



# Make Kitsch the Enemy: The “Monstrous Carbuncle” of the UK’s Vetting and Barring Scheme

David Wastell, Sue White

## ► To cite this version:

David Wastell, Sue White. Make Kitsch the Enemy: The “Monstrous Carbuncle” of the UK’s Vetting and Barring Scheme. Governance and Sustainability in Information Systems: Managing the Transfer and Diffusion of IT (Working conference), Sep 2011, Hamburg, Germany. pp.105-118, 10.1007/978-3-642-24148-2\_7. hal-01571744

**HAL Id: hal-01571744**

**<https://inria.hal.science/hal-01571744>**

Submitted on 3 Aug 2017

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

# Make kitsch the enemy: the “monstrous carbuncle” of the UK’s vetting and barring scheme

David Wastell

Nottingham University Business School, Nottingham, UK  
+44 (0) 7810522749  
david.wastell@nottingham.ac.uk

Sue White

School of Social Policy, Institute of Applied Social Studies, University of Birmingham, UK  
+44 (0) 7974196716  
s.white.3@bham.ac.uk

**Abstract.** In architecture, the primacy of function over form was one of the core tenets of the Bauhaus School of Design. In Information Systems, function is critical, yet so many systems fail to deliver hoped for benefits. Badly designed, acquired imitatively for their symbolic, magical power, they represent a form of kitsch. To illustrate this, we describe a major national IS initiative in the UK, the Vetting and Barring Scheme (VBS). Set up to ensure that only “suitable” adults would ever work with children and vulnerable adults, the Scheme became subject to increasing criticism for its intrusiveness and illiberality, and was suspended at the point of implementation in 2010. Here we expose the kitsch-ness of the Scheme as a meretricious imitation of the sort of diagnostic test used in medicine. We show how its inevitable dysfunctions outweighed its hypothetical benefits, which were largely magical and symbolic in nature. That the VBS attracted such little critical comment from IS scholars is significant, suggesting two biases (pro-business and pro-technology) in IS research which should be put right. We argue that kitsch can be combatted by practising design along principles akin to those of the Bauhaus. Our field can contribute to this, but our infatuation with theory, in itself a form of kitsch science, stands in the way of a closer relationship with practice.

**Keywords:** Design, kitsch, public services, Bauhaus, information systems, magic

## 1 PRELUDE: FROM BAUHAUS TO OUR HOUSE

*In great design, form and function come together seamlessly. Every part contributes to the whole in a way that seems inevitable. So too in a great system. Hence I’ve coined the term beautiful system (Peters, 2005, p. 54)*

Peters is right, aesthetics is more than a simple question of appearances: the well-designed artefact is a pleasure to use, be it high-tech or mundane. What matters is fitness-for-purpose, of form following function. In a cautionary tale, Norman gives the example of a friend, trapped in a set of swinging doors in a Boston hotel (Norman, 1998). Designed for visual appeal, with no visible pillars or hinges, his friend was pushing against the hinge: “Pretty doors. Elegant. Probably won a design prize”, the friend comments ruefully. The primacy of function in design, though hardly a new idea, was most notably espoused in modern times by the Bauhaus design school, especially under the leadership of its second director, Hannes Meyer (1928-30): “They rejected art... art is composition, but since building [is] only means to an end, building could never be an art form” (Droste, 2010, p. 69). Meyer’s functional design philosophy is well reflected in the following quotation (van Leeuwen, 2005, p.71):

*1. sex life, 2. sleeping habits, 3. pets, 4. gardening, 5. personal hygiene, 6. weather protection, 7. hygiene in the home, 8. car maintenance, 9. cooking, 10. heating, 11. exposure to the sun, 12. services - these are the only motives when building a house. We examine the daily routine of everyone who lives in the house and this gives us the functional diagram - the functional diagram and the economic programme are the determining principles of the building project.*

As le Corbusier famously said, the house as “machine for living”. Functionalism prospered in the Bauhaus and its influence on architecture has been profound, remarkably so for a small school which flourished for but a flash of time. Architectural functionalism has many critics, not least the novelist and acerbic essayist Tom Wolfe (Wolfe, 1981). Most would now agree that aesthetics, in the conventional sense of beauty, is important for buildings; they should be pleasing to the eye, not carbuncular! But for information systems, function is all, an anti-aesthetic if you like. What then does the record say, how well have we done in our house? Not so well, it would seem from the high rate of failure which continues to bedevil attempts to develop and deploy IT-based systems in organizations (Wastell, 2011). The problem is a chronic one. Writing 25 years ago, Reinermann (1986) comments on the widespread of “dissatisfaction with EDP<sup>1</sup> infrastructure” prevalent at the time. Interestingly, he goes on to proselytize the application of Bauhaus concepts to the design of information systems to redress this disquiet. He notes several “positive associations” between IS design and Bauhaus philosophy, singling out the following Bauhauser precepts as particularly relevant: a positive orientation to “modern technology”; the paramount emphasis on “user needs” and functionalism; concern with the “entirety of design”, i.e. the need for all elements to fit together in “the great building”; the striving for standardization of modules and products; and finally, the need for designers to be equipped with “solid knowledge of modern technologies... only architects and designers who really know about the properties of materials and production methods are able to utilize their full potential”.

Regarding functionalism, it is worth quoting Reinermann (with a little paraphrase) at length:

---

<sup>1</sup> Electronic Data Processing, in the terminology of yesteryear.

*The Bauhaus favoured a grassroots approach: having new materials and production methods at our disposal, isn't there a different way to fulfill the functions of a product? “Form without ornament”, “form follows function”, no more “Kitsch for the rich”, those were typical Bauhaus phrases. They led to courageous, resolute, sometimes radical approaches to new designs... [T]he analogy to information systems is obvious. Very often we have put administrative procedures on the computer as they had been carried out traditionally... It is probably not too wrong to compare today's information systems to the time when gasoline engines were “added” to stage coaches....(ibid, p.75)*

Kitsch for the rich is an apt phrase indeed, given the vast expenditure made by organizations on IT systems which so often fail to deliver. In thinking about IS design, the idea of kitsch will be explored further in this paper. Although, the term was originally used in connection with art, to distinguish between mass-produced imitations and original works of great quality, nowadays we use it to refer to anything second-rate and tasteless, the tacky stuff of gift shops and the like. But kitsch is not confined to the gift shop; it is ubiquitous. Launer (2008) talks for instance about medical kitsch, using the example of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT). He notes CBT’s popularity with politicians as a cheap, quick fix for depression, and the public benefit it thereby confers in reducing unemployment and social security bills (Launer, 2008). Launer characterizes kitsch as “the mindless confusion of what is banal, glossy, easy to produce and cheap, with what is complex, subtle, painstaking and unique” (p. 111). The idea that a short course of treatment given by people with minimal training can yield long-term transformation of people’s lives is pure kitsch. But it is difficult to resist, in giving us what we want in a simple prescription; who could be against it?

A well-designed Information System should inspire admiration and delight, but so often they don’t, and as we have noted, the literature abounds with “atrocious stories” of design calamities. In this paper, we will explore the recent failure of a major national IS initiative in the UK, namely the Vetting and Barring Scheme (VBS). We have two aims in mind in telling this particular tale. The first is to explore the idea of kitsch and its remedies. The second is to provoke a little reflexive thought within the IS “discipline” itself, in particular on its proper object of study. Although the VBS is an information system and a consequential one to boot, it has received no critique from IS scholars, outside some cursory comments by ourselves. This omission suggests a serious “attentional disorder” within our research community, a form of techno-myopia, which we will briefly reflect on, considering how it might be redressed through a broadening of the research agenda and an eschewal of what we shall call “kitsch science”.

## **2 THE FIASCO OF THE VETTING AND BARRING SCHEME**

*Madame Sosotris, famous clairvoyante,  
With a wicked pack of cards. Here, said she,*

*Is your card, the drowned Phoenician sailor.*  
*T.S. Eliot, The Wasteland*

## 2.1 The rise and fall of the VBS

Those of us in the UK will remember the Soham murders only too well, but we will begin with a brief recapitulation of the case. In August 2002, two ten-year-old girls, Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman, were drawn into the home of Ian Huntley, in the village of Soham (Cambridgeshire). We do not know why, but they may have thought his girlfriend, Maxine Carr (a teaching assistant in Holly and Jessica's class at primary school) was inside, but she was not and the children were brutally killed. The reasons for the murder have never been established, though sexual motives were implied at the trial. That Huntley was a caretaker at Soham Village College (located adjacently to the victims' school) caused public disquiet; it appeared he had been investigated in another part of the country (Humberside) for sexual offences involving girls under the age of consent, but this information had not emerged during the police vetting check when Huntley was appointed as caretaker.

In December 2003, a public enquiry was instigated led by Sir Michael Bichard to investigate the apparent failings of record keeping, vetting practices and information sharing that had occurred, and to make policy recommendations accordingly. Central to Bichard's recommendations was the setting up of a single, central body, with exclusive responsibility for administering the registration of all those wishing to work with children or vulnerable adults. A period of public consultation began on what became known as the Vetting and Barring Scheme (VBS) to be operated by an Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA). Crucially this new body had the power to bar as well as vet. In a glossy document, published in March 2010, the key features of the Scheme are trumpeted as follows:

*The Scheme aims to protect children and vulnerable adults by ensuring that people who are judged to present a risk of harm are not allowed to work with them. In the past, barring decisions have been taken by Ministers and civil servants. They are now made by an independent body of experts, the Independent Safeguarding Authority, and follow a clear and structured judgment process, which is about assessing the risk of future harm based on the information that is known about the individual (Home Office, 2010, p. 6).*

The quote brings out a critical aspiration of the new scheme; the phrase "risk of future harm" implies the ability to predict. The concept of "future harm" is invoked on 22 further occasions throughout the 73 pages of the document, in three basic guises, as something posed assessed or reduced. Yet nowhere is it defined or operationalized. What risk? What harm? The document itself has a strong kitschy quality in terms of its visual presentation, full of glossy images, generally of smiling, contented folk, "vulnerable people" in hospitals and schools, now made safe by the Scheme. This has the immediate smack of the "political kitsch" we readily associate with communist regimes: of May-day parades, simple slogans, sentimental images of happy workers in a workers' paradise, political party posters evoking idyllic folkloric scenes (Božilović, 2007). Lugg (1998, p. 4) speaks of kitsch as a powerful political

construction: “designed to colonise the receiver’s consciousness. As such Kitsch is the beautiful lie. It reassures and comforts the receiver ... through readily understood symbolism”. There are 25 such images in the main body of the document, some taking up a full page; a collage of three is shown in figure 1. Reading the crude semiotics of such visual propaganda, surely no-one can be in any doubt that the Scheme will work!

Announcing the Scheme in April 2008, Sir Roger Singleton (ISA’s Chairman) said: “The Independent Safeguarding Authority will provide a ground-breaking vetting and barring service... allow[ing] us to ensure an improved level of safeguarding as well the development of better information sharing systems.” Despite such worthy claims, the inception of the scheme in October 2009 was greeted with dismay on many sides given its scale and range. Over 11 million people would be covered, and it seemed that relatively minor contact with children in a voluntary capacity would require registration (e.g. parents helping with lifts to school sports events) and anyone seeking formal employment would also have to pay a significant fee. Crucially, soft data (e.g. evidence of drug misuse reported to social services) as well as hard data (criminal convictions) would be gathered. School leaders in particular were worried that the Scheme was overly bureaucratic and disproportionate, and that it would deter volunteers. Such concerns led to the VBS being scaled back, although the adjustments were relatively minor with 9 million individuals still caught in the net. The key date was set of November 2010 by which time anyone working in a “regulated activity” must be registered. Criticism rumbled on though throughout 2010. Civil liberties groups protested and the Royal College of Nursing also called for a judicial review. In June 2010, shortly after coming to power, the Home Secretary of the new Coalition Government announced that the Scheme would be put on hold and reviewed, describing it as draconian: “You were assumed to be guilty until you were proven innocent”.



**Fig. 1.** Collage of images from the Vetting and Barring Scheme Guidance, March 2010

## 2.2 To bar or not to bar, that is the question

In this section, we attempt to give a flavour of how the ISA's decision-making process was intended to work, constructed from a Guidance Note it published in February 2009. It is difficult, but we will try to resist the temptation for lampoonery! The Note reaffirms the purpose of the Process as "to ensure that all barring decisions follow a standard process which affords a fair, rigorous, consistent, transparent and legitimate assessment of whether an individual should be prevented from working with children and/or vulnerable adults".

Organizationally, such decisions were to be made by a body of 100 or so administrative grade case-workers based at a single "central" location, in Darlington in the north east of England. As well as hard data regarding criminal convictions, the ISA's database would garner a range of softer information not just from statutory bodies and employers, but from any "informal source", including "for example, a newspaper article which gives cause for concern". From this hotpotch of material, so-called "facts" would be determined. How such facts would be produced is notable, keeping in mind that this is desk work conducted from a remote location. For instance, regarding evidence from employers the Guidance Notes states:

*Referral information is received from employers which have dealt with individuals through their internal disciplinary procedures. The conclusions reached by employers are reviewed to establish, on a balance of probability, the facts. It is the facts of the case that determine whether the case requires further consideration and not the conclusions that the employer reached.*

The Note also encourages case-workers to be vigilant for "cumulative behaviour":

*You must look out for instances of behaviour which, although not in themselves determinative of the potential for risk, give rise to concerns when looked at cumulatively that someone may pose a risk of harm to children or vulnerable adults.*

Having assembled the "facts", a "Structured Judgement Process" (SJP) is then applied focusing on "risk factors linked to future harm". These factors are divided into four broad areas. The first, for instance, is designated as "Harm-Related Interests/Intrinsic Drives", defined as behaviour "driven by or motivated out of a specific interest in, and/or fantasy about, harmful behaviour". How were the case-workers to identify such an "intrinsic drive". The SJP instructs case workers as follows:

*Within this context, consider how far the case material reflects the presence or absence of the following risk factors (not exhaustive): Sexual preference for children; Excessive/obsessive interest in sexual activity; Personal gratification derived from thoughts/acts of violence or violent fantasy; Personal gratification derived from thoughts of being in control over others.*

And to reiterate, this risk assessment is purely a desk exercise! Having weighed up the evidence, the case-worker then has to decide whether she is "minded to bar" or not. If the former, the individual is invited "to make representations". If no challenge is made, then the decision stands. How such "beating your wife" representations are handled is somewhat vague, although one thing is clear, it is not an independent procedure. The implication is that disputed decisions are resolved within the ISA's

line management system; only a minority of cases are expected to reach the level of the ISA’s Board (to be decided by the Director of Operations) but this is still part of the organization itself. The moral hazard is obvious. How likely it is that decisions will be over-turned when to do so would intrinsically undermine the validity of the organizations own, much vaunted, decision-making process?

### **2.3 Critique – more harm than good**

As a major, national information system, the fiasco of the VBS makes fascinating and instructive reading, and we wrote a pamphlet in 2010 excoriating the systemic deficiencies of the Scheme (White and Wastell, 2010). We put forward the hypothetical case of a 16 year old youth, with a fractured family background, who becomes involved in a fracas with another boy in a taxi queue, after a night on the town. The police are called, he is cautioned; because the other boy was 15, a violent assault against a “minor” is now on his record. Over the next few years, there are other minor non-violent crimes (e.g. shoplifting) as our protagonist struggles with drug use, but in his early twenties, he settles down determined to make something of himself. He volunteers to work in a third sector young person’s service, aiming to train to be social worker, and is vetted. The ISA case-worker reviews his application; they do not meet him but evaluate his “electronic self” in the database, following their “clear and structured judgment process”. What else could be decided other than “minded to bar”, especially in an agency set up to extirpate risk. The wicked card is dealt; all are informed, the applicant and the agency. He may protest (how likely in this case?) but the damage has been done... ironically to the sort of young, vulnerable person the Scheme was designed to protect!

Aside from the social harm the scheme will inevitably produce, illustrated by this vignette, will it actually work in protecting children? We were highly skeptical. Most salient of all, it is hard to see how it would have protected Holly and Jessica. Yes, it would have excluded Huntley from the caretaker’s job, but this was at another school; his connection with the children came via his girlfriend, and even the Scheme’s intrusive tentacles do no stretch as far as checking partners. It may not have stopped Huntley, though it might have hindered him; it certainly would not have stopped Humbert Humbert, the ogre of Nabakov’s “subversive comedy”. Speaking of Lolita’s mother, H. H. ponders monstrously:

*I did not plan to marry Charlotte in order to eliminate her in some vulgar, gruesome and dangerous manner... Other visions of venery presented themselves to me swaying and smiling. I saw myself administering a powerful sleeping potion to both mother and daughter so as to fondle the latter through the night with perfect impunity (Nabakov, Lolita, pp. 70-71)*

Though the hideous plan was ultimately superfluous, it’s the thought that counts. Had the Scheme’s architects perused that novel, some pause might have been given to their grandiose ambitions; but it seems not. Other absurdities derive from the definition of the activities to be regulated by the Scheme. Car park attendants and kitchen staff in the health service, for instance, would be covered. Not so a self-employed music instructor working with a child alone in their own home, making one



of the images in our collage (figure 1) profoundly ironic. We drew particular attention to the publication of a “Myth-buster” web-page by central government, intended to defuse adverse media critique. Such criticisms, described as “Myths”, were systematically refuted by the marshaling of so-called Facts, such as “the VBS will make it much harder for anyone known to pose a risk to gain access to children through paid or unpaid work”. This is in no sense a fact, how can it be until the Scheme becomes an evaluated reality. We described such self-styled facts as magical thinking, that wishing something necessarily makes it true. Such magical thinking is typical of the language used throughout to describe the VBS; as we have seen, there is an unshakeable certainty that it will produce the desired effect.

The Scheme’s apparent ignorance of the nature and circumstances of child abuse, particularly sexual abuse, was especially concerning. We noted how the Internet had exponentially increased the exposure of children to predatory adults outwith the gaze of the VBS. Add to this the vast numbers of workers from overseas in the UK’s public services whose history cannot be traced. And so on, the complications multiply as the myths of the Scheme meet the facts of the real world. Putting all this together, we argued that such inconsistencies betrayed the real motives of Scheme as less about protecting children than protecting government from the lynch-mob of public outrage in anticipation of future adverse events. The purpose of the Scheme was like that of all political kitsch, to soothe, to pacify, to make people feel secure; the Benign State has acted, and all may now sleep safely.

### 3 BACK IN THE BAUHAUS: THE “RIGHT STUFF” OF IS DESIGN

*The breaking of a wave cannot explain the whole sea (Nabakov)*

The VBS exemplifies many salient features of Beck’s Risk Society: the application of “scientific models of hazard assessment” (Beck, 1998 p. 17) to control risks which are fundamentally incalculable; manufactured uncertainty (the production of risk by the effort to control it); and bureaucracy as a form of organized irresponsibility. The VBS depends crucially on the idea that the “risk of future harm” is something that can be predicted. It is one thing to exclude an individual from a job on the basis of their past record; certainly, had Huntley’s unsavoury history been known, he would rightly have been appraised as unsuitable for the school job. It is quite another to predict the future, as the Scheme purports, using the language of risk. The idea that salient “facts” can be determined and processed through an algorithmic process to produce some sort of “calculable probability” is magic pure and simple. But this is what the Scheme purports to do: it provides “a clear and structured judgement process, which is about assessing the risk of future harm”. To see the absurdity of such a claim, let us compare the VBS with a situation where such an actuarial approach is possible, the use of diagnostic testing in medicine. Writing in the year Wikipedia celebrates its tenth birthday, let’s consult it for an example. Wikipedia, kitsch – we’ll take the risk! Wikipedia gives the example of the faecal blood test to screen for bowel cancer and

we shall use this to introduce key concepts and terminology. Consider the results presented in table 1 regarding the predictive efficacy of this test. The table show the test to yield 184 correct results, 2 “true positives” (TP) and 182 “true negatives”. Errors fall into two categories: “false negatives” (FN) when a case is missed when the disease is present (FN=1), and the generally more prevalent “false positive”, i.e. when there is a false alarm (FP=18).

**Table 1.** The faecal blood test to screen for bowel cancer

	Bowel cancer confirmed (by endoscopy)	No cancer present	Total
Positive test outcome	2	18	20
Negative outcome	1	182	183
Total	3	200	203

Two statistics are used to summarize the performance of binary tests: sensitivity (the proportion of predicted cases where the disease is actually present), and specificity (the proportion of cases where no disease is present and this is accurately indicated by the test). Formally, we have:

$$\text{Sensitivity} = \text{TP} / (\text{TP} + \text{FN}) = 2/3 = 66.7\%$$

$$\text{Specificity} = \text{TN} / (\text{FP} + \text{TN}) = 182/(18+182) = 91\%$$

Both parameters are required to give a full appreciation of how well the test performs and mean different things. Sensitivity reflects how well the test predicts the disease whilst specificity reflects how effectively it indicates its absence. A high false positive rate compromises the latter, spuriously indicating the present of the disease. Here, sensitivity is relatively low, 1 of the 3 cancers is missed by the test, whereas specificity is high, 91%. High specificity is what we want in a screening test; its prime purpose is to provide reassurance. Here only 19 individuals are alarmed unnecessarily, compared with 182 who are correctly informed that they have no reason to fear. The distinction between sensitivity and specificity is crucial; for a screening test like this, it is specificity which is important: the purpose is to provide reassurance to those without the disease with a minimum of unnecessary distress (and expense) from false alarms. When a positive result is returned, this will be the occasion for a second stage of more rigorous investigation. Whether 91% is satisfactory is not the point; the point is that the figures allow rational decisions to be made about the value of the test.

In IS, we would not normally think of such diagnostic tests as information systems, but they certainly are, and again we need to ask ourselves why they fall outside our purview. In many ways, it could be argued that such systems represent something of an IS gold standard, the genuine article, the right stuff. What else do they do but provide information, and high quality, proven information to boot? Diagnostic tests are information systems whose design is informed by rigorous research (itself an information system) to establish the key properties of their performance, their predictive validity in particular. The faecal blood test is an IS whose efficacy has been materially appraised in terms of objectively defined and measurable properties and

credible non-magical claims can be made regarding its performance. It is truly scientific, unlike the “kitsch science” which underpins so much social policy, including the VBS. Commenting acerbically on the “notoriously low predictive power” of social science, Lugg argues that it functions as a “kitsched version of science”. She gives the example of the economic predictions made by such august bodies as the Federal Reserve:

*These predictions are generally based on economic theory and statistical modelling (and contain an air of science), yet such musings run uncomfortably close to tea-leaf reading, as some professional economists will cheerfully concede.... Scientific-sounding prognosticians are met with great anticipation and reverence. Yet the actual merits of this national ritual, bolstered by kitsched science, go largely unquestioned (Lugg, 1999, p. 76)*

Turning to the VBS, its kitsch-ness should now be self-evident. It purports to be scientific, to operate like the predictive, diagnostic tests of medicine. But it is an imposter, it is no such thing. There is no data whatsoever to appraise its efficacy. No idea of its sensitivity, or specificity, the likely false positive or hit rate. At the very least, one would have expected some piloting of the Scheme; its reliability could certainly have been appraised by submitting a sample of cases twice, checking for agreement. More fundamentally, is it actually possible to make the type of judgements it is set up to make in a systematic way, to infer with any degree of confidence the presence of harmful drives and instincts from a mish mash of electronic data? Surely, such “diagnoses” require rigorous face-to-face investigation by highly-skilled clinical professionals. Empirical evidence that the “clear and structured judgement process” produced consistent results would be reassuring and important to demonstrate. Carrying out an analogous evaluation to that of the clinical screening test would, of course, be difficult, if not impossible. The equivalent of “the cancer” would be the occurrence of a case of serious harm to a vulnerable person. But unlike cancer, there is no definitive “endoscopic” investigation that can be carried out at the time of the test. Serious harm can only be known once it has happened; then it is too late, and cause-effect attributions can only be inferred with considerable caution. But no evaluation was even attempted. Worse still, the need for evaluation seems never to have occurred to policy-makers. One doubts the nuances of sensitivity and specificity ever troubled the consciences of the Scheme’s votaries; a magical belief in its efficacy was quite enough.

#### 4 ROCKING THE BOAT

*[Kitsch] is easy and syrupy. It does not postulate an observer with an active mind, with the imagination and creativity to grasp a work’s potentialities (Edelman, 1995, p. 33)*

*We had two aims in mind in writing this paper. We will begin with the second, the neglect of the VBS by IS scholars and the implications of this for our field. Why did such a major and consequential system as the VBS, a project which developed over many years and was so often in the public eye, pass without critical scrutiny? One*

*factor may be the continuing bias within our scholarship and research towards commercial organizations. Yes, there is certainly a smattering of IS research in the public domain, but it remains a minority genre, despite the vast investments on IT in the public sector, the burgeoning of e-Government as a global phenomenon, and the highly prominent failure of many major IT projects in the public sphere.*

Another factor may simply be its low-tech nature, the fact that it was not explicitly talked about as an IT project. Yet IT certainly forms an integral part of the system, facilitating the flow of data from peripheral agencies to the nerve-centre of the Scheme, where databases and other electronic technology would store, process and report that information. In many ways, it is more of an information system than many of the systems which the majority of IS colleagues study. Properly speaking, these are not information systems at all, at least in the pure sense, as their primary goal is not the production of information. To use a handy phrase of Alty (2008), they are “IT-reliant work systems”; examples include: fulfillment systems for physical goods, package delivery systems, highly automated manufacturing systems. Information is important, but the primary production goal is something else, e.g. the manufactured article. In contrast, Alty defines a true information system as:

*a system in which human participants and/or machines perform work using information, technology and other resources to produce informational products.*

This is exactly what the VBS does: it is fundamentally a socio-technical system producing informational products involving the garnering of a range of data about individuals, some hard and some soft, and making decisions based on this about their suitability to work with children. That is its sole *raison-d’être*. That it almost completely escaped our attention suggests that we may have become rather too enthralled with technology; because the technology of the VBS was not emphasized, we missed it. As simple, and as tragic, as that. Galliers’s exhortation (Desouza et al., 2007) “to raise our sights beyond the IT artifact” would seem to be a timely injunction, to be heeded before it is too late. More generally, Galliers advocates a broader, more catholic prospectus for the “discipline”:

*We need to make the boundaries of our field more porous, to open up to the wider social science community. I use the term trans-disciplinary to describe this approach. It is the spaces between disciplines that require investigation and from which new knowledge will emerge. (pp. 267-8?)*

We would like to think that the work presented here, as the collaboration of an IS academic and a social work professor, provides a good example of what Galliers had in mind. Techno-myopia is one problem, but perhaps we also spend too much of our time doing the wrong things, writing self-referential journal papers, for instance, when we should be speaking out and entering the public debate, as we did here with our pamphlet on the VBS. We strongly concur with Desouza et al (2007) that the determination to make an impact, to make IS “really matter”, needs to replace the obsession with publication in soi-disant “top-quality” journals, which no-one but ourselves reads. How absurd is that! More kitsched science...

Turning now to IS design, we again encounter Kitsch. The VBS provides just one more example of IS kitsch, albeit a spectacular one, once its true colours are revealed. Its “Structured Judgment Process” in particular is pure kitsch, a meretricious copy of

the real thing, the medical diagnostic test. The SJP makes a complete mockery of the idea of expert professional decision making. Is it really possible to decide from a desk in Darlington, from data not specifically gathered for that purpose, whether an individual harbours harmful fantasies? This is preposterous. The VBS is an “ugly lie”, providing meaningless reassurance that all will be well and avoiding confrontation with unpalatable truths, that some children do die in appalling circumstance, and perhaps there is little that we can do about it. Its publicity, like so much other official documentation of the day, is even more obviously kitsch: glossy and sloganistic, chocker-block with sentimental images. Propaganda is another name for it!

Kitsch is ubiquitous, like a rash. How apt a phrase it is for organisations that spend lots of money on technology, without doing the hard graft of design to produce something which works and is of genuine value. Brown & Hagel (2003) contend that the productivity paradox, the dissociation between investments in technology and actual benefits, reflects the failure of many organisations to use technology to innovate their business practices: “Companies that mechanically insert IT into their businesses will only destroy IT’s economic value. Unfortunately, all too many companies do this” (p. 2). Kitsch for the rich! Magic, the fetishization of material objects, seems drive this faith in technology, this desire for kitsch solutions. Markus and Benjamin write of the enchantment of technology across all business sectors, and the need to break its spell:

*Many IT-enabled change projects fail, .... we have argued that [this] stems from mistaken beliefs about the causes of change, belief in IT as a magic bullet. IT is not a magic bullet. Change in human behavior cannot take place at a distance but requires direct personal contact between change agents and targets.... Successful change takes good ideas, skill, and plain hard work — but it does not need magic (Markus & Benjamin, 1997, pp. 66-7)*

If organisations are to gain real benefits from technology, kitsch must be eschewed. In medicine, Launer advocates “good, painstaking science” as the antidote to kitsch and its “plausible slogans”. What is needed is sound design approach utilizing “the positive aspects of the Bauhaus” (Reinermann, 1986, p. 80): no more adding “gasoline engines to stage coaches”! Though not all would approve, those Bauhausers certainly knew a thing or two about design and there is much we post-moderns can learn, especially in the world of information systems where appearance matters so much less than function. An IS should be fit-for-purpose above all else.

There are important implications in this for practice, and not just for IS practitioners. Elsewhere, we have argued that managers need to play a more central role in designing systems (Wastell, 2011). By “system”, we mean “the work system”, defined by Alter (2008) as “a system in which human participants and machines perform work using information, technology, and other resources to produce specific products and/or services”. The definition is important. So-defined, it should be self-evident why we assert the design of such systems to be the manager’s primary task, i.e. to configure the work-system under their jurisdiction as efficiently and effectively as possible. What else could “management” possibly mean? A change of managerial mind-set is thus needed; managers at all levels need to see themselves as designers, abjuring the magical and the meretricious. In the austere times ahead in the public

services in the UK, and doubtless other parts of the world, such a “design attitude” (Boland and Collopy, 2004; Wastell, 2010) will become ever more pertinent as managers and the value they add, are apt to come under increasing scrutiny, and the pressures increase to do more with less. Let designing be the “day job”, be it radical innovation, continuous improvement, or the mundane fine-tuning of existing designs, keeping form and function in alignment (Wastell, 2011).

Given the current vogue for evidence-based management (Baskerville, 2009; Wastell, 2010) there are important opportunities for IS scholars to seize. The time is ripe for our field. Our “design knowledge-base” is certainly formidable, ranging from practical design methods and tools, knowledge of particular classes of artefact and their impact, knowledge of the design process itself and its potential dysfunctions. This is especially the case for the “design science” wing of the field, which can look forward to a lustrous future. But the gap between theory and practice is still a wide one, with little of our knowledge-base making the cross-over into practical application. What is needed is a different dissemination approach and ethos, to make the knowledge accessible and actionable for the practitioner community. In this endeavor, care must be taken to avoid kitsch science. We have enough already: the plethora of TAM studies, for instance, each accounting for much the same 10% of variance, always leaving the remaining 90% unexplained! The test for kitsch in an applied discipline is whether anyone uses our theories in practice.

Finally, kitsch cannot be mentioned without invoking Milan Kundera, the Czech writer. For Sabina, the painter-protagonist in the *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, “kitsch was her image of home, all peace, quiet and harmony, and ruled by a loving mother and a wise father.... The less her life was like that sweetest of dreams, the more sensitive she was to its magic”. Sabina thus proclaims kitsch as the enemy of her creativity, and those involved in the design of information systems, and IT-based systems more broadly, should do likewise:

*Precisely by deflecting the creative and the uncertain, kitsch advances the repetitive, the secure and the comfortable, supplying the reassurance that what is to come will resemble what has gone before, that the hazards of innovation and uncertainty are far away, and that one is safe and secure in the routines of an unadventurous genre. (Binkley, 2000, pp. 135-6)*

## REFERENCES

- Alter, S. 2008. “Defining information systems as work systems: implications for the IS field”. *European Journal of Information Systems* (17), pp. 448-469.
- Baskerville, R. 2009. “Preparing for evidence-based management”. *European Journal of Information Systems* (18), pp. 523–525.
- Beck, U. 1998. “Politics of Risk Society,” in *The Politics of the Risk Society*, J. Franklin (ed.), Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 9 – 22.
- Binkley, S. 2000. “Kitsch as a Repetitive System: A Problem for the Theory of Taste Hierarchy”. *Journal of Material Culture* (5), pp. 131-152.
- Boland, R. J. and Collopy, F. 2004. *Managing as designing*, Stanford: Stanford Business Books.
- Božilović, N. 2007. “Political kitsch and myth-making consciousness”. *Philosophy, Sociology and Psychology* (6), pp. 41-52.

- Brown, J. S., & Hagel, J. 2003. "Does IT matter? An HBR debate". Harvard Business Review (letters to the editor), June, pp. 1-17.
- Droste, M. 2010. Bauhaus, Hohenzollernring: TASCHEN.
- Edelman, M. (1995). From art to politics. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Home Office (2010). The vetting and barring scheme guidance, March 2010. Home Office report, ISBN: 978-1-84987-202-7.
- Desouza, K.C., Ein-Dor, P., McCubbrey, D.J., Galliers, R.D., Myers, M., and Watson, R.T. (2007). "Social activism in information systems research: making the world a better place". Communications of the Association for Information Systems (19) 261-277.
- Launer, J. 2008. "Medical kitsch". Postgraduate Medical Journal (8), pp. 111-2.
- Lugg, C. 1998. "Political kitsch and educational policy". Proceedings of the AERA Annual Convention, San Diego, pp. 1-25.
- Lugg, C. 1999. Kitsch: from education to public policy. New York: falmer Press.
- Nabokov, V. 1955. Lolita, London: Penguin Books.
- Norman, D. A. 1998. The design of everyday things, New York: Basic Books.
- Peters, T. 2005. Design - innovate, differentiate, communicate, New York: DK Publishing.
- Pfeffer, J. and Sutton, R. I. 2006. "Evidence-based management". Harvard Business Review, January, pp. 63-74.
- Reinermann, H. 1986. "The design of information systems for local administrations: from Bauhaus to Rathaus," Computers, environment and urban systems (11), pp. 73-80.
- Van Leeuwen, T. 2005. Introducing social semiotics, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Wastell, D. G. 2010. "Managing as designing: opportunity knocks for the IS field?" European Journal of Information Systems (19) , 422-431.
- Wastell, D.G. 2011. Managing as designing in the public services: beyond techno-magic, Axminster: Triarchy Press.
- Wastell, D.G. and White, S. 2010. "Facts, myths and thought-styles.... and a rallying call for civic engagement", Journal of Strategic Information Systems (19), pp. 307-318.
- White, S. and Wastell, D.G. 2010. "Catching Sex Offenders: Vigilance is the Best Safeguard" in Why We Should Scrap the Vetting Database, London: Manifest Club Report, pp. 13-19.
- Wolfe, T. 1981. From Bauhaus to Our House, New York: Picador.

#### **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES**

**David Wastell** is Professor of Information Systems at Nottingham University Business School. His current interests are in public sector reform, innovation and design, and cognitive ergonomics. He has co-chaired three previous IFIP working conferences, of WG8.6 and WG8.2. Dave can be reached at david.wastell@nottingham.ac.uk.

**Sue White** is Professor of Social Work at the University of Birmingham. Her recent research has focused on information sharing and performance management in children's services. Sue is Chair of the Association of Professors of Social Work and Editor in Chief of Child and Family Social Work. Sue can be reached at s.white.3@bham.ac.uk.