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Abstract

This paper examines Markus’ (1983) paper, using literature from the sociological and philosophical disciplines to provide an updated view of power and its influence on politics and Information Systems (IS). Using these different literature sources, which are becoming more accepted in the IS discipline, provides a richer understanding of power and politics in Information Systems. An alternative research methodology, critical ethnography, has also been described in the context of Markus’ study and a case study has been provided which adopts this alternate approach.

Keywords

Power, politics, information systems, management information systems, organisations, Markus

INTRODUCTION

Markus (1983) developed an influential paper, *Power, Politics, and MIS Implementation*, which highlights social issues in Information Systems. The web version of the Social Science Citation Index shows that “over 200 other published studies have cited Markus’ classic paper since 1993 (the earliest year covered by the web version of SSCI)” (Lee, Myers, Paré, Urquhart and Markus, 2000: 724). Furthermore, its universal appeal is evident in its being regarded as an exemplar of not only positivist research (Lee, 1989), but also interpretive research (Walsham, 1993) (Lee, Myers, Paré, Urquhart and Markus, 2000).

In her paper, Markus (1983) discusses the social aspects of Information Systems, and particularly Management Information Systems (MIS). Since then, the social side of information systems has become predominant in IS research (for example, Ngwenyama and Lee, 1997; Romm and Pliskin, 1999; Trauth and O’Connor, 1991; Daft and Lengel, 1986). According to Romm and Pliskin (1999: 28), Markus’ (1983) “pioneering research has not only provided us with a definition of power and politics in the IT context, but also with a theoretical framework that can be applied to new and emerging technologies.” Markus (1983) highlights the issue of power and organisational politics in IS, looking specifically at MIS implementation. It should be noted however, that power and organisational politics are not applicable only to MIS implementation; power and organisational politics is evident in Information Systems as a whole, including Romm and Pliskin’s (1999) study of the petty email tyrant; and Ngwenyama and Lee’s (1997) study of the use of email in the organisational communication.

However, Markus (1983) does not offer a rich discussion on power in information systems or MIS implementation. Markus’ paper deals only with the obvious – an interpretive or positivist view about the role of influence and politics and agendas within organisations dealing with information systems. More recently Myers and Young (1997) describe the role of hidden agendas in the systems context within organisations in New Zealand. Again the approach is positivist. In line with calls by Myers (1997) to take a more critical stance, there is a need to extend the analysis into the realm of power.

Using Kling (1980) as the theoretical base for her paper, Markus (1983) defines three major categories of resistance to diffusion: people-determined, system-determined and interactionalist. Markus focused her argument on a variant of the interaction theory, the political aspect of, and resistance towards IS and MIS implementation (Romm and Pliskin, 1999; Myers and Young, 1997). Resistance is defined, according to Markus (1983: 432) as “a product of the interaction of system design features with the intra-organisational distribution of power, defined either objectively, in terms of horizontal or vertical power dimensions, or subjectively, in terms of symbolism.” That is, potential users would resist information systems if “they cause a re-distribution of power that either conflicts with the organisational structure (objective definition) or with the interests of individuals who are likely to lose power as a result of the implementation (subjective definition)” (Romm and Pliskin, 1999: 28). Markus (1983) provides a somewhat limited and simplistic approach on power in information systems and
MIS implementation. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to take a broader look at power, politics and the IS domain, using Markus (1983) as a base. The objective of this paper is to introduce literature from the sociological and philosophical disciplines in regards to the power and politics involved in information systems and MIS implementation.

THE NATURE OF POWER

Markus (1983) introduces the term power in the title of her influential paper. However, she does not provide rich detail, definition or discussion of the term. The aim of this section is to introduce the theme of power offering multiple perspectives before discussing the relevance of Foucault’s work and its implication for IS research.

The term ‘power’ is used everyday in standard conversation. However, as Parsons (1963: 232) points out, there is a “notable lack of agreement both about its specific definition, and about many features of the conceptual context in which it should be placed.” It is not only Parsons (1963) that reflects on the lack of agreement on the definition of power, as authors such as Galbraith (1984) and Pfeffer (1981) also highlight this issue. What further complicates this issue is, as Galbraith (1984: 1) states, “the reader or listener is assumed to know what it [power] means.”

Nearly every author that writes about power has his or her own definition (Russell, 1975; Weber, 1978; Dahl, 1968; Arendt, 1969; Habermas, 1977; Parsons 1963; Galbraith, 1984; Foucault, 1976). There are however, commonalities between some definitions. According to Dahl (1957: 202) “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do.” Here Dahl (1957) is referring to power as the controlling of someone else’s behaviour and/or actions. This view is shared by Russell (1975: 25), who argues “power over human beings may be classified by the manner of influencing individuals.” However, Russell (1975) describes how individuals may influence or be influenced via the use of power. These methods are:

- direct physical power over an opponent’s body – which refers to physical damage via the use of a weapon to get their way;
- by rewards and punishments as inducements – the use of incentives, such as monetary reward or punishment by removing privileges; and
- by influence on opinion – the use of propaganda to modify an opponent’s mindset.

Whatever the definition of power, one element is constant. Some people have power and some people do not. In other words, rather than focusing on a specific definition of power, we should examine power relations. For example, according to the French philosopher Michel Foucault, the simple, hierarchical approach to power is rejected, because power is not a unitary concept, nor an absolute.

Foucault (1978: 94) claims that “power comes from below; that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix.” Rather than power being an absolute term and concept, Foucault's notion of power is in the form of power relations. In one of his later works, Foucault (1982: 220) delves further into the concept of power relations offering that “what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act immediately and directly on others. Instead it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or future.”

People do not ‘have’ power implicitly. Rather, power is a technique or action that individuals can engage in. Power is not possessed, it is exercised. Essentially, ‘Power is’. Power is existential. Power creates and is created by organisational attributes, social or cultural attributes and individual attributes. A power relation occurs where there is the potentiality for resistance, that is to say it only arises between two individuals each of whom has the potential to influence the actions of the other and to present resistance to this influence. As Foucault (1978: 95) suggests, “where there is power, there is resistance.”

We are not born with power, but we may (or may not for that matter) come into power at some stage in our lives. Foucault (1978: 94) confirms this by stating, “power is not something that is acquired, seized or shared, something that one holds onto or allows to slip away.” These power relations are not static, but dynamic, transforming and constantly changing (McNay, 1994). Foucault claims that power is transformable, that we may have power at one point in our life and then at another point in our life have no power. Foucault (1978: 93) states that power “is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.”

One strong relation that Foucault associates with power is that of knowledge. According to Foucault (1977: 27), “power produces knowledge…power and knowledge directly imply one another…there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and
constitute at the same time power relations.” A loose analogy is that of a superiority complex. When one person has more knowledge in one area than someone else, they will feel superior and more ‘powerful’ than the other person because they have the upper hand and more knowledge about that particular subject (which could transform and shift at another point in time). How does power relate to knowledge? Foucault (1978: 100) suggests that: “It is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together. And for this very reason, we must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable. We must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies.”

Discourses are, “about what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority” (Ball, 1990: 17). Foucault (1977: 49) further elaborates, stating that discourses are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak…Discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention.” Discourses represent meaning and social relationships; they form both subjectivity and power relations. Using an analogy in academia, once completing a PhD, the student becomes a leading authority on their topic. They have developed and created knowledge in a specific area and people will turn to them when they want advice on matters that deal with that area. In other words, they have power over people who do not have knowledge in that area.

But power is not limited to existence. It is also related to leadership and acceptance (Corbitt and Thanasankit 2002). Hegemony, like power, is. Hegemony too is existential, created by previous experiences, and influenced by current experiences. Power relations and hegemony, due to their existential nature are dynamic, transforming and constantly changing. We create our ideologies, hegemony, discourses and power relations at the same time we are created by them – similar to Giddens’ view of society under Structuration Theory (1984).

McNay (1994: 101) criticises Foucault because in Foucault’s writing, “power relations are only examined from the perspective of how they are installed in institutions and not considered from the point of view of those subject to power.” McNay claims that Foucault is only discussing power from one point-of-view, the institution. To provide a balanced discussion, McNay believes that Foucault needs to consider the power relation of those subject to over-riding power, the less powerful, to see how they succumb the more powerful.

Corbitt (1997) extended the organisational role of power in systems implementation through seeing power develop in social dramas within the organisation. This research argued that a social drama is essentially a power play, or an attempt to gain a fundamental ideological shift, his exploration of what power is or how it is expressed is limited. To strengthen the analytical value of social dramas, it was argued that more refinement of the role of power is needed. Power may be exercised in a number of ways including decision making, agenda setting and in the shaping of felt needs. In the policy process, power can be exercised through misinformation. The communication of ideologies and arguments can be distorted in the policy process by the use of ambiguity, deceit, insincerity, misinterpretation, confusion, unresponsiveness, withholding information, manipulation, lack of accountability, mystification and complexity, and misrepresentation of the policy (Forester, 1989). Forester (1989: 45) sees power as political communication and concludes that: “power works through the management of competence, or obfuscation; of trust, or false assurance; of consent, or manipulated agreement; and of knowledge or misrepresentation. Each of the three modes of power works in this way, either to thwart articulate democratic participation and encourage positivity, or to encourage articulate political action and the rationalisation of a democratic planning (policy) process.”

Forester (1989), following the argument of Foucault (1972; 1979; 1981), argues that these three modes of power derive their effectiveness from differential levels of knowledge existing in society. Foucault (1977: 66) argues that power is inseparable from knowledge and that since knowledge requires records and a system of communication, it in itself is a form of power: “Power and knowledge directly imply one another. There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. These ‘power-knowledge relations’ are to be analysed, therefore, not on the basis of a subject of knowledge who is or is not free in relation to the power system, but, on the contrary, the subject who knows, the objects to be known and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge and their historical transformations.”

Foucault (1977) argues that power is established and maintained not by overt legisaltic control but, rather, by subtle forms of discipline. Disciplinary instruments of hierarchical observation, normalising and examinations are used. These serve to identify deviation from the norm or are overtly used for individuals “to become part of the ‘web of control’ of the state bureaucracy” (Kenway, 1990: 175). In the following case study the participants did display deliberate attempts at control, coercion and power within the social dramas of the Students at Risk Homelessness Project. Hatcher and Troyna (1994: 167) argue that “struggles over policy take place on a terrain
already structured by power and above all by the power of the state” or in this context an organisation and/or of ownership or governance structures. Criticising Foucault, who Hatcher and Troyna argue underplays the coercive dimension of power of the state, they suggest that the state, and we would argue here the organisation, often uses force in policy implementation. The role of the organisation in systems implementation is accepted both as an influential parameter and as an influence affected by the recontextualisation of the situation of the information system in its organisational context (Corbitt, 1997). It is an apparent simplification of what Foucault says to suggest that the organisation has no power. Rather, Foucault (1978) suggests that power is constituted by social relations and that when such a social relationship is created, the relationship can be challenged and/or modified. Social relationships he argues, not only exist as attraction but also generate resistance. Extrapolated into the realm of information systems implementation we would propose that within an organisation actors are both empowered and disempowered and that it is by studying the immediate, the personal and the ordinary that allow the various levels of resistance, empowerment and disempowerment to be recognised in the systems implementation process.

PUTTING THE ‘POWER’ INTO POWER, POLITICS AND MIS IMPLEMENTATION – A METHODOLOGY

As mentioned previously, the Markus (1983) study has been classified as both positivist and interpretive. This paper proposes a different research approach; a critical approach. Such an approach needs to be adopted for such a study because, according to Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991: 19), the critical researcher attempts to “critically evaluate and transform the social reality under investigation.” That is, the critical researcher is “concerned with critiquing existing social systems and revealing any contradictions and conflicts that may adhere within their structures” (Bernstein 1978: 181). A critical researcher creates awareness and understanding of the various forms of social domination, ultimately, so that people can act to eliminate them. The critical researcher investigates the political environment of their study.

Unlike the positivist approach to Information Systems research, the critical approach observes people “not as passive receptacles of whatever data or information that is transported to them, but as intelligent actors who assess the truthfulness, completeness, sincerity, and contextuality of the messages they receive” (Ngwenyama and Lee, 1997: 153). The critical approach also differs with the interpretive approach as the critical approach “requires the researcher to attend to not only the matter of mutual understanding, but also the matter of the emancipation of organisational actors from false or unwarranted beliefs, assumptions and constraints” (Ngwenyama and Lee, 1997: 153-154).

Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991: 19) further add that in critical research “social reality is understood to be produced and reproduced by humans, but also as possessing objective properties which tend to dominate human experience...the critical research philosophy emphasises the processual development of phenomena. Social relations are not posited as stable and orderly, but as constantly undergoing change.” This fits the perspective of the current study and similarly to the perspective of Foucault. That is, power, and power relations, constantly change and are not static. One cannot expect power relations to remain stable, as different occasions call for different decisions, different informants or participants. The power relations will depend on these different occasions as some participants will have knowledge in some areas and capitalise on their strengths, showing their power. If we equate that knowledge equals power, then there are going to be occasions where some participants have lots of knowledge in a specific area, and others do not. However, this will change in the next instance as a new decision will require different knowledge, and that knowledge is possessed by someone else. That someone else now has the power.

In this paper we apply the principles about power exposed above to a case study of implementation. This case study relates to an ethnographic study of an organisation implementing an information policy and traces the story over a 12 months period (Corbitt 1997). This is useful because it parallels the original Markus (1983) study but take s a critical rather than interpretative/positivist approach and exposes the realities of power.

Creswell (1994: 11) defines ethnography by stating that, the researcher “studies an intact cultural group in a natural setting during a prolonged period of time by collecting, primarily, observational data.” This statement is also supported by Leedy (1997) who notes that the ethnographic method focuses itself on “discovering cultural patterns in human behaviour; describing the perspective of members of the culture; & studying the natural settings in which culture is manifested” (Gall et al., cited in Leedy, 1997: 159).

Two important features of ethnography include critical hermeneutics and critical ethnography. The former, critical hermeneutics, is important to the understanding of the latter, critical ethnography, and is explained as an integrative philosophical approach, combining interpretive and critical elements (Myers, 1997). A definition of hermeneutics can be found in papers by Myers (1997) and Klein and Myers (1999), and states that it is the “science of interpretation, concerned with analysis of the meaning of text or text-analogue” (Myers, 1997: 283).
Therefore, the researcher creates the context through another form of text, which can then, in itself, be critically analysed, so that the meaning creation can be understood from an interpretive perspective.

The hermeneutic process usually continues until the apparent contradictions and conflicts in the organisation make sense via the collection and recollection of information, because as the more information the researcher gathers, the better they understand the organisation as a whole and its components. The critical hermeneutics also recognise that the pre-judgement or prior knowledge of the researcher plays an important part in their understanding of the organisational context, and they must distinguish between the “true prejudices, by which we understand, from the false ones by which we misunderstand” (Gadamer, 1976). By using critical hermeneutics, a better understanding of critical ethnography can be created. “Critical ethnographers describe, analyse, and open to scrutiny otherwise hidden agendas, power centres, and assumptions that inhibit, repress, and constrain. Critical scholarship requires that commonsense assumptions be questioned” (Thomas, 1993, cited in Myers, 1997: 287). The analysis moves beyond the direct account of the subjects to the broader processes within which the accounts are implanted.

As power is an abstract term, measuring and analysing power is something that cannot be easily done via a psychological measuring scale or other easily identifiable characteristics. Instead, power needs to be observed in the environment in which all actors operate. Observations according to Yin (1994) are often useful in providing information about the topic being studied. Particularly, “observations of the technology at work are invaluable aids to any further understanding of the limits or problems with the technology” (Yin, 1994: 87). Employing an ethnographic approach with observations as the main data collection method, can contribute to the understanding and analysing of power, in its natural setting, removing any unnecessary bias an experimental approach may create. Observations can be based on: seating positions (if power clusters are seated together, or if people have positional advantages – sitting in the “best” seats), posture (leaning forward over a desk as opposed to sitting back and just “going with the flow”), communication (how people communicate with each other, such as being up front, blunt and curt) and facial expressions (rolling of the eyes). By performing organisational observations, the researchers will be able to gain richer insights into MIS implementation in terms of the creation and transformation of power relations.

Face-to-face interviews were used in conjunction with organisational observations to obtain participants views and opinions. This method has been selected because, according to Daft and Lengel’s (1986: 560) information richness theory, it is the “richest medium because it provides immediate feedback so that interpretation can be checked. It also provides multiple cues via body language and tone of voice.”

The collection of documents including letters, personnel files, memos, annual reports and objects such as posters was used to supplement the other information collection methods. Collecting the aforementioned documentation will help the researcher in obtaining information on how power relations are created or transformed “behind the scenes” of the implementation group. Obtaining access to documents such as email will help the researcher create a richer picture of the MIS implementation group and how they operate. This may also provide information on how coalitions may be formed before the actual meeting, again indicating the power relations that may appear in the group that will be observed.

The following case study used a reiterative analytical technique of taking the literature review, the conceptual framework and the ideological preconceptions of the researcher and applying it to the data collected. Judgements were made on the data and referrals made to the literature review to substantiate the researcher’s personal judgements. Such a technique is termed ‘hermeneutics’. Hermeneutics is primarily concerned with the meaning of text. According to Myers (1997) and Klein and Myers (1999), the basic question is: what is the meaning of text? They, like Gadamer (1976) claim that the hermeneutic cycle helps us in the understanding of the text as a whole and the interpretation of its part, in which descriptions are guided by anticipated explanations. Text is interpreted based on iterations of the researchers own experience and existing literature and research. These interpretations are used to make judgements about text, creating further reiterations and interpretations of that text until conclusions or theorising suggests further reinterpretation.

Using the data collected, the data was initially coded into as many categories as possible focusing on the “events” as the appropriate unit of analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 1989; Creswell, 1994; Leedy, 1997). The researcher’s then “organised, arranged and chronologically ordered the data searching for recurring themes or patterns that represented the participants’ perspective. As a result, the researchers put forth a set of relational assertions about the culture using the language and terminology of the participants” (Leedy, 1997: 160).

**SYSTEMS IMPLEMENTATION CASE STUDY**

This study was concerned with the implementation of an information system policy within a large bureaucratic organisation with eight sub parts, each of which was required to digest and implement the IS policy. The
organisation was involved with the provision of services and support to a very large client base (Corbitt, 1997). Over the 12-month implementation period the researcher, who was also a participant in the process, attended a steering committee responsible for the systems policy implementation. What happened was extremely complex to describe and to unravel and make sense of. However key emergent themes related to power became apparent and are reported here as a basis for extending the utility of the Markus paper.

The study describes how the systems implementation policy worked. Complexity, messiness, inconsistencies, ambiguities, and dilemmas were revealed within the multiple levels of systems implementation policy formulation and reformulation - the organisation, the Steering Committee, the organisational subgroups and the individuals. In attempting to relate a structural concept, social dramas, to the description of policy implementation, this study has revealed some clearer understanding of the process in relation to the power of the organisation when it challenges or is challenged by the power of subgroups and individuals as social relations between participants were constructed, challenged, and broken down. At the same time, "big picture' discourse became evident not in isolation from information systems policy implementation but in relation to it. The constraints of other policies, such as strategic planning, economic policy, government requirements and policy and business practice policy, became evident as they distracted attention and action away from the original purposes of the systems implementation policy. The 'bigger picture' concerned implementation of business strategies, subjugating assistance for systems implementation. Subgroup members were expected to accept the importance of the 'bigger' policy. The subgroup members openly supported the strategic business policy and actively participated in its implementation. However, these same members contested, and publicly opposed, the strict relevance of systems implementation policy to the strategic policy and it was driving a different agenda at an operational rather than strategic level within the organisation.

The systems implementation policy was encoded in complex ways. There was struggle over directives and demands by the organisation. There was struggle over issues created by various and changing interpretations of the policy throughout implementation. There was a plurality of interpretations of the policy, resulting in debate about what the policy should address. Compromises were reached about some issues, whilst others remained unresolved. Ultimately, policy implementation resulted in 'schism' between the organisation and the subgroup level participants. Despite this, policy continued to be implemented. This situation, we would argue, supports a view that the organisation does have the power to enforce implementation. However, there is also considerable evidence that the subgroup members attempted to subjugate the power of the state at their level by altering and reconstructing the policy in practice. Whilst Hatcher and Troyka (1994: 163) argue that "the [organisation] can impose (an interpretation) at the level of practice", they neglect, we believe, to consider the policy in practice. Their argument ignores the situation, where there is no substantial match between the rhetoric of the policy and practice within the subgroups of an organisation. Both the ability of the organisation to impose interpretation of policy and the ability of subgroup members to challenge, reconstruct and reinterpret policy, we would suggest, can exist simultaneously.

Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992: 113) suggest that power is “circumscribed by the contextual features of institutions [subgroups], over which the organisation may find that control is both problematic and contradictory” and that power is derived by the recontextualising of policy within schools. Hatcher and Troyka (1994) contest that view. They suggest that the whole organisation has greater control of outcomes than suggested by Bowe, Ball and Gold. The evidence which has emerged from this study of systems implementation policy suggests that the subgroup members were certainly able to exercise considerable power in interpreting the policy, and significantly affected how the policy was implemented in the specific, micro-context of their sub-section of the organisation. The policy was changed but little change resulted in each subgroup’s programs. However, the organisation was still able to ensure that the systems implementation policy was implemented and that this implementation was within the broader context of ensuring that ideological objectives of corporate strategy were achieved. The analysis also demonstrated that power, or its subjugation by one party, in policy implementation cannot be represented as a homogeneous phenomenon. The power of the organisation, relative to the power of subgroup members, fluctuated. No real evidence emerged that the continual recontextualisation of the policy by the subgroup members produced continual subjugation of the power of the organisation. Rather, power and its importance throughout implementation was more episodic. The analysis showed that, at times, the power of the organisation was subjugated by the subgroup members. The organisation’s bureaucracy reacted and produced new forms of power and made new attempts to coerce the subgroup members. In some instances compromises were reached. In other instances, the new attempts to coerce and control were challenged and themselves subjugated. No evidence emerged to suggest that at any stage in policy implementation did the subgroup members submit to the coercion of the organisation. The power of the subgroup leaders, whilst initially established in existing corporate policy, has become institutionalised through practice and confirmed by social acceptance in the sub-sections of the organisation. This social acceptance lies beyond the power of the organisation. It has its roots, we believe, in operational justification, social prestige associated with the position, and in accepted practice in the sub-sections.
The analysis shows how the bureaucracy attempted to change policy by imposition of particular beliefs and values when attempts at persuasion and political strategy had failed. Despite the use of various and changing alternative policy implementation instruments and legalistic attempts to impose change, the subgroup members were able to protect their own programs from radical manipulation. In essence, the subgroup leaders used their own legitimate power to contest demands for change, whilst accepting some directives with compromise as a means of getting funding. Their defensive stubbornness, use of purposeful delay and their persistent contesting of all directives ensured that their programs were protected. In essence, the actions of the subgroup leaders were both illustrative of 'contained' and 'disruptive' strategies in response to policy imposition in systems implementation. Within the institution, subgroup leaders were able to challenge and contest organisational interpretations of policy. At the micro-political level, using power derived from other policies and regulations, the subgroup leaders challenged the authority of organisation’s directives by recontextualising the policy and adapting it to their individual contexts. The inability of the organisation to prevent this happening in implementation of this systems implementation project, despite the use of various interventions, suggests that the power of the organisation was subjugated, at least at times throughout implementation.

DISCUSSION

Markus (1983) argued that resistance in MIS implementation was either people-determined or system-determined. However, Markus also extended that argument and focused hers on a variant of interaction theory, which suggested that there was a political aspect of, and resistance towards IS and MIS implementation (Romm and Pliskin, 1999; Myers and Young, 1997). Resistance is defined, according to Markus (1983: 432) as “a product of the interaction of system design features with the intra-organisational distribution of power, defined either objectively, in terms of horizontal or vertical power dimensions, or subjectively, in terms of symbolism”. Markus suggests, we believe, that potential users would resist information systems if “they cause a re-distribution of power that either conflicts with the organisational structure (objective definition) or with the interests of individuals who are likely to lose power as a result of the implementation (subjective definition)” (Markus, 1983: 432).

The case study on systems implementation policy reported in this paper argues that power is more diffuse and non-systematic than Markus had argued. Power within organisation in systems implementation results from and creates subjugation of one group to another. It is people-influenced rather than people-determined. Determinism suggests that the power exists as some quantifiable whole and is ingrained and objective. Power in reality is subjective. It is, and is becoming, rather than exists unmoved or unchanged. Power changes and is changed. It forms and reforms as the context in which it is created or displayed and is recontextualised by the actors operating within it. The subgroup leaders in the organisation described gained their ability to resist from reputation gained and respect imbued in their legitimate power. Power was enacted by subterfuge, containment, disruption, challenge and radical action. Power was not static but dynamic and enforced through challenge rather than hierarchy or organisational structure, as the more interpretive/positivist paper of Markus in 1983.

What then have we added to the Markus paper? This paper challenged the limitations of that paper and suggested how those limitations might be met with a different approach and the acceptance of a more detailed appraisal of power relationships. This paper has then challenged Markus’ perception of power being determined and argues that it is created and reformed rather than determined by any set of factors. Thus this paper enriches our understanding of the reality and role of power in IS implementation in organisations. This paper enables a better understanding of the role of power in policy and politics within an organisation by taking an enlightened perspective of power in information systems. Finally this paper improves our ontological and epistemological understanding of the role of power in systems implementation and engages the reader and researcher in appreciating the richness and complexity of the role of power and power relationships. The Markus (1983) paper was a landmark in IS publishing and remains so. We have enriched its worth and challenged the importance of extending meaning and utility, noting that power fundamentally impacts on systems implementation and drives organisational attitudes towards systems acceptance.

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