were also differing views on the effectiveness of the review process. One project manager said that the reputation of the MPA made people "run in fear" of being reviewed, yet reviewers admitted that the quality of review was highly dependent on the capability of the review team and the orchestration of the review. This orchestration was done by the managers of the reviewed

project, who assembled documentation and scheduled interviews for the review team. Reviewers were also concerned that the MPA ‘lacked teeth’ and that recommendations were not always followed up effectively. The last word on this topic should go to one of the MPA’s founding managers, who said that the review process was “better than nothing”. In conclusion, the establishment of the MPA and mandating the review processes were political acts, and their effectiveness was bound up in the system of power relations within which the MPA had to act, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

5.5 Auditors – looking at project failure from the outside

5.5.1 Introduction

This section talks about the work of the NAO and the PAC in monitoring Government IT projects and in constructing narratives of success and failure. It starts with an *orientation* element where interviewees discuss the role of the PAC and the NAO in holding Government to account. There follows a *complication* element where interviewees discuss the ways in which they see projects as failing. It finishes with an *evaluation* element which is a reflection by the auditors on why, in their accounts, Government IT projects were currently described as failing and would continue to do be so described.

5.5.2 Orientation – so much to do, so little time!

As discussed in Chapter 4 of the thesis, the National Audit Office (NAO) examined the value for money achieved by Departments in executing policy, which included looking in detail at high-value, critical projects. The NAO conducted in-depth studies into such projects, each involving a team of 3-5 auditors and lasting several months. Using statutory powers, the NAO could ask to see any documents held by Government bodies and interview civil servants. Where an external supplier was engaged in delivery, contracts

stipulated that the NAO could see supplier documents and could question supplier personnel. The NAO's results were then presented to Parliament (Dunleavy *et al.*, 2009) and published. NAO studies were often commissioned by the Public Accounts and other Select Committees of the House of Commons. The Select Committee would then use the reports as source material for its own inquiries.

The practicalities of how audit and review were performed were quite different. MPA project reviews were short, sharp, point-in-time assessments carried out and completed over about a week. NAO audits could last several months and involved detailed examination of documents and extensive feedback. Audit reports were agreed line by line with the accounting officer of the audited body. However, like the reviewers, the auditors' task was to understand and interrogate the project's narrative, and within the terms of reference of the NAO, ascertain whether that narrative provided evidence that the project would deliver value for money.

Both the NAO and PAC wanted to know if the Government could deliver a broad portfolio of projects, including many complex IT projects. As well as critiquing the narrative of individual projects, the NAO and PAC critiqued the metanarrative of how Government approached all such projects. This metanarrative included the system of review.

Auditors' orientation

Parliament exercised its powers of oversight of major Government projects through several bodies. Select Committees of the House of Commons examined Departmental actions while the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) looked at public expenditure across the whole of Government. This frequently

led it to mount inquiries into large IT projects. In this role it was assisted by the National Audit Office (NAO).

Denny, an auditor, acknowledged that the NAO had strengths and weaknesses:

I think in some areas [the NAO is] very much taken seriously; I think the NAO struggles myself it does 60 reports a year; it's therefore got something to say about once every week; 50 reports will get published and it feeds a parliamentary process which does 30 or 40 or more hearings so.... you are unnecessarily dissipating your impact.... to become part of the 24 hour news cycle

Denny expressed concerns that the NAO occasionally compromised objectivity for a newsworthy headline. Other interviewees made similar comments; however, despite this potential threat to the quality of the NAO reports Daniel, a former PAC member, gave a more positive evaluation. He described the use that committee members made of the reports when conducting their inquiries:

The NAO, I think the reports they do are high quality. Indeed, when I was on the PAC I sometimes thought there was an issue that we didn't sometimes do justice to the quality of the work they did.... because.... they were expensive pieces of work, aren't they? They are £300 grand a time.... that's a major investment if the only purpose of it is a load of MPs to half read it on a Monday afternoon, that's not enough.

Daniel was slightly disparaging about the effort that PAC members put into committee hearings. Statistics suggest that only half of the fifteen-member committee were regular attendees (Dunleavy *et al.*, 2009), and the bulk of the research and subsequent questioning fell to them. The process of determining whether a project should be labelled a success or a failure thus fell primarily on

the NAO's investigation and the brief hiatus of an oral hearing by the PAC. In these hearings witnesses from the Department would be examined by PAC members. The hearings could be abrasive and critical of the witnesses, or could, as described by Denny, an NAO auditor, give an opportunity for a polished advocate to deflect criticism:

I hope we got as close as we could to a balanced place; but as a result of that then we had a parliamentary hearing; [CIO] presents very well the committee says "we need to keep [CIO] in the job" and that's job done.

Denny spent several months writing a "balanced" report on a major IT project, including what he saw as positive and counterbalancing negative features, but in the course of a one-hour hearing the Departmental CIO presented his case so well that the chair finished the hearing by encouraging the head of the Department to extend the CIO's fixed-term contract.

Both the NAO auditors and the PAC members said that they had an enormous potential field of inquiry, and with the time and resources that they had available, it was challenging to examine subjects in sufficient depth.

5.5.3 Complication – the difficulty of spotting the 'wrong uns'

Like reviewers, auditors examined the project's narrative, which for them consisted of project documentation and the oral accounts of project actors. The NAO's task was to synthesise a new narrative and produce a report on the project. This summarised the history and current state of the project and contained an evidenced opinion on whether the project represented value for money. Reports had to be agreed, word by word, with the relevant accounting officer, which meant that audit 'findings' had to be rooted in documentary evidence. The challenge of agreeing findings encouraged Denny, the NAO auditor to write reports that just set out uncontested "facts" and were "less

evaluative”. PAC members in most cases had less expertise in the subjects under discussion than the NAO’s auditors, and only a few of the PAC members had relevant experience of IT projects.

PAC members would use NAO reports as briefings before public hearings, very rarely looking at primary evidence such as project documentation. They would summon officials and ministers responsible for projects to these public hearings and cross-examine them on the findings of the NAO report. The PAC would then produce a further narrative of the project in the form of yet another report (often drafted by the NAO), which was tabled before the House of Commons.

Auditors and PAC members would seek out inconsistencies in project narratives. There might be disconnects between the ‘strategic intent’ of a project as expressed in its business case, and the plans, budget forecasts and other lower-level project artefacts. Auditors also had the opportunity to question project members to see if there was consistency of understanding between them. This search for inconsistency – places where the collective project narrative had weak spots – was a preoccupation of both auditors and committee members.

Auditors’ Complication

Auditors would point out the same kind of failings as reviewers and project managers – failings in people, processes and ability to address political hurdles. Eva, an auditor, described how people shortcomings conflated process shortcomings to the detriment of the project concerned:

You can overcome shortfalls in processes if you have really good capability [people] at different levels with everybody understanding what

they are doing and how to take it forward; and that's not the case in most projects....

Eva stressed that people who were really capable could overcome the kind of obstacles that many projects faced, but that really good people were in short supply in the public sector. Process compliance could compensate for this lack of quality personnel. However, even if processes were well executed, the auditors were concerned that a sort of 'process blindness' might set in. Project members might consider that, because their processes were well documented, the activity they were undertaking would naturally lead to the right outcomes. As Matt, another auditor said:

The danger with Agile is you also get that.... loss of ownership because you're doing an Agile process; it's.... the process like Prince 2.... justifies the outcome in a way

Matt's assertion is that some project managers unthinkingly follow the management process (such as Agile or Prince 2) and this leads to them doing the wrong thing in a well-documented way. In these circumstances the project's narrative may be complete and at surface level coherent, but the 'reality' of the underlying work products may be less satisfactory.

Another auditor, Denny, talked explicitly about the need to interrogate the project's narrative, but also the difficulty of penetrating a seemingly glossy façade of perfect documentation:

They've all got their assurance maps and frameworks and.... they also clearly serve to.... present a story which is a coherent story to external reviewers.... people can.... tend to do the right stuff on paper and all the registers...., that looks correct and when you interview them one-on-one

they're very careful about managing themselves to saying the right thing if they wish to present a unified front.... is this system is aligned with the organisation and what it's doing? There's consistency, the strategic consistency in a narrative....

The way that Denny describes this situation makes it sound like an organized conspiracy existed between project actors to conceal the 'true' state of the project from the NAO. The description has language that could be appropriate for a political arena, such as "presenting a unified front", presumably to the NAO. Denny's other source of cues were gossip ("keeping an ear to the ground"), journalists' reports, leaks (reported in "trade media") and observing interactions between project actors in formal situations such as board meetings. With these sources Denny sought to develop additional insights than were available from project documentation, for example into the nature of power relations around the project. Denny described one such situation in a major IT project that he had audited:

The relationship between [Departmental CIO] and GDS you know is a powerplay; we know that's a powerplay.... And actually I think [those situations are] quite hard to tease apart as a reviewer, because you might have your suspicions; and some of that might be well grounded or might just be you're being suspicious.... Because.... In those sorts of areas people tend to have the story quite well arranged....

Denny was drawn to consider this matter because he said "the story is not quite straight", i.e. some things were observed that did not match the 'official' project narrative. He surmised that political behaviour ("a powerplay") was driving his observations, but because his interviewees denied this in conversation – they had "the story quite well arranged" – it was impossible for

him to use this as concrete evidence. It was apparent to him, however that efforts had been made by his interlocutors to formulate and present a project narrative that held a consistent line on the sensitive political interactions between the Department and GDS.

PAC members only had fleeting opportunities to spot incongruities in project narratives. In each hearing, two committee members would be appointed as rapporteurs. These members would be expected to have researched the topic and read any associated NAO reports thoroughly. Other members could join in the questioning as they saw fit. Daniel, a PAC member, described what motivated him to probe a particular witness in a hearing:

I would join [in] based on the answers people gave; and that's based on.... my experience. And if they're being evasive, or something strikes me as incongruous based on what I know...and since I probably know more, just because of my background, than many MPs, that was relatively easy for me. So.... you'd see something come up [and conclude] that just can't be right!

Daniel's interventions were, he said, driven by his perception of inconsistencies in the behaviour or the accounts of witnesses. He said that he used his intuition and experience to expose these inconsistencies and uncover what he and his colleagues would label as the 'truth' about the project being examined.

In summary, auditors and PAC members found it challenging to identify flaws in the project narratives being presented to them. They relied on finding inconsistencies in project members' accounts and other elements of the project's narrative in order to identify failing projects. The reasons for failure that they mentioned include people who were not sufficiently qualified and experienced to do the jobs they were allocated and processes that were either

not established or not being followed. They were aware that projects were impacted by power relations but wary of attributing failure to this cause without direct evidence.

5.5.4 Evaluation – why is the system broken?

Auditors and PAC members were willing to generalise from their experiences and offer broader theories of why IT projects failed in the Government environment. By doing this they were critiquing the metanarrative of Government competence; that the expensive training offered by the MPA was developing a cadre of project leaders, who could go on to deliver better outcomes; that the system of review was leading to earlier diagnosis of troubled projects and allowing time for successful interventions; and that the project management, technical and commercial competence of Government was improving over time in response to historical criticism of these factors by the PAC and others.

So consequently, what narratives of failure did these highly experienced people, who had seen so many IT projects in government, construct? One theme was that many of these projects also involved high levels of business change, which was described as hard in any environment and even harder in the public sector where there were lower levels of understanding of how to do it well. The auditors argued that business change provoked resistance, and resistance often manifested itself in political action. They justified their theories using examples from the audits that they had conducted, backed up by examples from prior experience.

The Auditors – Evaluation – is the system capable of delivery?

Eva (NAO auditor) expressed the view that many projects failed because they had a poor start, something she attributed to a failure of leadership:

We know most projects fail because they're set up wrongly and they start off badly, and actually mostly you're kind of managing some form of failure all the way through.... so [they need] to have somebody right at the beginning of any kind of major programme.... to understand the Vision and Direction.... and to do that you need somebody really very, very experienced.... in programme management [and] delivery and you also need for them to have the levers to be able to do the right things.

Eva's explanation is based in part on *people* and in part on *power relations*. She said a strong project narrative was needed from the outset, based on a Vision and Direction, and this narrative needed to be personally formulated and communicated by a strong leader with access to the 'levers' of power. She describes an individual with very special skills and almost 'heroic' qualities. She also stated that the task of achieving 'fundamental' business change was beyond the capability of most Departments, and that while civil servants could tweak existing systems and achieve 'incremental' change, they lacked the necessary understanding of how their Departments 'really' worked:

Government.... is now saying.... we want to do something much more fundamental.... in a lot of our best Departments they've just about mastered incremental change.... but anything that requires.... a whole new process and systems to support that; that's hard for anybody and it's really nearly impossible in Government; they don't have the understanding or the capability at a business level to know how to do that.

Eva drew a distinction between 'business as usual' changes to IT systems (which she conceded were hard but doable) and changes that required major

changes to the working practices of affected staff. These she considered even more difficult, in her words ‘nearly impossible’.

As well as the organizational capability to achieve large-scale change, Government also needed organizational cohesion to carry it out. Daniel, a PAC member complained that the Civil Service lacked what he called ‘organizational discipline’ which would result in, at the simplest level, people doing what they were instructed to do. He referenced the performance management system, which made it difficult to enforce sanctions against people who did not do what they were told:

Organizational discipline means that.... the Chief Executive can remove roadblocks in a project, so it's not good enough for someone to say, "well it doesn't properly take into account my Department".... which I think say in the NHS would be a very big.... driver and people would have what you would call a vested interest and nobody can tell them what to do. Whereas in.... an organization that's got organizational discipline.... the good side is that you can get alignment towards change, and change is so difficult to [make] happen that without that alignment it's almost impossible. Which in my view is why some of these projects are very difficult to do.

Daniel mentions “alignment towards change”. The inverse of this state, a lack of ‘alignment’ might give rise to political activity. ‘Vested interests’ would be defended, and the ‘special’ requirements of particular departments would be used as an excuse not to implement a particular business change. Daniel’s prescription is simple, if authoritarian. The Chief Executive must be able to remove roadblocks, which is a euphemism for dismissing ‘obstructive’ managers.

Auditors stated that many of the difficulties of IT projects did not flow from their technological aspects alone but also from the necessary accompanying business change, and that 'transformative' business change was beyond the capability of Government. Government lacked the capability and the organizational coherence to execute dramatic changes that impacted staff and citizens.

Some PAC members had an in-built scepticism about IT projects in Government as reflected in the assertion of the former chair of the PAC (Hodge, 2016, p. 221) that the committee would laugh at the suggestion that a new IT project "might be introduced on time, within budget and save money". Denny, the auditor saw such scepticism as a professional necessity:

you're being suspicious, that's your job; it's your job to be sceptical

His explanation was that this scepticism was justified because he was frequently confronted by a wall of documentation that covered up structural inconsistencies at the heart of the project's narrative; for example an unexplained radical change in approach.

The lack of capability to deliver big IT projects, according to the interviewees, was both individual and organizational. Big, difficult projects needed to be 'led' by capable sponsors who spent significant time grappling with the many issues that might beset such a project, but in Government the SROs selected to sponsor projects had too many other things on their agenda. Even if good people were found from the private sector, the organizational constraints of Government would make them realise that they could not succeed, and they would consequently leave. As Eva the auditor put it: "it's that whole environment.... it inhibits delivery". In addition, interviewees stated that Government had a weak understanding of its business and insufficient internal

self-discipline to execute difficult projects which required a high degree of change in working practices, organizational structures or citizen behaviour.

The system of audit and scrutiny, according to the participants, was not designed to “fix” challenged IT projects. As Daniel, the PAC member said, it was unreasonable for Government to expect a part-time committee of MPs to detect flaws in the Government’s projects. The PAC’s role was to hold Government to account, not to diagnose its problems and second-guess its management. The actors in the system of audit and accountability (here termed ‘the auditors’) did express frustration at what they described as the inability of Government to make systemic changes that would improve the outcomes of these projects. Their frustration at seeing so many challenged projects was apparent in their accounts and in the formal reports that they published. Their prescriptions for success did not seem revolutionary; hire and retain better people, adhere to processes and build and maintain coherence with stakeholders; but since these prescriptions had been detailed on many occasions, auditors expressed doubts that the execution of these projects would ever be improved. Instead they attributed failure to systemic weaknesses which were linked to institutional factors special to Government. These shortcomings were described with what I interpret as resignation; that these weaknesses were so deep-rooted and embedded in the way that the civil service and Ministers interact with each other and with Parliament, that they could never be addressed; and thus some level of project failure was inevitable.

5.6 Analysing Power Relations impacting and flowing from the narratives

5.6.1 Introduction

The characteristics of the system of power relations between these groups and individuals can be seen in the way they talk about their work and about project failure. Firstly, all of them are constructing their identities within their narratives and legitimising their roles. By doing this they are also legitimising their 'didactic' narratives regarding project failure. Secondly, they are also clarifying the limits of their influence. The project manager, being one individual, says that he or she can only do so much to avoid project failure. The project reviewer describes a struggle against obfuscation and imbalances in the relationship with the reviewed entity that limits the ability to diagnose incipient project failure. Finally, the project auditor declares that the way that Government organizes its resources to executes projects is flawed and that as this is something that the auditors cannot change, failure of a proportion of IT projects is to be expected.

Using Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2013) this section looks at the three narratives (those of the project managers, project reviewers and the auditors) under the headings: *Emergence* (how and why are narratives constructed); *Hegemony* (how is the underlying system of power relations reflected in the narratives); *Recontextualization* (how are superordinate narratives adapted to this particular context); and *Operationalisation* (how is discourse translated into action). The construction, dissemination and translation into action of the narratives reflect the system of power relations in play during the project.

5.6.2 Emergence - How and why were the narratives constructed?

The narratives collected here were all constructed during interviews where the interviewees were given the broad topic of interest (IT project failure) and were asked to volunteer relevant stories. The narratives were offered in response to the questions of the interviewer, though many of the accounts and anecdotes arose seemingly without direct prompting by questions.

The project managers were asked to reflect on projects from their work experience that had been deemed a failure and to offer reasons why those projects did not 'succeed'. The project managers related stories of their own projects and broadly conformed to the principle of 'external attribution' identified by Standing et al. (2006). According to their accounts, the root causes of project failure are insurmountable externally imposed obstacles. While the projects failed, the individuals did not. The project managers' narratives contain retrospective self-justification, which is evidence of impression management or of sensemaking (or both). The project managers are saying to the interviewer, and through the interviewer to the readers of this thesis that they are experienced professionals, and although these projects failed, it was not (entirely) their fault. If anything, that fact that they have experienced setbacks strengthens their claim to talk authoritatively about project failure as they have experienced it.

Project reviewers were also asked to reflect on project failures. Reviewers were asked to pick on situations that were 'difficult' to diagnose and reflect on why they were difficult. Their accounts stressed the value of their deductive powers, with reliance on intuition and experience. This was an endorsement of their personal value to the system. For reviewers, the root causes of project failure include not only people and process shortcomings but also political

action by others. Political action, however, was difficult to evidence and it was thus more difficult for reviewers explicitly to attribute failure to this cause. The reviewers' task was to test the project's narrative and identify gaps and inconsistencies; then recommend corrective action to lower the risk of project failure. The reviewers' own narrative concerned the difficulty of their task when confronted with a complex project situation and a set of overlapping and conflicting accounts of status. They were also concerned about their ability to make recommendations 'stick', attributing this to power imbalances with the project owners and sponsors.

The auditors describe a similar process of inquiry to the reviewers, albeit with a different purpose. Their formal accounts are constructed as part of the process of parliamentary scrutiny. Their informal accounts, taken from interviews, stress the difficulty of arriving at a supportable, evidenced view of project status, even with the access granted by statutory powers. The parliamentarians of the committee indicate similar difficulties driven by shortage of time and inadequacy of expertise. For auditors and parliamentarians, the root cause of project failure is not people or process failures, but the 'system', the Government environment that allows, condones or enables these people and process failures. This environment includes the political activity of various actors.

The auditors' reports seek to justify their role (and the £70m annual cost of the NAO) as impartial guardians of public money. The Public Accounts Committee is a group of politicians, although as a cross-bench committee they said that they sought to avoid partisan judgements. They declare that their role is to demonstrate that the legislature is successfully holding the administration to account on behalf of the taxpayer (Hodge, 2016, p. 21).

All three groups are thus engaging in identity work by recounting these narratives. Their anecdotes of failure are evidence of their right to talk authoritatively about these topics and illustrate their didactic ‘points’ – that failure is caused by shortcomings in people, poorly applied processes or disruptive politics. The individuals also establish their credentials to discuss these topics, by describing their experience of project failure, direct and indirect.

5.6.3 Hegemony - which narratives come to be dominant and why?

In looking at hegemonic effects, in Fairclough’s (2013, p. 19) terms the analysis is:

Showing how different discourses are brought into dialogue and contestation within processes of strategic struggle

While there are many narratives ‘in play’ in and around the research site, this section addresses the three synthesized narratives of the groups of project actors. It gives a condensed interpretation of how these synthesized narratives portray ‘processes of strategic struggle’ and thus reflect on how a narrative of the project’s outcome becomes ‘dominant’, whether it is of success or failure.

The project managers’ narrative combines the ‘professionalisation’ narrative critiqued by Hodgson (2002) and accounts of improvisational bricolage (Leybourne, 2009), described by the managers as their response to uncertainty. The reviewers’ narrative has been characterized here as a ‘detective story’, although that is also cloaked with the respectability of a measured, professional approach. Finally, the auditors justify their work by suggesting that public scrutiny helps the system ‘converge’ on better ways of undertaking these large IT projects.

There are several places where the narrative of the project managers describes their part in a 'strategic struggle'. These start with the orientation, where the badge of the 'professional' is an entry qualification to the role. In this role the project manager will exert control because of their ability to shape elements of the formal project narrative – plans, job descriptions, status reports – and also exercise political influence less formally, by, for example, engaging in the 'emotional discourse' surrounding the project. Complications described by the project manager include the 'shackles' imposed by governance and assurance processes that seek to control their freedom of action, but the project manager may lose control in any event if a central body (such as GDS) 'gets its hands' on the project and insists that it be executed a certain way. Then there is a contest to find out who has the 'bigger boots' or who is most effective at influencing. A test of influence will be the ability to keep a project 'alive' in the face of adversity, and then if the central body 'has the ascendancy' in power relations with the project sponsors, the project can be labelled a failure.

Project reviewers describe contributing to this struggle by producing MPA reports as 'informed' commentaries on the project. In the reviewers' account, once they had interrogated the project narrative and worked out whether they believed the witnesses, they had to assess if the people in charge of the project 'had control' or were at the mercy of other 'political' forces. Having landed on a verdict, the reviewers then were concerned over whether the MPA had "sufficient teeth" to make a successful intervention, or whether because "the project sponsor.... has so much more authority than the reviewer" the sponsoring Department could continue to "mark its own homework" and not tell Ministers, who "just wanted to be told good news" that their project was in danger of failing. Sometimes persistence was necessary as demonstrated by a

project where it took “nine months to shut it down” even after being labelled a “plain failure”.

Project auditors also participated in this struggle by producing audit reports, whose effect they said was amplified by the other components of the ‘Audit Cycle’ which were PAC and other Select Committee hearings, PAC reports and subsequent Government commitments to address the faults in their projects. NAO staff said that their body was “very much taken seriously” albeit only “in some areas”. As a complication the auditors had to penetrate a “unified front” as the project used the “strategic consistency” of its narrative as a shield. In circumstances where “the story is not quite straight” and the auditor was certain that a “powerplay” was taking place, it was still difficult to name and shame political actors because in this area of the project narrative, actors would take care to “have the story quite well arranged”. The clearance process could lead to reports where wording was “smoothed.... back to acceptable things that no one's going to be too upset by.... written in fairly anodyne language”. Political action – “powerplay” was inevitable and might be expected in any environment, but because the public sector lacked “organizational discipline” it was difficult to counteract. “Vested interests” could successfully oppose change and lead to the label of project failure.

Project narratives themselves were also subject to hegemonic effects. Projects, and thus project narratives were expected to comply with certain standards and pass ‘evaluation’ (Foucault, 1984), an exercise in normalisation. Project reviews were kept confidential to ensure that interviewees could speak with candour but were exceptionally published following Freedom of Information requests or, on one occasion, a special motion in the House of Commons. Auditors’ reports were ‘cleared’ with the Department sponsoring

the project (Sharma, 2007), a process that was meant to avoid any disagreement over facts in front of the PAC but which in practice led to critical remarks being toned down. Even the free-speaking PAC occasionally had to water down its criticism of the Government as a majority of the Committee members were MPs from the governing party (Hodge, 2016, p. 27).

In summary there is considerable evidence within the narratives of Fairclough's "strategic struggle" both where narratives are used in the exercise of power relations and where shaping and reshaping of narratives has taken place because of power relations. The narrative of project outcome that becomes dominant will depend on how this set of contesting forces achieves resolution; and even that resolution might be temporary, as new 'facts' emerge and fresh voices construct new narratives of project 'reset' and redemption. These dynamics will be explored further in the case studies of Chapters 6 and 7.

5.6.4 Recontextualisation - How are wider, superordinate narratives translated and interpreted in this context?

Two 'superordinate' narratives are discussed here as they have relevance to the wider field of IT project execution in Government and they were referenced in the accounts of several of the interviewees. The first of these superordinate narratives is the continuing narrative that the failure of large Government IT projects is predictable and inevitable, and the other is that continuing influence of the narrative of New Public Management (Hood, 1991) on the system of projects and project execution.

The inevitable failure of Government IT projects was a narrative produced by, among others, the PAC and supported by the media, thinktanks and industry commentators. As Richard Bacon MP, deputy chair of the PAC put it (Bacon and Hope, 2013, p. 218):

Government IT projects seem to have an endless capacity to go wrong

The impact of this narrative was that every Government IT project was critiqued in a similar way by reviewers, auditors and others. Often this criticism used the language of a joint document published by the NAO and the forerunner of the MPA, the Office of Government Commerce (OGC) which listed contained what the authors considered to be the eight common causes of project failure (OGC/NAO, 2005, p. 1) This document owed much to Pinto and Slevin (1988) and similar lists of critical success factors. As an example, the first of the eight common causes listed in this document was:

Lack of clear links between the project and the organization's key strategic priorities, including agreed measures of success.

The document does not go far beyond this surface level – it does not discuss why there should be such a disconnect between the project and its host organization, or indeed why an organization should embark on a project which it did not support and then choose not to measure its results. The PAC's frustration at the perceived continuing failure of Government to fix seemingly straightforward shortcomings was reflected in the language it used, including terms such as "weak client" (PAC, 2015a, p. 3) and "an appalling Whitehall fiasco" (PAC, 2016, p. 1).

Some interviewees advanced reasons why in their view, Government was institutionally poor at the execution of large IT projects. As discussed in earlier sections one Minister was convinced that the lack of "organizational discipline" was the root of Government's problems. Other issues mentioned in the narrative included the overenthusiastic use of governance and assurance processes, described as "kind of treachery". The impact of national politics was also apparent, as some instructions had to be carried out because "Ministers

had decreed that”. It was also claimed that it was difficult, because of pay restraints, to recruit suitably qualified people and consequently capability was “woefully poor”. Even bringing in managers with private sector experience was not a panacea, as they would have to learn the special features of the environment or they would “come a cropper”.

Other interviewees discussed systemic issues, such as “a tendency in Government to ignore something that you’re not comfortable with” and suppress bad news. On another project, as recounted by one reviewer, the SRO did not want to receive bad news. When asked why, the reviewer replied:

Because he knew he was up for promotion; going for jobs in the civil service, bigger and better things, and it worked.... and the project ran into the buffers after he left.

The perceived tendency of senior civil servants to move posts before ‘failure’ becomes the dominant narrative had been criticised by the PAC many times (Hodge, 2016, p. 353).

The auditors also had doubts about the capability of ‘the system’ after seeing many Departmental failures over an extended period, compounded by a seeming inability to learn from these mistakes. One PAC report (2015a, p. 6) concluded:

Whitehall is not learning from past failures in IT projects, and is still repeating the same mistakes.

Eva, the auditor, went so far as to say that “fundamental” change was “really nearly impossible in Government” as managers did not understand their organizations sufficiently well or have the capability to lead them through periods of change.

The impact of the superordinate narratives can be seen in the framing of local narratives. If Government was poor at running projects, and especially IT projects, why should this project be any different? If the people running projects were competent, why were they not earning more money in the private sector? Unless some of the fundamental characteristics of the public sector (accountability, transparency, political oversight and benign, if onerous HR practices) changed, then none of the actors expected an improvement in the performance of IT projects.

A second superordinate narrative was recontextualised in the narratives of project managers, researchers and auditors. While the majority of participants in the study would not recognise the term “New Public Management” (NPM), nonetheless elements of this narrative found their way into the realm of projects and project evaluation. NPM represented the credo of the entrepreneurial state, (Veenswijk and Hakvoort, 2002), and the principal means by which NPM found its way into the world of major IT projects was an increased focus on performance measurement.

One such measurement, albeit a subjective one, was the RAG rating assigned by the MPA during Project Assessment Reviews. These ratings represented the level of delivery confidence of the review team and are detailed in Table 4.1. The MPA published an annual report which revealed the ratings for most of the projects in its portfolio. The implication, in support of the MPA’s narrative, was that the MPA’s interventions, including the leadership training described below, was improving the value of the portfolio of projects by increasing delivery confidence year on year.

Other attempts were made to introduce measurement into the narrative surrounding projects. Projects at one level can be seen as economic

mechanisms to convert capital into assets or outcomes. If project management was getting better, then the efficiency of capital conversion should go up; yet an MPA manager admitted that they had no good benchmarks (thus no idea of how efficient they were today), and an inability to get an accurate view of the value of what outcomes or benefits were flowing from investment, in some cases because of “wilful obfuscation” of the Departments owning the projects. While the narrative of NPM found expression in the establishment and actions of the MPA, there is also evidence of a counter-narrative of resistance on the part of the reviewed Departments.

5.6.5 Operationalisation - How are the narratives translated into actions?

The operationalisation of this last metanarrative, NPM is described here, as it also has wider application to the case studies analysed in Chapters 6 and 7. This operationalisation saw the introduction by the MPA of ‘leadership’ training, later mandated for all SROs of major projects in the Government’s portfolio.

Brookes (2011) talks about the need to replace New Public Management with New Public *Leadership*, saying that only through leadership can the culture changes needed for full implementation of the NPM vision be achieved. Leadership, however, may be a two-edged sword; a ‘leadership’ narrative implies a level of agential independence that will conflict with the managerialist, controlling intent of NPM (Hall, 2013) . Nonetheless, the MPA decided in 2011 to strengthen its narrative of improving project performance by investing heavily in developing a course at an external business school, in the style of an executive MBA. This initiative was named the Major Projects Leadership Academy (MPLA). The MPLA was supported by Departments who bought places for trainees at £30,000 each. By 2017 over 300 trainees had

graduated from this leadership course. The narrative of the MPA had diverged from the instrumental, process-driven project management of its predecessor organisation (OGC, 2010) to a nominally more holistic set of skills named 'project leadership'. The MPA stated that it was critical that project sponsors and project managers acquired these skills and graduation from the course became a prerequisite for becoming the SRO for a major project.

5.7 Summary

The narratives of project managers, project reviewers and auditors, at a high level, all attributed IT project failure to challenges with people, processes and politics. There were some differences of emphasis between the groups as to why these challenges arose and what, if anything, could be done to address them.

Project managers stated that they needed more than 'technical' skills to manage their projects; they also needed political nous and excellent influencing skills. Project managers also exercised influence by creating a convincing project narrative that gave their stakeholders reason to trust them. They described project failure as due to circumstances outside their control, often involving political activity.

Reviewers' reports could be explicit about shortcomings in process or people, but rarely if ever mentioned politics. The strategic response of the reviewers to people's shortcomings was to train managers to be 'leaders', preparing these individuals better to be able to recognise and deal with political situations. It was difficult for the authors of review reports to attribute failure to political activity. Such a diagnosis required subjectivity and judgement, would be challenging to evidence, and might itself be politically unacceptable. Reviewing was described as a search for inconsistencies in the project narrative

requiring deduction rather than just inspection. Reviewers were concerned about making recommendations stick because of the capability of larger Departments to ignore them.

Auditors also saw project failure in terms of people and process shortcomings, but attributed these failings to wider systemic problems – the Government had failed to recruit and train the ‘right’ people or devise and implement ‘effective’ processes. Auditors expressed concerns that the whole system of executing IT projects in Government was incapable of reform owing to lack of organizational capability and discipline. Within the political forum of a Select Committee, members could also attribute shortcomings to political action or inaction.

The reviewers of the MPA and the auditors of the NAO were in some respect intermediaries. Their position in the system of power relations was to bridge between the project and the bodies which could pronounce definitively on the success or failure of the project. MPA reports informed the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury and conditioned their view of the project narrative. NAO reports fed the PAC and the wider system of public and parliamentary scrutiny. The NAO and MPA reports were themselves narratives of interpretation and the subject of power relations between the project, the hosting Department and the reviewing or auditing body.

The system of power relations revealed by Critical Discourse Analysis of the narratives exposes a political battleground, where the struggle between project managers and others is intense and the project narrative plays a crucial part. Project execution is a power game played between, on the one hand, the Departments sponsoring the project, as represented by the SRO and the project manager, and on the other hand central units that tussle with the

Departments for influence, reviewers that seek to discover the ‘true’ status of the project while there is still time to fix it, and auditors who perform post-mortem examination and try to ascertain the cause of project death.

Narratives and counter-narratives are deployed by all sides to justify their actions and extend their influence. The formal reports produced by the reviewers and auditors contained little direct evidence of these struggles, whether because of convention (for example the clearance process), self-restraint or because project actors went to some lengths to avoid admitting or revealing evidence of political action.

Observing these struggles were the increasingly sceptical members of the PAC. They described these machinations as evidence that the ‘system’ was dysfunctional, and the public sector had unique features that made it less able to execute big IT projects than equivalent private sector bodies. These factors supported the PAC’s longstanding narrative that Government IT projects were doomed to end in failure.

6. Analysis II – Universal Credit

6.1 Introduction and structure of this chapter

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse a single IT project as a case study, and by analysing how narratives of its success and failure were constructed, understand something of the system of power relations that led to these ascriptions. This project was the implementation of an IT system to support the introduction of a new benefit, Universal Credit (UC). The chapter identifies and analyses two distinct narratives of this project. One narrative describes the ‘official’ view of the IT project, as given in published reports prepared by reviewers from the MPA, auditors from the NAO and parliamentarians from Select Committees of the House of Commons. This narrative is termed the ‘Official Verdict’ in the analysis because it is taken from these published sources and influenced the course of public debate on the project. The second narrative is taken primarily from interviews of project actors conducted as primary research for this thesis. It is termed the ‘Inside View’ as it contains statements about the project and project actors that were not intended for publication. Although the two narratives overlap in some areas, many of the observations of these ‘insider’ project actors were not reflected in the ‘Official Verdict’ narrative.

As discussed in Chapter 4 on Methods and Research Approach, the analysis first uses Labov’s (1972) structural analysis techniques to segment the ‘Official Verdict’ and the ‘Inside View’ narratives, then uses some of the techniques of Critical Discourse Analysis (van Dijk, 1993; Fairclough, 2003, 2013) to enable interpretation of the narratives regarding power relations in and around the project. This analysis focuses on the discussion of project events in 2013 when both narratives agree that the project was in danger of being labelled a failure.

The contrasting attributions of causality for the status of the project at this point are examined, together with differing accounts of the path to ‘recovery’. This chapter will argue that the narrative of the ‘Official Verdict’ largely accepts the DWP’s story of recovery after a ‘near-death experience’ for UC, and the Cabinet Office’s story that it played an entirely positive role in this recovery. The alternative ‘Inside View’ narrative portrays the Cabinet Office intervention as a bid for control at a point when the project and the DWP had been weakened, and may be seen as a reaction by insiders to the attempt to portray the Cabinet Office’s role as wholly beneficial and disinterested. This alternative narrative suggests that the DWP successfully fought off this bid for control and resumed work, albeit at a slower pace, continuing with a slightly modified form of its original approach. The ‘Official Verdict’ became the dominant Government account of the project but was contested by alternative accounts published in the press (Malik, 2013; Wright, 2013) and by an influential thinktank (Timmins, 2016).

The synthesised narratives cover the period 2010-2018 but include more detail on events in 2012 and 2013, when both describe moments of crisis for the project. A detailed list of UC events is given in Appendix G. The sources for the two narratives are identified in figure 6.1 below. The sources include Major Projects Authority (MPA) Project Assessment Reviews (PARs). PARs were not usually published, but these particular reports were released in 2018 following a long Freedom of Information campaign by activists and a special Parliamentary motion for a ‘Humble Address to the Sovereign’ (Hansard, 2017).

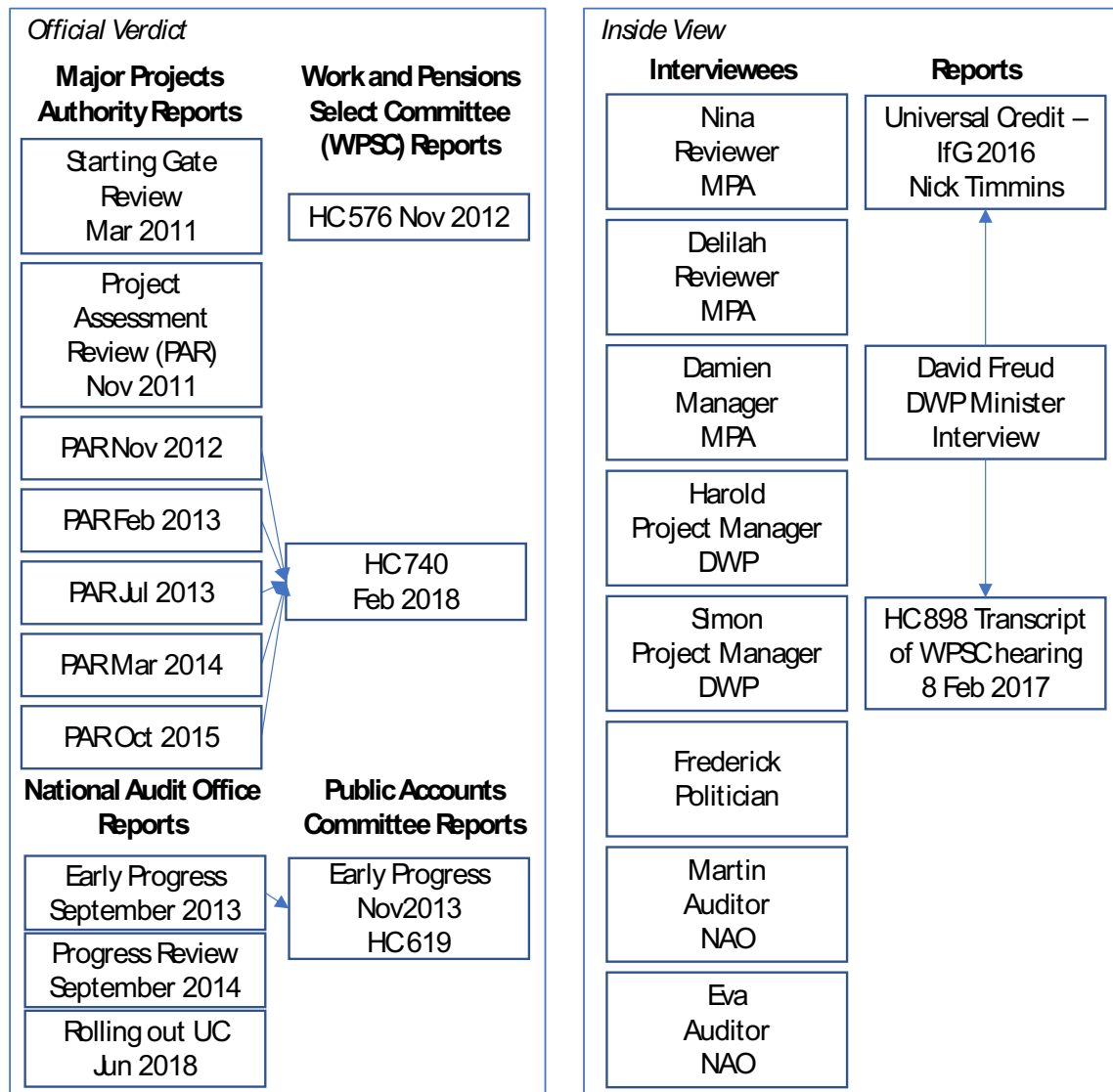


Figure 6.1 - Sources for UC Narratives

This chapter uses the term programme to describe the temporary organization formed for the purposes of implementing all aspects of Universal Credit (UC) including devising the policy (the complex rules regarding who got what and when), drafting the necessary legislation and taking it through Parliament, and crucially, building a new business system to administer the new benefit. This chapter uses the term project or IT project to refer to the temporary organization set up for the purpose of building the new IT systems necessary to

support this business system. This work was a subset of the effort covered by the UC programme.

Over the period examined by the thesis, many government and parliamentary bodies had an interest in UC and several officials and politicians are mentioned in the narratives. A list of acronyms of government bodies used in the thesis is at Appendix H and a list of the principal actors in the UC narratives is included at Appendix I.

As stated earlier the two narratives describe many of the same events; but portray them in quite different ways. The 'Official Verdict' describes a failure of management, what other narrators in Chapter 5 might label a failure due to people (and their lack of capability) and/or a failure of process (due to poor choices of development methods). The 'Inside View' describes a power struggle for control of the project. The overall structure of the two narratives, highlighting key points of difference, is shown in Table 6.1 below. Both narratives have been synthesised by the author using Labov's (1972) structure of six elements (an abstract followed by orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution and coda) as discussed in Chapter 4 (Methods). The primary sources for the 'Official Verdict' include the reports written by the MPA, NAO and PAC and transcripts of PAC and WPSC hearings. The sources for the 'Inside View' are transcripts of research interviews and quotations from another key actor, the DWP Minister in direct charge of UC.

In the sections that follow, the two narratives are analysed side by side, with an emphasis on understanding where they agree and where they diverge. The narratives are then examined to identify how they reflect or enact power relations in and around the project. A brief summary concludes the chapter.

TABLE 6.1 - OVERALL STRUCTURE OF THE TWO NARRATIVES OF UC

Narrative element	The Official Verdict	The Inside View
Abstract	Following near failure in 2013, the IT project to develop new software for Universal Credit was reset by the Cabinet Office then handed back to DWP.	During a period of hiatus, the Cabinet Office tried to seize control of the UC IT project. This attempt was rebuffed and control was retained by DWP.
Orientation	In developing UC, the DWP undertook to follow Government IT Policy and make the new system Digital by Default so that all claims and changes of circumstances would be handled online.	Driven by the accelerated timetable for introduction of the new benefit, the DWP used 'Agile' methods and developed software before the policy or business requirements were settled.
Complication	Following its 'Red' review rating of the project, the MPA was asked to reorganise and replan UC, an exercise termed a 'reset' and led personally by the head of the MPA.	During the 'reset', GDS seized control of the software development and started again from scratch. When the DWP resumed control, it questioned the need to throw away pre-existing software.

Narrative element	The Official Verdict	The Inside View
Resolution	The software developed in 2011-12 was deployed as a pilot and renamed the 'live' service, adapting it as lessons were learned from live cases. This approach was called 'Test and Learn'. The 'reset' was acclaimed as a success	After losing a battle for control of the software development GDS withdrew from the IT project at the end of 2013. The DWP continued to use software developed in 2011-12 while completing the software started by GDS.
Coda	In a 'Twin-Track' approach DWP continued developing the GDS software as the 'digital' service alongside the pre-existing 'live' service.	In 2018, several years after the original target date the 'digital' service was finally fully developed and deployed.

Narrative element	The Official Verdict	The Inside View
Evaluation	The unrealistic timetables set at the outset led to a false start. The 'reset' by Cabinet Office successfully restarted the project and it continued under DWP leadership to a revised, more realistic schedule	The original project narrative had been believed by Ministers and senior DWP officials because the pressure for quick results had led to a 'no bad news' culture. Having come close to failure, the timetable pressure was released and the project continued at a sustainable pace.

6.2 Abstract - What was Universal Credit?

This narrative element summarises the main points of each of the two narratives. The Abstracts of both narratives are presented for side by side comparison, with the Official Verdict presented first, then the Inside View, then a brief analysis. This structure is followed for all other narrative elements.

6.2.1 Official Verdict - Abstract

Universal Credit (UC) was the largest programme in the largest Government department, the DWP (NAO, 2013b). Within the UC programme, in 2011 DWP set up a major IT development project to build the new systems needed. The planned investment made it the single largest IT project in Government. After a Major Projects Authority (MPA) review in early 2013 heavily criticised the whole UC programme, the head of the MPA was asked personally to take over leadership on a temporary basis and undertake a “programme reset” (NAO, 2013b, p. 6). When control returned to the DWP in May 2013 there were two incomplete suites of software, one developed in 2011-12 by the DWP’s suppliers and another started by the Government Digital Service (GDS) in 2013. The project was resumed on a less ambitious timetable, and continued developing both software suites in parallel. This new approach was called ‘Twin-Track’.

6.2.2 Inside View - Abstract

Traditionally policy for a new benefit would be developed before coding of the IT system started, but to shorten timescales for Universal Credit (UC), DWP adopted a different ‘Agile’ approach and worked on both policy development and software development in parallel. Consequently, a large amount of software was developed in 2011-12 without a settled policy or business

requirement. A new Chief Information Officer (CIO) arrived at the DWP in late 2012 and prompted a rethink. Key project leaders were removed. Following the sudden death of the CIO, the MPA, a unit of the Cabinet Office, reviewed the programme and wrote a highly critical report. The MPA was then given temporary control of the whole programme including the IT project.

During this period of hiatus, the DWP's development of UC software was halted and a prototype of a new system was built by GDS, another unit of the Cabinet Office. GDS proposed that this prototype be expanded into a new 'digital' system that would replace all the software previously developed for UC in 2011-12. There then followed a power struggle between GDS and the DWP. When this struggle was resolved in the DWP's favour GDS withdrew its staff from the UC project.

6.2.3. Abstract - Analysis

The 'Official Verdict' portrays the decisions that were taken on how to complete the software development as driven by business need, value for money and good engineering practice. There is no mention in this managerialist account of the intense interdepartmental conflict described in the 'Inside View'.

6.3 Orientation – the biggest change in welfare in decades

The orientation element provides background to the narrative and sets it in time and place. Key characters are introduced. For UC, this element orientates the audience to the aims of the programme and the new IT system that would be used to administer it.

6.3.1 Official Verdict - Orientation

Following the General Election in May 2010, Iain Duncan Smith was appointed Secretary of State for Work and Pensions with a mission to reform the benefits

system for people of working age (Brien, 2009). Duncan Smith wanted to replace six existing benefits with a new, single benefit, Universal Credit (UC). In November 2010 DWP published a White Paper setting out the main points of the reform, and Duncan Smith commented in its introduction (DWP, 2010, p. 1):

Successive governments have ignored the need for fundamental welfare reform, not because they didn't think that reform was needed but because they thought it too difficult to achieve

By early 2011 the DWP had started work with the aim of beginning to roll out the benefit in October 2013. It was intended that around 8 million households (nearly one in three) in the United Kingdom would be claiming UC by October 2017. UC's ambitious objective was that claimants would have access to "full online services that will deliver a more automated, informative and responsive service for recipients" (DWP, 2010, p. 34). In a country where a quarter of adults and half of teenagers already had a smartphone (Ofcom, 2011) the internet was becoming the preferred way of performing financial transactions. If you could access your bank account and pay your bills online, said the policy's architects, why should you not be able to claim benefits online? This approach was aligned to the Digital by Default IT policy of the new Government (GDS, 2012) as drawn up by the Government Digital Service (GDS), a unit formed in 2011 to revolutionise the way that Government used the internet to transact with citizens and businesses.

The targets for introducing and fully deploying UC (DWP, 2010) were highly challenging. No comparable Government IT system had ever been built so quickly. The traditional or 'waterfall' model of IT development is a serial, time consuming process and starts with a statement of requirements. This is

followed by the production of a fully worked out design and only then is code written. Since the late 1990s innovators had been working on alternative methods of software production where code is produced incrementally, with the direct involvement of the owners of the requirement and the ultimate users of the system. The UC programme turned to these ‘Agile’ methods, which have been described in more detail in Section 4.4, in the hope that they would build a working system more quickly than more traditional methods. ‘Agile’ methods were also consistent with the GDS narrative of ‘Digital by Default’.

The MPA pointed out in a ‘starting gate review’ at the very beginning of the project in March 2011 (MPA, 2011b) that there were risks to UC in using the ‘Agile’ approach, as no-one in Government had used this approach on a project of this size and complexity before. In addition, policy teams in the DWP were still thinking through the overall workings of the new benefit, including its deep social impacts and the way new incentives might change the behaviour of claimants. The MPA reviewers were concerned that later changes specified by these policy teams would be difficult to retrofit to the software, but the MPA accepted DWP assurances that the ‘Agile’ methods in use would cope. The MPA concluded “that the foundations for a delivery Programme are in place” (MPA, 2011b, p. 5).

The Work and Pensions Select Committee (WPSC) was, however, concerned that the decision to make UC ‘Digital by Default’ was flawed, and in November 2012 said (WPSC, 2012):

We fully support the Government’s ambition to promote greater Digital Inclusion and offer an online process for claiming Universal Credit. However the presumption of ‘digital by default’ which the Government

proposed may face real challenges. The Government must also accept that some people may never be able to claim online, and must provide alternative means of access to meet their needs effectively.

In spite of the doubts expressed by both the MPA and the Select Committee, by the middle of 2012 the IT project had developed thousands of lines of new software.

6.3.2 Inside View - Orientation

The introduction of Universal Credit (UC) in 2010 presented an opportunity for the DWP. Tax Credits had been given to HMRC to administer as a sort of ‘negative income tax’ by Gordon Brown in 2003. DWP officials were eager to regain control of this large element of welfare spending, and UC would replace Tax Credits. In addition, Iain Duncan Smith, the incoming Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, saw UC as his flagship project and his political swansong (Porter and Riddell, 2010). This meant that he needed to have a system that would be difficult to unpick by the predicted end of the Parliament in May 2015. To achieve this aim UC would need to be in use by a significant proportion of the target population within three years of the new Welfare Bill becoming law in March 2012 (Parliament, 2012).

The traditional way to introduce a new benefit was to define the policy (the rules that say who is entitled to what and when) and then design the business system (the processes by which claimants apply, claims are assessed and benefits paid). Only then would work start on writing new software. Simon, a veteran DWP IT manager, described how long such a development would take:

I provided an estimate.... which said this is going to take us about five years.... There was a discussion that said five years was.... ridiculously long and that he [Iain Duncan Smith] had some advisers in he was

saying this could be done in 18 months and we needed to adoptan Agile methodology....

The UC programme could only be confident of political sponsorship up to the next General Election in May 2015. Consequently, Simon's 'establishment view' of a five-year project was rejected and UC project managers chose to develop the software using an 'Agile' methodology, allowing code to be written in parallel with work on policy and process design. In early 2011 the DWP hired special external 'Agile coaches' to teach everyone concerned how to work in this radically different way. No-one in the DWP had significant experience of using 'Agile' methods, and no-one in Government, or possibly even in the UK had used 'Agile' on such a large development.

As well as providing a new paradigm for software development, 'Agile' represented a radical departure from the conventional way in which large projects had been managed. If the project had followed the traditional 'waterfall' method then a firm plan would have been written for the whole project before writing any software. Instead, adopting 'Agile' methods, the project developed software incrementally in a series of 'Sprints' which were limited by time rather than functional content. According to Simon, this approach had been sold to Duncan Smith as the only way to develop this large body of software in the available time.

Some interviewees were suspicious of this approach. Those outside the project described the immense amount of resources devoted to writing software but expressed doubts that all these resources were being used to good effect. The reviewers of the MPA had concerns about the project, but said that the reviews that the MPA had undertaken (2011a, 2012) had failed to penetrate the self-confident narrative promoted by the project's managers. The project

developed a reputation for insularity which earned it the nickname “Fortress UC”. Damien, an MPA manager later reflected on this period:

Yeah well it started as a policy announced by a minister on television one Sunday morning and then it became a project on Monday.... and we [the MPA] never got a handle on it.... we undercooked it [MPA oversight of the project], there's no question about that.

Damien was speaking with hindsight, and his post-hoc attribution of causality for the project’s difficulties was that it was started in an unseemly rush with insufficient assurance. By May 2012 the MPA rated the project as ‘Amber-Red’ (MPA, 2012) and the language the reviewers used in their report was cautious, suggesting that much of the software had been written before the policy had been defined, and thus there was a risk that it would need to be modified later or scrapped.

6.3.3 Orientation - Analysis

The ‘Official Verdict’ portrays the start of the project as having made a seemingly good start to achieve idealistic and ambitious aims, although doubts soon arose about whether these aims could be achieved at such a challenging pace. The main risk mentioned by the parliamentarians of the WPSC was whether benefits claimants could get access to the internet, not whether the software could be developed on time. In private reports, not published until 2018, the reviewers of the MPA were suggesting that the software development was falling behind schedule.

The ‘Inside View’ identifies two potential conflicts between the ‘established’ way of doing things and the direction that the project managers had chosen to take. Insiders suggested that the DWP IT establishment, having produced its five-year estimate was side-lined as its ways of working were deemed ‘out of

date’. In addition the MPA was also side-lined as the reviewers’ views of what constituted ‘good project management’ – plans, risk registers, documentation – were not needed in the new ‘Agile’ world, and MPA reviewers could not get inside the ‘Fortress UC’ project to test whether the reported good progress presented by UC managers was merely rhetoric or could be evidenced.

Partly because of the overwhelmingly positive view of these managers, the voices of sceptics, both inside and outside the DWP, were not listened to. For outsiders, including the MPA’s reviewers, it was difficult to gain a view of what was happening inside the ‘Fortress’. The UC project managers had created a strong narrative of modernity and progress that maintained support amongst stakeholders. Simon, the veteran DWP IT manager described this narrative as a string of “childlike” good news stories. Ministers were taken to the development centre and told that coding on some elements was “80% done”. The point, however, was approaching when this positive narrative could no longer be sustained.

6.4 Complication - near failure and the subsequent reset

The complication element describes a series of events that lead to a crisis or turning point in the narrative.

6.4.1 Official Verdict - Complication

As 2012 progressed the narrative describes a gradual loss of confidence in the management of the UC IT project. In July 2012 Duncan Smith commissioned an internal ‘red team’ review of the project (although the existence of this review was not disclosed until December 2013 (WPSC, 2014)). Management changes were made, but when a scheduled review of the project was conducted by the MPA in February 2013 (MPA, 2013c) it reported a Delivery

Confidence Assessment rating of ‘Red’ meaning that if urgent steps were not taken, the project was very likely to fail. The MPA further said:

We recommend that further work should not proceed until the complete re-think of the delivery approach (e.g. Blueprint, business architecture, system architecture) is concluded.

In its report the MPA said that there was “no bridge between the high-level vision and the prolific detail in the programme”. Further, UC leadership had failed to produce or articulate the “blueprint”⁵ necessary to “turn vision into practical reality”. The MPA review team reported that they could not see what was to be achieved, how it was to be achieved, and, as there was no plan for the full programme, whether it was on track. By saying that “further work should not proceed” the MPA review team was asking HM Treasury to stop the flow of funds to the IT project and calling for a ‘complete rethink’ of the whole UC programme. The MPA was saying, as strongly as it could, that in its current form the project was destined to fail.

The MPA report also asserted that the major IT suppliers supporting DWP were “not in control” and were making large sums of money at the Government’s expense. These criticisms were later highlighted by Select Committees (WPSC, 2018):

In its November 2013 report, the PAC [Public Accounts Committee] found the programme had “a shocking absence of control” over its suppliers and had failed to “implement basic procedure for monitoring and authorising expenditure”.... Those suppliers were rewarded handsomely for ultimately pointless design and development work conducted without

⁵ End-to-end, quantified description of the business process, sometimes called Target Operating Model

clear sets of requirements or an overarching objective. Many millions of pounds of public money were wasted.

By describing their actions in this way, the 'Official Verdict' had placed at least some of the blame for failure with the suppliers. According to the MPA (2013c):

...there is a question around a professional duty of care on the part of the suppliers. To have continued, for a prolonged period of time, to accept instructions to develop software in the absence of a clear blueprint [for UC], is not acceptable behaviour and should be challenged

The misbehaviour of the suppliers is, in this extract, declared as evident by the reviewers. Surely 'professional' suppliers would not have accepted instructions (and money) from a client that had no real view of what it wanted?

HM Treasury stopped funding the programme and demanded a radical change of approach. The decision regarding what to do next was taken by the Major Projects Review Group (MPRG), a senior review body chaired jointly by HM Treasury and the Cabinet Office. The WPSC (2018) reported thus:

...the MPRG decided in February 2013 to pause the UC programme immediately, for three months. It appointed David Pitchford, then Executive Director of the MPA, as interim Chief Executive Officer of UC for that period, to "reset" the programme.

This move was unprecedented. The MPA's reports had informed the MPRG's decision, but the MPA reviewed projects and did not manage them; however, within a week, Pitchford had moved into the DWP's head office and started on a ninety-day programme to implement the 'reset'.

6.4.2 Inside View - Complication

In September 2012 a new Chief Information Officer (CIO), Philip Langsdale, started work at the DWP. He was an experienced CIO with no previous exposure to UC and no history in Government. Langsdale was sufficiently concerned about the project that within a week of joining the DWP he met Simon, one of his most senior project managers to discuss it. Simon recalls that Langsdale started by asking him “Do you know anything about this Universal Credit?” Simon replied:

I said.... I don't believe they can do it in the time frames they're doing it in, I don't believe they're really getting down to the real nitty-gritty of what needs to be done.... Langsdale went to the DWP board and went; “these people are mad doing this”....He.... put it as strongly as that. They told him to go away, that couldn't be the case because all these reviews are being done including one that had just been done by the Cabinet Office⁶; and it was all on track and tickety-boo

The DWP board did not initially believe that the project was in danger of failing, apparently because of the assurance performed by the MPA. When Langsdale went back to the board four weeks later with more evidence they decided to back his intervention. The programme director and the IT project manager were ‘relieved of their duties’ and within a few weeks both had left the DWP. Langsdale, supported by Simon and others started to review what had been done already and assess what was needed going forward, but at the end of December 2012, Langsdale, who had been suffering from Motor Neurone Disease, died suddenly.

⁶ Meaning the MPA

The project was now in an interregnum with an interim SRO and interim programme director. Within three weeks of Langsdale's death, a new MPA review team started an extended review of the project. The MPA team was augmented by two experienced IT leaders from the Government Digital Service (GDS). Delilah, one of the reviewers, said that the review team had an 'agenda' and was set up to justify specific conclusions:

So this [UC] had to be delivered in an Agile way and there were two GDS members of the review team whose express purpose was to find evidence that this was being done badly. It didn't take any genius to spot it because it was bleeding obvious

Delilah's conclusion was that the DWP staff in charge of the overall programme, the SRO and the programme director, didn't know enough about Agile and IT delivery generally. Delilah's language is technocratic; as an IT expert herself, she voiced the opinion that the project was managed by the wrong people using the wrong processes.

The outcome of the review was the worst possible assessment rating, a Red. Nina, a lead MPA reviewer said:

so nobody knew how they were operating. Just looking at it in behavioural terms, there were two or three people in the early stages who had really created a fiefdom and when we did the review people would talk to us about.... it's absolutely a steel palisade around that programme.... Yeah, Fortress UC.... and there [were] very cosy relationships with suppliers which were not properly controlled in any way

The success of the review team as recounted by Nina was to crack open the “steel palisade” of “Fortress UC” and uncover what was ‘really’ going on. One of the issues of concern was the large sums of money flowing to the major IT companies for software development. Frederick, a politician commented on this issue:

The people running it.... they were awful people and they were ... handing out money to.... all the usual suspects.... and they [the suppliers] were just filling their boots; it was just absolutely disgraceful!

Frederick’s assertion was that both the DWP and the suppliers were at fault; the DWP managers for handing out huge sums of money without defining what it was to be spent on, and the suppliers for accepting it. The managers that Langsdale had removed were thus, in Frederick’s account partially to blame for why the project had gone so wrong. The alleged poor behaviour of the suppliers and the nature of the DWP’s relationship with them would form a context for the later discussion on how the project should be taken forward.

The conclusions of the review team were discussed by ministers from DWP, HM Treasury and the Cabinet Office, who asked Pitchford, the head of the MPA, to take over the programme and ‘reset’ it. Despite Pitchford’s reservations (as reported by interviewees), he took the job and moved to the DWP’s headquarters for three months, with the documented mission of addressing the shortcomings that his reviewers had identified in UC.

Meanwhile a GDS team had set up a parallel IT development project to show the DWP (and other stakeholders) how Agile should ‘really’ be used to develop systems quickly. In three months GDS had developed a ‘proof of concept’ application that worked on mobile phones and would allow users to enter a very simple UC claim. This was demonstrated to Ministers, DWP officials, HM

Treasury and other stakeholders to attempt to persuade them that GDS should be allowed to continue and develop a full UC ‘digital’ service, and that the millions of pounds worth of UC software developed by the DWP and its big IT suppliers in 2011-12 should be thrown away and the expenditure written off.

Pitchford handed control of UC back to the DWP in May 2013. The DWP had two options – continue with the GDS-led new development and build the prototype out into a full ‘digital’ service, or salvage some of the millions of pounds worth of software that had already been written and continue working with the IT suppliers who had been so heavily criticised by the PAC and others. Harold, a DWP project manager, described the dilemma:

We’ve got.... 18 months to a general election; what do we want to do? Do we want to go down a route which says “trust us [GDS] we're going to come up with the great answer and we're going to redesign all of this; we’re going to do the whole lot, everything from scratch. We've never done it before; no one's ever done it before on this scale but we're going to be able to do it”. So I would be worried about risk there.

The resolution of this dilemma would involve a dispute at the most senior level of Government.

6.4.2 Complication – Analysis

In the Complication, the ‘Official Verdict’ frames the ‘reset’ as a necessary technocratic step to rescue the project from a near-death situation. It was clearly politically unacceptable to cancel the Government’s flagship welfare reform, and the collective resources of Government were turned towards finding an acceptable way forward. As the MPA had concluded (2013c), political support remained in place as Duncan Smith still strongly wanted the project to succeed. The ‘reset’ had to be led by someone who was trusted by

all the key Departments: DWP, Cabinet Office and HM Treasury. David Pitchford, head of the MPA and a Cabinet Office official, was the chosen leader. Direction of the project and its funding was taken away from the DWP and in an unprecedented step, given to an official from a different Department. The project, spending £20m each month and involving over 1000 people was 'paused' while Pitchford undertook the 'complete rethink' called for by his own reviewers.

The 'Inside View' gives a different view of this moment of crisis, and the background to the loss of confidence in the project within the DWP. Rather than being triggered by external reviews, the catalyst for change was the appointment of the new CIO, who did not believe the rhetoric of 'Fortress UC'. The Emperor inside Fortress UC turned out to have no clothes, and key UC managers were asked to leave the building. Before the DWP could put a recovery plan in place, the CIO died and in early 2013 the MPA reviewed a demoralised project with interim leadership and no direction. Unusually, the reviewers were then asked to steady the ship and 'reset' the project. During the 'reset', GDS saw an opportunity to further the broader narrative of Digital by Default. The 'reset' leaders provided money and political support for the development of 'proof of concept' software by GDS. GDS used the insights thus gained to develop a proposal to replace all of the software already developed for UC.

What both of the narratives agree on is that the new managers in charge of the project faced a key decision – whether to build on the IT that DWP had already spent a reported £303m developing or to start again from scratch with a new software concept developed by GDS. As Harold identifies, national politics had a bearing on this matter as well. Duncan Smith had been offered a move by

the Prime Minister, David Cameron, but refused it. He saw his political legacy as a reformed, working welfare system, substantially rolled out at the point that the country went to the polling stations in May 2015. The alternative scenario, of a delayed project, or worse, of a malfunctioning benefits system with unreliable software that underpaid claimants and left people in real need would not have been an electoral asset and was too risky to contemplate. The resolution of this dilemma is revealed below.

6.5 Resolution and Coda – recovery and restoration of confidence

In this section, two elements of the narratives are recounted. The resolution describes the outcome of the narrative, and shows how the dilemmas introduced by the complication were ‘resolved’. The coda continues the story beyond the events that are the immediate focus of the narratives and brings the story (more) up to date.

6.5.1 Official Verdict - Resolution

In April 2013 some of the software which had been developed by DWP’s contractors in 2011-12 was deployed in a limited pilot, called a ‘pathfinder’. This existing software, because it was in (albeit limited) use, was christened the ‘live’ service. Only the simplest cases could be processed; those involving single people with no children, no disability and no complex housing needs. Additional manual checking was performed to ensure that the benefits awards calculated by the system were in line with the regulations. By September 2013, according to the NAO (2013b), only 1000 cases were ‘on the system’. The amount of manual checking needed meant that in the opinion of the MPA the system was not scalable (PAC, 2013b, p. Ev 4).

Meanwhile the Government Digital Service (GDS), another unit of the Cabinet Office, had started a completely new UC software development from scratch.

It was claimed that this new development, in contrast to the ‘live’ service, would be scalable and secure. It was termed the ‘digital’ service.

Pitchford completed his reset by the end of May 2013 and handed control of the programme back to the DWP. Another MPA review in June 2013 (MPA, 2013b) reported on the achievements of the reset:

The Reset is acknowledged by all as having provided a necessary pause and opportunity to rethink. However.... much remains to be done in terms of detailed planning to take [the project] forward and timescales remain challenging.

This detailed planning work was to be undertaken by Howard Shiplee, the new SRO appointed by the DWP in May 2013 to replace Pitchford. Shiplee, whose previous job had been to build the 2012 Olympic Stadium, spent six months carrying out a detailed review and options appraisal. He then recommended a ‘Twin-Track’ approach, which meant that DWP would continue building the ‘digital’ service while enhancing the ‘live’ service to increase the number and variety of claimants that it could support.

This recommendation was considered by a ‘Ministerial Oversight Group’ in November 2013 (MPA, 2014). The group included DWP, HM Treasury and Cabinet Office Ministers. The decision of the group was reported by Iain Duncan Smith in a written ministerial statement to the House of Commons on 5 December 2013 (Hansard, 2013b). Shiplee’s recommendation had been adopted, and DWP took over development of the ‘digital’ service as well as the ‘live’ service’. The avowed purpose of the ‘live’ service was to gain experience with real cases and iteratively change the whole system, including policy, IT and business processes. This approach was called ‘Test and Learn’. The ‘live’ service did not just test the software but also supported what one interviewee

called “a huge social experiment on an epic scale”. The lessons learned in the pathfinder were meant to inform the development of the ‘digital’ service.

According to the WPSC (2018):

The Department argued that, through a “test and learn” approach, the live service would inform the development of the digital service. This method tested Universal Credit as it was gradually rolled out, to enable problems to surface.... The live service would also provide a contingency option should the digital service be delayed or fail.

By 2015 the programme had some momentum. Control had been returned to the DWP and 27,000 cases were on the ‘live’ service (DWP, 2015). As an election approached, Duncan Smith could claim that he had achieved his political intent. He further claimed that “analysis has found that the benefits of Universal Credit are statistically significant” and claimants were better off as a result (DWP, 2015, p. 5). This was a reform that would be hard for an incoming Government of a different political persuasion to roll back.

The WPSC (2018) included a coda for the end of the ‘official’ narrative, based on its analysis of the progress of the project. This was in the form of an elegiac reflection from Lord David Freud, who as junior DWP Minister was the architect of the policy and had spent six years trying to implement it (IFG, 2017):

So there are real issues in doing big change programmes, which I did not understand when I started. I now understand them better, but I think if I had understood those better earlier on, then I would have been much more frightened of trying to do something as big as Universal Credit

6.5.2 Inside View - Resolution

In the ‘complication’ the ‘Inside View’ narrative described how the project’s managers had to decide how to proceed with the software development – continue with the existing software developed in 2011-12 (the ‘live’ service) or start again with the new concept developed by GDS in 2013 (the ‘digital’ service). The ‘Ministerial Oversight Group’ debated this decision in November 2013 at a meeting described by interviewees as “stormy”. DWP Ministers, led by Duncan Smith, the Secretary of State, proposed a compromise ‘Twin-Track’ approach that kept the old software while continuing to develop the new. Francis Maude, Minister for the Cabinet Office argued that this was a waste of money, and that the old software should be thrown away. New estimates suggested that developing a new software suite from scratch would take several years. According to interviewees, Danny Alexander, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and thus the Minister in overall charge of spending, had the casting vote and came down on the side of the DWP. The Cabinet Office promptly withdrew from the project and GDS assigned the IT team that had been leading the development of the ‘digital’ service to other projects. David Freud, the DWP Minister directly responsible for Universal Credit, later reflected on this decision (Timmins, 2016):

Francis [Maude] was adamant that we should not go with the live system [the old software]. He wanted to kill it. But we, the DWP, did not believe that the digital system would be ready on anything like the timescales they were talking about then – I think they were talking about the following September at this stage. But I knew that if you killed the live system, you killed Universal Credit. If we did not get something out there working in the real world, with all these enemies circling, it would be labelled a failed project and would be all too easy to stop.

Freud's analysis is straightforwardly political. If the programme had not started to deploy UC with real claimants (in the 'real' world as opposed to the 'theoretical' world of the policymakers), then "with all these enemies circling" in shark-like fashion, "it would be labelled a failed project". The act of 'labelling' the project as a failure would be, in Freud's account, a step on the way to stopping it altogether.

As a coda to the 'Inside View', in 2017 Freud, who had left the DWP the year before, commented thus on the political battle for control of the IT project at the end of 2013 (WPSC, 2017):

The relationships between Departments is complicated and fluid so there were times when one's view about the Treasury was totally unprintable and there were other times when they were very supportive. Just by way of expressing some gratitude to the Treasury unusually, in 2013 the Treasury effectively saved Universal Credit. I don't think without Danny Alexander as the Chief Secretary we would have got through that process.

In 2018, two years after the originally planned finish date, the 'digital' service was finally rolled out nationwide.

6.5.3 Resolution – Analysis

The narrative of the 'Official Verdict' is a story of recovery and redemption. Having been labelled a failure in early 2013, the measured, concerted and coordinated efforts of Government bodies replanned the project and set it on a more pragmatic and achievable path. These efforts were portrayed, in managerialist terms, as a series of logical actions, resulting in the gradual implementation of a necessary and socially beneficial reform. Narratives

describing the interdepartmental conflicts that preceded this endpoint were not mentioned.

The 'Inside View' frames this process as a political battle over how UC should be delivered. This battle was impacted by the 'national' political dynamics of the UK Coalition Government of 2010-15. Freud attributed the UC project's survival to Danny Alexander's personal intervention. Without Alexander's support, Freud was confident that the project would have been stopped. This was a direct manifestation of power relations. During the 2010-15 coalition government, Alexander, the Liberal Democrat Chief Secretary to the Treasury was one of the 'quad', the four men reportedly running the Government. Alexander's decision to support Duncan Smith and continue funding the project kept it alive. In taking this decision, Alexander was overruling another powerful figure in the Government, the veteran Conservative Minister for the Cabinet Office, Francis Maude, and possibly acting despite George Osborne's (Chancellor of the Exchequer) known scepticism about the UC project (Laws, 2016, p. 98). Alexander and Maude were allies in promoting Government's efficiency agenda and jointly chaired a Cabinet subcommittee on the topic. This efficiency agenda included making more effective use of the internet as a channel for interacting with Government, which was the core mission of GDS. Despite this, Alexander was prepared to support Duncan Smith over Maude, reject the GDS proposal and allow the DWP to continue with UC.

6.6 Evaluation – how we got to here

The evaluation element of the narrative is where the narrators step back and attribute cause for the events that are the subject of the narrative.

6.6.1 Official Verdict – Evaluation

An assessment by the MPA in October 2015 gave a snapshot of the UC project in its new, reformed state. By this time, the MPA viewed the UC programme as “managed effectively and efficiently” (MPA, 2015, p. 7). With regard to technical delivery the reviewers said (MPA, 2015, p. 9):

This no longer feels like a programme dominated by a fixation on the agile methodology or being run by technologists. There is a more holistic approach with a healthy level of discussion around tradeoffs; priorities are clearer, dependencies have been understood, entry and exit criteria have been set, red lines for delivery of digital service products have been agreed

This very positive endorsement contrasts with the criticisms of earlier reports. After years of chaos, the reviewers’ comments suggest that the programme better fits their ideal model. It has a plan, the different specialist disciplines within the team are working together and, revealingly, it has what the MPA reviewers describe as strong leadership. The newly appointed SRO, Neil Couling included the following quotation in the report in response (MPA, 2015, p. 3):

There must be a beginning of any great matter, but the continuing until the end until it be thoroughly finished yields the true glory.⁷

⁷ Letter from Sir Francis Drake to Sir Francis Walsingham (1587).

6.6.2 Inside View - Evaluation

The 'Inside View' narrative offers a different view of how the state of affairs that led to the 'reset' had been allowed to occur and how the narrative of recovery had been constructed.

The original project managers had created a narrative of 'Fortress UC' where new, 'Agile' methods were going to overturn conventional wisdom and, in a radically shortened timetable, develop the most complex IT system that the DWP had built in a generation. Simon, the experienced DWP IT manager asked why so many clever and experienced officials had chosen to believe this narrative:

Why do people believe the blatant [lies].... it can't be true yeah? That you know Soviet [food] production.... has gone up a hundred percent.... it couldn't have been true?....

Delilah, one of the MPA reviewers explained this collective blindness by saying that the sponsors of the programme heard what they wanted to hear and had suspended their critical faculties:

You've got a Minister in charge who is absolutely wedded and committed to this agenda; it is his raison d'être, this is his reason for being in the job and he isn't going to see it fail; he doesn't want to hear that it's failing. And ... if there are still deaf ears at the top where do you go? And so he [the Minister] is basically repeatedly telling the permanent secretary it will succeed, it will succeed, it will succeed, it will succeed won't it? So the permanent secretary is going 'of course it is, of course it is, of course it is'....so you get this cascade down which is 'it has to work'

Delilah later noted, however, that the catharsis of the ‘reset’ had changed the DWP’s approach for the better. Because UC had come so close to disaster, Ministers had learned not to press too hard and managers were granted ‘latitude’ in setting goals and organising the programme going forward.

6.6.3 Evaluation – Analysis

In the ‘Official Verdict’, Couling’s quotation (about his ‘great matter’) starts to rebuild the UC narrative; not as a new version of Fortress UC but as a heroic endeavour. UC has survived its near-death experience where it was labelled a failure and came close to being stopped. It was now described in glowing language by the MPA and was held up as an exemplar. Couling’s statement was at once grandiose and cautious; he compared his project to the long struggle of Elizabethan England with Spain, and knew that there were several years to go before the project was delivered and could sustain a narrative of success. The heroes of the project would experience more trials and tribulations before reaching their goal.

The ‘Inside View’ blamed the crisis of 2013 on the original project managers, who used the ‘Agile’ narrative to convince Ministers and senior DWP officials that they could do something never done before – develop a new benefits IT system from scratch in two years. The insiders also blamed the Ministers and senior officials as in the first two years of the project the political pressure for its success was so great that alternative, more cautious narratives did not get heard. This, insiders asserted, contributed to the project’s narrative of near-failure in 2013.

6.7 Power Relations and the Narratives

6.7.1 Introduction

This section analyses the system of power relations surrounding and constituting the UC IT project. Using techniques from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2013), and as explained in Chapter 4 on Methods and Research Approach, the analysis examines the two synthesised narratives, the 'Official Verdict' and the 'Inside View'. It looks at the emergence of these narratives, which parts of these narratives achieved hegemony and how, the recontextualization that adapted external narratives to this situation and finally the operationalisation that enacted parts of these narratives within and around UC.

The analysis is summarised in Table 6.2 below, which associates CDA analysis of the narratives with specific narrative elements.

TABLE 6.2 - CDA OF OFFICIAL VERDICT AND INSIDE VIEW NARRATIVES

Narrative Element	Official Verdict	Insider View
Abstract	Emergence: MPA review <i>[used as justification for reset of project by MPA]</i>	Emergence: Power struggle between GDS and DWP <i>[over control of software development]</i>
Orientation	Recontextualisation: Digital by Default <i>[Compliance claimed with Government IT policy]</i> Hegemony: Political constraints dictate ambitious timetable <i>[used as justification for Agile approach]</i>	Hegemony: Fortress UC; steel palisade <i>[Control of information flow out of project]</i> Hegemony: Project cannot take 5 years <i>[so control taken away from DWP IT group]</i>
Complication	Hegemony: Reset <i>[Control of project (and project narrative) removed from DWP]</i> Hegemony: GDS write new software <i>[later used to generate fresh 'Agile' narrative and take over complete development project]</i>	Hegemony: New CIO does not believe project narrative <i>[and removes UC management team]</i> Hegemony: 18 months to a general election <i>[so political pragmatism impacts decision making]</i>

Narrative Element	Official Verdict	Insider View
Resolution and Coda	<p>Operationalisation: Politicians defend new Test and Learn and Twin Track approaches successfully <i>[and project continues]</i></p> <p>Recontextualisation: Test and Learn <i>[incremental development driven by actual user experience]</i></p> <p>Recontextualisation: Government IT Project failure <i>[PAC expectations set by long history of failure]</i></p> <p>Hegemony: DWP claims aims of project satisfied <i>[immediately before 2015 General Election]</i></p>	<p>Hegemony: enemies circle <i>[and try to 'kill off' Universal Credit]</i></p> <p>Operationalisation: HM Treasury 'saves the project' due to personal intervention of Chief Secretary <i>[flow of funding to DWP continues]</i></p>
Evaluation	<p>Hegemony: 'Great Matter' continues <i>[as DWP has won battle for control]</i></p>	<p>Hegemony : 'Blatant lies' believed <i>[due to political timetable pressure from Ministers]</i></p>

6.7.2 Emergence

This section looks at precursors of the 'Official Verdict' and 'Inside View' narratives that have been 'rewoven' and reproduced within the fresh context of UC. The section also looks at an instance of non-emergence; the lack of description within the 'Official Verdict' of the inter-departmental conflict that features so prominently in the 'Inside View' narrative.

The 'Official View' is a narrative of failure (or near-failure) and subsequent recovery. The 'failure' of the DWP's initial approach to implementing the software needed for UC emerges initially from MPA reports. Early reports in 2011 and 2012 speak of unresolved risks in the development of the IT system, and in February 2013 (MPA, 2013c) the MPA pronounced its definitive verdict, awarding the programme a Red rating.

All the MPA reports were private, as was Duncan Smith's 'red team' review, and although some details leaked to the trade press (Hall, 2012; Hamill, 2013), there was no public acknowledgement that the project was in difficulty. For example, when in July 2013, Duncan Smith gave evidence to the WPSC (2013) and was asked whether the project was on track, he gave a complex answer regarding the pilot and did not mention the 'reset' which had just been completed. However, HMT officials, concerned at the potential waste of money already spent had "called in the auditors" (Timmins, 2016, p. 43) and asked the NAO to review the project. The NAO report was published in September 2013 entitled, perhaps ironically, 'Universal Credit - Early Progress'. The NAO had access to the MPA reports and took a more negative view of the project's status (NAO, 2013b, p. 9):

The Department [DWP] has delayed rolling out Universal Credit to claimants, has had weak control of the programme, and has been unable

to assess the value of the systems it spent over £300 million to develop. These problems represent a significant setback to Universal Credit and raise wider concerns about the Department's ability to deal with weak programme management, over-optimistic timescales, and a lack of openness about progress.

The day following the NAO report the opposition laid an Urgent Question (Hansard, 2013a) on Universal Credit before the House of Commons, and asked Duncan Smith why he had previously told the House that the project was on schedule. Duncan Smith dismissed the NAO report as being out of date, said that he had already implemented its recommendations, and blamed the travails of the project on the failings of civil servants, some of whom he had removed. Although under extreme pressure, including from the head of the WPSC who felt that her committee had been misled, Duncan Smith insisted that the project remained on schedule and on budget.

A key omission from the 'Official Verdict' is a discussion of the political conflict between the DWP and the Cabinet Office. MPA reviewers labelled this relationship as conflictual in their interviews; for example Delilah, a reviewer, described the interaction between GDS and the UC project thus:

it's the same on Universal Credit.... we've got capability in parts of... government who aren't being used as constructively as they could or should be.... yeah, politics, style perhaps governance structures I don't know; but there's this sort of us and them thing that really is pervasive

Delilah is referring to 'capability' in GDS which is not being used constructively – i.e. destructively – and an 'us and them' relationship between GDS and the DWP, but there is no mention of this conflict in the MPA reports to which she contributed, perhaps because the constraints that govern the production of

the 'Official Verdict' (convention, audit relationship, clearance process, *realpolitik*) make it impossible to mention.

The narrators of the 'Inside View' were certainly aware of this fierce inter-departmental disagreement and it formed an important part of their accounts. The emergence of the 'Inside View' may in part be a reaction to the emergence of elements of the 'Official Verdict', which portray the two interventions made by the Cabinet Office to 'rescue' the project from its failed state. These interventions are the MPA 'reset' led by David Pitchford and the GDS development of the 'digital' service. Simon, the DWP manager was dismissive of the MPA's reset intervention:

We had the interregnum with.... the big guy from [MPA]... Pitchford ... and that was just hilarious.... he was very bluff and hale and hearty but he had no idea of what's going on.... they took the space up for three months.... and then they said we've reset the programme now and [it] is now on a good [footing]

To the insiders, the MPA 'reset' was window-dressing, a cosmetic activity to give the project an apparent fresh start. These insiders appeared to frame their counternarrative as a reaction to the positive way in which the 'Official Verdict' described the reset. Similarly, the 'Inside View' narrative is critical of the contribution of the GDS team. Simon characterised the conflict between GDS and DWP as a clash of cultures, between the established, traditional management style of the DWP officials and the incremental, improvisational style of the GDS team. As Simon put it, Simon and the DWP SRO, Howard Shiplee, represented one culture and the GDS staff another:

.... the thing with Howard isso we found the GDS people.... you know people coming in in shorts and he'd go "where's the plan" and they'd

go “Oh, we haven't got one because we're doing it in this Agile” he couldn't get that at all; he was a construction engineer I turned up with my plans and he'd go “I quite like that!”

The GDS staff dressed differently, talked a different language with its own arcane ‘Agile’ technical vocabulary and made the DWP staff feel uncomfortable; the DWP’s preferred project management narrative was firmly traditional, embodying end-to-end plans, detailed timetables and resourcing charts. The ‘Inside View’ can be seen as a narrative of resistance, a battle between the defenders of tradition (DWP) and the barbarians at the gate (GDS).

6.7.3 Hegemony

The ‘Official Verdict’ narrative achieved dominance through the platform of the narrators (van Dijk, 1993) and the perception of legitimacy by the audience. The ‘Inside View’ counternarrative was described by protagonists as an attempt to ‘set the story straight’ and legitimise their role in the action. Interviewees attempted to achieve hegemony for this counternarrative by leaking stories to journalists. There was thus a contest over which narrative would dominate.

The ‘Official Verdict’ was primarily constructed by NAO reports on UC, which were then discussed at length in open hearings by the PAC. NAO and PAC reports were published ‘by authority of’ Parliament and literally had the portcullis seal of the seat of UK democracy on the front cover. The ‘Official Verdict’ therefore meets several of the necessary criteria for dominance specified by Buchanan and Dawson (2007), including narrator credibility (from the NAO, MPA and PAC), political tactics (as evidenced by Duncan Smith) and symbolic influence (the portcullis seal).

The 'Official Verdict' narrative achieved dominance in spite (or perhaps because) of the omission, referred to above, of any reference to the conflict between GDS and the DWP. The 'Inside View' narrative discusses this political struggle between two Departments of State and two alternative philosophies of how IT projects should be run. This struggle was apparent at the time and was reported in the trade press (Hall, 2012), but it is largely absent from the 'official' account of events.

The effects of power relations are visible in this dominant account. Firstly, the initial ambitious timetable, and the consequent Agile approach of the DWP, were dictated by the political needs of a newly elected Government and of a senior Minister undertaking what he viewed as his 'last big job'. Secondly, when this approach appeared to be failing, it needed to be rescued; hence the term 'reset' entered the project's narrative, where control of the project was removed from the DWP and placed in the hands of the reviewing organization, the MPA. After control had been returned to the DWP and with a caseload of 27,000 (DWP, 2015) out of a potential customer base of 8 million, the DWP ministers claimed political success for the new policy and the 'reset'.

There is a question over whether the 'Inside View' narrative could ever achieve hegemony, given that by its very nature the narrators were not choosing to speak publicly. The narrators were in most cases trying retrospectively to justify their actions and those of other project actors that they supported. In the case of reviewers and auditors, often their 'inside views' referred to matters that they were unable or unwilling to put in published reports. While the 'insider' account may seem more authentic because of its willingness to discuss the 'undiscussable', its lack of 'reach' limited its effect. One way in which insiders attempted to influence the public debate was to engage in what

Ku (1998) calls ‘boundary politics’ and to leak information. Journalists in both the national and the trade press replayed the accounts of ‘sources’ at critical points during the project (Hall, 2012; Hamill, 2013; Malik, 2013, 2014; Wright, 2013). For example, the decision to adopt the ‘Twin-Track’ approach was taken in the ‘Ministerial Oversight Group’ in November 2013. No public account of this meeting has ever been released, but UC Programme Board minutes referring to the meeting were leaked to the Guardian newspaper in early 2014 (Malik, 2014). The subsequent article criticised Cabinet Office Minister Francis Maude for pulling GDS out of the project, resulting in months of delay in the project. The leak could be interpreted as an attempt to vindicate the DWP and place blame for the delay with the Cabinet Office.

The effects of power relations are also visible in the ‘Inside View’ narrative. These include the removal by the new DWP CIO of the UC project managers in late 2012 owing to the CIO’s scepticism about the UC project narrative. In the ‘Inside View’ narrative, these managers were then blamed for the project’s difficulties because they erected ‘Fortress UC’, put out a narrative of progress and optimism (later described as “blatant lies”) and deceived the gullible Ministers and officials who were eager to believe that their flagship project was destined for success. The ‘Inside View’ also describes the fightback by DWP managers to regain control of their project, beating off the ‘enemies circling’ and using the political impetus of an upcoming General Election to justify a ‘Test and Learn’ approach on the basis that it presented less risk.

6.7.4 Recontextualisation

This section describes how three wider narratives were reshaped to support the story of the ‘Official Verdict’ or the ‘Inside View’. The first of these narratives concerns Government IT Failures. It suggests that Government is

incapable of delivering large new IT systems on time and on budget. The second is the narrative of incremental deployment referred to earlier, which the DWP called Test and Learn. This mirrors the Agile narrative which describes incremental methods of software development. The third narrative is titled Digital by Default and describes Government's IT policy during the period studied, the Coalition Government of 2010-2015. Since the main proponent of this narrative was GDS, the way that the DWP chose to adopt or contest this strategy for UC forms an important backdrop to its struggle with GDS for control of the UC IT project.

The 'Official Verdict' asserted that the project reached a point of failure in early 2013, necessitating the 'reset' led by the MPA. The PAC explicitly stated that it saw the failure of UC as part of a systemic failure by Government to implement IT projects (PAC, 2013b). This is consonant with an established narrative of the PAC regarding Government IT Failures discussed below.

The PAC had criticised the way that Government undertook IT projects for many years. A key example was the 'National Programme for IT', an attempt by the Labour Government of 1997-2010 to computerise the National Health Service. Following increasingly damning reports by both the NAO and the PAC (Dunleavy *et al.*, 2009), this programme was eventually 'dismantled' by the Coalition government in 2011 (HMG, 2011). One longstanding critic of Government IT Failures was Richard Bacon MP, the deputy chair of the PAC and author of a book on 'Why every Government gets things wrong'. Bacon had the opportunity to rehearse much of his reasoning in a PAC hearing on UC in September 2013 (PAC, 2013b, p. Ev21). Here he addressed Robert Devereux, the DWP permanent secretary, quoting the criticisms in the NAO report (NAO, 2013b):

What is extraordinary is that.... the litany of problems there [in UC] is frankly one of the worst I have ever seen: 'Limited line of sight on cost of delivery...Poorly managed and documented financial governance ...Limited IT capability...Limited cost control...Inadequate internal challenge of purchase decisions ...Unclear financial reporting...Insufficient challenge of supplier-driven changes in costs...Inappropriate contractual mechanisms...Inadequate controls over what would be supplied...Over-reliance on performance information that was provided by suppliers without Department validation...Weak contractual relationships with supplier.'

Are you saying that you were unaware of any of that? This is the biggest programme going on in your Department. You were the accounting officer for it and there is this litany of failure.

Bacon places the UC project alongside the computerisation of the NHS in the panoply of Government IT Failures and blames Devereux, as the accounting officer, for leading it there.

The second recontextualised narrative is called Test and Learn, an incremental approach to deploying the UC policy and system. The 'Official Verdict' noted the slower pace at which the IT project proceeded after the 'reset' in early 2013, which gave more time for evaluation and feedback. Test and Learn involved experimentation with claimants in defined geographical areas. This was unusual; it meant that the law on benefits entitlement actually varied by postcode. Regulations were laid that brought Universal Credit into force in specific areas and for specific client groups – initially single men with no children living in the North West of England. The 'lessons' gleaned from the Test and Learn experimentation could be used to adjust the detail of policy and

feed into the Agile development of the new ‘digital’ service (NAO, 2014). The almost humble rhetoric of ‘Test’ (because policy makers could not foresee all possible side-effects) and ‘Learn’ (because the DWP knew that it would have to adjust) was used repeatedly to justify the slow speed of deployment. This deployment was considerably slower than the original plan for national rollout of UC, which was originally intended to be completed in 2017.

The third recontextualization concerns the Digital by Default narrative (GDS, 2012). This narrative, according to the ‘Inside View’, came into conflict with the DWP’s interpretation of Agile. Digital by Default recommended using the kind of new-on-the-block small supplier that operated from a coffee shop in Shoreditch to develop software in a continuous running workshop. This workshop included policy experts and benefit claimants. Faced with the need for scale and speed, the DWP had instead asked its existing large IT suppliers to quickly assemble a very large team of programmers at the DWP’s IT headquarters in Warrington with backup teams offshore in India.

The DWP later portrayed the Digital by Default narrative as in conflict with their views on how UC should be implemented. The DWP did not feel that every interaction with claimants should be online, as they saw face-to-face contact as essential to provide advice (and encouragement) for an unemployed person seeking a new job. The DWP’s strategy of mixed channel interaction was termed Digital where Appropriate, and it became a common feature of UC’s narrative from 2014 onwards. Digital where Appropriate did not reject all the features of Digital by Default. Some protagonists, however portrayed the choice between the two as a stark dichotomy. In a paper presented to the UC programme board in 2017, Cath Hamp, a DWP manager told the board (Hamp, 2017):

The rallying cry of “digital by default” and “everyone will do everything on line” was intended as a transformational challenge, but interpreted by some as a literal reality. Given the ultimate caseload of UC, this was never realistic....

Hamp’s argument was that people who suffer ‘digital exclusion’ because of various attributes are among the most frequent users of the benefits system. Hamp and others in the DWP claimed legitimacy for the counternarrative of ‘Digital where Appropriate’ by arguing that people who are ‘digitally excluded’ should not be further disadvantaged. The contrast between “Digital by Default” and “Digital where Appropriate” may be a coded way of describing the choice between two loci of control – GDS or the DWP.

6.7.5 Operationalisation

This section describes how these narratives were enacted, looking at the consequences of the publication of the reports that make up the ‘Official Verdict’ and the fallout from the conflict between Departments that was described in the ‘Inside View’.

Two reports were published in late 2013 that contained key elements of the ‘Official Verdict’ narrative. These were the NAO report, HC 621, into ‘early progress’ with UC (NAO, 2013b) and the PAC report, HC 619, including the transcript of the public hearing that discussed this NAO report (PAC, 2013b). The ‘reset’ of the programme and the circumstances that led to it were here made public in an official report (rather than a leak) for the first time. The reports were used by the press and by Parliamentarians to call Government to account. The DWP Secretary of State, Duncan Smith, and DWP officials had to defend their previous actions (BBC, 2013) and establish confidence in the approach taken to recover from the crisis. Instead of being cancelled (as a

failed project) UC proceeded, but at a much slower pace than originally planned. There was some reputational damage for the DWP but the new approach incorporating both the Test and Learn and Twin-Track narratives was accepted by HM Treasury who continued funding the project.

The ‘Inside View’ narrative was surfaced in a succession of leaks to journalists (such as Oliver Wright of the Independent (Wright, 2013)). The conflict between GDS and the DWP was thus played out in the national press, with both sides briefing against the other as discussed above in section 6.7.3. This included the publication of two articles in early September 2013, immediately before the publication of the NAO report (HC621) that brought problems of UC into the public domain. The first article was an op-ed⁸ written by Howard Shiplee, then the SRO of UC, for the Daily Telegraph on 2 September 2013 (Shiplee, 2013). Civil Servants do not usually put their name to op-eds; these are usually written by Special Advisers and published under the name of Ministers. In his op-ed Shiplee set out the justification of the ‘Twin-Track’ approach which was to deploy the existing ‘live service’ software while continuing to develop the GDS ‘digital’ service, describing the GDS contribution to the project thus:

We are working with the new Government Digital Service (GDS) to explore an enhanced IT programme that would offer more flexibility and security to benefit claimants. We’re planning to take the best of the existing system and make improvements using GDS support.

Shiplee set out the conclusions of his review rather than an agreed position, as the decision on how to proceed had yet to be taken by Ministers. He qualified

⁸ An ‘op-ed’ short for ‘opposite the editorial page’ is a commissioned (or placed) opinion piece written by someone other than the editor or a regular columnist (Sucharov, 2019)

GDS with the adjective “new” and made it clear that he wished to retain the software developed in 2011-12 and “take the best of the existing system” and enhance it rather than follow the approach proposed by GDS, which was to redevelop the whole system from scratch. The counterattack was not long in coming. Two days after Shiplee’s op-ed, on 4 September 2013 the Guardian published an article quoting ‘sources’ saying (Malik, 2013):

The Department for Work and Pensions has spent hundreds of millions of pounds on software for its flagship welfare project that may not be fit for purpose, the Guardian has been told.

‘Insiders’ told the Guardian that Shiplee had ordered a root-and-branch review of all work done to date and that a lot of that work, undertaken by the DWP’s traditional IT suppliers would be discarded. The Guardian’s informants were furthering the GDS narrative that all the software written so far should be replaced.

These newspaper reports mirror a conflict that came to a head in the Ministerial Oversight Group in November 2013. Reports of that meeting say that the Cabinet Office disagreed strongly with the DWP’s proposed ‘Twin Track’ approach, but HM Treasury came down on the side of the DWP. Following the meeting, the Cabinet Office withdrew from the governance processes that approved UC project funding, leaving this role entirely to HM Treasury, and also withdrew GDS resources from the development project. Since the project manager, chief architect and most of the team leaders of the ‘digital’ service build were GDS personnel, the DWP later claimed that the withdrawal of these personnel set the project back six months, and by the end of 2014 the DWP had pushed back the delivery date of the ‘digital’ service by

two full years. The withdrawal of GDS resources from the project, however, left the DWP in full control of its largest IT project.

6.8 Conclusions and Summary

The two narratives give different accounts of the project. The 'Official Verdict' narrative critiques the way that politicians and civil servants in the DWP had managed the enormous and resource-hungry UC programme. The focus of the narrative is the consumption of public funds. £425m had been spent on UC by November 2013 (PAC, 2013). The PAC wanted to flush out how much of this money had been wasted developing 'nugatory' software which, they asserted, was a significant failure of project management. In addition, the 'Official Verdict' was aligned to a historic narrative concerning Government IT Failures. Defensive narratives emanating from the DWP included one that justified the move to a slower timetable that allowed for experimentation and incremental improvement (Test and Learn) and another that justified the expense of having two simultaneous software developments (Twin-Track) as a risk mitigation strategy. In addition, Iain Duncan Smith, the Minister responsible, went to considerable lengths to soften the 'Official Verdict' and divert any criticism towards his officials rather than take personal responsibility. Some who contributed to the narrative of the 'Official Verdict' knew about the power struggle for control of the project within Government, but this does not appear in published accounts.

One might argue that the 'Official Verdict' is not the full, dominant hegemonic narrative of the project that persists in the public's memory. The public will possibly remember that the project was an 'IT Failure' and a waste of money, but that image will probably be overwritten by later travails of the project as people on benefits struggled with lower payments than they might have

received on the benefits it replaced and the challenges posed by having to wait for five weeks for the initial payment after claiming. I will argue that the 'Official Verdict' remains, largely unchallenged as the politically-endorsed account of the project's outcome, and in 20 years *that* account will form the source material for someone else's thesis.

The 'Official Verdict' did not come to dominate without some pushback. This came from two directions: politicians in Select Committees attempted to make more direct criticisms of the DWP, focussing on the loss to the public purse in 2011-12 when millions were spent on software that was later not needed; and 'insiders' who put forward alternative views that challenged the authenticity of the 'Official Verdict'. For example, while the 'Official Verdict' largely ignored political conflicts, the narrators of the 'Inside View' narrative offered considerable detail, including of the events in late 2013 when the struggle for control of the IT project between the DWP and GDS came to a head. These actors were free of the need to restrain their criticism of others, protected by anonymity. This does not imply that their accounts are in some way more 'accurate' or 'believable' than those underpinning the 'Official Verdict' narrative, as in practice interviewees may be deflecting criticism (either consciously or not) of their personal role in events.

The 'Inside View' portrayed the struggle between GDS and the DWP as cultural rather than technical. This wasn't a struggle between two coldly-expressed alternative design approaches; this was about lifestyle and culture, about the way people dressed and worked together, this was about 'empowering and emancipating users' rather than acting in the interests of suppliers and their shareholders; it was about Digital by Default rather than Digital where Appropriate; and it was a struggle between the traditional and the new.

In this narrative the supporters of the traditional approach were represented by DWP's project managers and IT department. The supporters of the new were the 'Agile' advocates from GDS, with a very different style of both managing projects and developing software. The arbiter in this struggle was HM Treasury. In the system of power relations surrounding the project, HM Treasury had a key role as it controlled the flow of resources to the DWP and the project. It appears that HM Treasury accepted the more traditional narrative promoted by DWP as this also avoided the need for a large and potentially embarrassing write-off of the value of the software developed in 2011-12, an action that would reveal to the public that over £200m had been wasted. Treasury officials were not convinced that the GDS narrative was a more attractive alternative, as this would have required GDS to build a very large software suite in a very short time, something that had never been done before. Eventually, as David Freud, the DWP Minister said (WPSC, 2017):

In 2013 the Treasury effectively saved Universal Credit

While the interplay of narratives and counter-narratives made for lively press coverage, Freud's thesis is that the narrative that had the largest influence on the fate of Universal Credit was the one that HM Treasury, and ultimately Danny Alexander, then Chief Secretary to the Treasury, found convincing. Alexander was, however, operating within a wider system of power relations framed by the Coalition Government of 2010-15. Other considerations may have weighed on him, including his party's long-established support for Welfare Reform and the political dynamics of the Coalition Government (Clegg, 2012).

7. Analysis III – Common Agricultural Policy - Delivery

7.1 Introduction and structure of this chapter

During a public hearing in Committee Room 15 of the House of Commons on 5 December 2015, Richard Bacon MP, deputy chair of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) said to Liam Maxwell, a senior manager from the Government Digital Service (GDS) (PAC, 2016a Q.63):

You are Mr. Fancy Pants coming in from the outside with your digital dreams

Bacon was suggesting that Maxwell's single-minded obsession with 'digitising' government processes (i.e. his "digital dreams") had contributed to the failure of Common Agricultural Policy – Delivery, (CAP-D) a large IT project run by the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) between 2012 and 2016. This chapter compares two narratives of this project to develop an understanding of why Bacon would make such a statement and what underlying system of power relations led to this and alternative attributions of cause for the project's failure.

The objective of CAP-D was to implement a revised scheme of farm subsidies following changes in EU policy. The project included the development of a new IT system to accept online applications for these subsidies from farmers and other rural businesses. Official accounts of the project by the Public Accounts Committee (PAC, 2016a) and National Audit Office (NAO, 2015) labelled the IT development a failure although these bodies accepted later claims by the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) that because farmers had been paid the revised subsidies, the overall project could be claimed as a success. The fact that this project was labelled both a failure *and* a success makes it an interesting subject of study in the context of the research question.

The project involved several Government entities including DEFRA itself, the Rural Payments Agency (RPA), an arms' length body reporting to DEFRA, and two Cabinet Office units, the Major Projects Authority (MPA) and the Government Digital Service (GDS). The interaction between these bodies and certain individual managers is reflected in the accounts given by project participants, reviewers and auditors during and after the project. These accounts talk of fierce disagreements between individuals and organizations regarding how the project should be approached.

In this chapter I have used these accounts to synthesise two alternative narratives of this large IT project, one assembled from publicly available sources and the other primarily from interview data. The analysis compares and contrasts these two narratives. As in the previous analysis chapter (Chapter 6), the two narratives are referred to as the 'Official Verdict' and the 'Inside View'.

The primary sources for the 'Official Verdict' are reports on the project by the National Audit Office (NAO), HC606 (NAO, 2015) and HC727 (NAO, 2016) and an inquiry by the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of the House of Commons into the project, HC 642 (PAC, 2016a). The NAO report HC606 also refers in detail to reviews undertaken by the Major Projects Authority (MPA). The proceedings of another Select Committee of the House of Commons, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee (EFRASC), are also quoted. The primary sources for the second, alternative narrative, the 'Inside View', are interviews with four officials who were directly involved in CAP-D. These officials were Leanne, a GDS manager who worked on the project during its last few months, Eva, a NAO auditor and George and Delilah, who reviewed the project on behalf of MPA. Other material for this alternative narrative was

drawn from accounts in blogs and the computer press, often quoting anonymous ‘sources’. The relationship between the primary sources and the two narratives is shown in Figure 7.1 below.

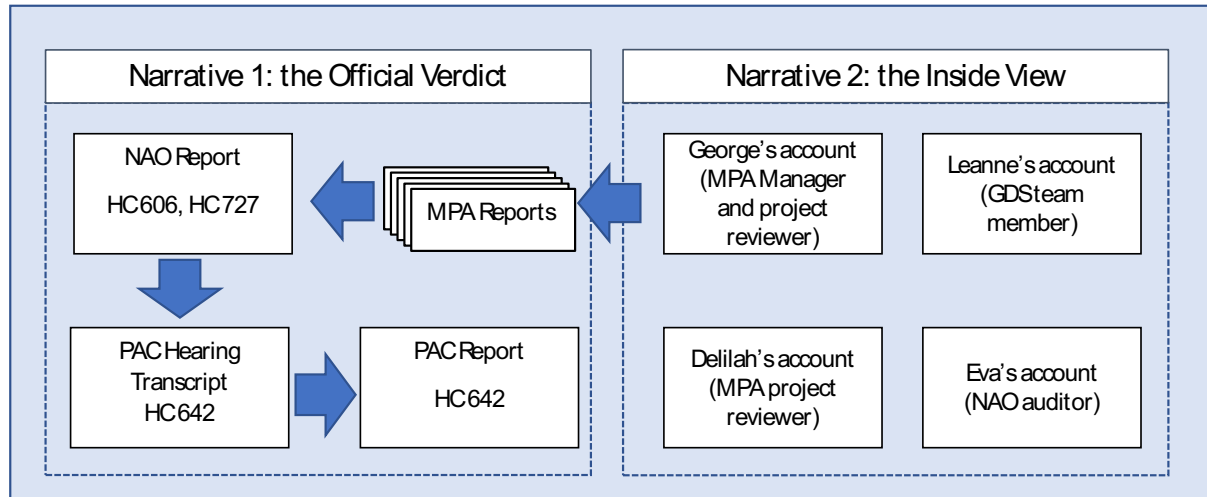


Figure 7.1 - Grouping of source material into CAP-D narratives

The analysis uses the same techniques and concepts as the previous chapter (Chapter 6), splitting the narratives into six elements following the narrative structure proposed by Labov (1972). The analysis compares the two narratives element by element; thus the abstract of the ‘Official Verdict’ is presented then the abstract of the ‘Inside View’, and then these two different interpretations of the project are compared. Following this element-by-element analysis, both narratives are examined for evidence of the underlying system of power relations that led to their construction and dissemination. The chapter ends with a reflection on the insights produced by the analysis and a summary of the conclusions. A summary of each narrative by element is shown below in Table 7.1.

TABLE 7.1 - OVERALL STRUCTURE OF THE TWO NARRATIVES OF CAP-D

Narrative element	The Official Verdict	The Inside View
Abstract	An inappropriate choice of development approach and personality clashes led to abandonment of the CAP-D IT development project	Determined resistance by RPA and technical difficulties led to abandonment of the CAP-D IT development project
Orientation	Introduction of new regime of Farm support payments required a new computer system to be developed and introduced by May 2015. DEFRA was responsible, with the assistance of GDS, for developing a new system for subsequent use by the RPA. This new system would be a 'digital exemplar'	After GDS rejected the RPA's choice of development approach, DEFRA, with GDS help, developed a new system using Agile techniques, against the wishes of RPA who saw risk in this approach

Narrative element	The Official Verdict	The Inside View
Complication	The 'Agile' development approach for the 'digital' system, which was mandated by GDS, required DEFRA to manage and integrate the work itself. The 'digital' system was not ready for deployment as the May 2015 deadline for introducing the new scheme approached. The MPA rating was 'Red'.	The RPA was continually critical of the way the new 'digital' system was being developed. In addition, the RPA had already chosen a key software component for the 'back end' of the new system. This was incompatible with other components developed by GDS and the 'digital' system could not be deployed into live use.
Evaluation	Poor cooperation between the Departments led to the failure of the IT project. Poor behaviour by senior leaders damaged cooperation.	DEFRA was unused to the Agile methodology and had not managed the software development well or attracted support from operational users in the RPA. The RPA's opposition to the new development was eventually successful and it took over management of the project.

Narrative element	The Official Verdict	The Inside View
Resolution	The RPA took over responsibility for the project and changed the approach to use a paper-based system to administer payments	RPA took over management of the project and controlled the project narrative from March 2015
Coda	Farmers were paid albeit later than under previous scheme	The GDS 'digital' system development was quietly abandoned

The narrative of the ‘Official Verdict’ gives an account of the project that attributes the blame for failure of the IT project to the poor collaboration between DEFRA, GDS and the RPA, as illustrated by personal clashes between senior officials. The narrative is consistent with other narratives produced by the PAC and the NAO regarding the failure of similar government IT projects, in that failures were attributed to shortcomings of individual personnel (‘people’ failures) or of organizational processes (‘process’ failures). The ‘Official View’ that became the dominant narrative of the project was reflected in accounts published by the mainstream media.

By comparison, the opinions expressed in the alternative ‘Inside View’ narrative were less widely reported. This alternative narrative attributed failure to political actions flowing from power relations between different government actors at the time. These power relations are reflected in widely different superordinate narratives regarding how such large IT projects should be approached. In an echo of a parallel struggle on UC as described in Chapter 6, these narratives were summarised as ‘Digital by Default’ and ‘Digital by Design’.

7.2 The Case study – Abstract of the Narratives

The abstract contains a summary and/or the point of the story. A summary timeline for the project is contained in Appendix J.

7.2.1 The Official Verdict - Abstract

According to the NAO (2015), in 2012 the RPA put forward a proposal to implement a new web-based IT system to administer EU farm payments. The Government Digital Service (GDS) demanded significant changes to the development approach and the project started in earnest in 2013. When in March 2015 the new IT system was not ready, RPA changed the approach to

accept claims on paper forms instead of over the internet. NAO (2015) and PAC reports (2016b) were critical of the way the project had been managed, highlighting poor coordination between Government Departments, as illustrated by personality clashes between senior officials working on the project.

7.2.2 The Inside View – Abstract

According to interviewees, historic failures influenced the RPA to submit a cautious and conventional plan for a new system development for processing farm support payments. When this plan was rejected, DEFRA, the parent Department, took over the management of the project, named CAP-D, using GDS staff to lead the software development. RPA actively distanced itself from the IT development and in parallel made contingency plans to process the payments using paper forms. When the IT development was stopped, RPA took back control of the project and activated these plans.

7.2.3 Abstract – Analysis

The PAC and the NAO could point to many similar narratives concerning Government IT projects, and did not express surprise that this complex, multi-party systems development, with a hard deadline imposed by an external body (the European Commission) had run into difficulties. The ‘Official Verdict’ narrative thus asserts that the approach chosen for this complex project was wrong, and that this wrong choice was made because of poor coordination between government Departments (a ‘process’ failure). This ‘process’ failure was compounded by interpersonal conflicts between individuals (a ‘people’ failure).

The ‘Inside View’, however, presents a counternarrative with an alternative cause for the failure. In this narrative the interpersonal clashes are symptoms

of a wider power struggle between GDS and RPA. One key difference between the two narratives is the depiction of the RPA's actions as resistance, or political activity, as the 'Inside View' depicts the outcome of the project as a 'political' failure. The narratives thus differ in how they share out the responsibility for project failure. While the 'Official Verdict' places the lion's share of the blame with GDS, the counternarrative of the 'Inside View' is more critical of RPA. This difference will be highlighted in analysis of other narrative elements.

In summary, the project was the subject of active conflicts through its short life, with conflicting narratives of the events that led to and followed the abrupt termination of the IT development in March 2015.

7.3 Orientation – the project in context

This section gives the background to the project, orientating the audience to the time in which events took place, the location, the characters involved and the situation that they found themselves in. A list of the principal characters engaged in the project is in Appendix K.

7.3.1 The Official Verdict – Orientation

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) defines the scheme of agricultural subsidy throughout the EU. The main body responsible for administering this scheme in the UK was the Rural Payments Agency (RPA), an arms' length body reporting to DEFRA. DEFRA estimated that support payments made up 55% of farm incomes in the UK in 2014. The scheme that was the subject of CAP-D, the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) distributed £1.4Bn annually (EFRASC, 2016) to more than 105,000 farmers and other landowners (DEFRA, 2014). The reforms to the scheme, due to be implemented in May 2015, changed the rules that determined how much was paid to each landowner.

Since subsidies were based on land use, submitting a claim involved marking up maps and completing associated forms. DEFRA planned to use the introduction of the new 2015 scheme as an opportunity to modernise the then-current application process, dating from 2005, which could only accept claims on paper. The information gained from these paper forms was fed into a computer system by RPA staff and appropriate payments made to farmers. If a subsequent audit found errors (either under- or over-payment), the European Commission had the power to levy significant fines on the RPA (so-called disallowance penalties).

When the RPA introduced the previous scheme in 2005, computer failures led to a high level of errors and £600m in disallowance penalties over seven years. According to the NAO (2015), the objectives for the new replacement system included reducing these disallowance penalties, lowering administration costs, building a system that would be easier to change, giving farmers better access to information and delivering better environmental outcomes. In the eyes of the NAO and the PAC, lowering disallowance penalties was the most important of these objectives.

Mark Grimshaw, the CEO of the RPA, had joined from the Child Support Agency in 2011. Newspaper reports depicted him as a “doughty force to be reckoned with” (CSW, 2017). He personally led the feasibility and planning work for the new system, proposing a conventional development approach whereby RPA would procure the services of a large computer company, a systems integrator, to manage the design and construction of the new system and its introduction into live service. £155m was set aside to build and operate the new system over seven years. When RPA submitted its proposal to DEFRA, HM Treasury

and Cabinet Office in the summer of 2012, it was not approved and instead, according to the NAO (2015, p. 21):

The Programme was 'reset' during 2013 as a result of the Cabinet Office ICT spending controls review. It was established as a 'digital exemplar' under the Cabinet Office Transformation Programme.

In the early months of 2013, CAP-D was 'reset' by GDS and DEFRA, at roughly the same time that UC was 'reset' by the MPA (as described in Chapter 6).

7.3.2 The Inside View - Orientation

The introduction of the previous Farm Payments scheme in 2005 had been labelled "a fiasco" by the PAC (2007) because of the very high level of disallowance penalties and large cost overruns on a new computer system. Leanne, a GDS manager and project team member, described the legacy of these events:

10 years ago there had been a huge IT fiasco where the same thing had happened; they [landowners] were told [that the system of applications] was going to be online and it ran into problems and people [farmers] didn't get paid and there were suicides; maybe one or two.... it wasn't good basically. The whole organisation [RPA] had that and carried it around with them, and to me it seems like a huge part of their culture.

Leanne stated that this narrative of failure (the 2005 'fiasco') was part of the RPA's collective memory. She also said that Mark Grimshaw had been brought into the RPA in 2010 to improve its operational performance, to "sort it out", and that RPA managers and staff had worked hard over several years to rebuild the reputation of the organisation in the eyes of the public and the RPA's main client group, farmers. RPA managers were therefore unwilling to risk a repeat

of 2005 and the loss of this hard-won reputation. The RPA proposed what it claimed was a low-risk approach to the development of the system and submitted its plan for DEFRA and Cabinet Office approval. GDS conducted the technical evaluation on behalf of the Cabinet Office and rejected the RPA proposal, according to George, an MPA manager:

The Cabinet Office had overturned the previous plan of the RPA driving this and doing it old school with Accenture and PWC.

GDS wanted the project to adopt an approach consistent with its new strategy 'Digital by Default' (GDS 2013). This mandated 'Agile' development methods and doing as much as possible with in-house resources. GDS was looking for 25 new 'exemplar' projects that would demonstrate the value of 'Digital by Default' across government (PAC 2016). One of the leading exponents of 'Digital by Default' was Liam Maxwell, the Government's Chief Technology Officer. Maxwell had helped the Conservative party prepare for the Coalition Government of 2010 by advising on IT policy and had then joined the civil service in 2011. He was described in the press as responsible for changing the way Government thought about technology, and as a "bulldog" character who "bashed heads together" (Glick, 2016a).

The GDS, 'Digital by Default' approach to the projects was adopted but, according to George, this provoked a reaction from the RPA:

So the old way [RPA's conventional proposal] was thrown out; Agile, Digital by Default [were] thrust upon them and they [RPA] didn't want to go that route. But Mark Grimshaw [CEO of RPA] was effectively put back in his box and probably.... was quite divisive throughout and not terribly helpful.

The 'Inside View' thus suggests that RPA was reluctant to go forward on the basis mandated by GDS but lacked the ability to say no, as Grimshaw "was effectively put back in his box" and his views suppressed. Grimshaw later listed the reasons for his reservations during an appearance before the Environment Select Committee of the House of Commons (EFRASC, 2015b):

One of the biggest issues was.... a concern that there was a little tiny bit too much focus on being first on a number of key development areas, so compounding the difficulties of being a digital exemplar for Digital by Default, being one of the first to use some of the new contracts on Government's G-Cloud and being the first to try the identity verification service called Verify in a live environment. Of course, the more firsts you add together, the greater the level of risk.

Grimshaw asserted that the project was being forced to adopt a riskier approach against his better judgement.

7.3.3. Orientation – Analysis

The 'Official Verdict' points in the background material to a misalignment of objectives. The expressed objective of RPA was to avoid risk and reduce disallowance penalties. The alternative 'Inside View' suggests that this view was overridden in the pursuit of 'modernity', and the promotion of an online approach to 'digital government'.

The project approach that the RPA originally proposed was to pay a large 'systems integrator' to undertake a conventional systems development. GDS demanded changes to the development approach to align it to the 'Digital by Default' narrative. This narrative asserted that adopting different methods would yield quicker and cheaper results and reduce the number of failing IT projects. The changes demanded by GDS included asking DEFRA to take the

lead in integrating the new system (rather than delegating this activity to a private sector ‘systems integrator’), using more open-source components and adopting the Agile software development methodology (as described in more detail in Chapter 4). CAP-D became one of 25 ‘exemplar’ applications that would demonstrate the success of the GDS approach by quickly delivering on-line services of similar quality to those offered by large commercial organisations, thus supporting the narrative for change that GDS was spreading across Government.

DEFRA accepted the GDS conditions, although, according to insiders, RPA was far from content. The project had been designated as an ‘exemplar’, forced to use all the tools of the GDS ‘Digital by Default’ strategy at once, and also forced to meet a hard, externally imposed deadline. As Grimshaw pointed out, in his view this involved some level of risk for the project (and ultimately for the farmers, whose income depended on its success). The ‘Inside View’ rationale was that this risk was taken to advance the GDS ‘Digital by Default’ narrative, and as a direct outcome of power relations between the Cabinet Office and DEFRA.

7.4 Complication – it all starts to go wrong

This section of the narrative describes the sequence of events leading to a crisis in the project. The project started its development phase in early 2013, planning for a go-live in May 2015.

7.4.1 The Official Verdict – Complication

In 2013 work started on developing software for the new system using Agile methods. DEFRA was managing the work itself with the help of some seconded GDS staff, recruiting individual subcontractors and small software firms to write the code and build the systems. By 2014 it was clear, according

to the NAO (2015), that the development was running behind schedule. Key components of the software could not be integrated together. Large numbers of farmers could not register as users of the system, and when many people tried to access the new system at the same time, it would crash.

The Government's Chief Technology Officer, Liam Maxwell, who was also a senior GDS official, was drafted in to help. He became Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) for the project in September 2014 and started spending several days a week with the project team at the RPA's headquarters in Reading. This brought him into frequent contact with Mark Grimshaw, CEO of the RPA, who had voiced doubts that the new 'digital' system could be delivered on time. The NAO reported that the two officials argued openly (NAO, 2015):

Senior people told us that they found it almost impossible to work together at times. Interviewees reported confrontational behaviour between senior Programme staff at the RPA and GDS.

The NAO (2015, 2016b) reported that the MPA had reviewed the programme five times between its inception in early 2013 and early 2015. Each time concerns were expressed on the ability of the project to meet the hard deadline to deliver a serviceable system in May 2015. Although the reports themselves were confidential and have never been published, the ratings given by the review teams between 2013 and 2016 are shown in Table 7.2 below, together with the main concerns expressed. The 'Project Stages' are labels that I have assigned, drawing on Riessman (2005).

TABLE 7.2 - MPA/IPA DCA RATINGS, CAP-D FROM NAO REPORTS

Project Stage	Date of review	Delivery Confidence Assessment	MPA/IPA “Areas of Concern”
Inception	Apr 2013	Amber	Programme complexity Agile approach Legacy transition Programme workload
Early Development	Jul 2013	Amber	All parties need to recognise their role ‘Agile’ governance Legacy transition Recruitment capability and resource
Mid Development	Jan 2014	Amber	Agile Policy requirements not prioritised Transition from legacy systems Development is behind schedule Resource challenges

Project Stage	Date of review	Delivery Confidence Assessment	MPA/IPA “Areas of Concern”
Crisis point	Dec 2014	Red	Heavy reliance on senior staff Cultural challenges Poor reporting SRO churn Target Operating Model Systems integration critical Access to technical resource Staff burn out
Conflict over leadership	Feb 2015	Amber/Red	No contingency Critical resource areas stretched Cultural challenges remain Aligning internal and external communications

Project Stage	Date of review	Delivery Confidence Assessment	MPA/IPA “Areas of Concern”
Recovery	Jul 2015	Amber/Red	Funding and cost overruns Alignment of parties in business outcomes ICT issues Governance has space to consider strategic issues
Perceived redemption	Sep 2016	Amber	Rollout proceeding well but concerns over future releases of software

The MPA’s review in December 2014 resulted in a ‘Red’ Delivery Confidence rating, which was relatively rare; in September 2014 only 3 of 199 major projects across government had received such a pessimistic rating. The MPA’s stated view was that the project was in very serious trouble, and unless immediate actions were taken, the project would not achieve its objectives. The review team labelled the project as ‘failing’, and predicted that failure would occur unless dramatic interventions were made.

7.4.2 The Inside View - Complication

DEFRA had no experience of managing a complex systems development such as CAP-D. In addition, the Agile methodology was still relatively new in

Government and had not yet been used on a project of this size. George, of the MPA, said that the DEFRA team was out of its depth:

It's as simple as.... you don't have the skills or you don't know where you're heading

The project assumption was that a new web-based “front end”, to be developed by the IT project in cooperation with GDS, would collect the claim information from farmers and others and pass information to the “back end” where RPA software would calculate the entitlement. According to Leanne, a project member, her colleagues in the project were certain that this combination was not going to work:

.... they [the RPA] thought they could bolt on the front end stuff and they had the back end system and actually that was never going to work

George, of the MPA, reported other early indicators that things were not going well, for example, a budget overrun was forecast with the project only half complete. He reported:

At that point it was quite clear that the budget was shot. basically, half of [the contingency] had been used by the end of June [2014].... which didn't bode well.... that doesn't smell right, what's going on?

By July 2014 it was apparent to these project actors that the project was in trouble. Liz Truss MP was appointed Secretary of State for the Environment in the summer of 2014. According to George, Mark Grimshaw, the CEO of the RPA, went to see her and said he had no confidence in the management of the project. George reported that this intervention was the trigger for a meeting in the Cabinet Office between senior Cabinet Office officials including Mike

Bracken (CEO of GDS) and Liam Maxwell (Government Chief Technical Officer) to discuss who should take charge of the project. George said:

Mark [Grimshaw was] using his opportunity to try and seize control again. The centre [asked]... can this still be delivered, Agile, Digital by Default, by March? Mike [Bracken's] call " Yes but it's tight".... Who's the lowest ranking person in the room? Liam Maxwell. So they picked him to run it.

George perhaps cynically suggests that Maxwell was too junior to say no to the appointment, reflecting the system of power relations in the Cabinet Office. Leanne reports that Maxwell himself said he “did not duck” when he was asked by a Minister to take the job. According to Leanne, Maxwell was appointed to provide a counterweight to Grimshaw’s negative influence on the project:

He was asked to do it [act as SRO] by a minister and everybody really everyone said there can't be a better person; someone needs to be able to stand up to Mark [Grimshaw].

Maxwell quickly came into conflict with Grimshaw. George from the MPA witnessed one attempt to resolve this conflict:

There had been a need for [senior official] before Christmas [2014] to have.... a physical meeting and basically knock heads between. ... Liam [Maxwell] and Mark [Grimshaw]. There was outright war in the office so people, they were screaming at each other across the office and dissing each other and effing and blinding down in Reading, they were not getting on.

By December 2014 a further MPA review was overdue. The verdict of the reviewers, according to George who was on the review team, was stark:

We do the review ... We give it a Red.... on the basis of there is no plan, there is no contingency, there is no governance, there is nothing we can see that's working...

A further MPA review in February 2015 reached similar conclusions, and precipitated a 'stocktake' review meeting in front of John Manzoni, Chief Executive of the Civil Service, which was described by George thus:

By the time we had the stocktake in front of John [Manzoni], at the end of February, they were still saying well, if it all uploads this weekend, we'll still be OK.... it didn't work again that weekend, but they were already moving to.... [the contingency solution]

As the deadline approached, interviewees report that Maxwell realised that the new system was not going to be ready on time. According to George "the environments were...unstable". In March 2015 Maxwell stood down as SRO and Mark Grimshaw took over the project.

7.3.3. Complication - Analysis

The 'Inside View' narrative differs from the 'Official Verdict' in its treatment of the circumstances under which Liam Maxwell was appointed as SRO in 2014. In the 'Official Verdict', the appointment of four SROs in three years was considered to have 'created disruption' (NAO, 2015, p. 25). This was because each SRO had a different background and approach to managing the complex demands of the project. The appointment of Maxwell, however, was presented by the 'Official Verdict' as a response to the challenges that the project faced in late 2014, which were described as primarily technological.

The 'Inside View' portrays the decision to appoint Maxwell as SRO as part of a continuing to-and-fro struggle between GDS and RPA. As stated earlier, when Liz Truss MP was appointed Minister in charge of DEFRA, Mark Grimshaw asked her to give him control of the project. Cabinet Office officials met to discuss a solution that did not cede control of the project to Grimshaw and the RPA. The solution was the appointment of Maxwell, who was the second most senior official in GDS, as SRO, and someone robust enough to 'stand up to' Grimshaw. Maxwell's appointment was unusual. The two predecessor SROs reported to the project's accounting officer, the permanent secretary of DEFRA. Maxwell was a Cabinet Office official and thus nominally independent of DEFRA. Maxwell's appointment was framed by interviewees as a political act, taken to retain control of the project by GDS and avoid control reverting to RPA, with the consequent damage to the 'Digital by Default' agenda.

7.5 Evaluation – so what went wrong?

This section of the narrative, according to Riessman (2005, p. 3) "is where the narrator steps back from the action to comment on meaning and communicate emotion".

7.5.1 The Official Verdict – Evaluation

'The Official Verdict' places the blame for the project's failure on the failure of GDS and the other Government bodies to work together. The NAO pointed out the "deep and persistent personal rifts at senior levels" of the project (2015, p. 6). The head of the NAO, Sir Amyas Morse, repeated this criticism of individuals during the PAC hearing (PAC, 2016a):

I just want to say, particularly to Mr. Maxwell and Mr. Grimshaw, that we very rarely write reports that relate to personal behaviour like this. It

is a most unusual event to have had such extensive comment on behaviours that were distressing to staff and visibly confrontational.

In the same hearing PAC members also criticised the behaviour of these two “senior Programme officials” asking them first to explain themselves, then asking the DEFRA Permanent Secretary whether anyone had been disciplined for this behaviour. Grimshaw and Maxwell described their conflicts as “robust exchanges of comments” which were due to a “difference in focus” and resulted in “very clear conversations about what we needed to do”. The committee was unsatisfied by these explanations and in its formal report stated that the conflict between Maxwell and Grimshaw was a damaging influence on the project (PAC, 2016a, p. 3):

Dysfunctional and inappropriate behaviour between senior Programme officials impacted on implementation and delivery, potentially costing the taxpayer hundreds of millions of pounds in financial penalties.

7.5.2 The Inside View - Evaluation

According to interviewees, in late 2012 the RPA’s plans for the project were overruled by GDS; a decision which was opposed by Mark Grimshaw, CEO of the RPA. DEFRA took over management of the project and started developing software using the Agile methodology, but, according to Eva the NAO auditor, without really understanding how to manage it properly:

there's a lot of overstatement about Agile working the IT team's building a web front end[saying] “ You don't need to be spending weeks [on] the requirements, you can sit with somebody next to you on the screen and design what it's going to look like”; the governance and the steering group were.... a bit blinded [by the IT team which said] “oh well you don't need a plan, you know we're just doing it in this way

and we'll let you know how it goes as it goes along"; actually, you need very tight control on an Agile project

Eva positioned this as a common problem across Government, suggesting that this was a systemic issue rather than confined to a single project. George, from the MPA was also aware of the challenges with the development method:

Throughout the whole of August [2013] all I was hearing was bad news they were saying we launched release one well [informant] was saying it's not working or it's partly working and there's a load of fixes; there was a "we have always met our milestones" mentality rather than "why has this Agile gone wrong? How bad is the code?"

George said that the project managers did not want to admit that the software development was running late, although according to George, Mark Grimshaw (CEO of the RPA) was aware that the project was in trouble, and, in September 2014 Grimshaw made a direct bid to establish control by persuading Liz Truss, Secretary of State for the Environment, to say that she was not confident of the project's management:

"The only person who can save this is Mark [Grimshaw]". Mark using his opportunity to try and seize control again.

Grimshaw's management style was described by Leanne of GDS as "command and control". Leanne said that Maxwell could (and did) argue with him, but his own staff felt that they could not:

This organisation [the RPA] is Mark [Grimshaw] and people would never tell him he was wrong. Liam did I think that he [Grimshaw] was quite

a character - so it needed someone who would stand up to him. He [Grimshaw] was a bit manipulative....

One behaviour that interviewees interpreted as ‘manipulative’ was Grimshaw’s news management. External communications by the RPA about the IT development made it clear that it was run by DEFRA and GDS, and thus anything that went wrong with it was not the RPA’s fault. Leanne described this distancing strategy thus:

*Lots of their [RPA’s] communications had certain things like “well the GDS technology people are doing such and such” and it was pretty darn obvious that that they were positioning for.... Cabinet Office have said that we should do this; it was very easy to read between the lines that we [RPA] don't want this.... so I said “look, DEFRA is your mothership and you are **quite clearly positioning them to have done this because you think it is going to go wrong**” (laughs) [my emphasis]*

The extended communications campaign of the RPA, in preparation for the launch of the new scheme, ‘othered’ the systems development as being the responsibility of outside agencies. Grimshaw’s control of communications to the farmers made it clear that the development, and possible future failure was the responsibility of DEFRA and by extension GDS. For example, a trade paper commented thus (Driver, 2015):

The dynamic between DEFRA and RPA has been fascinating throughout the saga. In the early days of this ambitious online project, the message was very much that it was being led by DEFRA’s CAP Delivery Team.

This reportedly deliberate news management by the RPA may have influenced the statement of the chief executive of the Tenant Farmers’ Association in

March 2015, when the abandonment of the IT system was announced (Case, 2015):

George Dunn questioned whether DEFRA had learned anything from the last payments fiasco which rocked the industry in 2005. He said his association had been expressing concerns about the functionality of the system as long as two years ago. "It was being driven by DEFRA/[GDS] service philosophy that 'digital by default' was the right way to go – we didn't think it was appropriate," he added. "We thought this was going to end in tears. It's quite evident that the RPA has been left in an extremely difficult position by GDS and DEFRA, who created a system that was never going to work."

Dunn, speaking for thousands of stakeholders, placed the blame for the 2015 'fiasco' on 'Digital by Default', the approach mandated by GDS.

7.5.3. Evaluation – Analysis

In the 'Official Verdict', the PAC and NAO exercised their public oversight functions and gave their considered view of the project. They concluded that a failure of intra-government cooperation contributed to the failure of the project, a 'process' failure. In addition, the poor behaviours of the officials involved in the project (a 'people' failure) hindered cooperation. The PAC portrayed this clash of individuals as driven by a clash of cultures, with Maxwell representing GDS and the centre, and Grimshaw representing the operational frontline and the RPA. These cultures had different working styles; the people dressed differently, used different language and behaved differently.

The 'Inside View' identifies a struggle for control of the project between RPA and GDS that lasted for more than two years. In 2012 as GDS took control of the project, Mark Grimshaw was "put back in his box". The RPA did not

support GDS in its execution of the project, and in late summer 2014 it was apparent that the project was late and overspent. Grimshaw then asked the new Minister in charge of DEFRA for control of the project but his bid failed when, in a countermove by the Cabinet Office, Maxwell was installed as SRO instead – as someone who “will stand up to Mark [Grimshaw]”. Maxwell did stand up to him, and this resulted in stand-up rows with colourful language – as was described earlier “effing and blinding”. When Maxwell accepted that the software could not be made stable in time for go-live, in 2015 control of the project was passed back to Grimshaw, who had a manual system ready to deploy as a contingency. With Grimshaw in control, the IT project could be labelled a ‘failure’; thus the cause of the failure, according to the narrators of the ‘Inside View’ is ‘political’ action that ousted GDS and left RPA in charge.

The ‘Inside View’ narrative positions the actions of Grimshaw and the RPA as ‘resistance’ and as a barrier to the project’s success. This is an alternative storyline to the ‘Official Verdict’ where the cause of failure was given as poor cooperation (evidenced by personal clashes). In the ‘Official Verdict’ more of the blame for failure sits with GDS who had been too ambitious in setting goals for the new system and had not backed this up with resources. In the ‘Inside View’ more of the blame for failure sits with RPA, whose initial passive resistance became active resistance as the go-live deadline approached.

7.6 Resolution – delivering a service and Coda – what happened next?

The Resolution describes the project’s outcome and the Coda finishes the story and brings the action back to the (near) present.

7.6.1 The Official Verdict – Resolution and Coda

The project’s problems were resolved by abandoning attempts to make the online system ‘work’ and accepting applications by post; a process described

by the RPA as “paper-assisted digital”. This involved mailing out prepopulated paper forms which applicants annotated by hand and posted back to the RPA. Civil servants then typed the content into computer systems. The NAO’s report (2015, p. 10) described this stage of the project as “damage limitation”. The RPA suggested that it would return to implementing a fully online ‘digital’ approach at some later point, removing the need for these paper forms.

The NAO and the PAC described these changes as a pragmatic response to the abandonment of the ‘digital’ approach. The farmers had (by and large) received their money, although in most cases much later than they would have wished. It appears that the RPA’s narrative did, with this core stakeholder group at least, succeed in diverting the blame onto others; for example, Robin Milton of the National Farmers’ Union (Driver, 2016):

.... urged farmers not to pin all the blame on RPA boss Mark Grimshaw, who he said had been had placed under ‘intense political pressure by DEFRA to deliver something patently undeliverable’.

7.6.2 The Inside View – Resolution and Coda

When in March 2015 GDS stopped trying to get the ‘digital’ software ready to take applications, RPA proceeded with its contingency plans to move to a system that accepted applications on paper. Instructions were published on the Government’s website (RPA, 2015) and prepopulated forms were sent to farmers, to be amended by hand. When another MPA review took place in 2015, Delilah, a reviewer was positive about the way that Grimshaw had mobilised the RPA to meet the challenge of standing up this complex, largely manual system in a matter of weeks:

*Mark took responsibility and accountability, brought it back in house and basically took **personal** [interviewee’s emphasis] responsibility. I guess*

that's you should say that that's what an SRO should do; you don't always see that in an SRO but he took it to heart; and then started driving through it in a crisis management mode so he made unilateral decisions and made them stick and he's got the kind of personality that most people would jump when he shouts

Grimshaw later informed the NAO (2016) that the RPA had abandoned the 'Digital by Default' approach mandated by GDS and had adopted a more conventional approach, which he described as "Digital by Design, practical in application" (EFRASC, 2016 Q. 8). Leanne, the GDS manager and project member was asked if she thought that the project's story was being accurately told. She said:

I don't think so! (sighs)DEFRA shouldn't have allowed it to go on GDS was too pushy and Cabinet Office was too much about innovation and RPA they came out of it best actually (laughs).

In the contest to shape the dominant narrative of the project, Leanne asserted that the RPA had had the last word.

7.6.3 Resolution - Analysis

The 'Official Verdict' describes the fallback actions taken by the RPA when the new, online application system failed to work in time to take applications under the new scheme in May 2015. The RPA's story focuses on the need to process payments to farmers accurately (to avoid disallowance claims) and quickly (to resolve cash flow issues in rural businesses). Because the IT system had been bypassed in this solution, the narrative of 'Digital by Default' was replaced by one of 'Digital by Design'. While the IT project had been a failure, the 'Official Verdict' concludes that the 'business' project had been rescued by

the intervention of Grimshaw and his command-and-control style of management. The farmers had been paid.

The narrators of the ‘Inside View’ had a different opinion of Grimshaw and his actions. The interviewees placed blame for the failure on political action by Grimshaw and the RPA. In addition, they said that the legacy of GDS was being erased from the project, as the RPA now controlled the way that the project was being portrayed. The IT project had failed and Grimshaw and the RPA had contributed to its failure.

7.7 Analysing Power Relations impacting the narratives

The analysis above contrasts the two principal narratives (the ‘Official Verdict’ and the ‘Inside View’) and for each narrative isolates an outcome and attributes one or more causes. These are summarised in Table 7.3 below.

TABLE 7.3 - OUTCOME AND ATTRIBUTED CAUSES FOR PRINCIPAL NARRATIVES

	Official Verdict	Insider View
Outcome	IT Project Failed but overall ‘business’ project rescued by RPA	IT Project Failed because of active resistance by RPA
Attributed Causes	<p><i>Process:</i> Poor coordination between GDS and RPA</p> <p><i>People:</i> Personality clash between Maxwell and Grimshaw</p>	<p><i>Politics:</i> Clash of IT development ideologies – ‘Digital by Default’</p> <p><i>Politics:</i> Power struggle between centre (Cabinet Office, GDS) and periphery (RPA).</p>

Using CDA, this section looks at the two principal narratives under the headings *Emergence* (how and why are narratives constructed), *Hegemony* (what does the struggle for narrative dominance say about the underlying system of power relations) *Recontextualization* (how are narratives adapted to this particular context) and *Operationalisation* (how is discourse translated into action). The intention is to glean from the narratives evidence of the nature of these power relations. The principal segments of text that are referred to in the Critical Discourse Analysis are shown in Table 7.4 below, which identifies their discursive function and where they occur (by element) in the narratives.

TABLE 7.4 - CDA ANALYSIS BY NARRATIVE ELEMENT

Narrative Element	Official Verdict	Inside View
Abstract	Emergence: NAO account of poor cooperation and personal conflicts leading to failure	Emergence: Power struggle between GDS and RPA <i>[over control of software development]</i>
Orientation	<p>Recontextualisation: CAP-D becomes one of 25 ‘digital exemplars’ as part of ‘Digital by Default’ narrative.</p> <p>Hegemony: Project ‘reset’ in 2012 to become compliant with ‘Digital by Default’ approach.</p>	<p>Emergence: 2005 Fiasco <i>[previous development led to disallowance penalties]</i></p> <p>Hegemony: GDS rejects RPA proposal <i>[using control of funds to insist on “Digital by Default” approach]</i></p>
SRO	Hegemony: MPA review awards RED rating <i>[although SRO rejects conclusion]</i>	<p>Hegemony: Grimshaw attempts to seize control <i>[by talking to new SoS Environment]</i></p> <p>Hegemony: Senior civil servant ‘knocks heads’ <i>[telling Grimshaw and Maxwell to stop fighting]</i></p>

Narrative Element	Official Verdict	Inside View
Evaluation	<p>Hegemony: Failure of DEFRA, GDS and RPA to work together causes failure</p> <p>Hegemony: Personal rifts damaged cooperation</p>	<p>Recontextualisation: Use of Agile methods without experience led to difficulties</p> <p>Hegemony: Grimshaw's bid for control foiled by Cabinet Office putting Maxwell in SRO post</p> <p>Hegemony: RPA distances itself from project <i>[So that failure blamed on DEFRA and GDS]</i></p>
Resolution and Coda	<p>Operationalisation: 'paper-assisted digital' solution adopted <i>[and project deemed to have succeeded]</i></p>	<p>Recontextualisation: Digital by Design <i>[counternarrative to Digital by Default]</i></p>

7.7.1 Emergence - How were the narratives constructed?

The 'Official Verdict' includes the accounts of the project auditors at the NAO, which incorporate material from unpublished MPA review reports. The NAO started to investigate CAP-D after the decision to abandon the 'digital' system on 17 March 2015 (ARC, 2015). The RPA then executed its contingency plan, took paper applications and started making the first payments. The NAO continued investigating CAP-D during this period, and when its report was finally published in December 2015 (NAO, 2015) it was immediately followed by a PAC hearing (PAC, 2015). The subsequent, highly critical PAC report was published a few months later (PAC, 2016b). The wish to investigate the project was driven by the RPA's history "of failure" and the substantial risk of disallowance penalties and of damage to farm incomes (PAC, 2015).

The NAO auditors were not the only actors with an input to the published narratives that form the core of the 'Official Verdict'. These other actors include the management of the NAO (notably Amyas Morse, the Comptroller and Auditor General) who authorised the publication of the NAO reports, the PAC members who conducted formal, minuted hearings, and the PAC clerks who briefed members before hearings and who together with the NAO auditors, drafted the subsequent PAC report to Parliament. The formal reports are negotiated documents, and a considerable proportion of the time taken to produce the NAO report is taken up by the 'clearance' process (Sharma, 2007) where the wording of criticisms is negotiated with the criticised. The PAC report is not subject to the same constraints (Dunleavy *et al.*, 2009) but must nevertheless be a 'consensus' report of this multi-party body. The 'Official Verdict' is thus a heavily edited, carefully constructed narrative of the project, reflective of the system of power relations embracing the auditors and the audited.

The 'Inside View', being constructed from anonymous accounts, is clearly not subject to the same strictures. It includes the accounts of two project actors who were directly engaged within a more local system of power relations. This impacted on a daily basis what actions they could take within the project and how subsequently they described these constraints and enablers to me as a researcher. These 'insiders', Leanne and George, said that they were concerned to depict their personal roles and the roles of their organizations 'accurately' in their terms. They both said that their voices had not hitherto been heard, and that their 'accurate' version of events had been suppressed; in Leanne's case because her explanations for failure were "too complicated" and in George's case because "the system is completely broken from my point of view".

The account they both gave, which was supported by the other interviewees Eva and Delilah, was that the project was the subject of a continuous struggle between RPA and GDS. When this struggle was resolved (by the withdrawal of GDS) Leanne said that her organization, GDS, had been blamed unfairly for the failure of the project. She said that DEFRA had over-interpreted the GDS narrative about how digital systems should be developed and thus had lost a measure of pragmatism. Leanne's overall conclusion was that everyone involved had contributed to the failure of the project:

I can see quite clearly what went wrong and everyone had a fault; everyone was at fault for various reasons....

Leanne expressed frustration that the dominant narrative placed the blame on GDS and exonerated RPA. She said that RPA were also complicit in what she described as the failure of the project:

I mean people were really angry and it's really easy to think that actually RPA were right and GDS was wrong it's not.... there's truth in that, but GDS people tried to do the right thing and RPA didn't let them

George's account was more equivocal about the cause of failure. While he stated that RPA had been "unhelpful throughout" he also thought that the original strategy was flawed:

I agree with the findings of the NAO report.... there was a lot of bad decisions before my time.... when GDS.... were all powerful....

Unpacking this, George reflects on a time (2012) when he felt that GDS, with Francis Maude behind it, was at the apex of its power and able to "foist" policies on departments such as DEFRA. From a personal point of view, George was responsible for the review of a project which appeared to fail disastrously. He summarised his feelings thus:

It's such a torrid tale; I've sat and watched a car crash without a seat belt

In his account he claims that, whatever the failings of the project managers, SROs, his superiors and the system of review, he had attempted to "call it right" and make clear that the project was not going well. He defended the integrity of the review process but was frustrated at the apparent ability of DEFRA and GDS firstly to resist the need for review and secondly to ignore the recommendations.

Both George and Leanne said that their contribution to the 'Inside View' narrative was to counter some of the statements in the dominant narrative; as George put it, to "set the record straight". While acknowledging that the project had failed, these individuals did not acknowledge that *they* had failed; someone else, or even more amorously, the system had failed.

7.7.2 Hegemony - How does the struggle for dominance of narratives reflect the underlying system of power relations?

The data contains evidence of struggles between proponents of the 'Official Verdict' and the 'Inside View' in an attempt to establish a dominant interpretation of events. There is also evidence that the narratives were constrained to conform to pre-existing narratives that had already achieved hegemony. Three specific struggles are described in this subsection: the struggle between GDS and the RPA for control of the project; the personal struggle between Maxwell and Grimshaw for project leadership; and the struggle between RPA and GDS to influence the perception of the project held by stakeholders. In these struggles alternative narratives were suppressed or criticised because of power relations between individuals and groups. The outcome of these struggles is reflected in the dominant account of the project.

GDS vs RPA – Agile Dogma vs Pragmatism

The 'Official Verdict' refers to the battle of ideas between the centre of Government, GDS and other groups regarding how Government IT systems should be developed. In this depiction GDS specified an innovative and high-risk approach for the project and then failed to support DEFRA and RPA with appropriate resources to implement it. The NAO said that a key cause of failure was the lack of capability in DEFRA to execute the project in the way that GDS had stipulated.

The GDS approach was labelled 'dogma' by both George of MPA and by the farmers' representatives, perhaps fed by briefing from RPA. George labelled these policies as 'dogma' as, in his opinion, they were being adopted through an act of faith because there was no 'rational' business case for them. George

said that these policies were being imposed on unwilling recipients who then had to implement IT projects following their ‘dogmatic’ constraints:

I would use the word dogma [as decisions were taken] without any evidence basis attached to the policies that they were foisting upon departments.... I'm.... happy to go on the record that the Digital by Default [strategy] was never going to work for this cohort.... there isn't broadband in these areas; farmers are not the most tech savvy etc. etc.

Another George, of the Tenant Farmer’s Association (TFA), a powerful stakeholder group, issued a press release labelling the policy explicitly as ‘dogma’:

TFA Chief Executive George Dunn said “The TFA has always been opposed to the “digital-by-default” dogma expressed by DEFRA (TFA, 2015)

When the online scheme was abandoned, the trade press identified DEFRA’s ‘dogma’ (the source of which was GDS) as the cause of failure and not any lack of competence by RPA:

With just seven weeks to go before the May 15 deadline for applications under the Basic Payments Scheme (BPS) the UK government has climbed down from its dogmatic commitment to digital by default. (ARC, 2015)

The labelling of the GDS approach to IT projects as ‘dogma’ is an interesting rhetorical device. The negative connotations of ‘dogma’ include inflexibility, a blind or religious faith in the correctness of the doctrine, an inability to see possibilities beyond the set of rules defining the dogma and a suspicion that the rules have been given by an outside authority rather than derived in a logical manner. This labelling is thus an example of ‘othering’, contrasting the

inflexible approach of GDS with the ‘common sense’ (TFA, 2015) pragmatism offered by the RPA. It is evidence that the ‘Official Verdict’ achieved hegemony by excluding or diminishing elements of alternative narratives that contradicted the main tenets of what became the dominant narrative.

Maxwell vs Grimshaw – who is in charge of the show?

The ‘Official Verdict’ personalises the struggle between RPA and GDS, and frames it as a personality clash between Mark Grimshaw, CEO of RPA and Liam Maxwell, the Government CTO and briefly SRO of the project. The authors of the NAO’s report included a vivid description of conflictual behaviour “between senior Programme officials” and its consequences (NAO, 2015, p. 29). They linked the chaotic state of the project to the chaotic behaviour of the project’s leaders. This, they said, created an atmosphere where collaboration was difficult, and the lack of coordination between Departments brought the project down.

Grimshaw was forced to abandon his original plans for a new system because they did not follow the tenets of ‘Digital by Default’, for which Maxwell was the main proponent. The PAC criticised this split of responsibilities between GDS who set the technology policy and DEFRA and RPA who had to deliver the project within those constraints. In the December 2015 PAC hearing David Mowat MP said to Maxwell (PAC, 2015, p. 27):

***It is no wonder there were personality conflicts.** You had somebody with power without responsibility insisting on this [Digital by Default], and some other person supposed to be delivering it [my emphasis].*

The vocal disagreements between Maxwell and Grimshaw also attracted comment from Richard Bacon, the deputy chair of the PAC, who gave Maxwell the soubriquet “Mr Fancy Pants” and justified his rhetoric thus (PAC, 2015):

There is plainly a difference [of opinion on the right approach]. I was simply trying to paint it in bright colours so that it is easy to understand.

Bacon's portrayal of the clash was that Maxwell, coming in from the "outside" and "banging on about Digital by Default" distracted Grimshaw from his job of implementing the new system of Farm subsidies on time.

When the software development ran into trouble in 2014, the 'Inside View' alleges that Grimshaw used several tactics to gain control of the project, including an information campaign to stakeholders and a direct approach to the Secretary of State. The 'Inside View' further says that these attempts were thwarted by the appointment in the autumn of 2014 of Maxwell as SRO, by senior officials and Ministers who thought he could 'stand up' to Grimshaw.

The 'Inside View' portrays Maxwell as a frustrated, would-be hero who could have built a successful digital system but for the aberrant and undermining behaviour of Grimshaw and the RPA. In the narrative of the 'Official Verdict' Grimshaw was lauded as the person who had rescued the rural payments regime from the perceived failure of the new 'digital' systems development. Grimshaw succeeds despite the significant diversion of the digital systems development, a development not mandated by the EU and thus labelled as a distraction to the key task of paying the farmers what they were due.

Controlling the Agenda – presenting the project to the farmers

From an early stage in its life, the RPA controlled communication about the project to the main stakeholder group, farmers and other rural landholders. This communication was necessary to educate the beneficiaries of the farm payment scheme who were also going to be the users of the new online application system. The campaign involved briefing the Agricultural Trade

Press and farmers' representative organisations as well as providing online resources and conducting outreach work such as attending agricultural shows.

The material used made it clear that the IT project was not the responsibility of the RPA. The project was described to journalists as "DEFRA's CAP Delivery" project, and the project manager responsible for the work was identified on the RPA's website as a GDS employee (RPA, 2014). When RPA announced the withdrawal of the IT applications portal on 15 March 2015, Tenant Farmer's Association president George Dunn said (Case, 2015):

It has been a DEFRA-run project to this point. Mark Grimshaw has secured victory out of the jaws of defeat by moving to a paper-based system. We would congratulate him on being able to secure such a fundamental change in position from the government.

Grimshaw himself denied responsibility for the 'fiasco' when appearing in front of EFRASC (2016):

I would just remind you that I was not in charge of the CAP delivery programme until May of last year. I was in charge of the Rural Payments Agency, which was the customer of the CAP delivery programme, not the leader of the CAP delivery programme.

As commented earlier, the RPA's communications painted a clear line between the RPA as 'customer' and DEFRA (and behind DEFRA, GDS) as 'leader' of the CAP-D project. Leanne, the GDS manager and CAP-D team member described this depiction as 'positioning', and a deliberate strategy adopted to avoid blame in the event of project failure. The influential stakeholders quoted in the Agricultural press certainly seemed to accept this strategy, expressing the view that Grimshaw should not be blamed for the 'fiasco' but instead praised

for getting the Government to ‘change direction’ and abandon ‘Digital by Default’.

7.7.3 Recontextualisation - How are wider, superordinate narratives translated and interpreted in this context?

This section examines the translation of a major superordinate narrative within the context of the CAP-D project. This narrative is the ‘Digital by Default’ battle cry of the IT modernisers, led by GDS. The section looks at the origin of this narrative and its intersection with the narratives of CAP-D, and the emergence of counternarratives which were evidence of the balance of power relations in and around the project.

In 2012 the Cabinet Office, led by Francis Maude, took a key role in implementing the Government’s austerity agenda by seeking to cut the cost of delivering Government policies. This narrative was summarised in the Civil Service Reform Plan (Cabinet Office, 2012) published in June 2012. In this narrative, the old way of developing IT systems was portrayed as inefficient and having the side effect of making a small number of large systems integrators (the “oligopoly”) wealthy. The new way of developing systems, which were ‘Digital by Default’, was quicker, hence cheaper, and more flexible. ‘Agile’ development (a separate but related narrative, described in Section 4.4) was a key part of this story.

The RPA’s original proposal for developing CAP-D, as described above, would have used conventional non-Agile methods and relied on a contract with a large systems integrator. This approach would have broken the tenets of the ‘Digital by Default’ narrative. It would also have undermined the perception that Maude and GDS had control if the RPA had been allowed to proceed with a conventional development. The RPA’s narrative of local control and low-risk

solutions was thus superseded, and hegemony was (temporarily) achieved by 'Digital by Default'.

The counternarrative to the 'Digital by Default' narrative had two components. The first was the explicit labelling of 'Digital by Default' as 'Dogma', described in the previous section. Labelling the policy of opponents as dogma is not a new rhetorical device; indeed a Conservative critic of Margaret Thatcher's neo-liberal economic policies used the same term to title his book 'Dancing with Dogma' (Gilmour, 1992). The counternarrative suggested that the RPA's alternative system, which was paper based and used several pre-existing 'legacy' systems, was somehow more pragmatic. Grimshaw labelled this alternative approach "Digital by Design". This implies that the RPA made careful, measured choices to use Digital techniques whereas the proponents of "Digital by Default" were, as one interviewee put it, more "governmenty gung-ho". The RPA's labelling can be compared with the "Digital where Appropriate" counter-narrative of the DWP (DWP, 2014), as identified in the Universal Credit case study in Chapter 6. Together these two counternarratives, "Dogma" and "Digital by Design" were deployed with a number of different stakeholders including farmers' groups, the PAC (PAC, 2015) and EFRASC, the Select Committees of the House of Commons (EFRASC, 2016). Since the 'Official Verdict' casts doubt on the value of the "Digital by Default" narrative to this project, it would appear that the counternarratives achieved some traction with these audiences.

The money allocated to the CAP-D IT system was significant (the original budget for the whole project was £154m). This however was dwarfed by the

£1.4Bn⁹ annual value of the farming subsidy and the risk of disallowance penalties which in some years had exceeded £90m under the previous scheme. The NAO (and subsequently the PAC) thus felt that the CAP-D project was aiming at the wrong target. An internet-based application process would result in less clerical work for the RPA as it removed the need to process paper applications and rekey data into RPA systems. The potential savings this would generate were low tens of millions per annum. The potential penalties for inaccurate claims were potentially hundreds of millions. This mismatch drove criticism of the focus of GDS and support for the narrative of the RPA, as stated by the PAC in its 2016 report (PAC, 2016b):

The Department's and the RPA's priority is to pay farmers accurately and on time and to reduce disallowance penalties. The Cabinet Office, through GDS, focused on trying to encourage digital innovation, reduce costs and develop learning across government. ... Reducing the risk of disallowance penalties was not given sufficient priority.... The Chief Executive of the RPA [Mark Grimshaw] told us that the designation of the Programme as 'digital by default' may have been a distraction from the important task of developing the controls to protect taxpayers from disallowance.

The PAC, in the extract above, describes 'Digital by Default' as a 'distraction' that took the focus away from obtaining value for money. Grimshaw also distanced himself from 'Digital by Default' by describing the RPA's current approach thus (EFRASC, 2016):

⁹ BPS only, 2016, (EFRASC, 2016)

Last time I came here [2015] I talked about a development of Digital by Default to Digital by Design, Practical in Application. Many of our farmer customers are not as IT-literate as some other areas of industry, so we have to come up with something that is practical for everybody.

Within the narrative of 'Digital by Default' can be seen the cultural footprint of a city-dwelling, 'digital native' population used to transacting business on a mobile phone with ubiquitous, high bandwidth internet coverage. The counternarrative of 'Digital by Design' was positioned as tailoring the approach to address a less 'digitally literate' population, struggling with poor connectivity after an arduous day managing a lambing flock, as Primrose wrote on the RPA's blog (RPA, 2015) after trying to register with the system:

Since then there's been first half of lambing and family matters that demand attention away from the screen, and also further trouble with the internet connection itself.

The recontextualization of the metropolitan, GDS 'Digital by Default' narrative into the rural, pragmatic world of flock management and poor connectivity had been countered by the RPA. The RPA portrayed itself as being closer to its constituency and their concerns.

7.7.4 Operationalisation - How are the narratives translated into actions?

This section describes the adoption of a paper-based system for CAP delivery by the RPA, which was the principal action taken following construction of the 'Official Verdict' narrative.

Following the change of SRO in March 2015, the online element of the project was abandoned and instead of using a website to collect data, the RPA implemented a contingency plan using paper forms. Following a last attempt

to fix problems with the online application system Grimshaw told a Select Committee (EFRASC, 2015c):

Unless we look at an alternative.... I am concerned we will not hit the deadline. I, Mark Grimshaw, have a plan of how to do that in an alternative way.

The RPA's actions were portrayed as a heroic rescue in the face of a digital disaster. Grimshaw later asserted that the project had not failed as the farmers had been paid. His counternarrative was that, by using paper forms and manual processing, the business objective of implementing the new Farm Payments system had been achieved *despite* the distraction caused by the GDS-led digital development, since abandoned.

7.8 Conclusions

The analysis places these alternative narratives of the project in a wider context. A key part of this context is the emergence of GDS in 2011 as a strong voice at the centre of Government, promoting a new, distinctive IT narrative ('Digital by Default'). Prior to 2010 the IT powers of the centre had been relatively weak, and the role of Government Chief Information Officer (CIO) was merely to coordinate. GDS' interest in CAP-D was strategic. As an exemplar project CAP-D would demonstrate the value of GDS's narrative by avoiding the IT failures of the previous Government. In this narrative, if the CAP-D project was 'successful', it would enhance GDS's credibility and strengthen its mandate to change Government's approach to IT. Liam Maxwell, as Chief Technology Officer, was an ardent advocate of the 'Digital by Default' approach and thus supportive of applying it to the CAP-D project.

In 2005, the introduction of the previous version of the farm payments scheme had been dominated by another systems failure, leading to late payments,

allegedly some suicides and £600m in disallowance penalties. The RPA's narrative was highly influenced by the memory of this 'fiasco'. Joining in 2011, the new CEO, Mark Grimshaw, had spent years repairing relationships with stakeholders and restoring the reputation of the RPA for competence. This meant that the introduction of a new scheme and a new system in 2015 could not risk a repeat of the 2005 'fiasco'. The priority for the RPA was to pay the farmers accurately and on time. In the RPA's 'pragmatic' narrative, a 'digital' approach was a distraction.

The clash of these two narratives led to an impasse, and the irresistible force of Liam Maxwell came up against the immovable object of Mark Grimshaw. Only external deadlines resolved this impasse. In 2010, the fixed-term Parliaments Act had set the date of the next general election on 7 May 2015. The deadline for completing applications for the new CAP payments was 15 May 2015. The RPA's narrative foregrounded risk, and no government could risk a flood of stories about distressed farmers struggling with a new and failing computer system days before the election. The bad press headlines from when the previous system was introduced in 2005 were on record. Preserving the purity of the policy was no longer worth the political risk – and the RPA was allowed to take over the project and effectively abandon the new digital system. The dominant 'Official Verdict' narrative (constructed by the NAO and the PAC) endorsed this decision.

The plot of the 'Official Verdict' casts Grimshaw as the hero who rescued the project and the Government's reputation for competence; and Maxwell, the dreamer of 'Digital Dreams' as the villain. The counternarrative of the 'Inside View' asserted that Maxwell had been given the difficult task of rescuing a

development which already had deep flaws, and that Grimshaw had sought to undermine him in performing that task.

For the reviewers and auditors, the failure of the CAP-D digital development was another chapter in a long-running narrative highlighting Government's inability to run complex IT projects. The MPA had tried to signal problems with the project, but its message was lost in the noise created by the strident conflict between Grimshaw and Maxwell; in fact Maxwell had reportedly rejected the findings of the report, saying "you talked to the wrong people". The authors of the 'Official Verdict' were also given a more newsworthy target than a simple story of waste and incompetence. The conflict between two such strong personalities was unusual, of interest to the committee, and also of interest to journalists – as the Times proved on 2 March 2016. This short summary of the project is perhaps the most long-lasting outcome of the construction of the 'Official Verdict' and firmly attributes the cause of failure to GDS:

Civil servants' row with Mr. Fancy Pants costs millions : The infighting began soon after digital experts arrived at the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) to computerise its old paper-based system for paying out £1.8 billion a year in subsidies to farmers (Webster, 2016)

This clash of personalities was certainly journalistically interesting, but as the analysis above shows, it drew attention away from other possible narratives of the project's failure, which highlighted the wider political struggle between GDS and the Departments for control of the way that Government developed IT systems.

8. Discussion and Conclusion

8.1 Introduction and structure of this chapter

Sir Peter Gershon was the founder of the Office of Government Commerce (OGC), the predecessor body of the MPA and the person who introduced the practice of regular project review to government. In 2015, Gershon took part in a meeting of the Major Projects Review Group to discuss one of the largest IT projects in Government. He remarked to his fellow board members that sometimes the stated wishes of politicians could not always be achieved because:

The law of politics does not override the law of large projects

Yet analysis of the empirical material of the thesis suggests the opposite. Political action, driven by the system of power relations impacts every aspect of these large projects, from their inception to the post-mortem evaluation.

In this discussion chapter I return to the Research Question and the supplementary questions that were raised in subsection 1.2.5. The Research Question is:

What do the narratives of project managers, reviewers and auditors reveal about the ascription of success and failure to large IT projects in UK Government?

The findings show that for an IT project, 'success' or 'failure' is a term in the dominant narrative that recounts the outcome of that project. The presence of 'failure' in this dominant narrative signals an inability to sustain a narrative of success. The 'reasons' for failure are reasons why that particular narrative became and continues to be dominant. These reasons are connected to the system of power relations surrounding the IT project and are thus highly

contextual. The findings confirm Fincham's (2002) view that the terms success and failure are ascribed within project narratives because of struggles within the system of power relations and to further the interests of one or more actors within this system.

In section 1.2.5, I challenged myself to explore wider aspects of the Research Question, and to seek to understand *how* the system of power relations in and around the project impacted the consideration of success and failure. For example, did narratives reveal: what organization-level agendas were being pursued; the place of review and audit functions within the system of power relations; how the evaluators related to the evaluated; how reviewers and auditors achieved and maintained legitimacy; how within this system actors conceptualised project failure; and how narratives with this conceptualisation achieved and maintained hegemony?

In answering these questions, I explain how this system worked to produce ascriptions for these large IT projects. This explanation starts with an examination of how the Political context shapes the execution of these projects. Within this context there are a set of power relations that were in tension, and broadly in balance at the time of the study. The narratives studied described and enacted these tensions. They also reveal how it was in the interests of some actors in this system of power relations to ascribe the term 'failure' to some of these projects at particular times, using a 'transgressive' conceptualisation of failure. While narratives of review and audit played an important role in these ascriptions, they were not the most important drivers of the narrative of success or failure for a specific project, as other factors were also relevant.

In this chapter, over the next five sections I show how this explanation is supported by the key findings of the research. I relate these findings to the relevant literature, showing where the thesis contributes by extending theory. Following this I discuss the constraints on the research, while making suggestions for further work that may overcome these constraints. Finally, the conclusions of the research are summarised.

8.2 The context - the system of power relations in UK Government IT projects

While many technical and organisational features of large IT projects are shared with the private sector, the social and political context of Government within which these projects were exercised is quite different. Government is a rules-based environment with strong institutions, and project management within Government reflects this social structure; however, before starting work on the thesis, I did not support the proposition that the development of large IT systems was somehow 'different' in the UK public sector. I knew that in the UK private sector, the same technologies were used by the same IT companies using the same methods. Yet the perception remained, developed by the PAC and others into a powerful metanarrative – large IT projects in Government invariably failed, or at least failed more frequently than elsewhere. The findings demonstrate that the system of power relations within which these projects were executed is unique, and that this uniqueness contributed to both the metanarrative and the generation of specific narratives of individual project failure that gained hegemony. This section looks at the particular features of this landscape that make it unique.

Within Government the system of power relations is institutionally shaped by the UK's Parliamentary democracy, but the temporal context is important too.

The case study projects were executed in 2010-15 during the first coalition Government since the Second World War. This administration came to office immediately after a seismic financial crisis and was led by the Conservative Party after 13 years in opposition. I discuss this context under four headings: how this system managed large IT projects, the role of individuals, the special features of a coalition and the relationship between the Civil Service and politicians.

8.2.1 Managing large IT projects

The system of managing very large IT projects under the Coalition had largely been inherited from the previous Labour Government, which introduced the 'Gateway' project review system following a series of critical headlines and PAC reports (PAC, 2004). The incoming Coalition government made two innovative changes as described earlier in section 4.2 that changed the system of power relations around large IT projects and that were discussed extensively in narratives of these projects. The first was to formalise the system of project review and put it in the hands of a new body, the Major Projects Authority (MPA) (Fawcett and Marsh, 2013) and the second was to create a 'disruptor' unit, the Government Digital Service (GDS) to change the way that Government delivered large IT projects and accelerate the use of the internet as a communications and transactional medium (Eaves and Goldberg, 2017). Figure 8.1 below shows this revised landscape. It groups the organizational entities and other bodies that are mentioned in the narratives and which are described as having a role in the system of power relations.

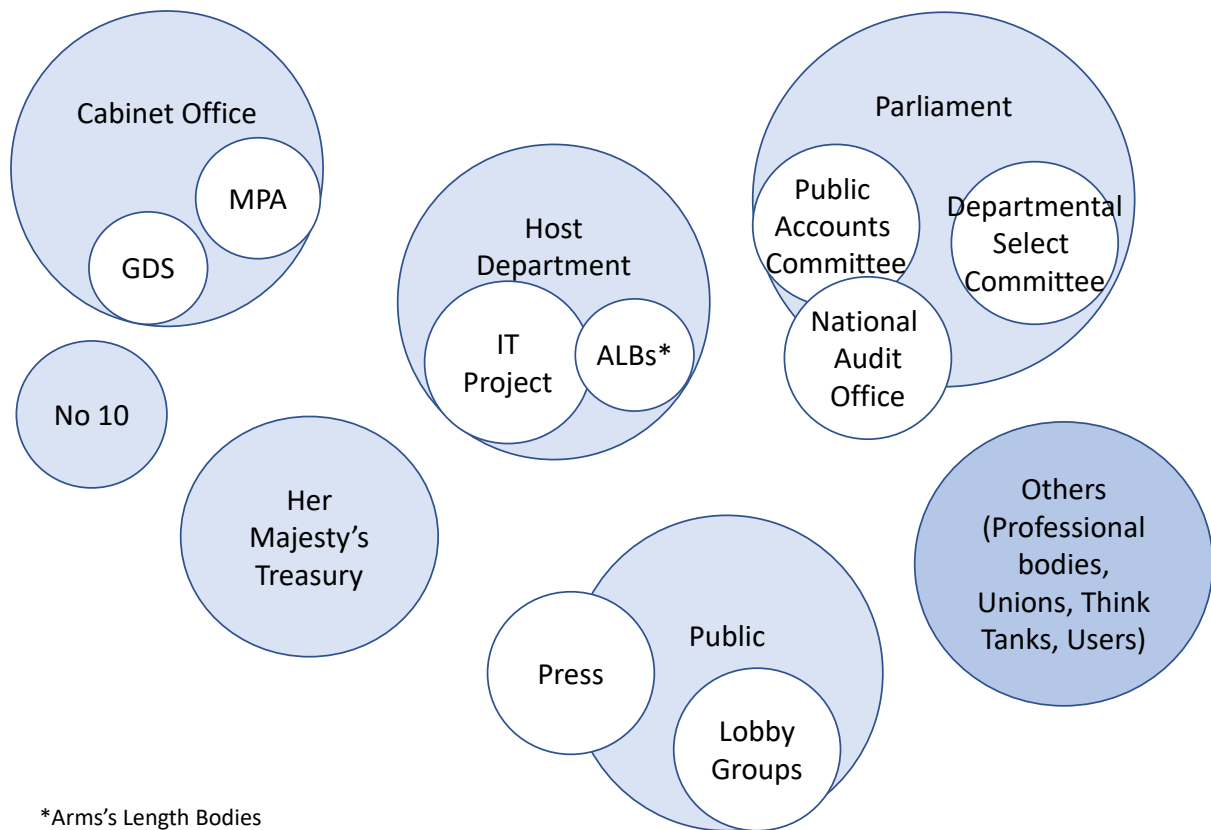


Figure 8.1 - Entities within the system of power relations

These bodies form part of an ecosystem of power relations, linked by the law, institutional conventions, party and personal relationships and the flow of funding and patronage. Several of these entities were described in section 4.2, Research Site and a summary is given here. The Host Department (e.g. DEFRA, DWP) was responsible to Parliament for the IT project, the policy that the new IT system was meant to support and the money expended on building and running the new system. Some Host Departments delivered policy through an Arm's length Body (e.g. RPA) tasked specifically with that delivery function. The Host Department obtained the funds to deliver the policy by submitting a specific business case for any new asset (such as an IT system) to Her Majesty's Treasury (HMT), which included estimates of needed funding. During the period studied, HMT sought the support of specialist units in Cabinet Office such as the IT experts in GDS to decide whether to let the project proceed, and

the IT project, if large or strategic, was subject to monitoring by another Cabinet Office unit, the MPA. This monitoring took the form of an annual evaluative review. Parliamentary Select Committees of backbench MPs reviewed the work of particular Departments, including any large investments such as IT projects. Another Select Committee, the Public Accounts Committee took an interest if an IT project was deemed to have run into trouble, or some aspect of the project was said to deliver questionable value. It then launched an inquiry, asked the NAO to write a report to ‘establish the facts’ and held one or more public evidence hearings before writing its own report on the project.

The press and the public have key roles in the narration of Government IT project failure, though these roles have not been studied by previous researchers. Press reports amplified the narratives of other actors, notably the NAO and the PAC, and in both case studies protagonists used press reports to attempt to gain support for particular courses of action. The Prime Minister’s office at No. 10 controlled the flow of information (where it could) from Government bodies to the press, but some of these actors talked informally to journalists (engaging in ‘boundary politics’ (Ku, 1998) or leaking) and thus sought to influence the ‘public’ narrative regarding certain projects. The case studies also show where the public responded to this narrative by exerting pressure on the system through parliamentarians and lobby groups.

8.2.2 The role of individuals

The diagram in figure 8.1 shows organizations and groups rather than individuals in this system, though individual actors figure strongly in the narratives. The narratives describe ‘political’ acts of individual agency, but these acts are constrained by conventions, written and unwritten ‘rules of the

game’ and resistance or counteractions by others. Similarly, these individual ‘political’ acts are enabled and legitimised by institutional and other arrangements.

The project managers themselves made statements stressing the importance of individual political skills to their ‘success’, a topic examined by Ferris and his collaborators (Ferris, Fedor and King, 1994; Ferris *et al.*, 2000) and others. Project managers in interviews described professional, technical competences as necessary skills for a successful IT project manager, but that ‘success’ required a repertoire of “soft skills” to accompany these “hard” accomplishments. Project managers identified themselves as intuitive, flexible entrepreneurs, using a range of coping strategies dubbed ‘practical wisdom’ by researchers (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Cicmil, 2003, 2006), and improvisational skills that might be termed ‘bricolage’ (Thomas, George and Henning, 2012; Marshall and Bresnen, 2013; Floricel *et al.*, 2014). Project management was described by these practitioners as an individual accomplishment and interviewees outlined how their experience and their personal characteristics were important in enabling successful project delivery. Project failure was ascribed to causes outside of the individual’s control, including political action by others, and often that action was attributed to an organization or ‘the system’ rather than specific individual political ‘opponents’. Within the project narratives studied, the failure of the project was not attributed to the failure of the individual project manager, or any lack of individual political skill, but to wider forces that could not be resisted. ‘Failure’ occurred when it was impossible for project managers to sustain a narrative of ‘success’ in the face of counternarratives. This suggests that while the social competencies described by some authors as ‘individual political skill’ (Ferris *et al.*, 2000;

Zhang, Zuo and Zillante, 2013) may be *necessary* to sustain a narrative of success, in this context they did not prove *sufficient*.

8.2.3 Special features of the coalition

Within the context studied, National party politics played a full part in the system of power relations. As stated earlier, during the period studied (2010-15) the first formal Coalition government in the UK since the Second World War was in office, and the narratives of the case study projects show the impact of 'National' coalition politics on decision making. According to the Minister in charge of the UC project, the project could have been stopped after the 'reset' activity of 2013 but a political decision was made to keep funding it; and the decision to continue was supported by one coalition partner against reported opposition by another. Decisions that might otherwise have been taken in Cabinet became the subject of cross-coalition negotiation. As an example, the narratives of both case study projects describe how steps were taken to avoid either project being portrayed as a "failure" in the national press during run up to the General Election in 2015. This election marked the end of the Coalition, and neither party wanted bad headlines driven by irate farmers or unpaid benefit claimants. The dynamic of the relationship between Coalition partners was an explicit factor in the ascription of success and failure to these projects.

8.2.4 Politicians and Civil Servants had a changing relationship

During the period studied, the relationship between elected politicians and civil servants continued to change, following a trajectory that had been established by Thatcher's governments in the 1990's and continued thereafter. It has been claimed that these changes were driven by the establishment of New Public Management (NPM) (Hood, 1991) within UK Government.

Politicians expressed frustration with the seeming slow pace of policy implementation by the civil service, and constructed a narrative that civil servants lacked ‘practical’ skills including digital, commercial and project management (NAO, 2011, p. 19). Pure policy development became the domain of think tanks (for example Universal Credit: Brien, 2009). From being symbiotic partners in the formulation of policy, civil servants became delivery managers, brigaded in delivery-focused units such as GDS and the MPA. Richards and Smith (2016) suggest that this change to a more traditional master-servant relationship reduced the ability for civil servants to temper the sometimes over-optimistic ambitions of politicians, who were driven to innovate in order to deliver complex policy objectives within the politically constrained timescale of a single Parliament. By following the direction of their political masters, project managers chose to use novel techniques and consequently encountered a novel set of risks.

8.2.5 Political context – summary

A number of new factors came together to generate a new and unique set of power relations within which the case study projects needed to be executed. No serving civil servant had ever experienced a coalition government before. This government was concerned that the electorate might not grant it a second term unless it could show concrete achievements, and consequently it was under pressure to deliver against its ambitious policy agenda. At the same time, it was voluntarily observing a strict set of fiscal rules, which did not allow the traditional investment in large capital projects by which Governments have secured popularity since Roman times. This Government sought to square this circle by pursuing an ‘Efficiency’ agenda, described in more detail in section 8.3.2 below, that promised more output for less input. Meanwhile the Government sought to fill a perceived skills gap with investment in training,

while not recognising that individual prowess by ‘hero’ project managers was unlikely to overcome aspects of the system of power relations that inhibit delivery. The Government context sets a pattern for this system of power relations, but in addition some specific relationships within this system were directly relevant to the ‘failure’ of the case study projects, and these are discussed in the section below.

8.3 The system of power relations had forces in tension

The system of power relations within which these Government IT projects were executed maintained several relationships in tension. Some of these tensions flowed from attempts to change the way that Government approached these large IT projects, others from deliberate checks and balances on executive action and yet others from historic institutional characteristics implemented in formal systems of ‘governance’. These balanced forces constrained any attempt to change the perception of the rate of project failure, as the impetus for change was resisted by forces that would preserve the status quo. I illustrate this by looking at three key relationships that were in balance at the time. These relationships were: the centre of Government versus the periphery; the modernisers versus the traditionalists; and the legislature versus the executive.

8.3.1 The Centre vs the Periphery

Apparent tension between the centre of Government and the periphery is not a new perception. According to Anthony Seldon (2021), David Cameron said of his time as Prime Minister:

I remember joking after a few months that you spend far too much time trying to find what the government's actually doing and quite a lot of time trying to stop it.

As stated earlier, the centre of government consisted of the Cabinet Office (CO), Her Majesty's Treasury (HMT) and a far smaller unit directly supporting the Prime Minister and usually referred to as "No 10". HMT controlled public spending, thus having power relations with every element of Government. CO managed the civil service and the Cabinet Committees that decide on policy. No 10 provided the Prime Minister's staff, giving policy advice and organising where the PM is, what the PM does and who the PM talks to. This unit provided a strategic view of how the Government's agenda was presented and executed.

The periphery consisted of the 'spending' Departments and their Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs). Each Department (and many of the ALBs) was headed by an 'accounting officer' who was personally accountable to Parliament for delivering policy and spending the money that Parliament had allocated appropriately. The Departments had additional claims to legitimacy through direct contextual knowledge of who their 'customer' base was and how specific policies affected them. Some actors from this group expressed annoyance at being told what to do by the 'remote' centre, and there are descriptions of overt and covert resistance within the narratives. There is also evidence of a cultural gap between the policy teams (made up of fast-track civil servants and Oxbridge graduates) in the centre and managerial culture of the operational delivery units dispersed across the country (Jarman and Greer, 2010).

While delivery units expressed annoyance at 'interference' by the centre, those at the centre also expressed frustration at their inability to 'get things done', and the apparent 'softness' of the levers of power. In his account of a meeting with a group of civil servants, Francis Maude, then Minister for the

Cabinet Office (a leading ‘moderniser’) described asking why a change that he had sponsored was not being executed (2017):

On one occasion I asked a cross-departmental group of officials why a Cabinet Committee’s very clear decision had simply been ignored. The answer? ‘We didn’t think it was a very strong mandate’. What on earth do you need? A Papal Bull?

In summary, Government exhibited what another Minister characterised as “a lack of organizational discipline”; in his view, managers at the periphery would commonly ignore or fail to act on instructions from the centre.

8.3.2 Modernisers vs Traditionalists

As stated earlier, in 2010 the incoming Coalition Government brought in an ‘Austerity’ agenda, suggesting Government expenditure needed to be cut so that the large amounts of Government debt incurred (largely from nationalising endangered banks) during the 2008-9 financial crisis could be repaid to restore the public finances. Modernisers in the Cabinet Office energetically promoted an ‘Efficiency’ Agenda, suggesting that there was no need to compromise on public service delivery while cutting costs. Instead, new ways of interacting with the public and businesses through the internet and better government housekeeping would reduce costs painlessly. The civil service reduced its headcount by 15% in the five years of the Coalition Government (IfG, 2015).

Critics of previous Government efficiency drives noted that in 30 years of ‘New Public Management’ costs had gone up rather than down, and the bureaucracy was less efficient (as measured by the higher level of complaints) (Hood and Dixon, 2016). Managers in the public service had learned to ‘game’ (Bevan and Hood, 2006) the targets placed on them by the centre, and while more and

more targets were met, the efficiency and effectiveness of the services were not perceived to improve by users. Meanwhile, the enthusiastic pursuit of NPM had led to greater numbers of IT projects to support the new, metricated ways of working. Many of these IT projects were labelled as failed projects and UK Government had become, in the words of one group of researchers “a world leader in ineffective IT schemes for government” (Dunleavy et al. 2008, in PASC, 2011).

What was needed, according to Francis Maude, the incoming Minister for the Cabinet Office, was a revolution rather than an evolution. In the case of IT, this was embodied by a new ‘Digital Government Unit’ (Clarke, 2019) called the Government Digital Service (GDS), a self standing organization that could act as evangelist, policeman, educator and implementor all at once. To break the cultural norm, this unit was staffed primarily with new recruits from the commercial world. GDS set about developing policies and making funding conditional on following them.

The narratives (for example on the CAP-D case study) suggest that the practices mandated by GDS were seen as introducing risk for those who had to manage and account for the success of IT projects, and who in some cases expressed a preference to stay with what they saw as conventional and well-understood ways of working. One key example was the introduction of ‘Agile’ methods to large-scale developments, which was criticised as untried at scale, unfamiliar to Government and incompatible with standard forms of governance and contracting methods. The reaction to ‘Agile’ illustrates another feature of this system of power relations; the introduction of new ways to manage projects led to the introduction of narratives that described new ways to fail. The narratives described determined resistance to such

changes. Even where some changes were adopted, they were attenuated by the retention of prior project management and development practices.

The dynamic between the modernisers and the traditionalists was more intense and personalised than the historical, polite, collegiate (and arguably ineffectual (McNulty, 2004)) way that change had hitherto been undertaken in the civil service. These struggles were, according to the narratives, cultural and existential. The incomers spoke differently, dressed differently, “were culturally very different”(PAC, 2015b). This was not just a contest to see which development method was most appropriate. In the new, modernised, digital world there was no place for the skills of the traditionalists. The risk-taking, constantly innovating culture of the tech start-ups that GDS modelled itself on clashed with the process-heavy, risk-averse, box-ticking ethos of the established IT groups in Government (Clarke, 2019).

8.3.3 Checks and balances – legislature reviews the executive

Finally, the tension between the legislature and the executive is a built-in facet of the UK’s unwritten constitution. The executive consists of Ministers and their Departments of State, and the legislature is Parliament and the body of written and common law; thus checks on executive power come from the courts and parliamentary scrutiny. One of the most active parliamentary bodies was the PAC which during the 2015-2017 Parliament examined six large IT projects (some of them twice). The PAC, supported by the NAO, identified major faults with the almost all the IT projects that it looked at, describing them as “fiascos” that had resulted in “failure in a Government IT project at huge cost to the taxpayer”. They further remarked that “the litany of problems there is frankly one of the worst I have ever seen”, due to a “a history of poor management and a worrying complacency about its impact on

taxpayers”. The activity of the PAC and its subsequent reporting in the press created the metanarrative that “Government IT projects always end in failure” which gave the impression that all these large IT projects were doomed to end in conflict and confusion. The vice-chair of the Public Accounts Committee, Richard Bacon MP and a PAC member for 16 years had collected enough examples of such ‘failed’ projects to co-author a book on the topic, (Bacon and Hope, 2013), describing the computerisation of the NHS, the Passport Service, the Courts and Tax Credits among others. The PAC’s open and frequent criticism of Government execution generated eye-catching headlines, and thus provided a powerful platform for this metanarrative. The metanarrative was also apparently supported by some quantitative research (Budzier and Flyvbjerg, 2012) and was widely accepted by both the technical (Ballard, 2013) and national press (Daily Telegraph, 2014). The PAC had little cause or time to examine the counternarrative – that many IT projects initiated by Government in this period were not described as failures.

Departmental Select Committees examined the projects undertaken by the Departments that they scrutinised, bringing their specialist knowledge of the customer base to the discussion. While interested in value for money, they were as motivated by policy effectiveness – in the example of the two case study projects, what was the new system going to do for the benefit of claimants of UC? Or of Farmers? Departmental Select Committees could criticise the executive for adopting ineffective policies as well as implementing ineffective IT systems.

The PAC was supportive of the modernising narrative promoted by Maude and others (PAC, 2012). The role of Select Committees as auditors and scrutineers required examination of how effectively the modernising agenda was

executed, and when an opportunity arose they were as ready to criticise the modernisers as the traditionalists. GDS came under fire because of its 'digital dreams' (PAC, 2015b). The MPA was criticised for its prolix prose (dubbed 'MPA-speak') and its compliant attitude to Departmental requests for delay in reviews (WPSC, 2018).

The relationship between the legislature and the executive was therefore in constant tension. While the standing Select Committees of the legislature occasionally praised the good work of Ministers and civil servants, they were more likely to blame them for their errors, and commentators suggest that this culture of naming and shaming produced defensiveness and inhibited learning from these errors – thus producing more errors (Guerin, McCrae and Shepherd, 2018). To maintain their legitimacy as effective stewards of probity and accountability, the Select Committees needed a continuous flow of evidenced criticisms.

8.3.4 Power relations and the ascription of failure

The public accounts of both case study projects (UC and CAP-D) attribute failure to failures of management – to organise, to achieve needed collaboration and to plan effectively; however, the findings confirm Fincham's (2002) observation that success and failure are rhetorical terms, serving the political interests of particular project actors. The centre, with its modernising agenda, was incentivised to describe traditional projects as 'failures' in order to justify the introduction of new approaches. Equally the periphery, wishing to protect its autonomy, was incentivised to discredit such new approaches as too risky and the cause of project failure. The scrutinising legislature was motivated to demonstrate its independence and effectiveness by highlighting a

regular flow of 'failed' projects. This subsection examines these findings in more detail.

The agenda of the modernisers was that change was necessary and inevitable. The 'old ways' had led to a decade of failed IT projects, as the Departmental IT functions, aided and abetted by the 'usual suspects', the big 6 outsourcing companies had produced well-documented catastrophes such as the NHS "National Programme for IT" (Currie, 2012), ID Cards and Tax Credits. These projects were too big, too rigidly controlled and importantly did not conform to the development model proposed by GDS. Failure in this narrative was not a stochastic phenomenon, but the end result of a conspiracy between the 'oligarchy' (PACAC, 2011 Q.146-7) of big IT outsourcers and their allies in the IT functions who wished to protect their large budgets while denying policymakers and users the responsive, cheap IT that they deserved; "IT as good as you use at home" (GDS, 2013).

The agenda of the Departments at the periphery was that as they held the accountability, they should have the freedom to manage their own destiny. The accountability structure of Departments meant that each major IT project was devised, launched and resourced independently of others in Government, even if a system with very similar functionality existed already. A Departmental official, the Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) was given personal responsibility for deciding on the approach to be taken and who should manage the project. If a project was deemed to be struggling, there was a reluctance to admit to problems and to ask for support from outside the Department, and a more common response was to defend the project from outside scrutiny by the MPA and to increase commitment and the flow of resources to 'fixing' the problems, a phenomenon observed by researchers for

30 years (Brockner, 1992; Lyytinen and Robey, 1999; Pan, Pan and Flynn, 2004; Jani, 2011). If the department did lose control of a project to the ‘modernisers’, it was quite helpful if that project was seen to fail and then be rescued by its former owners.

The agenda of the auditors was to encourage or embarrass Government into improving its performance. The PAC generally only scrutinised projects with inherent challenges, thus the expressed view in its metanarrative (that IT projects invariably failed) was influenced by a constant diet of audit reports describing missed deadlines, cost overruns and functional shortcomings. It was the function of the PAC, supported by the NAO, to point these out as part of its scrutinising mission. Although Government reacted to this metanarrative with initiatives including novel development methods, expensive training of project leaders and tougher review of major projects, the metanarrative persisted. These initiatives were resisted, and the metanarrative thus was sustained as power struggles produced a regular flow of challenged projects for the PAC and others to criticise, and the causal attributions that they chose to use were consistent with the metanarrative; Government was under skilled and ill-organized, and inappropriate processes of governance, risk management and project execution contributed to inevitable failure outcomes. More detailed analysis reveals a richer picture, as the promotion of new ways to manage projects by the reformers at the centre of Government had led to the emergence of new narratives of failure. The reforms themselves became reasons for failure. New ways of doing things were matched by new ways to fail.

The system of power relations thus produced and sustained failure – within this system, some level of IT project failure was inevitable. Failure advanced

and discredited the modernisation agenda. Failure undermined and reinforced the status quo. Failure legitimised the view of the scrutineers that things needed to get better, and reinforced their view that improvement was always promised but never happened. As explored in the next section, narratives reflected these apparent contradictions and enabled them.

8.4 How narratives ascribed failure and achieved hegemony

The thesis confirms the view of previous researchers (Dawson and Buchanan, 2005; Bartis and Mitev, 2008; Veenswijk and Berendse, 2008; Rogers, 2013; Sergeeva and Winch, 2021) that the narratives surrounding these large IT projects are constitutive of both project execution and evaluation. The narratives are “powerful tools” (Dawson and Buchanan, 2005, p. 846) in shaping technological change. The thesis contributes to this body of research by showing how evaluators (project reviewers and auditors) took these project narratives and produced fresh narratives that ascribed success or failure. This section describes this process of ascription, how it was enacted in this particular context and how these narratives (and in particular failure narratives) were used in ongoing struggles for hegemony.

8.4.1 Narratives of Evaluation

Both reviewers and auditors said that their role was to analyse the project narrative and within it find gaps and inconsistencies. These flaws in the narrative showed that the project had diverged in some way from the norm, and the norm for project management and execution at the time was expressed in the processual models put forward by the ‘professional’ bodies, APM and PMI, and the interpretation of these models as documented and promulgated by the OGC between 2000-2010 such as Prince 2 (HMG, 2010) and its extension, Managing Successful Programmes (Axelos, 2021). These

interpretations were a de-facto rulebook for project managers in Government, and deviation from this rulebook by omission or innovation was seen as introducing risk. The evidence of project failure produced by evaluators of the case study projects was by reference to this model. Evaluators stated that the project managers and others responsible for the project 'failure' omitted steps in the process, broke the rules and introduced risks that then materialised with adverse consequences.

This conceptualisation of failure is consistent with the 'processual' view of project management found in the literature (Southon, Sauer and Dampney, 1999; Gemino, Reich and Sauer, 2008b). The rules of successful project execution are coded into processes; yet Sauer (1993b, p. 336) recognises that IT projects are a contested space, and political action may disrupt project processes so that the project consequently fails. Baghizadeh et al. (2019) suggest that the rules of project execution are part of a collective institutional sensemaking process, but that inconsistencies may appear between the rules as interpreted by a particular project and the collective norm; thus they assert that failure is the result of discrepant sensemaking.

Cuellar (2018), however, finds shortcomings in all conceptualisations of IT project failure. The 'Objectivist' conceptualisations (which would include Sauer's processual view) miss consideration of many contextual factors and are too generalised, the Subjectivist, Social Constructionist view (Fincham, 2002; Wilson and Howcroft, 2005) relies on an agential focus and the Non-Representational view, which maintains that failure flows from 'Ontological Politics' (Cecez-Kecmanovic, Kautz and Abrahall, 2014) has no ability to either diagnose or predict – failure is an 'agential cut' and thus the subjective view of one actor at one particular point in time. Cuellar's solution to these

shortcomings appears to be to adopt a critical realist viewpoint (Cuellar, 2017), and thus success or failure becomes a 'real' characteristic of a 'real' project, overcoming the limitations of subjectivism. I suggest that there is an alternative, in that success or failure, as a term in the dominant narrative regarding the project, achieves a level of inter-subjectivity and thus influences the behaviour of a number of project actors. For a failed project, these actors may withdraw funding, stop work and communicate the 'failed' outcome to others. These acts (and their motivation) may themselves be interpreted and perceived subjectively, but they may also reinforce the dominance of the narrative of failure and thus advance the interests of certain groups within the system of power relations.

Anticipating review, it was in the interests of the project manager to present a fully consistent narrative with no gaps and in order to do so important information could be omitted, subjects glossed over and partial answers given to questions. Sergeeva and Winch (2021) follow other researchers in identifying the project narrative as a major "carrier of meaning", a way of attracting and maintaining support for an at times risky enterprise and justifying it once complete. The thesis extends this analysis by showing how the project narrative was the main point of interaction between evaluators (reviewers and auditors) and the evaluated. The job of the project manager was to construct and enact a convincing narrative, and the job of the evaluators was to deconstruct this narrative and test its plausibility. The ideal narrative put forward a picture of a well-reasoned plan leading to a well-defined goal, and did not refer to the improvisational excellence which the project managers claimed was essential to their success, nor the political activity surrounding the project. By framing project evaluation as narrative analysis, the thesis demonstrates its subjective and necessarily political nature.

Reviewers and auditors described evaluation as a job requiring experience and intuition as gaps in the project narrative were not obvious. Using these insights, the reviewers and auditors constructed evaluation narratives that were time-based descriptions of the events of the project, together with a prediction (or in the case of audit, a post-hoc assessment) of the outcome and an evaluative commentary on causality. Evaluation narratives and project narratives competed within the system of power relations for hegemony, and the view expressed in the dominant narrative defined whether the project was seen as a success or failure.

The language of these formal narratives, as produced by the MPA and the NAO, was technocratic, measured and depersonalised. Errors were identified, but fault was not directly attributed to anyone. In both case study projects, many leaders had come and gone, but while saying that this was unfortunate and had damaged continuity of purpose, no individual leader was singled out for criticism because of their lack of competence. The effectiveness of these narratives as exercises in power relations is linked to this dispassionate, depersonalised technicism. Legitimacy is gained through 'professional' detachment and might be lost in score-settling and personal attacks. The evaluation process is presented as assessing conformity with an institutionalised ideal, enforcing isomorphism (Currie, 2012). Evaluation is about discipline and control. The hegemonic view of what is the 'right way' to manage and execute these large projects is rationalist and process-oriented, governed by rules and procedures. Failure is conceptualised as transgression of these rules. Failure is somehow immoral because risks were intemperately taken and irresponsibly managed. Icarus flew too near to the sun, and melting wax made projects late, extended budgets and reduced the functionality delivered to users.

The project's narrative is expressed in rationalist and managerialist language. Review reports use the same linguistic paradigm, a fact remarked on by the Work and Pensions Select Committee in considering the PAR reports for Universal Credit (WPSC, 2018):

The reviews are written in dense project management speak, a combination of the cryptic and the clichéd.... The PARs are no loss to the canon of published prose.

The reviewers responded to a normative, rationalist presentation of the project with a normative evaluation, which included what the reviewers described as rational reasons for failure. Reviewers put forward rationalist solutions to project distress including strengthening processes and hiring and training better people. Reviewers thus required project managers to apply the same project management techniques more intensely, with what Cicmil and Hodgson describe as (2006b, p. 115) “a yet-greater emphasis on technicist solutions”. Reviewers did not recommend other potential actions, such as intervening to try and resolve a political conflict between Departments. Auditors made similar rationalist recommendations while privately expressing the opinion that the Government's system of project execution and review was unfit for purpose and incapable of reform.

When discussing project failure, the PAC as a *political* body did not exercise professional or technocratic restraint in its use of language. Both case study projects were described as a “Fiasco”, a term which etymology links to a description of a botched theatrical performance. The project managers who have contributed to this failure event were labelled as unskilled actors, imperfectly following a flawed script under incompetent direction. The approach that led to the “Fiasco” was relabelled as a dogmatic ideology, and

the state of the project one of sickness leading to death or disability. This labelling reflects the isomorphic conceptualisation of failure as flowing from a lack of conformity.

In both case studies a drastic intervention, involving new management and a completely different approach was deemed necessary to rescue the “Fiasco”, and the interventions in the narratives of both projects were labelled “resets”. Whether or not the intervention was effective was also the subject of debate, but since both case study projects were later relabelled as a success, the “reset” was at a minimum useful as an effective plot device.

Evaluation narratives were used by the PAC as supportive evidence in their ascription of failure, although the evaluation narratives themselves did not use language such as “fiasco” or even “failure”. The NAO quoted from MPA reports and the PAC quoted in turn from the NAO, stressing to interviewees that the content of NAO reports should be accepted as uncontested ‘facts’ because the interviewees or their Departments had agreed the wording through the clearance process. The NAO’s audit method in turn relied on ‘facts’ extracted from relevant MPA review reports. The PAC’s criticism was given more weight as it relied on the legitimacy of both the NAO and the MPA.

8.4.2 Divergent Narratives

As Dawson and Buchanan (2005) note, most large projects are characterised by a range of divergent narratives, and the case studies and some of the other projects mentioned here are no exception. This divergence reflects a struggle for control of the project, as opposing parties reinterpret past events and construct prospective futures that support their arguments. Divergence appears as actors react to the dominant narrative, attempt to “set the story straight” and foreground their version of events, including their personal

causal role in bringing these events to pass. The thesis highlights narrative divergence in each case study by contrasting the 'Official Verdict', with its managerialist view of cause and effect and the 'Insider View', with its (apparently) uncensored account of a messy 'reality'. Both narratives are driven by prevailing elements in the system of power relations, and both paint a view of 'reality' that is shaped by that system. The 'Official Verdict' has roots in the evaluation narratives of the MPA, NAO and PAC. These narratives reflect a dominant, managerialist view of how projects should be executed and reinforce the legitimacy of evaluation. The description of project events within the 'Official Verdict' may be compromised by the clearance process as evaluators may not be able to say whatever they like, although as shown above, the legitimacy of the reports is strengthened by the 'agreed' nature of their wording. The 'Insider View' also strives for legitimacy by presenting individual narratives of personal integrity. Freed by anonymity, individuals restated their own 'truth' about why projects succeeded or failed. Their view was explicitly part of their own identity work, and thus was not ontologically privileged; they were strongly motivated to omit parts of the narrative that did not show their actions (or those of allies) to advantage, and additionally to embellish causal explanations that might be seen to reflect positively on them. Instead of triangulating between these accounts in a search for "what really happened" (Dawson and Buchanan, 2005), the reader can alternatively see them as evidence of differences of motivation, interpretation and expression and the exercise of power relations.

8.4.3 Rhetorical Struggle

The narratives are discourse and amenable to discourse analysis. Using Critical Discourse Analysis, I examined their origins, relationship to common metanarratives, the roots of their hegemony and their impact in

operationalisation. All these facets reveal the impact of power relations in shaping the narratives and in addition, the impact of their use within the system of power relations. Foucault (1976, p. 95) suggests that change creates resistance, and without this relational juxtaposition we cannot see that power is being exercised and change effected. In the case studies of the thesis, narratives of change were met with matching narratives critiquing the nature or speed of change – thus ‘Digital by Default’ spawned ‘Digital where Appropriate’ and ‘Digital by Design’. The increasing use of three-word soundbite constructions as rhetorical devices within the narratives is notable. In phrases such as “Test and Release” and “Digital by Design” we can see echoes of contemporary political slogans such as “Take back Control” and “Get Brexit Done” (Tardio Lopez, 2020). While these rhetorical constructions have been used in electioneering for some time (Beard, 2000, p. 38), the literature does not explore the use of such slogans in other contexts such as business change. The language in the narratives seemed constructed specifically to a) oppose pre-existing slogans in counternarratives and b) increase their communicability and thus potential for hegemony.

Sergeeva and Ninan (2020) suggest analysis of these counternarratives in order to find ways of nullifying resistance. In the thesis I concentrate on analysing what these counternarratives imply about the system of power relations and successful attempts to gain hegemony for alternative project narratives.

8.4.4 Conclusion

To summarise, the narratives present causal explanations for certain events, characterise the role of individuals and organizations and expand or restrict the frame of discourse by selective dissemination or restriction of information. The findings confirm that the narratives are shaped by and constrained by the

system of power relations within which they are produced. They can overtly only express what is allowed within this system; and if the narrators seek to break these rules, then their narratives become covert, private accounts protected by anonymity. The findings also show where the narratives set or subvert the terms of discourse regarding these IT projects and their outcome, thus fulfilling a key role in the system of power relations. The language used in the narratives reflects this role and serves to reinforce legitimacy, discredit counternarratives, open some terms of debate and suppress others.

8.5 Review and audit contribute to but do not drive narratives of failure

In the previous section I discussed the contribution of review and audit narratives to the ascription of success or failure of these large IT projects. The progress of these projects was the main topic of the narratives produced by project reviewers and auditors, and the narratives contained either prospective views on the likely outcome or a retrospective appraisal of the actual outcome. I argue here that, in this particular time and context, the ascription of success or failure was not a consequence of narratives created by review and audit functions alone. While their accounts contain important judgements, the review and audit functions could not always *make that judgement stick*, i.e. sustain a dominant narrative of success or failure. This suggests that the position of the review and audit bodies within the system of power relations was not as ‘principals’, directly contesting the struggles described in the subsections above; but that their reports were used by ‘principals’ within these struggles.

In the judgement of many researchers, and as supported by many of the narratives collected in the thesis, review and audit are evaluative political acts

(Sauer, 1993b, p. 91). This literature states that evaluation is subjective and coloured by the interests of the evaluator. The organizational response of Government (and other large bodies) to this shortcoming was to construct an ostensibly *disinterested*, 'independent' system of evaluation. The thesis extends Sauer's finding by examining how other actors within the system of power relations used the resulting review and audit reports to advance certain interests.

The project reviews that I examined were all performed by teams assembled by and directed by the MPA. Case study narratives positioned some Departments as having the ability to push back on the MPA, by either delaying or blocking reviews. Individual reviewers described information being withheld from them, behaviour labelled "deliberate obfuscation". In addition the recommendations of some reviews were resisted. Once the review report was completed, the SRO was asked to comment on the findings and recommendations. One reviewer described the reaction of an SRO as dismissive, and often the written response of the SRO suggested that the recommendations of the review team were already in their plans and should thus be discounted.

To counter resistance of the type encountered by the MPA, NAO Auditors could fall back on the statutory powers of the National Audit Acts (1983 and 2011)¹⁰ which entitle the auditors to see any and all relevant documents and data. There were thus fewer accounts of outright obstruction of audit activities, but instead it was reported that project teams went to some lengths to "get the story straight" and present a consistent narrative to auditors that

¹⁰ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/4/contents>

portrayed their project positively. The evaluated body in turn was accused by auditors of “holding its cards close to its chest”. Auditors also explained how their evaluations were generally post-mortem, looking at projects after they had finished and aiming to draw general lessons for Government to apply to future similar projects. Politicians were thus able to label these evaluations as “out of date” and diminish the impact of recommendations for improvement by saying that they had already completed similar actions.

Both reviewers and auditors were acting in conjunction with other actors. The MPA’s reviewers were acting on behalf of the MPRG, a board jointly chaired by HMT and the Cabinet Office. If one of these bodies had concerns about a particular project, the MPA’s report would be used to ‘evidence’ these concerns and thus justify action by the MPRG. The NAO had a similar relationship with the PAC (as explained in the ‘audit cycle’ in section 5.6.3), but here the relationship was more nuanced. The NAO by convention was meant to report factually on the status of projects, although the way that ‘facts’ were chosen and presented could be read as overt criticism. It was common for NAO reports to start with some ‘key facts’ that illustrated the scale of the project. The ‘key facts’ presented for CAP-D (NAO, 2015) were that the budget was now £215m, which was 40% greater than that approved at inception three years earlier, and that during this period 7 fundamental changes to the Programme had increased the level of innovation and risk. The report thus starts with a rhetorical accusation of profligacy and unstable management.

PAC members would question the project sponsors and managers during oral hearings using the NAO report as source material. The PAC would then generate yet another report into the project and its shortcomings, which would also be drafted by NAO auditors. In these PAC reports, NAO auditors

could use the constitutional legitimacy of the PAC to criticise the project. Once agreed by committee members the report was laid before Parliament and published, which presented a further opportunity to increase the impact of the narrative by speaking to the press.

Both reviewers and auditors were positioned as functional experts rather than as mainstream political actors. By promoting a narrative of dispassionate and independent objectivity, integrity and impartiality they reinforced their legitimacy. The findings also suggest that reviewers and auditors refrained from strong criticism of project managers in their own reports, leaving it to others to do it for them. The power effects of their narratives were strengthened however, because of the apparently evidential nature of the 'audit' or 'review' process that was used to create them.

In summary, the reviewers and auditors had a key part to play in the system of power relations, driven by their role and their perceived apolitical nature. Their aspirations to legitimacy limited their role as principal actors and made them less able to deliver direct criticism of the projects that they evaluated. Their evaluative narratives were tools that others used within the system to obtain desired political outcomes.

8.6 Limitations of the Research and ideas for future studies

This section discusses possible limitations in the research and acknowledges their impact on the conclusions that can be drawn from the research. Where possible I show how future studies might overcome these limitations. The topics examined are generalisability of the study, contextual limitations, my personal position as a researcher and the choice of analytical framework.

8.6.1 Generalisability

The research is based primarily on project narratives of two large case studies, and many other anecdotes of projects mentioned by interviewees. Normative researchers will thus question the generalisability of any observations made, particularly as the examples quoted are large UK public sector IT projects based in a unique institutional setting, executed within a few years of each other. These projects are, however of national significance and the observations made may be of value for example to other national governments.

It could be questioned why within an interpretive, qualitative study I should discuss the concept of ‘generalisability’ at all; however, one of the background issues that drove the choice of research topic was the reported inability of Government to learn from historical mistakes. The ‘generalisability’ of the Critical Success Factor approach (Pinto and Slevin, 1988) and its Government equivalent the ‘Common Causes of Project Failure’ (OGC/NAO, 2005) has been questioned before (Jugdev and Müller, 2005; Maddison, 2011), and indeed it should be debated whether there is any single ‘silver bullet’¹¹ for preventing these large, expensive projects ending by being deemed to be failures. This, in Alvesson and Sköldbjerger’s (2018) terms, was the ‘mystery’ that the thesis sought to examine. The evidence suggests that, for the case studies, the generation and subsequent adoption of failure narratives was highly contextual. While some similarities were observed (for example the presence of new ‘Agile’ development methods and frequent changes in leadership) the causes ascribed in narratives for the ‘failure’ of these two big IT projects

¹¹ Chris Grey private conversation 2015

cannot be summarised in the relatively simple terms of the ‘8 Common Causes of Project Failure’ (OGC/NAO, 2005).

Rather than ‘generalisability’, a more limited claim of ‘transferability’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) might be made for the case studies presented here. They attempt to present a ‘thick description’ of the events and their context. The thesis also identifies some commonality in the narratives presented by different actors, thus crystallising the ‘vicarious experience’ that they describe and making it accessible to the reader. Some might contest even this claim, given that the narratives that comprise the data are identified as ‘self-serving’ (Brown and Jones, 1998) and by implication unreliable. Similarly because of the social constructionist stance of this thesis, no one ‘unreliable’ account can be privileged over another (Klecun *et al.*, 2014). Here as elsewhere, I rely on Barnes and Bloor’s (1982) explanation that any belief rests on local causes of credibility, and by exposing the data and analysis method I also delegate to the reader the judgement of whether the findings are transferable to their own context.

Alvesson and Sköldbjerger (2018) critique ‘transferability’ as being a softer form of generalisability, which echoes the positivist equivalent but applies weaker tests. For Alvesson and Sköldbjerger the point of examining empirical material is to challenge existing assumptions and draw out alternative, but interesting, assumptions. An alternative assumption advanced by the thesis is that the Government’s system of power relations, including the system of project review and audit may have generated and perpetuated rather than reduced narratives of project failure. The review and audit system contributed to this perpetuation by avoiding discussion of ‘political’ causality and thus failing to analyse or challenge the system of power relations within which the projects

were executed. This generates a recursive argument, as failing to expose ‘political’ causality is itself a political act. I argue that the political forces wishing to improve the perceived failure rate of these projects by making organizational and process changes were balanced by other forces intent on resisting these changes.

8.6.2 Contextual limitations

The empirical material portrays projects and their assurance system at a specific time and in a specific organizational context. The special and relatively short-lived circumstances of the 2010-15 Coalition Government framed the system of power relations surrounding the projects. Some reference is made in the thesis to the role of individual politicians within the Universal Credit (UC) project and in particular the Conservative Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith, and the Liberal Democrat Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Danny Alexander. The political dynamics of the coalition government and the role of the ‘quad’, the four men with key roles in the Cabinet are topics of great interest and would be a suitable subject for a further PhD if one had access to appropriate source material. The memoirs of David Laws (2016), a senior Liberal Democrat politician who was a member of this government, contain accounts of the challenging nature of dispute resolution and policy prioritization during this time, including with regard to one of the projects studied, UC.

The system of power relations had already changed by the time of writing this conclusion (2020), and since the main argument of the thesis is that such power relations are central to the enactment of these major projects, any analysis of the ‘failure’ of a Government IT project in 2021 would have to start with a detailed analysis of the contemporary state of power relations. While

the processes of review and audit have not changed perceptibly, the political context, dominated by Brexit and the pandemic, is radically different; however, the relative continuity of the UK's system of Government means that there are, within this thesis, other useful points of reference for a researcher of today's situation. The system of power relations still contains forces in tension and in balance, including the centre vs the periphery, the legislature vs the executive and the modernisers vs the traditionalists. The impact of these tensions can be seen in the newspapers and the proceedings of Parliament every day. The need to understand these dynamics and their effect on IT projects is a key finding of the research.

8.6.3 My position as author and researcher

I have written reflexively about my own position elsewhere in the thesis and will not repeat it here. I had a modest role within the system of power relations studied, was already known to almost all the interviewees (which is how access was obtained) and have opinions regarding how and why certain events had occurred, some of which I later revised when confronted by the empirical evidence. For example, I had a perhaps naïve belief that MPA reviews were relatively independent and unbiased; and was disappointed to learn that some set out with an explicit 'agenda'.

The process of narrative generation is itself a political act, whether it is an official report authored by the NAO, a research interview or a story leaked to a friendly journalist. Analysis requires some attribution of motive and assumptions about the political position of the narrator, and in so doing I am overlaying personal prejudices and 'inside knowledge' not explicit in the empirical material, though I exercise some reflexivity by acknowledging this. The advantages of my 'inside knowledge' are of course, access, and a wider

familiarity with the language and context of the studied topic. The use of CDA is also a reflexive device in that it provides a set of analytical viewpoints to examine particular attributes of discourse. While no interpretive technique can or should divorce analysis from the interpreter, a systematic analytical approach as used in this thesis encourages reflexivity. I also exposed early findings in a conference paper and in several short papers at college symposia. These tested, among other things, the consistency of my theoretical position.

8.6.4 Choice of Analytical Lens

The decision to focus on structural decomposition and CDA as the main analytical lens meant that I have omitted from the thesis other interesting possibilities, some fully and others partially explored during the research. Many authors describe the relationship between project narratives and sensemaking (Brown, 1998; Dawson and Buchanan, 2003; Veenswijk and Berendse, 2008; Smith, 2011; Clegg *et al.*, 2016). There are clear linkages between the activity of sensemaking, as described by Weick (1995) and others, and the activity of review and audit, in particular the search for plausibility in accounts rather than absolute 'truth'. Other analysis work was omitted from the thesis; for example analysis of the narratives to determine the plot type (following Gabriel (2000)), to identify the principal characters and to compare with stereotypes identified by other researchers (such as Whittle, Mueller and Mangan, 2009; Rostron, 2015). The classic plotline of the heroic struggle against adversity was a common way for interviewees to describe projects and personalise these narratives. While I have sought to extract meaning from the narratives studied and thus describe the effects of the underlying system of power relations, there are other possible ways of interpreting this rich material that I did not have time and space to explore.

8.6.5 Implications for future research

The thesis demonstrates the value of taking a narrative approach to analysing projects and project evaluation. Further analysis of case studies or accounts of the process of project evaluation should seek to deconstruct project and evaluation narratives and challenge the rationalist assumptions behind them.

Semi structured interviews were used as the primary data collection mechanism for this thesis. Alternatives might produce a richer set of narratives concerning the project. These might include diary studies and participant observation, for example to track the process of a project review through multiple drafts of reports and conclusions. Although not possible within this thesis (due to lack of access), direct analysis of more MPA/IPA review reports would clearly be desirable.

Long, complex projects with multi-stage lifecycles would benefit from truly longitudinal study. The approach to review taken by the MPA was purposefully different depending on the stage that a project had reached, as it was assumed that the development of artefacts and the sophistication of the project narrative would progress as the project matured. It would be valuable to observe the interplay of reviewers and reviewed during different stages of the project.

Post project review is frequently called for and infrequently performed; and when it is performed, attempts to distribute the learnings, even from projects considered highly successful, are not deemed effective (Duffield and Whitty, 2016). It would be valuable to investigate this phenomenon and why organizations resist such improvement attempts.

The research has looked at two nearly contemporaneous projects, which thus were undertaken within overlapping and comparable systems of power

relations. It would be valuable to take a wider snapshot of a similar portfolio of projects, as this would give more opportunities for comparison and contrast and perhaps produce deeper insights.

Finally, Söderlund and Lenfle (2013) edited a special edition of the *International Journal of Project Management* on project histories. It would be valuable to look at historical influences on the formation of project narratives, both in terms of how individuals use analogies of famous projects of the past to explain “how we got to here” following Ricoeur (1980) and others; and also what part emplotment (Riessman, 2005) plays in the creation of project narratives.

8.6.6 Implications for future practice

The main implications for practice concern the use of narratives and discourse analysis in evaluation and the examination of power relations in understanding project failure situations. I also make some practical suggestions regarding the execution and positioning of project evaluation that may change the role that review and audit plays in the system of power relations.

The conceptualisation of the project as a narrative, and the project artefacts as elements of that narrative, is unknown in the everyday practice of project evaluation; yet there are aspects of this conceptualisation that would be of value to the evaluator. The evaluator is being told a story about the project, which is of necessity abbreviated and partial. The story skips over the mistakes of the past and is over-optimistic about the future. It accentuates the opportunities open to the project and downplays the risks. The evaluator may interpret this as dishonesty on the part of project manager or as one reviewer put it “deliberate obfuscation”. Project managers are highly motivated to put forward for evaluation (and other purposes) a convincing, yet positive

narrative. Rather than dishonesty this is an understandable need to be “economical with the truth” (Durant, 1996), an admirably relativist concept made popular by a former Cabinet Secretary. There are many factors within the system of power relations that shape this narrative, including by enforcing the need for ‘economy’, to protect or advance the interests of groups or individuals.

Once reviewers frame what they are reviewing as a narrative, they can draw back from an ontologically fruitless search for the ‘truth’ about the project. They can analyse the narrative presented to them and consider whether alternative narratives exist that might be more plausible. They can examine the language used in the narratives, and for example see how they recycle other metanarratives within the project environment. Finally, they can consider how and why the narrative presented to them has achieved hegemony, and what this reveals about the contextual system of power relations.

The formal narratives of the ‘Official Verdict’ contain no evidence that reviewers and auditors were considering the underlying system of power relations; yet their informal accounts, like the accounts of project managers, have many references to political activity, inter-organisational conflict, National party political activity, the need for effective public presentation of a façade of progress and influence tactics and countertactics. It seems to me feasible for evaluators to seek to understand the currents in the system of power relations that are countering metanarratives such as ‘Digital by Default’, shifting control between different actors, affecting resource allocation or driving expedient political decisions. Evaluators may consider such analysis is too difficult, or too sensitive, or too highly contextual and not amenable to the

quick generalisation that sells management texts; but well-trying techniques exist that may help. These techniques identify the main actors in the system of power relations (stakeholder mapping) and delineate the systems of enablers and constraints within which they exercise influence (deriving the unwritten rules of the game (Scott-Morgan, 1994)). If evaluators seek to understand project failure, they need to ask whose interests are served by the labelling of the project as a failure, and how that labelling is achieved.

I also have some practical suggestions that may impact the positioning of the evaluating bodies relative to the evaluated. In the case of the MPA (now IPA), the relative power of the reviewed and the reviewer needs to be balanced. Review teams are drawn from mid-level, mid-career civil servants and (usually) retired consultants. The consultants want to be asked back to do further reviews, and the civil servants know that they will encounter the reviewed (and usually more senior) officials again at some point in the future. Consequently, the review teams are careful with their criticisms, as some reports in the narratives describe (“pulling their punches”) and the quality and frankness of the review reports suffers as a result. The IPA could choose review teams that are *not* subject to these constraints, and in particular that are willing to comment on political circumstances.

A similar but opposite effect can be seen with the NAO. The NAO’s criticisms are tempered by the clearance process, which indulges a cosy fiction that the audited come to agree with everything the auditors have written. While the numbers may not be in dispute, the rhetorical presentation of these numbers can imply incompetence or in extremis corruption. A more straightforward interaction could result from removing the ‘clearance’ process altogether (apart from simple fact checking) and allowing the audited some right of reply.

The close interaction between the NAO and the PAC also would benefit from some revision. While ostensibly independent, the C&AG is a standing invitee to PAC hearings and often contributes. The impression is that the fact-based, intellectually detached evidence gathering of the NAO is then replaced by a politically-motivated public castigation by the Select Committee with little pretence of objectivity. These two functions of Parliament are essential but should be more clearly separated; the PAC can base its hearings on the NAO's reports but should write its own lines of enquiry and importantly, write its own reports.

8.6.7 Limitations – Conclusions

The research has limitations that are shared with other studies *of its type*; qualitative, interpretivist and subjective enquiry into complex subjects with many possible shades of meaning. Interpretive analysis of written and spoken material requires ascription of meaning by the researcher, justified by the use of analytical techniques. I have omitted some empirical material and quote selectively from the rest, presenting it in a particular order and context that suits my argument. I have shown my 'workings' and sought to justify the choices that I made. The study is limited because of my qualifications as a researcher, with interpretations that are guided by my reading and personal experiences, and the features of the analytical lens that I have chosen to use. Ultimately the reader must decide whether there is congruence with their own philosophical position, and if so whether the findings are useful to them or to a broader audience.

The research findings are 'generalisable' within the limitations of the context; however, I argue that the impact of context is central to the findings. The search for generalisable recipes of success is ultimately fruitless precisely

because the context is so important. Analysing the special contextual features of UK Government and the unique political characteristics of the period of study is key to understanding how these projects came to be seen as failures.

8.7 Conclusions

I summarise the conclusions of the thesis thus: the ascription of success or failure to an IT project in Government results from an interpretation of the dominant narrative. In the context studied, the dominant narrative may draw on the 'project narrative' put forward by the managers and sponsors of the project, a 'review narrative' put forward by the MPA and an 'audit narrative' put forward by the NAO and Select Committees. Dominance is achieved because of power relations between these actors and others, including the audience. Since the power relations surrounding each major project are unique and specific to that project, prescriptive recipes for avoiding 'failure' – i.e. the dominance of a 'failure' narrative - are unlikely to exist. Prescriptions drawn from review and audit will adhere to a rationalist paradigm within which discussion of many aspects of the programmes' execution, including political action have been suppressed. These and other aspects of this system of power relations appear to sustain a system where the perception of a high level of IT project failure in Government is almost inevitable.

The general characteristics of this system of power relations have evolved over many years, but some are specific to the time studied – the Coalition Government of 2010-15, when 'Austerity' spawned a modernising narrative of 'Efficiency'. This led to organisational changes which added to the forces already in tension in this system; the tensions between the modernisers and the traditionalists were added to pre-existing tensions between the centre and the periphery and the legislature and the executive. It was thus in the

interests of certain groups within the system that the label 'failure' was ascribed to several large IT projects; and in some cases, after 'resets' it was in their interests that these projects were relabelled as 'successes'.

Narratives become dominant if they suit the interests of certain individuals or groups in the system of power relations. Dominance can be achieved in several ways (see Vaara, Sonenshein and Boje, 2016 for a discussion of relevant narrative research). In the case studies several of these mechanisms are present including the authoritative platform of the reviewers and auditors, the claims for legitimacy of their reports and the suppression of alternative explanations for what happened in the project. There is also evidence that the project narratives of the case studies were linked with already-dominant overarching metanarratives (Veenswijk and Berendse, 2008). These key metanarratives included: 'Austerity', the overriding need to become more efficient in an era of constrained public spending; 'Digital by Default', the wish to modernise the way that Government developed IT systems; and the narrative of 'Government IT Failures', the repeated assertion that large Government IT projects inevitably end as fiascos. While the dominance of these metanarratives can be 'inherited' by aligned project narratives, the data also suggest that explanations of why certain narratives become dominant are contextual and unique to the project concerned.

All the actors in the system of project execution, review and audit appeared to be playing a 'language game' (Wittgenstein, 2014) that said that project execution is a rationalist activity and problems are amenable to rationalist solutions. This behaviour was linked to institutional norms regarding the engineering respectability of 'professional' project management (Hodgson, 2005b) and the evidence-based nature of review and audit. These isomorphic

constraints suppressed any discussion of power relations within formal accounts of how the projects were executed.

The thesis builds on Fincham's (2002) contention that project success and failure flow from discursive acts, and that far from being discrete, objective states, success and failure are terms within the narratives constructed by organizational actors. These narratives were constructed to gain support for specific courses of action. Success and failure were produced through rhetorical treatment within the project's narratives. The thesis builds on these ideas by looking in depth at how and why such narratives were constructed in the highly important context of UK Government IT projects. In the case studies of the thesis, the perception that the project was just about to fail legitimised a radical change in project approach; and similarly, a narrative of project success was later promoted which retrospectively justified these changes. The perceived frequency of narratives of project failure was used to justify wider policy and organizational changes, such as 'Digital by Default' and the review system administered by the MPA. The thesis thus develops and extends the arguments put forward by Fincham (2002), Bartis and Mitev (2008) and others by showing evidence of similar power effects in a complete system of project execution, review and audit.

The ascription of project success and failure is thus a result of the system of power relations, and in UK Government, the reviewers and auditors are an important part of this system. The reviewers and auditors constructed evaluative narratives that are used by others as evidence of success or failure. The overt rationalism of the review system reinforced the message to project managers to keep going with the same management approach, only this time *try harder*. There is no evidence that anyone in the system was challenging the

status quo and pointing out those characteristics of the system of power relations that generated and sustained the narratives of project failure. The review and audit reports thus suppressed a discourse concerning the political struggles surrounding these large projects.

When reviewers and auditors did construct narratives of project failure, these were used as rhetorical resources by others within the system of power relations as part of a wider struggle for control and hegemony. Government's system of project review and audit formed part of a self-reinforcing loop that generated and perpetuated rather than reduced the occurrence of narratives of project failure by not discussing political conflicts that may have contributed to their formation. These political conflicts lead to ascriptions of failure, then these ascriptions were given legitimacy by the seemingly rational process of review and audit, and the review and audit reports of project failure were then used as tools in further political struggles. The need for distance from political acts of ascription means that, in the name of legitimacy, while the knife was furnished by the reviewers and auditors it was wielded by others (often the PAC or the Treasury).

Every project is unique and situated in a unique political situation, so broad generalizations about the causes of project failure are likely to be flawed and based on simplistic assumptions about causality. Examination of narratives can however generate explanations about the interactions and political struggles taking place around each large project and thus give insights into how a narrative of success or failure became dominant. Big IT projects are a field of conflict, as their proponents compete for resources with other investments or other policy innovations. Such competition drives the proponents to construct an optimistic narrative to 'sell' the project at initiation (Chapman, Ward and

Harwood, 2006), and because of churn in senior positions, including Ministerial posts, often the instigators of a project are gone before this narrative starts to fall apart. In addition large IT projects carry risk (Flyvbjerg, 2006), some of it associated with the use of technology. On occasion power relations enable the initiation of such projects without the knowledge and resources to manage and mitigate the subsequent risks.

Finally, the research question challenges me to say what the narratives of these project actors reveal about the ascription of success or failure of these large, important, and expensive IT projects. Fincham (2002, p. 1) said that the IT industry was unduly obsessed with project failure and has “stigmatized” itself as a failing project. It was certainly true that commentators had successfully applied the same stigma to Government IT projects at the time, as the metanarrative that “Government IT projects always fail” had wide currency. The thesis explores the persistence of such a narrative in spite of many attempts to change it.

There is plenty of evidence that Government IT projects *were* a contested space, and at the time this contest had a number of drivers: the policy ambitions of an incoming Government (generating a need for new systems); the Austerity agenda of the same Government (“there is no money”(Laws, 2016, chap. 2)), the reforming zeal of the ‘Agile evangelists’ and the scepticism of the review and audit system. The fact that some IT projects were labelled as ‘failures’ is an indication of the intensity of this contest, and the persistence of an overall narrative of failure showed that forces within the system of power relations sustained this narrative in the face of efforts to change it.

Appendices

Appendix A – List of Interviewees

Pseudonym	Date of interview	Position	Organisation	Background	Relevance
Angela	4 May 2016	Programme Director	Independent Consultant	Project and Programme management in private sector	MPA Reviewer, Project manager of large IT project
Christian	26 Nov 2015	Review Team Lead	Independent Consultant	Former projects director with large systems integrator	Review leader on major IT projects, team member on other reviews, experienced project manager

Pseudonym	Date of interview	Position	Organisation	Background	Relevance
Colin	19 May 2017	Project Manager	Independent Consultant	Project manager in systems integrator, then in other public sector organizations	Sometime reviewer, project manager of reviewed project
Damien	12 Aug 2013 (Joint with Nina)	Director-General	MPA	Civil Engineer	SRO of major IT project, project reviewer
Daniel	19 Oct 2016	MP, Former PAC member	Minister in Department of State	Former executive in large Systems Integrator	PAC member on inquiries into IT projects

Pseudonym	Date of interview	Position	Organisation	Background	Relevance
Delilah	21 Sep 2015	Transformation Director	Department of State	Former technical project manager, programme director in mid-size organisation, project reviewer	Review team leader on major projects including introduction of key new products, experienced project manager
Denny	1 Aug 2016	Auditor	NAO	Joined NAO from IT consultancy	Auditor of IT projects, IT specialist
Eva	1 Aug 2016 (Joint with Matt)	Auditor	NAO	Former CIO in private sector and Government Departments	Author of NAO reports, director of team auditing IT projects

Pseudonym	Date of interview	Position	Organisation	Background	Relevance
Frederick	25 Oct 2016	Cabinet Minister	Department of State	Veteran politician, Front bench posts in Government and opposition	Supporter of change in IT arena and of system of project review
George	4 Dec 2015	Deputy Director	MPA	Accountant	Review team member and manager of reviews
Hanniyyah	16 May 2016	Director	Department of State	Long civil service career before joining external consultancy	IT project manager then SRO, project reviewer
Harold	4 Sep 2016	Director-General	Department of State	Civil Engineer	Project manager of reviewed projects

Pseudonym	Date of interview	Position	Organisation	Background	Relevance
Leanne	22 Dec 2016	Project Manager	GDS	Communications professional	Project member
Mark	2 Feb 2017	Review Team lead	Engineering Consultancy	Chartered Surveyor	Review team leader
Matt	1 Aug 2016 (Joint with Eva)	Auditor	NAO	Former consultant	IT expert, auditor of IT projects
Michael	2 Oct 2013	Director of Programmes and Project Management	Large Public Sector organization	Mechanical engineer	Responsible for all project managers in organization and portfolio including IT projects

Pseudonym	Date of interview	Position	Organisation	Background	Relevance
Nina	12 Aug 2013 (Joint with Damien)	Interim DG	MPA	MPA Manager	Review team Leader SRO of projects
Simon	22 Feb 2016	Deputy CIO	Department of State	Longstanding civil servant, CIO, Project Manager	Project manager of reviewed projects
Tariq	20 Jan 2016	Director	External Consultancy	Project Manager in Systems Integrator	Project manager of reviewed projects
Tristan	27 Feb 2017	Director	Department of State	Longstanding civil servant, Project Manager	Project manager of reviewed projects Project Reviewer
Tim	4 Nov 2015	Director General	MPA	Engineering manager, heavy process industries	Reviewer

Appendix B – Ethics Form

**Royal Holloway Ethics Approval Form**

Please complete all parts of the form and the checklist. Please append consent form(s) and information sheets and any other materials in support of your application.

If relevant, please also append the appropriate department-specific annex.

All applicants should refer to the Royal Holloway, University of London Research Ethics Guidelines document.

Check one box:

STAFF Project POSTGRADUATE Project UNDERGRADUATE Project

Start date ___1 Feb 2013_ Duration ___1 year___ Funding

Agency ___n/a_____

Title of project : ___Narratives of Major ICT Project Failure___

Name of Researcher(s) : ___Chris Hall_____

Name of Supervisor (Student Project) : ___Prof Gillian Symon___ Date: ___30 Nov 13

Contact e-mail address : ___pxtm017@live.rhul.ac.uk___

Does your project involve NHS patients, staff and facilities? Yes No

*If your project **only** involves NHS patients, staff and facilities, you do not need to complete the rest of this form. Please send the above information, along with a copy of your initial NHS ethics application to your departmental ethics coordinator and the college ethics committee secretary. Please provide any interim communication about amendments required. Final approval by the college can only be provided once evidence of NHS approval has been provided. The researcher should provide an electronic version of the final approved NHS application, with all its attachments and a photocopy/scanned copy of the final letter of approval from the NHS ethics committee.*

Section 1

		YES	NO	N/A
1	Will you describe the main experimental procedures to participants in advance, so that they are informed about what to expect?	√		
2	Will you tell participants that their participation is voluntary?	√		
3	Will you obtain written consent for participation?	√		
4	Will you explain to participants that refusal to participate in the research will not affect their treatment or education (if relevant)?			√
5	If the research is observational, will you ask participants for their consent to being observed?	√		
6	Will you tell participants that they may withdraw from the research at any time and for any reason?	√		
7	With questionnaires, will you give participants the option of omitting questions they do not want to answer?			√
8	Will you tell participants that their data will be treated with full confidentiality and that, if published, it will not be identifiable as theirs?	√		

9	Will you debrief participants at the end of their participation (i.e. give them a brief explanation of the study)?	√		
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If you have ticked '**NO**' to any of Q1 – 9, please give an explanation in the box below (expand as necessary):

Section 2

		YES	NO	N/A
10	Will subjects/participants be paid?		✓	
11	Is electrical or other equipment to be used with subjects/participants?		✓	
12	Are there any financial or other interests to the researcher(s) or department arising from this study?		✓	
13	Will your project involve deliberately misleading subjects/participants in any way?		✓	
14	Is there any realistic risk of any <i>subjects/participants</i> experiencing either physical or psychological distress or discomfort? If yes, describe any measures to avoid/minimise harm to subjects in the box below.		✓	
15	Is there any realistic risk of <i>researchers</i> experiencing either physical or psychological distress or discomfort?		✓	
16	Will the project require approval by any ethics committee outside Royal Holloway (e.g. NHS NRES committee)?		✓	

17	Do subjects/participants fall into any of the following special groups? (see attached guidelines)	a) Children (under 16)		√	
		b) Those aged 16-18		√	
		b) People with learning or communication difficulties		√	
		c) Patients		√	
		d) People in custody		√	
		e) People engaged in illegal activities. (e.g. drug taking)		√	

If you answered 'yes' to any of questions 10-17, please provide full details in

Section 3

Please provide a description of the project using the following headings

Expand this section as necessary

1. Title of Project: Narratives of Major ICT Project Failure

2. Purpose of Project: To gain insight into the way reviewers and project managers characterise and recognise failure

3. Methods and measurements to be used (widely used questionnaires need not be appended, but previously unpublished questionnaires should be submitted for approval). Please provide a full list.

Qualitative methods of narrative enquiry – semi-structured interviews, observation of teaching, inspection of review reports and teaching materials

4. Participants: recruitment methods, number, age, gender, exclusion/inclusion criteria

Reviewers and project managers nominated by HM Government Major Projects Authority, 30-70, m/f, engaged with large ICT projects

5. Consent and participant information arrangements (see checklist below). Include description of procedure for obtaining second consent where deception was involved (see guidelines).

Information Sheet and Consent Form to be distributed to all participants, designed and approved by supervisor.

6. Nature of data to be collected (including a description of any sensitive data)

Narrative accounts of project review and execution. May contain classified or commercially sensitive information which will be redacted.

7. Possible benefits to subjects/participants of taking part in this research

Greater insight into methods of review or management

8. Description of procedure for obtaining parental consent for research involving participants aged under 16 (or 18, if relevant). An opt-out only method will require a strong justification (see attached guidance). n/a

9. Data security and destruction and data protection procedures.

All data stored on encrypted laptop. Data to be destroyed 6 years after capture.


Section 4: Applicant's Statement

I am familiar with the RHUL and other appropriate subject-specific guidelines and have discussed them with the other researchers involved in the project.


I undertake to inform the Committee of any changes to the protocol or the staffing of this project

Applicant(s)

UG or PG Researcher(s) or research staff. If applicable:

Signed:  Print Name: C D Hall..... Date: 30
Nov 13

Lead Researcher or Supervisor:

Signed:  Print Name: ...G Symon.....Date: 2nd December
2013

Head of Department (or designate) statement of support (if project is to be forwarded to the College Ethics Committee)

Appendix C – Consent Form

CONSENT FORM – Royal Holloway PhD Research

Please read the following before participating in this research:

I have read the Information Sheet “Failure of Major IT Projects” and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I understand I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and to decline to answer any particular questions.

I agree to provide information to the researcher(s) on the understanding that my name will not be used without my permission. The information I provide will be used only for this research and publications arising from this research project.

I agree to the interview being recorded.

I understand that I have the right to ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet

Signed by:

The researcher: Date:

The interviewee: Date:

Appendix D – List of Interview Questions

Interview Questions – October 2013
<i>Please tell me about your background</i>
How long a reviewer?
How long have you been involved in Major projects?
What is your parent department and role there?
<i>Training</i>
Training to be a reviewer? Where and how long?
Formal or informal training as a programme manager?
What is your experience of the MPLA ¹² training? How do you feel this prepares you for your role(s)?
<i>Nature of failure</i>
Definition of failure – what for you constitutes a failing project? Can you give examples from your experience?
How do you define a ‘Red’ rating? What would you have to see, or not see to give a ‘Red’ rating? Can you give examples?

¹² The Major Projects Leadership Academy, an MPA-sponsored course at Said Business School

<i>Causes of failure</i>
What for you are the early warning signs that a project is failing or likely to fail? Where have you seen these?
What are the most important data sources for you – can you give examples of where these have proved crucial?
Of the failing projects that you have seen, which was the most difficult for you to diagnose? What factors made it difficult?
How do these relate to the ‘Common Causes of Project Failure’? Do you feel there are common factors a) at all and b) that are peculiar to Government?
What characteristics of ICT projects (and business change projects with significant ICT components) make them especially difficult?
What contribution does the administrative discipline of ‘project management’ make? Can a project be well administered and still failing?
<i>Reporting Failure</i>
Looking at the reports that you have written on failing projects, what standards of proof do you set yourself?
Have you ever had suspicions of problems that you have chosen not to report? Can you give an example? Have you ever discussed factors with the SRO that have not found their way into the written report?

Have you ever had cause to consider a 'minority' report? What were the circumstances?

What do you feel could improve the reporting process?

Appendix E – Source documents¹³

Project	Title	Type	Author	Date
CAP-D	What's behind the delivery of fast, agile IT solutions	Blog Post	RPA	20-May-14
CAP-D	Update on Rural Payments service availability tomorrow (17 March)	Blog Post	RPA	17-Mar-15
CAP-D	Farm payments IT system NFU response	Blog post	National Farmers Union	19-Mar-15
CAP-D	A progress update in resolving difficulties in administering the single payment scheme in England	NAO Report	NAO	12-Dec-07

¹³ Note all source documents quoted are in References

Project	Title	Type	Author	Date
CAP-D	NAO 2015 Early review of the Common Agricultural Policy Delivery Programme	NAO Report	NAO	30-Nov-15
CAP-D	Progress on the CAP-D Programme HC 727	NAO Report	NAO	24-Oct-16
CAP-D	IT fiasco forces U turn on farm payments	Newspaper Article	Farmers' Weekly	19-Mar-15
CAP-D	Farmers 'frustrated, angry and anxious' over BPS chaos	Newspaper Article	Farmers' Weekly	20-Mar-15
CAP-D	UK government reverts to paper for basic payments	Newspaper Article	Agricultural and Rural Convention	27-Mar-15

Project	Title	Type	Author	Date
CAP-D	NFU voices 'real concern' at slow rollout of payment system	Newspaper Article	Farmers Weekly	17-Feb-15
CAP-D	What went wrong with Defra's rural payments system	Newspaper Article	Computer Weekly	20-Mar-15
CAP-D	Liam Maxwell; The man who checks the homework Computer Weekly Editors Blog	Newspaper Article	Computer Weekly	19-Apr-16
CAP-D	A force to be reckoned with; Rural Payments Agency chief Mark Grimshaw quits	Newspaper Article	Civil Service World	31-Jan-17
CAP-D	TFA Media Release No. 05 – Common Sense Prevails for Basic Payment Scheme Applications in England	Press Release	Tenant Farmers Association	19-Mar-15

Project	Title	Type	Author	Date
CAP-D	HC 627 EFRASC 2014	Select Committee Oral hearing	EFRASC	30-Apr-14
CAP-D	EFRASC Oral Hearing 2014	Select Committee Oral hearing	EFRASC	19-Nov-14
CAP-D	EFRASC 25 Mar 15 Oral evidence HC1143	Select Committee Oral hearing	EFRASC	25-Mar-15
CAP-D	EFRASC 2015 Oral Grimshaw 19 Sept	Select Committee Oral hearing	EFRASC	19-Sep-15
CAP-D	Early review of CAP- D	Select Committee Oral hearing	PAC	09-Dec-15
CAP-D	Mark Grimshaw oral evidence EFRASC Mar 16 HC 405	Select Committee Oral hearing	EFRASC	09-Mar-16
CAP-D	HC 642 The Common Agricultural Policy Delivery Programme	Select Committee Report	PAC	02-Mar-16

Project	Title	Type	Author	Date
CAP-D	HC405 i EFRASC CAP Payments to farmers	Select Committee Report	EFRASC	04-May-16
CAP-D	Treasury Minutes April 2016	Treasury Minutes	HM Treasury	27-Apr-16
UC	Register 2013 Universal Credit_ Universal DISCREDIT, more like, say insiders	Blog post	The Register	10-Jul-13
UC	Iain Duncan Smith questioned by MPs about Universal Credit	Blog Post	Guardian	09-Dec-13
UC	UC Board Paper 5 Service and Provision for Vulnerable Customers	Board Paper	DWP	18-May-17
UC	Universal Credit Early Progress HC621	NAO Report	NAO	03-Sep-13

Project	Title	Type	Author	Date
UC	Universal Credit progress update HC 786 Nov 2014	NAO Report	NAO	26-Nov-14
UC	Iain Duncan Smith; My welfare reforms are Beveridge for today, with a hint of Tebbit	Newspaper Article	Telegraph	06-Nov-10
UC	We need some tough love to get people off welfare and into Pret -	Newspaper Article	Telegraph	12-Jan-12
UC	Welfare reform is not ready and should be delayed for a year, says Labour	Newspaper Article	Guardian	16-Sep-12
UC	Software issues risk delaying Universal Credit by one year, according to reports	Newspaper Article	Computer Weekly	12-Nov-12

Project	Title	Type	Author	Date
UC	Shiplee Op-ed; Universal Credit - The First 100 days	Newspaper Article	Telegraph	02-Sep-13
UC	Universal Credit IT programme not fit for purpose, sources warn	Newspaper Article	Guardian	04-Sep-13
UC	Civil servant who presided over Universal Credit programme accused of a 'litany of failures' by MPs	Newspaper Article	Independ ent	11-Sep-13
UC	Universal Credit and Welfare Reform 11 Sep 2012 House of Commons debates	Proceedings	They Work for You	11-Sep-12
UC	House of Commons Hansard Ministerial Statements	Proceedings	Hansard	05-Dec-13
UC	Universal Credit Project Assessment Reviews	Proceedings	Hansard	05-Dec-17

Project	Title	Type	Author	Date
UC	MPA starting gate review UC	Project Assessment Review	MPA	08-Mar-11
UC	Nov 2011 universal credit project assessment review	Project Assessment Review	MPA	22-Nov-11
UC	UC PAR 03.05.12	Project Assessment Review	MPA	03-May-12
UC	UC PAR 12.02.13	Project Assessment Review	MPA	12-Feb-13
UC	UC PAR 10.06.13	Project Assessment Review	MPA	10-Jun-13
UC	UC PAR 03.03.14	Project Assessment Review	MPA	03-Mar-14
UC	UC PAR 26.10.15	Project Assessment Review	MPA	26-Oct-15

Project	Title	Type	Author	Date
UC	Dynamic Benefits	Report	Centre for Social Justice	02-Oct-09
UC	UC at work spring 2015	Report	DWP	20-Feb-15
UC	Universal Credit from Disaster to Recovery	Report	IFG	01-Sep-16
UC	WPSC July 2013 House of Commons - Work and Pensions Committee Minutes of Evidence_ HC 569	Select Committee Oral hearing	WPSC	10-Jul-13
UC	Oral evidence DWP Annual Report and Accounts, Universal Credit and DWP Statistics HC 867	Select Committee Oral hearing	WPSC	09-Dec-13
UC	Universal Credit early progress HC619	Select Committee Report	PAC	07-Nov-13

Project	Title	Type	Author	Date
UC	UC PARS HC740	Select Committee Report	WPSC	24-Jan-18
UC	Universal Credit welfare that works	White Paper	DWP	11-Nov-10
UC	Government's flagship benefits scheme faces more delays after rift	Newspaper Article	Guardian	08-Jan-14
	Civil Service Reform Plan final 2012	Report	Cabinet Office	28-Jun-12
	Government Digital Strategy	Report	GDS	01-Nov-12
	Government Digital Strategy	Report	Cabinet Office	10-Dec-13
	Francis Maude's Speaker's Lecture	Speech	Francis Maude MP	13-Sep-17

Appendix F – Example narrative and analysis

#	Element	Text	CDA Analysis
1	Abstract	S: one of [this government's] largest IT initiatives, which is the [Alpha] Programme. In the last few years so I have had three goes at [reviewing] that one....	<i>Emergence</i> – S is telling this story because the review was unusual
2	Orientation	S: [First involvement in] February 2013.... it was a much bigger team [than usual] there were a team of 5 of us, 2 from [technology group] [it was a] 7 day review, which I don't think there are that many of, and led by an external [consultant]	<i>Emergence</i> - the review was unusual because of the size of the team and the leadership
3	Complication	S: ... the first review that I did at [Alpha] the external reviewer at the time had a style that was essentially combative from the outset and actually what I thought was relatively unhealthy there appears to have been an agenda going into the review	<i>Hegemony</i> - There was an 'agenda' going into the review

#	Element	Text	CDA Analysis
4	Resolution	S: nobody was listening to anybody really, it was a case of let's just find the dirt and make sure it's all appropriately documented and we will as a review team have done our job	<i>Hegemony</i> - The review was intended to come to a pre-ordained conclusion
5	Evaluation	S: for me, the review is there to genuinely identify the challenges, issues and to provide genuine assistance on the back of it, so that things can be remedied and that should be I think the way this stuff works	<i>Recontextualisation</i> – There is a 'genuine' altruistic purpose that ought to be served by a review
6	Coda	S: I then had one of the most awkward moments of my civil service career on the back of that review, where myself and one other member of the review team were taken in to see [politician's] private office, and asked very directly, some pretty harshly worded challenges around the senior staff in that department	<i>Operationalisation</i> – S was asked to criticise senior officials with the possible consequence that they might be removed.

CDA analysis of narrative content

Emergence

The review starts in an unusual way, which the interviewee states was different to her previous experience. In the *abstract* and *orientation* she says that she is telling this story because the review was unusual – the review team was larger than she had previously experienced and led by a consultant not a civil servant

Hegemony

Various attempts to achieve hegemony for the review were highlighted in both the *complication* and the *resolution*. The interviewee says that she felt compromised as the review had an ‘agenda’ and was intended to justify a pre-ordained conclusion. The process of review was to find evidence – which she termed ‘dirt’, as it was possibly incriminating - document the results appropriately and then leave quickly.

Recontextualisation

In the *evaluation* S contrasted this review with her idealistic vision of the purpose of review, which she stated was to make constructive recommendations.

Operationalisation

To add to her discomfort, as shown in the *coda* she was later asked, in the sensitive environment of a politician’s private office, to make direct criticisms of a senior civil servant.

Appendix G – List of principal events on UC

Date	Event	Notes
November 2010	Policy intent published	White Paper (DWP, 2010)
Jan 2011	Project established; Terry Moran appointed Senior Responsible Owner (SRO)	Malcolm Whitehouse appointed Programme Director
Early 2011	Start of software development	'Agile' methodology adopted
March 2011	Major Projects Authority (MPA) 'starting gate' review has "high degree of confidence that, notwithstanding the inherent challenges, the programme can deliver Universal Credit."	(MPA, 2011b)
November 2011	First MPA full Review "....the Programme overall still feels very focused on IT and does not yet seem to have embraced fully the transformational nature of the required business change at all levels."	Status AMBER-RED (MPA, 2011c)

Date	Event	Notes
May 2012	Second MPA review Good early progress made but some elements 'behind the curve'	Status AMBER-RED (MPA, 2012)
September 2012	New SRO, Philip Langsdale appointed	Moran retires due to ill-health
October 2012	Langsdale removes programme director Whitehouse	Tech lead Dover also removed from post
December 2012	Langsdale dies suddenly	Mark Fisher appointed interim SRO
February 2013	MPA Review highly critical of programme "The cumulative effect of the issues in this report is to challenge the delivery of the policy intent"	Status RED (MPA, 2013c)
March 2013	Reset of programme led by Cabinet Office	David Pitchford, head of MPA appointed SRO
March 2013	Separate 'digital' software development starts led by GDS	Initially to develop proof-of-concept

Date	Event	Notes
April 2013	'Pathfinder' system goes live based on pre-existing 'live system' software (i.e. not 'digital' software)	'live' system has limited functionality and client base
May 2013	Reset ends and control of overall programme handed back to DWP	Howard Shiplee appointed SRO
June 2013	MPA review says review team is unable to revise the February 2013 delivery confidence assessment (i.e. status rating) due to insufficient evidence	Status RED (MPA, 2013b)
November 2013	Ministerial 'Oversight Group' meeting to decide future course of UC programme	Involves DWP, Cabinet Office, HM Treasury and senior officials
December 2013	Cabinet Office ends involvement in IT project and 'digital' development handed back to DWP	GDS withdraws support for IT development abruptly and DWP incurs six months' delay while new team recruited

Date	Event	Notes
March 2014	MPA review says 'some areas of improvement but still no coherent plan or clear Target Operating Model'	Status AMBER RED (MPA, 2014)
September 2014	Howard Shiplee, SRO retires due to ill health	Neil Couling appointed SRO
October 2015	MPA Review says 'considerable progress since last review and coherent end-to-end plan agreed by all'	Status AMBER (MPA, 2015)

Appendix H – Acronyms used in the thesis

Acronym	Stands for	Notes
APM	Association for Project Management	Professional Body
C&AG	Comptroller and Auditor General	Officer of Parliament and head of NAO, position held by Sir Amyas Morse 2009-19
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy	Policy defining system of agricultural subsidies across EU
CAP-D	Common Agricultural Policy - Delivery	Project within DEFRA, later RPA to implement new 2015 version of system of agricultural subsidies
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis	Discourse analytic technique described by Fairclough (2013) and others
CEO	Chief Executive Officer	Title held by the most senior official in some Government Agencies such as RPA and GDS
CIO	Chief Information Officer	Most senior IT manager in Department
CTO	Chief Technology Officer	Senior IT manager; in 2013-16, position of Government CTO held by senior GDS manager Liam Maxwell

Acronym	Stands for	Notes
DEFRA	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	Ministerial Department responsible for implementing farm subsidy policy
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions	Largest ministerial department in UK Government, responsible for welfare policy and paying benefits
EFRASC	Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee	Select Committee of House of Commons responsible for examining work of DEFRA
GDS	Government Digital Service	Unit within Cabinet Office tasked with developing and implementing new Government-wide policies for IT development and delivery
HMT	Her Majesty's Treasury	Finance Ministry of UK Government, in charge of Government spending
MPA	Major Projects Authority	Cabinet Office unit charged with monitoring Government's Major Projects Portfolio -2011-2016. Merged with other body to become Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) in 2016
MPRG	Major Projects Review Group	Occasional joint HM Treasury/Cabinet Office Board charged with scrutiny of very largest projects

Acronym	Stands for	Notes
NAO	National Audit Office	Parliamentary body tasked with auditing Departmental accounts and producing Value for Money reports
NFU	National Farmers' Union	Representative body of UK farmers
HMRC	Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs	Non-ministerial Department; tax raising body of UK Government
PAC	Committee of Public Accounts	Select Committee of the House of Commons tasked with the examination of Departmental Accounts and enquiring into the value for money
PMI	Project Management Institute	Professional Body
RPA	Rural Payments Agency	Executive Agency of DEFRA, responsible for making payments to farmers and other owners of agricultural land under Common Agricultural Policy of the EU
SoS	Secretary of State	Cabinet Minister responsible for oversight of a Department of State such as DEFRA or DWP

Acronym	Stands for	Notes
SRO	Senior Responsible Owner	Senior civil servant with oversight of the project and accountability for outcomes. Typically Director-General or more senior, chairs project board
TFA	Tenant Farmers' Association	Representative body of UK farmers
UC	Universal Credit	New comprehensive benefit for people of working age, refers to policy, programme and IT project
WPSC	Work and Pensions Select Committee	Select Committee of the House of Commons, responsible for scrutinising work of DWP, chair 2010-2019 Frank Field MP

Appendix I – Dramatis Personae in UC Narratives

Name	Position	Role
Danny Alexander MP	Chief Secretary to the Treasury	Minister in charge of public spending 2010-2015
Richard Bacon MP	Deputy Chair of PAC	2010-2015
Stephen Brien	Special advisor (political assistant to Duncan Smith) then Deputy SRO	Author of 'Dynamic Benefits' (Brien, 2009) policy paper presaged UC
Neil Couling	Director General, Universal Credit	SRO 6 (2014-)
Robert Devereux	Permanent Secretary DWP	Most senior civil servant in DWP and Accounting Officer 2011-2018
Steve Dover	IT Project Manager	Universal Credit 2011-12
Iain Duncan Smith MP	Secretary of State for Work & Pensions	Minister in charge of DWP 2010-16
Frank Field MP	Chair of Work and Pensions Select Committee	2010-2019
Lord David Freud	Minister of State for Welfare Reform	Junior DWP Minister directly in charge of UC 2010-16

Name	Position	Role
Meg Hillier MP	Member of PAC, successor to Hodge as chair of PAC 2015	2010-
Margaret Hodge MP	Chair of Public Accounts Committee (PAC)	2010-2015
Philip Langsdale	Chief Information Officer, DWP	SRO 2 September – December 2012
Francis Maude MP	Minister for the Cabinet Office	Responsible for both GDS and MPA 2010-15
Terry Moran	Chief Operating Officer DWP	SRO 1 (2011-12)
George Osborne MP	Chancellor of the Exchequer	Minister in charge of HM Treasury 2010-2016
David Pitchford	Director-General, Major Projects Authority	MPA head then SRO 4 (2013)
Howard Shiplee	Director General, Universal Credit	SRO 5 (2013-14); Former Director of Construction, Olympic Park
Malcolm Whitehead	Programme Director UC 2011-12	Former Chief Technology Officer, DWP

Name	Position	Role
Norma Wood	Deputy to Pitchford during reset; MPA Reviewer	Contractor

Appendix J – Timeline for CAP-D

A list of major events during the project is given in the table below. This builds on a timeline contained in HC606 (NAO, 2015).

Date	Event	Notes
October 2012	Outline Business Case submitted to HM Treasury	RPA's proposal seeks permission to start the project
November 2012	Ian Trenholm appointed Senior Responsible Owner (SRO)	DEFRA formally leading project as Trenholm was DEFRA Chief Operations Officer (COO)
January 2013	Project renamed CAP-D (Common Agricultural Policy Delivery)	Previously named Future Options Programme
January 2013	Memorandum of Understanding signed by DEFRA and GDS to support delivery	GDS agreed with DEFRA to provide a technology lead and resources to help develop the new system
January 2014	First draft of disallowance regime published by EU	The disallowance regime, whereby the EU levies penalties for errors in grants, was a critical part of the requirement
June 2014	Trenholm leaves DEFRA and Norma Wood appointed SRO	Wood was a contractor and former interim head of the MPA

Date	Event	Notes
July 2014	Some parts of the system deployed successfully	e.g. Finance system to account for payments
October 2014 – January 2015	Technical problems reported with elements of the development	Integration and testing problems reported
October 2014	Liam Maxwell appointed SRO	Maxwell was a senior GDS official and the Government Chief Technology Officer
March 2015	Software development of digital front end abandoned.	RPA takes over management of project and prepares to take applications on paper
March 2015	Application window for 2015 grants opens	Paper based applications accepted
March 2015	EFRASC holds urgent hearing on change in method of application	Liz Truss (SoS Environment) and Mark Grimshaw defend paper-based approach
May 2015	Mark Grimshaw appointed SRO	Grimshaw was Chief Executive Officer of RPA
June 2015	Applications window for 2015 grants closes	Deadline extended by European Commission

Date	Event	Notes
November 2015	NAO report HC 606 published	Report titled 'an early view'
December 2015	PAC holds formal hearing	Oral evidence from Maxwell, Grimshaw and current and immediate past permanent secretaries of DEFRA
December 2015	First payments to farmers	Payment window opens
February 2016	PAC publishes report HC 642	Follows December 2015 hearing and is critical of project execution
October 2016	NAO report HC 727 published	Report reviews payment performance of 2015 scheme

Appendix K – Dramatis Personae in CAP-D narratives

Name	Position	Role
Richard Bacon MP	Deputy Chair of PAC	2010-2015
Mike Bracken	CEO GDS	2011-2015
George Dunn	Chief Executive Tenant Farmers Association	1997-2020
Mark Grimshaw	CEO RPA SRO 4, CAP-D	2011-2017 Mar 2015 - 2017
Meg Hillier MP	Chair of PAC	2015-present
John Manzoni	Chief Executive Civil Service	2014-2020
Francis Maude MP	Minister for the Cabinet Office	2010-2015, Responsible for both GDS and MPA
Liam Maxwell	Government CTO SRO 3, CAP-D	2012-2016 Oct 2014 -Mar 2015
Robin Milton	Chairman National Farmers' Union Upland Farming Group	2012-2018
David Mowat MP	PAC Member Parliamentary Undersecretary of State for Care and Support	2012-2015 2016-2017

Name	Position	Role
Ian Trenholm	COO DEFRA SRO 1, CAP-D	2012-2014 Jan 2013-June 2014
Liz Truss MP	SoS Environment Food and Rural Affairs	Minister in charge of DEFRA 2014-2015
Norma Wood	SRO 2, CAP-D	Contractor, SRO Jul-Oct 2014, Deputy SRO Oct 2014 to Mar 2015

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