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Gauld, R., & Goldfinch, S. (2006). *Dangerous enthusiasms: E-government, computer failure and information system development*. Dunedin, New Zealand: Otago University Press (160 pp., \$39.95 softbound).

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Since two decades, many countries have launched e-government initiatives. This online provision of both information and services is seen as a necessary step to modernize administrative processes. The intended effect of e-government technology is to make government more efficient. Citizens and businesses are expected to access information and services faster, in a more personalized manner, and cheaper than before. The new technologies are expected to enable politicians and public administration to serve citizens better and would allow citizens to keep closer tabs on the performance and actions of their government. But moving government online is a complex challenge, especially with current information systems (ISs) becoming larger and more complex.

In *Dangerous Enthusiasms: E-Government, Computer Failure and Information System Development*, Robin Gauld and Shaun Goldfinch present four case studies of large-scale information and communications technology (ICT) projects in the New Zealand public sector. They describe how ICT projects seldom (if ever) deliver the financial and other benefits they promise. Their well-documented case studies chronicle a series of major failures, which leads them to conclude that “the processes involved in information system (IS) developments are not fully understood, that their complexity makes them difficult if not impossible to control, and that large IS developments are likely to fail” (p. 133). This book is valuable for its empirically grounded analysis of e-government failure and will appeal to practitioners, policy makers, and researchers involved or interested in e-government developments. *Dangerous Enthusiasms* provides worthwhile and engaging case studies and is interesting to read.

Although the book focuses on the New Zealand experience with e-government projects, it is a reflection of experiences all over the world. From the literature review in chapter 1, we learn that a U.S. survey by the Standish Group in 2001 found that the success rate of IS developments in government is 18%. More shocking is that this success rate depends on the total project budget involved: “At less than US\$750,000 the success rate was 55 per cent; with budgets over \$10 million, no project was successful” (p.11). As the authors point out, the larger the development, the more likely it will be unsuccessful. Even more recent at the Government U.K. IT Summit in May 2007, Joe Harley, the chief information officer of the Department for Work and Pensions, said that in the United Kingdom, 7 out of 10 government IT projects have failed.

Dangerous Enthusiasms describes four in-depth case studies of e-government and ICT failures in the New Zealand public sector. The detailed analyses are based on thousands of pages of documents, reports, correspondence, meeting minutes, and interviews. The first two empirical chapters examine failures in the health sector, particularly during the 1990s. In chapter 3, four consecutive health care structures are described. The chapter reviews the impact that a decade of health-sector restructuring and shifting policy preferences has had on health care information management and ICT development. Chapter 4 reports the failure of the Health Waikato project, which was abandoned after an investment of \$17 million. Gauld and Goldfinch argue that in public governance situations, with accountability shared between board and management, it is very difficult to determine who is responsible for failure. Chapter 5 describes how the Integrated National Crime Investigation System project failed to live up to its expectations. After a \$100 million investment, the project was abandoned. The authors bring home the magnitude of this project failure when they illustrate how the drain on the \$800 million police budget led to buildings not being maintained and fleets of cars not being upgraded for years. Finally, in chapter 6, the Landonline project is analyzed. Landonline is an

electronic database of land title and survey information, and it is the only described IS development that has actually been implemented. The system had a reasonably modest aim of converting manual processes to electronic ones and is considered to be a partial success. As with the other projects, the Landonline system experienced project overruns and overspending and was threatened with termination. An important observation by the authors is that even a premature termination of a project would be a costly affair, with in this case a cost estimation of \$15 million.

What precisely constitutes failure in e-government projects? Gauld and Goldfinch make a distinction between three types of failures. First, there is project failure, in which the project overruns the budget, is not delivered on time, or does not meet the agreed standards, providing fewer functions and features than originally specified. Then, there is system failure, in which the system does not work properly, including not performing as expected or not being operational at the specified time, consequently failing to deliver the expected (productivity) gains. Finally, the authors identify user failure. In this case—even when the system performs as the designers intend—it may not be used as intended or not used at all. There is user resistance because of recalcitrance, lack of training and ability, and the complexity of the new system. An important point that the authors make, based on their Landonline case, is that project and systems success does not automatically lead to user success.

It is difficult to pinpoint why IS developments fail. The authors refer to Heeks's "critical failure factors" as being a relatively promising checklist. The factors Heeks describes are data inadequacies; technical problems; management, process, and technical skill shortages; cultural clashes and political infighting; and external environmental factors (p. 14). Although the checklist provides a good starting point, there has been a lot of critique on the use of these factors by other writers.

Another issue that is given significant coverage by the authors is the explanation that IS failure has recently been seen as the problem of learning. Organizations fail to learn from external and internal sources because of information overload, a high turnover of skilled staff, embedded ways of thinking, and an inability to learn from previous failures. Gauld and Goldfinch observe that the "learning organization" literature is not very useful in explaining e-government IS failures because it focuses on IS within a firm or organization while government agencies are often dependent on external consultants to advice on IS developments and on large IT companies to develop and supply software and hardware.

But how is it possible that even though so few IT projects are successful, governments keep investing in new initiatives? To explain why large and ambitious projects continue to be initiated, Gauld and Goldfinch propose a model containing four "pathological enthusiasms": idolization, technophilia, lomanism, and managerial faddism. These are the dangerous enthusiasms to which the book owes its title. In the case of "idolization" or "technological infatuation," politicians and public officials get carried away with the excitement of the possibilities that new IS developments offer to transform the business of government completely. In all of the projects described in the book, there has been a vast overestimation about what can be achieved by ICT. In the case of technophilia by developers, the idea is that "the more technology, the better." In other words, new technology will be able to solve every existing (or imagined) problem. Lomanism describes the role of overly enthusiastic and dedicated salespeople who will do anything to flog their company's product. Governments that overall have little knowledge or capacity in IS development will be easy to convince by the rosy promises that IT companies make them and, as such, form an unusual responsive audience. Finally, there is what the authors call managerial faddism. This is the tendency for consultants and managers to embrace the idea that most problems can be fixed by improving management structures along the lines of a new managerial fad, with new IS projects often being a key element. The authors argue that the combination of these "Four Enthusiasms of IT Failure" undermines the attempts to curtail or abandon failing projects (p.19).

In the concluding chapter, Gauld and Goldfinch propose a list of definite *dos* if you want a large-scale project to fail. Going through this quite comical rundown of *must dos* that will guarantee

a full-blown fiasco, the listed blunders seem so obvious and self-evident that it is hard to believe that time and again governments commission these far too ambitious IS developments. But the “pathological enthusiasms” model the authors proposed in the first chapter suggests that large projects will continue to be initiated and will continue to fail. Although small, bottom-up public sector IS developments have a fair chance of succeeding, both history and the case studies in *Dangerous Enthusiasms* show that because of their inherent complexity, the heterogeneous population of stakeholders and users, and the unrealistic and uncurbed enthusiasm of different actors involved, large projects almost always fail (p. 133). Therefore, the authors advise that pessimism should be the guiding principle in IS developments.

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