

# The Apology of a Retiring Founding Editor [1]

With this short missal, I'm violating the principle I established to the effect that the Senior Editor of the *MIS Quarterly* shall not publish in the journal [2]. To ease my conscience, I'll modify the principle to be: that any Founding Senior Editor after six years of service can have approximately four journal pages in the last issue of their tenure as compensation for their efforts [3].

Seriously, I'd like to look back over the past six years of dealing with the *MIS Quarterly*. I want to say a bit about how the journal got started and to tell some "war stories" about our early days. I'd also like to say "thank you" to some of the key parties that are responsible for where the journal is today, and to look ahead to what I see for the journal in the next few years.

I must warn you, dear readers, that you may find my writing offensively informal, my statements insufferably outrageous [4], and/or the discussion plain boring. If this is the case, I suggest that you simply page past this writing and see if you can find something more worthwhile in this issue's formal articles. Another distraction for some of you is that I will do some name dropping throughout this writing. Those of you who do not know who these people are should make an attempt to find out. Anyone deeply involved in the information systems area will not have much difficulty figuring out who's who.

Finally, since I have exercised the Founding Senior Editor's prerogative of occupying some pages, I promise not to list this item on my curriculum vita. I further will acknowledge that this material is totally unrefereed, subject to no editorial scrutiny, and was provided space in the journal purely by my own edict.

## Looking back

Many of us working on the organizational aspects of computing in the mid-1960s wanted to be like our peers in accounting and management science. We wanted to communicate with one another, we wanted to teach others what we knew [5], and we wanted respect. In other words, we wanted to be a profession.

A profession, though, usually has (among other things) various mechanisms for its members to communicate with one another. These mechanisms typically take the form of professional societies with their meetings and journals.

Some key people got a professional society going (The Society for Management Information Systems [SMIS]) in our area in 1969. About this time a few university teaching and research programs were also begun in the area. The few people in academia associated with information systems needed a place to publish their work. Existing journals were not MIS oriented even though they might from time to time publish an MIS article. As a result, MIS articles were scattered over many journals and many MIS academic authors had their work rejected because it did not fit closely enough with computer science, management science, or whatever was the focus of a particular journal.

---

[1] With an apology to Socrates.

[2] See the Editorial Preview of Vol. 4, No. 4.

[3] In the six years spent establishing this journal, other than psychic income, all that I received by way of compensation was a reduced teaching load during the fifth year.

[4] I'm afraid my overall style is very much influenced by a well known, egocentric writer primarily associated with science fiction. Another writer, Gene Woolsey, has, after all, been very successful with a flippancy style when he edited *Interfaces*. Finally, you only have to put up with me this once.

[5] Albeit not much.

Some people, MIS academicians and SMIS members, thought that if we were going to make anything of ourselves we ought to have a vehicle for written communication (e.g., a journal). At this time, SMIS was quite short on products and services to offer its members. It seemed natural that it would be a perfect marriage to couple the needs of the Society with those of the researchers by creating a journal.

There were problems in doing this, however. First, there was not a great quantity of MIS material that was available. Second, it's expensive to produce a journal. One just can't initiate a journal "willy nilly" when there may not be a readily identifiable market for it.

The match took a long time to consummate, which was primarily for economic reasons. SMIS didn't have very much extra money in those days and couldn't afford a journal. No one else was ready to risk starting a journal without the built in subscriptions that a tie with a professional society would provide. Then, along came a possibility. SMIS was approached by a European group, IAG, that had a journal, but not enough good material to publish. The question was raised about getting together. SMIS would provide some additional publishable material for the journal, SMIS would buy the journal at a favorable price, and the academics would have a place to publish.

Two SMIS practitioners, Herb Schwartz and Harvey Golub, met with two academicians, Hank Lucas and me at my condominium in Colorado to work out the details. Soon, an arrangement with IAG was struck and *Management Informatics* was distributed to SMIS members [6]. Yours truly was the SMIS representative to the journal and began to collect material from U.S. authors.

Not long after the journal began to circulate to SMIS members, a well known U.S. software vendor (having a name remarkably like the journal title) threatened dire consequences if we continued to use the name [6]. To pacify this firm (which I will not identify), the name of the journal was changed to *Management Datamatics*.

I think we published some pretty good articles in *Management Datamatics*. One of those was an article by Eric Carlson on the subject of economic evaluation of information systems. To generate material for the journal, SMIS had sponsored a paper competition and Eric's paper won. This concept, in modified form, is what we now employ as the SMIS Award Paper Competition. Despite these efforts, *Management Datamatics* was not very successful. My feeling is that we had too little editorial and publishing control to produce a product satisfactory to SMIS members and to U.S. academics.

A saving event took place about this time. Herb Halbrecht ran the annual SMIS meeting in Chicago in such a way that a good deal of income was generated for the Society. The MIS Research Center at the University of Minnesota [7] wanted to be the home for a journal in the area and entered a risk sharing agreement with SMIS. My time, half of Naomi Estes' time, and some dollars were committed to the journal project by the MIS Research Center. SMIS put in funds and committed to subscriptions for their membership. This is the point at which the fun really started.

Recognize that we wanted a journal in which MIS academics could publish while our primary source of funding was a society primarily of information systems practitioners. As a result, the vast majority of our readers would be practitioners. The task was to define a product that could satisfy both groups.

I take the complete credit/blame for the idea of a two section journal, one on Application and one on Theory and Research. This concept gave the practitioner something readable and still gives the academic a place to publish the heavy stuff.

---

[6] Informatique or Informatics is, in Europe, the name applied to what we would call Information Systems.

[7] Read this one. Gordon Davis supported it with the understanding that if my plunge into journalism broke the Research Center it would come out of my hide.

The Application articles are intended to be of high quality. Some people still have trouble understanding the fact that *MIS Quarterly* application articles are not *Datamation* or *Infosystems* type articles. These journals have a purpose and achieve it very well. We intend to be different and our Application articles are market differentiated from those in other practitioner oriented publications. Our Application articles have references and even may have an equation or two [8].

All our articles are refereed. Theory and Research articles have a practitioner referee make a judgment as to whether or not the article has any practical value. The primary refereeing of these articles is by academics. The Application articles have only practitioner referees. This way, we have been extremely successful serving the two audiences and still have a unique product.

One feature we used in the early days to build circulation was interviews with CEOs. Herb Halbrecht did most of the interviews (I did a few) and for his efforts I am most grateful. I wish I could share some of the “unsanitized” versions of the interviews with you. The tapes of the interviews were recorded in restaurants, offices, and on the road. Our typists and our editor, Naomi Estes, did a fantastic job of making very entertaining and readable articles out of some very rough raw material.

I could bore you with tales from the early days. If I did this, I'm afraid no one would ever again start a journal from scratch. Would you believe Naomi and I stuffed journals into envelopes at midnight for Volume 1, Number 1 (March 1977)? Another exciting time came from working with small, inexpensive typesetters and printers. These people had no experience whatsoever working at the quality level we required. Our typesetter in the first issue had a probability of about .3 of introducing a new, heretofore unseen error each time a correction was made. We proofed that issue so many times that we memorized the contents.

Over time our problems with production, the editorial processing, and subscription management smoothed out. Whereas in the early days we often came out late because we didn't have enough good articles, we now publish early in the month the issue is dated. We've stabilized on quality, our subscriptions are growing, and it's time to get some new blood into the running of the journal.

## An assessment

I'll miss working with the *MIS Quarterly*. I find a great analogy between creating and establishing a journal and conceiving and raising children. My son may never be an NHL hockey player or president. My daughter may not be a beauty queen or a CEO. On the other hand, my son is doing very well at a respected private university and my daughter is blooming into a young lady with unlimited potential [9].

What I'm saying is that parents of a child may have unrealistic expectations for the child and be very satisfied with a very good but lesser accomplishment. The same holds for the journal. Three of us are like the parent above. The *MIS Quarterly* has not met our expectations but it has done awfully well.

While we may not have achieved the practitioner acceptance of the *Harvard Business Review* or the academic prestige of the *Annals of Mathematical Statistics*, we have achieved an amazing amount of acceptance in just six years.

I admit to being relatively heavy handed at times regarding the *Quarterly*. By and large it has been my journal and I've called the shots. One group I've backed to the hilt has been our Associate Editors. I've tried wherever possible to respect their judgment and support them. I selected the editorial staff and had faith in the quality and attitudes of the people I selected. Looking back, I don't believe I've ever second guessed an Associate Editor. Perhaps as a result we've had zero turnover in our Consulting and Associate Editors.

---

[8] It's very hard to write a practical article on estimating project time and cost and not have an equation.

[9] I also promise never to let either child see this article.

## Apology

I would like to see the *MIS Quarterly* better accepted by two groups over the next few years. First, I'd like to see more senior management interest. Second, I'd like to get better visibility in academic areas beyond MIS.

I think my job has been to get established within the MIS academic and practitioner community. There are enough external measures (reprint permissions, subscription levels, article submissions, and surveys [10]) that suggest that my goal has been achieved.

Another disappointment I've had is that the journal is still a money losing proposition for the MIS Research Center. Inflationary printing costs [11] and salaries always seem to keep ahead of subscription revenues.

## A thank you

There are groups of individuals and specific persons that ought to be called out for the support they've given the *MIS Quarterly* and the help they've given to me.

First and foremost are the two people who have served as Managing Editor, Naomi Estes and Catherine Ross. They've both been colleagues and my friends. Despite several shouting matches and a couple of tears (never mine!), we've had a lot of fun with our "baby." I like to think both Naomi and Katy have "grown" as a result of their *Quarterly* experience.

As I have constructed the editorial process, the Associate Editors do most of the work with authors. This group has done a fantastic job over the years. Our Consulting Editors help me decide whether or not to review the various articles [12]. Their opinions, while not always the same as mine, have been extremely valuable to me.

I also want to thank SMIS. This organization and its Secretariat have provided us resources as well as advice and guidance. Best of all, they've been there when needed and otherwise let us run the show as long as we produced. Management by committee almost never works and during the formation of new enterprises, it is almost always fatal. This was not our problem. Special thanks go to Robert Rouse, SMIS Publications Chairman, and Michael Rippey and Evelyn Bickley of the Secretariat.

Other groups to receive my thanks are: our reviewers, both academic and practitioner; our clerical support staff over the years, especially Lori Ritter; and those typesetters and printers who've known what they're doing.

Naturally, special thanks go to our readers, subscribers, and especially the authors that have thought enough of us to submit their material to us. The latter group has paid us their ultimate compliment and it is appreciated.

Now it's usual at this point to say something to the effect that some groups or individuals may have been overlooked in the acknowledgments and such oversight was unintentional. Such is not my case. The reader may detect candidates who were omitted. This omission, in this instance, was conscious and intentional [13].

---

[10] CIS Proceedings

[11] Printing costs, for example, have increased by a factor of four between 1977 and 1983.

[12] Eric Carlson won first prize in the SMIS Paper Competition and had his paper published in *Management Datamatics*. Second prize was that I asked him to be a Consulting Editor for the new journal. He may have felt obligated to accept.

[13] The reader may have noticed our obsessive use of footnotes in the writing. It turns out that the most difficult part of "laying out" the Journal contents is to get all the footnotes lined up under the column in which the reference appears. This is my final legacy to Katy Ross.