Debate Section Editorial Note: Reviews, Reviewers, and Reviewing: The “Tragedy of the Commons” in the Scientific Publication Process

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Debate Section Editorial Note: Reviews, Reviewers, and Reviewing: The “Tragedy of the Commons” in the Scientific Publication Process

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1 Introduction

After a year without a published debate section, the debate section returns in 2018 stronger than ever. This editorial note introduces the first of four debates I have been working with over the last 21 months. The second one is in the finalizing stage, and another two are with the authors for rejoinders.

Extending where we left in 2016 after Juhani Iivari triggered a debate on the quality of peer review, which itself followed a discussion on the role of open access in scholarly publishing, Tom Stafford, who had been deeply involved in this previous debate, contacted me to share his wider concerns about reviews, reviewers, and reviewing—a problem he and, indeed, everyone involved in managing review and publication processes with and for our community experience. Stafford, who currently serves as the co-editor-in-chief for the DATA BASE for Advances in Information Systems and has had many other editor roles, opens the debate with his paper “Reviews, Reviewers, and Reviewing: The ‘Tragedy of the Commons’ in the Scientific Publication Process”. Using the concept of the tragedy of the commons, Stafford elucidates the dilemma that we all want the maximum good—a timely, high-quality review of our work—but that we are not all willing to share our resources to reach that end.

Several colleagues, in various editor roles, followed our invitation and provided interesting and thought-provoking rejoinders to Stafford’s argument. Altogether, the debate issue contains six papers: Stafford’s opening paper, four responses to it, and Stafford’s final response to the responses.

In the first response, Edgar Whitely, the co-editor of Information, Technology & People, digs deeper into the concept of the “commons”, and, while agrees with Stafford’s line of argument in principle, challenges the concept’s usefulness for tackling the problem of reviewer scarcity in times where academics experience all kinds of institutional pressures. Others have expressed this sentiment in various contexts, and it may be time to tackle this situation concertedly and more broadly. Whitely provides a pragmatic way to increase the pool of reviewers by referring to the reviewer workshops he has organized over the past years.

In the second response, Janice Sipior, the editor-in-chief of Information Systems Management, adds further facts to the increasing number of submissions and publications and, consequently, the rising need for peer reviews. She also analyzes the motivations of reviewers and their ethical conduct in more detail. Subsequently, she makes a proposal to request more formal integrity statements from both reviewers and authors at the beginning of a review proposal as her contribution to solve the problem.

In the third response, Michel Avital, who serves among others as associate editor on the board of the European Journal of Information Systems, suggests that we should deploy a blockchain-enabled market-based eco-system for peer reviewing in which authors, instead of a possible monetary fee, pay “peer review coins”, which reviewers receive to then pay for the reviews of their own work—an interesting idea given the current interest around blockchain technology.

In the fourth response, Stacie Petter, Stafford’s co-editor at the DATA BASE for Advances in Information Systems, publicly shares what she might have discussed with Stafford in intensive face-to-face discussions. She puts forward the “golden rule of reviewing” as her contribution to settle parts of the issue. She formulates the golden rule as “do unto others as you would have reviewer two do unto you” and contrasts authors’ and reviewers’ self-interests in resolving the tragedy of the scientific commons to give her ideas quite some weight.

Finally, in the debate issue’s final paper “Rejoined and Regenerated: Response to Responses to ‘Reviews, Reviewers, and Reviewing: The ‘Tragedy of the Commons’ in the Scientific Publication Process”, Stafford discloses his relations to the authors of the rejoinders and rejoices in taking up the challenges that they pose—a delightful read. I do not spoil more of the overall compelling discussion and leave it to readers and members of the IS community to continue the debate offline and online. We are still working on an online direct comment feature for our debates, but I am happy to collect and share short comments and edit them for publication in future issues of the debate section. And more will come. As I indicate above, we might need to jointly counteract the institutional pressures we all experience, and more radical viewpoints and approaches that debate information systems and the role of our journals, publications, and rankings for the advancement of our discipline, for our collective standing, and for our individual contributions and careers will appear in this section in the future. Enjoy and stay tuned.
About the Authors

Karlheinz Kautz holds the position of Professor of Digital Business at the School of Business Information Technology and Logistics in the College of Business at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. His current research interests are in Digital Innovation and Transformation, Information Systems Development, and the organizational and societal impact of IT. He is the co-founder and former chairperson of the International Federation of Information Processing (IFIP) Working Group 8.6 on the Adoption, Transfer and Diffusion of IT. He has served the information systems (IS) community in numerous capacities as editor and board member of journals such as Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems, Journal of Information Technology, Information Technology & People, the Journal of the Association of Information Systems (AIS), and the Communications of the AIS.