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Incubating Foundations of Information Systems (FIS) -- Issues in Creating an Electronic Journal

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Introduction

It has been said that "the Internet tears at the tyrannies of time, distance, and the printed page" (Watson, 1994). This dramatic change has been greeted as an opportunity to rethink academia and its journals (Ives, et.al., 1996). In the prevailing conversation, the Internet and the WWW are often portrayed as the pinnacle of emancipating academia from its tradition. According to this viewpoint, the "prison of history" has hindered spontaneous collaboration, expression of thought and intellectual progress. Today, the information systems research field is confronting the new technology like an adolescent - critical, excited, and convinced that the ways of the past several millennia have been flawed by conservative control. For several years the authors have been involved in experimenting with ideas which have led to the creation of an electronic journal called Foundations of Information Systems (FIS). Although FIS is still in its infancy, the project has already shown that the freedom to create new ways goes hand in hand with appreciation for the tradition which can also be called -- wisdom.

Toward FIS - Panels and Mini Tracks

The seed for FIS was planted in 1993 when the authors together with John Haynes (Australia) and William Hodges (Canada) decided to do something about a shared problem: forums and publishing outlets for discussions of foundations of information systems were few and far between. Yet the group felt strongly about the need for such forums during this time of great change. The first panel titled "Philosophical Foundations of Information Systems" was held in the DSS conference, in Honolulu a year later. Encouraged by the positive feed back, the group decided to organize a similarly titled session at the first AIS conference in Pittsburgh in 1995. This in turn encouraged them to take the next step in 1996: organizing an AIS mini track in Phoenix, Arizona on Philosophical and Conceptual Foundations of Information Systems. The mini-track was among the most popular ones receiving 27 submissions. More than 80 people attended the session of the special guest speaker (and the honorary editor of FIS), C. West Churchman, who moved the audience to tears with his talk about this century and how it had dealt with information for good and bad. In his speech, Churchman passed on the torch encouraging the audience to ask difficult questions about information and answer them in an ethically responsible manner.

By the time of the first AIS mini track, the support for the group had grown to include not only junior faculty and doctoral students but also senior and distinguished faculty on several continents. The supporters shared the views of the core group that forums for a scholarly debate about the philosophical and conceptual premises of the information systems field were missing. Many shared the frustration of trying to publish their work in traditional journals. The authors decided to start FIS in an electronic format. An

electronic format seemed appropriate because it (1) made the journal more accessible, (2) reached a wide audience; (3) had nearly no start up costs; and (4) had immediate international ramifications. The entire four year process of creating FIS has been a highly collaborative process. The authors have sought the advice and views of the supporters in most aspects of the journal. The next section of the paper discusses policy issues that we had to address in setting up the journal, followed by a discussion of technical issues.

Policy Issues

Several different questions arose, as to the policies that would be appropriate for an electronic journal on the foundations of information systems:

(1) How do we get high-quality papers and gain academic respectability?

The most basic issue was to ensure the submission of high quality papers, and gaining respect in the academic community. Of course, the two are directly related. The question is how to get authors to submit to an unknown journal, especially an unknown e-journal. From our experience at AIS in 1996, we felt that there were several people who were interested in the philosophy of information systems, but could we convince them to send us their best work, and provide them with the ammunition to convince promotion and tenure review committees that the journal is respectable. This brought us to several other questions addressed below.

(2) Should the e-journal be conventional or unconventional?

(3) Should there be a formal review process?

(4) How can we recognize outstanding papers?

At first we discussed having a rather informal style, with papers simply being "submitted" by being placed on the WWW for all to see. We planned on putting together a e-mail list or list serve, so that we could post messages indicating that a new paper had been received. We hoped to get discussions started on each paper, without resorting to formal reviews.

But after thinking about the need to get good papers, and for them to carry some weight in merit reviews and promotion and tenure decisions, we decided to go with a more formal review process. That way, author's can at least argue that the paper appeared in a refereed journal. We chose to go with three reviewers for each paper, so that hopefully, two of the three will agree about the disposition of the paper.

We also decided to let the reviewers nominate papers for a "Thinker Award." Outstanding papers would be placed in a separate list on the page. If all three reviewers recommend that a paper should be put in the outstanding category, then it would seem reasonable to put it there. If two of the three agree, then it will be further reviewed. We hope that this recognition will encourage the submission of quality work. We have already started a list of people with an interest in the area. Our belief is that it will not be difficult to get reviewers who are willing to provide reviews in a timely manner.

(5) Should we have an advisory board?

Again, to gain some credibility and respectability, we felt it was necessary to have an advisory board consisting of people widely respected in the field. The role of the advisory board was to help establish the policies of the journal, and to update policies as necessary.

(6) What should be the characteristics of advisory board members?

After consulting with several respected scholars who had started journals, we decided to look for advisory board members who were established in the field, but who were rather open-minded and not unduly wedded to a particular world-view or dogma. Of course in this field, there will always be different opinions. But we wanted board members who were respectful of the right to disagree. From our contact at

previous panels and conferences, we were able to come up with a list of several people who fit our needs.

(7) Should we have an editorial board?

Since we decided to have a review process, we first felt it was necessary to have an editorial board in addition to the advisory board. While the advisory board members would manage the review process, the task of the editorial board would be to provide the reviews. After forming the advisory board, however, we have had second thoughts. Our wish is to keep FIS as open as possible for new and creative academic work without compromising the respectability of the outlet. While the advisory board and the review process are designed to take care of the latter, the openness principle, we saw, is best maintained if the reviewers are selected by the advisory board members and the editors from the academia at large. Therefore, there is no editorial board. How we will recognize the referees work and whether the reviews should be published, are some of the remaining unsolved issues.

Technical Issues

The technical issues of FIS have included several decisions.

(1) Where should FIS be located in the cyber space?

First, the relationship between the e-journal and the ISWorld Net pages called the Philosophical and Conceptual Foundations of Information Systems (or the Philosopher's corner) (section editors: Jaana Porra, Rudy Hirschheim and Kalle Lyytinen) had to be determined. The decision was made to form a "symbiotic relationship" between the two. All FIS activity is kept inside the FIS Web pages. However, FIS will appear as a part of the Philosopher's corner -- which is designed to provide a more comprehensive, collaborative environment. Additionally, FIS will appear as a peer to MISQ Discovery -- the other ISWorld Net e-journal.

(2) Where should the articles be located?

Should FIS provide links to authors' home pages or should the articles be physically published on the FIS pages?. The editors decided to try both although it is apparent that having links to author's home pages may cause problems in the accessibility; link maintenance; and dealing with post review document life. Further, the final design of FIS had to be determined (a centralized or a distributed site). The editors decided to start with a centralized approach as the most practical because of time and cost savings of one site and one designer.

(3) How to cope with the visual demands of the e-journal and the degree of technical skills required from authors?

The editors teamed up with Michael Parks for graphical design of the journal and for the author's kit -- a template for article submission. The editors felt that as important as it is for a paper magazine to have a designed look, it is for an e-journal to have one. The decision to use an author's kit was practical. Among others, the editors expect submissions from senior and distinguished IS faculty less willing to spend the time learning the details of the Web; and authors stronger at philosophy and less savvy in the Web technology. Demanding an HTML document without a template may still limit the authors to technology experts.

Summary and Conclusion

It has been said that the only thing we need from the old academic tradition for e-journals is peer review (Watson, 1994). Based on the experience with FIS, we suggest that although peer review is part of the academic tradition it is by far not an adequate representation of it. Rather, the unique ways in which knowledge is created, passed on, inherited, exchanged and furthered in a collaborative spirit is the type of

academia we wish to support with an electronic journal. In such an effort, academia does not appear only the judge of correct and flawed contributions but as the facilitating supportive context for achievement and intellectual growth of the entire field.

As illustrated above, starting an electronic journal is mainly not primarily related to the technology of the Internet or the WWW. It is about creating objectives, mission and a spirit which make sense for the discipline. We believe, this can only be done with the advice, support, help and trust of distinguished elders of the field. We suggest that the kind of collaboration the authors have enjoyed during the years leading toward FIS are a manifestation of the very scholarly tradition so often attacked in the name of technological progress.

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