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EDITORIAL: INTRODUCTION TO THE DEBATE ON THE CORE OF THE INFORMATION SYSTEMS FIELD

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INVITATION

This editorial introduces a debate about what should be the IS core. The debate is in the form of a series of short papers. Readers of CAIS are invited to participate in this debate by submitting their own paper to this series. Papers should bring new perspectives or present alternative critiques from the ones presented here.

CAIS does not favor one position or another. We seek publishable articles on all sides.

Articles should be short (about 10 pages plus references and figures, 1½ spaced) and to the point. Papers will receive 'light review'; that is, they will be sent to an associate editor and the editor for their comments. Papers will receive quick turnaround. Submit papers to cais@cgu.edu. Please follow the CAIS style sheet (found at <http://cais.isworld.org/style.doc>) in creating your contribution. Papers for which people seek full peer review should be submitted to our sister publication, the Journal of AIS (JAIS). Submit electronic copy to both dstraub@gsu.edu and JAIS@mcombs.utexas.edu

BACKGROUND

In June of this year, Izak Benbasat of the University of British Columbia and Robert W. Zmud of the University of Oklahoma [2003] published an article titled "The Identity Crisis Within the IS Discipline: Defining and Communicating the Discipline's Core Properties" in the *MIS Quarterly*. The article was accompanied by an Editor's Comments section by Ron Weber, editor-in-chief of MISQ, titled "Still Desperately Seeking the IS Artifact".¹ Six months earlier, Phillip Ein-Dor, then President of the AIS, chaired a meeting at ICIS in Barcelona to discuss these and related issues with a group of long-time leaders in the IS field. The meeting and the two MISQ articles are part of a wave of discussion within the IS field: Is there a Crisis? Is there a Core? If so, what is the Core?

When the MISQ articles appeared in the June 2003 issue, Steven Alter of the University of San Francisco and a Senior Editor of CAIS, wrote a long reply and submitted it to MISQ. The paper was deemed too long for an MISQ response and Alter was told it would have to be cut by more

¹ Members of AIS who did not yet read these important articles can find them by going to the AIS home page at <http://aisnet.org/> and selecting eMISQ from the menu at the top of the page.

than half before going through a full review process. Alter believed that this approach would result in a long delay that would interrupt rather than promote serious discussion of the issues and would require him to remove some of the examples and lengthy tables that he believed were essential to convey his main points convincingly. He opted instead to revise his original submission based on some of the initial comments from MISQ and submit the article, titled "Sidestepping the IT Artifact, Scrapping the IS Silo, and Laying Claim to 'Systems In Organizations'" to CAIS.

I accepted the article [Alter 2003a], which precedes this series because I believed that the discussion of the core, if such exists, was important to the IS community. To expand the discussion beyond Benbasat & Zmud and Alter, I invited each of the associate editors of CAIS to contribute a think piece (of approximately 10 pages when 1.5 spaced) in response to both papers. Ten of them did. The ten articles that resulted plus Alter's response to them part of a series called The IS Core. A list of the articles in this series published thus far is shown in Table I.²

Table I. Articles in IS Core Series

Article Number*		Title	Author
41	IS Core – XI	Sorting Out Issues About the Core, Scope, and Identity of the IS Field	Steven Alter U. of San Francisco
40	IS Core – X	Information Systems Research and Practice: IT Artifact or a Multidisciplinary Subject?	Christopher Holland, University of Manchester
39	IS Core - IX	The 3 Faces of IS Identity: Connection, Immersion, and Fusion	Omar El Sawy U. of Southern California
38	IS Core – VIII	Towards Information Systems As A Science Of Meta-Artifacts	Juhani Iivari University of Oulu
37	IS Core – VII	Defining the Core Properties of the IS Discipline: Not Yet, Not Now	Michael Myers Auckland University
36	IS Core – VI	Further Along the Road to the IT Artifact	Y. Wu and Carol Saunders U. of Central Florida
35	IS Core – V	Defining the IS Core	Ruth Guthrie California State U.
34	IS Core – IV	IS Research: A Third Way	Don McCubbrey University of Denver
33	IS Core – III	The Core Domain Debate and the International Business Discipline: A Comparison	P. Candace Deans University of Richmond
32	IS Core – II	The Maturing IS Discipline: Institutionalizing our Domain of Inquiry	Dan Power U. of Northern Iowa
31	IS Core – I	Economic and Systems Engineering Approaches to IS Identity	Donna Dufner U. of Nebraska-Omaha

*Denotes article number in CAS Volume 12

As you will see when you read the articles in the series, viewpoints range over a broad spectrum, with none of the articles fully accepting either Benbasat and Zmud or Alter's views. Three responses (Nos. I through III) use the debate to introduce viewpoints that reflect the impacts of the arguments on their fields of specialization.

Of course, when a journal presents a series of opinions, the authors whose work is being discussed are offered the opportunity to reply. While Benbasat and Zmud chose not to reply at this time, Alter responded in the eleventh paper in the series by identifying and summarizing key

² Note: CAIS articles are published in a push-down stack; that is, the latest article is on top of the next to last article, and so on. The articles in this series are organized in this way. Thus, Alter's response follows this editorial as Article 41.

issues addressed by the other authors and accentuating areas of agreement and disagreement through brief excerpts that illustrate these authors' views. Readers can begin either by reading Alter's summary and response and then the individual responses or by looking at the individual viewpoints and then Alter's response.

THE EDITOR'S PERSONAL VIEW

In thinking about the debate I was struck by the role language plays in all of it. Although most of us think about information systems in terms of hardware, software, people, and policies, a large fraction of our ideas are expressed in language. And language matters. It matters in what you call things.

I personally think the term artifact is an unfortunate choice because it raises two images in the minds of those outside our field, which can be seen from the following examples of the definitions given in the papers:

- An artifact as a physical piece, such as a Mesopotamian vase, found by anthropologists
- An artifact of the data in an experiment where the numbers give a different impression about reality than what is actually the case. That is, an artifact is not the real thing.

While artifact is a serious academic term, I doubt that the image it projects to the non-specialist is one that people in IS want to convey to their colleagues in Schools of Business or in Computer Science or wherever IS is housed. I therefore strongly recommend that, as a discipline, we find a better term.

A second consideration for me is what is the core and where are the field's boundaries? Do defining these terms explicitly wind up limiting what is considered legitimate IS research? Core and boundaries are elastic, growing and shrinking over time. Phenomena come and go. Consider three technologies: twenty five years ago, personal computing was a blip; a decade ago, wireless computing was a blip; today, wearable and immersion computing are blips. Yet, in my opinion, the social, organizational, international, and societal aspects of these technologies are or will be legitimate areas for IS research. Limiting approvable research to what is in the mainstream currently, in an era when it typically takes three years from the start of a project to its publication, risks making our work a study of IS history, not IS future; a position we should not be in as a field.

In thinking about what is researchable, we should take into account the classic conundrum of statisticians: we can make errors of the first kind by studying something we should not and errors of the second kind by not studying something we should. As any statistician knows, you cannot guard fully against both; if you take the first position you do some unnecessary work; if you take the second you miss things which are important. In many respects, the arguments presented deal with which kind of error to avoid. I come down on the side of avoiding errors of the second kind.

CONCLUSIONS

The debate is an ongoing one, running back over many years, perhaps even as long as the discussion of the relevance of our research. A bibliography of papers important to the debate follows.

The debate certainly won't be resolved with these papers or even after many more are published. Nonetheless, the discussion of issues such as the IS Core are healthy for our profession because they help all of understand the theoretical, philosophical, and practical aspects of the work we do.

I look forward to your contributions.

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