MAKING AN IMPACT IN A PUBLISH-OR-PERISH WORLD

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MAKING AN IMPACT IN A PUBLISH-OR-PERISH WORLD

Panels

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1 Introduction

The ultimate goal of every researcher is arguably that her or his research has an impact. Research impact is broadly defined as “the demonstrable contribution that research makes to the economy, society, culture, national security, public policy or services, health, the environment, or quality of life, beyond contributions to academia” (Australian Research Council 2015).

At the same time, however, in order to advance their careers, researchers are increasingly pressured to publish in top-tier journals (e.g., the AIS Senior Scholars’ Basket of Eight in the case of the IS discipline), often referred to as “publish or perish”. This is particularly true for young scholars, including PhD students and assistant professors, who are subject to constant evaluation and who still need to ‘fight’ for their raison d’être in the world of academia. To get the desperately needed top-tier publications, in today’s publishing world, researchers must navigate through a review process that may take years for a single paper. And, in many top journals, far less than ten percent of the paper submissions that start this treacherous and lengthy journey are eventually accepted and published in these journals.

To make things worse, while one could expect that publishing in top-tier journals should go hand in hand with making a research impact, this is unfortunately not necessarily the case. Here, for example, one may argue that while top-tier publications are primarily concerned with addressing specific research gaps and answering specific research questions related to these gaps, research impact is concerned with solving real-life problems (outside of academia). Relatedly, a published research study may have a very short half-life and/or never be cited.

In this context, Samir Chatterjee—IS professor at Claremont Graduate University—recently initiated a much-noticed discussion about the “Most Influential Information Systems Papers”. In an email distributed via the AISWorld mailing list in summer 2016, he voiced his concerns that, in the IS community, “we periodically tend to talk about elite journals by name [but] very seldom do we take the time to actually discuss what papers/content published in these journals actually have an influence” (i.e., not only high citations but also real-world impact). Put differently, he sees “our field as obsessed about journal prestige but very little attention is paid to what work has actually benefitted mankind.” A controversial debate involving IS scholars from all over the world unfolded: Some scholars expressed their agreement and sometimes even expanded the voiced criticism on current IS publication practices (e.g., narrow focus of top IS journals on behavioral research and general management topics; strong focus on “bean counting” when it comes to hiring, tenure, and promotion processes; publishing for the sake of “mutual admiration”), whereas others largely rejected the voiced criticism, for example, by noting that knowledge itself is a “beautiful asset” that may or may not have immediate practical value.

The polarity of this debate can be seen as one indication that we, the members of the IS community, still need to engage in a broader discussion of what constitutes impactful IS research in order to develop a more uniform understanding of research impact within the IS discipline. Further, the debate also illustrates that today’s academic scholars—especially those just starting their careers—are faced with numerous, very difficult decisions about how to proceed in this ‘perilous’ world. To start with, they...
need to decide on a topic of study that will not soon show to be a fad, but that actually has the potential to make an impact (whatever that exactly means). But then, what are the most promising pathways to eventually make a research impact? Here, because of the complexity of research topics and the tools that are being used to explore them, it may be necessary to join a team. So, how does one select collaborators? And as research teams tend to steadily grow in size, how can one’s contribution on these teams be seen and appreciated? Also, how can one’s publications become visible in a sea of publications? Or, since it is getting harder and harder for any one article to be visible, should one even bother with publishing articles?

The proposed panel is designed to help researchers, especially those just starting their academic careers, find some answers to these questions. A panel whose members have been recognized for their impactful research around the globe will provide some guidance for living in a publish-or-perish world.

The overarching goal of the panel is to initiate a discussion on the essential topic of research impact within the IS discipline. In particular, the panel aims to contribute to the development of a more uniform but also more diverse understanding, and appreciation, of different approaches to making an impact with IS research.

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2 Issues and Dilemma

The central dilemma addressed by the proposed panel can be summarized as follows:

In today’s publish-or-perish world, IS researchers face increasing pressure to publish in top-tier journals (e.g., AIS Senior Scholars’ Basket of Eight). For example, hiring, tenure-track, and promotion decisions are often primarily based on a candidate’s publication record. Consequently and not surprisingly, scholars, especially young scholars, are increasingly shifting their sole focus on publishing in such outlets. On the other hand, there are highly controversial discussions on the real-life impact of research published in top-tier journals (see, for example, the discussion initiated by Samir Chatterjee on AISWorld in summer 2016). The polarity of these discussions can, at least partly, be traced back to very different understandings within the IS community of what research impact actually is (and how to measure it). Here, common definitions of research impact provide only limited guidance, as they seem to be very generic (see definition above). Another issue with existing definitions relates to the question of whether research impact necessarily requires contributions beyond academia (see also definition above), or whether sole contributions to academia can constitute a ‘sufficient’ impact as well.

This dilemma is further intensified by the rising pressure universities and researchers face from funding agencies to conduct impactful research and to “give back” to key stakeholders, including students, society, businesses, and tax payers in general. For example, based on the insights gained from an international ‘impact of research’ study, the Chair of the AACSB Board of Directors concludes that “in the future, business schools will have to be more strategic about their research investments and more explicit about assessing the return—not because AACSB will require it, but because stakeholders are starting to demand it” (AACSB 2012, p. 4).

3 Panel Structure

All participants/panellists have made a commitment to attend ECIS 2017 in Guimarães and serve on the panel.

4 Panellists

The panellists have been recognized for their impactful research around the globe, and represent the perspectives of different countries/regions (Australia, Germany, Sweden, and USA) with partly unique research cultures (and thus also with potentially different understandings of research impact and different approaches to achieving such impact).
Panellists (in alphabetical order):

- **Samir Chatterjee** (Professor, Claremont Graduate University, USA) is considered a leading technology designer and strategist for 21st-century health care, especially in the emerging field of persuasive technology. He founded several companies (VoiceCore Technologies Inc., and DCL Health), directs the IDEA Labs that he founded, and works closely with the venture capital and entrepreneurial startup community in the Southern California area. Since 2006, he has been an evangelist of design science as a research method in the IS community. Among other things, he started the successful DESRIST series of conferences and co-authored the book Design Research in Information Systems: Theory & Practice (with Alan Hevner). One of his design research methodology (DSRM) paper that appeared in JMIS is the most cited paper in the IS community in the last 10 years. Prof. Chatterjee will share his initial findings from the community-wide discussions that took place. He also believes that time has come for IS to look beyond journal prestige and focus more on research that matters.

- **Alan Dennis** (Professor, Indiana University, USA) holds the John T. Chambers Chair of Internet Systems in the Kelley School of Business at Indiana University. He has won numerous awards for theoretical and applied research. He was the founding Publisher of MIS Quarterly Executive and currently is Editor-in-Chief of AIS Transactions on Replication Research. In 2012, he was named a Fellow of the AIS. Over the years, Prof. Dennis has developed several software systems and technology start-ups, and his current focus is on using big data and analytics to help parents select baby names (NameInsights.com). Prof. Dennis will briefly discuss three “high-impact” projects that resulted in second-tier journal articles, but had noticeable economic impacts (US$1 billion per year), quality of life impacts (1 million people per year), and cultural impacts (300 popular press stories), and contrast them with more traditional forms of scholarship.

- **Shirley Gregor** (Professor, Australian National University, Australia) is Director of her College’s Innovation Hub at the Australian National University (ANU). Before beginning an academic career, she spent a number of years in the computing industry in Australia and the UK. Prof. Gregor has led several large applied research projects funded by the Meat Research Corporation, the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, the Australian Research Council and AusAID. Her publications include 4 edited books, 15 book chapters, and over 100 papers in conferences and top-tier journals. Prof. Gregor was inaugural President of the Australasian Association of Information Systems and Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of the AIS, and was made an Officer of the Order of Australia 2005 for services as an educator and researcher in the agribusiness sector. She will talk about metrics for research impact that are being introduced in some national research systems and the impact these metrics have on academics’ behavior.

- **Magnus Mähring** (Professor, Stockholm School of Economics, Sweden) is responsible for strategic internationalization initiatives at SSE and serves as SSE’s representative on the CEMS Executive Board. He regularly contributes to international conferences, has co-edited three books, and published in journals such as MIS Quarterly, Information Systems Research, and California Management Review. He also serves as a government expert to Swedish ministries and agencies, and has extensive consulting experience, including assignments for organizations such as Bang & Olufsen, Microsoft, SAS, and The Swedish Red Cross. Prof. Mähring has been a regular columnist in the CIO Sweden professional magazine, is on the jury for the Swedish CIO Awards, leads the meetings of a Stockholm-based CIO Executive Club, and regularly teaches executive audiences. He will talk about strategies for making practice impact research and research impact practice. In particular, he will elaborate on how to build and nurture a personal “eco-system” that enables cross-fertilization between high-quality research and situated CIO practice.
• **Peter Mertens** (Professor emeritus, University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany) held the first business informatics chair in the German-speaking part of Europe at the University of Linz. He wrote and co-authored 77 books—including translations into Chinese, English, Italian and Russian—and published almost 600 articles in journals and edited books/volumes. One of his books was released in 18 editions. He is a Fellow of the German Informatics Society, and has received honorary doctorates from five universities in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. He was honored with The Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany and the Ring of Honor of the Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU). Prof. Mertens likes to stress that publishing is only one ‘discipline’ of the “Decathlon of the University Professor”. His former PhD students founded numerous companies, now employing several thousand people.

Panel chairs/moderators:

• **Carol Saunders** is Research Professor at the W. A. Franke College of Business at Northern Arizona University (USA). Carol has received the LEO award in Information Systems and the Lifetime Achievement Award from the OCIS Division of the Academy of Management (AoM). She served on a number of editorial boards, as Editor-in-Chief of MIS Quarterly, as General Conference Chair of ICIS 1999, and as Program Co-Chair of AMCIS 2015. She now serves on several editorial boards including Organization Science, AIS Transactions on Replication Research, and Journal of Strategic Information Systems. She is AIS Vice President of Publications. Carol has extensive experience with organizing panel discussions at major international conferences, including ICIS and the annual meetings of the AoM. She also served as Panel Track Co-Chair of ICIS 2012.

• **Martin Wiener** is an Associate Professor in the Information and Process Management (IPM) Department at Bentley University (USA). He is also an Affiliated Researcher at the Stockholm School of Economics Institute for Research (Sweden) and the Friedrich-Alexander University (FAU) Erlangen-Nürnberg (Germany). He regularly contributes to international conferences and has published in journals such as EJIS, ISJ, JIT, JSIS, and MIS Quarterly. Martin served as track co-chair at ECIS 2013, 2014, and 2016. He currently serves as an Associate Editor for the Information Systems Journal and as an Editorial Board Member for Information & Management. From 2010 to 2016, Martin acted as Managing Director of an international research center at FAU in Germany. In this role, he gained considerable experience in organizing and moderating panel discussions with thought leaders and experts from academia and practice.

5 **Target Audience**

We expect the proposed panel to be of particular interest to:

• Young IS scholars (i.e., PhD students, post docs, and assistant professors) who need to manage the often delicate balance between publishing in top-tier journals (answering research questions) and making an impact with their research (solving real-life problems)

• IS researchers who supervise PhD students and/or mentor early-career scholars

• Deans and faculty members who serve on hiring, tenure-track, and promotion committees

• Editors of IS journals who aim to (further) increase the impact of research published in their journals

• Members of review committees mandated with evaluating the research output of universities, IS departments, etc. (e.g., on behalf of accreditation bodies such as AACSB)

6 **Suitability to ECIS Audience**

Generally, the topic of ‘research impact’ should be of great concern to any IS researcher. Also, a significant proportion of ECIS participants tend to be young IS scholars to whom the panel topic will be
of particular interest and who likely benefit the most from the advice/guidance given by the panelists. We thus believe that the proposed panel fits very well with the ECIS audience.

References