

Cynicism as user resistance in IT implementation

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Abstract. *In this paper, we examine the process by which user cynicism emerges and is constituted as part of resistance in information technology (IT) implementation. We ground our process perspective in the received user resistance literature by linking cynicism to users' projections of the system's future use. Rather than attributing cynicism to perceived threats, however, we see user cynicism as cognitively distanced resistance that manifests as a perception of seeing through the espoused goals of the implementers. Based on a process analysis of a customer relationship management implementation at a customer service centre, the paper extends the user resistance model proposed by Lapointe and Rivard by identifying three dimensions of user cynicism in IT implementation. It also shows how cynicism, as a form of passive resistance, easily escalates and feeds new forms of resistance. Lastly, we introduce the cynicism literature as a new reference theory for the Information Systems (IS) audience.*

Keywords: user resistance, cynicism, IT implementation, process study, CRM

INTRODUCTION

User resistance is a prime topic in the information technology (IT) implementation literature (Joshi, 1991; Doolin, 2004; Kim & Kankanhalli, 2009). Although typically framed as neither good nor bad (Lapointe & Rivard, 2005; Ferneley & Sobreperez, 2006), resistance does not resonate well with the virtue of environments in which employees identify themselves with organisational norms and values (Willmott, 1993; McGrath, 2006). A common conception, therefore, is that user resistance needs to be mitigated in the interest of yielding functional rather than dysfunctional outcomes. Such mitigation, however, relies on an in-depth understanding of its manifestation in IT implementation efforts. The received literature has converged on a view on user resistance as *resistance behaviour to IT that follows from perceived threats* (Lapointe & Rivard, 2005). First, it investigates resistance behaviour along a continuum from passive and covert resistance (Marakas & Hornik, 1996; Prasad & Prasad, 2000) to more active and overt forms (Ferneley & Sobreperez, 2006). Second, the literature attributes

resistance behaviour to perceived threats, such as power loss (Markus, 1983), inequity (Joshi, 1991), deskilling (Alvarez, 2008) and genuine doubts of the benefits of the particular change (Marakas & Hornik, 1996).

Although user resistance research is multifaceted, it is fair to say that existing research privileges active resistance over passive resistance (Marakas & Hornik, 1996; Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Doolin, 2004). Less spectacular than active forms of resistance, passive resistance is a form of routine resistance that influences the appropriation of an IT system on a daily basis and over time (Prasad & Prasad, 2000). One form of passive resistance that has received little attention is cynicism. We define cynicism as cognitively distanced resistance that constitutes negative affect towards the IT implementation and manifests a perception of seeing through the espoused goals of the implementers (cf. Kunda, 1992; Dean *et al.*, 1998; Fleming, 2005). The inattention to cynicism in the IT implementation literature is unfortunate since it, similar to other forms of passive resistance, may have long-term effects on the eventual success of an IT implementation. For instance, as our findings will show, the negative affect among cynical users may be transferred to other users in the same implementation environment creating ripple effects.

We argue that user cynicism is an important topic for IS research and that the extant resistance literature can not fully account for cynicism in their conception of IT implementation. We therefore address the following research question: *what is the process by which user cynicism emerges and is constituted as part of resistance in IT implementation?* To investigate this research question, we conducted a 3-year longitudinal case study of the implementation of a customer relationship management (CRM) system at a call centre unit of a European energy firm: Energy Technology Inc. (ETI). We followed ETI's implementation process for tracing the patterns of behaviour that yielded resistance behaviour, in general, and cynicism, in particular. Using temporal bracketing as our sense-making strategy (Langley, 1999), our data analysis produced three distinct episodes that allowed us to extend user resistance theory for understanding cynicism as user resistance in IT implementation.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: the second section reviews user resistance literature with a particular focus on Lapointe & Rivard's (2005) process model. We then present basic elements of cynicism and establish how cynicism can be viewed as a specific manifestation of resistance with relevance to IT implementation. While the fourth section describes our methods, the fifth section presents the case findings as three episodes of user resistance where user cynicism emerges over time. We thereafter discuss the findings and how our study contributes to the literature. The last section concludes the paper by summarising our argument, presenting limitations of our study and outlining future research issues.

USER RESISTANCE AS PROCESS

In her seminal paper almost 30 years ago, Markus (1983) pioneered user resistance in the information systems discipline by arguing that better theories of resistance were needed to

enable better IT implementation strategies. Since then, user resistance has received relatively significant attention, although most work has avoided theorising the phenomenon beyond the surface level (Lapointe & Rivard, 2005). In addition to Markus' (1983) research, Lapointe and Rivard only identified three other papers (Joshi, 1991; Marakas & Hornik, 1996; Martinko *et al.*, 1996) that indeed 'opened the black box and proposed theoretical explanations of how and why resistance occurs' (p. 462). Lapointe & Rivard (2005) presented a synthesised, theoretical perspective on user resistance in IT implementation (see Figure 1). This research is formalised as a model that explicates user resistance as a process composed of six elements: initial conditions, object of resistance, interaction, perceived threats, resistance behaviour and consequences of system use/non-use. This process is cyclical, meaning that the consequences of resistance behaviour trigger the initiation of a new process.

Lapointe & Rivard (2005) posited that user resistance starts when users assess the new system in view of the *interaction* between the object of resistance and initial conditions. The *object of resistance* includes the system itself, the significance of the system and/or the system advocates. The *system itself* refers to specific features of the system (e.g. the system's user interface) and how well it meets user needs and expectations. The *system significance* relates to the very meaning of the system. Such meaning may entail the ways by which the system changes the work and power structures within the organisation. As a third type of object of resistance, the *system advocates*, whether they are implementers or not, may be targets of resistance.

Initial conditions are established work routines, power relationships or the internal organisational structure as perceived by individuals or groups within the organisation that implements the new IT system. On the basis of the interaction between the object of resistance and initial conditions, users make assessments of the projected consequences of the system's use. In cases where these consequences are *perceived threatening*, *resistance behaviour* occurs. In Lapointe and Rivard's research, resistance behaviour triggered by such threats involve the following: *apathy* – including resistance by inaction and lack of interest; *passive resistance* – manifesting resistance through refusal and formal protests; *active resistance* – including forceful complaints, stir up of pre-existing conflicts and exchange of insults; and *aggressive*

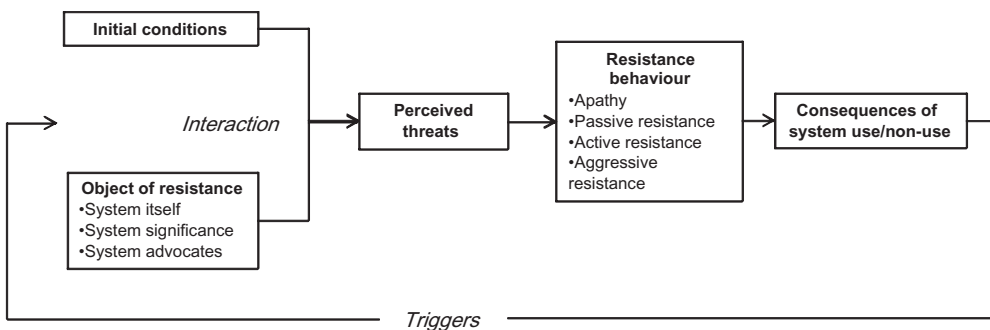


Figure 1. Lapointe and Rivard's process model of resistance to IT.

resistance – which is a form of resistance typically expressed through the usurp of rights, rebelling and posing ultimatum. Depending on the exact nature of the interaction between the initial conditions and the object of resistance, consequences of system use/non-use are likely to occur. The resulting consequences may thus change the nature of the initial conditions.

One distinguishing feature of Lapointe & Rivard's (2005) model is its insistence on tracing resistance behaviour to perceived threats. A closer review of the literature on passive resistance suggests, however, that resistance may not necessarily involve perceived threats. As an example, an antecedent of resistance is what Prasad & Prasad (2000) referred to as *naming resistance*. Naming resistance is the process by which particular actions and/or incidents are labelled as resistance behaviour. Once incidents are framed as resistance, such framing becomes a powerful way of exposing managerial incompetence or user ignorance. Such exposure is typically materialised as narratives, gossiping or storytelling among organisational actors (Prasad & Prasad, 2000). Prasad & Prasad (2000) argued that multiple acts of routine, or passive, resistance by several actors may open up a *set of spaces* in an organisation. They suggest that such spaces of resistance (cf. Fleming, 2005) allow organisational actors 'to renegotiate their own positions and preserve some amount of personal dignity in a period of technological change, from which they had been largely excluded' (Prasad & Prasad, 2000, p. 402). However, this form of passive resistance may not radically change the path of the organisation. It may rather 'stretch it in ways that make it a more habitable space for those for whom escape or exit is not a viable option' (Prasad & Prasad, 2000, p. 402). In other words, multiple acts of routine resistance, deliberate/conscious or not, may have the function of constructing a more habitable space (breathing room) under conditions where certain actors are under pressure within an organisation.¹

In addition to resistance as a response to perceived threats then (Lapointe & Rivard, 2005), resistance can be nurtured in *spaces of resistance*, keeping resistance at arm's length from the actual IT implementation (Prasad & Prasad, 2000). We argue that cynicism can be seen as an essential element in the ongoing production of such resistance spaces through supporting a sense of autonomy for the individual (Gabriel, 1999; Fleming, 2005; Mumby, 2005; Contu, 2008). This will be further elaborated in the next section.

CYNICISM AS USER RESISTANCE

Recent management literature explores the relation between employee resistance and cynicism. For example, Stanley *et al.* (2005) explained how cynicism influences employees' intentions to resist change. Similarly, Bommer *et al.* (2005) identified a relation between organisational changes, cynicism and resistance, while Gabriel (1999) proposed that cynical resistance is a way to subvert and undermine managerial control mechanisms. Recent research portrays cynicism as a strategy for increasing individuals' perception of autonomy. For example, Contu (2008) suggested that cynicism is an example of 'decaf resistance' – that

¹We would like to thank the Associate Editor for offering this point in the review process.

Table 1. Dimensions of user cynicism

Dimensions of user cynicism	Definition	Manifestation
Cognitive distance	<p>'The ways that organization members create resistant spaces by virtue of their engagement with and appropriation of extant managerial discourses' (Mumby, 2005, p. 36)</p> <p>The ongoing production of selfhood (Fleming, 2005)</p>	<p>Feeling disconnected from organisational norms and managerial control mechanisms (Fleming, 2005)</p> <p>'Supporting the fantasy of ourselves as liberal, free, and self-relating human beings to whom multiple choices are open and all can be accommodated' (Contu, 2008, p. 367)</p>
Negative affect	<p>'An employee response to culture management' (Fleming, 2005, p. 47)</p> <p>The belief that the organisation lacks integrity (Gabriel, 1999)</p>	<p>Mockery and irony (Kunda, 1992; Fleming, 2005)</p> <p>Transgressive behaviour (Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Contu, 2008;)</p> <p>Scepticism (Fleming & Sewell, 2002)</p>
Seeing through espoused claims	A personal insight of knowing what is 'really' going on (Kunda, 1992)	<p>Anticipating deception rather than candour from management and co-workers (Dean <i>et al.</i>, 1998)</p> <p>Subversion and undermining of managerial control mechanisms (Fleming, 2005)</p> <p>Pointing at managerial inconsistencies and debunking managerial decisions (Dean <i>et al.</i>, 1998)</p>

is, resistance that 'supports the fantasy of ourselves as liberal, free, and self-relating human beings to whom multiple choices are open and all can be accommodated' (p. 370).

In this research, we refer to user cynicism as cognitively distanced resistance that constitutes negative affect towards the IT implementation and manifests a perception of seeing through the espoused goals of the implementers (cf. Kunda, 1992; Dean *et al.*, 1998; Fleming, 2005). As depicted in Table 1, three dimensions stand out in this definition: cognitive distancing negative affect and seeing through espoused claims of management.

Cognitive distance

Similar to other forms of covert, passive resistance (Gabriel, 1999), cynicism involves conscious distancing from management (Prasad & Prasad, 2000; Fleming & Spicer, 2003). Distancing creates resistance spaces in which one might form, and preserve, a sense of self and autonomy – distanced from managerial claims (Gabriel, 1999; Fleming, 2005). Fleming (2005) explained this as a temporal behaviour stemming from a combination of defence and distancing: 'the defense and distancing metaphors imply an a priori self, there is a tendency to separate "who one really is" behind the cynicism from the power being resisted' (p.52). The distancing process is suggested to create an inner space of dignity and integrity, insulated from the organisational environment.

Negative affect

User cynicism involves an attitudinal state towards managerial behaviour (Fleming, 2005; Kim *et al.*, 2009). It incorporates a wide range of negative affect including defeatism, betrayal and disillusionment, typically instantiated as irony, sarcasm and mockery. This type of affect has been suggested to derive from previous managerial violations of cultural or psychological contracts (Andersson, 1996; Andersson & Bateman, 1997; Dean *et al.*, 1998; Wanous *et al.*, 2000).

Seeing through espoused claims

Cynicism manifests resistance in the form of enlightened transgressive behaviour (Sloterdijk, 1987; Contu, 2008). In this sense, cynicism is a way 'of dealing with knowledge' of how things could be done better (Sloterdijk, 1987, p. 288). Enlightened, in this context, signifies a perceived awareness of 'what is really going on' (Kunda, 1992; Sloterdijk, 1987; Fleming & Spicer, 2003). Such enlightenment has been suggested to provide a 'specious sense of freedom' (Fleming & Spicer, 2003, p.162) of being outside of, and not affected by, organisational norms and values. Subsequently then, by pointing at managerial inconsistencies and debunking managerial claims, cynical resistance includes reasoning and 'cognitive distancing' beyond overt opposition.

In sum, the three dimensions presented earlier characterise user cynicism and establish it as a form of passive resistance. Drawing on Lapointe & Rivard's (2005) user resistance model and this three-dimensional understanding of user cynicism, we conducted process research at ETI to explore how user cynicism emerges as a form of resistance in IT implementation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study did not begin as a study about cynicism (cf. Plowman *et al.*, 2007). It emerged out of an interest in users' framing of technological change in late modernity work environments such as call centres. Early on in our 3-year interpretive field research (Walsham, 2006), however, the CRM implementation at ETI – a large European utility firm – turned out as an excellent setting for studying resistance and user cynicism. First, previous research describes Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) and CRM systems as inherently inflexible, often implemented with the intention to streamline work processes (Robey *et al.*, 2002; Gosain, 2004). Despite significant implications for users' work practices, CRM systems provide little room for compromises. A CRM implementation can therefore be regarded as fertile ground for user resistance and cynicism. Second, stakeholders at the customer service centre of ETI were influenced differently by the CRM implementation. For instance, the front office workers, largely influenced by the new software in their daily customer encounters, had different stakes than managers, who controlled them through dedicated software tools and quantitative targets. Finally, our access to the ETI case through a long-term agreement between the first author's

university and ETI allowed us to map the complex and changing forms of resistance and cynicism over time.

Data collection

Starting in February 2005, the data collection included 57 semi-structured interviews, informal interviews, document analysis as well as several weeks of on-site observations (see Table 2). It ended in June 2007, when the CRM system had been up and running for 13 months and we had reached theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Suddaby, 2006). In addition to the real-time data collection, we collected retrospective data for tracing the antecedent conditions of the CRM implementation. This was typically done through documents review and interview questions that targeted the period preceding the implementation. This meant that the data collection not only covered the actual implementation process but also the antecedent conditions and the use of the CRM system.

The 57 interviews were conducted at virtually all levels of the organisation: managers at headquarters (14 interviews/six respondents), middle managers (16 interviews/nine respondents) and customer service representatives (27 interviews/18 respondents). Repeated field visits, including attendance at training courses and SAP project meetings, allowed us to track how the change process, actions and expectations evolved over time (Langley, 1999). All interviews, lasting, on average, 1 hour, were recorded and partly transcribed. While interviews were conducted with individual respondents, we also attended several group manager meetings and SAP 'emergency room' meetings at the customer service centre. When observing customer service representatives, we were, at several times, 'double jacked' into the telephones, overhearing customer conversations. This enabled a good sense of typical calls. Each observation was recorded through field notes and was added to the research database for subsequent coding together with other types of data.

Data analysis

The data analysis aimed at 'conceptualizing events and detecting patterns among them' (Langley, 1999, p. 692). It followed five key steps (see Table 3).

The data analysis started by open coding (Charmaz, 2006) of the entire collected material. After generating the initial codes, we eliminated redundant codes and settled with a multitude of mutually exclusive descriptive concepts from the CRM implementation. Following step one, we identified key events and decisions in the coded material to create a chronology of the system implementation process. In the third step of the data analysis, we conducted a cross-stakeholder analysis to sensitise multiple interpretations (Klein & Myers, 1999), comparing and reflecting upon the codes and coding families related to each stakeholder group (Langley, 1999). For instance, we identified significant differences between front office and back office customer representatives in their interpretation of the IT implementation. In the following phase, we used Lapointe & Rivard's (2005) model of user resistance to discriminate initial conditions, object of resistance, interaction, perceived threats and resistance behaviour

Table 2. Data sources

Data source	February 2005	May 2005	August 2005	October 2005	June 2006	September 2007	January 2007	June 2007	Total
Interviews	13	2	7	11	9	3	7	5	57 interviews: length (mean), 57 minutes; 33 respondents
Participant observation	4 days		4 days	4 days	3 days		3 days		24 days of observations including: six SAP project meetings; four SAP meetings; four group manager meetings
Training courses	5-day introduction to the Curry system		5-day introduction to the CRM system						
SAP project meetings		2 days					2 days	2 days	
Archival data			Project descriptions, internal documents, SAP business case, SAP blue print, ETI customer satisfaction index, press releases						

Table 3. Data analysis process

Steps	Tasks	Outputs
1 Open coding	(a) Merge data sources; (b) initial coding of the data material; (c) initial data cleansing	Exclusive descriptive concepts
2 Establishing a chronology of system implementation	(a) Establish a timeline of system implementation; (b) verify timeline with ETI line managers and the customer service centre manager	A chronology of key events (postponements, system training courses, go live, Web device, improvements in functionality)
3 Cross-stakeholder analysis	Compare and reflect upon the coding for key stakeholders	Overview of key stakeholders; an understanding of key stakeholders' interpretations
4 Identifying phases of user resistance	(a) Use Lapointe & Rivard's (2005) resistance model to discriminate initial conditions, object of resistance, interaction, perceived threats and resistance behaviour; (b) use our three-dimensional understanding of cynicism as to identify cognitive distance, negative affect and seeing through espoused claims	Identification of three main user resistance phases and evidence of user cynicism (see Table 4)
5 Theorising the underlying process of cynical user resistance	(a) Synthesise steps 2–4; (b) compare the three phases of user resistance identified in step 4	Theoretical implications

in the coded material. We also used our three-dimensional understanding of cynicism to identify cognitive distance, negative affect and seeing through espoused claims. This theory-informed analysis helped us to trace evidence of user cynicism in three episodes of user resistance (see Table 4). Lastly, we compared the three user resistance episodes generated in step four in order to examine how user cynicism emerges in IT implementation. In addition to an overall synthesis of steps one to four, this enabled us to derive theoretical implications from our study.

USER CYNICISM AT ETI

Following a description of the case setting, this section describes the CRM implementation at ETI as a sequence of three episodes of user resistance.

Case setting

ETI is a European utility firm that delivers energy to approximately 6 million consumers in Northern Europe. It is the largest producer of heat and the fourth largest producer of electricity in Europe. Given this large-scale operation, ETI's customer service centre receives more than 1 000 000 calls per year. The customer service centre had about 300 employees before (2005) and 400 after (2007) the CRM implementation analysed in this paper. Operational customer

Table 4. Main episodes from the ETI case

Episodes	Episode 1 Implementation postponements July 2004–April 2006	Episode 2 Escalating implementation problems May 2006–August 2006	Episode 3 Keeping the production going September 2006–June 2007
Initial conditions	<i>Control panacea</i> : all-in-one system for reducing costs and increasing flexibility; standardise work practices <i>Implementation incompetency</i> : history of IT implementation failures; postponements of new system	<i>Turbulent work premises</i> : system go live; hiring of temporary employees; temporary system	<i>Defeatism</i> : declining performance; new customer service manager
Object of resistance	<i>The system itself and system significance</i> : roll-out delays; configuration problems; lack of functionality	<i>System significance and system advocates</i> : lack of system accuracy; parallel work with the 'Web device' and CRM system	<i>System advocates</i> : managerial inconsistencies; McKinsey consultants; lack of system support
Reaction	<i>Perceived threats</i> : more refined control mechanisms; deskilling; dismissal ('Curry Huggers')	<i>Perceived threats</i> : lack of system support; fear of working overtime <i>Seeing through espoused claims</i> : anticipating deception; subversion	<i>Distancing</i> : striving for autonomy; disconnected from organisational norms and values <i>Negative affect</i> : defeatism; scepticism
Resistance behaviour	<i>Covert resistance</i> : gossiping and storytelling; scepticism	<i>Active resistance</i> : calling in sick; leave of absence <i>Covert resistance</i> : mockery and satire; undermining management directions	<i>Covert resistance</i> : debunking of managerial claims; indifference; ridicule and irony

service work was divided between front office and back office representatives. While front office work focused on inbound calls, back office work involved complicated matters that front office staff could not resolve. In addition, group managers supervised customer service representatives through time scheduling and performance assessments and reported directly to line managers. Line managers, responsible for the strategic management of ETI customer service sites, in turn, reported to the head of production at ETI headquarters.

Episode 1: implementation postponements (July 2004–April 2006)

There were two overall reasons why ETI decided to invest in SAP's CRM solution in July 2004. First, ETI intended to reduce IT costs and increase flexibility by implementing an 'all-in-one' system. The IT costs had increased dramatically since the old in-house developed CRM solution called Curry was launched in 1996. Over 8 years, Curry had grown into a patchwork composed of 46 subsystems. The multitude of systems was perceived as unnecessary complex, difficult to maintain and time-consuming for Curry users, i.e. ETI service representatives. As ETI's manager of the implementation project described:

The large system flora drives costs. The system platform is old and we are in the need of a more flexible system. We need change; the routines have not evolved over time. We need to improve cost control and to optimize work processes.

Second, in addition to reducing IT costs, significant cost savings were anticipated from eliminating redundant work processes and standardising the remaining ones. With the standardised processes mediated by the CRM system in place, ETI estimated to reduce the average customer call cost from about 50 to 30 euros. As one manager commented:

The main goal of the implementation and the reorganizations is to reduce manual work processes. The idea is to solve every customer errand at first encounter without sending them away to back office staff.

Similarly, one customer centre line manager observed:

Today, there is far too much tacit knowledge in people's heads. We hope to become less vulnerable to personnel turnover with the new system. Just shortening the introduction courses and making routines explicit will help us reduce costs [. . .] we need to reduce the back office function in the future; we won't need that sort of specialist knowledge.

Initial conditions

Looking at the state of the CRM implementation at this stage, there were two conditions that stood out. First, management, who advocated the system, viewed it as something of a control panacea. This was reflected in the attempts to use the system as a means to refine managerial control and increase efficiency. They considered the existing system portfolio as inflexible and the existing work practices as fragmented and random. Exercising tighter control over these

issues was considered as the key to increase the proportion of customer requests resolved by the front office staff and to realise the espoused company core values '*faster, cheaper and better*'.

The other condition was the seeming implementation incompetency. Given a history of IT implementation failures, few people at ETI expected that the CRM system would 'go live' as planned in late July 2005. Because of several unanticipated technical, organisational and user training problems, the implementation date was postponed three times. First, ETI decided to postpone the 'go live' date until 24 November 2005. However, even with this 4-month delay, initial configuration problems remained, and the go live date was postponed yet another 3 months until February 2006. Despite this, ETI had to postpone the go live yet once more until late April 2006.

Object of resistance

Coinciding with the initial go live date in July 2005, ETI gave 5-day user training courses at the head office. These courses were the first possibilities for users to test the CRM system. The courses were a problematic experience for users due to the roll-out delays and configuration problems. Given the incompleteness of the system, the course material, as well as the 'system dummies', was continuously revised over time. This created significant frustration among course participants as expressed by a back office representative:

Usually I work at the back office with big customer changes. I thought this course would give me the possibility to see how my processes will change with the new system yet all I've heard so far is that that part isn't ready yet. It makes me worried since I guess that this is the only course I will attend, except the e-learning parts.

This fear of ending up as an unprepared user was common among ETI staff, in general, and among the back office representatives, in particular. Leaving many questions unanswered, the course accentuated the already existing concerns of the back office representatives about the lack of system functionality. Processes that took about 5 minutes in the Curry system, such as changing a customer address, consumed about 15 minutes in the new CRM system. So by this time, the object of resistance was both the system itself as well as the system significance. As illustrated by the words of a back office worker:

At the SAP introduction it was said that everything would run automatically in SAP and that it would be impossible to make mistakes. You were just supposed to press a button. But it doesn't work that way at all. [. . .] It's like the blind leading the blind.

Reaction

By that time, most of those who were less enthusiastic about the system could be found among the back office staff. Essentially, they were afraid that the system would bring more refined

control mechanisms and that they would lose their less controlled specialist positions at the back office. A back office representative commented:

They thought that they could simply replace us with this SAP thing, that there will be no need for back office functions anymore. They don't know what we do here, and it makes me scared. I will not go back and work at the front office again, that's for sure.

As a reaction to this view, management coined the concept 'Curry Hugger' (referring to the old system 'Curry') as a way of naming the resistance (cf. Prasad & Prasad, 2000) of those reluctant to the change. With the 'Curry Hugger' naming in use, rumours of dismissal started to circulate among staff.

Resistance behaviour

The back office staff particularly responded to the postponements and lack of user training by creating narratives and war stories. For example, a story of a previous customer service employee 'Gareth' circulated among the representatives. As a back office representative described:

We all know what happened to Gareth, he complained about things you know all the way up to the ETI CEO – and they invited him to Stockholm and all. And after that he got laid off.

This kind of collective storytelling was widespread at the customer service centre. True or not, these stories influenced the implementation pace by hampering user acceptance. As commented by a line manager:

We grew too fast and we have a strong culture with a lot of history 'in the walls'. Our group managers have tried to change the culture but old coworkers maintain it by recalling old events. There is an enormous amount of gossiping in the organization.

Thus, while the back office staff responded to the implementation by creating threatening narratives, the front office staff was rather positive to the system changes. However, they were sceptical about the capabilities of management to handle the CRM system implementation. Well-educated, their view of the CRM implementation, in general, reflected little faith in management. As noted by a front office representative with a major in information systems:

The system replacement is useful but the timing of the implementation is badly chosen, the time schedules are too tight. Implementing and adopting a new system such as SAP usually takes 2–2.5 years. Frankly, I can't figure out how they [management] are thinking.

In February 2006, ETI management revised the go live date, for the third time, despite large monetary losses (about 100 000 euros a day). As noted by the project controller:

The system was estimated to generate several million EUR per year. The delays have increased costs and I would guess that these setbacks will be impossible to regain.

In May 2006, ETI was finally ready to go live with the CRM system, thus starting off a new wave of resistance behaviour.

Episode 2: escalating implementation problems (May 2006–August 2006)

Initial conditions

As to address the workload peak projected at go live in May 2006, ETI educated and hired about 50 temporary employees to help out in the front office. However, the CRM system turned out to be very premature. So, by the time of go live, the Curry system could not be replaced immediately as initially planned. Thus, management changed the work premises for the customer representatives by introducing another new system, referred to as 'Web device', to be used in parallel with the CRM system. The Web device was a spreadsheet application with the objective of dealing with the temporary problems with new customers' invoices and registration. The parallel use of the 'Web device' required ad hoc learning by the experienced customer representatives. In addition, all temporary staff was idling for weeks as they only had training in the CRM system. The introduction of the Web device came as a surprise for customer service representatives. In fact, even the line managers were unaware of how premature the CRM system actually turned out to be. Indeed, the state of the implementation was turbulent for all involved.

Object of resistance

During this episode, the system significance and the system advocates became the objects of resistance rather than the system itself. The sheer awkwardness of working with the 'Web device' in parallel with the CRM system became a source of resistance in itself among users. While the queues on the telephones were continuously growing, the fact that ETI's group managers found themselves unable to address the problems substantiated the implementation problems. Customer service 'emergency meetings' were held twice a day to update line managers about what functions in the CRM system that were ready to be used. By June 2006, the average response time for incoming calls was about 90 minutes, and every day 500 unsolved customer cases were accumulated, amounting to about 73 000 1 month after the go live date. By that time, management made it clear that if customer representatives would not accept the new system and structures, dismissal were to be expected.

Reaction

Initially promised an improved system, users, and to some degree, even the group managers, now felt abandoned by management. Reminded each working day, users were frustrated by the system incompleteness. In addition, they felt threatened by the demands of working overtime and the lack of system support. A back office representative expressed her concerns:

Most of us are starting to get really tired now. How are we supposed to cope with this? I don't know, maybe it's because it's so close to the summer vacation now. The latest news was that 'this fall you will have to work overtime'. I guess that you can figure out how it feels to hear this message two days before your summer vacation.

With the old system, red lights were literally flashing if the queue was more than 5 minutes long. However, in this extreme situation, the red light function was simply disabled. A group manager said:

Right now we have 73 000 unsolved cases and more than a 60-minute phone queue. Everything is falling apart. You will see that people are going to call in sick. It will happen this fall, I'm sure. I guess that the younger part of the staff will go back to university studies and that the older ones will quit.

The front office representatives, on the other hand, started to call the customer service centre the 'mad house'. Claiming to see through managerial directions and apparent inconsistencies in their line of argumentation, a front office worker stated:

SAP won't ever beat Curry [the previous system used] in terms of usability. For front office workers, Curry outperforms SAP. SAP might improve things for ETI overall but definitely not for customer service.

These front office representatives combined their distrust in management with a sense of power of knowledge, that is, the insight that things could be done better.

SAP is a total fiasco. SAP will be really good within a couple of years when the customer service center has been able to correct all of the faults in the system. The question is just how many of us who are going to be sacrificed along the way.

Resistance behaviour

During two very chaotic months, ETI struggled to handle the escalating implementation problems. Despite ETI's efforts to hire temporary staff, the users and the group managers were stressed out. This resulted in forceful complaints and resistance behaviour. ETI responded to the user frustration by sending high-level managers to the customer service centre with the intention to reiterate the vision of the CRM system implementation and how to communicate with upset customers.

Meanwhile, in the front office, the awareness about mixed messages and broken promises was growing and a tone of ridicule and irony was spreading. As a front office worker commented:

Recently we received a new manual: 'this is how you communicate with upset customers'. It must be a joke. We have confronted annoyed customers for weeks and this is what they [senior management] give us. It makes me laugh. It also makes me thinking. Seriously,

someone spent time on producing this manual. And even worse, someone up there [senior management] assigned the task. They obviously don't understand a thing.

This kind of statement was telling for the front office representatives. Rather than becoming upset by the managerial failures, however, they developed a discourse of mockery and sarcasms directed towards the lack of system functionality and the managerial inability to fix the problems:

In the coffee room we make jokes of how long each process takes. Stuff that took five minutes before now takes half-an-hour, you know, voila! And, that was not what our managers told us from the beginning.

Thus, while the front office staff appeared distanced to the implementation problems, the back office staff responded rather differently. More emotionally attached, and in a tone of dissatisfaction rather than satire, a back office representative explained:

We are a low status part of the organization. We get all the complaints from customers no matter what. It never ends. I really understand the expression of 'going postal', you know. It's a phenomenon in the States, and it sort of fits in here as well.

Indeed, ETI had been expecting some problems in the implementation phase, yet the problems during the spring and summer of 2006 were exceptionally costly in monetary terms. In addition, management faced unusually high levels of staff calling in sick or taking leave of absence. A back office manager commented:

A lot of people are taking leave of absence, going back to university studies. More or less a whole section left now before the fall. Additionally, more people than ever are calling in sick. I honestly understand them.

The consequences were two-fold. First, only 2 months after implementation, the management in Stockholm deemed the CRM initiative as a failure, not least in view of the increasing monetary losses. Second, ETI decided to replace the customer service director immediately. This last action was ratified by ETI's own measures of customer satisfaction revealing declining numbers throughout 2006.

Episode 3: keeping the production going (September 2006–June 2007)

Initial conditions

Despite the managers' intention to 'keep the production going' and respond to the low customer service index numbers, a sense of defeatism was spreading throughout the organisation during the beginning of fall 2006. As a front office representative commented:

Right now I've just come back from a two-week vacation. I was totally stressed out before with the system and all, but now things have cooled down. We know that there is nothing we can

do and that there are too few of us who can answer the incoming calls. Before there would have been panic if the numbers showed more than five-minute queues. Now, nobody cares.

Even though the CRM system was continuously enhanced, staff performance was dropping. The combination of poorly developed system functionality, declining performance and the increasing number of staff triggered the ETI head office to take action. Under the leadership of a new customer service manager, ETI revised the initial reorganisation plan. The slow pace of the implementation, as well as the high proportion of temporary staff (about 150 people at the time), was increasingly frustrating for users as well as for middle management. As a result, McKinsey consultants were hired to help the group managers to battle the defeatism and indifference surrounding the organisation.

Object of resistance

During this episode, the object of resistance was, in particular, the system advocates. Specifically, the implementation generated tensions between the group managers and the line managers. One group manager illustrated a commonly held view:

We know that this is a management failure, from the CEO and down. The vision is a well functioning customer service, yet nobody tells us how. You have to guide people otherwise everyone will do just as they want.

Despite the head office's responses and ambition of changing the organisation, the group managers had little, if any, tools to implement them. For example, the back office staff was ordered to take incoming calls. Yet, the backlog of unsolved customer matters continued to grow. Specifically, difficult cases were 'floating around' as nobody bothered to solve them. The group managers noticed the problem and openly expressed their disappointment of higher levels of management. Illustrative comments were:

How do you communicate [to members of the staff] that 'well we bought this new system that will make every work process more complex and time consuming than before. To compensate, we will need to increase our workforce with 200% during the next one and a half year – how do you feel about that?'

I guess that we felt that we needed to keep the illusion of CRM going.

The winter of 2006/2007 was characterised by efforts to reduce the average queue time and the backlog of unsolved customer cases at the customer centre. Yet, the functionality of the CRM system was still not corresponding to user needs, meaning that many core work processes took much more time in the new system than it did using the old Curry system. As expressed by the words of a previous back office representative:

I have answered incoming customer emails since October. When I started working on this, we were expected to answer within 24 hours, yet today [with the new system] it takes about two months to provide an answer.

Reaction

The lack of system support and the struggle within management created an unstable work environment. The customer support centre started to lose experienced personnel. During the fall of 2006, the staff turnover increased with about 5%. By that time, the McKinsey consultants had started to take action. However, among the front office staff, every attempt to change was now met with debunking of managerial claims and ridicule. As illustrated by the words of a highly educated front office representative:

Along came McKinsey with 'the right way' of doing things. And if you questioned them they got really frustrated. We took courses where you were to gain the right flow. Sure, we got to fold papers in the shape of an airplane. It was so idiotic and such an over-simplified way of illustrating our organization. But in the end, I got paid for sitting there and doing it.

By this time, it also became clear that the cynical discourse among the front office staff had spread to several of the group leaders, triggering new forms of resistance. In particular, it seemed that the group leaders increasingly exercised passive resistance by not complying with the McKinsey consultants' recommendations. A group leader described the situation in the following way:

I don't know. We have been giving our best for so long. And all we get is another spreadsheet to fill out. The McKinsey people have been running things; you simply just don't cope with them. It's always just numbers, what the hell? Why don't they talk to people instead . . . you know and ask how things are going?

They were supposed to increase efficiency with 25% and I think they reached like 10%. I guess that they were very costly; honestly they [management] could have invested that money in fixing the system instead.

In addition, the group managers were increasingly starting to question previously accepted work routines and managerial directions such as sales courses and the information flow throughout the organisation:

It's like these sales courses that we are having. You know this guy comes here to tell if you have the personality of a bird, a fish, or a hen. He got really pissed when others and I started to question the use of it all.

So, even with head office commitment, the effort to support the middle managers was misdirected, generating unfavourable user responses.

Resistance behaviour

While the system changes were typically very bothersome for many of those working at ETI, the front office staff compared them with a '*bad sitcom from the early 1990s*'. Around Christmas time, a front office employee described the situation:

There is nothing to do but to laugh about the [managerial] incompetence here. [. . .] If one would provide the staff with a decent salary I guess that we would be able to hold onto some competence. Right now, more or less the whole office is looking for new jobs.

The group managers were now also openly expressing a cynical attitude about the line manager's inability to control the situation:

I have experienced that the organization is built on intrigues and politics . . . It would be much better to decide that we do not give a shit about quality, difficult matters, and complicated problems and only answer the phone. Our new line manager made this rather clear by saying 'It doesn't matter if you solve customer problems as long as you have an answer for them'.

Moreover, suspicions that the new customer service centre manager had a hidden agenda were starting to grow. A front office worker explained the situation with the following words:

Bad quality, we give the customers bad service. The customers don't know what happens as soon as we hang up on them. But I mean, quantity has always been prioritized over quality. Maybe the new manager will change this. He is supposed to come here and clean up this mess during three years. Then he will probably move on. Like a hit man.

Epilogue

Under the leadership of the new customer service manager, ETI decided to revise their initial reorganisation plan. The slow pace of the implementation, as well as the high proportion of temporary staff, was increasingly frustrating for users, as well as middle management. Once again, the change pressure was pervasive in management discussions, and after about 2 months in office, the new customer service manager started to take action.

After spending a month observing the organisation, the new customer service manager described, not too cautiously, his observations in the following way:

Have you ever seen the TV show 'Extreme Makeover Home Edition' – you know when they bring in the bulldozers and just tear down the old houses? That is what I think and believe that we need to do here.

He launched a reorganisation plan, which included efforts to increase the CRM implementation pace and reorganising the customer service once again. All in all, 400 customer service representatives, temporary staff and middle managers were given notice of dismissal. They also got the opportunity to apply for 255 new assignments. Needless to say, this reorganisation was devastating for the customer service representative's commitment to ETI and its IT-enabled customer service. Thus, with one minor difference, the organisation was more or less back where they started in 2004. They had an almost functioning CRM system. Beyond the scope of our empirical investigation, one might speculate that this radical measure (the

reorganisation) enabled a forced action of recommitment by those who chose to stay on and served as a necessary move to address the dysfunctional cynicism paralysing the customer service centre.²

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we set out to investigate the process by which user cynicism emerges and is constituted as part of user resistance in IT implementation. Synthesising literature on user resistance (Lapointe & Rivard, 2005) and cynicism (Kunda, 1992; Dean *et al.*, 1998; Fleming, 2005), we conducted a process analysis of a CRM implementation at a customer service centre. Using a 'temporal bracketing strategy' (Langley, 1999) to establish comparable units of analysis, we identified three case episodes, serving as such units of analysis, for tracing the emergence of user cynicism in IT implementation. In what follows, we analyse the case episodes identified and described in the case section. We then specify implications and issues for future research related to our study.

It is perhaps an understatement to say that the CRM implementation at ETI was an agonising experience to many involved. Not only did the project exceed budget and miss deadlines, it was also counterproductive to initial intentions. It was therefore not surprising that resistance behaviour emerged among users at ETI's customer service centre.

During the *first episode*, ETI initiated the IT implementation with the intentions of reducing IT costs and standardising work processes. The prospect of a 40% cut of the average customer call cost justified the significant IT investment required to replace the Curry system with the new CRM system. In view of three consecutive go live postponements, configuration problems and lack of functionality, the new system soon became an object of resistance, not least because of its significance for customer service practices. Users feared that the CRM system would imply more refined control mechanisms, deskilling, dismissals and become another failed implementation project in a series of similar ones. In this regard, we witnessed a process that largely confirmed Lapointe & Rivard's (2005) user resistance model in that covert resistance was triggered by perceived threats. Interestingly, the resistance took a discursive form including gossiping, storytelling and scepticism largely emerging as routine resistance formed by 'the everyday interpretations of and negotiations of local organizational actors' (Prasad & Prasad, 2000, p. 398). Retelling the story of 'Gareth' could be seen as an example of such a collective construction of cynicism, contributing to the construction of 'resistance spaces' among users. Managers reacted to these acts of resistance by naming (Prasad & Prasad, 2000) those reluctant to change 'Curry Huggers', referring to the system to be replaced.

After several postponements, the *second episode* (May 2006–August 2006) was initiated by the 'go live' event, taking the CRM system from being a management vision and an

²We would like to thank the AE for offering this point in the review process.

anticipated object of resistance to becoming a reality in the work practice of customer service representatives. However, it soon turned out that the new system lacked functionality to the extent that a parallel system, the spreadsheet-based 'Web device', had to be used to handle customer cases. In addition to the use of parallel systems, these problems could be traced to the lack of system accuracy. In view of the flawed system, painfully impacting the everyday work of the customer service representatives, users feared the lack of system support and the considerable overtime required to handle the ever-increasing number of unsolved customer cases.

During this episode, the object of resistance shifted towards the system advocates, triggering resistance in both covert (Marakas & Hornik, 1996; Prasad & Prasad, 2000) and active forms (Ferneley & Sobreperez, 2006). While more active forms of resistance included people calling in sick and taking leave of absence, the passive resistance was of a more cynical character. Irony and satire were directed towards the perceived inconsistency in the actions of management, creating a distance between those representing the 'mad house' and the customer service representatives. Concurring with Fleming (2005) and Andersson (1996), the distancing among the front office staff not only contradicted and debunked managerial incentives, it seemed to provide the staff with a sense of dignity in a situation characterised by flux. This distancing was especially evident in the case of front office representatives, among whom many held a university degree. For example, some of them had IS majors, thus having considerable textbook knowledge about large-scale ERP implementation. They perceived themselves superior to management with regard to IS implementation, which made them repeatedly pinpointing managerial ambiguities. This form of enlightened awareness (Sloterdijk, 1987; Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Contu, 2008) included not only the idea of how things could be done better (Sloterdijk, 1987, p. 288) but also the idea of seeing through the claims of management. So, while people were still doing their jobs, cynical user resistance retained a strong foothold at ETI.

The initial conditions of the *third episode* (September 2006–June 2007) were characterised by defeatism, negative affect and declining performance. To deal with the continued problems, ETI hired a McKinsey consultant team. This move did not mitigate front office representatives' resistance behaviour. On the contrary, the system advocates became an even more profound object of resistance. In fact, we observed how the user cynicism among front office representatives was transferred to other stakeholders including middle managers. Originally supporting the implementation, middle management now felt disconnected from the espoused managerial norms and values. This distancing process slowly triggered a fragmentation of the middle management team. In accordance with Prasad & Prasad (2000), we found that the managers, at least in part, also facilitated the construction of covert resistance. Specifically, we observed how the cynical discourse among middle management became a way to fend off organisational norms and values by various forms of passive resistance (such as ignoring prescribed rules and not complying with the McKinsey consultants' recommendations). Manifested as defeatism, betrayal and irony, this negative affect (Fleming, 2005; Kim *et al.*, 2009) was particularly visible in the second and third episodes of the ETI case.

IMPLICATIONS

This study provides new insight into the role of user cynicism as part of resistance in IT implementation. In this regard, its findings have specific implications for IS research on user resistance.

First, our research both confirms and extends the user resistance model proposed by Lapointe & Rivard (2005). We confirm how resistance behaviour typically is associated with perceived threats when users analyse the projected consequences of the implemented system (Lapointe & Rivard, 2005; Kim & Kankanhalli, 2009). However, our research also extends Lapointe and Rivard's model by incorporating the notion of user cynicism. We define user cynicism as cognitively distanced resistance that constitutes negative affect towards the IT implementation and manifests a perception of seeing through the espoused goals of the implementers. This notion is helpful for capturing sources of resistance behaviour that can not readily be typified as perceived threats. To provide a detailed basis for analysing such sources, we identify three dimensions of user cynicism in IT implementation: cognitive distance, negative affect and seeing through the espoused claims of management. We illustrate how the combination of enlightenment (Sloterdijk, 1987; Fleming, 2005) and negative affect towards the system advocates (Markus, 1983; Martinko *et al.*, 1996; Lapointe & Rivard, 2005) may trigger a distancing process that is unproductive for an implementation project. Importantly, however, our research also shows that user cynicism might be beneficial to the individual by providing a space where he or she can escape what he or she perceives as incompetent managerialism.

Second, the results of our study also break with conventional wisdom in the user resistance literature. Extant research typically characterises passive resistance as something constant over time (Marakas & Hornik, 1996; Prasad & Prasad, 2000; Contu, 2008). As evidenced in episode three, in particular, the recurring discredit of management not only slowed down the adoption process but also left management with few opportunities to correct mistakes and inconsistencies. Every attempt to improve the situation was met with more of the same: distancing in various forms. In other words, our research shows how cynicism, as a form of passive resistance, easily escalates and feeds new waves of resistance.

Third, we introduce a new body of literature to the IS community, in general, and the IS user resistance literature, in particular. To the best of our knowledge, the organisational cynicism literature (Dean *et al.*, 1998; Fleming & Spicer, 2003) has not been recognised in the IS literature. This is surprising since cynicism is not only pervasive in society but also exists at our workplaces. Given that large IT implementation projects can be lengthy and involve significant organisational change, such settings may epitomise the milieu where management vision may be met with cynicism as much as conventional resistance. In this regard, the research presented in this paper introduces a new promising reference theory to a field of research that historically has relied on such theories for grounding its research (e.g. technology acceptance). In the interest of yielding functional rather than dysfunctional outcomes of IT implementation efforts, this study shows that attempts to understand user resistance would usefully be complemented with a detailed appreciation of cynicism.

CONCLUSION

Although existing research has identified numerous sources and instantiations of resistance in IT implementation, the literature is surprisingly silent about cynicism as a form of resistance. To this end, this paper presents an initial attempt to address this gap in the literature by tracing how cynical user resistance emerges and by delivering new knowledge about an important passive form of user resistance in IT implementation. Apart from variance studies for testing the process account generated in this paper, our findings may encourage more research on user cynicism along two distinct but interrelated research directions. First, our findings suggest the need of more conceptual work that further develops the theoretical foundation for the study of user cynicism. Second, they suggest the need of applied research that seeks to develop design theories and heuristics that can help managers and implementers to mitigate user cynicism. It is likely that such research would seek to develop ways to empower users. Such empowerment could minimise users' needs to create resistance spaces as a means to support a sense of autonomy and dignity.

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