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Embracing Absence: Researching What is Not There

Short Paper

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Abstract

In the absence of light, we find means to push back the darkness; when data is sparse, we find surrogate measures or extrapolate from existing data. Absences play a role in how we respond to the world. Here, we seek to better understand engagement with absences relationally initiating a productive research pathway for engaging with absences in Information Systems (IS) research. We argue the existence of absences can be considered, their implications can be examined, and their unique importance within different contexts can be demonstrated through careful articulation in reflexive research. Through an exploration of absence in selected literature we outline a variety of ways absences are interpreted and shape the world. Further, using examples of the intersection of IS and “care” we demonstrate the impact of absences in context. Doing so we build a path forward for IS scholars to imaginatively engage with absences in the future.

Keywords: absence, nothing, epistemology, negative phenomena, care

Introduction

There is an existential unease in a void. The haunting qualities of that which is unknown activates our imaginations and stirs us into action. When in the absence of light, we find the means to push back the darkness; in cases where data is sparse, we find surrogate measures or extrapolate from existing data. Sometimes called the “haunting of absences” (Rappert, 2014, p. 43), this discomfort, stimulated by the missing, the invisible, and the empty, has largely been viewed as problematic or as *knowledge gaps* needing to be filled (Francis et al., 2005). This identification of gaps in a landscape of knowledge has become a routine justification to explore that which has not been considered adequately studied (Croissant, 2014). The dominant gap-spotting approaches to research undeniably provide fruitful insights by focusing attention on what knowledge will *fill-in* a hole in an otherwise known knowledge structure. However, in doing so, gap-spotting often takes for granted the “gap” itself seeing gaps as problems to be solved. In contrast, attention to absences, on their own terms, focuses attention on the relationality and production of that which is absent: “Instead of asking whether something is there, it is necessary to ask how absence implicates presence and vice versa” (Rappert, 2015, p. 11). Shifting attention away from gap-spotting, we focus on this latter, relational view of absence and how it might be embraced as a topic of research for Information Systems (IS) scholars.

Within this relational orientation, we argue that absences are not only produced through research, but are themselves productive in regimes of knowledge building. We seek to better engage with the concept of absences to understand how that which is present and that which is absent are implicated in world-making.

We do so by showing that their existence can be considered, their implications can be examined, and their unique importance within different contexts can be demonstrated through careful articulation in reflexive research. By doing so, we develop a path forward for studying and appreciating absence in socio-technical phenomena.

Knowledge building practices frequently seek to replace *absence* (e.g., missing data or knowledge) with *presence* (e.g., proxy data and claims to knowledge). In IS this is often interpreted to mean interviewing unheard voices (Masiero, 2023), developing proxy representations (Grover & Lyytinen, 2015) or extrapolating from the present to the future (Markus & Mentzer, 2014). However, alternative perspectives have emerged to challenge the assumption that presence is the contrast space and oppositional category of absence. There is a rising interest in exploring the relational and substantive impacts of *absence itself* in shaping what and how we come to know phenomena (Rappert & Bauchspies, 2014) and in seeking to make the invisible visible (Monteiro et al., 2022). For example, in analysis of “how much **nothing** matters” (Scott, 2018, p. 3), specific dimensions of *social absence* are demonstrated to be production of imagination, new objects and shared meaning. Absences are then ontologically important and carry epistemological significance. That is, *absence* - what we do not do and do not say, whose voices we do not hear, or what data we do not have, has numerous implications for sociotechnical research. Assumed under this perspective is that research has been epistemically narrowed by emphasizing phenomena which have been positively defined (doing/being somethings) at the expense of the negatively defined (non-doings/non-being somethings) (Scott, 2018, 2020). Therefore, absence is not a space to be filled or a problem to be solved, but a domain for inquiry in and of itself.

In this research we ask the question *How do absences contribute to shaping the world?* To answer this question, we organize the paper as follows: First, we provide insight into the multiplicity of ways in which absences are interpreted within selected literature from IS reference disciplines. Second, we provide an illustrative case where technology in healthcare is posited to show promise in the face of absences, and a second case in homecare which demonstrates where absences are produced by technology and relationally shape how phenomena are produced and perceived. Third, we propose a pathway forward for IS scholars to embrace absence. By doing so, we reframe the role of absence, proposing avenues to conceptually engage with “not-doings” and “not-beings” within IS.

Configurations of Absence

Reference disciplines, including sociology and philosophy, have developed epistemic positions that engage with that which is a void, unknown, or invisible - a category of phenomena which we term absences (Rappert, 2015; Scott, 2018). These engagements with absence do not neatly reflect a single unified interpretation, but rather reveal a ‘slippery, diffuse and wily’ understanding, where the more we try to form a concrete analytical representation, the less of absence is seen (Rappert & Bauchspies, 2014, p. 2). This conceptual slipperiness that is characteristic of absences has resulted in research attending to *what is not present* in a multiplicity of ways.

While the multiplicity of forms of absence renders singular definition difficult, researching absence broadly fits into wider sociological and epistemic debate on negative phenomena (Rappert, 2015; Scott, 2020). Negative phenomena partially unfold through the enactments of absences, namely via acts of commission or omission defined by their “not-doing” and “not-being” something (Scott, 2018). Acts of commission refer to when an actor chooses to avoid doing or being something, whereas acts of omission refer to passive omissions in actions or neglecting to act, where the end position of an actor occurs through a lack of intention as opposed to a decision to not-act. For example, the conscious choice to not use technology due to value-based judgments would be an act of commission, whereas acts of omission would include not using those same technologies simply because the actor was unaware of their existence (Scott, 2018). These negative actions have positive consequences, absences shape what has happened and aid in speculating on alternative worlds when actors imagine “what could have happened if they had *not done the non-doing*” (Scott, 2018, p. 9).

One domain of research into absences provides a critique of the unacknowledged political positioning of absence in discourse and its relationship with *development* or lack thereof (Bauchspies, 2014). Absence here is connoted negatively and perceived as a [lack of...]. In the context of “developing” nations discussed by Bauchspies (2014), absence is perceived as a signifier of a lack of science and technology. Lacking technology is observed as a deficiency or a missed opportunity for development. Absences as a [lack of...] are politically freighted and socially enacted. Post-colonial research notes this view of absence and its relationship with development reinforces a Western orientation where absences are filled with technology to progress society,

with the implication that technologies introduced by Western countries signify development (Bauchspies, 2014). This absence as a [*lack of...*] emphasizes the ways in which our engagement with not-being and not-doing are never neutral – they unfold through attempts to replace a perceived absence in service of “developing” society through a replacement of absence with technological interventions. While the perceived solution from this view is to fill-in the absence, from a more relational view, the [*lack of...*] is not a simple gap to be filled, but a space constitutively defined by something present, a [*lack of ... according to ...*]. This can be echoed in research paradigms concerned with gaps signifying missing knowledge. Filling in missing knowledge requires a *gap* to fill-in; this gap emerges through and becomes defined by existing research processes and epistemic norms. Simply, when there is a lack of knowledge, this claim comes bundled with a particular research tradition and epistemic regime which position what contours of absence can be defined.

A similar strand of research on absences emphasizes (in)visibility and how absences’ relational interactions with presence builds an appreciation of the underlying political fabric in instances when phenomena are made visible or become invisible (de la Bellacasa, 2014). We term this mode of absence [*making ... (in)visible*]. Absence from this view is that which fades from perception and attention. This concept of [*making ... (in)visible*] carries both research and practical implications. For example, who is defined in a dataset, by whom, and for what purpose, brackets what is attended to (Islam, 2022) and thus what is not attended to vanishes from sight. However, the focus of this mode of research is not to make present that which has been made absent, but instead it is to explore what happens through this passing into presence or submerging into absence (de la Bellacasa, 2014; Papadopoulos, 2014). From this view, when we engage absences as [*making ... (in)visible*] we are disrupting/reinforcing “possible worlds” (de la Bellacasa, 2014, p. 38). Absences relationally shape and are shaped by what we care for and attend to, and are implicated in world-making (Papadopoulos, 2014). While absences are not readily available to us, we experience and are affected by them in their relation to what is present (Rappert, 2014, 2015). There is a co-dependence between presence and absence that is tacitly understood and often unquestioned as we make meaning of everyday objects in relation to what those objects *are not*. But this view of absences reveals their elusive aspect – when we recognize absences they themselves become present and are often seen as an oversight, a gap or something to be filled. (Rappert, 2015). Simply, attempts to understand absences in this way transform them into something that is present. However, understanding absences as [*making ... (in)visible*] provides a frame to understand how absences are enacted through how we attend to the world (de la Bellacasa, 2014).

Underlying these perspectives on engaging with absence is a backdrop of assumptions and cultural norms. A theme across the understanding of absences is the ethico-political and socio-historical forces positioning perceptions of absence. How absences are conceptualized, if they are conceptualized at all, is not a neutral activity and rests on a foundation of culturally positioned logics. When absences are perceived as gaps in research, or a lack of technology (Bauchspies, 2014; Francis et al., 2005), there is an assumption that absences are problematic and out *there* waiting to be filled. Such problematizations then focus attention on the role that technology plays as a solution, often understating the ethico-political orientations contributing to how gaps are originally created and defined (Bauchspies, 2014). Inversely, where absence is viewed as relationally bundled with presence (de la Bellacasa, 2014; Rappert, 2015), absences are seen as a necessary feature in shaping and limiting our perceptions of the world.

Where Absence Makes Itself Known: Two Illustrations

While ubiquitous, the real impact of absences can be observed in traditionally interpersonal contexts. To illustrate the generative potential of this approach, we call upon selected examples of the high-stakes professional contexts of algorithmically enabled decision-making in end-of-life care and home care through platform organizations to explore the implications of absences. These cases illustrate potentials for the study of absence by contrasting a case where technology is seen as a surrogate to fill-in for absence with a case where aspects of the world are made absent by technology. These contexts of care are selected based upon the ontological assertion that “Care is omnipresent, even through the effects of its absence. Like a longing emanating from the troubles of neglect, it passes within, across, throughout things. It’s lack undoes, allows unravelling” (de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 1).

Algorithmic Decision-Making in Medical Contexts

Within a medical care context, ongoing innovations in technology – specifically that of algorithmic systems that incorporate machine learning – are promoted as possibly “making healthcare smarter” due to the “expert-

level accuracy” in areas like diagnosis and prediction (Grote & Berens, 2020, p. 205). However, within medicine, there are many decisions that go beyond a medically ‘correct’ answer, with certain decisions being inherently value-laden (McDougall, 2019), where the personal values of patients are given primacy over longevity. This includes treatment decisions that will affect one’s quality of life and even end-of-life decision-making. In such contexts, the accuracy or correctness of the decision becomes difficult to discern, and responsibility for these decisions becomes increasingly complex. Although the intent should be to follow the ethical ideals of shared decision-making between physicians and their patients (Charles et al., 1997), in many instances, the patient may be cognitively and emotionally absent, and unable to express their personal values, wishes, and treatment goals. The absence of information that is typically expected creates an epistemic void that is worked around through an algorithmic decision process. Reflection on this process reveals the underlying absence (e.g., the patient’s values and wishes), and raises questions regarding other options such as the conscious and critical evaluation of alternatives from the practitioner’s clinical expertise.

A prominent tenant within the context of medical decision-making, is that of intentionality, and more specifically, intentionality of action for the individual making decisions. Chia (1994, p. 782) states that this serves as a “subtle privileging of the conscious over the unconscious in accounting for decisional ‘events’...” This understanding of decisions revolves around social norms and practices concerned with a deliberative and rational process, making the absence of intentions (e.g., conscious inputs from decision-makers) contribute to how aspects of medical-decision making are made known. In medical decision-making, ascertaining information from patients regarding values and wishes as part of shared decision-making may overcome uncertainty surrounding treatment decisions, and it is hoped that the ultimate decision-maker (i.e., typically the consenting, conscious, adult patient) is aware, or at least present and able to exercise their autonomy and a right of self-determination for healthcare decisions (Pope, 2012). This is a central tenant of the Western medical system and the basis for making decisions for future situations while the patient has decision-making capacity (e.g., the rationale behind advance directives of “do not resuscitate” and end-of-life treatment decisions). In this context, absence of patient voice positions creates a nexus of practices to respond to the absence of patient intentionality.

Surrogacy in decision-making, where the patient is unable to decide for themselves, remains one of the greatest ethical challenges in medical decision-making (Shalowitz et al., 2006). When medical practitioners are unsure of the desires of the patient, the Western medical system is typically guided by one of two approaches if there are no known wishes. First is the Substituted Judgment Standard, which seeks to prioritize “the decision that the patient would have made if he or she were able to make decisions” (Torke et al., 2008, p. 1514). Decisions are made through a proxy, with those stepping-in as “substitute decision makers collectively known as ‘surrogates’...” (Pope, 2012, p. 1075). Second is the Best Interests Standard, which simply serves to prioritize the “best interests” of the patient according to medical standards of preserving life (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001). Thus, in the absence of a patient’s voice, decision-making defaults to an established, professionally normalized standard that responds to the absence and provides a decision to act upon. While this does not account for the absence of voice, standing idly by would likely be viewed as ethically irresponsible. One suggested approach in decision-making in the absence of patient voice and other adequate surrogates is then to substitute an algorithmically derived proxy (Lamanna & Byrne, 2018).

In such high-stakes and irreversible contexts, the passing of voice into absence and the absence of the individual’s specific intentions is understandably troubling. Recent discussions in medicine and bioethics raise the possibilities for prediction and data *in lieu* of patient voice and surrogate decision-makers, even for critically value-laden (e.g., end-of-life) decisions for incapacitated patients. Technology is purported to play its own potential role via Patient Preference Predictor algorithms (Rid & Wendler, 2014), or an Autonomy Algorithm (Lamanna & Byrne, 2018). In these instances, there is a perceived need and attempt to handle absence with algorithmically derived data to provide a sense of accuracy, certainty, and even perhaps a means to off-load decision making. In this case, where decisions are defined by their finality and moral gravity, handling absence through innovation is poised as a solution – however we are not aware of what is lost in employing technological solutions as a replacement of human voice is unknown.

Homecare as a Platform Organization

The context of home-based disability and aged care is a second illustration of the attempted negation of absence with technology. The sector has seen a rise in data-driven decision making and an increasing embrace

of digital technology in organizing and managing homecare (Macdonald, 2021; Williams et al., 2021). This has accompanied an increase in platform organizations utilizing algorithmic systems to automate aspects of care work such as client matching, and work opportunities (Williams et al., 2021). Introducing these technological interventions and digital platforms to home-based care has prompted debate around the benefits and challenges involving the enhanced labor market flexibility, and efficiencies associated with a growing marketisation and commodification of care (Macdonald, 2021).

Broadly, platform algorithms organize workers, schedules, tasks and records through the use of data (Parent-Rocheleau & Parker, 2021). Similar algorithmic functions are emerging in homecare platforms (Williams et al., 2021). Quantitative practices underlying algorithmic systems necessitate a decontextualization, where emphasis is granted to the quantified object, representing something in the world (Islam, 2022). What is datafied are selected phenomena, materials and tasks that are “the serendipitous result of social, political, economic and technical factors, which determines which data get to travel in ways that are non-transparent and hard to reconstruct” (Leonelli, 2014, p. 7) by either the caregiver, management or the recipient. However, this quantified object, an abstraction composed of algorithmic inferences, surrogate measures, simplified categories of action and an absence of context, reconstructs the relations between caregiver, recipient, the organization, and the nature of care in a manner amenable to optimization of specific values. This valuation of optimization is, in itself, a response to an absence, an absence of labor to meet demand, with care sectors often characterized as having a workforce shortage (Macdonald, 2021). This requires labor optimization strategies to meet the needs of care recipients. Although this approach serves economic goals it risks severing the human relations of care through decontextualization, further creating new absences in the process. The concern is that we do not know what is made absent, in the datafication of care work and management when practices related to care-work and caring are subject to algorithmic systems.

The increased emphasis of datafication has accompanied an increased marketisation of care where work, risk and responsibility are increasingly individualized (Macdonald, 2021). Here aspects of care work, management and organization are quantified in service of improving efficiency and cost-saving principles (Macdonald, 2021). This has resulted in the introduction of algorithmic management systems in the care sector (Williams et al., 2021). What is submerged into absence through algorithmic management systems has epistemic consequences. Existing research in the platform economy reveals that black-boxing processes in algorithmic management risks making system transparency and fairness (Parent-Rocheleau & Parker, 2021), and organizational support (Veen et al., 2020) absent, as a consequence of prioritizing the values of efficiency, productivity, and prioritizing metrics (Galière, 2020). Unlike the medical example, where absences of voice are handled through the introduction of technologies or proxies, absences in homecare are (re)created through technological interventions that privilege efficiencies, metrics, and cost-saving, all with the risk of submerging fairness, transparency, and care depending on how absences are enacted.

Further complicating absences *in* homecare is an absence *of* homecare as a focus of existing research on algorithmic management. One dominant focus of research on the introduction and emergence of algorithmic technologies in organizations privileges research where the labor is “visible”, such as rideshare (Möhlmann, 2023), and food-delivery (Veen et al., 2020), or where tasks are comparable and easily defined such as micro-tasking (Bergvall-Kåreborn & Howcroft, 2014), at the expense of work that flies under the radar and is widely considered “invisible” like care work (Macdonald, 2021). Alternatively, research on algorithmic management has also privileges high skill white-collar professions such as online freelancing (Bucher et al., 2021), professional service work (Gal et al., 2020), and alternative care-contexts, primarily medical healthcare (Lamanna & Byrne, 2018). Despite the use of similar technologies, homecare work becomes undervalued and overlooked (Macdonald, 2021). This omission of homecare in the research pose real consequences for how emerging research on platform organization in homecare is now being framed in reference to more readily available organizations like Uber (Glaser, 2021). Algorithmic management of homecare is then fitted into existing research frameworks of understanding at the risk of omitting how algorithmic management in homecare might be unique in how it corresponds to interpersonal labor such as care work. In this case, existing epistemic norms and absent contextually sensitive alternatives shape how platforms in homecare are made present under existing research regimes.

Absence unfolds in homecare through acts of omission where passive *not-doings* and *not-beings* result in, and are, temporally and spatially positioned by a complex of absences. Increasingly, these absences are handled by practitioners through a reliance on technological interventions. In homecare contexts, absences are themselves created by the attention to a specific set of values at the expense of others. Algorithmic optimization for specific aspects of care (e.g., efficiency and costs) shadows and unmakes alternative concerns.

The issues surrounding an absence of transparency for example, emerged as a product of introducing algorithmic systems leveraging black-box processes (Parent-Rocheleau & Parker, 2021). These different understandings are responded to by comparisons, which also reinforce existing norms in how algorithmic systems are understood, such as comparing algorithmic management of care to algorithmic management of Uber (Glaser, 2021), overlooking the possibility that the algorithmic phenomenon is enacted differently in the context of home care platform organizations.

Embracing Absence: Moving Forward with Nothing

With the existing approaches to absence as a foundation and considering the practical consequences of absence suggested in the selected examples above, we now outline four domains for future IS research to embrace absence as a topic of scholarly inquiry. In developing a path forward to understand absences, we contribute to ongoing goals of IS scholarship interested in phenomenon focused problematization (Monteiro et al., 2022).

Politics of Absence

A core theme across explorations of absence are the underlying values and ethico-political nature of the production, observation, maintenance, and elimination of absence (Bauchspies, 2014; de la Bellacasa, 2014). In the illustrative case of algorithmic decision-making in care, values of efficiency, objectivity and accuracy underlying the use of technology reinforce managerial practices grounded in a politics of extraction. Here, negatively perceived absences are eliminated through technology to reduce uncertainty, to extract labor (Veen et al., 2020), and improve the extraction of value (Jarrahi et al., 2021) while, new absences are produced through acts decontextualization. This line of research would seek to understand existing and alternative norms in managerial and algorithmic practices regarding absences and to make visible the political aspects of technology which often go unobserved (Susskind, 2018, 2022). Identifying the underlying politics at play and developing alternatives would produce new approaches to how absence is addressed and understood and would effectively identify what values and practices are privileged and silenced through acts of commission and omission in the field of IS. As interest in the politics of IS phenomenon are growing (Monteiro et al., 2022), this stream can speak directly to ongoing calls to identify the political aspects and implications embedded in IS phenomena and research. The types of phenomena that can be explored are: The alternative politics not currently present in IS due to acts of omission; The values that underlie existing approaches to digital transformation and datafication; and what stakeholders are involved in demarcating what, who and why something should or should not be absent. Working towards understanding these politics underlying absence can aid in deconstructing the role of negative phenomena in IS and reflect on what assumptions we implicitly privilege in our research.

Presencing Absence

That which is *absent* will present challenges for existing empirical approaches to research. Absences are not just unobserved but verge on being unobservable. One of the greatest difficulties in researching absence empirically is the ethereal nature of absence. The very act of recognizing what is not there changes what is absent to a “present emptiness”, thus, negating the character of absence in the process. Responding to this paradox challenge calls for an openness to alternative epistemic regimes and avoidance of streetlight effects where researchers become overly occupied with that which is easily measurable and observable (Lee & Sarker, 2023). Observing patterns in what is not there enables opportunities for IS researchers to account for absences in novel ways. As examples for methodological contributions to be made: Proposing methodologies accounting for absences, while not seeing absence as something *missing*; Highlighting methods to articulate absences as part of existing methodological approaches while not instantly attributing absence to uncertainty in research findings or limitations of the study; Carving the ways, contexts, and methods that can be employed to appropriately account for and even quantify absence. Working towards an epistemic regime of presencing absence can inform how IS scholars might employ alternative methods to empirically engage with negative phenomena and work towards calls for IS scholars to interrogate our commonly held assumptions (Monteiro et al., 2022).

Acts of Commission and Omission in IS

As another direction, future research centered around acts of commission or acts of omission might be

revisited with a focus on how absences are made in practice and research, rather than providing a solution via filling them. The Critical Literature Review approach, which aims to “strengthen knowledge development” within an extant area of literature (Paré et al., 2015, p. 189), might assist with articulating absences in areas where research efforts would otherwise seek to address them. Absence itself can become a topic of interest by critically reviewing and recognizing phenomena where absences have simply been overlooked, or treated as a gap to fill, but also where absence in and of itself is part of the phenomena under investigation. Examples may include technological adoption and the digital divide, where the use of specific technologies are absent; privacy and surveillance, or that which may be seen as desirably absent; accessibility, equity, and inclusion when it comes to individuals and groups that are absent from representation. Additionally, a hermeneutic approach (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014) might be fruitful in critically reviewing prior literature for the multiple and sometimes contradictory ways in which absences have been understood previously and what these multiplicities mean for IS and practice.

Futures Research: The (Un)-Making of Worlds

Research into absences lends itself to futures research in information systems (Hovorka & Peter, 2021). The interest in what futures are annihilated or made silent through acts of commission, omission and design solutions are a theme in epistemic inquiry of absences (Rappert, 2015). A tension exists between design solutions which foreclose other future possibilities and design practices without goals which create new alternatives and open spaces for “a better body of knowledge and a greater capacity for experience” (Simon, 1981, p. 187). Research into futures as a site of inquiry in information systems explores alternative future imaginaries (Peter et al., 2020) and provides insight into what is privileged in existing futures orientations. While it is important to ask, “what will happen in the future?” it is equally pertinent to consider “what won’t happen in the future?” To further reinforce a reflexive orientation in future studies researchers might engage with some of the following questions: What do acts of commission and omission reveal about current trajectories in the use and non-use of technology? What future doings and beings won’t exist? What technologies won’t be needed? Recognizing that the IS discipline is a future-oriented field, engaging with the role absences play in making future worlds “We can adopt other or even absent perspectives revealing what we fail to notice in our everyday encounters in technoculture” (Hovorka & Peter, 2021).

Conclusion

In this paper, we begin an examination of embracing absence as a problematization in IS scholarship – the valuable concept of absence lies in between what we can observe, know, and research. We argue for a relationality of presence and absence as a productive space for IS researchers to engage with foundational concepts of how what is absent changes understandings of data, measurements, and representations. We first address this conceptualization in reference to selected literature and use two illustrative cases to explore the multiplicity of absences and their real impact in shaping the world. General approaches to absence in research and practice see absences as something troubling and to be avoided. This is achieved through reducing uncertainty by filling gaps in knowledge with created data and technology (Croissant, 2014). The case of algorithmic decisions in healthcare illustrates how extrapolations from data and the use of technologies manifest as proxies for missing voices of patients who cannot speak for themselves. The case of homecare as a platform reveals the way in which algorithmic emphasis on specific value outcomes submerges and shadows alternative concepts which are of concern. We have outlined a series of avenues for future research to embrace absence encouraging alternative and more imaginative perspectives in IS. In outlining how not-doing and not-being in IS can be engaged with we do not seek to pathologize gap-filling or problematization. Instead, we seek to consider alternative constellations of engaging with absences where their existence is not problematic. Doing so we acknowledge that absences are of ontological importance and epistemological significance.

However, considering the elusive nature of absences, we caution against an overreliance or uncritical use of techniques which seek to *fill-the-gap*. Any attempt to structure absences and negatively defined phenomena, there is the risk of losing what is absent in the process (Rappert, 2015). Simply, by filling absence, we assume we know what is missing and annihilate other possibilities. This short paper identifies an opportunity to, counterintuitively, make absences more present and productive in the IS research discourse. Doing so, we respond to calls within IS to make the invisible visible, (Monteiro et al., 2022). Developing a conceptual apparatus for researching absence opens opportunities to embrace what we do not know and *what is not there* in a productive and meaningful way.

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