Communications of the Association for Information Systems

2-2019

Rejoinder to "Reconsidering Counting Articles in Ranked Venues (CARV) as the Appropriate Evaluation Criteria for the Advancement of Democratic Discourse in the IS Field"

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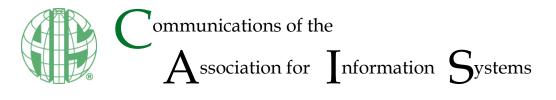
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Rejoinder to "Reconsidering Counting Articles in Ranked Venues (CARV) as the Appropriate Evaluation Criteria for the Advancement of Democratic Discourse in the IS Field"

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Abstract:

In their article, Cuellar, Truex, and Takeda (2019) criticize the "process for evaluating scholarly output, "counting articles in ranked venues' (CARV)" (p. 188). In their view, CARV limits the open exchange of ideas and, thereby, democratic discourse, which leads to unwanted performative effects and, ultimately, inhibits the growth of the information systems (IS) field. They propose the scholarly capital model (SCM) as a preferable mechanism that evaluators should employ to assess scholarly capital instead of scholarly output. In this rejoinder, we argue that CARV does not claim to measure output quality; it neither limits quality in the IS field nor the IS field's growth, and mingling the effects of CARV with debates on quality or growth could be misleading. Replacing CARV would not change the game, only its rules. We posit that we all entered academia voluntarily knowing its rules and argue that colleagues facing P&T committees should recognize and focus on the specific (CARV-based or not) criteria of their institutions' committees. While we expect that a new method will replace CARV in the not so distant future, we are convinced that, until then, a CARV-based environment offers ample opportunity to advance quality and growth of the IS field.

Keywords: Scholarly Output, Evaluation, Scholarly Capital Model, Ranked Journals.

1   Introduction

In this commentary, we respond to Cuellar, Truex, and Takeda (2019) who criticize the "process for evaluating scholarly output, counting articles in ranked venues (CARV)" (p. 188). In their view, CARV limits scholars from openly exchanging ideas, and thereby, democratic discourse. Hence, it has (unwanted) performative effects (Mouritsen, 2006) and, ultimately, inhibits the information systems (IS) field's growth. Cuellar et al. propose that the scholarly capital model (SCM) represents a preferable mechanism that evaluators ought to employ to assess the scholarly capital instead of scholarly output.

We appreciate that Cuellar et al. (2019) point to the weaknesses of the CARV approach. Scholars may feel more at ease articulating their doubts with respect to CARV as a result of their article being published in *CAIS*. Indeed, we share certain of these misgivings, such as the subjectiveness of the review system and, in certain instances, perceived journal quality. As with any ranking system, CARV is partially inconsistent, volatile, and, in some ways, inherently unfair given that it encourages individual self-interest and can undermine good scholarship (Adler & Harzing, 2009; Mingers & Willmott, 2013).

"Good" or "bad", however, we argue that CARV does not claim to measure output quality. Hence, it neither limits quality in the field nor the field's growth. As it stands, "playing CARV" (i.e., following the rules of a game we have all chosen to be part of) does no worse for the IS field than any other distorting scales by which one measures success or growth.

2   Mingling the Effects of CARV (Quality, Growth, Author Evaluation)

Cuellar et al. (2019) attempt to integrate aspects of a free exchange of ideas as a means to obtain (or at least encourage) sought-after "output quality" and of growing the IS field on the one hand while pointing to inadequate author assessments that arise from applying CARV on the other. In contrast, we argue that assessing IS research quality, fostering the growth of the IS field, and evaluating IS academics in the context of promotion and tenure (P&T), hiring, or degree granting decisions conceptually differ and, thus, that one should not conflate them. While we may agree with these arguments on an individual basis, we find them to be misleading when intermingled as in the way Cuellar et al. (2019) criticize CARV.

2.1   Mingling CARV with any Debate on IS Research Quality

In our view, the ongoing and apparently never-ending debate on determining or even measuring research quality in general or in the IS field in particular lacks relevance when considering the appropriateness of CARV in this context. Evaluators have employed CARV to assess authors and promote those authors who publish in certain shortlisted outlets. But they do not use it to assess content or research quality—a point we focus on in this rejoinder. Agreed, the list of outlets that count in CARV contributes to delineating what appears to be, or is counted as, quality IS research journals. Here, CARV has some guiding effects in that it recommends certain works that will likely fit with the selected journals. Whether such an influence the kind of research that scholars conduct also has performative effects as regards to what scholars deem quality IS research seems to be a somewhat subjective argument, however. What is better quality in relation to IS research? Better for whom? Better in which context? Any debate concerning whether a article from a so-called A+ journal as compared to a (perceived to be) lesser-quality outlet provides higher quality seems to be endless and pointless. Any "data–based" scale objectifies such debate—even if many scholars who criticize CARV may not like the objectified assessment. A highly ranked and, thereby, CARV-relevant A+ publication simply indicates that the (A+) authors have mastered the "IS field's publication game" as assessed by experts who their colleagues in the IS field have nominated (EICs, SEs, reviewers, etc.). CARV excludes appreciating readership, downloads, visibility, or even citations regardless of the citing outlet; as such, it does not suit efforts to assess the quality of research.

The community has specified some journals as quality outlets. Preferences as to what journals one would like to "count" as quality outlets differ, which the many prolonged AIS Senior Scholars' "basket" debates would indicate. Perhaps more relevant, especially for each new generation of scholars, is the journal list that a particular P&T committee applies. Strictly speaking, the controversy concerns the journal list and less the approach to assess authors via counting how many articles authors have published in which outlet. Further, top journals have the incentive to publish high-quality relevant research. If they systematically published irrelevant works, they would lose their scientific influence because researchers would not refer to or utilize such works.

If a poor-quality article makes it into an A+ publication (a type 1 error), it would benefit the lucky authors but barely degrade the research quality of the field. Conversely, if a brilliant piece gets rejected by top outlets and ends up in a less recognized outlet or a book[1] (a type 2 error), the work would still be "in the field": it would simply perhaps not help the authors' careers (at least in the short term). Alternative partial or integrated measures would place different content (or authors?) high up in any ranking. However, they would not change the research quality of the field but rather the standing of the respective authors.

2.2   Mingling the Effects of CARV with the Growth of the Field

Cuellar et al. (2019) postulate that CARV limits scholars from openly exchanging ideas and democratic discourse and, thereby, the IS field's growth. How do we measure growth? As number of manuscripts written, published, read, downloaded, or cited? As the number of colleagues in academic positions? As the number of degree programs offered, students enrolled or graduated, or departments established? Or—based on whatever scale—as the field's impact in the real world or on cognate fields? CARV offers an extra "quality label" to some publications and leaves others untouched, and, while it may change what scholars mostly appreciate, we do not see how it limits the field's overall growth. If we take impact and relative standing as a measure of growth, we might be more concerned about arguments that define the scope of the IS field more rigidly (Benbasat & Zmud, 2003) than those who argue for the emergent and expanding nature of the IS "universe" (Galliers, 2003).

Cuellar et al. (2019) do not want to identify more "top" IS publications. They argue for a different mechanism to determine "top"-quality IS work and the "top" IS researchers. They do not clearly explicate how replacing current "top" work/researchers with a similar-sized "top" would grow the field as a whole, however. Any filter (CARV or SCM) leads to some (maybe not agreed-on) pyramid with a limited top. Such a "top" helps avoid increasing modularization (a list per subtopic) and helps scholars allocate their reading time (Loebbecke, Berthod, & Huyskens, 2007; Loebbecke & Leidner 2012). It also supports establishing "a field" in times when a growing number of scholars work on IS topics.

Admittedly, one could also think of a mechanism that allows for a larger "top" that somehow inflates IS quality standards. Such an approach may help IS colleagues to pass the threshold for P&T or obtain a higher degree. But in situations with limited resources (e.g., when competing against other academic positions and/or degree programs from other fields or when applying for an academic position), a broader "top" would not help because neither CARV nor P&T decisions pertain only to the IS field.

To grow, the field needs to garner respect beyond its borders. Growth comes from adding people, content, and quality beyond what the field already contains. Hence, a defined and widely acknowledged "top" helps to foster the field's development and standing even if it does not help or support all authors active in the field.

Overall, we question that—good or bad—CARV and its focus on a small number of community-defined outlets limit the quality or growth of the IS field. A small number of journals that publish a smaller number of articles can more easily gain recognition and appreciation outside the field and by P&T committees and, thereby, help to grow the perceived quality of the IS field much more than a huge number of articles that scholars barely read, note, or even cite could ever do.

3   The Social Capital Model (SCM) as an Alternative Evaluation Method

Cuellar et al. (2019) suggest the scholarly capital model (SCM) approach (see also Cuellar, Takeda, Vidgen, & Truex, 2016) as an alternative to CARV. We believe that the "pro or contra CARV" debate on counting articles and defining those journals that should appear in any list plays a role where a group of IS evaluators (e.g., PhD committees, internal IS department decisions) assesses IS candidates. The top-listed journals impact the work that researchers do. Many researchers cannot afford to study "what they are passionate about" and focus instead on what they hope to have published in highly ranked outlets. Hence, if a P&T committee took alternative measures such as citations or the actual content of manuscripts into account, we would expect that researchers would adapt quickly to such measures.

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[1] But note, for example, 'highly respected and cited work such as Shoshana Zuboff's "The Age of the Smart Machine" (1988) and most of Enid Mumford's work have been published in books.

3.1 Partial vs. Integrated Measures

As distinct from the single-measure CARV, the proposed SCM integrates nine individual measures: three h-index related ones, three social network analysis (SNA)-related centrality factors that measure connectedness, and three SNA-related centrality factors that measure venue representation. We perceive these submeasures as more or less arbitrary—nicely grouped in three groups of three. Despite a lengthy coverage as to why each submeasure contributes a relevant aspect, we are concerned that each measure, and even more so any integrating algorithm, may well open up Pandora's Box. Together, they set up a different game with different rules, but we predict that they will have similar effects on the IS community to CARV. For instance, downloads and citations may depend on authors' age, standing, and network (Hassan & Loebbecke, 2017). Recently, in the big data era, any P&T committee can extract and assess several single measures and develop its overall set of criteria and eventual assessment based on many data points. A fixed algorithm that does not allow for parameterization or configuration does not consider different needs. The idea that SCM implies—that all committees weigh the different data points for all candidates and decision situations in the same pre-coded way—seems neither wanted nor generally helpful or realistic.

3.2 Content vs. Person Orientation

The proposed SCM approach combines an assessment of a research contribution with measures for a person or that person's overall opus (e.g., h-index). If a Nobel Prize winner such as Peter Higgs states that, under the current rules of the game, he would not have gotten an academic job because he does not publish enough (Aitkenhead, 2013), it indicates that any approach that assesses a person's performance suffers from fundamental flaws when one uses it to judge content quality. It further questions the appropriateness of combining person and content assessments in one integrated (SCM) value. Again, we do not see how applying SCM over CARV would increase quality or grow the IS field.

3.3 Timing / Moving Target

CARV determines research quality—if at all—when a journal accepts an article for publication. Once published, the "quality" of an article and the derived author's performance stay the same. For other single measures, they can differ. An article's downloads and citations and personalized measures such as an h-index can constantly change without any changes or additions to the research contribution, which emphasizes network effects. The strong become stronger and, overall, the weak get weaker in the context of any comparative P&T decisions, by definition.

3.4 Theory-based Focus on Democratic Discourse

We doubt that contemplating the need for a democratic debate following Habermas (1984) and, latterly, Mingers and Willmott (2013) benefits the discussion on whether CARV or SCM strengthen scholars' ability to freely exchange ideas, improve quality, and foster the growth of the IS field. We miss the explicit link between the extended recap of some theoretical basics and the nine SCM measures. The focus on Habermas' (1984) theory of communicative action (TCA) and Mingers and Willmott's (2013) "need for discourse" plays into the hands of a rather small group of critical IS researchers. While all researchers prefer democratic decision making and fair and transparent debates on what gets published, such a narrow focus on critical IS seems to conflict with growing the community. We question whether technically oriented design scientists or positivistic researchers buy into the importance of democratic discourse and TCA-based grounding. Hence, an evaluation approach that gives equal respect, air time/journal slots, and promotion opportunities to all of the IS field's subgrouping would surely be preferable.

4 Conclusions and Takeaways

Similar to Cuellar et al. (2019), we do not necessarily like CARV as it stands. Having said that, we voluntarily and happily joined the academic game knowing it had certain rules, so we feel that we ought to play by the rules whether we like them or not. Along these lines, we develop five takeaways from this rejoinder to Cuellar et al. (2019) in the hope of stoking the fires of debate still further:

> 1) We suggest that one should be realistic and pragmatic while contending with evaluation decisions. First, find out what counts in the institution relevant to you and see how to perform best on the pre-defined scale (CARV or its derivatives). Second, develop your own educated

guess about how long evaluating committees (in the institution relevant to you) will stick to their current criteria.

2) We assume that tuition and tax payers will not approve CARV-based decision making for much longer. Too many intelligent resources are bound up in peer-review processes that produce, review, and edit articles that mainly seem to focus only on decorating lines in a CV for P&T decisions.

3) We doubt that any other publication-based evaluation method such as SCM will do better in or be more accepted for evaluating persons or content.

4) We recommend any suggestions to change evaluation or governance regimes should come from a position of strength—from IS researchers who are at the "top" based on CARV or from IS departments/institutions who are in a strong position compared to other fields.

5) We see important growth options for the IS field under the current "CARV regime". First, IS researchers need to accept and play the game according to given rules. Second, the IS community needs to appreciate interdisciplinary works with different literature bases beyond philosophical groundings, accept actual design works over design science pieces, and open up to fields such as business strategy, computer science, engineering, neurosciences, and many others. Many authors in neighboring fields cover the same topics as we IS researchers do; they package their insights differently and diffuse their contributions through different academic, press, and practitioner channels. Hence, they tend not to appear on the IS radar. If a proportion of them felt at ease and found a home in IS, then they would truly help to foster the growth (i.e., impact) of the IS field and its interdisciplinary acceptance.

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Rejoinder to 'Reconsidering CARV as the Appropriate Evaluation Criteria for the Advancement of Democratic Discourse in the IS Field'

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