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# Panel 11 The Web and IS Academics: An Opportunity or a Trap?

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# PANEL 11

# THE WEB AND IS ACADEMICS:
# AN OPPORTUNITY OR A TRAP?

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Panelists:      **Gerry DeSanctis**, Duke University
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The area of Information Systems research has been blessed — or cursed — with fast evolving subjects of study that have created a lot of hype, captured the attention and imagination of wide audiences, and generated a significant demand for corresponding literacy and skills.  At the moment, it seems that none of these — the use of computers for the management of large scale operations, the augmentation of human intelligence, and personal computing — has become such a broadly referred phenomenon as the Internet and its related uses, most prominently the World Wide Web.

The resulting breakneck speed of developments in these areas creates a significant barrier to their mastery.  Surfing at the front of the wave implies an enormous investment of time and effort, as network literacy is complex and materials are difficult to obtain.  Surfing at the front of the wave also provides obvious rewards of relevance and currency which the IS/IT community values so much.

Like many of the preceding "hot topics," the Web also raises quite a few dilemmas for the IS research community — with respect to academic pragmatics of efforts allocation and reward, with respect to notions of IS research professionalism and its implications for "proper conduct," and indeed with respect to intellectual concerns about the core definition of what is IS research.  Being a hefty dilemma there is perhaps no way to "resolve" it — it touches upon too many and different dimensions of the IS research communal existence.  Being a dilemma, its exploration best involves a dialectic study, a debate through which the facets of the problem will become clearer, a reasoned argument that will sharpen the questions.

For the sake of this dialectic study, the panelists, Blake Ives and Gerry DeSanctis, will try to assume diametrically opposing stances and present contrary views on the following — bluntly and hopefully provocatively stated — assertions and predictions.

**Academic Pragmatics:**

• Web-involvement of academic is well justified, clearly motivated and in general a cost/beneficial activity.

• Promotion and Tenure processes "get in the way" of people spending time with crucial initiatives such as ISWorld Net and MISQ Discovery (or other online journals).

• The Internet and the Web are turning out to be yet new areas of academic freedom, superficial and temporary areas of expertise.

• Hype-laden Web activity detracts from the real work with which IS research should deal.

**IS Research Professionalism:**

• The IS research community and its institutions have no explicit role with regard to Web activity.

- There is no future at all to IS research if it does not embrace the Web as a topic of interest and as a research medium and a way of life.

- Web technology is bound to redefine IS research behavior, outcomes and performance due to its effect on "research economics" (e.g., the easier access to certain kinds of information may lead to their overutilization and the underutilization of others).

- The development and study of Web related issues is an effective way to impact the scholarly progress of the IS research "discipline."

**The Intellectual Concerns:**

- Web components and technology as well as other forms of net-life are not essentially new.

- A viable IS/IT research must deal with Web technology as a significant and perhaps permanent new component of the IT repertory.

- The study of the impact of the new connectivity which Web technology represents recasts all our good old questions in a new context.

- The study of Web technology and impact is an opportunity to recycle IS research within a fashionable context.

- Web components and other forms of net-life require essentially new ways of research and study as compared with other IS and IT phenomena.

Sci-Fi author William Gibson, who coined the word *cyberspace*, says the World Wide Web "offers us the opportunity to waste time, to wander aimlessly, to daydream about the countless other lives, the other people, on the far sides of however many monitors in that postgeographical meta-country we increasingly call home." Gibson describes the Web as "a procrastinator's dream," which offers the added advantage that "people who see you doing it might even imagine you're working" (*New York Times Magazine*, July 14, 1996, p. 31). This description may as well highlight essential elements of basic research in general and basic research in IS in particular. This contrast of views of a single activity as either unconstrained exploration or a waste of time is the essence of our debate.

The panel is meant to expose the tensions — which are real and painful — related to the electronic world of IS academia. The tension is between the conviction that the Web represents a unique opportunity for IS research to make a difference and the opposing view that "Web technology" obfuscates once again the fundamental concerns of IS research. It has much to offer but is also a brain drain for all involved. It could end up hurting the progress of our field or it could also offer IS research yet another chance to become centrally relevant to the constituencies it constantly chases.