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Closing Thoughts on “Information Systems Research: Thinking Outside the Basket and Beyond the Journal”

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1 Introduction

We thank Liz Davidson, Joey George, Varun Grover, Chris Sauer, and Leslie Willcocks for taking time to comment on our paper. Understanding papers' and journals' quality is complex, so we were pleased to see a variety of thoughts and insights from our colleagues, some of which align well with our opinions and some of which diverge. In this short response, we reflect on three themes that we see running through their commentaries.

First, we agree that our primary focus, citations, is an imperfect measure. Any single dimension and subsequent metrics built on a single dimension (e.g., journal impact factor) are imperfect because they miss the phenomenon as a whole. For example, as Sauer and Willcocks (2019) point out, our data include teaching cases, which rarely receive citations due to their nature. We also agree that one can manipulate citations (and other metrics such as downloads, social media mentions, etc.). In any case, one can manipulate the journal review process, too—one can manipulate any human process.

Second, we disagree with some of our colleagues who argue that top journals have better papers than those in other journals because top journals have a better peer-review process. This argument rests on three assumptions: 1) that top journals have valid and reliable review processes, 2) that other journals have invalid and/or unreliable review processes, and 3) that a good process ensures good outcomes. Much empirical evidence from other disciplines shows that the review process at top journals is *not* valid and reliable (Bornmann, 2011; Bornmann & Daniel, 2009; Ernst, Saradeth, & Resch, 1993). Unless one believes that we in the information systems (IS) discipline materially differ from our peers, these empirical findings remove the first and most important assumption that this conclusion requires to be true.

One a deeper, more theoretical level, why should the opinions of three to five reviewers and editors about a paper quality's have greater validity and reliability than a larger market of expert consumers? Is a small set of experts better than a market of experts? Perhaps another fundamental question concerns whether those involved in the review process are actually experts. We like to think that journal reviewers are experts, but, in truth, having served in editorial roles at top journals, we have to confess that most reviewers are not experts at assessing others' research. The "reviewer three" meme confirms that many researchers regard the traditional review process as flawed across many disciplines. Furthermore, for all kinds of other reasons (e.g., demands on one's time), reviews even for the same reviewer will lack consistent quality.

Third, we agree with our colleagues that journal lists are simple and straightforward and play important pragmatic and political roles both in the academy (e.g., for promotion and tenure) and for those that support it (e.g., librarians buying journals). But simple does not equal good. The h-index, for example, represents a simple measure that that promotion and tenure committees use to assess researchers. However, Donna Strickland, the 2018 Nobel Laureate in Physics, has a h-index of 20. In fact, Kreiner (2016) found a relatively low h-index among Nobel Laureates generally, which indicates that this simple measure conveys a great deal less than the whole story.

Some of our colleagues have argued that we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater—but the baby is drowning. As Davidson (2019) points out, non-basket journals struggle to secure reviewing resources and receive fewer submissions from IS scholars. Also, junior scholars who have their research rejected by basket journals have a difficult path to tenure.

In conclusion, we agree that using journal rankings and journals to measure paper quality will not go away anytime soon. And, for now, we do not want them to. Rather, we suggest that, as a discipline, we should step back and collectively think of a better way to assess research's quality. We believe that one better way involves focusing on the quality of papers (as the primary research product) rather than journals. At this point, we do not have a solution to offer. Instead, we call on our colleagues across the discipline to do more research to develop and test better measures, especially measures that one cannot easily manipulate.

If one thinks about it, one will realize that change comes slowly to the academy. Many classes still use paper textbooks and an instructor who lectures. The only thing that has changed from a century ago is that we use PowerPoint rather than a chalkboard; we have automated, not informed (Zuboff, 1988). We have only recently begun to informate teaching as we adopt new technologies such as interactive e-textbooks, video games, virtual reality, and flipped classrooms. We believe we need similar changes in the way we think about research, and, like change in teaching, change in research will be slow.

The debate about paper-level quality measures is taking place in other disciplines (e.g., Moher et al., 2018). We in the IS discipline have a choice: should we lead, follow, or get out of the way? We argue that, as IS researchers, we should be key players leading this change for our colleagues across the academy. Who else better understands information technology, users' needs, business processes, and new technology adoption? After all, information technology innovation is our core strength as a discipline. We believe we need to start thinking about how we move outside the basket and beyond the journal.

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