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SETTING OUR RESEARCH AGENDAS: INSTITUTIONAL ECOLOGY, INFORMING SCIENCES, OR MANAGEMENT FASHION THEORY?

ICIS 2010 PANEL STATEMENT

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Abstract

A new reflexive discourse is emerging in the IS research community concerning how we, as academic scholars in the information systems field, set and pursue our research agendas. How should we choose our research topics, how should we conduct our research, and how should we communicate our research results? This panel will present and debate the merits of three distinct perspectives concerning the setting of our research agendas in information systems. There will be three short rounds of presentations by the three panelists: Richard Baskerville, Grandon Gill and Neil Ramiller. Following these presentations, Michael Myers (panel chair) will briefly summarize the discussion so far and give his own views with respect to the merits of the three arguments. After suggesting some key points for debate, he will then facilitate what promises to be an interesting and lively discussion with the audience.

Keywords: *IS discipline, research agendas, institutional ecology, informing sciences, management fashion theory*

Introduction

A new reflexive discourse is emerging in the IS research community concerning how we, as academic scholars in the information systems field, set and pursue our research agendas (Ramiller et al. 2008). This discourse is distinct from the more well-established discourses on relevance (or irrelevance) and subject-matter coherence (e.g., concerning the “IT artifact”). How should we choose our research topics, how should we conduct our research, and how should we communicate our research results? These are obviously important questions for all IS scholars.

However, there is considerable disagreement and debate about how we should set our research agendas, as can be seen by the recent debate in *MIS Quarterly* (Baskerville and Myers 2009; Gill and Bhattacharjee 2009a; Gill and Bhattacharjee 2009b; Myers and Baskerville 2009). The recommendations for action vary, depending upon the perspective being taken. The purpose of this panel, therefore, is to present and debate the merits of three distinct perspectives concerning the setting of our research agendas in information systems.

The first perspective looks at the shaping of research agendas from the viewpoint of management fashion theory (Abrahamson 1996; Abrahamson and Fairchild 1999). Management fashion theory, and in particular, the Milan theory proposed by Baskerville and Myers (2009), suggests that IS academics should actively engage with IS practitioners in the IS fashion setting process. The key recommendation is that IS researchers should be among the leaders, and not just the followers, of fashion.

The second perspective looks at the shaping of research agendas from the lens of informing sciences (Gill and Bhattacharjee 2009a; Gill and Bhattacharjee 2009b). An informing sciences perspective suggests that the extent to which IS research is informing its external clients has declined over the years. It also suggests, contrary to the viewpoint of management fashion theory, that IS fashions can be better viewed as an informing process driven by the diffusion of innovations perspective. The key recommendation is that our current publication-oriented strategies need to change so that practice-informing activities are encouraged. It is through direct engagement with practice, not through publication, that IS researchers will influence practice.

The third perspective looks at the shaping of research agendas from the viewpoint of institutional ecology (Ramiller et al. 2008). Institutional ecology suggests that the field’s research directions constitute responses to institutionally constituted market forces that arise both within academia and in the larger economy and society. The key recommendation is that IS research agendas should be set that help to foster research that better serves both theory and practice, while being less subject to the whims of industry fashion. This recommendation is clearly at odds with both management fashion theory and an informing sciences perspective.

Organization of the Panel

Michael Myers, the chair of the panel, will introduce the panel discussion. He will briefly outline the motivation for the panel and introduce the speakers. This will then be followed by three short rounds of presentations by the three panelists: Richard Baskerville, Grandon Gill and Neil Ramiller.

The presentations and debate will be structured as follows. First, each presenter will briefly summarize their theoretical perspective. Second, each presenter will put forward their recommendations for setting our research agendas. Third, each presenter will have an opportunity to comment on the other two presentations. Following these presentations, Michael Myers (panel chair) will briefly summarize the discussion so far and give his own views with respect to the merits of the three arguments. After suggesting some key points for debate, he will then facilitate what promises to be an interesting and lively discussion with the audience.

A summary of each presenter’s argument follows.

Richard Baskerville will argue from the first perspective that scholars in information systems should fulfill their obligation to participate in leading, not just following, practice. Current research agendas that follow practice descriptively provide explanation and understanding, but are not as useful in forming new strategies for practice. Information systems research programs that provide platforms for new practices can deliver maximum value to society. Rather than holding research aloft from the whims of practice, researchers are obliged to help practice avoid these whims. An important element in establishing the appeal of scholar-leaders is establishing a capability in practice to access information systems research. Scholars cannot alone push themselves into practice fashion-setting. A demand-pull must be present that motivates practice to turn to this research for guidance. Research

accessibility does not just mean delivery of research to a practitioner audience. In order for research to be accessible, practitioners must learn how to digest and interpret research. The practical interpretation of research findings cannot be efficiently achieved as a scholarly activity. Rather, higher forms of practice, modeled perhaps on clinical medicine, will be required. The access by practice to research is a practice problem, not a research problem. A simple notion of engaged research, i.e., asking scholars to engage in practice themselves is not the solution. Substituting scholars for practitioners diminishes research more than it enhances practice. We need scholars who can help lead practitioners to the knowledge they require without converting scholars into practitioners.

Grandon Gill will discuss an emerging stream of research from the informing science transdiscipline that distinguishes between routine and non-routine informing (Gill and Cohen 2009). For the MIS research discipline to survive, he asserts, we must take responsibility for better informing practice. He argues that if we do not, we will be on a path that leads first to obscurity, then to extinction. The key to changing our course is to accept three important premises: 1) that the landscapes we research are complex; such landscapes are unlikely to yield attractive theory and will be informed effectively only through non-routine processes; 2) that the practitioners we seek to inform are experts, meaning that failure to involve them in every aspect of our research represents a de facto abandonment of true rigor; and 3) that, as an applied discipline, we need to view the diffusion of our ideas as being integral to the research process, rather than serving mainly as the inspiration for a imaginative paragraph on the subject of "implications for practice" included near the end of an article published in an academic journal that practitioners are far less likely to read (and believe) than a supermarket tabloid.

Contrasted with the views expressed by the other panelists, the non-routine informing perspective asserts that for the MIS discipline to have any long term chance of success: a) our informing of practice will necessarily depend upon rich face-to-face interactions with carefully selected practitioners (the innovators and mavens of MIS); what we publish in any outlet—including trade journals—will have minimal informing impact on practice (except, possibly, where serving as the catalyst for formation of a new face-to-face relationship) , b) we can never aspire to lead practice but we may be able to play a role in their decision making if we engage in active research, case writing and consulting, c) that access by practice to MIS research is a research problem, since practice can survive perfectly well without our help but it is doubtful that MIS research will survive as an independent discipline for much longer if we do not find external clients for our research activities; time being of the essence, rather than engaging in another round of scholarly self-examination whose most likely outcome is to inflate participant publication counts, we should be acting to apply what we already know about the diffusion of complex ideas to our own field.

Drawing on his earlier essay with Burt Swanson and Ping Wang (Ramiller et al. 2008), Neil Ramiller will reflect on the influence of the current institutional landscape over our field's research agendas. In that earlier work, the authors noted our field's curious history of adopting research agendas that in some cases chase after industry fads and in other cases spin in insular circles quite isolated from the concerns of practitioners. Ramiller, Swanson, and Wang argued that both phenomena could be understood as collective responses to institutionally-constituted markets for research. Invited now into an on-going debate about research agendas between Baskerville (plus Myers) and Gill (plus Bhattacharjee), Ramiller will consider how an institutionalist perspective might help us all think about the positions taken by his fellow panelists, and what else it might suggest about the possibilities and limitations for IS scholars, when it comes to shaping and commanding the field's research agendas. While Ramiller will concede the appeal of proposals that IS scholars should "lead" practitioners and "inform" them, he will question whether the cultural and institutional circumstances in which we labor will be entirely kind to the positions advanced by the other panelists.

Notwithstanding a lot of contrary evidence, many business executives continue to believe that information systems are easy, should take very little time, and ought to be practically free. (At a recent meeting of his school's business advisory board to discuss the termination of the school's information systems program, Ramiller actually witnessed a CFO claim that his company no longer had any need to hire IS professionals, because the firm would now just get all of its computing "from the cloud.") Vendors, consultants, the press, and industry pundits partner in the production of discourses that expressly encourage this way of thinking. The proposal that IS scholars should help lead industry in setting fashions has the admirable virtue of being forward-looking. It also acknowledges that fashion is a discursive necessity in the diffusion of innovations. However, fashion is a hazard, also. The very problem with fashion in our context is that it is reductionist. It fosters the denial of complexity and contingency, and promotes the view that difficult things will be easy. Can we academics change the very nature of fashion discourses surrounding IT innovation and practice? Baskerville appears to suggest that this will depend in part on the reinvention of the practitioners themselves, as receptive consumers of scholarly discourse. How this might be

accomplished, given the established (indeed, institutionalized) relationship between academia and practice, is unclear.

While the proposal that IS scholars become fashion entrepreneurs points the field toward more proactive and creative engagement with the Big Ideas of the day, the call to do informing science invites us to appreciate and engage the complexity of IS practice on the ground. That practitioners are “experts” is undeniable; what is less clear is what IS scholars, as informing scientists, can offer beyond simply being additional hands-on-deck. That is, our distinctive contribution absent theory is unclear. (“The landscapes we research... are unlikely to yield attractive theory.”) Complexity does not make theory un-useful, or impossible. To the contrary, theorizing builds the bridges that help us to generalize across diverse settings where the actual practice takes place. It is possible that the real issue turns on the kind of theory that we ought to be developing. In particular, we are not well-served by theory that over-simplifies in the way that fashion does, especially in regard to processes and contingent circumstances. This, however, begs for critical consideration of the institutional pressures within our field that might restrict the horizon for theorizing (especially among untenured scholars). Meanwhile, even as we seek richer interactions with practitioners (in part so we can build richer theory?), we should not be too quick to abandon publication as a means of contributing to, and helping to shape, public discourses about IT-related problems and opportunities. We do not lack role models who could point the way around the cultural expectations and institutional barriers that tend to deny us an audience with practitioners in grander forums.

A current question for our field, as we once again doggedly follow (not lead) our industry colleagues into the Next Big Thing – in this case, The Cloud – is whether we can define a research agenda that will help them with the impaired visibility. Is there a middle ground from which we, as IS scholars, may be able to reach both the groundedness and granularity of real practice and the broader sweep of theory (attractively packaged, perhaps, as fashion)?

Conclusion

We hope that this panel session will contribute to the establishment of a new debate concerning the setting of our research agendas. Whether the three theoretical perspectives proposed are the best or only ones that can be taken remains to be seen.

Panelist Bios

Michael D. Myers is Professor of Information Systems and Head of the Department of Information Systems and Operations Management at the University of Auckland Business School, New Zealand. His research work has focused on the social and organizational aspects of information systems and the use of qualitative research in IS. His research articles have been published in many journals and books. He won the Best Paper award (with Heinz Klein) for the most outstanding paper published in MIS Quarterly in 1999. This paper has been cited over 1750 times and is third most cited paper to appear in MISQ. He also won the Best Paper Award (with Lynda Harvey) for the best paper published in Information Technology & People in 1997. He currently serves as Senior Editor of Information Systems Research and as Editor of the AISWorld Section on Qualitative Research. He previously served as Senior Editor of MIS Quarterly from 2001-2005, as Associate Editor of Information Systems Research from 2000-2005, and as Associate Editor of Information Systems Journal from 1995-2000. He also served as President of the Association for Information Systems (AIS) in 2006-2007, and as Chair of the International Federation of Information Processing (IFIP) Working Group 8.2 from 2006-2008. He is a Fellow of AIS.

Richard Baskerville is a Board of Advisors Professor of Information Systems and past chairman in the Department of Computer Information Systems, Robinson College of Business, Georgia State University. His research specializes in security of information systems, methods of information systems design and development, and the interaction of information systems and organizations. His interest in methods extends to qualitative research methods. Baskerville is the author of *Designing Information Systems Security* (J. Wiley) and more than 100 articles in scholarly journals, professional magazines, and edited books. He is Editor-in-Chief for *The European Journal of Information Systems* and serves on the editorial boards of *Business & Information Systems Engineering* (*Wirtschaftsinformatik*), *The Information Systems Journal*, *Journal of Information Systems Security*, and the *International Journal of E-Collaboration*. A Chartered Engineer, Baskerville holds degrees from the University of

Maryland (B.S. summa cum laude, Management), and the London School of Economics, University of London (M.Sc., Analysis, Design and Management of Information Systems, Ph.D., Systems Analysis).

Grandon Gill is a Professor in the Information Systems & Decision Sciences department at the University of South Florida. Over the past decade, his particular research focus has been the use of information technology in education and informing science. Currently, he is Editor-in-Chief of *Informing Science: The International Journal of an Emerging Transdiscipline*, and an Editor of the *Journal of IT Education*. In 2009, he was named a Fellow of the Informing Science Institute (ISI). In 2009, he co-edited the book *Foundations of Informing Science: 1999-2008* with Eli Cohen, the founder of the ISI. In 2010, he authored two books, *Informing Business: Research and Education on a Rugged Landscape* and *Informing with the Case Method: A Guide to Case Method Research, Writing and Facilitation*. He sheepishly admits that he had to look up "reflexive discourse" to determine what it meant.

Neil Ramiller is the Ahlbrandt Professor in the Management of Innovation & Technology at Portland State University. His primary research activities address the management of information-technology innovations, with a particular focus on the role that rhetoric, narrative, and discourse play in shaping innovation processes within organizations and across inter-organizational communities. He is also interested in the social construction of information technology scholarship. Ramiller has presented his work at a variety of national and international conferences, and his articles have appeared in a number of journals, including *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, *MIS Quarterly*, *Information & Organization*, *Information Technology & People*, *Organization Science*, *Journal of Management Information Systems*, *Communications of the AIS*, and *Information Systems Research*. He is a member of the editorial boards for *J AIS* and *Information, Technology & People*, and a past associate editor for *MIS Quarterly*. Ramiller holds undergraduate degrees in anthropology and chemistry, an MBA (from U.C. Berkeley), and a Ph.D. (from UCLA). He is currently studying for the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies (at Reed College).

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