

Change the Metrics to Liberate the IS Field

TREO Talk Paper

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Abstract

Evaluating scholarly output is a critical concern to the Information Systems field. The measures used to reward faculty with promotion and tenure (P&T) will drive publishing behavior. P&T evaluation metrics, to a great extent, influence the types of papers and research foci accepted in the IS field (Grover and Lyytinen 2015; Mingers and Willmott 2013) thereby determining how the field grows and develops.

Currently scholarly output is not evaluated directly, rather scholars are judged by the ‘perceived/assumed’ quality of the journal venues in which they publish – a simple and practical, yet flawed, measure. The publication venue metric is simple because it eliminates the need to be an expert in all areas of the field; decision-makers can rely instead on the expertise of the reviewers and editors. If these reviewers and editors have the expertise to make the correct evaluation, we can eliminate the need to read and evaluate each paper because each journal has been determined to be of a certain ‘quality’ and all papers in that journal are presumed to be of like ‘quality’. Second, the sorting of the venues in terms of quality, by experts provides a kind of warrant that we are getting an accurate assessment of the paper.

However, this method is problematic. First, the entire concept of scholarly output quality is not defined (Locke and Lowe 2002; Straub and Anderson 2010). Thus the standards that the reviewers employ to evaluate manuscripts are subjective and therefore different reviewers will arrive at a different perceptions of the work (Bedeian 2004). Second, studies in the management area (Singh et al. 2007) and in IS (Cuellar et al. 2016b) have shown that significant type 1 and 2 errors are found when journal or journal list performance is evaluated. Finally, there are performative effects that occur by use of this system. The pressure to publish motivates authors to capitulate reviewer and editor demands (Bedeian 2004) resulting in gamesmanship (Macdonald and Kam 2007) or in research that conforms to the norms of the field. Research becomes standardized (Mingers and Willmott 2013) adhering to a “script” that precludes interesting research at the edges (Grover and Lyytinen 2015).

To resolve these issues, we suggest that the field needs to consider alternative methods of evaluating a scholar’s research capability, such as the Scholarly Capital Model (SCM) (Cuellar et al. 2016a). The SCM eschews the quixotic search for quality and instead evaluates scholars based on their demonstrated scholarly capabilities. The SCM considers the uptake of their ideas (“ideational influence”), measured by the h-indices; their “connectedness” to other scholars and the field, as measured by social network centrality measures; and how their work is represented in the venues of the field (“venue representation”), measured by centrality measures of a venue affiliation network. SCM de-centers the venue of publication in favor of the results of that publication and position of author in the research network. Rather than the ability to get published, SCM assesses the results of that publication and publication convention.

Using the SCM or similar method to evaluate scholars will eliminate the deleterious effects on the field of the current methodology. Without the need to publish in specific venues, there will be less pressure to conform to the demands of reviewers and editors thus allowing the authors to express themselves more freely. New ideas and methodologies will be admitted sooner into the field’s discourse since they will less likely be censored. Different methodologies and frameworks will be used. Papers dealing with IS responses to the great society issues will be written. In short, if the field were to adopt the SCM or similar approaches to evaluating scholarly output, we believe that the field will be set loose to grow and develop and impact society in a larger positive way.