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Taking the Green IS Message to the World

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Abstract

Issues of sustainability and environmental responsibility are of such global importance that it is critical to get the Green IS message outside the IS community to those who can make use of it in practice. This will not happen if we just follow the traditional path of publishing the findings of this research in IS conference and journals. The knowledge that we are gaining through Green IS research should be disseminated to as wide an audience as possible so that the findings of Green IS research can be applied where they can really make a difference. This paper investigates what, where and how we can achieve this outcome.

Keywords: Green IS, Publication

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INTRODUCTION

In keeping with the global significance of all knowledge that could benefit the environment, the Green IS message is too important to keep within the IS academic community. Over the years, most of what IS research has to say on any topic is published in IS journal or presented at IS conferences. Despite the extensive activity of the IS research community, it is doubtful whether many people outside academia or indeed anyone outside the IS discipline know about much this body of work. Although we believe that our research should inform practice, it is questionable whether many practitioners ever read, or make use of our research findings or have much appreciation of the IS body of knowledge.

Concern for the future of the planet is a powerful motivator for IS professionals to give more consideration to using their knowledge, skills and expertise to provide solutions to problems that threaten the environment. Green IS projects, programs and initiatives have the potential to influence the sustainability of organisations and communities where they are under threats from climate change and other aspects of environmental degradation. Several IS researchers are investigating how IS can find ways to support efforts to mitigate these threats or to adapt to circumstances where their effects are already felt.

The findings of Green IS research are too important to have the limited circulation that our academic journals provide. They are of such global importance that it is incumbent on those who take up the Green IS banner to get our message out there; to take their knowledge outside the IS community to those who can make use of it in practice. This will not happen if we just follow the traditional path of publishing the findings of this research in IS conference and journals. The knowledge that we are gaining through Green IS research should be disseminated to as wider an audience as possible so that the findings of Green IS research can be applied where they can really make a difference. This paper investigates what, where and how we can achieve this outcome.

EXPERIENCES OF IS AND OTHER DISCIPLINES

The question of balancing relevance to practice with academic rigor is frequently discussed in IS literature (e.g. Benbasat & Zmud 1999, Roseman & Vessey 2008). Desouza et al (2006) extend the discussion to say that in order to reach practitioners IS scholars should undertake research that really ‘matters’. The fact that the academic IS community has a problem communicating its knowledge to practitioners may reflect its immaturity as a professional discipline in comparison to those such as Medicine or Accountancy. Indeed, Moody (2000) uses medicine as a model for changing IS research to become more relevant and have a genuine impact in practice.

There has been some research in other areas attempt to understand how to reach a non-academic audience. From the field of Operations Management, de-Margerie & Jiang (2011) found that practitioners evaluate academic research by three criteria: whether the research is applicable or implementable (solution oriented), whether it provides novel insights or new perspectives to management (eye opening), and whether academic research helps practitioners recognize their situations (accessibility). Haddow (2010) found that the publications of professional associations are read by more practitioners than any other titles and so are the most useful channel for communicating research information as these publications are received as a membership entitlement. Authors writing about research for these publications presumably consider their reader audience and therefore deliver the information in a style that is appropriate, thereby addressing the cognitive barriers to accessing research information.

Of particular relevance for Green IS is an investigation by Holmes and Clark (2008) into the knowledge transfer between the environmental scientist and government policy makers and regulators. Participants in this study highlighted the important role played by interpreters in the interface between science and policy. The role of these interpreters included providing an up-to-date balanced overview and synthesis of what is known, and what are the key uncertainties, in relation to a policy issue.

If we are to act as ‘interpreters’ of Green IS and take the advice of those mentioned above, what, where and how should we communicate to environmental policy makers?

WHAT TO PUBLISH

I classify what we can publish into three themes.

1. **Insights and Understanding:** Although there are as yet few published empirical studies on Green IS topics, the body of knowledge in this area is growing. We already have collections of papers from conference tracks and special issue journal publications demonstrating our collective understanding of issues of sustainability and environmental responsibility. As we address these issues from the IS perspective we complement those of other disciplines.
2. **Opinions and advocacy:** In addition to releasing our knowledge to the world we can also add our support as the IS profession to initiatives that address issues of sustainability through social and environmental responsibility. As professional organisations AIS and SIGGreen can give authority in a responsible way to the international debate on these complex topics and how we can use IT and IS to mitigate and adapt to challenge such as global warming and climate change.
3. **Practical Solutions:** We need to indicate how the findings of our research can lead to practical solutions to environmental problems including devices, and information systems as well as mechanisms for changing behaviours of individuals, corporations, governments and communities

WHO TO TARGET

The audience for *what* I have suggested we publish should be those who are able to make decisions and to act on our knowledge, ideas and IS solutions. This includes in the public sphere politicians, national and international leaders and those who put them there (e.g. voters in democracies). In the private sphere it would be CEOs, CFOs, CIOs and senior managers. We should also include community leaders.

The other group to target, particularly with the practical outcomes of our research would be those who work in the IT/IS industry and those in MIS Departments in organisations. It is often their advice that can sway those making the big decisions. This group may best be influenced through their industry associations and societies.

WHERE TO PUBLISH

So where does our target audience go for information? I suggest we could do some research on this topic. I suspect that the results would include:

- Practitioner oriented journals (HBR etc)
- Magazines of Professional associations
- Management / Organisational magazines
- Newspapers, the popular press
- Blogs and other online media

- Report to Governments, UN agencies

HOW TO PUBLISH

I am sure that those of use accustomed to writing for academic conferences and journals would need to change our style and language to concentrate on the main message, perhaps also backed up with the evidence where appropriate. As IS folk we should be competent at incorporating images, audio, video and anything else the new technology offers. To get the required skill see we may make use of journalists, PR and marketing experts.

SOME HURDLES

I hope to this point what I say makes sense but it is not as easy as it may seem. Producing descriptions of our research output for the general public is not part of our normal skill set. Activities such as writing for popular magazines, producing videos for you tube etc are not part of our job description so that this effort is not formally rewarded in academic institutions which value A* journal articles. For most academics this is not critical to their career and so is not high priority so some incentive is needed to anything extra as we are already pretty busy.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

It probably depends on where people are in their careers and personal circumstances as to how far they want to go with this idea getting our message to the world. The potential of Green IS to make a contribution to “saving the planet” may be a catalyst for us to do something, either as individuals but more likely as a group. The latter has been my main motive for working to form SIGGreen. I believe that his may be a great opportunity for IS to make a significant contribution to global affairs and to be widely recognised as an important field of endeavour

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