March 2001

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Recommended Citation

Dalal, Nikunj (2001) "What Does It All Mean? A Meta-Inquiry," *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*: Vol. 6 , Article 27.

DOI: 10.17705/1CAIS.00627

Available at: <https://aisel.aisnet.org/cais/vol6/iss1/27>

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WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN? A META-INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

The relevance of IS research has long been a hotly debated topic. This article is a living open inquiry about how we may approach the issue of IS research relevance. We observe the nature of the relevance discussion and highlight conceptual distinctions used by the IS community. We raise questions about whether there is an objective truth about IS research relevance. We inquire into the dual nature of concepts in general and its implications for IS research relevance. Finally, we ask if a collective dialogue of a deeper nature can be used to continue this inquiry. It is suggested that an understanding of the issues and questions raised in this meta-inquiry may lie in awareness, insight, and experience rather than in conceptual analysis and hence the implications of the issues should be neither conclusively accepted nor rejected.

I. INTRODUCTION

What follows is an inquiry into our collective inquiry of Information Systems research relevance – a meta-inquiry. For some time now, we (the people teaching IS) have been lamenting, arguing, disagreeing, debating, and discussing passionately about the relevance of IS research. This type of discussion of issues and exchange of opinions is necessary, critical, and indeed welcome for a young and inquiring discipline. However, along with our inquiry of specific issues, isn't it also important for us to inquire into the nature of our inquiry itself? Doing so may provide an awareness of our individual approaches, give us a deeper ground and perspective for our inquiry of specific issues, and perhaps even create a paradigm shift in the way we view reality.

What is meant by a meta-inquiry (in the sense it is used in this article) may become clear by clarifying what it is *not*. This is not an abstract philosophical discussion or the application of some philosophical theory or technique. Neither is this a position paper where one takes a position (on IS research relevance in this case) and presents logical arguments or evidence to support the opinion. Nor is this an article that proposes and tests new concepts. Philosophical theories, positions, and new conceptual developments have their place but this article is not about any of those. Rather, this article is a living open inquiry about how we may approach the issue of IS research relevance. In an inquiry of this kind, there are no direct answers, only questions. An inquiry cannot be open if it started with a conclusion. By the same token, an inquiry cannot be living if it ends with a conclusion; it would die if it did. Hence, this inquiry does not conclude. Of what use is an inquiry that does not end? – One may well ask. It is a logical and natural question. The answers to all such questions including the ones raised in this meta-inquiry are revealed in awareness, insight, and experience; they may not lie fully in conceptual analysis and logical arguments. Hence, as we pursue this inquiry, is it possible to neither conclusively accept nor reject the implications of the questions raised here but to hold them up for a living discussion by us as individuals, as groups, and as communities?

The relevance of IS research has long been a hotly debated topic. First, we observe the nature of the relevance discussion and highlight conceptual distinctions used by the IS community. While some of the data for the observations comes from the large number of messages posted to the ISWorld list on this topic [Cockcroft, 2001], the observations themselves have broader applicability. Next, we raise questions about whether there is an objective truth about IS research relevance. Then, we inquire into the dual nature of concepts in general and its implications for IS research relevance. Finally, we ask if a collective dialogue of a deeper nature can be used to continue this inquiry.

II. OBSERVATIONS

Observation: While discussing an issue, we are usually exchanging opinions using various conceptual distinctions.

In practically all the messages on relevance, we have seen opinions. When the opinions are examined, many conceptual distinctions are evident in the content. These distinctions may be seen to consist of two-sided dimensions (e.g., academia vs. industry). Many on the list who participated in the discussion supported one side or the other (to a larger or smaller extent), while a few have embraced both sides of the dimension. Some of the many conceptual distinctions expressed in these messages are shown in Table 1. We will call the two-sided conceptual distinctions of Table 1 *dualisms*. A dualism in its neutral sense, according to The Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary, is a "state of being dual or twofold; a twofold division; any system which is founded on a double principle, or a twofold distinction."

Table 1: Conceptual Distinctions Evident in Messages on ISWorld

One Side of Dualism	Other Side of Dualism	Example
Relevance	Non-relevance	
Theory	Practice	
Academia	Industry	
IS	Other disciplines	
Private sector	Public sector	
Research	Other activities	Research vs. teaching
Some journals	Other journals in IS	
Basic research	Applied research	
Some research methods	Other research methods	Survey vs. action research
Some research approaches	Other research approaches	Quantitative vs. qualitative
Some countries	Other countries	U.S. vs. Europe

Observation: We have differences of opinion.

Opinions are based on differing perspectives of individuals. Such opinions will naturally be different (and sometimes widely divergent) because of differences in individuals' backgrounds, experiences, perspectives, individual characteristics, countries of origin, and a host of other

factors. Hence, for example, a research associate with considerable industry experience in a public research-oriented school in Europe is likely to view the world, in general, and IS research relevance, in particular, very differently from an tenured professor having little industry experience in a public teaching school in the U.S.

Observation: We are hearing only from a small part of the IS community and an even smaller part of the larger universe of interest.

Despite the lively and often passionate discussions on ISWorld and other forums on the issue of relevance, it is likely that only a very small percentage of the opinions that actually exist in the universe of interest are expressed. Many chose to remain silent in their wisdom or their views were not known for other reasons. It is also obvious that email messages, formal presentations, and responses to surveys do not completely express the mindsets and emotions of individuals.

III. ISSUES

Keeping the above observations in mind and any others of our own, the following issues and questions can be raised.

TRUTH

Issue: Is there a truth about IS research relevance?

The discussion on ISWorld and elsewhere seems to presuppose the existence of some "truth" about IS research relevance that we are all trying to uncover (e.g., IS research is relevant or not relevant in XYZ ways).

1. Is there such a truth in the first place and if so, can it be glimpsed or better-understood through the thicket of a small number of opinions and perspectives, however well-founded?
2. If there is no such truth, are we simply trying to better appreciate the various issues involved for ourselves individually and perhaps collectively? If so, are there other approaches for understanding besides what we are already doing?

DUALISMS

Issue: Are dualisms such as the ones in Table 1 useful or pointless?

Let us keep in mind that virtually anything, even a multiplicity, can be examined as a dualism; that dualisms arise naturally in the thinking process; and that we are not denigrating or praising dualisms. However, like anything else, a dualism is a double-edged sword. Hence, the question comes up:

Can a dualism that is obviously helpful in analyzing an issue also become a psychologically divisive wedge?

Take the case of one IS research methodology versus another. It is possible to have an "objective" comparison of approaches and an examination of the suitability of methods in different contexts. However, don't we also see warring camps (in some sense) that are psychologically identified with one or the other pole of the dualism, creating a feeling of "Us vs. Them"? Don't we also see that this feeling becomes psychologically divisive, splitting the entire IS field into camps of various kinds? Note that we are making a distinction between a conceptual distinction and a psychological division. For example, a statement or thought that "We are ABC researchers and superior to XYZ researchers" is quite different from saying, "ABC research methods are better than XYZ research methods in some situations." The former is divisive (whether expressed outwardly in words or felt internally) while the latter may be an objective statement of fact (if expressed with that intent). Similar such divisions may exist for all the dualisms in Table 1 as well

as for many others not shown in the table including gender, nationality, tenure status, experience, motivation to do research, and others. (Recall two recent controversies on ISWorld: one over the location city of an important IS conference, and another about women being invited to a women's breakfast meeting at an IS conference.)

Do differences and distinctions have to mean divisions? And, if such divisive feelings do exist in the IS community, do they deserve to be condemned or ignored as inevitable? Or neither of the two? Will a deeper inquiry help?

Taking this inquiry further, is it possible to see the essential quality of all dualisms?

Can we use the dualism as needed for making a conceptual distinction without being limited and constrained by it? In other words, is it possible to step up to a slightly higher level and look at the current level from a deeper, greater, and in some ways, better vantage point?¹

In the simple language of data flow diagrams, would being at level 0 give us a better perspective while allowing us to drill down to any lower level as needed? If we can transcend the dualism, not only can we address detailed issues at either or both poles of the dualism from a broader deeper perspective but we can ask questions at the new level as well. An example of such a question may be:

Does our research into systems and technologies have a role to play, however small, in addressing or resolving the major crises of our times?

This line of inquiry may trigger another question at a yet higher level:

Do we find it uncomfortable to mention or acknowledge the big and enduring questions as if to do so were somehow naïve and impractical for a young discipline?

Note that holding and posing these questions in the mind without trying to answer with a "Yes" or a "No" will not take away from our current research though it could provide us a deeper perspective.

THE USE OF CONCEPTS

Issue: What do all these concepts mean anyway?

If we go back and look at the conceptual distinctions shown in Table 1 as well as other IS constructs, several questions come up, the most basic ones being who created the concepts and what they really mean.

Have we not collectively constructed these terms/concepts/ frameworks/models (e.g., IS, discipline, relevance, research, support systems, etc.) in the first place? And now, are we trying to find out what they really mean in a changing world?

Just as we teach our students that the conceptual model (e.g. an E-R diagram) is only a simplified representation of reality - it is not the reality; in a similar way, do we see that our concepts and constructs are simply ways to perceive, construe, delineate, and interpret an undivided reality?

Do we sometimes end up mixing up the clarifying concepts with the underlying reality - much like confusing the map for the territory? Can we use our concepts just for their analytic purpose for which they were created, without ourselves being bound, limited, divided, confused, and constrained by them?

After all, "IS as a discipline" is also a concept carved out with an analytic knife (much like what human beings have done with other disciplines). But the world as we experience it is not

necessarily neatly packaged in these categories. This is not to say that conceptual analysis is a fruitless exercise; it has its uses. However, we may well ask:

Having created higher-level concepts, some of which are nebulous at best, are we now put in the position of having to define their characteristics, relationships, and boundaries (for which, incidentally, we have no choice but to use other concepts that may also be equally nebulous)?

This leads to the following question to clarify our thinking about the meaning of relevance.

What is meaningful and relevant IS research in our immediate context as well as in the context of a wider community that we all make up? Is there a reality about relevance that includes all its definitions but does not itself lie in or is limited by any of its definitions?

Philosophy, whose root meaning relates to love of wisdom and learning, covered all aspects of inquiry long ago. But with the knowledge explosion, specialized disciplines and subspecialties became inevitable for obvious practical reasons. However, does the mind have to think in conceptual compartments? After all, don't many of us still earn doctorates in *philosophy*, regardless of discipline? Hence, we may well ask.

What are the boundaries of the IS field and hence IS research? Although it might make perfect sense to have boundaries for practical and administrative reasons, if we define boundaries of the IS field in our own minds, are we limiting the field and consequently our potential to effect change in a deeply troubled world?

IV. WHAT NEXT?

A final issue: How do we continue our inquiry?

If we see the importance of individual opinions and perspectives but we also see the limitation of remaining at the mere level of opinions and perspectives, how do we collectively continue our inquiry into IS research relevance and other IS topics? Are there other modes of inquiry available to us besides what we are already doing?

For example, as groups and communities, can we hold collective Dialogues electronically and face-to-face? The term "Dialogue" is used here in the sense proposed by David Bohm (1991), the eminent physicist and philosopher, as a "collective inquiry not only into the content of what each of us say, think and feel but also into the underlying motivations, assumptions and beliefs that lead us to so do (Bohm et. al., 1991)."

Can we continue our inquiry not knowing whether consensus is possible or even desirable?

Ultimately, the sounds of disagreement in the community -- whether arising from a reasoned analysis or reactionary anger - may be just as important as the voices of agreement. They have to be heard and not out of "tolerance" or with a sense of separation but with a view to understand their origins and cause. We have to learn from them because they are also "our" voices - the forces of energy and passion. And passion is the lifeblood of a discipline.

END NOTES

¹ Of course, this vantage point creates another level of dualism with a possibly higher level of usefulness but also having the same intrinsic traps, and this can go up infinitely to higher and higher levels. Ultimately, dualism itself is also a concept having the conceptual dual of non-dualism. Readers interested in pursuing this line of inquiry to its translogical end/non-end are referred to the works of Ken Wilber (2001) among many modern and ancient philosophers who have used similar approaches.

REFERENCES

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Communications of the Association for Information Systems

ISSN: 1529-3181

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