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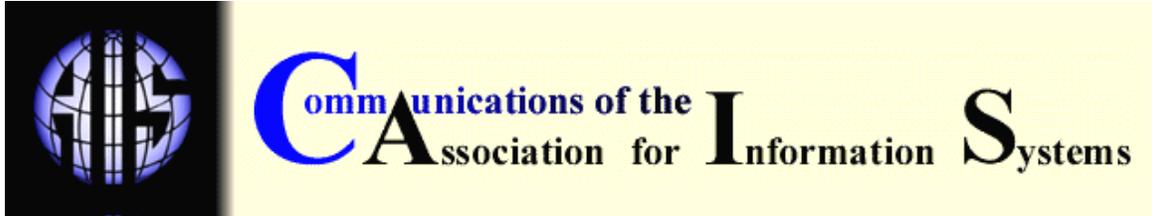
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THE IS CORE - V DEFINING THE IS CORE

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ABSTRACT

Information Systems and other academic fields struggle with what is termed an identity crisis. For Information Systems, an ongoing debate focuses on defining the field narrowly versus broadly. Defining the field narrowly, as called for by Benbasat and Zmud's nomological core [2003] is compelling because it distinctly defines what is IS research and what is not. Those who find the distinctness of IS lacking may find this a pragmatic solution. However, the narrow definition excludes a large portion of the IS community and their research. Alter's [2003] *Systems in Organizations* proposal broadly defines the IS discipline in an inclusive way that embraces our historic diversity and makes IS distinct too.

Keywords: IS research, IS discipline, IS identity crisis, systems in organizations

I. INTRODUCTION

As graduate students in the early 90s, my contemporaries and I examined and debated the future of the IS discipline. What was Information Science? What were the taxonomies and core theories that made us distinct? Later, upon graduating, I remember my grandmother asking 'What is Information Science?' and my struggling to define it for her. I could not offer simple explanations such as, "I study computers and am a computer scientist.", or "I am an accountant and do research on financial forms related to communicating how businesses perform." I could not say, I am an Information Scientist because it sounded so peculiar and either made me think of libraries or user interface design. At the time, I was very much a student and practitioner of software methodology. My dissertation was about how people trifle with computers, wasting time on tertiary tasks, instead of getting their work done. How could I explain to a 90 year old woman that these topics were part of Information Science?

Arguments about the IS identity crisis are still with us, over twenty years after beginning with Keen (1980) and Dickson, et al. (1980). For the IS field, there is a sense of urgency to define ourselves. Twenty years is a very short time for an academic discipline and an extremely long time for technological innovation. The discussion is certainly worth having so that we can understand how our field has emerged and in what direction we wish to continue.

II. THE AMBIGUOUS IT ARTIFACT

In the paper, *Sidestepping the IT Artifact, Scrapping the IS Silo, and Laying Claim to "Systems in Organizations"*, Alter [2003] examines the Benbasat and Zmud [2003] argument for a narrower focus in IS research. Alter makes a detailed analysis and points out areas where the IT Artifact is ambiguous. He also makes several good points about a tighter focus in the IS discipline being of questionable benefit. For example, excluding research because of errors of exclusion and inclusion in the nomological core would reject many relevant works, clearly weakening our discipline and our relevance. Alter also makes the point that

"Establishing a tighter focus on those variables would marginalize and to some extent dishonor the research of a substantial fraction of the IS research community."

While this statement alone, is not an argument for seeking truth, Alter gives several compelling arguments for embracing our diversity and building a discipline that allows breadth and depth to flourish together with a broad taxonomy that contains a narrow core. Alter recommends moving towards 'systems in organizations' as as our defining umbrella for the IS discipline.

Alter's concept of systems in organizations is appealing. It is inclusive and broadly conceivable. Alter argues that it makes IT directly relevant to practice in that the holistic inclusion of systems can cover many types of work systems and business professionals, with results relevant to managers and a research umbrella broadly covering existing IS research. This argument takes advantage of our diversity as scholars and what is already accomplished through research in our young field.

Allowing for a narrow core with a wide breadth, enables us to move forward, including relevant works from the past, and enabling future scholars to explore promising new directions. Given technology in organizations is still defining and redefining work, it seems the breadth of coverage also makes us adaptable to the technological changes that the future surely holds.

Three issues struck me in reading Alter's work.

- a massive record of IS scholarship can be frustrating to work with if you do not have the means to classify it.
- the origins of our field are diverse. Diversity can be treated as a strength rather than a weakness.
- Darwinian analogies made in defining our discipline would imply a broader acceptance of research, not narrower.

III. SCHOLOGLUT

In reading Weber's Editorial Comments [2003] that appears in the same issue as the Benbasat and Zmud [2003] article in MISQ, I am struck by the massive work of an editor reviewing hundreds of papers, most of which are inappropriate or not ready for MISQ. IS scholarship on widely varied topics is abundant. Keeping ahead of the production of research is near impossible. We rely on A-journals to filter the research gems from the scholarly abundance that we face with so many authors, journals, and conferences.

Schologlut, an over-abundance of scholarly work, requires a lot of intellectual time and effort to organize the 'mountains of research' to support new theories. Editors of A-journals have a massive responsibility to review a large amount of research and determine how to define the IS field.. A guide, such as Benbasat and Zmud's nomological core would give editors direction for consistency.. However, their wisdom can open doors to new research, not adhering to a tightly

defined core. We rely on their insight, experience, and wisdom not only as a filter but, as a catalyst.

In his famous 1945 article, *As We May Think*, Vannevar Bush [1945] said

“There is a growing mountain of research. But there is increased evidence that we are being bogged down today as specialization extends. The investigator is staggered by the findings and conclusions of thousands of other workers – conclusions which he cannot find time to grasp, much less to remember, as they appear. Yet specialization becomes increasingly necessary for progress, and the effort to bridge between disciplines is correspondingly superficial.”

Although Bush was speculating on how to refocus post World War II scientific minds, the specialization vs. cross-disciplinary argument applies to our IS identity too. Specialization, or a narrow focus, on a specific core of IS variables makes us more distinct. It gives us tighter control and focus, perhaps yielding the research with definitive answers on the construction and delivery of robust information systems. Yet, our effort to bridge between disciplines, a factor that took us as far as we are today, does bring some superficiality with it. IS scholars are spread very far with their knowledge. To be expert in wireless technology, sociology, and quantitative methods is quite impressive. Often the attention to the bridge between disciplines is studied without due consideration to detail and the breadth of scholarship that already exists in other disciplines.

Specialization makes us more distinct but cross-disciplinary research makes us relevant. Bush also states that for a body of work to be relevant, it must be recorded and consulted so that it, “endures throughout the life of a race rather than that of an individual.” However, we do have a ‘mountain of research’ in many disciplines. If it is difficult to work through the scholarship of one discipline, imagine being an expert in several. A-journals and conferences are a filter or mechanism for eliminating some of the schologlut when we seek to expand the body of knowledge. Schologlut, even with our massive ability to store and retrieve information, keeps confounding our aim towards defining a true core or all-encompassing taxonomy for Information Science, distinct from other disciplines.

IV. DIVERSITY

One explanation for our ‘identity crisis’ is that it is a natural occurrence because of our varied origins. Scholars of Information Science come from a wide variety of disciplines. Founders of the Information Science field have backgrounds in such fields as Economics, Computer Science, Physics, Psychology, and Management Science. Broad and narrow conferences on Information Science are interesting because you can easily find new topics and ideas that stimulate your imagination. The diversity of our interests drives new ideas and novelties. The diversity of our scholarship makes our field exciting. Certainly too, a wide variety of rigor and methodology accompanies the wealth of diversity.

Diversity also makes our field adaptable. Given the massive changes in computer technology within the last three years, the core is still evolving. Being diverse and wide ensures that a narrow, homogenous definition does not doom IS to extinction. Instead of viewing diversity as a disadvantage, perhaps our acceptance of diversity will enable us to keep up with changes in technology. Indeed we are very fond of Darwinian analogies and like to claim that no ‘identity crisis’ exists. Let the research flourish and ‘survival of the fittest’ will ensure that an IS core emerges.

Perhaps we view Evolution in too narrow terms. It is ironic that although Darwin offered several theories about evolutionary change, natural selection, popularly known as, ‘survival of the fittest’ (actually coined by Herbert Spencer in *First Principles*, 1862) is the only one that translates into popular consciousness. What does this mean for information systems? Will the ‘best’ research live on while topics outside the discipline die on a dusty bookshelf? Does a faster computer with a larger hard drive increase one’s chances of success? What about your laptop? Are the editors of

MISQ and ISR scholarly carnivores, weeding out the weak? The theory of evolution is not about survival, it is about adaptability. A successful species leaves enough viable offspring to procreate into future generations. Thus, survival of the fittest should be interpreted to be a density of research.

V. FINDING AN UMBRELLA

Evolution, or more generally Biology, may give insight into interpreting our identity crisis. We should look at the field of biology, not just biological theories of evolution to gain insight into our own discipline. In the beginning, biology was based upon observation and taxonomies. With the invention of the microscope, a new world was discovered and biology grew and came to know several different areas of research from molecular biology, to anatomy, to sexual behavior. The current trend in biology is to promote evolution as the overall umbrella. Evolution is the study of biological processes supporting the transformation of systems. Evolution works as the umbrella because it is a description of how systems work, transform and interrelate. Systems in organizations or technological systems, that Alter supports, are a satisfying solution to broadly defining the Information Systems discipline. Systems in organizations is broad but, gives us a distinct way to identify ourselves while embracing the diversity that we already thrive on.

VI. CONCLUSION

The appendix in Alter's paper provides a list, and quotations of disciplines in crisis. Even the age-old study of geography is cited as having "another identity crisis". Like the philosopher's creed, "The unexamined life is not worth living." (Socrates, 399 BCE), perhaps the unexamined discipline is not worth building. The papers, debates, and graduate student speculations over late night coffee are surely worth our time and effort. Regardless of how the core is defined, the dialog in defining it will produce reflective scholars and assist them in being mindful of how their contributions to IS grow the body of knowledge.

Editor's Note: This article is the fifth in the series titled *The IS Core*. At the time of publication, the papers in this CAIS series included Articles 31 through 41 and the editorial in Article 42. These articles were motivated by Benbasat and Zmud [2003] in the MIS Quarterly and by Article 30 [Alter 2003] in this journal. The article was received on October 7, 2003 and was published on November 24, 2003. It was with the author one week for one revision.

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Ruth Guthrie is a professor at California Polytechnic State University, Pomona, where she teaches Web design and development. Her research interests are User Interface Design and Computer Ethics. She is the author of several papers in a variety of areas including two books on Web development. Currently, she is Associate Director for AACSB for the College of Business at Cal Poly and is involved in several Web development efforts using Video embedded Flash.

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