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Panel 7 Target Journals for Information Systems Research: Current Practices and Controversies

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PANEL 7

TARGET JOURNALS FOR INFORMATION SYSTEMS RESEARCH: CURRENT PRACTICES AND CONTROVERSIES

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Abstract

This panel examines the practice of identifying target journals for IS research. As participants in a scholarly community, individual researchers and their institutions may benefit from guidance on the choice of journals for submission of scholarly work. Official "target journal" lists have begun to appear within departments, where they play a role in evaluating the contributions of individual faculty. The panel examines this practice from three distinct angles. First, research that evaluates the relative standing of scholarly journals in the IS field will be described. The results of a 1998 survey and two earlier surveys (Hardgrave and Walstrom 1997; Walstrom Hardgrave, and Wilson 1995) will be presented. Second, the current practices of two leading IS departments in North American business schools will be described. The actual lists, the controversies surrounding their development and maintenance, and their use and consequences will be described. Third, the practice of identifying target journals will be challenged, and the controversies surrounding the use of such lists will be examined.

In any scientific field, a group of journals may be identified that represent the best work done in the field. Because of their agreed-upon quality, these journals serve as targets for scholarly work produced by the field. A field's leading journals are more widely read, cited more frequently, and are more influential. Publications in a leading journal weigh more heavily in the evaluation of faculty performance. For some, the identification of target journals is a measure of a field's paradigm consensus and scientific progress.

Although IS is a new field, several journals have emerged as targets for faculty research. These appear in surveys of journal quality and desirability. They are also appearing on a growing number of target journal lists, produced by IS departments at several schools. By identifying specific target journals for its faculty, a department explicitly adjusts its reward system to recognize the difference between leading journals and other publication outlets.

Target journals are important and highly visible scholarly outlets for research publications of IS researchers. Identifying target journals supports the shared goal of excellence in research within the IS research community and specific departments. Faculty members at many schools seeking promotion or tenure would be seriously disadvantaged without one or more publications in

premier academic journals. An article appearing in a target journal carries with it a presumption of a certain level of quality. A formal list of target journals reduces ambiguity and clarifies expectations for faculty.

Such practices may be highly controversial. Editors of journals not included in surveys may object to being excluded. Authors may become so focused on a narrow set of targets that they fail to support other worthwhile outlets for their research, and departments may disregard all but the target journals. Identifying journal destinations may become more important in faculty evaluation than reading articles. Departments may strategically manipulate their lists in order to make faculty look either more or less favorable, and the list and the department may thereby lose credibility. By depending upon reputational rankings of established journals, a target list may not recognize emerging areas of inquiry that are tied to new technologies. Target lists may take on lives of their own and be difficult to change. In IS, a small list of target journals may inadequately mirror the diversity of research topics and methods that are appropriate to the field. A target list may also undervalue contributions to professional/trade journals.

The panel will explore the topic of target journals in three ways. First, Kent Walstrom will describe his research into IS journal rankings, presenting results from two prior surveys and the most recent survey conducted in 1998. Second, Dennis Adams and Daniel Robey will describe the development, use, and consequences of target journal lists at the University of Houston and Georgia State University, respectively. Finally, Burt Swanson will offer criticism of the current practices and offer an alternative recommendation for the IS field. Audience members will be invited to contribute their experiences and criticisms of the practices described by the panelists. Brief summaries of each panelist's contributions are given below.

Kent Walstrom: There have been many surveys of publication practices in the IS field (see Appendix A). One of the more common approaches is to identify the perceptions of IS faculty about the significance of the journals and conferences used as outlets for their research findings. The results of three surveys of this type are presented here. The 1998 journal rankings survey is the third in a series of studies. For the 1998 study, questionnaires were sent more than 2,000 IS faculty from the U.S. and Canada listed in the *ISWorld Faculty Directory*. The previous list of journals and conferences was modified by adding the journals and conferences suggested by the respondents. Journals and conferences receiving ratings of "not appropriate" or "no value to the MIS field" were removed from the list. Based on these modifications, respondents were asked to provide their perceptions about 51 journals and 13 conferences. Results from the current study and trends across all three studies will be presented.

Dennis Adams: At the University of Houston, a journal list was created to aid in the annual merit review process and to provide guidance to junior faculty members in pursuit of tenure and promotion. The journal list is divided into three tiers: highest quality, high quality, and supporting journals. Articles appearing in the highest quality category represent those that the University feels exhibit rigorous, mainstream IS topical and methodological issues. Articles in these journals typically enjoy high visibility and are cited in other works. High quality journals contain articles that focus on other topical or methodological areas and contain papers that may not be as widely cited. The supporting category consists of journals that do not properly fit into the other categories.

In trying to reconcile differences between various streams of IS research, the journal list is further divided into tracks defined as *management-oriented IS* and *computer-oriented IS*. The management-oriented track contains those journals that focus on societal, organizational and individual uses and impacts of computing technologies. Computer-oriented journals concentrate on understanding and perhaps improving upon the state of computing itself. While the computer-oriented track is more technical in nature, it does not currently include those journals that might more commonly be found on a journal or conference list in computer science. The supporting category for both tracks is where professional/practitioner journals might appear.

Journal lists at the University of Houston are compiled and reviewed by each department's promotion and tenure committee. They are used by the College's Administrative Committee for merit review and by the College's Promotion and Tenure Committee. The primary objective in placing a journal on the list is career-building and, hence, factors such as readership, editorial processes and board membership, acceptance rates and citation analysis are important elements.

Daniel Robey: The target list for Georgia State University (see Appendix B) distinguishes between premier and high-quality journals. *Premier* designates the absolute best outlets for academic research, whereas *high-quality* signifies journals that contain articles based on accepted research methods that are frequently cited in other academic journals. Both premier and high-quality academic journals have high academic respectability as judged by these criteria. While it may be worthwhile to distinguish academic journals from professional/practitioner journals, only journals directed toward the academic audience are listed.

Premier and high-quality journals in related disciplines are often highly desirable outlets for research in IS. To this end, IS researchers may take advantage of target journal lists from other departments. At Georgia State University, for example, the Management Department includes *Organization Science*, which regularly published articles by IS researchers.

The most frequently used objective indicators of quality are a journal's editorial policies (refereeing process, acceptance rate), its affiliation with a prestigious organization, the institutional affiliations of its editor and board members, and its rating as discussed in published articles that compare different journals. Periodically, researchers have surveyed IS academics to ascertain which journals are perceived as the most prestigious. The appendix to the target journal document at Georgia State University provides this external, objective evidence for many of the journals on the target list. Such objective information can also be produced as testimony of the high quality of specific journals not on the target list.

Burt Swanson: There are four reasons why the practice of establishing and using target journal lists should be cautiously evaluated. First, lists of target journals may be important to the local politics of promotion and tenure within certain universities and their departments, but they have no global relevance for the field and its substantive progress. Second, the existence of a list of target journals does not reflect well upon the university and its departments that employ it or the field of IS as a whole. Third, progress in a field is reflected by its most influential published articles, regardless of where they are published, rather than by the contents of journals appearing on any particular target list. Fourth, promotion and tenure processes are best advised to focus on the import and impact of the candidate's research, rather than on the vehicles through which the candidate's research is disseminated.

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Appendix A
Articles Documenting Journal Quality

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Appendix B
Target Journal List at Georgia State University

PREMIER ACADEMIC JOURNALS

CIS General:

ACM Computing Surveys
Communications of the ACM
IEEE Transactions/Journals[1]
ACM Transactions[2]
Acta Informatica
Information Systems Research
Journal of Management Information Systems

Information System Development:

Information Systems
VLDB Journal

Information Technology:

Artificial Intelligence
Journal of the ACM
SIAM Journal on Computing

Information Systems Management:

MIS Quarterly
Accounting, Management, and Information Technologies

HIGH-QUALITY ACADEMIC JOURNALS

Data Base
Decision Support Systems
European Journal of Information Systems
IEEE Magazines[3]
Information and Management
Information Systems Journal
Information Technology and People
Journal of Information Technology
Journal of Organizational Computing and Electronic Commerce

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[1]*IEEE Transactions/Journals* is a group of journals published by the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers and includes *IEEE Transactions on Software Engineering, IEEE Transactions on Knowledge and Data Engineering, IEEE Transactions on Computers, IEEE Transactions on Pattern Analysis and Machine Intelligence,* and *ACM/IEEE Transactions on Networking, IEEE Journal on Selected Areas in Communication,* among other premier journals.

[2]*ACM Transactions* is a group of journals published by the Association for Computing Machinery and includes *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction, Database Systems, Information Systems, Software Engineering and Methodology*, among other premier journals.

[3]*IEEE Magazines* is a group of journals published by the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers and includes *IEEE Multimedia, IEEE Network, IEEE Software, IEEE Computer, IEEE Expert,* among other high-quality journals.