Foreword

It is a pleasure to write a foreword to this important, new text on Information Systems (IS) research. I have to confess that I was one of the originators to the UKAIS definition of information systems referred to at the beginning of the Introduction. It was the product of a number of meetings of a subset of the (then) board of the UK Academy for IS (UKAIS). The intention was to be inclusive, since we recognised, as the editors describe in their introduction, that IS is a broad church. UKAIS members worked in departments ranging from psychology to creative arts, and from engineering to mathematics. We sought not to exclude researchers who used very different methods to address very different problem types, but the upshot is a definition that, in trying to be all things to all people, perhaps did not help to establish IS as a discipline in its own right. Nearly a decade later, much the same group, this time under the auspices of the Council of IS Professors suggested a new definition that sought to reflect the multitude of changes that had taken place in the intervening period. However, this definition does not seem to have supplanted the earlier version.

Pedro Isaias and Miguel Baptista Nunes have valiantly waded into the mire that is information systems research, but as they identify, this is not necessarily a mire in a bad way. It is perhaps more a garden that has run wild with some flowerbeds obscured by others, some that are misplaced, and some glorious blooms not recognised for what they are. I think those of us who have grown up with the development of the information systems discipline—and it is amazing that nearly all the IS researchers I met when starting out on my own research journey in the 1980s are still active—forget how difficult it can be for the outside world, for funders, and for new doctoral students to understand what it is that we do, and more importantly, why we do it. This is why this text is so important. By gathering together the work of 54 researchers from 28 institutions in 13 different countries around the globe, Isaias and Nunes present us with a vital snapshot of the current state of information systems research approaches.

Multi-disciplinarity and inter-disciplinarity are now well established and are advocated by funding bodies. Information systems research has always exhibited characteristics of multi- and inter-disciplinarity, so might be seen as being the future, though a future that arrived a little too early for its own good. There are many ways to categorise IS research approaches. In their valedictory editorial in the Information Systems Journal, Guy Fitzgerald and David Avison analyse the changing nature of research approaches used in papers published in the journal. They identify the rise in interpretive-empirical and critical methods and the decline of descriptive/conceptual/theoretical methods and the increasing use of mixed methods. Fifteen categories of method are identified with surveys and case methods dominating. Fitzgerald and Avison note that the largest number of articles continue to investigate research issues related to the IS development category, but big “gainers” are papers on IS usage, and the big “loser” is the IS management category. They conjecture that the greater emphasis on IS usage may be a reflection of the greater maturity of the discipline as it seeks to investigate best practice in IT use.
This book helps us to make sense of approaches and methods. It identifies five main approaches: positivist and deductive, interpretivist and social constructivist, case study, mixed-methods, and evaluation. The editors argue that this diversity of approaches has led to a flourishing and adaptive IS research community and that this has enabled a natural co-evolution of research topics and technology. Hence, this book is rich, and it is diverse. It needs to be read by all new doctoral students and by masters and other students seeking a concise, coherent analysis of the state of IS research approaches. The editors acknowledge that this work is ephemeral as the socio-technical contexts being addressed change. However, unless we are to “capture reality in flight” now, we are never to understand the present nor prepare well for the future.

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