Debate Section Editorial Note: Reconsidering Counting Articles in Ranked Venues (CARV) as the Appropriate Evaluation Criteria for the Advancement of Democratic Discourse in the IS Field

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1 Introduction

This CAIS debate marks the sixth debate since the debate section’s inception in 2014. With this debate, we further catch up on our backlog with one more debate in queue awaiting the original authors’ rejoinder to their opinion piece. In the inaugural editor’s note, I invited critical notices about information systems research and welcomed any critical or controversial topic that addresses a phenomenon in our community in general or that deals with specific arguments made in our journals, at our conferences, or in a book. The submissions we received revolved with a steady regularity around two topics: 1) the identity and value of our field as in the very first debate “The Value of IS Research: Is There a Crisis?” (vol. 34, 2014) and the latest one “Is Information Systems a Science?” (vol. 43, 2018) and 2) the way we evaluate and publish our research work as in the other debates “Open access: The Whipping Boy for Problems in Scholarly Communication” (vol. 37, 2015), “How to improve the Quality of Peer Reviews: Three Suggestions for System-level Change” (vol. 38, 2016), and “Reviews, Reviewers, and Reviewing: The Tragedy of the Commons in the Scientific Publication Process” (vol. 42, 2018).

The present debate is no exception: built on their manuscript entitled “Reconsidering Counting Articles in Ranked Venues (CARV) as The Appropriate Evaluation Criteria for the Advancement of Democratic Discourse in the IS Field”, Michael Cuellar, Duane Truex, and Hiro Takeda combine the two topics and both challenge the general advancement of our field and our contributions to the body of knowledge and the way we publish and evaluate individual academic scholarly output based on counting articles in ranked venues. This topic is not easy to wrestle with, and, not surprisingly, it has caused some debate ranging from strong/mild support for the authors’ position to serious concerns and outright rejection.

However, I found a particular challenge that directly concerns the earlier debate on “Reviews, Reviewers, and Reviewing: The Tragedy of the Commons in the Scientific Publication Process” and my promise in the inaugural note that the CAIS debate format should enable dialogue without delay. Little did I know what I should have known; namely, that, although the authors of the original opinion pieces would nominate engaged colleagues with strong and interesting rejoinder opinions, a foresight which certainly has become true, scholars with profound and compelling opinions are in high demand, busy, and, although always willing, not always able to deliver in the agreed time regardless of any gentle reminders sent. So, this section took its time, but it was definitively worth the wait, and I am sure you will enjoy the opposing positions and further develop your own view on the topic.

Cuellar, Truex, and Takeda (2019a) oppose the current approach of counting articles in ranked venues as a basis for personal promotion and a measure for the field’s advancement and argue, grounded on their Habermasian critical standing, that such an approach limits what they consider democratic discourse in the field, hinders a fair assessment of all contributions to the field beyond those that the field’s top-ranked journals publish, and, thus, hinders the field’s advancement. They reason that counting articles in ranked venues is at best a partial measure, lacks a theoretical basis of the concept of quality, and relies on systemically distorted data. They conclude their critique with making a proposal to replace the current approach with a “scholarly capital model” that relies on not only published articles in ranked journals but also what they term ideational influence (i.e., the extent to which a field takes up a scholar’s ideas), connectedness (a scholar’s ability to draw on the scholar’s relationships with other scholars to advance the scholar’s ideas), and venue representation (i.e., the ability to publish in venues central to the field).

While sympathetic to these ideas, Subhashish Samadar and Samir Chatterjee (2019) express the most concern with the authors’ combination of individual research contribution and the field’s research discourse and focus on clarifying the relationship of the criticized approach to individual contribution and discourse. They also offer an alternative solution to substitute or supplement counting articles in ranked venues based on academic metrics, industry and practice metrics, and qualitative and subjective data concerning societal metrics. A forthcoming volume of CAIS will publish their full model as well.

Robert Galliers, Claudia Loebbecke, and Christoph Rosenkranz (2019), while acknowledging Cuellar et al.’s (2019a) concerns about the weaknesses of the current approach, argue that these authors’ position that counting articles as an accepted evaluation criteria to judge the quality of any individual researcher’s work and as a measure for the advancement and growth of the field is wrong and mistaken. Accordingly, they put forward that counting articles in ranked venues never claimed to measure output quality and, thus, does not limit the quality of the research in the field nor its growth. Like Samadar and Chatterjee, Galliers et al. express their unease about 1) mingling the approach with any debate on individual researchers’ research output and that output’s quality and about 2) mingling the approach’s effect on growth. They consider blending a critique of counting articles in ranked journals with discussing individual
researchers’ research and its quality as irrelevant because counting published articles is independent of the quality of a researcher’s work and is used and abused for researchers’ promotion and tenure. As for counting articles’ effect on the field’s advancement and growth, Galliers et al. contend that needs to be dealt with through adding new people and scholars, new and more content, and more quality to the field. To this end, they argue that replacing the current approach with a new one would not change the “game” but rather its rules. They also summarize their conclusions in five takeaways.

Alexander Serenko (2019) fully supports the argument that Cuellar et al. (2019a) make and their resulting proposal. He focuses on the aspects of an effective scholarly appraisal system. In line with others, he would like to extend the suggested model by including not only scholarly or academic capital but also practical capital in the form of knowledge outreach and impact through a scholar’s direct and indirect contribution to professional forums and the scholar’s general connections to the non-academic sector. For this purpose, he argues any extended model needs to meet criteria such as truthfulness to an organization’s history, compatibility with its goals, balance of organizational and individuals’ needs, fairness and consistency in its application, manageability, credibility, lawfulness, and, not least, articulation in formal documents.

In contrast, Rick Andersen (2019), a library science scholar fully rejects Cuellar et al.’s (2019a) position. Andersen clarifies his standpoint by positioning himself clearly in a tradition where reason is a non-negotiable principle of scholarly inquiry and where certain aspects of reality are not socially constructed. Against this background, he posits that, although a social behavior, academic evaluation relies on logic and reason that one can examine in a purely empirical, positivistic way. Further, he develops an argument that, from his perspective, shows that Cuellar et al. (2019) use flawed reasons to reject CARV. Therefore, he clearly advocates for the current approach.

These positions give Cuellar, Truex, and Takeda (2019b) quite some food for thought, and they take up the opportunity of their own rejoinder to make some amplifications, clarifications, and corrections with regard to what they mean by a free and open discourse, what it means for a field to advance, what counting articles in ranked venues assesses, how this approach connects to the field’s advancement, and how they would like evaluators to use an alternative such as the scholarly capital model. They respond to their strongest opponents but finish with a further invitation in which they state that the scholarly evaluation issue remains an unfinished topic and that they would like to see further discussion based on a multi-theoretical pluralism that has benefitted and advanced our field so far.

I extend this invitation and hope that the reading of this debate section advances your opinions on this important issue of IS research and beyond.
References


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About the Authors

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