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Paul Gray

Cremont Graduate University, paul.gray@cgu.edu

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Communications of the Association for Information Systems

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Journal Self-Citation I: Overview of the Journal Self-Citation Papers – The Wisdom of the IS Crowd

Paul Gray

Professor Emeritus, Claremont Graduate University

Paul.gray@cgu.edu

Abstract:

The author who sits on an editorial board received a request from that journal's publisher that articles which were submitted to them contain at least five references to that journal. The publisher stated that this request was common practice. A simple three-question, yes/no survey on AISWorld yielded overwhelming consensus that this journal self-citation practice is neither common, nor appropriate, nor ethical. The survey results are presented. In addition, a large number of respondents sent messages discussing their responses. The 21 papers that follow this introductory article are the result of a request to expand responses into short articles for CAIS. Many of the papers are based on solid analysis while others are detailed expositions of points of view. The papers are divided into four groups: analysis of impact factors (an important consideration), responses from editors, discussions of ethics, and analyses of related issues. Based on the responses, this article argues that the request for journal self-citation is a form of "payola" (pay to play) that is ethically inappropriate. The article is also an example of using the "wisdom of crowds" (Surowiecki 2004) as an alternative way to understand phenomena.

Keywords: journal self-citation, ethics, payola, wisdom of crowds, introduction to papers on journal self-citation

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Impetus

In February, I posted a short survey on *AISWorld* about a requirement set forth by the publisher of *Journal X* that articles published in that journal should contain at least five references to previous articles in that journal. This technique is known as *journal self-citation*. I asked for yes or no answers to three questions:

- Question 1: Is this practice common?
- Question 2: Is it appropriate?
- Question 3: Is it ethical?

The results were overwhelming: 126 responses, almost all within the first 48 hours on a U.S. holiday weekend. Furthermore, 97 of the respondents added substantive comments.¹ Obviously, the questions hit a nerve in the global information systems (IS) community.

Table 1 summarizes the responses numerically.

	Yes	No	Maybe	Don't Know	Low	Questionable or debatable	Did not answer specifically
Q1(common)	31	65	2	11	6		11
Q2(appropriate)	6	100	6				14
Q3(ethical)	3	97	6	4		4	12

Although the questions were asked in yes/no form, some people chose to submit extensive text as well.

1. The mode was NO to all three questions.
2. Not everyone answered every question. That explains the approximately 10 percent in the "did not answer specifically" column.
3. For "Is it common?" the usual answer was no. Of the 31 who said yes, 18 described experiences in which they were asked to add journal self-citations.
4. The ethical issue also showed strong consensus. The interesting answers are the ones that said yes, maybe, and questionable or debatable.

Be aware that this poll is unscientific from every aspect. Yet I believe it provides significant information on where the IS community stands on the issue.

The Origins of this Special Set of Papers

The large number of detailed survey responses led me to ask professor Ilze Zigurs, the editor in chief of *Communications of the Association for Information Systems (CAIS)*, whether the journal would be interested in publishing a series of short papers on the subject. She agreed and hence this special set of papers. The idea is analogous to a set of 12 papers that appeared in *CAIS* in 2003 under the series title "The Core of the IS Field." The impetus was an article by Benbasat and Zmud [2002].

¹ The full text of the comments can be found at <http://home.aisnet.org/associations/7499/files/responses.pdf>.

I invited a number of people who had submitted detailed, substantive discussions to the *AISWorld* survey to respond. Each was asked to write an article of approximately five pages. As you will see, 20 submitted papers are included in this special set of papers.

Diversity of the Authors

The authors of the papers include prestigious LEO and AIS Fellows, faculty, graduate students, a pure researcher, and three senior people in industry. They come from throughout the world (Australia, Canada, Denmark, Hong Kong, Slovenia, Sweden, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States). They encompass a range of ages and hence see the problem from different perspectives depending on where they are in their career. Thus, I believe the authors are a representative cross section of the people in our field.

Diversity of Methods

The methodologies used are also diverse. They include (in alphabetical order) bibliographic analysis, empirical survey, game theory, stakeholder analysis, statistical analysis, and systems thinking. Some papers are pure opinion.

How the Papers are Organized

The papers plus my own conclusions follow. The responses are divided into four groups:

1. *Impact factors*: Five papers that are intrigued by the (perhaps assumed) intent to manipulate journal ratings by journal self-referencing. Four of the five articles are by journal editors. In addition, I asked a colleague who had been involved in the use of Impact Factors when they were in their infancy to write an article that puts these factors into perspective.²
2. *Journal editors*: Two additional journal editors who examined a variety of positive and negative views of the practice.
3. *Ethical issues*: 10 quantitative and qualitative responses about the ethical issues involved.
4. *Additional considerations*: Three papers on related issues.

Although inevitably some papers could fall into two groups, I put each paper in only one group.

Section II describes the lessons I learned personally from the papers. Section III proposes a solution to the problem. Section IV summarizes some of the key ideas that were found and Section V introduces each of the 21 papers through a use of all or part of their abstract or conclusion.

II. WHAT I LEARNED

With 21 papers on a single topic, almost all facets of journal self-referencing are discussed at some level of detail. As I read through all of them, I came to three major conclusions:

1. The request for journal self-citation is a form of payola, or as it is known today, "pay to play."
2. All systems are competitive [Good and Machol 1957]. It's an old adage, The publisher's request is an example.
3. The concept of the "Wisdom of Crowds" [Surowiecki 2004] applies in two ways: in the results obtained and as a different way of doing research.

In the subsections that follow, I examine these three conclusions in inverse order. In addition, in the conclusions section I offer a possible solution for consideration by readers, editors, and publishers.

² This article, by David E. Drew, is the last article in this set of papers (Drew, 2009).

The Wisdom Of Crowds

In 2004 James Surowiecki, the long time business columnist for *The New Yorker Magazine*, published a seminal book titled *The Wisdom of Crowds*. His key argument was that large groups of people are smarter than individuals in such diverse areas as solving problems, innovation, decision making, and predicting the future. What is fascinating to me is that Surowiecki's idea also offers a new way of doing research. The sidebar summarizes the idea.

RESEARCH BY USING THE WISDOM OF CROWDS

A typical research paper in IS is written by a solitary author staring at his/her screen, describing experimentation or theory. Sometimes the authors form a small (two to four person) group but they come out with a single, agreed upon solution. People read the paper (assuming it is accepted), think about it, and some write a response, an elaboration, or a completely different viewpoint. The turnaround time to the next publication on the subject is sometimes a year but usually much longer. The field moves at a glacial pace.

Yet there are issues, such as the one discussed here, that really require much quicker turnaround and more than a single viewpoint. That is, people should look at the multiple facets of the problem before the community can come to a conclusion. Looking at multiple facets is quite hard for most individuals, particularly over a short period of time.

Here is where the Wisdom of Crowds comes in. A lot of people, in our case working in parallel, examine the problem quite quickly and apply their methodologies and ideas to it. They also uncover a huge amount of prior literature, much of it not known to the individual researcher. The result, for journal self-referencing and perhaps for many other conundrums, is that the problem is explored broadly and quite quickly. At this point, if the answer is not self evident, the lone, brilliant scholar (or doctoral student, for that matter) should be able to synthesize what should be done or what the true state(s) of nature are.

All Systems Are Competitive

Before the term systems engineering was used in computer science it was used to refer to large man/machine systems such as air traffic control and telephone networks. The original book on the subject [Goode and Machol 1957] contained four rules about such systems, of which the last was:

All systems are competitive.

That is, no matter how many safeguards (i.e., security) you apply, someone will always try to beat the system. Today we talk about "gaming the system."

The publisher's request for journal self-citations is, in my mind and that of some of the other authors, a prima facie example of gaming the system.

Pay to Play

Payola was a term invented around 1960 to refer to record companies paying a disc jockey to play their records on the air. Today, we talk about politicians and others requiring some form of payment to do favors, be they campaign contributions or bribes. The most visible recent case is that of Governor Blagojevich of Illinois when filling a Senate seat. In the present instance, the journal and publisher involved told authors that they must cite references to be published. In other words, pay to play.

III. A PROPOSED SOLUTION: "TO DIG DEEPER"

Pay to play is perhaps the key ethical issue in asking authors to add journal self-citations. As professionals we believe that it is not our role, in effect, to march around the communications commons wearing a walking billboard advertising the journal. We are not shills.³

Framed in this way, it is clear to me that the technical content and the advertising content of an article must be separate. The easiest way to do so is to put the advertising outside the article. For many years commercial magazines have put lists of other articles at the end of a story, usually with a headline such as *To Dig Deeper* or

³ The term 'shill' refers to people hired by the company to praise a product for them. Often used in casinos, at auctions, and in advertising for people who are seemingly neutral but are actually hired for the purpose.

Related Articles, followed by the titles and bibliographic reference of related articles. For example, *Information Week* and *Scientific American* do so.

The details of what and where such information is presented would depend on the journal. For example, if the accepting associate editor for an article explains why the article is important, this information could be included there. Many other arrangements are feasible. But the basic principle is to separate the work of the author from the billboard.

IV. SUMMARY OF PAPERS

As you will see, each of the 21 papers in this special set takes a different approach to journal self-citation. Yet a belief that runs through almost all of them is that the journal's impact factor rating is at the heart of the issue. Following is a summary of the wisdom of the IS crowd:

1. Impact factors, created by Thomson Reuters Scientific (originally known as ISI), are important metrics in the discussion. Therefore, several authors applied bibliometric and statistical techniques to examine the volatility of these metrics when comparing results with and without journal self-citation.
2. Some journals request journal self-citations in an effort to increase the journal's impact factor. However, ISI publishes impact factors both with and without journal self-citation. While the former are increased, the impact factor scores without journal self-citation are not. But the latter are harder to find in the published data.
3. The AIS Code of Research Conduct, agreed to by all who publish in AIS journals, was examined to determine how it applies to journal self-citation. These researchers argue that it does.
4. Authors and editors generally (but not always) offer different viewpoints. Authors generally see self-citation requirements as inappropriate and not ethical, whereas some editors see self-citation as a way of attracting readers and perhaps increasing their journal's impact factor.
5. There is a circular situation here. People seek to publish their work in journals with a high impact factor because that is considered desirable by tenure and promotion committees (such committees confuse impact factor of the journal and quality of the paper). Such journals receive a reputation for quality and an increase in submissions results. Since journals work with finite resources, they cannot expand the number of papers they publish quickly. If their size is limited by budgets then, as their input climbs, they accept an ever smaller proportion of the number of papers submitted. However, that is considered a good thing because impact factors increase as the selectivity of the journal (measured by percent rejected) increases. The irony is that people are submitting to journals where they are ever more likely to be declined (there's always hope). The journals themselves are stretched ever thinner in trying to find referees for papers, since good referees are an extremely scarce resource. The journal takes a longer and longer time between when a paper is received and when it is accepted, and even longer to actually publish. The poor authors, who make the mistake of submitting to a leading journal that declined them, must rewrite the paper slightly and send it to a new journal. At that point, the cycle begins again. When offering the paper sequentially to several journals is required to publish a paper, years can elapse. Of course, by that time the paper is likely obsolete and may never find a home.

These and other problems raised by journal self-citation are discussed in the individual papers.

Order of the Papers

The papers in this special set (and their abstracts) are presented in four groups:

1. Analysis of impact factors and their role
2. Views of journal editors
3. Authors' views of the ethics involved

Additional considerations Within each group, papers are listed alphabetically by first author. For multiple authors, the first author is not necessarily the person who led the effort for the paper.



Impact Factors

Of the 21 papers, five analyzed the Thomson-Reuters impact factors. These are original research papers, some done in a short period of time, while others (e.g., Holsapple, Romano) reflect long term research streams. Of the five papers in this category, four are written by people who also edit journals. A sixth paper by Drew, at the end of this series, looks at impact factors from a historical perspective.

Clyde Holsapple: *The Quest for High Impact – Truth and Consequences*

We conclude that use of JIFs in university decision making should be undertaken only with great caution, alternative decision inputs should be considered, and that judging the impact of a specific article by the journal in which it appears is questionable.

Eldon Y. Li: *Exploring the Self-Citation Patterns in MIS Journals*

This study examines

...the cited table and the citing table in the database of Journal Citation Reports and identifies the self-cited and self-citing patterns of MIS journals included in this database. Through a descriptive analysis, influential as well as problematic journals are identified and the implications for journal stakeholders are discussed.

The analysis is based on three groups of journals: (1) 11 IS journals listed in the Social Science Citation Index, (2) nine IS journals listed in the Science Citation Index, and (3) nine journals in related fields (e.g., management science, marketing, applied psychology) with much larger circulations than IS journals. He finds that almost without exception, IS journals do much less self-citation than major journals in other fields. However, he identifies one IS journal that, starting in 2004, moved from less than 10 percent to the order of 60 percent journal self-citations.

Prashant Palvia, Shailendra Palvia, and M. Naveed Baqir: *Citations Analysis of IS Journals – Separating Facts from Fiction*

Results show that the practice of self-citation is fairly common among both [top tier and non top tier] journals. Additional analyses showed that the preference for top tier citations was more prevalent in top tier journals than in non top tier journals. Supported by the data, we provided several arguments for these practices.

Nicholas Romano: *Coercive Journal Self-Citation – Manipulations to Increase Impact Factors May do More Harm Than Good in the Long Run*

I present empirical and editorial support that practices and policies of editors, publishers, authors, and reviewers intended to raise a journal's impact factors by any means other than publishing the highest quality original work of authors may in fact do more harm than good to the journal and to the academy as a whole. Finally, I echo the call of those that have studied and written on the issue to abandon the practice for the sake of scientific integrity.

Detmar W. Straub and Chad Anderson: *Forced Journal Self-Citation – Common, Appropriate, Ethical?*

We introduce a statistical perspective.... We find that journal self-citations do influence journal impact factors, a measure of journal quality and a tool for many schools in their promotion and tenure process. We suggest that forced self-citations are not considered appropriate by community standards nor are they ethical in terms of the greatest good. We therefore propose that impact factors be disseminated both with and without self-citations to make the practice of forced self-citation more transparent to the IS community. An example of the proposal is shown.

Journal Editors

In addition to the four journal editors included in the previous section, two other editors, Murray Jennex and Raghav Rao, responded. Both see problems and merit in journal self-citation.

Murray E. Jennex: *Building a Body of Knowledge*

This article accepts that it is unethical to require a set number but takes the position that there are several ethical and necessary reasons for editors to require additional relevant citations/references. The arguments presented are from the perspective of a journal editor-in-chief.

...two sets of relationships are explored. The ... author-reader ... and the author-institution or community relationship. In these dual relationships, the author is considered to be an IS researcher who publishes and disseminates knowledge through the channel of research journals. ... these twofold relationships ... go beyond the common belief that the author is the sole and autonomous source of knowledge creation and distribution. We posit that (1) an author cannot exist isolated from the reader, and (2) an author exists only as a part of an institutional system which opens and at the same time constrains an author's knowledge production. In other words, an author is destined to create knowledge within the constrained system, and for that very reason, it is important to understand the author as a function of conditional discourse of a specific institution. We conclude that editors' request for an author to cite papers from a journal to which one is submitting an article is ethically critical to (1) build a good author-reader relationship, and (2) produce rich and plural knowledge which is "good" for advancing learning in the global community.

Ethical Issues

The 10 papers in this section deal with various aspects of the ethics of the journal self-citation problem.

Niels Bjørn-Andersen and Suprateek Sarker: *The Power of the Unspoken in Journal Referencing*

Publication of articles in so called reputed journals and achieving high citation counts for the publications are becoming increasingly important in establishing the scientific achievements of individual scholars and institutions. Given that a journal's reputation is based predominantly on the extent to which its articles are cited, some editors, reviewers, and journal publishers tend to overtly request references to their articles or journals. This is justifiably found unethical by many of us. However, we shall argue that such explicit requests for referencing are only the top of the iceberg. There is a widespread covert understanding among potential authors that unless they cite work of editors and/or have references to the journal, where one is submitting a manuscript, the probability of getting the paper accepted for publication may suffer. This consideration is a much more powerful influence than the overt requests some may have experienced as authors. Overt as well as covert activities aimed at bumping up individual and journal citations is a dysfunctional result of an increasingly competitive scholarly environment, where the value of success is high, and failure is a very unpleasant option. In the short run, making the community aware of dysfunctional behaviors with respect to citations might help counteract the most blatant exertion of power. However, addressing the more covert use of power requires a more in depth look at ourselves, and the way we conduct and assess scholarship. In the long run, the IS field may even need to seriously assess the extent to which our research efforts serve standards primarily internal to our field (similar to rites of other tribes) rather than delivering value to society.

Ilia Bider: *Requirements on References – Can They Be Justified?*

The paper discusses a possibility of introducing quantitative and qualitative requirements on references in academic publications.... Quantitative requirements concern the number of references, while qualitative requirements concern types of publications to which the references are made. To reach the goal, the classification of contexts of reference usage is suggested. It differentiates three categories of references, namely: (1) references to foundations of the current research, (2) references to the core knowledge in the discipline, and (3) references to (loosely) related research works. Possibilities of introducing quantitative and qualitative requirements for the first two categories of references are limited. For the third category of references, both quantitative and qualitative requirements can be justified. Based on the suggested classification, the paper also discusses such issues as meaning of the impact factors and misuse of references.

Roger Clarke, Robert Davison, and Cynthia M. Beath: *Regulation of "Journal Self-Referencing" – The Substantive Role of the AIS Code of Research Conduct*

[Note: The authors are the committee that updated the AIS Code of Research Conduct]

The practice of a publisher requiring authors to include citations to previous articles in the publisher's journals is widely acknowledged to be inappropriate. This paper presents the reasons why that is so. It considers possible means whereby the practice could be subjected to control, and concludes that the primary regulatory vehicle is the Code of Research Conduct of the Association for Information Systems (AIS). The framework created by the original 2003 Code is described, and the extensions approved in principle by the AIS Council in December 2008 are shown to greatly enhance the discipline's ability to bring pressure to bear on publishers that misbehave in this way.



Janna M.Crews, Alexander McLeod, and Mark G. Simpson: *The Ethics of Forced Journal Citations*

This paper uses stakeholder theory to model the positions of both authors and journal representatives. We also used two empirical surveys to answer the questions (1) how ethical are such requests, and (2) how common are they? Our initial, stakeholder analysis suggests that neither authors nor the IS profession at large is likely to consider such requests ethical. Our empirical surveys suggest that, although about a third of the respondents had encountered such requests, most agreed that such requests are unethical.

Geoffrey N. Dick: *The Ethics of Influencing the Peer Review Process – An Essay*

There is no ethical support for a request from an editor to cite previous works in a journal to which the author is submitting work. [The paper] posits that higher values should exist in academia and that the reviewer's task is difficult enough. The paper ... tries to put this in the context of a supportive ethical framework, without success. It then ... considers the roles and responsibilities of reviewers and editors more generally. The paper concludes by calling for openness and honesty in the review process with only changes for the good of the article being proposed.

Brian Janz: *Right versus Right – Gaining Clarity into the Ethical Dilemma of Editorial Self-Referencing*

Rather than dismissing (the practice of editorial 'self-referencing') behavior as patently unethical, this paper seeks to better understand the possible motivations for this editorial behavior. The notion of the ethical dilemma is introduced, as well as a framework to assist in analyzing them. Ultimately, the analysis suggests that while editors may feel they have worthwhile reasons for requiring self-citation, the potential long term risks to the journal, the academy, and the body of knowledge outweigh those reasons.

Mary C. Jones: *The Quest for High Quality Research in IS – Unintended Side Effects*

This paper addresses the research quality produced and published by the IS academic community by providing a lens through which future in depth discussion of the issues raised can be framed. It uses a systems thinking approach to do so, and argues that the discipline may be caught in a vicious cycle of unintended consequences (side effects) that has arisen because of our focus on achieving quality. The paper provides examples of the side effects and posits that we must address these in the short run to increase the quality of both inputs (research conducted and submitted to journals) and outputs (the journals themselves).

Shirlee-ann Knight: *Academic Citations – A Question of Ethics?*

This paper examines the common, and highly complex, practice of academic citation use. Citations - and their analysis - are seen as fundamental to the provenance of scientific investigation and publication, and therefore deserving of a public discourse in how to best ethically frame; (1) citation-analysis methodologies; (2) academic citation behavior; and (3) peer review and publisher citation behavior. These three aspects are examined in the context of their potential to distort the scientific process and intellectual honesty.

Joseph Sarkis: *Editorial Self-Citation Requests – A Commentary*

Journal self-citation requests may be viewed as impinging on an author's academic freedom and could be construed as an unethical or unprofessional request. In this commentary we argue that it is not necessarily the case that all, or even many, of these requests cross the line into unprofessional or unethical behavior. There are a number of institutional and stakeholder forces that play a role in this seemingly simple editorial request. These forces arise because of the environment that is faced by editors, authors, publishers, and their audiences. We discuss ... the various motivating forces and the responses to them. Rather than rushing to alter our codes of ethical editorial conduct, we need to take a careful look at our research and publication environment to determine the reason editors would make journal self-citation requests.

Bob Travica: *A Tale of Kings, Serfs, and Liberation*

The relationship between mainstream publishers and academics (authors, editors) in North America resembles the relationship between the king and serfs in the Middle Ages. I discuss why this situation is no longer acceptable and outline a possibility of change.

Additional Considerations

This group of three papers center on additional professional aspects of the journal self-citation problem. Specifically, they consider issues of plagiarism and self-plagiarism, determining the “fit” of a paper to a journal, and the implications of inappropriate citations on bibliographic measures of productivity.

Roger Clarke: *Self-Plagiarism and Self-Citation – A Practical Guide Based on Underlying Principles*

When is it reasonable to re-use work of your own, particularly if it has already been published? And when is it appropriate to cite your own works, and when is it inappropriate? Rather than being mysteries, this paper suggests that basic principles of academic communication and professional ethics provide a framework for each of us to make our own decisions, and to evaluate actions taken by others.

Peter Trkman: *Citations and the Question of Fit*

The paper reviews several reasons why a number of self citations in a journal paper may indicate the fit of a paper to a scope of a journal. It shows how the calculation of impact factors and their thoughtless use for promotion/funding can encourage unethical behavior of editors and reviewers. Those actions may considerably hinder the objectiveness of scientific research and compromise the quality of search engines like Google Scholar that use the number of citations as an important source for ranking results.

Eleanor Wynn: *Bibliography as Artifact – How Citations Are Data*

Citation rates are important criteria for judging an author's impact in the research community or discipline. They form one of many indicators of research quality that help people less familiar with a field understand the effectiveness of a research paper or individual. The contents of a bibliography or set of references are also markers that help orient the reader to the framework of a piece of writing. Lately journal publishers have paid increased attention to citation rates as more and more journals vie to be included in abstracting and indexing services. These lists act as a filter for libraries and bulk subscription brokers, so they can affect circulation and hence revenue. Because of this, some journals ... specify how many citations are needed for a paper to be considered. This paper argues that commercial considerations must not outweigh the primary academic purpose of a citation list. Not only are there a host of conventions associated with citations that arise from author integrity and community relationships, but the bibliography is itself research data for another discipline. Compelling and precise portraits of researchers can be derived from such data. A case from library science on the late Rob Kling's sources illustrates the value of preserving the integrity of citations for the purpose of building and understanding a discipline, not a revenue stream.

Historical Considerations

David E. Drew: *On the Journal Impact Factor – A Historical Perspective*

This paper puts a historical perspective on the use of Impact Factors. It describes how Impact Factors were used in a U.S. National Research Council project 35 years ago to evaluate the improvements that resulted from a billion dollar NSF University Science Development project. Impact Factor rankings proved to have a remarkably high correlation to science departments rankings obtained from a different source. The paper also considers additional policy aspects of impact factors.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

I am incredibly impressed by the papers that were contributed to this special set. The contributors were asked for an opinion piece. All presented a solid analysis, often using the techniques of our field.

A few who were asked to contribute could not respond on the short timeline because their plate was full with end of semester or personal problems. Each is being asked to contribute a letter to the editor once the papers are published.

In addition, I invite each of you who read this special set of papers also to write a letter to the editor. The discussion is far from finished.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Gray was the founding editor of *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*, serving from 1999 through 2005, and he is currently on the Senior Editorial board of the journal. He was awarded a LEO in 2002. He is a Fellow of the AIS and of INFORMS. Paul is Professor Emeritus of Information Systems and Technology at Claremont Graduate University.

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