

Smart(er) Research

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Smart(er) Research

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Abstract. This is an answer and an elaboration to Carsten Sørensen's "The Curse of the Smart Machine?". My answer disagrees with the postulate of a mainframe focus within the IS field. Instead I suggest that it is a struggle between old and new science. The answer then agrees with the notion that we need new and more agile publication mechanisms and I elaborate that.

First of all I strongly disagree with Carsten Sørensen that we have an IS field rooted in the "organizational mainframe" and that the mainframe perspective can be described as "the main organising vision within the IS field". That may have been true 20 years ago—you cite Swanson and Ramiller (1997) for the notion. However, these days I see fewer and fewer studies in the good journals of our field from what we could call classic organizations having an internal IT department and a mainframe. In fact, I am surprised by the opposite. Namely how many studies you find about social media, smartphone use, digital natives and so on.

If we take the most recent issue of JAIS (volume 17, issue 9)—a journal in the top 3 of our field—there are three papers;

1. Tallon et al. (2016) considers alignment between IT and business strategy at the process level. They use data from IT and business executives at 317 U.S. and E.U. firms. Yes, some of them probably mainframe-owners. But the issue of alignment is not in itself mainframe-oriented; especially not when companies are looking into new IT from "digital dust", over Internet-of-Things to Global infrastructures (Figure 1 in Sørensen's paper).
2. John et al. (2016) developed an approach to cluster similar questions based on a web of social relationships among the questions. That is not mainframe or even business-related at all.
3. Finally, Brown et al. (2016) looked at email and impressions associated with writing style and the use of things such as emoticons in email. Not mainframe-oriented at all but rather focusing on the individual and the use of new technology. E.g.; emoticons have only come-of-age the last 5 years.

I did the same with the latest issue of MISQ (September 2016). Here the issues span from on-line trading and auctions, over telemedicine and information hiding in online advertising, to structuration theory for the individual. The only paper that may be a bit mainframe-oriented is talking about Senior Executives' IT Management Responsibilities. All the rest is on newer technology.

This confirmed my view as a senior editor of many journals in the IS field that we are very much aware of new technology and that we have many papers at the bleeding edge of technology. It also confirmed my point that some of the core theories in our field; e.g.; in the journal issues above on alignment and structuration, are not in essence mainframe-oriented at all. Because they keep being useful in explaining new observations with new people using the newest technology.

If I think further—inspired by your writing—you may be seeing what I called “Old Science” in a paper at ECIS, which I wrote with Richard Baskerville (Baskerville and Pries-Heje 2016). Here we describe Old Science as being “anchored to assumptions about nature that favor predictability, measurability, regularity, and clear cause–effect relationships” whereas New Science “... encompasses concepts present in quantum mechanics, self-organizing systems, and complexity theory”. Thus in new Science behavior depends on context, and context is beyond complete description. And that is especially the case with new technology, digital dust and the other non-mainframe innovations. In the same paper we also show some examples where New Science work may have been burdened by having to “cloak itself in old-science wrappers” and therefore is being suppressed from realizing its full potential as new-science. I actually believe that may have been what Carsten Sørensen have experienced with some of the journals in our field?

Second, I agree with Carsten Sørensen that the way we publish new knowledge in our field—and many others—need to become more agile. The way we do things now is simply not very smart. It can take years to get a piece of writing through the defences of editors and reviewers. And even when the paper is accepted it can take 1-2 years before it is published in paper form. That is the reason why some of my work has taken 5 years to publish. We need something smarter!

In the Agile Manifesto the authors state that they had come to value “Individuals and Interactions” over “Processes and Tools”. Hence it is us as individual researchers that need to do something. One of the problems I have been facing is that I would like to publish some of my work in a good online open access journal. But how do I know what is good? Luckily I heard the other day that in Norway they are working on an authorized list of acceptable online journals that will go together with the bibliometric research indicator that we have both in Denmark and Norway. I look forward to that. And I will promise to publish or at least submit some of my work there as soon as possible. That will be smart(er) research.

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