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How IS can become more Agile and Relevant

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Carsten Sørensen argues that the IS field needs more “academic agility” to address the current impact of digital technologies. He argues that we are stuck in an organization-centric modus and attracted by the “smell of mainframes in the basement”. Therefore, we are unable to fathom the real impact of the digital transformation going on, specifically the impact of wholesale digitalization, the shift from localized to distributed arrangements of sociotechnical systems, and the exponential increase in computational capabilities.

Here is much to agree with, but I wish to raise some additional points that may suggest other remedies for the ‘academic stiffness’. First, not all of us are “children of the mainframe”. While organizational information systems may be the reference point for the current establishment in IS, there is a lot of us that entered the IS field through and continue to relate to other neighboring disciplines such as CSCW, HCI, PD, and STS. Compared to IS these communities are more eclectic, and academic attention is paid to the full range of research objects that Sørensen discuss, from digital dust to global information infrastructures. Engaging with their debates regularly makes for a good intellectual workout. In addition, the new recruits into the IS field come with a novel set of interests, experiences and sensibilities. They carry the potential for natural regeneration and renewal and provide any ossified senior a pleasant opportunity to be challenged, illuminated and informed. As a preventive measure against stiffness I would prescribe regular attendance to IRIS or other venues such as doctoral consortia (but please note that this won’t work if you just hang out with old friends when you’re there).

Beyond the agility issue I believe there is a greater problem: we are not properly equipped to understand what it is we have helped create through digital technologies. It is here that Sørensen’s recipe is insufficient. We need to rethink more than just the scope of legitimate objects of study in IS (and frankly—there is already research on the phenomena Sørensen asks for, albeit perhaps on the fringes in IS). I would argue that we need to rethink also a) our positioning towards our research objects, and b) for whom and why we seek to generate knowledge. IS programs are often offered by business schools and the field has been significantly shaped by the search for

instrumental (or relevant) knowledge for a managerial audience. The field has privileged theory with a constructive orientation, informing design, development, and implementation, for the manager (rather than other stakeholders) in a corporate, competitive and changing world. We have focused on the production phase and have invested less in researching consumption and the 'living with' technologies in everyday life (Croon Fors 2006). These two biases (the managerial and production orientation) have hindered the IS field in developing a conceptual apparatus that would be required for understanding the larger societal and historical significance of digital technologies. The Scandinavian IS community should be well positioned to initiate such a re-thinking and reformulation. In particular, the user orientation in the early participatory design tradition has left us a heritage of empirical studies, methodological approaches and theoretical insights that transcends the narrowness of mainstream IS studies.

Sørensen mobilizes the notion of a curse in the title of his piece, but doesn't elaborate much on it. This notion links with widespread cultural expressions that point to what happens when our creation turns against us, for instance the Frankenstein story, the story of the sorcerer's apprentice, the imagery of the juggernaut etc. Worries related to current digital technologies abound: What will be the societal effects of the impending large-scale automation? Will we see the replacement of knowledge and politics with data-driven decision-making and algorithmic regulation? Is the global tech sector emerging as the real, but state-less and law-less ruler of the world? Will the Internet-of-Things just further strengthen the mass surveillance schemes that already seem beyond control? The IS field is currently ill-equipped to answer such questions. While several of the field's founding figures have conducted critical studies, this has not become a mainstream or even a particularly strong IS approach. At the time of writing it is approximately one year after the publication of a hard-hitting call for action by one of the Grand Old Dames of the IS field, Shoshanna Zuboff (Zuboff 2015a). Her analysis of the information civilization's turning point as we now encounter the technology-enabled surveillance capitalism, has still just around 40 citations. I am not sure why. Perhaps IS researchers don't see that while the Internet was born in a context of distribution and cooperation, it is now becoming more concentrated and corporate. Or perhaps we are actually siding with the digital land grabbers? Much IS research uncritically celebrates innovation; e.g.; highlighting the vastly more efficient coordination and benefits of sharing under-utilized assets enabled by the sharing economy. However, as a field, we are not doing serious academic work if none of us address also the emergence of new, exploitative intermediaries who hijack this economy and engage in "crowd fleecing" (Scholz 2016), monetization of our social interactions, and undermining of workers' rights and other public goods. We need to address the problematic sides of this "half-way innovation where opportunistic disruption is not followed by creative customer-aligned institution-building, a re-formulation and innovation of the social contract, which is necessary for building systemic coherence" (Zuboff 2015b). The one-sided preference for managerial relevance leaves our field at loss in supporting this necessary building of new value creation models, institutions and social contracts. Currently, some of the most perceptive analyses of the smart machine come not from IS but from other fields which have cultivated other positions towards their object of study, for instance media and communication studies (Schäfer 2016), digital labour studies (Scholz 2016), legal studies of Internet/technology governance (Ulbricht & von Grafenstein 2016). To be able to contribute to understanding what the current digitalization entails, the IS field should engage with such research traditions and develop a political economy of IS; i.e.; we need to be aware of

«the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources» (Mosco 2009, p.2). This is another area where the insights on power relations that were developed within the Scandinavian tradition should be revived.

When the machine becomes smart, we should become wise. Today's challenges are different from yesterday's challenges and may require a reorientation of our research. For instance, could it be that our insistence on understanding the IT artefact has hindered us from seeing the uses technology is put to? Zuboff claims that "technology is the camouflage, not the driver. That means our responses must be political and social" (Zuboff 2014). Perhaps we should extend the examinations of 'digital affordances' and 'constitutive entanglement' to phenomena such as architectures, configurations, ecologies, and orchestration practices, and seek to analyze the ownership and governance structures of these arrangements, as well as the algorithms that run on/in/of them? When we are after materiality, wouldn't it be meaningful to make visible the material reality of hazards and exploitation of workers in the global technology supply chains, to analyze the cloud's material infrastructures, or the carbon footprint of the blockchain technology? Such questions arise from a wish to generate knowledge with a broader orientation than just managerial relevance and informing design and production of technology.

Such a revision of our research should seek to transcend the "hermeneutics of suspicion" and engage in more reparative research practices, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) suggests. Susan Hekman's (2010) notion of disclosure, which is not to be taken in the sense of 'uncover' or 'expose to view', but to help reality "show itself, come to light" may help us to articulate an alternative, a "hermeneutics of calling forth". Such a perception of our research would inject a sense of responsibility for what we choose as our research objects and what knowledge we seek to generate. If we believe that IS research can contribute to history making through "disclosing new worlds" (Spinoza et al. 1999), and by building "landings strips for the future" (Scharmer 2010), we should consider which futures and which worlds we help build. We need to navigate not only after what benefits a company, but ask if innovations are aligned with real needs of people, societies and the planet. For instance, working to remedy the shortcomings of today's sharing economy could be a perfect goal for IS. It would mean to invest research attention and effort to resolve the great challenges of devising appropriate governance models, compensation mechanisms, and incentive schemes in collective action settings, such as commons, cooperatives and other decentralized, non-hierarchical, peer-to-peer arrangements. A purposeful and discerning investment towards this core challenge could help articulate, crystallize and prototype sustainable models of collective governance and ownership. Such an undertaking would benefit from drawing on (and updating and scaling up) the insights of the Scandinavian approach to systems development. Yes, IS researchers should be weaned from their addictions, whether it is to the smell of mainframes or to managerial relevance. There are greater things to pursue in our world.

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