

1990

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Recommended Citation

Lee, Allen S., "PANEL 6 MAKING SENSE OF QUALITATIVE DATA IN INFORMATION SYSTEMS RESEARCH" (1990). *ICIS 1990 Proceedings*. 20.
<http://aisel.aisnet.org/icis1990/20>

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PANEL 6

MAKING SENSE OF QUALITATIVE DATA IN INFORMATION SYSTEMS RESEARCH

Panel Chair: Allen S. Lee, Northeastern University, USA

Panelists: Richard Boland, Case Western Reserve University, USA
M. Lynne Markus, University of California, Los Angeles, USA
Michael Newman, University of Manchester, England

Qualitative research enjoys broad support and widespread acceptance in the IS research community. Motivating this session, which goes beyond the well worn topic of making the case for qualitative research, are two themes.

The first theme is the differences among different qualitative methods. Sample considerations are:

- What are the different qualitative methods available for the study of information systems?
- What are the different types of qualitative data that the different qualitative methods are useful for analyzing?
- What are the different circumstances under which the different qualitative methods are appropriate?
- What are the different contributions of the different qualitative methods to theory generation and development in research on information systems?

The second theme is the relationship and the differences between qualitative methods in the study of *social systems that use information technology* (i.e., information systems) and qualitative methods in the study of *social systems where no information technology is present* (i.e., the traditional subject matter of the reference disciplines, such as sociology and anthropology, from which the IS discipline has taken its qualitative methods). Sample considerations are:

- Must the IS discipline conduct qualitative research only in ways that the traditional reference disciplines would approve?
- What lessons might qualitative researchers in the IS discipline learn from the debates among social scientists, in general, about how best to do qualitative research?
- When and how does the presence of information technology in a social system make a difference in how we utilize qualitative methods for making sense out of the qualitative data describing the system?
- How do the differences between different kinds of information technology make a difference in how we do qualitative research on information systems?
- How may qualitative methodology, which we develop and refine in our research on information systems, contribute to qualitative methodology which is used in research on social systems in general?

In the first half of the session, the Michael Newman will pursue the first theme. Acknowledging the different disciplinary groups and research communities where qualitative traditions have long been well established, he will look at a variety of qualitative methods of data gathering and analysis with a particular emphasis on the social aspects of the research process. He will provide illustrations drawn not only from his own research, but also from the work of other IS researchers and other social scientists.

In the second half of the session, the panel will use the second theme as the frame of reference in which to amplify the points made by the speaker and to weigh the issues involved when qualitative methods themselves become the object of research. Through examining considerations such as the samples presented above, the discussion will address the underlying issue of how IS researchers may determine the quality of qualitative research – i.e., what is good qualitative research?