7-1-2009

Journal Self-Citation VIII: An IS Researcher in the Dual Worlds of Author-Reader and Author-Institution

Onook Oh
State University of New York at Buffalo, onookoh@buffalo.com

H. Raghav Rao
State University of New York at Buffalo

Follow this and additional works at: https://aisel.aisnet.org/cais

Journal Self-Citation VIII: An IS Researcher in the Dual Worlds of Author-Reader and Author-Institution

Onook Oh

Department of Management Science and Systems, School of Management,

State University of New York at Buffalo

onookoh@buffalo.com

H. Raghav Rao

Department of Management Science and Systems, School of Management,

State University of New York at Buffalo

Abstract:

This paper responds to the question of whether it is ethical for a journal editor to request an author to cite papers from a journal to which one is submitting an article. To craft a response to this question, two sets of relationships are explored. The first set is an author-reader relationship, and the second set is an author-institution or community relationship. In these dual relationships, the author is considered to be an IS researcher who publishes and disseminates knowledge through the channel of research journals. The reason for articulating these twofold relationships is to go beyond the common belief that the author is the sole and autonomous source of knowledge creation and distribution. We posit that: (1) an author cannot exist isolated from the reader, and (2) an author exists only as a part of an institutional system which opens and at the same time constrains an author's knowledge production. In other words, an author is destined to create knowledge within the constrained system. For that very reason, it is important to understand the author as a function of conditional discourse of a specific institution. We conclude that editors' requests for an author to cite papers from a journal to which one is submitting an article is ethically critical to: (1) build a good author-reader relationship, and (2) produce rich and plural knowledge which is "good" for advancing learning in the global community.

Keywords: author function, reader, editor, institutional discourse, knowledge creation and dissemination, ethics, Foucault, Deleuze

I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to respond to the question of whether it is ethical for a journal editor to request an author to cite papers from a journal to which one is submitting an article.[1] To craft a response to this question, two sets of relationships are explored. The first set is an author-reader relationship, and the second set an author-institution or community relationship. In these dual relationships, the author is considered to be an IS researcher who publishes and disseminates knowledge through the channel of research journals. The reason for articulating these twofold relationships is to go beyond the common belief that the author is the sole source of knowledge creation and distribution. In this paper, we posit that: (1) an author cannot exist isolated from the reader, and (2) an author exists only as a part of institutional system which opens and, at the same time, limits the possibility of an author's knowledge production. In other words, an author is destined to create knowledge in the constrained system. For this very reason, it is important is to understand the author as a function of conditional discourse of a specific institution [Foucault 1977].

As the given question is ethical in its nature, our position on ethics is briefly introduced. According to Deleuze, ethics is more about "good or bad" rather than "good (right) or evil (wrong)"- the latter being a foundation of moral judgment [Deleuze 1988]. Deleuze's ethics purports to realize and actualize the potential power latent both in the individual mind and/or the social organization. His thought is that, be it intended or not, or conscious or not, our lives and social relations are composed of endless encounters with others. Whether such unexpected encounters are good or bad is measured against the metric of contribution to increase individual and/or social potential. Thus, the real substance of Deleuzian ethics is how to minimize the effect of bad encounters, and at the same time, to assemble good encounters with different others such that it increases individual as well as social potential. To put it simply, ethics is about the act of developing good relationships with others to actualize individual and/or social potential to its maximum in practice.

In the context of journal self-citation, we assume that an IS researcher encounters an editor of a journal during the writing process, and this encounter is the point that needs ethical unfolding. Following the Deleuzian notion of practical ethics, we avoid exercising moral judgment of whether this encounter is "good (right)" or "evil (wrong)." Rather, we discuss whether a journal editor's intervention into an IS researcher's writing process is "good" or "bad" in terms of the relationships of author-reader (Section II) and author-IS (Section III) communities.

II. AUTHOR AND READER

Historically, the meaning, role, and social status of author have varied over time. Author as individual has never existed autonomously separated from the reader. Although modern authors are paid for their intellectual labor by the sale of books endorsed by their signatures, it was only in the 19th century when, for the first time in history, "poetry had become a commodity for sale along with socks and shoes" [Tompkins 1980]. Author function always presupposes readers of a specific historical context, and, conversely, readers influence the development of authors.[2] To show that the author function is not constant over time, as Tompkins suggests, consider some titles of Ben Jonson's verses during the Renaissance age of England:

> "Lord Bacon's Birthday," "An Epigram on the Court Pucelle," "The Dedication of King's New Cellar to
>
> Bacchus," "New Year's Day Poem" (To Elizabeth, Countess of Rutland)," "To Penshurst" (the home
>
> of the Sidney family), "To the Right Honourable the Lord High Treasurer of England an Epistle
>
> Mendicant," "A New Year's Gift Sung to King Charles, 1635" [Tomkins, 1980].

As can be seen from the titles, in the Renaissance age the author composed verses of celebration of nobility, entertainment or homage toward a specific royal family. The author's focus of attention tended to be targeted to the service of patrons. His patron-readers existed within the reach of social and physical contacts. Literary works were circulated by hand or performed within the circle of his associates. In exchange, the author received social protection

---

[1] In this paper, we refer to this practice as journal self-citation.
[2] The expression "author function" is borrowed from Michel Foucault. Although Michel Foucault explains author as a function of discourse, in this section, we relate "author function" to reader [Foucault 1977].

along with financial support from his intimate readers. As many literary scholars state, "virtually all English Renaissance literature is a literature of patronage" [Tomkins 1980]. In this particular age, rather than being a separate entity, author and reader relied on each other by maintaining complementary relationships within a closed circle.

By the end of 18th century, according to Tomkins, links between literature and patron systems began to dissolve with the growth of industrialization, advances in printing technology, and the growing size of the reading public. This historical change enabled authors to secure themselves through the economic activity of publication. Accordingly, the mechanism of literary production and consumption reconfigured author and reader relationship. Dissolution of the patron system and massive distribution of books created readers capable of individual thinking. Book circulation no longer required physical contact between author and patron. Authors responded to this change with more individual and psychological works that respected individual value. In this changed socioeconomic environment, "instead of writing a dedicatory poem for the King's new cellar, the poet writes an 'Ode to Joy'" [Tomkins 1980]. In the industrial age, a reader's individual value was reflected upon literary works. Accordingly, the author-reader relationship is reformulated through shared understanding of the subjects of the age.

The review of the past two ages enables a perspective that the author-reader relationship is an artificial construct reflecting a specific political, economic, and technological context. Given that an IS journal is a genre of rigorous scientific writing and is a product of the modern age, reflection about author and reader relationships in journal publication is critical to understanding the ethical role of an editor's intervention into the researcher's writing process. This is especially true in the Information Age, when:

(1) The knowledge production cycle is short

(2) Circulation speed is immediate

(3) Distribution reach is global

(4) Reader feedback is almost instantaneous

The role of the reader is becoming more important in author and reader relationships, and the editor's responsibility is heavier than before. In recent years in the IS research field, efforts were undertaken to redefine readers of IS journals. This effort was in response to a crisis faced by IS journals. Benbasat and Zmud reported that the Society for Information Management (SIM) International decided to terminate their long standing subscription to *MIS Quarterly* as part of their membership requirement. Many SIM members even rejected a discounted offer of a journal subscription [Benbasat and Zmud 1999]. This crisis led to a series of self reflective special topics to answer the question of what is relevant research.

At the heart of this discussion, however, is the existence of the author-reader relationship crisis regarding whether an IS journal is creating a good relationship between the IS researcher (author) and IT professionals (readers). As Benbasat and Zmud point out, if the reader considers that the IS researchers/authors simply reproduce irrelevant knowledge which does not contribute to an increase in the reader's capacity of IS understanding, in practice, it eventually would lead to the breakdown of the author-reader relationship, and the disappearance of readers, authors, journals, and IS research community in the long run. Thus, at the very fundamental level, the relationship of author (IS researcher) and reader (e.g., IS professionals, IS researchers and IS students) is an "immanent rule" in IS journal publication. For that very reason, a journal editor has a valid reason to intervene in the writing process to invigorate the good relationship among author, reader, and IS community. In this sense, a journal editor's request for authors to cite papers from the journal to which an author is contributing can be seen as an ethical intervention to actively consider readers of the journal in her/his writing process. This request is ethical not only because it characterizes the role of the editor as an intermediary between author and reader, but because the editor is an essential part of the writing process that builds up relevant relationships among authors, readers, and the IS community. An IS journal needs authors, readers, as well as editors who mediate the author-reader relationship. We therefore submit that these three entities are necessary conditions for journal publication, and their unexpected encounters during the publication process are immanent logic to create relevant knowledge.

III. AUTHOR AND INSTITUTION

While in the previous section the author function was described at a micro level to explain the dynamic of inter-relations of actors that constitute IS journals, this section takes a macro level approach to explicate author functions in terms of institutional discourse which provide a theoretical and practical framework for IS journals. When Foucault [1977] discusses the author function, he intentionally differentiates the concept of "author" from that of "writer." In Foucault's context, the writer has a neutral meaning as an actor of writing itself which does not have particular consideration of publication, knowledge domain, or a reader group. However, the concept of author contains special

meaning in that it always and already assumes target readers, publication channels, knowledge distribution, knowledge discipline, intended argument and, eventually, recognition by a particular institutional discourse. Therefore, the nomenclature of "author" embodies an implicit institutional discourse. For this reason, Foucault says that although "an anonymous poster attached to a wall may have a writer, but he cannot be an author" [Foucault 1977]. This quote implies that the writer who created the poster is not an author because s/he has not yet entered into the institutional discourse. Therefore, s/he is not given the title of "author" to publish her/his voice.

Following the logic of Foucault's author function, an author is not a genius mind that exists autonomously. S/he is an individual who is awarded the title of author by the recognition of a specific institutional discourse. An author is made within the discourse and is destined to produce knowledge within the constrained system which allows only a publication of specific topic that fits with their institutional goals. Thus, "(T)he name of an author is a variable that accompanies only certain texts to the exclusion of others" [Foucault 1977], and is an artificial title which carries many symbolic implications and expectations. Fundamentally, carrying the title of an author is a political struggle; knowledge of an author is not created out of vacuum. In this regard, the title of "author" already involves ethical questions in practice. S/he has to encounter many actors of the institutional discourse and is destined to produce knowledge only through the discourse. Therefore, the real ethical question for IS researchers/authors is to make a conscious effort to realize:

(1) What types of knowledge our institutional discourse allows us to include or exclude in order to produce?

(2) If possible, how can we change the discourse itself to create better or different knowledge?

In essence, this ethical question is to make a conscious and concerted effort to see the institutional discourse itself from both inside and outside in order to embrace rich and plural knowledge. This ethical effort inherently accompanies risk, courage, and dialogue because it can cause tensions among authors, readers, editors, knowledge, and institutional discourse.

In the IS research community, the tension between knowledge and institutional discourse seems to surface especially when discussion of a different research methodology emerges. For example, Orlikowski and Baroudi studied the different epistemological assumptions latent in the major IS research methodologies of positivism, interpretivism, and critical theory. Their review of four major U.S. based IS literatures published from 1983 to 1988[3] found that: positivist research papers account for 96.8 percent of the total studies; the interpretivist only 3.2 percent;, and the critical approach represents 0 percent. Until recently, the dominant position of the positivist research paradigm has repeated to a slightly different degree, especially in the U.S. IS research community. Chen and Hirshheim extended the research of Orlikowski and Baroudi by examining close to 2,000 information systems research papers published both in the U.S. and Europe from 1991 to 2001.[4] Their research reports that, while in the U.S. the positivist research papers account for 90.5 percent and the interpretivist 9.5 percent, in Europe the former represents 61.75 percent and the latter 38.25 percent.[5]

Both authors point out that this dominant position of positivist research methodology over interpretivist in the U.S. can limit the effort of embracing pluralism. In other words, the skewed research methodology based on specific epistemological assumptions can cause a risk to the IS research community to remain in a departmental silo by blocking interdisciplinary knowledge creation. This skewing is mostly related to institutional discourse which "accompanies only certain texts to the exclusion of others." Thus, important for IS researchers is to consciously reflect on both the inside and outside of the boundary of institutional discourse, and how the discourse creates its own image of authors while excluding other authors of different domains. Otherwise, IS researchers/authors are likely to reproduce homogeneous knowledge without being able to create a knowledge of difference in kind. This risk is related to institutional discourse as succinctly described by Orlikowski and Baroudi, and Chen and Hirshheim:

It is certainly true that the research approaches adopted by all researchers, not only information systems researchers, are influenced to a greater or lesser extent by the various institutional contexts within which they are trained and work. [...] They are heavily influenced by the doctoral program attended, the agendas of powerful and respected mentors, the hiring, promotion, and tenure criteria of employing institution, the funding policies of agencies, the rules of access negotiated with research sites, and the publishing guidelines of academic journals. [Orlikowski and Baroudi 1991]

---

[3] Four major U.S. literatures reviewed were *Communications of the ACM, Proceedings of the International Conference on Information Systems, Management Science,* and *MIS Quarterly.*
[4] The four U.S. based information systems research journals examined included *MIS Quarterly, JMIS, ICIS,* and *ISR.* The four European journals included *AMIT/IO, EJIS, JIT* and *ISJ* which was called *Journal of Information Systems* until 1997.
[5] The epistemological assumption of each different research methodologies is not discussed here. However, how these epistemological assumptions are related with the institutional discourse in creating IS knowledge is often deemed to be an important ethical topic for research.

> [W]e suggest that the field has been dominated by the positivist paradigm, despite calls to the contrary. Indeed, if the field was to truly embrace pluralism, it would have to find ways to fundamentally change the publication practices of the journal systems, including the current tenure and promotion system, which pose considerable obstacles for the acceptance of alternative paradigms. [Chen and Hirschheim 2004]

Both quotes echo an ethical request as they alert one to the danger of reproducing homogeneous IS knowledge by being confined within a particular discourse of institution. In this regard, our original question — if it is ethical for a journal editor to request an author to cite papers from a journal to which one is submitting — is ethical in that it exposes authors to other discourses and urges a dialogue with other authors. Although we understand that it is not an easy task to go outside of one's own comfortable discourse, this request is ethically important in that it encourages authors to embrace plural perspectives rather than repeating the institutionalized knowledge of specific discourse.

IV. CONCLUSION

Our ultimate goal as academics is to nurture a domain of knowledge. As we are seeking and producing knowledge within academic institutions, the expectation that our society has upon us is different from that for newspaper articles, or weekly magazines such as *Time* or *Newsweek*. In fact, our mandate as academics is to reach the larger global society with rigorous and relevant knowledge in a timely manner. Thus, IS researchers/authors always need to reflect on the dual worlds:

(1) Who are our readers

(2) What the institutional boundary is which both allows and prohibits us in the production of knowledge

This self reflection involves constructive criticism with due respect among readers, authors, and editors. In this regard, an editor's requests for an author to cite papers from a journal to which one is submitting an article is ethically appropriate in order to:

(1) build a good author-reader relationship, and

(2) produce rich and plural knowledge that is not necessarily confined within an institutionalized scenario

This goal may be best achieved through concerted effort between authors and editors within the constrained institutional systems. IS researchers/authors need to remember that the writing process is a dialogue, an encounter with others, and dependent on good relationship building. When the writing process becomes a monologue, it is the end of writing, loss of readers, disappearance of authors, editors, IS community interaction, and loss of IS knowledge.

REFERENCES

Benbasat, I. and R.W. Zmud (1999). "Empirical Research in Information Systems: The Practice of Relevance," *MIS Quarterly* 23(1), pp. 3-16.

Chen, W. and R. Hirschheim (2004). "A Paradigmatic and Methodological Examination of Information Systems Research from 1991 to 2001," *Information Systems Journal* 14, pp. 197-235.

Deleuze, G. (1988). *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. by Hurley, R., San Francisco: City Lights Books pp. 17-29.

Foucault, M. (1977). *Langugage, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interview,* trans. by Bouchard, D.F. and S. Simon, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY pp.113-138.

Orlikowski, W.J. and J.J. Baroudi (1991). "Studying Information Technology in Organizations: Research Approach and Assumptions," *Information Systems Research* 2(1), pp. 1-28.

Tompkins, J.P. (1980). *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism,* The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD pp. 210-232.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Onook Oh is a doctoral student of the Department of Management Science and Systems at State University of New York at Buffalo. He received his bachelor's degree of English literature at the Hallym University, and his MA at Seoul National University, Korea. Also, he received his MS degree of management science and systems at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Prior to joining the doctoral program he worked as a network system administrator, web programmer, and database developer. His current research interests are information ethics and collective intelligence.

H. Raghav Rao is a professor of MSS at SUNY Buffalo. He received his bachelor's degree in chemical engineering from IIT Kanpur, MBA from Delhi University, and PhD from Krannert Graduate School of Management, Purdue University.