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Dov Te‘eni
Michel Avital
Tilo Bohmann
Emma Coleman
Monideepa Tarafdar

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THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC ASSOCIATIONS IN BUILDING BRIDGES ACROSS COUNTRIES AND CULTURES

Panel

Dov Te'eni, Tel Aviv University, Israel, teeni@tau.ac.il
Michel Avital, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark, michel@avital.net
Tilo Böhmann, University of Hamburg, Germany, Tilo.Boehmann@uni-hamburg.de
Emma Coleman, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, emma.coleman@wits.ac.za
Monideepa Tarafdar, University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA, mtarafdar@isenberg.umass.edu

Abstract

Recent turbulent events worldwide make it pressing to ask ourselves as members of the Association for Information Systems (AIS), what roles can and should the academic association play in the world beyond its professional charter. The panelists first present several initiatives of collective action for social good, and then critically argue for and against taking such action. We aim to set the ground for gauging the opinions and priorities of the audience as a message to the AIS on its mandate.

Keywords: Academic associations, Social responsibility, Activism, Special Collaboration Groups, Social good, AIS mandate.

1 Aims and Goals

Socially-responsible individuals are not only aware of how personal actions have an effect on their communities but also engage as agents of world benefit. Naturally, such individuals leverage their expertise and professional networks to generate social goods. With the growing and critical dependency of people around the world on digital technology, academic associations, such as the Association for Information Systems (AIS) must wrestle with the questions of what is the extent of their social responsibility activities and what is their role in enabling and empowering its members to engage in social action. The panel aims to explore whether an international professional association representing a diverse community, such as AIS, should engage with or refrain from other affairs that do not relate directly to its core professional objectives. This panel will focus on enabling and empowering people by promoting the use of digital technology for collaborative action in times of crisis and in times of calm. We will examine the role of AIS as an association of educators and researchers who understand the potential of digital technology to facilitate collaborative action across social, cultural and economic boundaries. In particular, we will examine the feasibility and impact of collaborative action across boundaries on normal days and in days of crisis, including natural disasters as well as human inflicted crises. Overall, we seek to evoke provocative ideas and generative thinking with regard to the future of collective action orchestrated by AIS and its membership. At a minimum, we hope that the panel will stimulate new insights into the potential role of our community in leveraging information technology for social good.
2 Panel Structure and Themes

The panel is intended to generate varied responses to two thematic rounds. The panel is designed to stimulate an engaging discussion that not only appeals to a broad audience but also provides practical insights and lively debate. The panel comprises a team of five panelists who have significant experience in various aspects of human-centric system design and played various roles in AIS and its affiliated organizations and conferences. The panel will follow a roundtable discussion format. Following an introduction by Dov Te’eni, the moderator, the panelists will address the initial set of questions, and then the audience will be invited to voice their opinions in response to the panelists’ remarks, or question them about the topic.

2.1 Round I: What can we do and what do we need in order to do it?

Monideepa: A bridge between academia and the outside world (e.g. industry, governments, think tanks, city councils) without borders, with an emphasis on industry for social good. Each of these links is a bidirectional link that is a win-win collaboration. Let’s push further to facilitate such links across countries in the region by capitalizing on relationships formed within our academic community to create and strengthen ties with entities.

For this I propose that AIS (and similar scholarly associations) develop knowledge repositories covering different dimensions of activities of its members that members can draw on. For the AIS, the primary focus of such repositories has been IS research and teaching. However, it is hard to find repositories that shed light on how IS scholars can engage in impact related activities to help companies, non-profits and government organizations use the fruits of IS research. Let me expand on potential actions that AIS can take in order to build this kind of knowledge resource, based on my own experiences of impact related work.

Michel: We can leverage our expertise and professional network to promote grassroots activities for social good (e.g., reducing carbon emissions, replenishing the land, saving the bees, and helping refugees) as well as other, perhaps not universally, worthy crusades (e.g., fostering democratic values, and promoting equality and fair equity distribution).

As an international body representing a diverse community, a professional association such as AIS is bound by the articles of association and should avoid other affairs that do not relate directly to its core professional objectives. However, the association can provide space for grassroots-driven initiatives of its members. An association can lend its organizational infrastructure to the formation of Special Collaboration Groups (SCGs) that operate, just like SIGs and Chapters, to advance a specific area of action where a subset of members collaborates to affect or produce objectives of choice that deem of utmost importance. In our case, AIS can set the ground rules for the formation and activities of SCGs by AIS members.

Emma: My suggestion relates to how we can apply our knowledge and skills as IS academics to the area of ‘reverse innovations’. There are many examples of innovations that have been developed independently in developing countries to address a specific need allowing for greater inclusion of citizens (for example, USSD and M-PESA in Africa, or PhonePe in India). In many cases, these cater to those who are ‘unbanked’ and/or who tend to work as informal traders or relate to access to healthcare. In some cases, it may be that these innovations from developing countries would provide benefits to people in developed countries who are digitally excluded.

In the first instance, I argue that IS academics should conduct research in this area, ensuring (somehow) that our publication outlets are open to accepting this kind of research. Thus strengthening the bridge from the outside (developing context) into academia. However, given the lack of a ‘bridge’ between academia and practice in the field, this may not be enough to encourage impact on inclusion in developed countries. Another option is to apply Michel’s idea of Special Collaboration Groups to the specific area of action of ‘reverse innovation’. I would also recommend Action Research that is publishable as a methodology for researchers to pilot some reverse innovations in developed countries. We also need to
consider the different potential stakeholders involved and our role in encouraging collaboration between them.

**Tilo:** The community has been promoting research on collaborative action with impact beyond academia. I will share our set-up for and experience with the AIS impact award, showcasing a few examples of how teams of researchers, sometimes working across borders, have created business, regulatory, and/or social impact.

Following my previous colleagues, we can invest in building the necessary infrastructure. Going from the AIS impact awards, we can leverage the idea of a repository of examples, i.e., exemplary, collaborative work with impact. Then we have Monideepa’s idea of a repository of knowledge on how to engage for impact. And Michel’s idea of collaborative action/initiatives can build on this further. This could describe different horizons for collaboration for impact and how far an academic community can or should go in this direction.

### 2.2 Round II: Should we do it?

**Tilo:** We have seen that there are many promising ways for us as an academic community to build bridges beyond academia. Now the question is which of these options we should pursue not only as individuals but also through our community organizations, such as AIS. While my colleagues will explore the possibilities let me start out with some words of caution. The more we move towards collective action towards specific societal goals, the more we will have to take decisions based on societal values that we see as worthwhile pursuing. And while I recognize that there are no decisions that are independent of specific values, the set of values expands that we will have to deliberate on as a community. So I sense some degree of tension between focusing on a narrower, academic set of values that facilitate building bridges within the community and a more expansive set of values that can help build bridges beyond academia but may risk some of the connections that we might have within the community. In addition, at what point do we run the risk to overestimate the powers of our community. There are many forms of collective action in our society, often specialized in pursuing and achieving particular goals. Should we not rather join or support such efforts as individual academics if we feel these goals are worth achieving? Are we in a better position as an academic community to reach such goals? So maybe it is helpful to reflect on the different horizons that we have elaborated in the first round, starting from recognizing impactful work via developing our individual capabilities as researchers to engage beyond academia and reaching to establishing forms of organized collective action with goals of impact. How far can we go, how far should we go, and how far do we want to go as a community rather than as individuals?

**Michel:** I enter this debate with the question of whether international associations that represent communities of practice or communities of scholars should get involved in discussion and action of urgent current affairs beyond their respective core interests, e.g., in our case, the study of digital technology and information systems.

Is it appropriate to ignore the world outside the professional bounds? One may argue that we should keep an objective (or value-free) position and focus only on the subject matter of our practice. However, can we say that any position is objective and not value-laden? Perhaps this is an old debate between objectivists and constructionists. Regardless, if we argue that the world is interlinked and we cannot separate our practice from its context, then it begs the question of how can an international association that represents a diverse community engage in such inherently controversial discussion and action in a constructive fashion?

The formation of Special Collaboration Groups (SCGs) that advance specific areas of action where a subset of members collaborates to affect or produce common objectives of choice seems like a potent pragmatic mechanism. The formation of SCGs can empower a critical mass of members to follow their hearts while not committing the association and the membership at large to any activity that does not relate directly to its core professional objectives.
Monideepa: My position is that yes, we should if our interests and expertise allow. We should do it with both confidence and humility. We live in an inter-connected world, and building bridges that lead outside our academic homes, should we choose to do it, can be both meaningful and fun. Our approach should be collaborative and take into account the greater good. Associations such as the AIS can help by providing members with material from which they can draw relevant information and develop pertinent skills and worldviews. 

Emma: My question for the audience and panel is ‘does the AIS/do IS academics have a role to play in actively promoting reverse innovation’?

These may be two different questions, as the role of individual academics may be different than the role of the AIS as an institution.

I agree with Michel that the AIS can play a role in supporting the formation and activities of SCG’s. The role of individual academics comes back to whether our role is purely to gain an understanding of the world, or to improve it; and thus whether we have the right, means, and capability, to define what ‘improvement’ means.

3 Panelists

Michel Avital is Professor of Digitalization at Copenhagen Business School. Michel is an advocate of openness and an avid proponent of cross-boundaries exchange and collaboration. His research focuses on the relationships between the digital innovation ecosystem and organizational practices. He studies how emergent technologies are developed, applied, managed and used to transform and shape organizations. He currently examines blockchain-enabled innovation, transformation, organization, collaboration, and business models. He has published over 100 articles on topics such as blockchain technology, sharing economy, big data, open data, open design, generative design, creativity, innovation, the social impact of IT and sustainable value. He is an editorial board member of leading IS journals and serves in various organizing capacities in major international conferences on digital technology and organization studies. Michel is AIS Fellow Award recipient. Further information: http://avital.net

Tilo Böhmann is Professor and Deputy Head of Department, Informatics, University of Hamburg, researching digital service systems engineering & management. He has served AIS in several capacities including council member and Program Co-Chair for ICIS 2022 in Copenhagen. For many years, he collaborates with industry and the public sector in research and innovation. He has initiated the AIS Impact Award in 2020 through which AIS recognizes the research with impact beyond academia.

Emma Coleman is a Senior Lecturer in Information Systems, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, specializing in IS and society, social inclusion, and inequality, with further research interests in qualitative research methodology and philosophy. She was a Track Chair for ICIS 2021, is a Junior Faculty Consortium Mentor for ICIS 2022, and is Region 2 Representative of the AIS Diversity and Inclusion Committee, Treasurer and past Secretary of the AIS Special Interest Group on Social Inclusion (SIGSI), and Past-President of the AIS South African Chapter. Emma views social inclusion as important to both local and international IS communities. She believes that devising strategies for greater inclusion and collaboration will strengthen the capabilities and opportunities of IS academics locally and globally, and in turn increase the research impact of the field.

Monideepa Tarafdar is Charles J. Dockendorff Endowed Professor at Isenberg School of Management, University of Massachusetts Amherst. She has held appointments as Visiting Scholar at MIT Sloan CISR, Visiting Professor at Indian Institute of Management Calcutta, and Senior Research Fellow at Weizenbaum Internet Institute, Berlin. Her research has been funded by Leverhulme Trust (UK) and Economic and Social Science Research Council (ESRC-UK), as Principal Investigator of secured funding of over 1.5 million USD, and supported by organizations in the US, UK, EU and India. She is Scientific Adviser to a Dublin start-up that designs programs in wellbeing-oriented use of
technology. She has been an invited member of the policy sub-group on Digital Skills of the UK Government’s Department of Culture, Media and Sports. Her work has been published in top-tier journals in Information Systems and Operations Management.

Dov Te’eni obtained his PhD from Tel Aviv University in 1987 and returned as faculty after serving at Case Western Reserve University and Bar Ilan University. He currently studies visualization, feedback and knowledge sharing, combining human and machine intelligence. He has co-authored “Human-computer interaction for developing effective organizational systems” and, amongst others, co-edited the “Encyclopedia of Knowledge Management”, and “Innovation and IT in an international context”. When President of AIS, he called for building bridges to industry. He chaired MCIS2010, ECIS2014 and ICIS2008, and served as Editor-in-Chief of EJIS. Dov was awarded the AIS Fellowship (2008) and LEO Lifetime Exceptional Achievement award (2015) as well as the AIS Vision award (2016), and the ILAIS over-the-years award (2021).