

EDITOR'S COMMENTS

A Midterm *MIS Quarterly* Progress Report

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I would like to take this opportunity part way through my term as Editor-in-Chief of *MISQ* to reflect on how things stand at the journal, with particular respect to our research community at large. This is, likely, a tall order, but I feel the need to depart from the format that I have been trying to follow since March of 2008. What is that editorial format? I have made a real effort (no doubt not fully realized) to include matters of substance in the editorials. To warranty this, I have invited other IS scholars, some quite senior and some quite junior, to join me in speculating and yet still offering evidence for one or more points of view. The topics have ranged widely, from what, for heaven's sake, can be done to reinvigorate *MISQ* to what journal citations mean to upward and downward spirals in a profession and so on.

This editorial will take a different tack. There will probably be, by most people's standards, precious little in the way of evidence and far too much opinion and vast speculation. But, at the very least, it will represent something different and, I hope, thought-provoking.

Where Do We Stand, Overall?

My belief is that, as a journal, *MISQ* has achieved a very strong position in the field and across the business, management, and information disciplines. We enjoy high citation factors, even against other outstanding business and information science journals, and we have garnered editorial boards of unparalleled distinction. What is more, our authors are challenging the known and launching forth in new directions for the field to consider and react to. Our articles engender lively debate and set us forth boldly on new theoretical adventures. Special issues in the offing on sustainable IT, service science innovations, digital strategies, and business intelligence promise a bright future of intellectual pioneering.

The appointment of new members to the editorial board is one of the most critical joint tasks of the EIC and the current editorial board. The process we use is a consensual one and, in my opinion, it results in a board that demonstrates both excellence in scholarship and sound evaluation of the work of others (criteria which are equally important); it also results in a board that spans the globe and has strong representation from different ethnicities, genders, and scholarly paradigms. In point of fact, we have made a concerted effort to include influential members of research subcommunities such as design science, the economics of IS, and qualitative research methods on our boards and have succeeded in doing this.

That being said, and so as not to appear too self-satisfied, we still have Himalaya mountains to climb and Pacific oceans to cross.

Himalaya #1: Perception that *MISQ* is a Closed Shop

Some people believe, for example, that the journal is a closed shop. They feel that they are frozen out of publishing in *MISQ* and that only those who are insiders or old timers are given a voice in our journal pages. I personally believe that this is not the case. There will undoubtedly be an entire editorial dedicated to investigating such perceptions at some point, but for the moment, let me share some simple statistics. Over the last 10 years, more than half of all *MISQ* authors are first-time or "new" authors. If one accepts the propositions that established researchers continue to be active in publishing and that their talents have not waned, this statistic regarding brand new authors is impressive, as I interpret it. If one were a proponent of the "closed shop" thesis, the number put forward as demonstrating a serious problem might be that 75 percent

or more of the authors have published at least once before in the journal. I am happy to report that this is assuredly far from the truth. How can those in the profession who are of the “closed shop” mentality be convinced to the contrary? That is just one of the large mountains or oceans before us.

What makes this particularly poignant is that there is likely no grass roots movement for the *Quarterly* to lower its standards and publish more papers that are not at the level of historic quality. Even those who believe in the “closed shop” thesis are supportive of continuing high standards because they believe in their souls that these are good for the field (although ironically too stringent for yet-to-be-established authors). So it is not clear, to me at least, how one puts to rest such fears. But, as I said, I will try to do so in a future editorial where we have quite a bit of documented evidence that *MISQ* is, in fact, an “open shop” and new authors from around the world stand a good chance of being published, especially if they are persistent.

Pacific Ocean #2: Encouraging an Editorially Directed Review Culture

One of my most intensive lobbying efforts has been for our editorial board to sign onto an editorially directed review process where decisions about manuscripts are made up front—carefully but quickly. The concept here is that papers should not be sent out for review unless the chances of acceptance are already fairly high. In short, we would not use our precious reviewers’ insights unless the editors were already impressed in many ways with the paper.¹ Keeping in mind that editing is a voluntary task (as well as a hugely demanding one), one can easily see that this places new burdens on an already highly committed and heavily working editorial board in that, in order to successfully execute this strategic goal, they have to make at least an initial assessment of the paper before receiving any reviewer feedback.

I have also been encouraging our editors to rethink the relative importance of Type I and Type II reviewing errors. When a journal’s citation factors are at a respectable level, as they have been for the last 10 years at *MISQ*, the possibility of a Type I reviewing error (accepting weak papers that the community would have rejected) is diminished. Citation factors indicate that, overall, the journal is being read and knowledge is being transferred to other scholars, which implicitly argues that there is a low level of Type I reviewing error.

The issue, as I see it, lies in Type II errors, where manuscripts submitted to the journal are rejected by the editors, but, if the truth be told, the community would have eagerly welcomed these articles. Evidence for a Type II error is hard to come by, but it would be represented by rejected manuscripts that were later published in another journal and thereafter heavily cited. Clearly, there could be a mammoth systematic bias in attempting to document this as most authors hold privy the prior history of their articles even when asked to reveal this on submitting fresh to a journal. Nevertheless, it is conceptually possible that a Type II reviewing problem could be documented if there were a deep-seated desire to gather and interpret the data.

Here we tread on soft ground. My impression is that there are still Type II errors occurring at *MISQ*, and that this results in our publishing fewer good-to-great papers than we could otherwise. It is not an input problem. We have an abundance of high quality manuscripts to evaluate and so there are always manuscripts that meet the acceptance hurdles to the extent that we are able to put together full issues. Second, the special issues are likewise well provisioned with a sufficient number of good manuscripts, and these acceptances swell the pool of publishable papers. Third, *MISQ* is owned by the University of Minnesota and, for all intents and purposes, manages its own budget. As long as revenues match or exceed expenses, we are at liberty to publish as many papers in the journal as we can afford. In that *MISQ* does not have fixed page constraints imposed on it by external bodies, we are in a position to publish more papers than we do currently.

The thinking that leads me to suspect *MISQ* Type II errors is convoluted (and highly anecdotal), but let me advance it anyway. When I read the other top-notch journals in our field, which includes not only the AIS-8, but a selected few others, I find papers that heavily cite *MISQ* articles and sometimes are advancing a line of research that had begun in *MISQ*. In such cases, I wonder whether the authors must not have tried their paper first at *MISQ*, but had it rejected before finding a good home in another journal later. This is, perhaps, testable, and I may well attempt this with a few more years of data accumulating in Manuscript Central. For the moment, however, I will leave the issue by just stating that I am uneasy that we are rejecting papers that the community would welcome.

¹This orientation by no means guarantees publication once a paper goes out for review, but its chances should have gone up markedly. As I recall, this was once the way in which all our best journals functioned. Over the years, it has become more and more common to hear about the unconscionable rejection of papers after a plentitude of reviewing rounds. In my own experience with our top journals, I have been heartsick to hear, more than once, that my paper was rejected in a fourth round because, among other reasons, it was not a good fit with the journal. It is difficult to hear an editor utter such words when this should be, by all the laws of common sense, an initial, up-front judgment by the editors.

Himalaya #3: Influencing (and Being Influenced by) Other Fields

Another Himalaya is the recognition of *MISQ* (and the other dozen or more IS journals that represent the best in the field) throughout schools of management, information schools, and other applied disciplines. This is a long, slow process. Assembling voluminous co-citation evidence, Grover and his colleagues (Grover et al. 2006a; Grover et al. 2006b) argue that we are finally seeing progress on this front. But Wade et al. (2006a, 2006b) contend the argument with evidence of their own and so the jury on IS as a “contributing discipline” (Lee 2001) is still out.

What I can share with you from the vantage point of EIC of *MISQ* is that what I am seeing is that the range of submitters and the disciplines they represent is becoming quite latitudinarian. One research domain that is particularly active is scientific methodology, where the topic itself is in service to the broader setting of social science. With the advent of very viable Web-based enterprises from Amazon to Google to e-Bay, we have seen a much tighter relationship between marketing constructs/ theories and IS. And the sharing of these ideas across the disciplines seems to be resulting in excellent articles in both IS and marketing journals, in more transdisciplinary collaborations, and in increasing levels of journal cross-citation. Something could be said about other field crossovers, but I will not mention them in that these are just my impressions and little more.

More can and should be done. As an ambassador of the journal, I have attended (and keynoted) two conferences that were avowedly cross-disciplinary, with representatives of e-learning, e-commerce, and computer science communities. In the vein of encouraging relationships with other fields, we are actively seeking out authors working in a variety of scientific methodologies and experts in entrepreneurship to bring about more boundary-spanning. The upcoming special issues on sustainability, digital strategies, business intelligence, and service science and innovation are also cases in point. All of these span traditional disciplines. More of this sort of boundary-spanning should be done, I think.

Pacific Ocean #4: The Evolution of Our Online Manuscript Management System

On a less exalted plane, how is our relatively new online submission and document management system (<http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/misq>) faring? After one and a half years, we are nearly at the end of the stream of manuscripts that were originally handled by our home-grown software, and have settled into the idiosyncrasies of the new system. At some point I will be reporting statistics about how efficiently, overall, we are processing manuscripts, but for the moment I can comment on other aspects of the system. What readers may not fully realize is that not all journals are alike in how they have parameterized the basic functionality of this tool. At *MISQ*, for example, we made major changes in over 100 default e-mail messages, including micro-decisions such as who is copied, who is blind copied, and so forth. We were also sensitive to the need to automatically keep the entire review team informed about manuscript decisions and about how other evaluators responded to the manuscript. The system now performs this task admirably.

When authors receive feedback from their submission, the editors have already bundled together the reviewer reports as well as their own reports and in this manner authors (as well as the blind-copied entire review team) receive a single report (in MS Word, along, optionally, with other documents such as edited versions of the manuscript, additional papers that may need to be utilized, etc.). One reason that reviews are not “tagged” onto the SE decision letter by the system in Manuscript Central is to try to ensure that review reports are themselves fully incorporated into the editorial decisions and that no “untoward” language has slipped into the packet. *MISQ* reviewers are almost always civil and constructive, but once in a while it is incumbent on the editors to suggest changes in wording so as to elevate the tone of the discourse. There is never any intention to alter the intellectual stance of the reviewers, but it is important that the language (especially the language accompanying a rejection) is ever polite.

Himalaya #5: Focusing the Field on Creating Great Work Rather than Avoiding Rejections

Another strategic effort that has been highlighted in several past editorials (Straub 2009a, 2009b) is to refocus our “depth of field” (to borrow a term from photography) on acceptance rather than rejection. There is no doubt that at a top journal rejections prevail, but this should be a necessary evil we live with and not something we revel in. The Himalaya that still needs to be climbed is convincing the community that this refocusing will lead to virtuous cycles (Grover et al. 2009) that become self-reinforcing.

It is not clear to me that much ground has been gained in convincing the community that we need to be talking about why papers are accepted rather than the contrary. I am still asked on a regular basis for *MISQ*'s rejection rate (or this implicitly when I am asked for the acceptance rate). These requests come from all manner of academics who either have not read my editorials on this topic (most likely, and one can hardly blame them in a busy world like ours) or do not believe me when I say that we are simply not calculating this rate of rejection figure.

Other Himalayas and Pacific Oceans

There are certainly other ways that *MISQ* can be improved. We have struggled to offer sessions for new authors at major venues like ICIS, but the low attendance means that either these are not valued by the community or not as effective as they need to be. Whichever is true, we would be happy to try this again should there be a strong expressed interest on the part of those who would like to publish in *MISQ*.

How do we communicate more effectively with the readership and the field as a whole? One of my goals before becoming EIC was to radically redo the website, and we are nearing the time when this will be a reality. There will undoubtedly be features on the new site that are more or less meaningful, but it is often difficult to get user feedback to alter these. But we will persist.

What kind of forum gives the journal the greatest direct contact with the IS community? As mentioned earlier, I have been representing the journal as an ambassador for several years now and have traversed the planet in quest of this elusive goal. Is this still desirable? Should we transition over to more advanced video technologies and cover more ground, albeit with lower richness in social presence cues? In practice, people still seem to value personal contact, and so I will not be planning any major change in physical visits for the moment, but other avenues would seem to be ideally suited for increasing scale and scope.

Without question there are many other mountains and oceans that lie before us. The list I present here is clearly not exhaustive. These do, however, represent what I see as key issues confronting the journal.

Concluding Thoughts

There are several strategic initiatives like Himalaya #5 that have been initiated at the journal, another of which is the editorially directed review process (Pacific Ocean #2). I have no empirical evidence that tells me that we are or are not moving in these directions other than the random remark or interactions with editors, reviewers, and authors in other contexts. A thorough-going status report should, perhaps, have more hard evidence of change.

My sense is that the editorial board is adopting this new viewpoint, but slowly. And this may not be unexpected. Changing a culture is like trying to turn a large barge around in a small harbor. It can be accomplished, but it just takes time.

In closing, I can assure the community that the editors and staff at *MISQ* are working hard to maintain the high status of the journal, and with the support of members of the community who agree to undertake the monumental task of expert reviewing, we will, I trust, continue to keep the journal well embedded in the intellectual heartland of the IS field.

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