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Sara Eriksén

Blekinge Institute of Technology, sara.eriksen@bth.se

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The Curse of the Smart Manager?

Digitalisation and the children of management science

Sara Eriksén

Department of Creative Technologies

Blekinge Institute of Technology

sara.eriksen@bth.se

Abstract. In this commentary of Carsten Sørensen's keynote address and commentary, I argue that it may be the concept of the smart manager—so fundamental to management science—rather than the concept of the smart machine, which is still haunting IS research today.

The mainframe computer was indeed an impressive and increasingly 'smart' machine in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, and well into the 80s. However, even forty-some years ago, in the golden era of mainframes, it was not the entire field of Information Systems (IS) research that focused on mainframe systems. True, the mainframe was the main focus of Management Information System (MIS) research (Grudin, 2006). But IS was—and is—not the same thing as MIS, even if it has been heavily influenced by, and frequently conflated with, MIS over the years. Conventional forms of managerial analysis, based on models still considered integral to mainstream management science research, may actually be at the core of the curse Sørensen high-lights in his commentary

It is important to understand and acknowledge where we are coming from, in order to understand what the IS research field is—and is not—today, and how this affects our understanding and conceptualisation of the challenges we are facing in an age of extensive digitalisation. For the sake of contributing to and broadening the discussion which Sørensen is calling for in his commentary, I have paraphrased his title and subtitle, shifting the blame, as it were, from the mainframe to the implicit management science framework which much of mainstream contemporary IS research appears to unquestioningly take for granted. It is the ghost of management science, not the ghost of the mainframe computer, which continues to encourage the choice of

organisational-centric analysis in IS research, even as digitalisation transforms organisational and public service processes, cutting across more and more organisational boundaries and forcing extensive industrial restructuring of previously well-established industrial verticals. Sørensen high-lights and provides illustrative examples of three of the grand challenges associated with the digital transformation of societies and organizations as well as the lives and livelihoods of individuals. The grand challenge for the IS research community in this context, as I see it, could be formulated as follows: Should we really be doing IS research which is primarily aimed at informing the practices of idealised smart managers in traditional work organisations, in an age when IS research concerning digitalisation, at its best, could inform a much broader target group of people in their everyday use of smart technologies? How can we constructively deconstruct the smart manager?

References

Grudin, J., (2006): A Missing Generation: Office Automation/Information Systems and Human-Computer Interaction. *Interactions*, May-June 2006, pp.58-61.