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# Communications of the Association for Information Systems

CAIS 

## Let's Start Fooling Ourselves: Strategies for Manoeuvring Within the Micro-Political Influences Surrounding Our Research Practices

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### Abstract:

The micro-political and pragmatic ideas introduced by Nik Hassan can change our view about the nature of the field's crisis from problems with the production of relevant knowledge through theory and methodology, towards our inattention to the power-knowledge politics of our field. Turning to this later possibility allows and requires us to be more foolish and playful about thinking through the nature of and responses to our research crisis, and provides the possibilities for alternative research practices to manoeuvre within and through varying micro-political influences. A few suggestions are offered using this strategy.

**Keywords:** information systems (IS) research, micro-politics, crisis, identity, methods, research practices, maneuver

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to The Value of Information Systems (IS) research: Is There a Crisis? I should start off by saying that there is much to admire in Hassan's work [2014], including: an excellent summary of the positions and dimensions of the debate thus far; a consideration of IS research value through pragmatism and Foucauldian micro-politics; an interesting view of a discipline's history as a "genealogy of problems"; the inclusion of various quotes illustrating the range of dimensions and responses to the debate; tensions around basic and applied research, and conclusions about a field being the "sum of its questions", if I can paraphrase. I draw off these strengths in my following comments, which focus on alternative conclusions arising from pragmatic and Foucauldian positions in the paper. My overall conclusion is that if there is a crisis for IS research relevance, we are responsible, but the nature of the crisis and our responsibility is due more to our inattention to the power-knowledge politics of our field than it is to the problems with the production of relevant knowledge through theory and methodology. Turning to this later possibility requires us to be more "foolish" about thinking through our particular and alternative practices to manoeuvre within and through these micro-politics.

## II. THE MICRO-POLITICS OF MICRO-POLITICS

First let me say that the question that Hassan's title asks -- whether there is a crisis (of Value in IS research)? -- is left unanswered. Perhaps this is now assumed, as a part of the chronic backdrop to our field's troubles, supported by what appears to be continuous evidence of schools closing IS programs, troubles with other colleagues and departments, and difficulties attracting students.

If Hassan is correct, then his and my attempts are the latest in a long history of responses and solutions which have been unable to change IS research practice. Ironically, this inability to transform research practice suggests that our work may be irrelevant to practitioners -- in this case, other IS researchers. If so, we may learn more about the theory-practice divide through a reflective analysis than through additional debate.

Leaving this aside, it is the obviousness of the problem and Hassan's conclusion, particularly drawing upon pragmatism and Foucauldian micro-politics, which piques my further questioning into the nature of the crisis and our collective role in it. Hassan's recommendation is that IS researchers need to increase the value of IS research by doing original and active work, asking unique questions and by making evident what is hidden. This suggests a "yes, of course" response, and a natural inclination to ask "how do we do it"? If Hassan's recommendations are a way forward from the crisis of value, then the pragmatic transformation is complete. I think it is fair to say that to some extent, he has done this.

Nevertheless, I find myself asking at times "are we not already doing this?", or with the collective capability of thousands of IS scholars, "how could we not be doing this?" Surely there must be enough of us doing original and active work, asking unique questions and making evident what is hidden. If so, then our problem may not be with identifying the crisis and its solution but a continuing focus on crisis-solutions that are no longer able to capture the nuanced details of what we are doing and could do differently. The crisis-solution may lie elsewhere.

The key may be in Hassan's relatively new position around the politics of knowledge-power. I believe we can carry this further, and consider how our discursive relations both enable and restrict how we speak and act, focusing more on the politics of knowledge-power and less on epistemological and ontological responses [Introna, 2003]. However, a micro-political position suggests our work is both more arduous and less immediately evident, because our discussions depend on manoeuvring within the micro-political forces that both enable and constrain our speaking about it, and away from the relatively easier advice about ontological and epistemological solutions in order to produce knowledge so clearly superior and relevant that it will wrestle power away from our competitor disciplines. This naïve view of power disables us from addressing questions of how academic knowledge is produced from relations of power, and prevents us from thinking differently about our struggle within it [Spicer & Fleming, 2006].

If we are to take the micro-politics seriously in Hassan's paper, we have the opportunity to turn the logic back onto our own possibilities for manoeuvre, without the promise of emancipation assumed in current debates which may dull our senses to the micro-politics within our field. This is perhaps one way that we can address the impossibility of changing research practice, as suggested by others in Hassan's article, through a revealing of the complex and

enmeshed micro-politics and disciplinary practices that make it difficult not only to practice differently, but to think and speak differently. If this is true, then our continued talk about cumulative tradition, diversity and relevance may no longer be the solution but a part of the problem – precisely because our readers are unaffected by more discussions about it, simply returning to his or her office on Monday practicing research the way he or she did before.

However, to do so we must confront how micro-politics dictates and shapes our respectability and seriousness because it regulates where and how we can make truth claims to others [Introna, 2003]. In order to avoid being captured completely by them, we must be “foolish” in attempting to speak and think differently, which this particular format in the CAIS allows us to do. However, I must admit that I find myself writing carefully here, in order to avoid purely ontological or epistemological suggestions, and to live with the irony that whatever I say may be easily captured by disciplinary influences which steer me towards less foolish and more respectable suggestions.

### III. FOOLISH THINKING ABOUT THE MICRO-POLITICS OF OUR DEBATES

To begin, the revelation of Foucault (and perhaps of Kuhn before him) is that disciplines are composed of groups like anyone else, and in Kuhn’s case, objective anomalies eventually shake the disciplinary core and normal science. In Foucault and Latour’s case, however, phenomena can only speak through disciplinary languages and practices [Introna, 2003], and in Collins’ [1998] case, new fields only emerge through the competition and struggle of researchers to move themselves away from other fields. It is politics through-and-through, resonating in the birth of the IS field separate from various other disciplines such as management science, accounting and computer science.

Collins’ insight normalizes our on-going discussions about the crisis of research relevance, as a part of any disciplinary group’s identity project through struggles and oppositions with other groups [Spicer and Fleming, 2006]. This struggle entails “a vital force of creativity and development” [Spicer and Fleming, 2006, p.9], in contrast to the negative view of power, as a zero-sum game between heroes and victims. In a related view, academic disciplines emerge from their struggles within other disciplines, with disciplinary dispersion and change best explained by competition between students and teachers – required to produce novelty [Collins, 1998]. If so, then we could see our debates about research relevance and disciplinary competition as a part of an on-going identity project -- a social movement which hopes to enrol others through its struggle and competition with other disciplines.

Turning to the debates within the field about its cumulative or diverse knowledge, a micro-political view of the fragmentation which some consider to be problematic is in fact a response to the competition in any field to produce original work [Collins, 1998]. Given this, our field’s coherence will necessarily need to come from what has been described as a quilt of overlapping areas [Collins, 1998] and not through a cumulative tradition with a restricted and simpler set of theories. On the contrary, the politics of research production and the expansion of the field to include new members is served by theoretical diversity, and the promotion of a core and simple cumulative tradition would shrink our numbers to the “law of small size” which would only allow a few people to thrive around a narrow set of theoretical and methodological possibilities [Collins, 1998].

I would also suggest that the inclusion of theories from other disciplines – like Foucault and “cumulative tradition” – does much to enrich our discipline by creating a space between alternatives –eventually giving us an ability to speak to the other disciplines that surround us. Perhaps it is this basis which allows us to work with and inform other disciplines [Baskerville and Myers, 2002]. A strong and simple cumulative tradition focused on a few core concepts would severely restrict the luminal thinking spaces required for a micro-political struggle and various manoeuvres with respect to other disciplines.

### IV. FOOLISH THINKING ABOUT THE MICRO-POLITICS OF OUR ACTIONS

However, recognizing our field as involved in an identity project not only involves a real conflict but also as an imaginary struggle invoked by those within the discipline itself. In this case, challenges to the logics and to those promoting the logics is always required.

Related, I would interrogate the proposed nature of a crisis, defined as “a juncture point and decision” – in this case, the decision to increase (or decrease) the value of IS research through original and active work, the asking of unique questions, and by making evident what is hidden. Phrases like this appear to be less of a decision and more of a compulsion, equivalent to the subtle fear tactics in advertising against smoking. Often these provoke little change in behavior despite creating a chronic fear. Possibly worse, the do or die of this framing may constrain our ability to think through the alternatives, despite the comfort of being alleviated from the hard work of the ethical and existential choices suggested by others [Boland and Lyytinen, 2004] -- the meaning of the word “relevance”. I suppose in making Hassan’s proposal completely relevant to us, we may risk losing an ability to think otherwise. Taking this a step further, we could ask about the problematisation and our enrolment into obligatory passage points called “the

IS crisis”, which would also prompt questions such as “What do I get from being enrolled into this and at what cost?”, and “what are my alternatives?” [Latour, 1987].

Beyond our collective creation of a crisis and solutions, Hassan highlights the important micro-political reality that the journal article remains the final end of IS research. And perhaps related to publishing, that end is best supported by a clear and rigorous research methodology which, given limited space for journal articles, is often the ultimate end [Constantinides et al. 2012, Introna 2003]. This logocentric approach to our texts is imbued with micro-political influences that make it extremely difficult to talk about alternative possibilities. These include journal and university rankings dictating how we add up and calculate our value primarily through journal article counts. What makes this political through-and-through is that these tallies and counts are almost always for those outside the field, although we may often find ourselves also counting our colleagues’ journal hits in order to evaluate hiring, promotion and tenure. It seems more and more that except for those few people who review the work in detail, the journal article and its count is increasingly for those either unconvinced or uninterested in reading our work. If this is the continuing case, it is no wonder that our work is increasingly less readable and accessible to practitioners, prompting solutions such as engaged scholarship which may effectively leave these micro-political practices unchallenged.

One way forward, already suggested by our colleagues, is to introduce alternative genres into the journals themselves, as proposed by an upcoming special issue in the European Journal of Information Systems (EJIS), initiated as a track at the European Conference of Information Systems (ECIS) 2012. We could also explore the reintroduction of the industry-focused papers and industrial associate editors into Management Information Systems (MIS) Quarterly, given that the political project of making MIS Quarterly a respectable journal has been accomplished [Introna, 2003]. This would create the space for practitioner-focused work to be legitimated under the radar of journal counters. However, I suppose it would require IS researchers to read and cite the papers in order to keep the journal citation counts respectable, which may be difficult now that the style and approach of industry-focused articles may seem odd, given our engrained and assumed aesthetic view of the serious research article.

However, the game is never completely played or lost. There are many micro-political fractures where engaged work is now increasingly possible, perhaps through the engaged scholarship now promoted in various journals, but also within the new requirement for so-called “impact cases” now required in such places as the UK, for the research excellence framework. For others, manoeuvrability for practical work and writing may be possible in their work environments depending on their own unique micro-political dimensions.

In this sense, I support Hassan’s conclusion that we should evaluate theories by “how much they disclose or uncover” – not only because they support our ability to ask unique questions, but for the novelty it brings to the IS academics needing to succeed through theoretical and empirical novelty. Beyond instrumental ends, this seems to be a strategy resonating with pragmatic and micro-political possibilities, one being the ability to talk about and converse with people in other disciplines, even if it seems many people in these disciplines don’t have a clue about IS research. In many cases, our form of thinking and working through particular research challenges and topics seems to matter more than some clear ontological identity that we can communicate as our own.

Nevertheless, I agree that this inter-disciplinary invisibility comes with a micro-political price – of being pushed aside by topics like marketing and accounting which often appear to be the default topics for business schools, and the computer scientists who appears to be asking and answering similar questions. However, the specifics of any particular opportunity or challenge to IS needs to be considered on its own micro-political terms in order to consider the options for manoeuvrability. For example, my own recent experience of a cancelled eMBA class was launched by a group of administrators untrained in any particular discipline who believed that using e-learning and social media was enough for their students, and that the other disciplines could address the IS component. Under severe pressure themselves to respond to reduced student numbers, I feel that the individuals involved are mediators of logics that sit beyond them, immobilized by their need to make a quick and difficult decision relying upon the simplest argument they could find. Such a simple logic required a response, and while the decision remained, it explicitly opened up dormant and unchallenged assumptions about IS, which allows me and others to restate the importance of IS to other colleagues and to provoke other course possibilities. The struggle here doesn’t rest with a power-holder and a hapless victim but a challenge to the discursive relations which underpin the decisions.

Looking at these micropolitics more opportunistically, our field sits on the boundary of numerous funding agencies which, through different discourses and logics, both channels and increases our ability for funding – sitting as we do at the crossroads of engineering, management, social science, and in some cases, health care. These positions allow various possibilities for manoeuvre unavailable to other colleagues in many other disciplines, but this manoeuvring needs to be carefully worked through. For example, medical council funding may require other medical people to be involved with and leading the grant. For the engineering councils, the intellectual property and “things” produced from the research are often emphasized, while the social science councils typically require a

language and discourse that suggests social science research focused on a greater understanding of a phenomena – to put it too simply. Our micro-political strategies are to play within these logics to convince and derive outcomes that are of interest to these councils – meanwhile serving our own and our external partners' interests.

Looking at the micropolitics of the other fields in competition with us, I often find it difficult to find a monolithic person called a “computer scientist” or an “accountant” On the contrary, the fragmentation assumed to be a problem in our field is often found there also, although sometimes along different dimensions. I also find in these fields a number of inter-disciplinary researchers who often share a surprisingly similar view about research and practice, and often an interest in the same topics, theories and methods (usually under different names), in spite of the disciplinary walls. In terms of our boundary spanning ability and the micro-politics of struggle, we have already taken and need to take further advantage of these micro-political openings in both teaching and research in order to provide resilient positions to counter the difficulties of living at the boundary, while also being cautious that individuals and groups in these other disciplines can sometimes dominate the discussions and outcomes.

I would also suggest a final foolish alternative – that perhaps being a marginal field is our role -- success at living with and between the numerous micro-political influences that our more successful colleagues have to live with, day in and day out. I sometimes wonder what our marketing colleagues feel about teaching the 4 ps – product price promotion and place – (or it if 5 or 6 ps now?) to their students every year. Perhaps life is not so enjoyable when locked into a singular and cumulative identity.

## V. CONCLUSION

To conclude, in order to complete what Hassan has set out to do, our micro-practices need to be brought to greater attention and light, including the crisis itself and our responses to it. To do so we need to suggest foolish alternatives that reveal and challenge the micro-politics of IS research practice – including the assumptions implicated in Hassan's and my closing statements. Thinking pragmatically, they will only provide value as long as they transform research practice in some way.

## REFERENCES

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**Mike W. Chiasson** is currently a Professor of Information Systems and an Advanced Institute for Management Research (AIM) fellow, at Lancaster University's Management School in the Department of Management Science. His research examines how the social context affects and is affected by IS development and implementation. Various topics studied have included: system development and diffusion (public policy, user involvement, agile development, packaged software, deconstruction) and the resulting effects of IT on organizations (entrepreneurial capabilities, IT diffusion and infusion, organizational change, client-patient outcomes, privacy, professional work, and cybercrime). In doing so, he has made various contributions to social theory (actor-network theory, Habermas, pragmatism, structuration theory, entrepreneurial opportunities), action research, research methods and ethics. His work has been published in such journals as *MIS Quarterly*, *Journal of the AIS*, *Information and Organization*, *Journal of Business Venturing*, *Journal of Information Technology*, and *the Information Systems Journal*.

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