

Foreword

Some people think I am an alien.

If you have picked up a book with a title like this one (*Information Systems Research Methods, Epistemology, and Applications*), some people may think you are an alien too.

Aliens, of course, are creatures from another world. Why should we be characterized as aliens? Perhaps it is because, as researchers, we exist somewhere other than the “real world.” We speak of “real world” case studies, grounding our theory in the “real world,” doing our fieldwork out in the “real world.” This viewpoint holds that information systems practice occurs out there in the real world, whilst researchers observe and reflect from outside the real world, some otherworldly place of another dimension. Perhaps this other world is academia; perhaps it is a division of research and development (R&D) within a larger organization.

It strikes me that I have existed in “non-real worlds,” ever since I was six. This was the age at which I entered school followed much later by university. We all thought that our schools and universities were not the real world, but prepared us for the real world. My earliest professional career was in television broadcasting. That world was constructed of bright lights, visual and sound effects, and artificial backdrops. Of course, we realized that the world of our studios, sets, and control rooms was quite separate from the real world. Much of my information systems practical experience was associated with the military and defense industries. Here again, these large institutions created a perception that the military was isolated and distinct from “the world.” My work has also allowed me to collaborate with members of large, global, commercial organizations. Members of those companies also tend to regard their corporate environment as something distinct from the real world. It seems as if members of institutions will always regard themselves and their colleagues as existing apart from the real world. From this perspective, “research” seems to be an institution of its own, one existing apart from the “real world.”

I am beginning to suspect that, if this “real world” exists, it is actually a rather narrow, imaginary place populated mostly by family farmers and the owners and employees of small businesses. Perhaps instead, the real world is actually composed of many “non-real worlds” each supporting the grand illusion of separation.

The distinction between the researchers’ world and the real world may be part of this grander illusion. Do not imagine that academic research is somehow different from corporate R&D. Universities are certainly organizations in the real world. As any academic administrator will admit, these are normal organizations with buildings, budgets, staff, and products. Academia is a very real part of our native planet. Researchers are not aliens who visit the world to collect their data and return to their own planets for analysis of their discoveries. Like any other profession, researchers practice their profession. Researchers practice research.

We construct our distinction between information systems research and information systems practice as a means to distinguish the researcher from the subject. But somehow in this process we can easily forget

that research is a profession and a practice itself. But it is indeed a little more complex to consider the practice of information systems research in the context of research into information systems practice.

The problem with such consideration is that it most commonly unfolds in textbook style studies of research methodology. Such studies can be abstract and prescriptive. These studies present the research principles independently from their application, although illustrations of applications may follow, almost as a consequence of the principles. Perhaps it is more useful to study the application of research principles in real studies and to develop the abstractions as a consequence of the application. In this sense we reverse the roles of the research principles: the research principles become a consequence of the context in which we must develop knowledge from research.

This book provides the opportunity for just such a reversal. Many chapters offer insight into principles of information systems research by demonstrating how these develop principles of information systems practice. Others illustrate how well planned information systems research can uncover why the application of such information systems principles succeeds or fails in specific contexts.

Information Systems Research Methods, Epistemology, and Applications provides a book with its own unique, and very pragmatic, treatment of information systems research as a practical outcome of professional researchers exploring their chosen subject. Overall, this book delivers us to the intersection of two realms of practice: research practice and information systems practice. This intersection is a collision between these two very real worlds with very real tasks at hand. This is excellent learning ground.

There are no aliens, only very human researchers engaged in the professional practice of research, who encounter equally human practitioners engaged in the professional practice of information systems. What follows is the real world of information systems research.

Richard Baskerville
Atlanta, Georgia
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Richard L. Baskerville is a professor of Information Systems at Georgia State University. His research and authored works regard security of information systems, methods of information systems design and development, and the interaction of information systems and organizations. He is a chartered engineer, holds a BS summa cum laude, from The University of Maryland, and the MSc and PhD degrees from The London School of Economics, University of London.