The King is Dead! Long Live the King!
Homelessness and Survival in the IS Field

ICIS 2014 Panel

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Abstract

Should the IS field relinquish its identity and surrender to the social, political and economic forces that are placing IS scholars outside of traditional IS departments and programs? Should IS scholars mesh into competing departments (e.g., marketing and accounting) and schools (e.g., information studies and engineering) instead of seeking placement in a traditional IS department? By touting IS as the blood that runs through all business functions, would we serve our stakeholders better by embracing our status as a field without a real home and becoming homeless? Is the key to the IS field’s survival ripping IS departments apart, keeping them together or following a hybrid approach? This panel session brings together eminent IS scholars to argue both for and against the case that the IS field should surrender to the destructive forces that are pulling it in every direction.

Keywords: IS Field, IS Discipline, Credibility Crisis

1. Introduction

The purpose of this panel is to provide insight into making the IS field stronger and more vibrant. We are situating this panel in the current environment characterized by an IS field that is multi-faceted, multi-
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focus, multi-premier-conference-hosting and housed-in-different-schools (i.e. business, information sciences and engineering). Given this environment, what course of action should the IS field take? This panel will have scholars arguing that the IS field should take one of three courses of action.

We are labelling these courses of action cohesive, homeless, and federated union. Should IS strive for its own identify characterized by having stand-alone IS programs with IS departments, faculty, majors and classes? This is the model the IS field has been striving for and what we will refer to as the cohesive perspective. IS scholars in this realm will attend IS conferences and publish in IS journals. An alternative is embracing the IS field’s multidisciplinary nature and becoming homeless. Homelessness would involve disbanding IS departments and housing IS scholars in competing disciplines like marketing, finance and logistics. In this model, homeless IS scholars would teach the IS component of these competing disciplines. For example, IS analytics professors would teach marketing analytics. IS becoming homeless may result in IS scholars engaging in more cross-disciplinary work, attending other discipline’s conferences and publishing in non-IS journals. Another option is for IS to become a federated union. A federated union represents a middle-ground approach. The IS field would still have a cohesive central governance like the Association of Information Systems, but the field’s powers will be devolved. IS scholars will be located in different departments and schools but will rely on a central IS governance to keep the discipline alive.

2. Panel Theme

IS scholars seem to use the word “crisis” more frequently than it really should be used in the IS literature. Most recently, Value of IS Research: Is There a Crisis? (Hassan 2014) hits on the issue of whether or not IS research is valued, spawning articles arguing against the position (Value of IS Research: Let’s Not Talk Crisis But We Can Do Better, Grover 2014) and a middle-ground approach (Let’s Start Fooling Ourselves: Strategies for Maneuvering Within the Micro-Political Influences Surrounding Our Research Practices, Chaisson 2014). The crisis in our field has been the subject of panel sessions at our leading conferences (for example, Addressing the Credibility Crisis in IS, Firth et al. 2011), and repeatedly taken on by our senior scholars (for example, The Impact of IS Research, Is it Enough?, Niederman et al. 2013 and What Do We Like About the IS Field? King et al., 2010). Just after the dot-com bust, “crisis” raised its ugly head, with Benbasat and Zmud talking about The Identity Crisis Within the IS Discipline: Defining and Communicating the Discipline’s Core Properties (Benbasat and Zmud 2003). Before “crisis” crept into the IS lexicon, the discussion was more about IS as a reference discipline, this conversation starting around 1980 with MIS Research: Reference Disciplines and a Cumulative Tradition (Keen 1980), and the evolving maturity of IS as a field (for example The Evolution of Empirical Research in IS: A Study in IS Maturity, Cheon et al., 1993).

Clearly our field’s identity is an enduring, important topic to the IS field. This panel proposes to look at our field’s role in a radically different way. Rather than defend the status quo and come up with strategies to protect it, “The King is Dead! Long Live The King!” alludes to the proclamation made when a king of England dies accompanied by the immediate announcement that a new king is in his place. This panel will introduce the idea that our ideal identity of IS as a stand-alone field should die so that new models of the IS field can thrive. We will have four panelists that will argue for and against the idea that IS should relinquish its identity and become homeless.

To help frame the debate and how the audience participates in the debate our panelists will take one of three positions: homeless, federated union or cohesive. In simple terms, these represent three possible futures of the IS field. Homeless suggests that the IS field as it stands should be no more and fragment into pieces throughout other departments to survive. For example, IS professors should be located in the marketing and accounting departments. Federated Union is a middle ground approach with a cohesive central governance structure but with devolved powers to the multiplicity of factions in the IS field. Cohesive represents the status quo of the field, where IS is an independent department. Each panelist will describe what their position will look like for IS scholars, the advantages and disadvantages of the position and the long-term impacts on the IS field. For example, how will becoming homeless resolve current territorial issues IS faces with marketing and accounting. What does homelessness mean for Ph.D. programs?
**Target audience**

This panel should interest a cross section of the IS field: those with different research interests, teaching vs. research schools, Ph.D. students through senior scholars. The topic matters to us all.

**For the Attendees**

After each panelist presents their perspective, we will poll the audience to see what direction (i.e., homeless, federated union or cohesive) they think the IS field should take. We will allow plenty of time for audience members to voice their opinion and put forth an implementation strategy for the IS field.

### 2. Controversial Issues and Panelists' Positions

The idea that the IS field should just allow itself to, or even pursue, fragmenting into pieces is clearly controversial and will stir debate and reflection on all sides. Below are the panelists and their position.

**John King** (University of Michigan, School of Information) will argue that the field is already fragmented and fighting a battle that has already been lost is a waste of time and does the IS field no good. Moving away from our narrowly defined IS field and partnering with other fields will help IS scholars focus on bigger, more impactful research problems. By having our scholars focus on pressing problems rather than the “IT artifact” we can nurture questioning, imaginative and insightful scholars rather than journal technicians (Alveson and Sandberg 2014). To address more complex problems in organizations and society IS scholars should take our strengths and use them to support other fields.

John presents the “homeless” position.

**Edgar Whitley** (London School of Economics) will argue that structure is necessary, but a flexible structure is required to meet the needs of the different areas within the IS field. A federated model means that there is a central organization (i.e., the Association of Information Systems) which provides an overarching framework for our field, but the different areas or specializations within the IS field should be allowed to operate freely with support and guidance from the central organization. IS scholars should loosely identify with the field while interacting with different people from different fields. Scholars should question IS and see how people outside the IS field respond to our research to see if it is really interesting. IS scholars need to move beyond maintaining and strengthening IS and instead seek radical ideas and research that reaches an audience broader than IS scholars (Alveson and Sandberg 2014).

Edgar presents the “federated union” position.

**Ron Weber** (Monash and University of Queensland) will argue that structure is necessary and vital to hold the IS field together against the forces acting upon it which constantly seek to do it harm. Ron will support the direction the IS field has been going as indicated by all the articles encouraging the IS field to build a strong identity and articles calling IS departments’ disbanding a crisis. Ron will advocate that IS scholars need to publish in IS journals, attend IS conferences and incrementally build upon IS theories. Flexibility is a weakness that only makes it more difficult for the IS field to present a clear and consistent message to those within and outside the field.

Ron presents the “cohesive” position.

**Hope Koch** (Baylor) will react to the positions laid out by the primary panelists and open the panel up to the audience’s perspectives.

### 3. Panel Structure

Controversial issues such as those discussed above will surface as each panelist discusses how their proposed future for the IS field (i.e., homeless, federated union, cohesive) will allow it become stronger and more vibrant. After the panelists make their points, the audience will vote on which of the three futures they feel will strengthen our discipline the most. Informed by the voting, the panelists and audience will share their experiences and suggestions on how IS academics can shape the future of our field.
4. Biographies

**John Leslie King**

John Leslie King is W.W. Bishop Professor of Information and former Dean of the School of Information and former Vice Provost at the University of Michigan. He joined the faculty at Michigan in 2000 after twenty years on the faculties of computer science and management at the University of California at Irvine. He has published more than 180 academic and professional books and research papers from his research on the relationship between changes in information technology and changes in organizations, institutions, and markets. He has been Marvin Bower Fellow at the Harvard Business School, distinguished visiting professor at the National University of Singapore and at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, and Fulbright Distinguished Chair in American Studies at the University of Frankfurt. From 1992-1998 he was Editor-in-Chief of the INFORMS journal *Information Systems Research*, and has served as associate editor of many other journals. He has been a member of the Board of the Computing Research Association (CRA) and has served on the Council of the Computing Community Consortium, run by the CRA for the National Science Foundation. He has been a member of the Advisory Committees for the National Science Foundation’s Directorates for Computer and Information Science and Engineering (CISE) and Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences (SBE), as well as the NSF Advisory Committee for Cyberinfrastructure (ACCI). He holds a PhD in administration from the University of California, Irvine, and an honorary doctorate in economics from Copenhagen Business School. He is a Fellow of the Association for Information Systems and a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Web site with research description and c.v. is [http://jlking.people.si.umich.edu/](http://jlking.people.si.umich.edu/)

**Edgar Whitley**

Edgar Whitley is in the Department of Management at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His present research and practical interests include global outsourcing, social aspects of IT-based change, collaborative innovation in an outsourcing context, and the business implications of cloud computing. Edgar has extensive teaching and executive education experience, and is also an expert in identity, privacy, and security issues relating to information and net-based technologies. Edgar is the co-editor for the journal Information Technology & People and was previously an associate editor for MIS Quarterly. His most recent book, written with Leslie Willcocks and Will Venters, is "Moving to the cloud corporation" (Palgrave 2014).

**Ron Weber**

Ron Weber was Dean, Faculty of Information Technology, Monash University from 2004 to 2012 and Pro Vice-Chancellor and Campus President of Monash South Africa in 2013. He is now retired, but he holds an emeritus professorship at Monash University and a part-time professorship at the University of Queensland. Ron specializes in the area of information systems development, particularly conceptual modeling. He is a past President of the Association for Information Systems and the Accounting and Finance Association of Australia and New Zealand. In 2000, he won the Australian Prime Minister's Award for University Teacher of the Year, and in 2012 he received the Association for Information Systems' Leo Award.

**Hope Koch**

Hope Koch is an Associate Professor in Baylor University’s IS program, where she leads the program's career development efforts. Hope has received numerous recognitions for her program-building efforts, including the ConocoPhillips Faculty Development Fellowship and the Southwestern Business Dean’s Association Innovative Achievement Award. Hope’s research focuses on solving organizational problems. Hope publishes in leading academic journals such as *MIS Quarterly, MIS Quarterly Executive and the European Journal of Information Systems (EJIS)*. In 2013, the European Journal of Information Systems and the Operations Research Society recognized her social networking research as the best paper published in 2012. Since 2002, Hope has chaired the Callaway Foundation which grants $500,000 in scholarship to high school seniors annually.
**David Firth (University of Montana), and Clayton Looney (University of Montana)**

Firth and Looney will serve as the panel’s organizers and facilitators. They are committed to raising awareness and creating forums to share strategies to critical issues facing the IS field.

5. References


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