Journal of the Association for Information Systems
Research Commentary

Special Research Perspectives Issue on the IS Core/Identity Debate

Rudy Hirschheim
JAIS Senior Editor
rudy@lsu.edu

In the last several years, a number of thoughtful papers have been published on the state of the IS Discipline, and more specifically what should or should not be the essence or 'core' of the discipline. AIS sponsored journals such as *JAIS* and *CAIS* have been the outlet for many of these papers as such debate and opinion is important for the continued development of the discipline. Indeed, that is why the authors of following papers have decided to publish their ideas in *JAIS*. We welcome the opportunity to publish these thoughtful arguments as we believe they further enhance our understanding of the IS discipline. But a bit of background is in order.

Several years ago, John King and Kalle Lyytinen wrote two papers commenting on the state of the Information Systems field. One was entitled "Reach and Grasp" (King and Lyytinen, 2004) the other "Nothing at the Center?: Academic Legitimacy in the Information Systems Field" (Lyytinen and King, 2004). They created quite a stir in the field as their comments challenged a number of the commonly held assumptions by members of the academic IS community Indeed, such challenges are good for an academic field and necessary for its sustained growth. It allows members of the community to critically reflect on their beliefs. We simply can't become too comfortable with our beliefs. Thus, insightful commentaries like King and Lyytinen's are welcomed[1].

One individual who disagrees with King and Lyytinen is Ron Weber. His *MISQ* commentary (Weber, 2003) was in some ways the basis for the King and Lyytinen commentaries. Having read and disagreeing with the Lyytinen and King *JAIS* paper, Weber wrote a commentary which appeared in King and Lyytinen (2006). He also wrote a longer commentary which he submitted to the Research Perspectives section of *JAIS*. This commentary was reviewed by Richard Mason and myself. We both felt Weber's critique was insightful and added to the debate. Of course it made sense to ask King and Lyytinen to respond to Weber's criticisms and they did. Lastly, I felt Mason's review offered an interesting angle on the debate and thus it is being publishing as well.

In his commentary "Reach and Grasp in the Debate over the IS Core: An Empty Hand?" Weber argues that King and Lyytinen have unwittingly missed the boat on the need to

[1] Readers are encouraged to examine the recently published book *Information Systems: The State of the Field* edited by King and Lyytinen for additional commentaries on the field.

have a theoretical core for the discipline. For Weber, the need for a theoretical core for the IS discipline is clear. He argues that having a theoretical core is a "necessary condition for having a *clear disciplinary identity*," although this does not necessarily lead to academic legitimacy. He also feels that an important issue to discuss is whether having a clear disciplinary identity is a necessary or a sufficient condition for academic legitimacy. Weber chides King and Lyytinen for believing that: "those who continue to "grasp" for a theoretical core in the IS discipline will undermine the possibility of "greatness" in the discipline. In contrast, Weber believes that: "What we can grasp with relative ease are reference-discipline theories, phenomena associated with the latest information technologies, consolation for our 'anxiety discourse' in rhetoric about the youthfulness of our field, appeals for the legitimacy of methodological pluralism, and so on. What is difficult to grasp–that which extends our reach–is the core of the IS discipline. Therein lies the possibility of 'greatness.' We must take care that the things we can now grasp with relative ease ultimately do not leave us with an empty hand." Weber's offers an excellent exposition on the need for a theoretical core for the IS discipline.

In response to the Weber critique, King and Lyytinen remain unconvinced by Weber's arguments. The note for example that talking about a 'theoretical core' leaves open the question of what exactly is a 'theory'. And do disciplines necessarily have such accepted 'theories'? They cite the example of sociology noting that whilst it is an identifiable and legitimate academic discipline, it is comprised of many subfields each with their own competing theories. King and Lyytinen note: "In many fields, it is not the theories themselves, but the conflicts over the theories that most clearly represent the field." So this suggests that an agreed theoretical core in not necessary for an academic discipline. For King and Lyytinen, there remains much ambiguity on what, exactly, constitutes a theoretical core. They are quick to point out however, that "this does not mean we deny the reality or importance of theory, or the role it can play in legitimating an academic field. It might be possible as time goes on to develop a more precise construct of the theoretical core for IS field that takes care of these concerns. In the mean time, the uncertainty that surrounds the nature and characteristics of the theoretical core of the IS field suggests that legitimacy for the field arising from a theoretical core is more likely to happen by accident than to be done on purpose." King and Lyytinen also disagree with Weber on the need for a theoretical core to have academic identity. They believe it is not necessary and suggest that other disciplines have a developed academic identity without an agreed theoretical core.

Dick Mason was asked to comment on the two papers and he graciously agreed to do so. His commentary is the third paper published in this issue. Mason notes that both the Weber piece and the King/Lyytinen response are very valuable in that they help to position the opposing viewpoints on the whether there is or is not a need for a core in order to establish an academic identity (and ultimately academic legitimacy). However Mason wonders whether such a debate is really necessary or if the whole issue is misguided. In reflecting on some P&T decisions he was involved in, he states: "It occurs to me now that never, to my recollection, was the 'legitimacy' of any of these fields questioned. That question had been institutionally and politically answered when departments were established and faculty hired and assigned. What was fiercely discussed was 'What are the standards by which faculty in this field are evaluated?'" For him, the issue of core and legitimacy is not as important as many seem to believe. He states: "It's really good to have a core theory, let's aspire to developing one or more and propagating it or them; but, a lot of good work can be done without such a core and we

should keep encouraging such good works as well." In other words, let's not get stuck in the 'core/identity' debate what really matters is that "a discipline or a point of view gains legitimacy by its claims to truth, not necessarily because it has a theory." He implores the IS discipline to move beyond the core/identity debate. Mason believes: "we have enough grasp to reach further." Now let's do it.

In closing, I would like to echo Mason's sentiments. The debate about the core and identity of the IS discipline has been useful and healthy, even this last round of commentaries. But enough is enough. Let's move on now. This is not meant to exclude new insights which could emerge from say, a careful genealogical study on the evolution of IS theories and how they have emerged, and what impact they could have on the field. Or discussions on what counts as an IS theory; what is unique about a particular theory, and the like. The Research Perspectives section is open to new and novel thinking about the IS field but please keep in mind what we will publish will be critically reviewed by the *JAIS* editorial board as well as outside reviewers. If you think you have something which may be appropriate for this section, please feel free to contact me and I can give you a pre-screening. Some ideas are likely to be better served by our sister publication *CAIS* but we welcome your submissions.

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