

COMMENTARY ON GILL AND BHATTACHERJEE: IS THERE AN INFORMING CRISIS?

By: **Michael D. Myers**
Department of Information Systems and Operations
Management
University of Auckland Business School
Auckland
NEW ZEALAND 1142
m.myers@auckland.ac.nz

Richard L. Baskerville
Department of Computer Information Systems
Robinson College of Business
Georgia State University
Atlanta, GA 30303
U.S.A.
baskerville@acm.org

The article by Gill and Bhattacharjee (2009) continues what is starting to become a regular theme: that of lamenting the state of information systems as a research discipline. Early on, the field was criticized for having virtually no cumulative tradition (Keen 1980). Two decades later, Orlikowski and Iacono (2001) commented that they could not find the “IT” in IS research. This soon led to suggestions that the IS field as a whole had an identity crisis (Benbasat and Zmud 2003). Continuing in this vein, Gill and Bhattacharjee say that the future of MIS as an academic research discipline itself is under threat. We now have an “informing” crisis. Unless MIS researchers make a determined effort to engage and inform external clients, “our very survival” may be at stake.

It seems to us that we, as IS researchers, enjoy sharing our insecurities at regular intervals. But is such self-flagellation really warranted? We do not think so. We believe that the

academic discipline of information systems is in reasonably good shape, although this is not to say that the field cannot improve its informing activities. In this short commentary, therefore, we examine some of Gill and Bhattacharjee’s claims. We offer an alternative interpretation of their evidence, although we actually agree with many of their recommendations.

One important contextual piece missing from Gill and Bhattacharjee’s article is that of the history of the discipline. Information Systems is a relatively young academic field. In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s the overwhelming problem was one of achieving legitimacy. Building this legitimacy meant gaining acceptance under the existing models of research in business and management. For a North American management journal such as *MIS Quarterly*, this meant long, hard decades with a highly positivistic focus in order to prove that researchers and research publications in this field could measure up to the most stringent social scientific standards. Eventually, however, the battle for legitimacy was won. For some years now, *MIS Quarterly* (along with *Information Systems Research*) has been accepted as a first tier journal in business schools around the world. Without disagreeing that improving the impact of academic research on practice is a worthy goal, we caution against strategies that potentially sacrifice this hard-won academic legitimacy.

Gill and Bhattacharjee argue that the level of academic–practitioner collaborations in the principal research outlets of the discipline is *de facto* evidence of mutual informing. They suggest that the “observed reduction in academic–practitioner collaborations” (p. 219) in *MIS Quarterly* in recent years is a negative development. They imply that the evolving editorial objectives of the journal (emphasizing academically rigorous research at the expense of practice) are to blame.

What they neglect to mention, however, is that *MIS Quarterly Executive* was established with the explicit purpose of putting IS research findings into the hands of practitioners. This journal, published with support from the Society for Information Management (SIM), was first published in 2002. They also neglect to mention that the strategic decision of the *MIS Quarterly* Editorial Board to focus primarily on academically rigorous research has been remarkably successful. Exactly 10 years after *MIS Quarterly* subscriptions were unbundled from SIM membership, *MIS Quarterly* was rated as having the highest impact factor by Thomson ISI in the category of Computer Science/ Information Systems. In fact, MISQ was rated ahead of all the ACM, IEEE, and INFORMS journals in this category in 2005. They also neglect to mention that *MIS Quarterly* is one of only two IS journals included in the *Financial Times* list of Top 40 academic journals in business. All the journals in this list are research, not practitioner, oriented. Achieving such a reputation did not happen because the evolving editorial objectives of *MIS Quarterly* took this journal down the wrong path. On the contrary, a focus on academically rigorous research has considerably enhanced the reputation of this journal and, by association, the field as a whole. *MIS Quarterly* now has an excellent, hard-won reputation, one of which all IS scholars should be proud.

Gill and Bhattacharjee cite a recent report by AACSB International as indicating a lack of visibility of MIS research. However, this report simply provides a few examples showing that advances in basic research have had a substantial impact on practice. The examples given for accounting, marketing, and management are equally brief. This report actually states that “Research cannot be innovative if it is focused on current business problems and true academics should not concern themselves with relevance” (AACSB 2008, p. 19).

Gill and Bhattacharjee assume that the separate existence of MIS departments within universities is some indication of the strength of the field. They claim that the lack of such independence puts the research discipline at risk. We disagree. Institutional arrangements for locating various disciplines can be expected to change over time and even now differ considerably in various parts of the world. Many scholars in information systems and other business disciplines have never worked in departments that have a solitary focus (including one of the authors of this commentary).

We suggest a much better indication of the independence of the field is the quality and strength of its journals and conferences. Are IS conferences and journals being taken over by scholars from other fields? Are our IS conferences and journals languishing? We do not see any evidence of this. In

fact, attendance at the most recent International Conference on Information Systems (ICIS) in Paris was greater than ever before. The continued vibrancy of our top conference (along with others) suggests to us that overwrought fears about our field’s imminent demise are misplaced.

Of course, this is not to say that we are unaware of the recent decline in student enrolments. However, student enrolments in computer science and information systems have always been cyclic, and anecdotal evidence indicates that the bottom of the current cycle may have already been reached. In fact, the employment outlook is now fairly solid (Panko 2008).

An unstated assumption in Gill and Bhattacharjee is that our informing problem lies in the kind of research being delivered into practice. But what if the problem is partly (or entirely) with IS practitioners, who fail to appreciate solid research results? We agree with them that the impact of research on practice is stronger in Europe. However, based on our experience, there is a stronger presence of academic research in courses at the bachelor’s and master’s degree level in Europe. Rather than depending on the “processed” content of textbooks, many European students are required to critically read and discuss research articles, content that is usually reserved for doctoral courses in other parts of the world. Some of these programs require major student research projects. The end result is that European universities tend to produce graduates who have developed a healthy, critical respect for academic research. These graduates not only continue to value academic articles, they also become willing and active participants when invited to host or coauthor research projects. Hence, the disengagement of information systems students from our research may be part of the problem. The lack of overlap between faculty teaching and research may result from misdirected faculty research; but it may also reflect misdirected student curricula. Too many practitioners may not be sufficiently educated to comprehend the degree to which IS research addresses some of their most intractable issues.

In summary, therefore, we disagree with Gill and Bhattacharjee’s pessimistic assessment of the state of IS as a research discipline. However, we concur with many of their recommendations. In the short term, most of Gill and Bhattacharjee’s proposals are practical; namely, that IS academics should more actively engage with our external clients such as IS practitioners, students, and researchers in other disciplines (see also Baskerville and Myers 2009).

Their first recommendation—to establish discipline-level priorities for engaging practice—is excellent. We especially like their suggestion to convene a special global symposium on the current challenges facing the IS discipline. We need

to find ways to better engage with our IS practitioner colleagues. Like them, we encourage AIS to take the lead in this initiative.

Their second recommendation—to encourage hybrid academic–practitioner doctoral programs—is also very sensible. This has the potential to enable access to IS research knowledge at the higher levels of practice and vice versa. This is similar to Klein and Rowe’s (2008) suggestion to recognize the value of professional qualified doctoral students. They suggest that we should adjust doctoral programs to the specific needs and talents of practitioners.

Gill and Bhattacharjee’s last three recommendations have reasonable elements. Researchers should be encouraged to disseminate their research discoveries to practice. Taking a more pro-active stance with the news media and practitioner press would be a positive step. Of course, *MIS Quarterly Executive* was established for precisely this reason, to facilitate the dissemination of research findings from the IS research discipline to practice (we expand on this point in Baskerville and Myers 2009). We also agree that research that focuses on real-world, practical problems should be valued. It would be good to continue pro-actively fostering research methods and approaches that engage practitioners (Van de Ven 2007), such as action research (Baskerville and Myers 2004), case study research, and design science research (Hevner et al. 2004). But we regard this as a continuation of existing directions, since *MIS Quarterly* editors have already promoted them in the past, specifically by dedicating special issues to action research and design science research.

However, we think that substituting practical articles for research content in our premier research journals is a questionable strategy. The impact on practice is likely to be minimal, while the academic legitimacy of our journals could suffer.

In conclusion, while we agree with the recommendations of the authors that IS researchers should seek to improve their research informing activities, particularly to our key external stakeholders, we do not agree that the current state of the field is one that threatens its survival. The authors admit that “our informing problem” is no worse than that of other business disciplines, such as accounting, marketing, and operations management (p. 222). We caution against sacrificing the quality and the hard-won reputation of the field’s premier journals as part of the process. In addition, we recommend a long-term strategy that includes a critical look at the content

of our curriculum, and the degree to which it properly prepares information systems students to take up their role as forward thinking, critically minded professionals. In terms of appraising the state of IS as a research discipline, we also suggest it is time for us to reconsider our continuing insecurity. Why do we always see the glass as half empty? While we acknowledge that there is much work to do in improving the engagement of researchers and practitioners, it is our opinion that the “doom and gloom” scenario is unwarranted.

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