Editor's Comments

I will cover two topics in this editorial comment. First, I wish to discuss the role of manuscript referees in the process of scholarly publication. Second, I will formally announce the changes on the *MIS Quarterly*'s Editorial Board since the publication of the June 1998 issue.

A Personal Perspective on the State of Journal Refereeing

Referees serve truly critical and important roles in both the editorial process and in the development of knowledge in any field of study. Luckily for the health of the information systems field (and especially with the *MIS Quarterly*), there are many individuals who fulfill the refereeing role in an excellent manner. What do I mean by "excellent manner." Briefly, I mean that individuals serving as referees:

- Agree to review manuscripts in those areas (theory, methodology, phenomenon) where they possess expertise.

- Produce reviews that accurately point out a manuscript's weaknesses, make clear the nature of a manuscript's (potential) contribution, and direct the author in how to enhance the ideas being expressed.

- Deliver these reviews in a timely fashion.

However, after more than a decade serving in editor positions, I must state that there are simply far too few individuals in the information systems field serving the refereeing role in such an "excellent manner." What does this mean? It means that the truly excellent referees are overworked and that too many authors are provided poor and tardy reviews.

The time has come for the information systems research community to do a little "soul searching." How often do you turn down refereeing requests? Worse, how often do you accept a referee assignment and then not deliver a review? Or, if you do deliver it, it is only after you have been hounded by an associate editor to do so. My guess is that this occurs far more often than any of us recognize. It might surprise (is "shock" a better word?) readers to discover the number of "leading" information systems scholars who regularly turn down requests to serve as referees even though they themselves continue to submit manuscripts for publication.

The problem that faces us actually goes far deeper than having too many members of our research community not performing reviews. The problem extends to the content of the reviews being received, which often prove to be very hastily produced (thus providing little commentary) or too harshly produced (thus providing overly critical commentary).

This editorial statement covers four topics: a brief discussion of the nature of the refereeing role, a brief discussion of the necessity for timeliness in carrying out this role, a more lengthy discussion on review content, and finally, some suggestions on how scholars should approach their refereeing assignments.

Importance of the referee role

Manuscript referees serve two central roles regarding scholarly publications. First, they are the gate-keepers of what is published. Unless a manuscript is favorably received by referees, it is unlikely the manuscript will be published. Second, and more importantly, they are actively involved in the development of the knowledge being communicated through a manuscript. When a manuscript is accepted,

credit for the ideas being expressed is rightfully given to the authors. Often, however, the referees are the ones who have suggested the insightful theoretical arguments or the innovative analytical treatments that distinguish published articles. What do referees receive for such contributions? At best, a footnote in which these contributions are anonymously acknowledged. Why do they do it? Because they enjoy contributing to the development of new knowledge and because they hope for similar contributions from the referees of their own manuscripts.

Necessity for timeliness

The *MIS Quarterly* has attempted, over the last six years or so, to significantly improve the timeliness of its editorial review process. Generally, we have been successful in doing so. Sometimes, a full review cycle is completed in five or six weeks, most of the time in less than three months, but occasionally longer review cycles prevail. Why do these longer review cycles occur? Because referees who have made up-front commitments to produce a review within a three-to-four-week window do not deliver. Regardless of how much we improve our internal processes, we will always be at the mercy of our referees. I am proud, and personally grateful, to be able to state that the majority of our referees do produce quality, timely reviews.

Why is timeliness so important? There are three reasons. First, people's careers are often at stake. Not infrequently, I receive a message such as the following from an author: "My tenure packet is going up next week and I badly need an *MIS Quarterly* hit. Can you speed up the review process of the article I submitted last month?" Second, review cycles are getting way too long. It is not uncommon at some information systems journals (but, not the *MIS Quarterly!*) for a single review cycle to take a year or more. Given that most acceptances go through at least two revisions, it is quite understandable why the time from initial submission to final acceptance can cover a two-to-three-to-four-year time period. Third, it is simply not professional to delay performing a referee assignment, and we are professionals in every sense of the word. There is no good reason why every manuscript submitted to every journal should not be "turned around" in a three-to-four-month review cycle.

Content of reviews

Too many of the reviews we receive are either devoid of content or far too critical. It should be clear to everyone why shallow reviews add very little value to the scholarly process. Consequently, I have not spent any time on this problem. Instead, I focus my attention to the problem of overly critical reviews.

What do I mean by an overly critical review? What I am referring to are referees who expect to find perfection in the manuscripts they assess. Thus, such referees expect every article to be flawless—

- to fully incorporate all prior research,
- to develop a rich, comprehensive theoretical model that includes every construct relevant to the phenomenon of interest,
- to have designed an empirical study that contains no limitations regarding its internal or external validity,
- to have used, correctly, the most appropriate analytical techniques, and
- to have interpreted all results in an acceptable yet insightful manner.

Then, as a manuscript begins to deviate from any of the above, the referee becomes increasingly critical of the authors' efforts.

It must be realized that it is impossible to complete the "perfect" research project. The phenomena we investigate are just far too messy, and all researchers lack the resources (time, contacts, funding, etc.)

to do everything required in examining such phenomena. Why do many well-intended referees expect perfection? Three reasons present likely explanations. First, we are trained to perform the perfect research project and hence, look for it when reviewing a manuscript. Second, our overly critical commentaries are "rewarded" in the sense that most manuscripts eventually are rejected. Third, our overly critical commentaries are "reinforced" in that our own submitted work is harshly assessed by our peers.

There are very viable grounds for recommending that a manuscript be rejected. Usually, such decisions can be traced to the fact that a manuscript is felt to contain: (1) fatal flaws, (2) such a lengthy list of moderate problems that, in aggregate, these problems lead a reviewer to doubt the content, or (3) an insufficient contribution to knowledge, despite the study being carried out well. A fatal flaw is a problem that cannot be resolved regardless of the effort put forth by authors. Fatal flaws, when they arise, tend to be associated with the following types of problems:

- The phenomenon being studied was seen as being trivial or unimportant

- Errors occurred in data collection that have corrupted, or otherwise cast doubt on, a study's data

- Errors in logic invalidate a study's theoretical or analytical argumentation

- A study's finding, though statistically significant, explain so little variation that they are meaningless

It certainly is appropriate for a referee to recommend rejection when a manuscript is found to contain deficiencies such as described above. However, very critical reviews are frequently produced in their absence.

I am not asking for referees to be uncritical. Instead, I am asking them to be more reasonable in their assessment of a manuscript's potential in spite of its imperfections. Even though a manuscript has minor or major flaws, it may still possess the potential to contribute in significant ways if the major flaws are (largely) corrected, and the potential is effectively tapped. All too often, referees look for reasons to reject manuscripts. What I am asking is that referees turn their thinking around ... and begin instead to look for reasons to accept manuscripts.

Why are overly critical reviews detrimental to the progress of good scholarship? There are two major reasons. First, promising ideas are left fallow, never to be developed. Who knows what directions follow-on research (by the authors or others) might have taken had the ideas been harvested through a more effective editorial process. Second, promising scholars are discouraged from undertaking difficult, time-consuming, and innovative research efforts; and eventually, many scholars simply stop (voluntarily or involuntarily) engaging in research after receiving a continuing stream of overly critical reviews.

Suggestions to referees

What follows is a brief listing of a set of desirable referee behaviors:

1. Agree to review manuscripts when asked, but only when the manuscript addresses phenomena, theories, or methods in which you possess expertise.

2. Turn the review around as quickly a you can. Get it off your desk!

3. Do not agree to perform a review if you cannot turn it around quickly because you are truly overcommitted. But, be sure that a meaningful portion of your professional life is committed to serving the referee role.

4. Read any article you are reviewing twice before beginning the review.

5. Identify an article's strengths, weaknesses, and fatal flaws before writing your review.

6. Identify possible ideas or tactics that the authors have overlooked that might add materially to a manuscript's value.

7. Provide your assessment of whether an article's weaknesses can be resolved as well as suggestions or directions for resolving each weakness.

8. Provide suggestions or directions for improving on an article's strengths.

9. Present your assessment and recommendations in a positive style and tone.

Wouldn't you want others to look at your own manuscripts following such a script? That's all I'm asking that you do. I look forward to reading the next review you produce for the *MIS Quarterly!*

Editorial Changes and Other Announcements

It is always difficult to announce that one of our senior editors has completed his or her term of office. This is certainly the case for me now, in explaining Lynda Applegate's (Harvard Business School) absence from our masthead. Lynda completed her three-year term as a senior editor with the June 1998 issue, a term of office that was (as anyone who knows Lynda would expect) carried out in a superb manner (despite Lynda's taking on an administrative role at Harvard during this time). I personally am very appreciative of the effort and time Lynda has devoted to the *MIS Quarterly.* I am sure the other Board members, referees, and authors who have worked with Lynda feel likewise.

The only positive thing that happens when a senior editor leaves is that we are able to bring on a new colleague to work with us. I am very pleased to announce that Cynthia Beath (Southern Methodist University) has accepted our invitation to serve as a senior editor. Cynthia has served the *Quarterly* in the past as an author, a (truly excellent — see above) reviewer, and an associate editor. If the past predicts the future, Cynthia will very ably step into the hole that Lynda's leaving has left.

The senior editors offered two-year reappointments to two of our associate editors: Richard Baskerville (Georgia State University) and V. Sambamurthy (Florida State University). Both, to our joy, accepted. Richard and Samba have done exceptional jobs during their tenure as associate editors. I look forward to continue working with both of you.

Three associate editors completed their three-year term on the Board: Ron Rice (Rutgers University), Mike Vitale (University of Melbourne) and Kwok-Kee Wei (National University of Singapore). Ron, Mike, and KK all proved themselves invaluable during their tenure.

Three of our colleagues have accepted invitations to join the Editorial Board for three-year terms as associate editors: Soon Ang (Nanyang Technological Univeristy), Deborah Compeau (University of Calgary) and Mats Lundeberg (Stockholm School of Economics). Speaking for the entire Editorial Board, "Welcome Aboard!"

Finally, I wish to repeat two announcements that have already been listed on the *MIS Quarterly's* website (www.misq.org). First, Deborah Compeau was selected by the Editorial Board as the *Quarterly's* "Reviewer of the Year" for 1997. (You don't have to be selected as "reviewer of the year" to be appointed to the Editorial Board ... but it surely helps!!) Second, the article "Communication Richness in Electronic Mail: Critical Social Theory and the Contextuality of Meaning," by Ojelanki K. Ngwenyama and Allen S. Lee was selected by the Editorial Board as the best article published in *MIS Quarterly* during the 1997 volume year. (You don't have to have your article selected as the "article of the year" to be appointed as editor-in-chief ... but it doesn't hurt!!) Congratulations for a "job well done" to Deborah, Ojelanki, and Allen.

Bob Zmud
Editor-in-Chief