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ICIS 2006 Proceedings

International Conference on Information Systems  
(ICIS)

2006

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### Recommended Citation

Desouza, Kevin C.; Ein-Dor, Phillip; McCubbrey, Donald J.; Galliers, Robert D.; Myers, Michael D.; and Watson, Richard T., "Social Activism in IS Research: Making the World a Better Place" (2006). *ICIS 2006 Proceedings*. 123.  
<http://aisel.aisnet.org/icis2006/123>

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# **SOCIAL ACTIVISM IN IS RESEARCH: MAKING THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE**

*ICIS 2006 Panel*

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## **Introduction**

Information Systems (IS) can play a salient role in the transformation of our societies, especially in less-developed (or under-served) communities. IS can be used to benefit citizens in these societies through improvements in education, government, healthcare, social, and entrepreneurial systems. It would be a mistake to think that under-served communities can develop without optimal deployment of IS, after all advanced societies depended on IS to boost their development. The realization that IS offers potential benefit to improve the livelihood of the less-privileged is not new or recent. However, what is not clear is what should be the role of IS researchers in addressing the needs of the under-served communities?

On a philanthropic level, we might all believe that IS researchers should get involved in addressing the needs of the under-served communities. However, this is not the same as being pragmatic and actually taking required steps to act in a tangible and measurable manner. Hence, the question is raised – is addressing the needs of the under-served communities a lofty ideal or an actionable proposal? It would be irresponsible to leave the issue as a lofty ideal. Hence, we should address the question - how can we transform it from a lofty ideal to an actionable proposal?

The answer lies in the taking steps to transform the structure of our academic community by re-examining the fundamentals – teaching, research, and service. Examining these fundamentals, we should ask how our current goals, incentives, and efforts are addressing the needs of the under-served communities. More specifically, we must look at to what degree we are being cognizant of the needs of under-served communities when we chart our goals, plan our efforts, and devise incentives. Moreover, we must also recognize that studying IS issues in under-served communities can inform and deepen our understanding of contemporary research issues. For example, the IT infrastructures in under-served communities will not resemble those of their counterparts in advanced societies. We should look at how these newer designs (e.g. wireless-based networks, digital libraries, etc) can revolutionize traditional practices in advanced societies. Hence, while IS research that has been conducted in advanced societies can contribute to efforts in the under-served communities, we must also appreciate the reality that IS deployments in under-served communities can in fact inform our current research problems, approaches, and even the practice of IS.

Unless we take steps to transform the current structure of academe to make significant impacts on how we conduct and disseminate research (e.g., appreciating the difficulty of solving messy problems in under-served communities), educate our students (e.g., engaging students in the generation of knowledge that can be consumed by under-served communities), and engage in societal efforts (e.g., rewarding efforts that are geared to building bridges between social organizations such as the U.N. UNESCO, World Bank, and the IS scholarly community), we risk being spectators to the impact of IS in under-served communities rather than directing this effort. This position is not only undesirable, but also will be irresponsible as we would be under-utilizing and mis-using the intellectual resources that have taken considerable effort to develop.

The goal of this panel will be to encourage change in the IS research community via the Association of Information Systems by debating methods for addressing the needs of the under-served communities. Some of the questions that will be discussed include:

1. How do we build IS research programs that make an impact on addressing the needs of the under-served communities?
2. Is use of IS a cause of development, or does the use of IS expand when communities are more developed? Or is it an iterative process: more development leads to greater use of IS, which in turn promotes greater development?
3. How do we deploy our current knowledge resources to better address the needs of the under-served communities?
4. How do we learn from the novelties of IS deployments in under-served communities to help inform research and practice in the advanced societies?
5. How do we engage stakeholders outside our research community to develop fruitful alliances to better achieve the goal of addressing the needs of the under-served communities?
6. How do we educate and equip future researchers (e.g. doctoral students) and practitioners (e.g. graduate and undergraduate students) to be sensitive to the needs of the under-served communities?

Kevin C. Desouza, the panel moderator, will open the discussion by setting the stage for the debate by sharing examples of IS research aimed at making impacts on under-served communities. He will then outline the format of the debate and pose questions to the panelists. It is expected that each of the panelist will be given about five minutes to share their views on the above questions. Specifically, Bob Galliers will discuss the issues involved in how we leverage the AIS community to build a truly global community of researchers to engage in scholarly pursuit of difficult problems that impact under-served communities. Phillip-Ein-Dor will discuss the pragmatics of doing research on problems of interest to the under-served communities by examining the problem of the digital-divide. Rick Watson will follow up with his thoughts on building a symbiotic and integrative relationship between research, teaching, and service. He will explore how the three goals of academicians can be integrated to meet the needs of under-served communities via the Global Textbook project. Don McCubbrey, will explore how academics can better engage with practitioners to enhance the quality of our research efforts targeted at under-served communities. Finally, Michael Myers will engage the audience by discussing his views, as President of the AIS, on how the IS community should both gear research to address the needs of under-served communities, while also embracing the reality that we have to learn from these communities to better inform how we design and manage IS in developed nations.

Below are more in-depth statements from each panelist to reflect the diverse perspectives they will bring to the panel.

Phillip-Ein-Dor will use the case of digital divide to address research into the issue of causality between community development and use of IS; which is the chicken and which the egg? The existence of a digital divide has been recognized for some time now; the divide exists both within countries and between countries. The divide is frequently considered important because of the belief that information systems contribute to economic development and thus, as a result, those communities that are digitally deprived also suffer economic deprivation. While

information systems may often contribute to economic development, the question arises under what circumstances is this true? Or, more bluntly, what are the preconditions required in order for information systems to be able to contribute to enhancing welfare? This is an important question because efforts to drive development by means of information systems before conditions are ripe will result in frustration and wasted resources; once conditions are appropriate, it will be wasteful not to apply the required IS resources. The research questions then are (1) how to determine when countries or communities have reached a level of development in which IS resources can be effectively applied, and which resources are relevant at each stage of development?, and (2) how do we help under-served communities reach the necessary threshold in order to start to gain from IS investments? Relevant measures presumably relate to levels of human and infrastructure development such as literacy, market organization, purchasing power, communications, and electric power supply. A secondary consideration, but necessary for structuring the research, is how are information systems defined. An inappropriate definition of IS could lead to premature or late application.

Donald McCubbrey will address the topic through the lens of a practitioner. His contention is that we are passive observers of the impacts of IS on societies. Unless we take an active role in the creation and deployment of technologies that impact society our role will be resigned to that of a spectator. In the past, many futurists described how the world would be changed for the better by information systems. Typical examples were shorter work weeks, equal educational opportunities for everyone, online communities supporting democratic institutions, breathtaking advances in healthcare, and a world citizenry comforted by advances in safety and security systems. Some observers say that, unfortunately, technology has helped shape a world characterized by flattened or lower wages for workers in the developed world, huge increases in the gap between rich and poor in most countries, and little progress in closing the digital divide in education and health care. We have seen the introduction of voting technologies with questionable security and integrity components, and created surveillance systems in the name of safety and security that raise concerns over citizens' personal liberties. With some notable exceptions, we as IS professionals, have not made our voices heard on such issues. Perhaps, finally, now the time for us to use our specialized knowledge of IS and strategic alignment to help ensure that the right kinds of information systems are created and used to help solve the most pressing needs of our global society.

Bob Galliers will examine issues involved in attempting to build a truly global IS research community. His contention is that unless we take the building of an international IS research community seriously - one that embraces diversity, leverages local knowledge, and is sensitive to local needs, cultures, and traditions in the creation of new knowledge - the IS academy will lose out. First, we will not be suitably positioned to address the needs of the under-served communities, and second, we in the so-called advanced economies will fail to learn from our colleagues elsewhere. The IS academy is still marked by a large degree of parochialism - even in the advanced economies. We face an uphill task if we are to have any chance of becoming truly international. Thus, Bob will discuss ways in which we might better structure our interactions with researchers across the globe, and in particular in under-developed communities, to help them advance the state of knowledge, and to help us understand the challenges their circumstances pose. He will also attempt to discuss how we might better structure deliberations with students, both graduate and undergraduate, to make them more cognizant of the issues facing us as an international academy and the under-served communities themselves.

Richard T. Watson will use the problem of global warming to elaborate on how and why the IS research community should get involved in addressing problems of a societal nature. Global warming is a problem that affects both the developed and the under-served parts of our society. Global warming is the dominating problem facing the world, and IS academics should be engaged in solving this momentous problem. We can contribute indirectly to the solution by making mass education more affordable. The global text book project <[www.globaltext.org](http://www.globaltext.org)> intends to produce free, open content, electronic text books for university students in developing countries by engaging academics and their students in writing chapters for these books. The project also addresses waste in higher education—the failure to engage our students in the creation of value creating intellectual products. Too often, we discard our students efforts at the end of the term, if not before. By creating the appropriate infrastructure we can develop renewable, value building student projects. With a target of 1,000 text books, the global text book project offers opportunities for IS researchers to discover how we can use technology to create a mass scale, virtual, collaborative community of academics, professionals, and students. The technology and

management structure needs development and evaluation, which are both relevant research topics for IS scholars. The entire project can also be addressed as an action research opportunity for the IS community as there many avenues for participation in a variety of ways. We need to learn how to use technology to engage many for the benefit of many more.

Michael Myers will focus on the question on how we might build better alliances with other organizations to help generate better research that is sensitive to the needs of the under-served communities. With the advent of globalization and increasing interdependence among nations, international associations are on the rise in both number and prominence. "Operating in practically every country around the world, associations are membership-based organizations that are private, legally incorporated entities with a public benefit purpose. By providing benefits to their members, associations around the world impart a wider value to society" (ASAE 2006). The American Society for Association Executives (ASAE) says that associations can play an important economic, social and policy/advocacy role in our increasingly global society. In fact, the ASAE has launched a "Better World Campaign" to promote awareness and understanding of the contributions of associations worldwide. However, the ASAE also says that to succeed in the 21st century, nonprofit associations around the world must be able to tell the story of their collective impact upon millions of lives. To form effective partnerships with government, business, the media and other nonprofits, associations need to know and communicate their collective contribution to society. This raises a few obvious questions for the Association for Information Systems. For example: What is the story we want to tell the public, the media, and policy makers? What is the story we want to tell to our members and supporters? How can AIS help to build a better world? Michael will suggest some answers to these questions while also inviting suggestions from members of the audience.

## Panelist Bios

Kevin C. Desouza is on the faculty of the Information School at the University of Washington. He is a founding faculty member of the Institute for Innovation Management (I3M) and is an affiliate faculty member of the Center for American Politics and Public Policy, both housed at the University of Washington. His immediate past position was the Director of the Institute for Engaged Business Research, a think-tank of the Engaged Enterprise, a strategy consulting firm with expertise in the areas of knowledge management, crisis management, strategic deployment of information systems, and government and competitive intelligence assignments. He has authored *Managing Knowledge with Artificial Intelligence* (Quorum Books, 2002), co-authored *The Outsourcing Handbook* (Kogan Page, 2006), *Managing Information in Complex Organizations* (M.E. Sharpe, 2005) and *Engaged Knowledge Management* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), and edited *New Frontiers of Knowledge Management* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). His most recent book is currently in press – *Agile Information Systems* – to be published by Butterworth Heinemann (2006). In addition, he has published over 80 articles in prestigious practitioner and academic journals. His work has also been featured by a number of publications such as the *Washington Internet Daily*, *Computerworld*, *KM Review*, and *Human Resource Management International Digest*. Desouza has advised major international corporations and government organizations on strategic management issues ranging from knowledge management, to competitive intelligence, and crisis management. Desouza is frequently an invited speaker on a number of cutting-edge business and technology topics for national and international, industry and academic audiences. He is a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

Phillip Ein-Dor is currently Professor Emeritus at the Faculty of Management, Tel-Aviv University. His research interests include theory of information systems, natural language processing, information technology infrastructure and development, artificial intelligence, and the Internet. Over the past three decades, Dr. Ein-Dor has published about 50 research papers and has written or edited four books in his fields of interest. Ein-Dor was the founding editor of the *Journal of AIS* and has served on the editorial board of *MIS Quarterly*. He currently serves as a member of the Advisory Board of Information Technology and Management and of the Editorial Boards of the *Journal of MIS*, *Information & Management*, *Internet Research*, and *Management Science and Regional Development*. He has held visiting appointments at New York University, Claremont Graduate University, the Naval Postgraduate School, the National University of Singapore, City University of Hong Kong, ESSEC, and the Czechoslovak Management Center (now CMC Graduate School of Business). Ein-Dor has served as council member as well as on the

organizing, nominating, publications, Fellows Awards and LEO Awards committees of AIS. In 2000 he was honored as an AIS Fellow. In 2001 he was elected President-Elect of AIS, and served as President in 2002-2003.

Donald J. McCubbrey, PhD is a Clinical Professor in the Department of Information Technology and Electronic Commerce and Director of the Center for the Study of Electronic Commerce in the Daniels College of Business at the University of Denver. He joined the Daniels College faculty in 1984 after a career in information systems consulting with Andersen Consulting/Arthur Andersen & Co. From 1981-1983 he was in charge of the Firm's consulting practice in Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela. Since then, he has concentrated his teaching and research in the areas of strategic information systems and electronic commerce. He is a co-founder and board member emeritus of the Colorado Software and Internet Association. He has co-authored five textbooks and has published papers in several academic and practitioner journals. He has been an associate editor of Communications of the Association for Information Systems since its inception.

Robert D. Galliers joined Bentley in July of 2002 as Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs. Previously Professor of Information Systems and Research Director in the Department of Information Systems at the London School of Economics, he retains his connection with the LSE as a Visiting Professor. Before joining LSE, Dr. Galliers served as Lucas Professor of Business Management Systems and Dean of the Warwick Business School in the United Kingdom, and earlier as Foundation Professor and Head of the School of Information Systems at Curtin University in Australia. Dr. Galliers holds an AB in Economics from Harvard University, as well as an MA in Management Systems from Lancaster University, a PhD in Information Systems from the London School of Economics, and an Honorary Doctor of Science degree awarded by the Turku School of Economics and Business Administration in Finland in 1995 for his contributions to European Information Management research. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, the British Computer Society, and the Association for Information Systems, of which he was President in 1999. He has chaired previous ICIS and ECIS conferences, and has been a keynote speaker at ECIS and ACIS, among others. He is editor-in-chief of the Journal of Strategic Information Systems and on the editorial boards of a number of other major journals. He has authored over 60 journal articles and a number of books - the most recent being "Exploring Information Systems Research Approaches" (Routledge, 2006), with Lynne Markus and Sue Newell, and the third edition of the best-selling "Strategic Information Management" (Butterworth-Heinemann, 2003), with Dorothy Leidner.

Michael D. Myers is Professor of Information Systems and Associate Dean (Postgraduate and Research) at the University of Auckland Business School, New Zealand. He currently serves as President of the Association for Information Systems (AIS) and as Chair of the International Federation of Information Processing (IFIP) Working Group 8.2. He also serves as Editor in Chief of the University of Auckland Business Review and Editor of the ISWorld Section on Qualitative Research. His research articles have been published in many journals and books. He won the Best Paper award (with Heinz Klein) for the most outstanding paper published in MIS Quarterly in 1999. He also won the Best Paper Award (with Lynda Harvey) for the best paper published in Information Technology & People in 1997. He previously served as Senior Editor of MIS Quarterly from 2001-2005, as Associate Editor of Information Systems Research from 2000-2005, and as Associate Editor of Information Systems Journal from 1995-2000.

Richard T. Watson is the J. Rex Fuqua Distinguished Chair for Internet Strategy and Director of the Center for Information Systems Leadership in the Terry College of Business, the University of Georgia. He has published in leading journals in several fields as well as authored books on data management and electronic commerce. His current research focuses primarily on electronic commerce and IS leadership. He has given invited seminars in more than 20 countries for companies and universities. He is past President of AIS, a visiting professor at Agder University College, Norway, Fudan University, China, and a consulting editor to John Wiley & Sons. He has been a co-chair of ICIS and a senior editor for MIS Quarterly.