



# Visiting the red-light zones with Claudio

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## Introduction

Shortly after Claudio's permanent appointment at the LSE, he joined me in teaching the advanced MSc option 'Interpretations of Information'. I had previously co-taught this course with Lucas Introna who had recently moved to Lancaster University. Both Lucas and Claudio shared a love of the work of Martin Heidegger so the structure and aims of the course remained relatively unchanged.

Claudio, of course, also brought many innovations to the course, which he proudly described as both the most theoretical *and* the most practical that we taught at LSE. Even while he was ill, he was keen to know how the enrolments on the course were going and was always pleased with the excellent student evaluations the course received.

Claudio always began the course with an intriguing lecture on the 'krisis' faced by the information systems field (Ciborra, 1997; Ciborra, 2002, chapter 2). The course, he argued, would provide the intellectual tools for dealing with the crisis; and after outlining the phenomenological method of putting aside our preconceptions he illustrated his approach by proposing to study some of the red-light zones of organizational life.

For Claudio, these red-light zones were the places where much organizational innovation took place, at the boundaries of the conventionally accepted and traditionally regulated. The red-light zones were always there, he suggested, even if they were overlooked or ignored by many traditional management scholars; as such they were as much a constituent of organizational life as roles, hierarchies and structures. By starting our study here, he argued, we could advance our understanding of the information systems phenomena far more than by simply describing what 'ought to be'.

In this paper, I shall seek to develop this intriguing metaphor further by developing a clearer understanding of what is implied by the notion of red-light zones before illustrating the kinds of red-light zones that Claudio had studied in his own work and describing how I am trying to take Claudio's challenge forward in my own work.

## Red-light zones

When he used the metaphor of red-light zones, Claudio was referring to those areas on the edge of acceptable organizational behaviour. They may be areas where the activities are not or cannot be officially sanctioned, yet may produce important and popular results and services. The traditional red-light zones that the metaphor is based on are relatively under-researched, with most published material focussing on issues arising from their existence. Those studies that do seek to understand red-light zones in their own terms offer some important insights that can help develop our sense of what these zones are like, which will aid our study of organizational red-light zones.

A key feature of red-light zones can be found in the overview of Dutch policy on red-light zones presented by Brants (1998). Brants notes that while the activities taking place in these zones may not have been morally

acceptable they were also not seen as an absolute evil. In fact, they were seen as a 'social necessity' and 'part of city life' (p. 621). The Dutch tolerance of red-light zones is firmly rooted in a 'culture of compromise' that inevitably leads to contradictions in policy (p. 622). This, in turn, leads to new problems that themselves can only be addressed by further compromises (p. 622).

A common response to traditional red-light zones is based on the command and control metaphor, typically through some form of regulation such as licensing or land-use zoning. There is a risk, however, that any legalization is seen to imply legitimacy. However, as Ryder points out, such controls often lead to the emergence of red-light zones in other areas or other changes in the organization of activities (Ryder 2004, p. 1663). Indeed, in certain cases, red-light zones maintain their status not because they are repelled from other areas but because their relative success enables them to maintain their locations and may even keep 'obsolete and otherwise unmarketable districts intact' (Ryder 2004, p. 1674).

More generally, Ryder (2004) points out that describing red-light zones as marginalized places is an imprecise description of location as it is little different from the exclusion of other services to sub-central districts (Ryder 2004, p. 1661).

Drawing on these insights, we can see that the kinds of organizational red-light zones that Claudio was keen to study had the following characteristics:

- They are tolerated through cultures of compromise.
- Command and control approaches may be less than effective or may even have negative consequences.
- They are often very successful in their own terms.
- They do not necessarily exist as marginalized areas.

In the next section, I use these characteristics to identify two of the red-light zones that Claudio studied.

### Some of Claudio's red-light zones

An illustrative example of Claudio's seeking out the red-light zones of organizational life can be found in his 1991 ICIS paper 'From thinking to tinkering: The grassroots of strategic information systems' (Ciborra, 1991). This paper sought to understand how strategic information systems came to be developed and rejected the belief that they could be 'prescribed' and that, instead, factors like serendipity and reinvention played important roles. These factors thrive in organizational red-light zones.

Sustainable competitive advantage needs to avoid easy imitation and should be based on unanalyzable and even opaque areas of organizational life. The strategic systems often arise from tinkering and hacking. Claudio's paper presents four examples of well-known strategic information systems and, in each case, they can be seen as originating in the red-light zones of their host organizations rather than arising from planned, control activities.

The American Hospital Supply Corporation system started as a localized response to a customer need while McKesson's Economist originated as a local initiative by one of the business units and was 'stumbled upon' almost accidentally. SABRE began as a relatively simple, inventory-management system for American Airlines to address an internal inefficiency around monitoring available seats.

The most telling, however, is the French Minitel system that was successful in part because of the free distribution of Minitel terminals at a time when personal computers were uncommon and in part because of the use of the system as a private messaging service (especially for so-called *messageries rose* (BBC, 2003)). Thus, the success of Minitel required precisely the culture of compromise that enabled this innovative use of new technology to establish the technology more generally. A more controlling approach that restricted the use of Minitel as a private messaging service would have resulted in a far less successful implementation.

All these cases are not designed in abstraction but rather are tried out away from the formal strategy formulation process where existing attitudes and expectations 'usually prevent designers and sponsors from seeing and exploiting the potential for innovation' (Ciborra, 1991, p. 287). Claudio's advice for the development of strategic information systems can be seen as encouraging organizations to create more red-light zones, which allow and encourage 'tinkering by people close to the operational level'.

A second example, and one which particularly highlights the cultures of compromise, can be found in Claudio's study of the intranet at Hoffman La Roche (Ciborra & Hanseth, 1998; Ciborra and associates, 2000, chapter 11). This case study was analysed using a variety of theoretical frameworks, including the economics of standards and actor-network theory and led to the development of Claudio's interpretation of Heidegger's notion of *Gestell* as a way of understanding information infrastructures such as intranets.

Roche is a large, multinational pharmaceuticals company with a global presence. It is typical of such organizations to develop corporate information infrastructures to enable the sharing of information and to support collaborative teamworking arrangements (Ciborra, 1996). One such role that needed to be supported throughout the global organization was strategic marketing.

Marketing of drugs is knowledge intensive and often requires adjustment to local circumstances and regulatory regimes. To support this process, the strategic marketing function in Roche created a global corporate network MedNet in the late 1980s. Its aim was to support the centralized marketing function.

Technological issues meant that the implementation of MedNet faced many problems and after 8 years of development, its use was 'limited' with alternative systems being used in different countries (including a Minitel based system in France). Not surprisingly, MedNet was eventually discontinued.

The replacement infrastructure at Roche is a corporate intranet. However, unlike many corporate intranets, there is no overall control plan for the intranets. Instead, each is left to regulate its own behaviours, with the only requirement being the Roche logo and a link to the main website. This involves a culture of compromise within Roche, and Roche's central management only intervenes into particular websites if it is made aware of particular problems that go beyond what is considered acceptable practices for parts of the organization (Ciborra & Hanseth, 1998).

The intranet at Roche can therefore be seen as a collection of red-light zones, with each website permitted to do what it wishes, rather than imposing a central control. Each of these websites is very successful in its own terms, providing in its own local constituency necessary advice and support for the users of the company's pharmaceutical products. While they exist outside the formal corporate control, they are not considered marginal by the organization.

### About the author

Edgar Whitley is a Reader in Information Systems at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His main interests are music, travel and DIY. Academically, his main focus is in the application of sociological and philosophical ideas to information systems. Among the

### My search for red-light zones

I learned of Claudio's death half way through teaching the Interpretations course, literally on the morning of one of the lectures. Giving the lectures on 'his material' (especially Heidegger, infrastructures and improvisation) was particularly challenging but also helped remind me immediately of the depth of insight that his work gave to us, and his engaging lecturing style will remain a standard that we will aspire to match.

One of the many things I will take from working with Claudio will be that sense of continuously searching for my own red-light zones to study. Claudio was never happy with the obvious answers, found in the obvious places. Instead, he sought out places where real life was being experienced. As we have seen, this often involves visiting and relishing the organizational red-light zones.

In the past, I, like many others, would hurry past these areas feeling slightly uncomfortable with what they were telling me about the phenomena I was studying. Claudio's challenge is to spend more time in these areas and learn from what they tell us about (organizational) life.

people whose work he draws upon are Bruno Latour, Harry Collins and Martin Heidegger. He is co-editor for the journal *Information Technology and People* and an associate editor for *MIS Quarterly*.

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