8-2019

Debate Section Editorial Note: Information Systems Research: Thinking Outside the Basket and Beyond the Journal
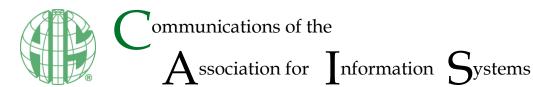
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Debate Section Editorial Note: Information Systems Research: Thinking Outside the Basket and Beyond the Journal

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1 Introduction

This *Communications of the Association for Information Systems* (*CAIS*) debate marks the seventh debate since the debate section's inception in 2014. Like four of its predecessors, it deals with the way and where we publish and implicitly with the relationship between publication outlets and how we evaluate individual scholarly output for hiring, tenure, and promotion purposes. The previous debate, as the regular debate reader might recall, focused on "Reconsidering Counting Articles in Ranked Venues (CARV) as the Appropriate Evaluation Criteria for the Advancement of Democratic Discourse in the IS Field" (Cuellar, Truex, & Takeda 2019) and strongly emphasized the evaluation process. With their paper entitled "Information Systems Research: Thinking Outside the Basket and Beyond the Journal", Brian Fitzgerald, Alan R. Dennis, Juyoung An, Satoshi Tsutsui, Rishikesh C. Muchhala (2019) trigger the current debate. They use a large amount of bibliometric data to extensively examine the impact of journals in the AIS Senior Scholars' basket of eight journals and to compare the impact of these journals to that of three journals that researchers frequently suggest the basket should include and with six randomly selected IS journals from the Web of Science list by applying several traditional measures (e.g., a variation of the well-known journal impact factor and newer ranking measures such as PageRank). With that said, they do not call for generally abandoning any accumulated measures, journal rankings, or journal ranking lists as, for example, Vardi (2016)—who considers anyone who makes decisions based on rankings as having a lazy mind—has called for in computing schools. Fitzgerald et al. conclude that impact factors do not represent valid measures, that the basket of eight does not represent a reliable measure for quality, and that journals represent an unreliable measure for paper quality. Thus, they agree with Cuellar et al. (2019) that one should not use the number of papers that a researcher has published in a certain journal for promotion and tenure assessments and argue that we should stop using journal impact factors and the journal basket. Instead, they propose that paper-level measures represent the best way forward if we continue to use metrics at all. After yet another extensive pursuit for replies to create a vivid debate, five eminent senior scholars accepted our invitation to provide rejoinders to this position and its justification.

Joey George (2019) grounds his response by questioning why journal lists at different levels at academic institutions and beyond exist in the first place. He argues that, despite the known weaknesses that such lists suffer from, they have important and appropriate roles at the departmental, college, university, and governmental levels. He also cautions strongly against IS—as an individual discipline—giving them up when everyone else uses them. On this background and underlining that faculty and administrators must understand the limitations of such lists, he agrees with Fitzgerald et al. (2019) that we need to explore new measures to include in any rankings.

In the same vein, Varun Grover (2019) calls for the IS discipline to diversify performance metrics. He argues in favor of the journal basket and illustrates that, despite the fact that the journal-level metrics that Fitzgerald et al. (2019) use led to partly unfavorable results, the basket offers some value in differentiating journal quality. As a root cause for the problems that arise from using citations as a quality measure, he identifies that authors do not usually use citations based on research quality but on how useful they find the cited research in their own work. As such, he challenges Fitzgerald et al.'s arguments and conclusion that metrics and ranking lists have little to no value. Grover requests more data to substantiate such a conclusion and argues for a combination of journal- and paper-level metrics.

Chris Sauer and Leslie Willcocks (2019) take a different turn in their rejoinder. They provide a cautionary note that we should consume bibliometrics carefully. They contest the notion of objectivity in whichever bibliometric measurement one adopts and emphasize that reviews and editorial decisions always involve subjectivity. Thus, bibliometrics should only aid judgment, not substitute it. Against this background, they critique Fitzgerald et al.'s (2019) premise concerning the notion of paper quality and the role of citations. However, they argue against totally abandoning impact factors based on the merits these factors have for librarians and, most importantly, for institutional politics when the IS discipline is compared to and competes with other disciplines. Finally, in this context, they also elaborate on the risks in using Altmetrics as an alternative in the current environment.

Elizabeth Davidson (2019) grounds her reflections in a fundamental concern regarding Fitzgerald et al.'s (2019) position. While she does not argue with these authors' empirical findings, she questions the purpose that the extensive data analysis they provide serves. Beyond her speculation that reconfirming *MIS Quarterly*'s outstanding reputation might lead to a run for the few spots available in that journal, she puts forward that Fitzgerald et al.'s chosen approach embraces rather than critiques the preoccupation with rankings and measurements. Understanding citations as a social action, she extends the critique of citations

and qualifies them as increasingly meaningless indicators for both paper and journal quality. She argues for other indicators of journal quality such as the qualifications of the editorial staff and the review process's reliability. Not denying the reality of promotion and tenure committees, she puts forward a request for more transparency and openness concerning any journal-ranking process. She continues that, rather than basing decisions on young scholars' careers on one list that ranks publication outlets' quality, we should seek a variety of sources. In addition, we should volunteer and serve as external reviewers on junior colleagues' panels and evaluate the quality of their work based on personally reading the submitted work rather than only on ranking lists and measurements. From my perspective, this alternative should definitively receive more thought.

In their closing thoughts, Brian Fitzgerald and Alan R. Dennis (2019) reply to the concerns brought forward in the rejoinders. They express their disagreement with the argument that top journals are better than other journals because they have a better review process. They also declare their agreement with the stated critique of citations as a measure of quality and that journal lists are simple and straightforward and play an important and political role and that they will not go away. But they reinforce and appeal to the IS community to move outside the basket and beyond the journal as assessment measures. These closing thoughts hardly constitute the end of this debate about measuring and assessing human academic practices, and I hope that these contributions help readers to develop their position on the matter.

With this debate, I have facilitated my final one. I found serving as the inaugural debate section editor very rewarding. For the future, I hope that the section can strengthen its standing and that coming debates reach the community in a more timely manner. Despite the importance of continuously discussing the publishing and evaluation practices in our discipline and beyond (especially against the background of our shared interest in and responsibility for the part information plays in all sorts of professional and private practice), we might also need to take up some critical and controversial thematic topics related to our discipline again in this section such as the allure of big data (Kallinikos, 2013), which caused a substantive debate (Constantiou & Kallinikos, 2015; Kallinikos & Constantiou, 2015) about a research theme some years ago. In this context, it might be timely to challenge and discuss AI ethics (Ahern, Oviatt, & Walsh, 2018), design thinking as a delusion (Seitz, 2018), or blockchains—autonomous systems of trust—as being caught between hype, promise, and reality (Williams, 2018). I look forward to reading future debates in the *CAIS* debate section.

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Karlheinz Kautz holds the position of Professor of Digital Business at the School of Business Information Technology and Logistics in the College of Business at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. His current research interests are in Digital Innovation and Transformation, Information Systems Development, and the organizational and societal impact of IT. He is the co-founder and former chairperson of the International Federation of Information Processing (IFIP) Working Group 8.6 on the Adoption, Transfer and Diffusion of IT. He has served the Information Systems (IS) community in numerous capacities as editor and board member of journals such as *Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems*, *Journal of Information Technology*, *Information Technology & People*, the *Journal of the Association of Information Systems* (AIS) and the *Communications of the AIS*.