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## Politics and AIS: Where Do We Draw the Line?

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## Politics and AIS: Where Do We Draw the Line?

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### Abstract:

The Association for Information Systems (AIS) is the preeminent global professional association for academics in the Information Systems (IS) discipline. Throughout its more than 20-year history, AIS governance documents have included no guidance on matters related to national or international politics. However, recent events have challenged AIS to reconsider its responsibility as a political or moral advocate for its members and the discipline it serves. A panel at ECIS 2017 explored the ways in which AIS has inadvertently or intentionally entered the political fray and debated the benefits and drawbacks of taking on a more formal political position. This paper presents the positions that each panelist raised and summarizes the active discussion that followed. It concludes with a set of questions that constitute a "call to action" to the AIS council to enact a politically acceptable set of core values to benefit its members.

**Keywords:** Politics, AIS, Association for Information Systems, Core Values.

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## 1 Introduction

The Association for Information Systems (AIS) is the preeminent global professional association for academics in the information systems (IS) discipline. Throughout its more than 20-year history, AIS governance documents have included no guidance on matters related to national or international politics. However, recent events have challenged the AIS to reconsider its responsibility as a political or moral advocate for its members and the discipline it serves. A panel at ECIS 2017 explored the ways in which AIS has inadvertently or intentionally entered the political fray and debated the benefits and drawbacks of taking on a more formal political position. The first author, who created and moderated the panel, invited the members of the panel because each has been involved in one or more politically or policy-oriented activities or perspectives that affect our members and/or IS research and education<sup>1</sup>.

The topics that the panel covered involved many areas of concern as new incidents confront the AIS and its members. Some of these external forces affect the ability of the AIS to support its mission and goals. Others help to shape the research questions and methodologies that its members favor. The panel covered a wide spectrum of issues that concerned the roles and obligations of the association at large to its subunit communities or individual members.

The impetus of the panel draws on several politically sensitive issues that recently appeared on the association's radar. Each issue required careful political considerations on the part of AIS leadership. Without any prevailing guidance, the leadership resolved each example individually, which could lead to either repeated resolutions or future discord among the membership. Examples include:

- **Conference location:** the ECIS conferences in particular have suffered from pushback on some of their location selections. Some members who objected to the Israeli-Palestinian situation rejected the decision to hold ECIS in Tel Aviv in 2014<sup>2</sup>. ECIS 2016 in Istanbul lost attendance when participants and some universities refused to attend ECIS in a country that had had a number of recent terrorist activities. Other members attended to support colleagues who faced oppression from their government. More recently, ICIS 2018 in Seoul lost attendees who had concerns about the onset of war.
- **Restrictive travel policies:** the current U.S. president's recent attempt to limit travel to the US by citizens of majority-Muslim countries has set a troubling precedent for members who work in countries other than their country of origin or who wish to travel to or from countries where they may be denied access or return. Doctoral students in many countries must be extra vigilant that their visa status will not affect conference attendance opportunities.
- **AISWorld and social media postings:** the proposed U.S. travel ban instigated substantial, heated discussion among members both on AISWorld postings and on Facebook forums. Many members called for the AIS to publish an official position (and then a stronger position) on the topic. Members roundly discussed the AIS mission as to whether it does or should cover political advocacy. Even though the association hosts a Social Inclusion Special Interest Group that espouses research and discussion about inclusion-related issues, AIS leadership distributed no official statement about the travel ban.
- **Government policies that affect and are affected by IS:** in response to the permeation of technology in all aspects of life, governments have adopted regulations that incur a strong influence on ICT and how individuals, businesses, and society use ICT. The newly adopted E.U. General Data Protection Regulation both helps and challenges researchers in what they do and the data with which they engage. France passed a law that requires companies to give employees the right to disconnect by not answering work email after office hours as a potential means to decrease stress from email. To date, the AIS has made only one formal political statement to any government body, when it sent a written statement that supported net neutrality to the U.S. Federal Communication Commission. It submitted this statement after polling the membership and obtaining strong support for the comment from the membership.

<sup>1</sup> See the "About the Authors" section at the end of the paper for a description of each panelist's relevant experience.

<sup>2</sup> The wording "Israeli-Palestinian situation" represents a compromise that does not really suit any author. Some authors preferred to write "the policies of the Israeli government against the Palestinians", while others felt it more correct to state "the terrorism of certain Palestinian groups against Israel". This example clearly illustrates the politically divergent views of the AIS panel.

These examples reflect challenges that the AIS must elect whether and how to address at the association level. Rather than deciding on each in a vacuum, a first challenge will involve debating AIS values and then stating mission-level goals about what political stances it should and will make.

The net neutrality experiment generated near total agreement among surveyed members that the association and its leadership should tackle net neutrality and subjects like it. Many of our members find the association lacking in willingness to extend beyond its historical inward focus and would like to see the AIS reach to a broader societal level. Others prefer that the AIS maintain its original purpose of supporting and promoting the IS research and teaching academy. This aspect of the debate centered on the mission of the association and the role of outreach in its mission:

- **Outreach mission:** the AIS recently committed to increasing outreach efforts to communities outside of our membership to entities such as universities, IS professionals, the media, and society at large. The outreach effort supports the organization's mission, which is:

*The Association for Information Systems (AIS) serves society through the advancement of knowledge and the promotion of excellence in the practice and study of information systems. The AIS is the premier professional association for individuals and organizations who lead the research, teaching, practice, and study of information systems worldwide. (AIS, 2010)*

One can see that this mission statement does not explicitly mention political stances or lobbying.

Further, the panel examined the political aspects of member activity and, in particular, the professional service activities members engage in and the research topics and methodologies they employ. Researchers do not conduct research in a vacuum, and politics can both inform and be informed by the work we choose to perform.

- **Member actions with political implications:** many AIS members choose to work on socially meaningful and politically relevant research projects that aspire to “give back” to people and society. Other members aim to improve the lives and careers of AIS members, professionals and students through AIS-sanctioned activities and activism. For example, ICIS 2016 and ECIS 2017 included panels on how IS researchers can help to leverage technology to aid in refugee integration. The AIS's Bright ICT Grand Vision Project is working with the United Nations and national agencies to propose new standards for global communication and mechanisms for addressing the dark side of ICT adoption. The Special Interest Group on Diversity and Inclusion and the Women's Network are deliberating actions to promote IS research in and draft AIS responses to recent high-profile social problems that the “Me Too” movement has raised and the problems that our LGBTQ members face.

Each issue is worthy of debate when it comes to defining the role of the AIS. Ultimately, with this panel report, we focus on documenting different perspectives on the issues. We hope to provide guidance for the AIS council, AIS communities (special interest groups, chapters, and colleges), AIS conferences, and AIS-related journals in deciding on appropriate measures to condone and/or support.

This paper proceeds as follows: in Section 2, we define politics to frame the varying perspectives of the panel participants. In Section 3, we provide each panel member's preliminary statement submitted prior to the panel event. In Section 4, we summarize the perspective of each panelist from the discussion at ECIS 2017. The paper concludes with a “call to action” to AIS to address the hard questions that the panelists identified.

## 2 Defining Politics

Politics is one of those “loaded” words: it means something different depending on context and its usage can (and should) differ depending on circumstances. Thus, the panel decided to adapt a general definition taken from Collins English Dictionary as the basis of our individual and collective discussion:

*Politics are the actions or activities concerned with achieving and using power in a country or society.... Politics can be used to talk about the ways that power is shared in an organization and the ways it is affected by personal relationships between people who work together. (Politics, n.d.).*

Formal politics relate to the official institutions, procedures, or systems of government and distribution of power, while informal politics relate to the exercise and distribution of power that often hinge on relationships and alliances between people rather than official policies and rules.

The Association for Information Systems creates policies; provides journals and conferences; supports local chapters, special interest groups, and colleges; and provides overall leadership for the academic IS profession. These foci predominantly concern the discipline's internal politics. AIS exercises political influence at both local and international levels. While some AIS decisions reflect formal politics (approving new national chapters, setting sliding scale membership dues rates), others reflect the informal political clout that the association has (AIS webpage highlights, conference paper acceptance rate goals). Most internal political debate from the AIS occurs in council or executive committee meetings with little or no input from the membership. The AIS sometimes makes inconsistent decisions due to its lack of formal guiding policies. For example, speakers at ECIS 2017 in Istanbul could present their papers over Skype (or not at all), an option the AIS has not afforded to other conferences.

AIS members also exhibit political influence in the research we choose to conduct: essentially, what (the endpoint/effects), how (research methodologies and the way we treat different constituents), and who (the individuals who will likely gain from our research, such as the rich or poor). Although most (IS) researchers attempt to conduct "value-free" research, it is almost impossible to avoid political implications of almost everything we do. While our research projects mainly exert informal political power relative to publication success, there are opportunities for semi-formal politics to influence where AIS communities, university research centers, or funding norms help to delineate the impetus for and diffusion of our research.

The AIS has had a less substantial entrée into external politics. Other bodies (e.g., the Academy of Management, ACM, and the Dawkins Foundation) are more vocal about their political positioning. The AIS has no history of lobbying or taking actions that affect groups outside of AIS (e.g., boycotting a country as a conference location). The discussion that follows encompasses both internal and external political issues and explores where formal guidance may benefit AIS and its members.

### 3 Panelists' Initial Position Statements

The panelists contributed a valuable combination of AIS historical perspective and personal experience to the panel as their biographies show (see "About the Authors" section at the end of the paper). Their preliminary positions, submitted to ECIS 2017 and published in those proceedings (Fedorowicz, 2017), follow.

**Jane Fedorowicz (Bentley University):** as moderator, Jane posed an initial set of questions to the panelists. She also provided input about the AIS's status on topics related to the panel discussion, such as the decision process undertaken to produce the net neutrality statement, the move to improve external outreach, and the roles and responsibilities of conference site-selection committees, SIGs, chapters, colleges, and council with respect to AIS decision making.

**Dov Te'eni (Tel Aviv University):** I believe AIS can and should advocate appropriate deployment and use of ICT on the basis of its members' expertise. Obviously, any action AIS takes must abide by well-defined procedures stated in its bylaws after the community debates them in community forums (such as this panel). The AIS should not take any other political action unless something threatens its members' wellbeing. I learnt this lesson when proposing a conference in Israel. I would go as far as saying that political discussion should be banned from AIS official SM or bulletin boards, although censorship may be too extreme a solution. Nevertheless, members should be supported when they take individual action using their professional skills for the benefit of mankind (e.g., providing IS teaching materials to developing countries or using ICT to enable dialog between partners in countries in conflict).

**Niels Bjorn-Andersen (Copenhagen Business School):** whether we like it or not, IS research is never totally neutral and always to some extent political. The more we resort to studying algorithms or quantitative statistics, the less political it becomes. However, few will defend even the most sophisticated BI analysis of differences between races or gender no matter how seemingly "objective" the research formulation. Very few will defend the atrocious experiments of Dr. Mengele (e.g., exposing Jews to constant radiation until they died in order to obtain valuable information about how the body worked, which allegedly proved instrumental in laying the groundwork for manned spaceflights). Accordingly, each and every IS researcher needs to recognize the ethical and political issues related to their research. Indeed, for almost all of us, it comes naturally, and I have not seen any serious breach of ethical standards recently. However, AIS cannot

hide behind a screen of pretending to be non-political. Who thinks AIS should have held a conference in South Africa during the apartheid regime? Who thinks that we should not help AIS members who experience discrimination? The question is, of course, how strong we should react.

**Sebastian Olbrich (European Business School):** while technology itself might be paradigmatically neutral, I fail to see how the creation process and its application can ever be. First, in the role of an observing researcher, we raise the opportunities and concerns that come along creating, managing, and using information and communication technology (ICT) in organizations. While observations should take a neutral/theoretical stance and one must apply academic rigor, we are already making a choice in deciding which phenomena are worth observing. Given the combinatorial explosion of phenomena at the intersection of ICT and social behavior, we cannot or should not research all phenomena. Second, as designers in a science of the artificial creating “possible future worlds”, I consider the IS community to have an even bigger obligation. We must not only tackle relevant real-world problems but also make design choices. Making such choices always has a political notion and might not even lead to a “perfect” solution to everyone’s satisfaction. Such dilemmas in decision making arise the same way when, for instance, one designs a data-driven business model or selecting a conference location. I encourage the AIS to reflect and point out that the designer’s (ethical) dilemma and take an active stance in the ongoing political discussion about IS use in society.

**Monideepa Tarafdar (Lancaster University):** the increased ubiquity, mobility, and pervasiveness of IS have led to a prominent role for IS in phenomenon that affect social units other than the corporation. Examples of such phenomenon include social media-enabled social movements, Internet-powered at-scale surveillance, algorithm-driven classification, and application/device-related stress and addiction. Indeed, we now see constant and relentless entanglement between the IS we use and our life activities such as communication, sensemaking, civic participation, and socialization. As IS researchers investigate research questions relating to such phenomenon, policy makers are emerging as key stakeholders for the outputs of their research. How should IS researchers respond to this development in their dissemination and outreach? I focus on how IS researchers can work with various organizations (finding agencies, governmental departments, NGOs, and companies) to influence policy, funding, or social welfare from a global perspective.

## 4 Starting the Conversation

The panel started with the moderator asking an initial set of questions to seed the discussion. We incorporate panelists’ positions related to these questions in the individual positions they present in the next four sections of the paper. However, we first summarize the panelists’ stances on each seed question in this section.

- As a global organization, what role should AIS have in addressing challenges to academic freedom when those challenges differ in degree, scope, legality, and publicity across our members’ countries of origin and work?

All panelists believed that AIS should take on some role with respect to members’ academic freedom. Panelists voiced a variety of opinions on the degree to which AIS should get involved. All felt that the AIS has a responsibility to advocate for and support individual members in AIS-sponsored initiatives. Panelists also agreed that the association should make choices that do not place members’ safety at risk. Country-based decisions must consider multiple perspectives as the political implications will differ depending on whose eyes one sees through. The discussion led to the panelists’ identifying a “grey area”, though they disagreed about what role the AIS should have when individual freedoms unrelated to ICT are imperiled (external politics) and whether AIS should venture outside of its owned activities (AIS conferences, communities, and journals) to broader ICT-related topics or to non-ICT issues (internal politics).

- Does English as the lingua franca of AIS and academe more broadly create a bias in what the association or our discipline values?

English as the lingua franca caused some controversy among the panel members. Forcing researchers to communicate in a language other than their native tongue can result in restricting membership or their ability to publish, participate in governance, or use AIS resources. A forced language choice perpetuates the resulting bias toward native and fluent English speakers among AIS governing bodies and editorial boards.

- Most current members and conference attendees come from “Western” countries such as the EU and the US. Membership numbers from “Eastern” countries are on the rise. How (or should) we reflect the political value system of our members if the majority ascribe to “Western” values?

The discussion about English as the lingua franca applies here. The AIS should also encourage members from non-English communities to take on some of the responsibility for promoting AIS locally and then influencing AIS as a whole to accommodate local members in ways that provide local value.

- If we politicize AIS, how does that affect our ability to conduct outreach or hold conferences in countries that do not reflect the organization’s politics? Would remaining apolitical give the organization the most flexibility to help IS academics in our far reaches or in war-torn or poverty-ridden areas?

This topic caused much controversy among the panel members. Opinions ranged from maintaining an internal focus (i.e., considering travel time and financial costs to the highest number of members) to choosing locations that ensure member safety as an overriding goal and to choosing locations that demonstrate support for academics in war-torn, impoverished, or other conditions that could restrict academic freedom.

- How can IS researchers best identify, fund, conduct, and share research that has social impact?

This topic received much support as a “no brainer” way for AIS to help society and to address issues with political implications. Dissension centered on the degree to which AIS should formally support such activity because one could consider such support as taking a political stance. Opinions ranged from AIS refraining from any such political statements to changing the mission statement to make it an acknowledged goal of the association.

Each panelist views politics from a unique perspective, which explains why the panel includes both formal and informal definitions of political impacts in its charge. In the sections that follow, we provide evidence about each person’s political leanings that collectively reflect formal, semi-formal, and informal politics in the purview of AIS and its membership.

## 5 Political Mission, Political Action (Dov Te’eni)

As an introduction, it is clear that black and white rules on what action the AIS should take and then address some grey areas including how it relates to its members’ individual action is not the way to go. I propose that the AIS should not take any external action to affect the behavior, attitude, or conditions of any other party outside the AIS community except action that pertains directly to the AIS mission. For example, it should not lobby for a green environment although it should advocate for green ICT. Let me begin with the importance of mission to guide the performance and conduct of non-for-profit associations such as ours.

According to business guru Peter Drucker (1989), “start with the performance of their mission”. The mission disciplines organizations to set boundaries on strategy and action and, thereby, avoid “the most common degenerative disease of organizations” (p. 89) in which they splinter their limited resources on things that look “interesting”, “profitable”, or, I would add, “good for mankind”. Similarly, other scholars from the non-profit sector have more recently reinforced the mission’s central role in guiding performance and conduct, particularly in non-profit organizations in which performing the mission constitutes their only bottom line (Young, 2004). When AIS performs outside its mission, it depletes two scarce resources it has as a community: the community’s attention and energy to act on our mission and the community’s commitment to our shared values embodied in the mission, a commitment to commission organizational action. As a mission also plays an instrumental role in guiding the conduct of behavior in an organization, academic freedom significantly characterizes our academic community; thus, the AIS mission certainly does not constrain individual humanitarian action. To put it bluntly, I believe that AIS should leave alone everything good and humane that our mission does not include and that falls outside the boundaries of organizational action to individual members.

The AIS states its mission statement as:

*The Association for Information Systems (AIS) serves society through the advancement of knowledge and the promotion of excellence in the practice and study of information systems. AIS is the premier professional association for individuals and organizations who lead the research, teaching, practice, and study of information systems worldwide. (AIS, 2010)*

In years back, AIS had the following strategic goals (AIS, 2010):

- *Promote AIS as a global leader for excellence in information systems research, practice, and education.*
- *Position information systems as a leading profession in the service of society.*
- *Lead and promote excellence in information systems education.*
- *Lead and promote excellence in information systems scholarship.*

Eventually, it added the additional goal:

- *Cultivate a community by providing services and products to meet the diverse needs of members and related communities.*

In fair disclosure, at the time, I was on the council and supported the decision to include this goal. This additional goal more concerns the mission's words about being a "professional association" than with its central theme of "information systems". It opens up, for example, the need to protect the rights of all AIS members, rights that have nothing to do with information systems. Other than this last goal, everything in the mission and its goals has to do with IS.

As such, as I state above, I propose that AIS take external action only in the boundaries set by its mission (i.e., related to IS). In relation to our debate about politics in AIS action, I would further distinguish between political action and direct action. AIS should engage in political action that furthers its mission through activity in political channels such as advocacy for battling digital divides. If anything, we probably do too little advocacy. Similarly, AIS should engage in direct action such as organizing educational projects to reduce the digital divide in developing countries or designing and operating systems to support victims of natural disasters or war regardless of the combating parties. Sebastian Olbrich's case of designing systems to support Syrian refugees (see Section 7) represents a commendable example of how the AIS could serve society according to its mission. In contrast, individual members can take direct action at their own discretion, which means the AIS mission does not restrict such action. However, the question whether AIS should support a member's individual initiative must be tied to the AIS's mission.

Some examples will help. Our mandate definitely involves lobbying for human-centered IS or producing a white paper on the prudent deployment of robotics. The AIS should do so even though the action may appear to some members of congress as a political issue and the recommendations may appear to some AIS members as controversial. Although I see such advocacy as obviously serving society within the scope of the AIS mission, we need to ask how we do not get tainted with unwarranted politicization. We must ensure that others perceive AIS as a trustworthy and reliable agent of society. As a professional community, its professionals should debate controversial issues, and the debate must be open to the community and transparent to all. For instance, it may be prudent to open forums for discussion, organize panels, and collect questionnaires to flush out the pros and cons and seek a unified AIS position—something we still need to figure out. In any event, AIS through its task forces and council must ensure its advocacy appears to the public as sound, balanced, and professional as one would expect from an academic association.

Denying a country to host ICIS because the country has, at least in the opinion of some members, violated human rights does not fall within the boundaries of our mission. In contrast, AIS can deny a proposal to host ICIS when it deems the location unsafe for AIS members due to physical violence or health hazards. Such an action follows directly from the goal to look after the interests of AIS members. I suppose the AIS economic safety and that of its individual members falls under this category, too. Having stated the rules, I acknowledge that extreme cases could arise, such as countries that allow atrocities that disgust any decent human being, in which AIS would neglect its members' emotional wellbeing by depriving individual choice with organizational action. These grey areas require the abovementioned open and transparent processes of debate and democratic resolution. On the other hand, it seems clear to me that we do not let a country host ICIS if the country does not commit to host all AIS members that wish to attend. Actively including members that cannot participate in our community due to economic or political reasons must be high on our priority list. This commitment should hold for anyone regardless of country, race, gender, religion, or politics.

Let me conclude by suggesting that AIS should be proud that its members engage individually in humanitarian activities, but, as an association, it should nevertheless concentrate only on mission-related organizational action. AIS can of course broaden its mission (e.g., to include ICT-supported humanitarian aid), but that would essentially be a different association with possibly a different membership. Personally, and perhaps paradoxically, I have always strived and continue to hope that we leverage the community to



advance peace in the world not by political action but rather by building bridges between AIS members and parties in conflict: dialog and collaboration in academia could, in the future, lead to broader collaborations between the parties.

## 6 Value Proposition in IS Research (Niels Bjørn-Andersen)

Many people believe that ICT/IS in general is value free and apolitical. Accordingly, they argue that researchers do not have to worry about how others use our research results. However, almost no research is totally value free. Although a caricature, the following lyrics aptly describe this issue: "Once the rockets are up, who cares where they fall down? That's not my department, says Wernher von Braun" (Tom Lehrer).

Over the years, ICT and IS have developed to become a strong agents of change, and, beyond any shadow of doubt, digitalization has contributed to higher effectiveness, better use of resources, and a higher level of innovation in almost all areas of society and inside individual organizations. ICT/IS has dramatically changed our lives as individuals. We are helping to create a stronger and stronger hammer that one can use for whatever purpose one who has a hammer may want to use it for. However, that fact constitutes the problem: one can use "our" technology in various ways that we do not consider legitimate/ethical or even beneficial. In these situations, ICT/IS becomes political.

Pure basic research can be almost apolitical. However, as Nobel Prize winner Niels Bohr discovered, his basic and fundamental research on atomic structure and quantum mechanics was key to the development of the nuclear bomb, and, indeed, many assume him to be instrumental in the Manhattan Project. However, after World War II, Bohr became very politically active in advocating for a totally open exchange of information in order to establish a terror balance, a behavior that many in the US viewed as a political act.

In sociology, Guttman (1950) developed a definition-graduated scale in which the political value proposition for most people changes as we go down the list (see Table 1). If one agrees/supports a particular type of research, one should also be positive about all types of research above it on the scale. While many researchers would conduct the first types of research in the list below, as we go down the list, most would reach a point where they would not do so unless forced to.

**Table 1. Guttman's (1950) Scale of Research Acceptability Applied to Types of Research Projects**

Increasing level of disagreement on value of the research
Abstract software modeling
Developing weather forecasting systems
Software for enhanced use of sustainable energy
Improve effectiveness of tax collection e-Government systems
Develop missile guiding systems for higher precision and effectiveness
Develop tax evasion schemes for wealthy individuals
Develop analysis of IQ differences between races and gender
Enhance competitiveness of person identification algorithms for subversive advertising
Use big data to understand how to use social media to increase cigarette smoking
Developing software for hiding the true level of NOx emission gas from Diesel cars
Analyze the results that Dr. Mengele obtained in his medical experiments on Jews, Romanis, and other Nazi prisoners

Whether one agrees with the specific sequence of the topics in Table 1 does not matter. Rather, it conveys the message that, if we stick to abstract modeling or other almost equally politically neutral research subjects, we could potentially claim not to make political choices, which has huge implications. If we stay exclusively politically neutral, it is very difficult to claim value of our research for society, organizations, or individuals. It is Scylla and Charybdis: we are damned if we do and damned if we don't. In order to provide substantial impact for society, organizations, and individuals, we almost invariably will have to make ethical, moral, political choices. I believe that we must these choices with open eyes and declare our intentions.

Following this line of thinking, we as an organization cannot avoid making political decisions. Not reacting also constitutes a political choice.

## 7 Design Research as Political Stance (Sebastian Olbrich)

Recently, I took a role in an initiative that the Germany and Turkish Governments funded development of an educational curriculum for Syrian refugees to work in the ICT sector. When talking about accepting such or similar roles, a discussion about the degree of the overall political agenda almost inevitably starts among the project members, friends, and family. The social scientist's natural curiosity complements such a discussion given the opportunity to collect data at the source of a highly relevant real-world phenomenon. In this section, I report on the project, share some observations, and try to present some insights from the discussion.

As of 2017, the UNHCR statistics count about 5.2 million Syrian refugees, roughly three million of whom are registered in Turkey (UNHCR, 2017). When the total number of asylum applications for the EU reached a half million in 2015, given little prospect of prompt stability in Syria, it became evident that the EU had to take long-term strategies and corresponding measures. Many refer to these political circumstances as the "refugee crisis"—a poor choice of words. As one measure, the German and Turkish Governments started educational programs in refugee camps. We conducted our educational program in one of the biggest refugee camps on Turkish territory, near the mainly Kurdish city of Gaziantep only few kilometers from the Syrian border, to, among other things, educate refugees to seek employment in the growing digital industry.

Academic rigor demands that we ground our observations in solid data. If the IS discipline indeed aims to engage in societal challenges (grand or not) and take part in the scientific "race for credibility" (Weber, 1997), we must understand the core of these phenomena and, therefore, should collect data at the source (AbuJarour et al., 2016). Yet, I acknowledge concerns that arose in the project team such as: is it responsible to involve other researchers from our team in the project including visits on site? By committing to the project, do we implicitly support the agreement between the European Union and the Turkish Government, which openly focuses on keeping the Syrian refugees out of the Schengen Area? Given the offer to join the project, is stepping away for political reasons an ethical option? Given the circumstances, what would a neutral position look like? When facilitating education and conducting interviews in the camp, could one possibly be politically neutral? Should political neutrality be a prerequisite? Can one achieve such neutrality at all? One can better assess such questions when framing them in a general debate and the foundations of our discipline.

Researchers usually consider the integration of human and machine as the core phenomena and binding element of the IS discipline. Epistemologically speaking, such an understanding goes back centuries. Observing that, with the help of tools, humans increasingly behave like machines, French philosopher René Descartes used the terms *res extensa* and *res cogitans* to distinguish between the two (Descartes & Schuyt, 1662). About 100 years later, Denis Diderot and Jean-Baptiste d'Alambert use the thought experiment of a music instrument to further elaborate (Diderot & Vernière, 1951): once played, so the argument in their conversations, a music instrument, just like a human, could repeat a certain tone or even a whole piece of music (*res extensa*). A conscious human being can go beyond that mere repetition and, in the role of a musician, alter existing melodies or create new music pieces or even instruments (*res cogitans*). We can conclude that the ever-increasing depth of integration between humans and machine results in systematic relations between the social and technological phenomena, which makes a distinct description increasingly difficult if not impossible. One can alter the systematic relations, however, by introducing a new technological artifact and/or changing human behavior in terms of capabilities, attitude, adoption, and so on.

Hence, we can understand our discipline as designing the relationship between human and machine by positioning humans as creators of technological artifacts (Simon, 1996). As a concrete design goal in a specific context always binds the design process, one would conclude that the design process always has a normative nature. Following that line of thinking, the underlying political agenda manifests in multiple ways. First, questioning the status quo usually sparks a designer to design something new. Hence, a design scientist first needs to identify and choose a worthy real-world research problem to investigate. Second, the design process neither starts nor ends with the initial "eureka" idea. Researchers commonly define design science as an iterative process that includes constant revisions based on feedback to the designers (Hevner, 2007; Peffers, Tuunanen, Rothenberger, & Chatterjee, 2008; Gregor, 2009; March & Smith, 1995) from the outside world (e.g., users, fundraisers, reviewers). Finally, introducing a novel artifact will ultimately alter the socio-technical system relations. As changing reality represents design's ultimate goal, I fail to see how a designer could be neutral to the cause that the designer pursues. Pursing neutrality would diminish the designer (*res cogitans*) into someone that merely executes programmed tasks (*res extensa*).

Naturally, the overall impact of an individual IS design varies a lot, and so does the political controversy. We might see high approval rates for some designs (e.g., broadcasting real-time traffic reports), while some put us in ethical dilemmas (e.g., surveillance software). Our discipline has the great privilege to engage in such dilemmas and reflect on design goals. As opposed to many private institutions, we can shed light on all consequences of a specific design and, therefore, the related political agenda. Of course, such activities depend on the privilege of academic freedom (i.e., to teach and publish theories, which includes theories that external political groups or authorities may find inconvenient) without being targeted for repression, job loss, or imprisonment. Demanding such academic liberty is a political statement—particularly when one remembers that public authorities steered researchers' research during World War II (Polanyi, 1951).

So, can or will the design process ever result in neutral positions or “perfect” solutions to everyone's satisfaction? Most likely not. However, one requires the freedom to pursue science for its own sake to produce knowledge that would not emerge otherwise. As a scientific community, we differ from practitioners in that we have the possibility (I call it obligation) to openly reflect on the consequences of our designs. One can best be neutral by making one's underlying agenda transparent! I encourage AIS to reflect and point out possible ethical dilemmas that designers face (e.g., using ICT-design for surveillance) and to take an active stance in the ongoing political discussion about the use of information systems. Without claiming to be comprehensive, I draft some possible areas to reflect on from the discussions of the project that I describe above in Table 2.

**Table 2. Possible Dimensions of Critical Reflection**

Area of reflection	Illustrative considerations	Project example
Philosophical stance / ethical guidelines	What school of thinking / candidate principle is followed? What epistemological positioning is taken?	In the project team, we believed that we acted based on Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative <sup>3</sup> . Many stakeholders supported the project based on Utilitarian principles <sup>4</sup> .
Design intent / goals, underlying agendas	What does the intended outcome look like (what problem does one want to solve)? What is the given situation / context? What current solutions exist and what shortcomings do they have?	Accepting the long-term effects of the situation in Syria, the overall design goal focused on integrating the Syrian refugees into Turkish and German society. One part involved training them as an ICT workforce (mainly for Turkish ICT companies).
Assumptions / design theory	What underlying instrument goal (as for cause and effect relation) exists? Are there enough observations to make a theoretical claim?	Baseline is social theory and education (i.e., the better the education, the more likely one is to find a job and the better the integration to local communities).
Evaluation / testing	Was the problem actually solved? What other outcomes and possible side-effects are observed? What design elements solved the problem?	We observed strong impacts in terms of a) the Syrian refugees' demand for IS education and b) quick integration into the job market (mainly in Turkey and serving Middle East clients as a service provider). We also found that many used their education to create start-ups.
Generalization / replication in other domains	Does the solution fit in different contexts? What other (probably unintended) consequences could the application to other domains have?	Similar problems occur in sectors of high demand in workforces such as engineering, mechanics, and so on and prove to be successful. We doubt, however, that such programs show effects in saturated industries with high barriers of entry such as law and public administration.

I conclude by asking the initial questions about AIS and politics the other way around: can one even possibly stay neutral in a design-minded integration discipline? Given the intensity of the debate around digitization and IS, can we, as AIS, remain neutral? Can the AIS community really tiptoe away from its responsibility as an interest group of IS academics and not take any political positions? If we want to generate an impact, do we not have to get politically involved one way or the other?

<sup>3</sup> Hypothetical imperatives apply to someone who wishes to attain certain ends (e.g., “if I wish to pass this exam, I must study”). A categorical imperative denotes an absolute, unconditional requirement that must be obeyed in all circumstances without exception and is justified as an end in itself (e.g., “if I am a researcher, interested in and talking about certain phenomenon, I must study it at its source”).

<sup>4</sup> That is, believing in the greater good or higher cause, which one judges case by case.

When I received the invitation to the panel, I was delighted that AIS has begun debating whether to join other scientific communities in taking positions. The IS community should be encouraged to continue on that path. To the proponents of neutrality, I say that neutrality constitutes an active political stance as well. In my mind, IS neutrality means to do the best we can to critically, assess, test, and challenge the results we create and make the design choice we take transparent. By no means should one confuse neutrality with the absence of positions or indifference to the context of the world we help to design (Rorty, 1999). I conclude by slightly modifying the final proclamation of Hessel and Duvert (2011) and state “to create is to stand up, to stand up is to create”.

## 8 Research as Political Influence (Monideepa Tarafdar)

IS and ICT have, without doubt, a prominent role in numerous important phenomena of our time, such as national security, healthcare provision, social-media enabled social movements, Internet-powered at-scale surveillance, algorithm-driven classification, and application/device-related stress and addiction. We now experience constant and relentless entanglement between our life activities, such as communication, sense-making, civic participation and socialization, and the technologies we use. As a natural consequence, as IS researchers examine these phenomena, several key stakeholders emerge as not only potential recipients and beneficiaries of the results of their research but also potential co-creators of research questions and methodologies. Going beyond the traditional ambit of the organization, IS research now tackles questions that various different entities such as government departments, police and law enforcement, national security agencies, healthcare organizations, press and media, and funding agencies find significant. By engaging with these stakeholders, IS researchers have the potential to influence, along with corporate profits and innovation, government policy, funding for research, and social welfare. IS research, along with being theoretically fundamental, is (perhaps more than ever) user-inspired and user-shaped (Stokes, 1997).

How should IS researchers respond to this increasing ambit of potential influence in disseminating the results of their research? I suggest three pathways and illustrate each with example respectively from the UK, the US, and India.

First, IS researchers can produce evidence that their research has benefits beyond scholarly citations. Such benefits include an effect on, change to, or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment, or quality of life. The U.K.’s Research and Excellence Framework (REF) periodically (usually every five years) reviews research conducted in U.K. universities. The review serves as an exercise in accountability for public investment in research by asking universities to evidence the benefits that this investment has produced. The outcome serves as benchmarking information and establishes reputational yardsticks that the higher education sector in the UK and the public can use. It also informs the allocation of funding for research. While traditional criteria for assessment have included the quality of journal publications and citations, the most recent REF conducted in 2014 weighed evidence on the nature and extent of the impact in terms of its reach and significance beyond the scholarly criteria at 20 percent. Relating to research and its findings, such criteria include: 1) critical reviews in the media; 2) visitor or audience numbers and feedback; 3) business performance measures, sales, turnover accruing from use; 4) documented evidence of change to public policy/legislation/regulations/guidelines; 5) citations and use by international organizations (funding agencies, UN organizations) in their publications; and 6) verifiable influence on particular projects or processes of import to enterprise, commerce and society. We expect the current REF cycle, due to culminate in 2021, to weight these criteria at 25 percent (Research Excellence Framework, 2017). Thus, an important pathway to making impact involves evidencing research benefits that go beyond academic citations<sup>5</sup>.

Second, IS researchers can conduct research that directly addresses problems important to the government such as cybersecurity, terrorism, social development, and environmental stewardship. As an example, the U.S. Government has developed crowdsourcing platforms that host details of numerous research projects that individuals and groups can volunteer to tackle through their research through bids and tenders. IS researchers may face a challenge in that such problems may not look like traditional research questions. For example, [www.change.gov](https://www.change.gov) has a competition for an initiative to build synthetic patient database software for the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (<https://herox.com/pseudovet>). While this initiative may not look like a research question at first glance, one can translate it into a design science research problem in IS and draw on, among other things, theories from a wide perspective of disciplines such as psychology, healthcare, and sociology. One could develop an appropriate work package that tackles this research

<sup>5</sup> For more information, see Research Excellence Framework (2017).

question and, from that, develop solutions to the stated problem. This sort of impact pathway feeds into evidence-based policy making wherein researchers develop tools and frameworks that policy makers incorporate into policy.

Third, IS researchers can influence and shape funding for developmental projects. We can see an example in e-government projects in India. The Indian Government seeks to encourage projects that relate to government's providing citizen services such as a public distribution system for food grains, passports, driving licenses, and voter IDs through computers and mobile phones. Among other ways, the Indian Government uses quasi-industry government entities such as the Computer Society of India (CSI) to highlight and fund such projects by evaluating them. The CSI runs annual e-governance awards whereby it showcases, assesses, and gives awards to e-government projects as a basis for expansion and possible funding going forward<sup>6</sup>. The awards themselves pertain to many areas that one might consider as IS research areas, such as process re-engineering and innovation and IS-enabled citizen-centric service delivery. Various organizations that include government departments and non-government organizations submit applications for the awards based on their projects. The committee that evaluates the proposals and makes decision on the awards comprises 1) academics who provide domain expertise and influence project funding, 2) government officials who are the key stakeholders and beneficiaries of the projects, and 3) system developers. As such, the prolonged and close interaction between these stakeholders exemplifies how academics can provide domain expertise and influence funding of government projects.

In terms of stepping beyond the domain of traditional research activities, researchers are increasingly being asked to create research impact beyond the scholarly world. While the above pathways do not represent the only avenues to do so, they provide a good starting point to think about how far IS research and its implications can travel beyond the purview of the scholars who carry out the research.

## 9 Where Does AIS Go From Here?

The panelists each provide strong and cogent arguments for AIS and its members to consider. An active discussion involving the audience ensued during and after the panel. Although this paper does not reflect the complete discussion, the active debate clearly revealed that the topic of politics and AIS involves much difficulty and controversy. The questions below manifest the complexity and difficulty of the challenge to AIS and its council. We urge AIS leadership to take up the concerns voiced in this paper by giving careful consideration to the following questions and issues:

- What are AIS's core values that should determine its politics?
  - Should council consult members to suggest and vote on a set of values?
  - Should AIS commit to a prescribed set of scientific values that represents the perspective of the majority of its members?
- Is it time to change the mission of AIS to include political positioning or outreach?
  - Should AIS take a stance on external political issues related to or affecting ICT?
  - Should AIS lobby about political issues related to or that affect academic freedom or member safety?
  - What is the best way to decide whether a political issue should be addressed: sponsor open debate, survey the membership, drafting of formal metrics/bylaws by council?
- How might AIS encourage non-native English speakers to participate more in the association?
  - Should AIS resources be translated into other languages to attract and support a more diverse membership?
  - What other resources would aid in expanding diversity?
  - How could AIS best include the differing perspectives of its diverse membership in facing a political concern?
  - Should AIS members undertake dissemination of research and teaching in underrepresented AIS regions?

<sup>6</sup> For more information, see <http://www.csinihilent-egovernanceawards.org/about.php>

- What guidelines should be adopted to steer tough AIS decisions in the future, such as conference location?
  - Should the location selection prioritize attendee safety?
  - How can we support our colleagues in war-torn, poverty-stricken, or politically dangerous locations?
  - Should we only select locations with lax visa restrictions?
- How can AIS facilitate the transfer of research knowledge to broader society?
  - Can or should we do more outreach to practice, government policy makers, and society?
  - How else should AIS advocate for members who conduct politically relevant research?
- Should AIS adopt a policy for enhancing the impact of our research towards societal, organizational, and individual objectives (e.g., the UN 17 goals for development<sup>7</sup>)?
  - Should we as an organization encourage the diverse sub-disciplines (Tarafdar & Davison, 2018) in IS to come together to create knowledge that solves problems for our stakeholders?
  - Should we work on developing measurements for impact of our research on stakeholders?
- What should AIS' procedures be for taking external political action?
  - Should we require a process of deliberation open to the entire association?
  - Should we require a majority vote?

The panel has raised more questions than it has answered. In light of these questions, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for AIS to remain completely politically neutral. Whether we like it or not, some will see many of our actions as an association as political no matter what we do. Accordingly, it is not inconsequential whom we elect into leading positions in AIS. Members should insist that candidates address the questions we raise above, and their responses should determine whom we elect and guide all decisions they make on the part of the association.

All panelists agree that it is past time for AIS to face these political challenges head on and make some hard decisions on the future and fate of the association and its members. The gauntlet is thrown.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

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