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Are We Wise About Sub-Fields in IS? Lessons from Forming and Sustaining a Research Community

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ARE WE WISE ABOUT SUB-FIELDS IN I.S.? LESSONS FROM FORMING AND SUSTAINING A RESEARCH COMMUNITY

Panels

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Abstract

Sub-fields within I.S. generate benefits for their participants and for the larger research discipline. Sub-fields can also fragment and compete with the broad field they emerge from. One of the largest and most active research groups in the ICIS community is the researchers examining Information Systems Economics. After 20 years of the Workshop on Information Systems and Economics (WISE), this is a moment to identify what sub-fields contribute in I.S. and look forward to what sub-fields can do for ICIS researchers and I.S. practice in the future.

Keywords: Economics, information systems, information technology

Introduction

Most ICIS participants also contribute to sub-fields within I.S., submit papers to special issues of I.S. journals, and attend smaller-scale workshops with a narrower focus than ICIS. These sub-field communities generate benefits for their participants and for the larger research discipline. Sub-fields can also fragment and compete with the broad field they emerge from. One of the largest and most active research groups in the ICIS community is the researchers examining Information Systems Economics. On December 3, 1989 the first Workshop on Information Systems and Economics (WISE) was held at MIT Sloan School of Management in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Yannis Bakos (at that time at University of California, Irvine) and Chris Kemerer (at that time at MIT) were the organizers of the first workshop.

The introduction of the first workshop in their Call for Papers was as follows:

“Theoretical and methodological tools from economics are becoming increasingly relevant to information systems research and can contribute to our understanding of the impacts of information technology on the elements of the economic system. As the number of information systems researchers working at the intersection of the information systems and economics disciplines has been increasing, it has become increasingly important to establish an identity for this research area, promote communication and awareness among researchers, and discuss issues of mutual importance, such as relevant developments in economic theory, directions for the field and research quality standards. In recognition of the above needs, the Organizing Committee of the Workshop on Information Systems and Economics (WISE) invites researchers to participate in a workshop addressing the use of theory and research methods from Economics to address theoretical and applied questions in the Information Systems discipline.”

The first workshop attracted 22 presenters and 32 attendees. The program in 1989 kicked off with a panel discussion “Economic Theory and Information Systems Research: Looking Back, Looking Ahead” by Charles H. Kriebel, Haim Mendelson, and Jeffrey H. Moore. There were six parallel sessions: information economics, pricing of I/S services, information systems and industrial organization, information systems as an economic input, measuring information systems performance, and management of distributed systems. The workshop finished with a panel discussion on “Coordination Theory and Economic Activity” by James C. Emery, Thomas M. Malone, and Andrew B. Whinston. (addressed partially in 3 below)

In the years to follow the annual workshop developed into an active community of researchers that focused their research on the interaction of information systems and technology and

economic principles and methodologies. The workshop discussions were always intense, very lively, and very stimulating both from a theoretical and empirical point of view. The very lively discussions were enabled by the unique mix of beginning Ph.D. candidates and researchers and more well established researchers.

We characterize the drivers of WISE over 20 years as:

1. Rapid advances in information technologies (internet, mobile, aggregation, open source, etc.) that created new economic contexts (e.g., online auctions, search, social networks) not yet fully incorporated into standard economic models
2. Extension of recognized research methods (field studies, lab, controlled experiments) to the enormous, new sets of data generated in the digital economy
3. Application of advanced theories (game theory, market microstructure, prospect theory) to management problems transformed by IT (contracting, transparency, productivity)

From these seeds, a very productive research community within the broader ICIS community developed. Among the ICIS 2009 tracks, Information Systems & Economics track received the largest number of submissions at 58.

Panel Discussion

The objective of the panel is to describe the motivations for launching sub-fields such as WISE, identify the factors that sustain a sub-field, and give guidance on the choice of research topics, research methods, and both theoretical and empirical contributions that contribute to a vibrant community of researchers.

Key questions the panelists will discuss:

- 1) WISE began in 1989 – Why was it needed? What shortcomings did it address? What were the antecedents in the I.S. field of the sub-field and its annual workshop.
- 2) In what ways has WISE benefited its participants? In research? In their home schools?
- 3) What are the performance metrics that participants can use to judge a sub-field such as Economics of IS/WISE?
- 4) Sub-fields can reach critical mass (e.g., 200+ WISE participants, 58 EIS submissions to ICIS 2009). When does a sub-field community that once complemented the field, become a rival to it?
- 5) Researchers with economics as their primary field are not regularly or consistently represented in WISE. Why? Is that a problem?
- 6) Economics of IS as a hybrid field – Is it always sensible to form research communities at the intersection of two developed topic areas?

References

WISE website: <http://wiseconf.org>