Editorial Preface

Synthesizing IS Scholarship: The Missing Piece

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There is a tremendous growth in the quality and quantity of published scholarly papers in information systems. Papers with IS focus appear not only in journals dedicated to the MIS research, but also in journals for related (and sometimes unrelated) disciplines. This is expected, since computers, information technology, and the Internet have become staples of our personal, social, and professional lives. It is not surprising, then, to find papers with varying degrees of IS content in art, architecture, biology, computer science, economics, engineering, finance, gender research, library science, linguistics, genetics, management, marketing, medicine, neurology, philosophy of science, political science, psychology, real estate, sociology, and others. This pervasive interest in IS-related research broadens the borders of our field and provides ample opportunity for interesting and innovative cross-disciplinary research. However, the open border of IS research raises some interesting issues.

One issue is the need for critical synthesis of the state of knowledge in the sub-streams of IS research. In other fields, this job falls normally to textbook authors, who are well-known scholars in a given sub-stream. The top scholars take it upon themselves to write a definitive textbook that educates and informs where the sub-stream stands and the future of its movements. Edited books also provide additional collections of valuable contributions. The topics in the edited books are benchmarks for future textbooks in the area.

In the IS field, there is a scarcity of books that provide a rigorous and definitive synthesis of published research in various IS sub-streams. Although academic publishers publish edited books and encyclopedias in IS sub-streams, not enough intellectual investment has been made in synthesizing published work to develop unifying or cohesive structures for IS sub-streams. Part of this problem is the schism between IS research and industry applications. The IS undergraduate textbooks do not focus sufficiently on the latest intellectual movements within the field. Theoretical and conceptual discussions are watered down in order to increase the “industry” relevance of textbooks. Graduate IS textbooks also suffer from lack of attention to critical synthesis of theories and empirical results that inform readers of the state of knowledge within the sub-streams. One reason could be the size of the audience. Rigorous books may not have many buyers. Top schools rarely reward IS researchers for publishing books in their fields of expertise. Publishers do not demand rigor. Professors do not find rigorous books to assign. They may settle for watered down texts, then supplement them with papers, cases, software, and other materials to fill the void. Hence, teachers and students are under-served. The research outputs remain under-utilized since they are not adequately channeled to the mainstream knowledge base for broader audiences and practical applications. The size of audience remains small and limited to a few who specialize in each sub-stream, and the vicious circle continues.

Where should we begin to rectify the problem and fill the gaps? To help the professors, students, and authors in their daunting task of distilling and synthesizing new knowledge as it evolves and grows simultaneously in multiple fields, there should be a conscious effort by academic journals to publish papers that critically review the state of knowledge within each sub-stream. Such reviews should
offer a unifying framework and a synthesis of scholarly findings, and identify conflicts and controversies within the sub-stream. Such papers are distinct from a simple review of literature. A synthesis paper should be critical, thorough, and cover all the disciplines that publish in the topics of the sub-stream. More importantly, it must synthesize the findings to provide a structure for the state of the domain knowledge, and identify the gaps and areas of disagreements. These papers also provide a synthesis of managerial implications of the new knowledge within the sub-stream.

It is important to emphasize what these papers should not be. A synthesis paper is not (1) a superficial catalog of published papers, (2) a disjointed report of who did what, (3) an arbiter of controversies, or (4) limited to papers published only in IS journals. Synthesis papers should be definitive and thought-provoking in the topics they cover. The contributions of synthesis papers should be compelling in their completeness, thoughtful in their synthesis, and unbiased in the coverage of controversies and existing gaps. Journals that serve the field by promoting synthesis papers should discourage verbosity. However, they need to relax their page limitations in order to allow a complete treatment of the subject. Our existing or future online journals may be good candidates for such articles. Special issues dedicated to synthesis papers could increase researchers’ attention to the importance of such papers. Synthesis papers could supplement textbooks in classrooms, inform researchers who are not active in the sub-stream, and serve as valuable outlets to transfer the outputs of academic research to non-academics and industry practitioners.

Other fields have encountered and addressed this problem. For example, in computer science, ACM Computing Surveys publishes extensive review articles that discuss a given topic exhaustively. In natural science, one frequently finds annual survey papers that summarize and critically review the state of knowledge on a given topic. The broad range of IS research and the vast and varied topics covered in the field make synthesis papers a needed scholarly undertaking.

Breaking out of Lock-In: Insights from Case Studies into Ways Up the Value Ladder for Indian Software SMEs by Abhishek Nirjar and Andrew Tylecote that appeared in IRM 18(4) inadvertently listed the country in the second author’s affiliation incorrectly. The correct affiliation of the second author should be Sheffield University Management School, UK. IGI apologizes for this incorrect information.