Review of "Too Good to Fail-How management gets it wrong and how it can get it right"
by Jan Filochowski. FT publishing Harlow 2013
http://www.waterstones.com/waterstonesweb/products/jan+filochowski/too+good+to+fa
il3f/9606972/
and,
"To save everything click here - technology, solutionism and the urge to fix problems that don't exist" by Evgeny Morozov. Allen Lane London 2013
http://www.amazon.co.uk/s/?ie=UTF8&keywords=to+save+everything&tag=mh0a9-
21&index=aps&hvadid=1390014483&ref=pd_sl_5821xlz20b_p

Superficially these books are dissimilar, appealing to different audiences and singing different tunes. But both attack problems of relevance to NHS managers and between them are on to something.

The first is from an NHS insider, in the form of a practical manual and guidebook acting as a distillation of hard won wisdom in the NHS at a senior level. His claim to fame and the focus of the book is failure and how to analyse and manage it.

The second book is more academic and thoughtful with the references and learning to show for it but carrying a warning message for those being arraigned by solutionists and technology as the answer to complex problems. For those unsure of what solutionists are a useful definition is of those with a hammer looking for a nail. Its second target is those who think the internet and data analysis hold the key to the future.

The convergence in the two books is in scepticism toward "new" radical unproven solutions. Filochowski deals in his experience of confronting general symptoms of management problems: ignorance, certainty and complacency and warns of obsession, manipulation and evasion. He has seen recklessness, a culture of false reassurance, gaming and over-control. Most of his prescriptions may seem like common sense but the one big idea he promotes that achieves resonance in me is to avoid big shifts. By this he means avoiding quantum leaps for their own sake, which create risks and destroy organic functioning (by this I understand him to mean throwing the baby out with the bathwater); he restates 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it', and encourages humility, innovation as a growing process not creative destruction and adopts the song of the Nightingale 'above all do no harm'. In his summing up he cautions '…avoid the latest fad, the latest solution, the latest panacea, until you have evaluated just what it can and can't do for you' and demands of any story being told 'Does it make sense? Does it look as though it will have a satisfactory ending?' And, in its absence, advocates thinking about how you can shape one.

Morozov in contrast cites expertise in the form of warnings of the problems associated with "progressive reforms" from leading thinkers. Hirschman is approvingly quoted for identifying the following three themes afflicting reforms: perversity (whereby the intervention only worsens the problem), futility (whereby the intervention yields no results whatsoever) and jeopardy (where the intervention threatens to undermine previous accomplishments).

Nussbaum is drawn in to the discussion with the distinction between narrative imagination and numeric imagination. "Numeric imagination is very bad at describing complex systems, let alone imagining how these systems can be rearranged. Facts are seen as eternal, so numeric imagination, by and large, lives in the past and eschews any kind of contingency and historicism. Narrative imagination, by contrast, knows that most present practices, norms, and commitments are not timeless and that, by claiming to be the only way of doing things, they usually conceal many other alternatives."

Canadian anthropologist Tania Murray Li is quoted as accusing those with a will to improve as "short sighted and only perfunctorily interested in the activity for which improvement is sought". She damns all who recast complex social situations as neatly defined problems with definite computable solutions or as transparent and self-evident processes that can easily be optimised. This quest she believes is likely to have unexpected consequences that could cause more problems than the problems they seek to address. Such a quest Morozov calls solutionism which in architecture and planning refers to an unhealthy preoccupation with sexy, monumental and narrow-minded solutions to problems that are extremely complex, fluid and contentious. Design theorist Michael Dobbins describes solutionism as presuming rather than investigating a problem that it is trying to solve, reaching "for the answer before the questions have been fully asked". There is a naïve faith that politicians and politics can be replaced by technocrats and administration. The lesson is that good intentions don't justify naiveté.

Majid Tehranian sums it up nicely by contrasting "technoneutrals" with "technostructuralists". Technoneutrals "typically tend to be consultants, who have few theoretical pretensions and considerable interest at stake not to alienate their clients. They often assume a neutral position on the question of effects: on the one hand this, but on the other that." Little attention is paid to the hidden agendas of those advocating solutions. They are blind to the multiple contexts within which solutions may be launched and the many unpredictable ways in which those contexts would mitigate their effectiveness. Technostructuralists see solutions as technologies of power that lock into existing or emerging technostructures of power. They see the impact of a given technology is often in flux, impacting on political and social relations and can introduce entirely new classes of actors into the game. They eschew the easy fix. They advocate proceeding slowly, patiently and without grandiose assumptions.

By now I think you can see where I am leading. Both our authors coming from a practical and experienced viewpoint on the one hand; and from a theoretical but expert stance, based on a broad analysis of history and complex social issues, on the other, seem to be saying that extreme caution needs to be taken before launching into bold initiatives in health services and use of information technology to generate major improvements.

If you like me are concerned: that the headlong flight to major "reconfiguration" of acute hospitals may not be thought through; the unproven assumption of transfers of up to 50% of A&E activity into the community is sound; the faith in "integration" of services to achieve what was previously unachievable; the plans to save up to £20-£50bn of health service expenditure without affecting quality of services; plans to impose a duty to co-operate on organisations designed to compete; passing purchasing power to GP's with a vested interest in spending money on themselves and with no training in procurement or management; and to continuing to throw money at IT based solutions to problems when £10bn has already been wasted on the NPfIT programme and chronic disease management

programmes; you may need some support empirically and conceptually. These books provide that support in different ways.

The allied question is whether these books have relevance for the appointment of a future leader of the NHS. I know if the choice was between Jan Filochowski (or someone like him) or Tim Kelsey (or another guru) my choice would be easy. But read these books and make your own mind up.

Roger Steer