

Decommissioner Complexity

TANGLE. DID NOT SEE THIS COMING.

A project manager¹ for an unnamed Federal Government Department had installed a new information system aimed at gathering and analyzing information to a depth and extent never before experienced. As part of this process an old system² was decommissioned and disposed of by a specialist company, DeComIT P/L³. This was done as the data held on the old system represented an unresolved data inconsistency with the new system.

Much of the information held in the old system was on media no longer supported and it was considered by a departmental committee⁴ to be vulnerable to breaking down making the information unreadable. It was known that much of the information in the old system was about people who are now, either deceased or, octogenarians or older. Much of this information was gathered before notions such as informed consent were taken seriously by either organizations or ICT professionals. It was decided⁵ that finding the rights holders (legal and moral) to the information was either too hard or not possible: finding them was not pursued by the decommissioning team.

As the information technology was in a delicate state it was decided⁶ that the information should all be printed and then rescanned onto current technology for archival (this was the cheapest solution). Unfortunately when the dump was performed two copies were inadvertently made. While this was not an extensive or expensive matter⁷ it was inconvenient. The second copy was disposed of⁸ by putting it into the ordinary office rubbish.

A member of the decommissioning team, Helen Kierkegaard, knew that the copies were printed on only one side of A4 sheets of paper. Thinking environmentally, and rather than have the extra printout sent to landfill, they retrieved the paper and donated it to their child, Michael's, preschool.

As these things happen, a child, Alfred Rush, took their finger-painting home and said to their mother, Emma Tarski, "Look! I did a picture of prababcia⁹ and her name is already on the back of my painting!"

Cast	Role
Maggie Duquenoy	Project manager
Helen Kierkegaard	Decommissioner
Michael Kierkegaard	Helen's child
Søren Nissenbaum	Domain owner team leader
Prababcia	Alfred's Great-grandmother
Penny Robson	Lead decommissioner
Alfred Rush	Emma Tarski's child
Emma Tarski	Parent

Table 1: D_1 Cast

¹ This was Maggie Duquenoy. When this was first told to us there were no people's names attached to roles. Merely things like 'a project manager', 'the commission', and 'the team'. It took some sleuthing but we eventually found out which particular people made the decisions and which took the actions in the case.

We decided to retain the character of the original telling of the case so the reader can see for themselves the clever way in which responsibility is tried to be avoided by leaving it vague as to whom the actual, individual decision makers and action takers were.

² Nicknamed Old Fogies by the decommissioning team.

³ With Penny Robson as the lead decommissioner.

⁴ Chaired by Søren Nissenbaum the team leader of the domain expert owners of the data.

⁵ By Nissenbaum.

⁶ Decided by Nissenbaum and Robson.

⁷ Fewer than 100,000 persons were identifiable in the printout and 5,000 sheets of paper were used.

⁸ Under the direction of Robson.

⁹ Polish — Great-grandmother, Ema Stawski, in case you were wondering.