

EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Looking for a Few Good Concepts...and Theories...for the Information Systems Field

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In recent years, our field has spent considerable time and effort debating its image and proposing ways to enhance it. Much of this discussion has focused on defining the Information Systems core. We believe it is time to redirect attention to the concepts and theories we use in our field, including, but by no means limited to, those directly related to the IT artifact. Developing IS-specific comments and theories is, we believe, essential for our emergence (or survival) as a discipline that is autonomous of our several reference disciplines.

At the 2006 International Conference on Information Systems (ICIS), Nik Hassan argued that what differentiates disciplines from multidisciplinary fields of interest is a unique discourse (Hassan 2006). Borrowing concepts from other disciplines is fine, as long as we make them our own. Borrowing theories from other disciplines is fine, too, as long as we do so critically—recognizing the controversies, debates, and rival theories in their fields of origin and adapting them appropriately to our unique subject matter. Information Systems will only be recognized as a discipline when it builds its own unique themes and theories.

A particular challenge facing our discipline is the rapidly changing nature of information technology and its contexts of use. Is user participation, for example, the same phenomenon today that it was 20 years ago? What about managerial IT knowledge and skills? Can we expect our knowledge development to accumulate without confronting history and the time-boundedness of the phenomena we study?

Another challenge is our field's ambivalent attitude toward theory. It isn't as though our field hasn't emphasized the importance of theory. All major IS journals today claim only to publish articles based on theory. Former *MISQ* editors-in-chief Bob Zmud (1998) and Ron Weber (2003) have made helpful suggestions on how to write good theory. The 1999 founding of *MISQ*'s Review Department was intended to contribute "to the development of MIS as an academic discipline by synthesizing prior research and providing a conceptual foundation for future research" (<http://www.misq.org/archivist/vol/no23/issue1/edstat.html>). The Journal of the AIS has made a major contribution to our field by sponsoring Theory Development Workshops after ICIS each year.

But what do we mean by theory? We know that there are many types of theory (Gregor 2006). But some of us may think that theory is something we have to outsource from another discipline, rather than something we can build ourselves. Others who might prefer to develop their own theory end up borrowing theory because of the substantial time commitment required for theory building.

A valuable AISWorld webpage, maintained by Mike Wade and Scott Schneberger, describes theories used in IS research (<http://www.istheory.yorku.ca/>). A helpful tool for IS doctoral students and researchers, this site nevertheless presents a grim picture of our field as a builder of theory. Of 52 theories listed on the page, only four are described as originating predominately in the IS field: task closure, task-technology fit, technology acceptance model (TAM), and unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT). Others, like adaptive structuration theory (AST) and socio-technical theory, are described as joint

products of IS and reference disciplines. Even if we claim a few more for IS, like general systems theory, the number of IS theories is depressingly few. We believe that IS scholars can and should theorize, above and beyond the theories we import from other fields.

Borrowing and tweaking theories from other disciplines is something that can possibly be done adequately in the front half of an empirical research article. But the challenging tasks of conceptualization and theory building often require full-length articles (or even monographs). The editors of *MISQ* have noticed, however, that some reviewers doubt the contributions of theory building articles that do not also test the theories they propose. The editorial board of *MISQ* has decided to emphasize the criticality of conceptualization and theory development to our field by giving such papers a new home—in an expanded MISQ Theory and Review Department (MISQ-TR), with M. Lynne Markus now at the helm. MISQ-TR will continue to publish the high quality research syntheses that have won widespread recognition through awards as “Best Papers” and high citation counts. In addition, “pure theory” articles that were previously published as Research Articles will now be published in this department. The expanded Theory and Review Department will also be open to other types of articles, as described below.

Objectives of the MISQ Theory and Review Department

MISQ-TR aims to be the premier outlet for new theoretical insights that advance the study and practice of information systems design, development, management, use, and consequences. MISQ-TR is receptive to a wide range of philosophical foundations and disciplinary orientations, including perspectives that are constructively critical of established theory and practice. MISQ-TR publishes articles in a variety of formats, including research syntheses, theoretical essays, and debates. A major emphasis of the MISQ-TR is to support the development of theory that (1) addresses issues and concerns unique to IS theory and practice and (2) promotes further empirical research and practical developments.

Writing research reviews and theoretical essays is in many ways more challenging than writing reports of primary empirical research. Therefore, MISQ-TR approaches submissions developmentally. Departmental editors are willing to work interactively with authors from an early stage in manuscript preparation; prospective authors should be prepared for a more interactive (and potentially more protracted) review process than usual.

MISQ-TR will continue to draw on the *MISQ* editorial board and will occasionally use guest associate editors for submissions. In addition, we are pleased to announce a Board of Advisors for MISQ-TR. The following individuals have agreed to serve on the Board:

- Allen S. Lee, Virginia Commonwealth University
- Suzanne Rivard, HEC Montréal
- Dov Te'eni, Tel Aviv University
- Jane Webster, Queen's University
- Leslie Willcocks, London School of Economics
- Philip Yetton, University of New South Wales

Encouraged Contributions

MISQ-TR is open to a wide variety of formats, including some that are currently quite rare in the IS field. Welcomed formats include

- Comprehensive syntheses (using qualitative, grounded theory, meta-analytic, set-theoretic, or text mining methods) of previously published research with strong theoretical implications (this describes the *Review* articles previously published in this department—see Webster and Watson 2002)
- Essays on the philosophical foundations of IS theory and research
- Essays examining the theoretical implications of key IS concepts
- Integrative, transdisciplinary theoretical frameworks for the study of particular IS phenomena
- Pure theory papers with strong grounding in prior empirical research and/or practice (Gregor 2006; Zmud 1998)

- Process theories
- Debates with clear theoretical implications
- Historical essays with clear theoretical implications
- Critical research essays with clear theoretical implications
- Comparisons of academic theories and practitioners' theories-in-use
- "Evidence-based" information management reviews of the efficacy of IS interventions (such as ERP system software modifications, agile programming, or KMS librarians) (see for example, Rousseau 2006)
- IS design theories

Highly valued characteristics in submissions include

- Critical discussions of the controversies and debates around relevant philosophical foundations, rival theories, and differing conceptualizations
- Clear conceptualizations of concepts unique to Information Systems research (e.g., the "IT artifact")
- Clear conceptualizations of concepts relevant to Information Systems practice (i.e., "action levers" or interventions such as prototyping, training, etc.)
- Attention to history (of theories, IT, etc.) and its implications for the time-bounded validity of theory and empirical findings
- Papers drawing on more than one intellectual tradition
- Descriptions of theoretical mechanisms and processes
- Multilevel theory
- Theoretical statements enriched by relevant findings from previously published qualitative and quantitative research
- Research syntheses that consider relevant qualitative, as well as quantitative, studies
- Research syntheses that employ set-theoretic or text mining methods as well as those that employ qualitative or meta-analytic techniques
- Detailed explanations of, and rationales for, statistical moderation and mediation effects, when such effects are proposed

Please Take Note

The focus of all submissions must be consistent with *MISQ*'s mission. While MISQ-TR encourages a broader range of formats than the Review Department did formerly, submissions to the expanded department must meet the Departmental objectives stated above. In general, literature reviews of dissertations and new empirical studies are too narrow in scope to be suitable for submission to MISQ-TR.

As always, submissions that are primarily empirical tests of theory, case-based illustrations of theory, theory development from case studies, or grounded theory developed from a primary research study may still be submitted as Research Articles or Research Notes. Quantitative or set-theoretic meta-analyses that primarily test theory-based propositions or estimate effect sizes may also be submitted as Research Articles or Research Notes, but not to MISQ-TR, unless they develop new theory or critically explore the findings' theoretical implications. Although submissions with formal modeling, simulation or econometric analyses that offer a theoretical contribution and are consistent with *MISQ*'s mission may be appropriate as Research Articles or Research Notes, they must be written in a format familiar to the readers of *MISQ*. Authors preparing such submissions are strongly encouraged to consider placing, where appropriate, formulaic derivations, proofs, and formalized descriptions in an appendix.

Despite the significant value they make to the discipline, all Departments of *MISQ* will continue the long-standing practice of not publishing articles examining issues important to the professional careers of academicians, such as rankings of scholarly journals, rankings of departmental or individual research productivity, and promotion and tenure criteria. Nor will *MISQ* publish articles about the scholarship teaching, scale development, or nontheoretical descriptions or evaluations of IT artifacts.

Submission Process

Contributors are *strongly* encouraged to submit a brief proposal (5 to 10 pages) to the MISQ Theory and Review Department Editor, M. Lynne Markus (MISQReview@bentley.edu), prior to submitting complete manuscripts. For example, a proposal for a *theory-generative research synthesis* might include the following elements:

- Background for the review
- Objectives of the review
- Scope of the review
- Methods for the review (criteria for selecting materials for review, coding and analysis procedures)
- Contributor qualifications (past work related to this review, if any)
- Suggestions of developmental editors and reviewers.

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Additional Recommended Reading on Theory and Review Papers

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