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The Scandinavian Tradition. An outsider's perspective

Andrew Burton-Jones
The University of Queensland, Australia, abj@business.uq.edu.au

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Reflection note

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Andrew Burton-Jones
The University of Queensland
abj@business.uq.edu.au

Introductory remarks

I am an outsider to Scandinavian IS research[1]. I grew up in Australia where I completed my Honours/Masters, moved to the USA for my PhD, served as Assistant and Associate Professor in Canada, then returned as a faculty member to Australia. I had never visited Scandinavia until ICIS 2022 and IRIS/SCIS 2023. Until now, I have not even attended any of the other leading European conferences such as the European Conference on Information Systems (ECIS).

Despite being an outsider, I've always looked up to the Scandinavian IS tradition. I began my career with a focus on conceptual/data modeling. Many leading conceptual modeling scholars were Scandinavian. I was also trained at schools (University of Queensland, Georgia State University, and University of British Columbia) that cared deeply about the 'core' of the IS discipline. At each of these schools, senior professors told me that the Scandinavian tradition was part of the core. During my PhD at Geor-

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gia State, Lars Mathiassen moved to us from Denmark and Magnus Mähring spent time with us too, allowing us to get a personal sense of the tradition. Finally, after returning home, I have worked closely with my colleague Jorgen Sandberg and periodically with his colleague Matts Alvesson. Jorgen and Matts are admired at our school for standing up for true scholarly values in an increasingly crazy academic world, and I put much of that down to their Scandinavian values.

Given this background, I was thrilled to visit IRIS/SCIS in 2023 and discuss the Scandinavian tradition. I felt like an outsider coming to an intellectual home. It was an honour to learn from a senior leader (Kalle Lyytinen) and a young star (Olivia Benfeldt) at the conference.

I am delighted to have the chance to reflect further on the Scandinavian tradition by responding to the questions below.

How has the Scandinavian research tradition impacted the IS discipline?
I see five strong influences, and I apologize if I have missed other major ones or misunderstood those below:

Pioneering work on the workplace implications of IT and the value of sociotechnical and participatory design methods.
Thoughtful summaries of this work are offered by Bødker and Kyng (2018), Ehn (2017), Bødker et al. (2000), and Kensing and Blomberg (1998). Although this is an old stream, it has continuing impact and importance today.

Pioneering work on conceptual/data modeling.
Examples include Langefors (1977), Lyytinen (1987), Iivari & Koskela (1987), Bubenko (1993), Kelly et al. (1996), Solvberg (1999), Agerfalk & Goldkuhl (2001), and Opdahl & Henderson-Sellers (2004). In my view, the visibility and influence of this work has reduced over time (not just in Scandinavia, but around the world). I think this is unfortunate, and a symptom of researchers having less understanding of what is happening 'under the hood.' Nevertheless, I believe it has continuing importance.

Pioneering work on IT infrastructure and standardization.
I think this stream came later than the prior two streams, but it is possible that it only came to my attention later. Seminal references are Hanseth et al. (1996), Hanseth et al. (2006), Tilson et al. (2010), Aanestad and Jensen (2011), and Henfridsson & Bygstad (2013). This stream keeps growing in importance.

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Research helping underserved communities.
The example I know best is HISP, awarded the *2023 AIS Impact Award* from the Association for Information Systems. Key papers include Braa et al. (2004), Braa et al. (2007), Roland et al. (2017), and Nicholson et al. (2022). I see this work as partly overlapping with the three prior strands of work, because I have seen elements of all three in many of these papers, along with a pragmatic focus on achieving real-world benefits.

Your intellect and ethos.
You also have an impact as individuals, beyond your papers. To an outsider like me, Scandinavian researchers have a reputation for being especially thoughtful (with respect to ideas, theory, and philosophy) and engaged (with organization and real-world issues). You also have a more interdisciplinary outlook (melding IS with Computer Science and Science & Technology Studies), which I think stems from you often being located in 'Informatics' departments rather than pure business schools. Compared to researchers from some other countries, you also appear less focused on the publication rat race and rankings, and more focused on the difference you can make through your ideas and engagement. For all these reasons, you have a very positive impact on the field.

Summarizing these five themes, it is clear that you have a major influence on the field. It is not surprising, therefore, that Scandinavian IS researchers are frequently seen in key leadership positions in the field. As a personal example, in my role as Editor-in-Chief of MISQ, I took it as given that I needed several members from the Scandinavian tradition on the MISQ editorial board. I felt that we needed editors who would appreciate your work and likewise that the field as a whole, and I personally, would benefit from the intellect and ethos that your scholars bring[2].

What lessons can we learn from the Scandinavian research tradition in finding a balance between practical relevance and addressing knowledge gaps in conducting research?
I'm tempted to say we should move to Scandinavia! This might be easier for early-career scholars, although I was encouraged to see senior scholars who recently made the move. An alternative answer would be that researchers outside Scandinavia can try to emulate the model. A third answer (in honor of my colleagues Jorgen Sandberg and Matts Alvesson) would be to notice the word 'gaps' in this question and say that we should scrutinize the underlying assumptions in the research and be willing to take a critical stand. This can help practitioners and researchers, although it might involve 'speaking truth to power' to either party.

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Personally, one of the research methods that I associate with the Scandinavian tradition is action research. I wish we would see more action research papers published in our top journals, and I encourage you to continue showing leadership in this methodological approach. It provides an excellent way to balance practical relevance and scholarly contribution.

How can the Scandinavian community contribute to the future direction of the IS field?

I do not think you need any advice on this point. Please just continue what you are doing. You have always been, and continue to be, intellectual leaders in our field. You also have strong institutional mechanisms (namely this journal and the IRIS/SCIS conference) for nurturing and supporting your community. You also now have many leaders from Scandinavia in other countries who have exported your approach and created 'influence networks' for you.

What is the influence of AI on the future identity and research topics of the IS discipline, and what role will the Scandinavian perspective[3] play?

While many implications of AI are uncertain, I think three points are self-evident.

1. The effects of AI commonly discussed in the news and the literature are not really the effects of AI per se, but the effects of AI embedded in a multitude of infrastructures and used in a multitude of work and social settings.

2. There will be many sociotechnical complexities associated with the implementation and use of AI (just like any technology) in work and social settings and this will offer important opportunities and responsibilities for IS researchers.

3. The use of AI will have unintended negative effects, such as reinforcing existing biases and revealing previously hidden biases, which will need to be addressed.

All three of these points play into the traditions of Scandinavian research. Many of us will look to your community for approaches and insights that can move the field forward.

How can the perspectives of newcomers and outsiders help stimulate and invigorate Scandinavian IS research?

That is an interesting question. I do not know the answer. As an outsider, I believe I have more to learn than to offer. Two answers that might be offered but which I disagree with are that you could benefit from advice on: (1) publishing in 'top' journals (because the Scandinavian tradition is associated with publishing across a broad range of outlets

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including, but not limited to, top journals), and (2) using more quantitative research methods (because the Scandinavian tradition is more associated with qualitative, action, and design approaches). These are major focus areas of researchers in the US and parts of Asia. In general, I hope that you do not pursue that path too hard. Instead, if I were to pick one area to focus on, I would suggest 'scaling up' your work to show how it can address global issues (e.g., sustainability, chronic disease, labor rights).

How can Scandinavian values of equality, equity, and sustainability inform and shape future IS research?

These values are now discussed extensively in many parts of the world. However, I believe these values are more deeply felt in Scandinavia and you have a much longer track record in addressing them. I, therefore, believe that you can help show others what is truly needed for making progress (with all the complexity that goes along with it).

Unfortunately, I also believe that too much research around the world is driven by a rankings/ratings regime, at the individual level (Burton-Jones et al. 2023) and institutional level (Burton-Jones & Wang 2023). This regime is pernicious because it places performance metrics above the performance itself. For instance, it would place publication in 'top journals' on topics of sustainability above making progress on sustainability. I believe that your values have enabled you to resist some of these pressures but that other regions have not been so fortunate. As a result, I am afraid that it is quite likely that your impact on other parts of the world will sometimes be purely symbolic (e.g., they may cite you in their top publications!) rather than substantive. Over time, I hope this can change.

While I might be wrong, I think another Scandinavian value is a willingness to be critical and speak truth to power. As a result, building on your longstanding work on digital infrastructures, I hope some researchers from (or influenced by) the Scandinavian tradition will study the role of digital infrastructures in defining and reinforcing incentive systems in both practice and in research because these incentive systems are frequently what prevent the achievement of substantive progress.

What steps can the Scandinavian community take to increase gender balance and amplify underrepresented voices in IS research?

You are already well-known leaders in these efforts. At national and regional levels, you are admired the world over for your national policies on parental leave and other equity-related policies. In IS research, you have been known for your sensitivity to underrepresented voices (such as workers' voices) throughout the history of our field. This tradition continues today, as individual members of your community are well-known

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for their leadership on these issues (e.g., Silvia Maseiro's role chairing the AIS Women's Network College and IFIP 9.4, and Margunn Aaanestad's role as SE in the forthcoming MISQ Special Issue on Digital Technologies and Social Justice). And I mentioned above long-standing research programs such as HISP that have addressed underserved communities around the world.

I am sure there are still issues in your own communities that you need to address, but I do not feel knowledgeable enough to comment on them. Instead, I will limit my remarks to how you can help others in the IS field. My sense is that you are already doing a lot. I think the best approach for amplifying these efforts is simply to take opportunities to gently educate and nudge those around you from other locations and traditions. I can give a personal example. In choosing the editorial board for my first year as MISQ EiC, I benefited greatly from a conversation with Lisen Selander. During my attempts to appoint her to the MISQ board, she made several comments that caused me to think differently about the responsibilities of editors and the scope of the journal. It was one of the most helpful conversations I had during the lead-up to my editorial term.

Overall, I thank everyone involved in IRIS/SCIS 2023 for having me at the conference. I especially thank Esko Penttinen for being an excellent host. I also thank all the editors of this journal for giving me a chance to offer these reflections.

Notes

1. Before leaving for IRIS/SCIS, a close colleague told me that I should use the word 'Nordic' rather than 'Scandinavian.' I use 'Scandinavian' here, for consistency with the name of the journal, but I remain unsure which one to use! I offer my apologies for my lack of knowledge.
2. I will take this chance to sincerely thank Eric Monteiro (SE), Chee-Wee Tan (SE), Mari-Klara Stein (AE), Lisen Selander (AE), and Margunn Aanestad (Special Issue SE), who were all based in Scandinavian schools for the bulk of my editorial term, for their service to the MISQ Editorial Board.
3. See our definition of 'Scandinavian' here: https://aisel.aisnet.org/sjis/vol35/iss1/1/)

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