Beyond Rigor and Relevance: Producing Consumable Research about Information Systems

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Since the origins of the academic field of information systems (IS) in the 1970s, researchers have faced apparently contradictory pressures to produce research that is both academically rigorous and relevant to practice. On the one hand, we are exhorted to generate scholarly articles that are academically rigorous; on the other, we are urged to make our research more relevant to practice. In this paper, we argue that there is no inherent conflict between these two pressures; it is not only possible, but also desirable, for IS research to fulfill both directives. We present four major strategies for conducting research that is both rigorous and relevant: cultivating practitioner sponsorship, adopting new research models, producing consumable research reports, and supporting nontraditional research outlets.

Since the field Information Systems (IS) originated, researchers have faced apparently contradictory pressures to produce research that is both academically rigorous and relevant to practice.1 On the one hand, we are trained to conduct research that conforms to the norms of scientific rigor and scholarship so intimately associated with our institutions of higher education. On the other hand, the domain of our research lies in the realm of practice, which values knowledge that can be directly applied to business and professional practice. Like so many of our colleagues in other business school disciplines, IS academics have treated these opposing pressures as irreconcilable and chosen the academic path. We quickly learned that the respect of our colleagues and the rewards of academic life would come to those whose work was viewed as rigorous. Our collective choice has allowed our field to grow and prosper in many universities. Today, we prepare a large proportion of the new entrants to IS professional and consulting careers, and we have become less self-conscious about our scholarship and journals. We have gained respectability within many business schools by emulating our colleagues’ rigorous research and publication standards.

In many ways, this choice was a foregone conclusion. Throughout the 1950s, business schools were an embarrassment to their academic peers in more fundamental disciplines. Management education was derided as too vocational and devoid of intellectual content. In 1959, the Ford Foundation’s Gordon/Howell Report argued that the solution lay in promoting rigorous research that would form an intellectual foundation for the education of future managers. However, critics are quick to count the costs of choosing rigor over relevance. Our research, like that of our business school colleagues, has grown increasingly irrelevant to practice. We became widely self-conscious of this problem during the 1980s, when the Porter-McKibbin report criticized U.S. business schools for their complacent response to global competition. Among other conclusions, the report warned the research community that executives paid little attention to the research that we produce. This lack or loss of practitioner respect has important implications for the academic community, such as the reduction of its credibility and withdrawal of financial support for...
The Relevance Crisis in IS Research

Academic researchers are motivated by incentives to produce “high science” theory and empirical research for respected academic journals. Academics are evaluated according to the standards of the academy, which, stated bluntly, means that junior faculty in research schools will lose their jobs unless they publish in the premier peer-reviewed journals in their fields. When IS researchers faced a shortage of journals that would publish their research, we began founding our own. Our first — MIS Quarterly — began its existence in 1977, positioned as a journal that could serve both academic and practitioner audiences. Since then, many new journals have been recognized as desirable outlets for academic IS research, but few have adopted MISQ’s dual-audience strategy. Information Systems Research began publication in 1990 with a clear mission to serve academic readers, and it maintains a highly legitimate affiliation with INFORMS. Sadly, the dual-audience strategy has declined even at MISQ; non-academic subscribers have dropped from over 2,000 to less than 800.

By focusing their work on outlets targeted to other academics, academic writers have effectively abandoned the practitioner audience. A casual perusal of any issue of any leading journal reveals the source of the problem: arcane explanations, advanced statistical analyses, extensive mathematical notation, excessive references to other published work, and a shortage of practical advice. From a practitioner’s perspective, academic writings are literally unreadable. Indeed, research would cease to be relevant if it were not rigorous in conception and execution. However, rigorous research that is prepared for practical consumption differs markedly from the articles that have traditionally graced our field’s premier research journals.

To make matters worse, the domain of IS practice is changing at an accelerating rate, spurred on by rapid technological developments. This makes the establishment of a traditional “program of research” about any particular technology a questionable enterprise. For example, although the IS field has amassed an impressive body of knowledge about group support technologies over the span of ten years, one wonders whether this body of knowledge can be applied to the technologies that are emerging now. Moreover, few practitioners can sustain their interest in a given topic long enough to accommodate the academic calendar and the customary delays in the publishing cycle. Managers need to know most about a technology when it is new, yet the academic world produces results only after practical interest has cooled. Viewed from this perspective, the presumed benefits of the revered “cumulative tradition” in IS research are potentially valueless to the practitioner. No matter how thorough and conclusive the research findings, they may have little relevance once the technology studied has disappeared from practice. Because IS researchers often define their interests around particular information technologies, we may ironically be ensuring irrelevance by targeting our work at traditional academic publication outlets.

Meanwhile, consultants and the practitioner media (e.g., Computerworld and CIO Magazine) have stepped in with timely reports on the practical implications of numerous emerging technologies. Virtually every topic of recent importance in IS — reengineering, mass customization, intranets/ extranets, enterprise models and software packages, electronic commerce, and virtual organizations — has been tackled by consultants, vendors, and journalists before the academics even got started. They, not we, are shaping the way that practitioners think about these important new technologies and applications. Writing by consultants is both innovative and practical, and the market for their writing and advisory services has grown enormously. Academics who are not consultants are characteristically skeptical of the superficiality of consulting work, but it is obvious that academics have a hard time competing for practitioners’ attention.

Ironically, we disparage articles in Harvard Business Review, Sloan Management Review, CIO Magazine, and Computerworld when they appear in tenure and promotion dossiers, yet we value these sources as teaching materials more than we value our own papers in leading academic journals. We are exposing our students to the more appealing writing of the consultants who author these articles, while our own research is directed toward our fellow researchers. In the eyes of those denizens of the “real world,” practitioners and our students, academia hypocritically pursues “rigorous research” that is curiously unknown in corporate boardrooms and in university classrooms. Our credibility is damaged because we fail to practice what we preach. Unlike Microsoft Corporation, whose associates delight in using the software products they build, academics do not “eat our own dog food.” Rather, we consistently send signals that our research is irrelevant to practice by keeping it away from the professional students we serve.
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