EDITOR'S COMMENTS

The Alliance

On April 30, 2002, Gordon Davis, as Publisher of the *MIS Quarterly*, and Blake Ives, as then-President of the Association for Information Systems, signed a contract to establish an alliance between the *MIS Quarterly* and the Association for Information Systems. It was an historic day. Both organizations had committed to a course of action that potentially would have significant implications for their futures.

In this editorial, my goal is to paint a picture of the alliance. I wish to relate some history leading up to the alliance, describe the terms of the alliance, discuss the motivations for the alliance, and canvass some opportunities and pitfalls that might arise as a result of the alliance. At the outset, let me underscore that the material below presents a view of the alliance through my eyes. Other colleagues might hold a different view. Nonetheless, I hope that my recollections and perspectives are reasonably representative of those held by colleagues who were closely involved with the planning and implementation of the alliance.

Some History

In an editorial statement in the March 1993 issue of the *MIS Quarterly*, the then-four past Editors-in-Chief of the *MIS Quarterly* (Gary Dickson, Bill King, Warren McFarlan, and Jim Emery) and the then-current Editor-in-Chief (Blake Ives) indicated their concerns about the fragmented nature of the information systems discipline. They stressed the need for an international professional association to serve the discipline. All these colleagues played an important role in the establishment in 1994 of the Association for Information Systems (AIS). Indeed, Bill King became the first President of AIS. Moreover, three of the seven past Presidents of AIS have been Editors-in-Chief of the *MIS Quarterly* (Bill King, Blake Ives, and myself). A fourth past President (Gordon Davis) is the current Publisher of the *MIS Quarterly*. From the outset, therefore, AIS and the *MIS Quarterly* have had close ties. Perhaps somewhat ironically, however, the two organizations had only a relatively minor formal association prior to the alliance. When AIS was first formed, members could choose one journal "free" from a short list of journals. The *MIS Quarterly* was on this list. Subsequently, AIS changed its journal policy to allow members to obtain subscription discounts on a longer list of journals. Again, the *MIS Quarterly* was on this list.

During my term as President of AIS, AIS Council became increasingly concerned that service activities within the information systems discipline still remained too fragmented. Many colleagues were undertaking outstanding work in a number of important areas. Nonetheless, they often lacked adequate support. Moreover, sometimes their work was duplicated or ended up at cross-purposes with other colleagues' work. Accordingly, with the support of AIS Council, I made approaches to the then-governors of ISWorld and the then-Executive Committee of the International Conference on Information Systems (ICIS) to establish formal alliances with AIS. Through the hard work, perseverance, tolerance, and goodwill of many colleagues, mergers eventually occurred between AIS and ISWorld in 1998 and between AIS and ICIS in 2001. Three pieces of a four-piece jigsaw puzzle were in place. A fourth, however, somehow still had to be slotted in–the *MIS Quarterly*.

As early as 1997, I recall having an informal meeting with Gordon Davis and Blake Ives where we first talked about establishing some type of alliance between AIS and the *MIS Quarterly*. This discussion was motivated in part by the hard work of a 1996 AIS Committee (the members included Hank Lucas, Paul Gray, and Phillip Ein-Dor) that was charged with determining whether to set up a journal under the auspices of AIS. This Committee's work eventually led to the establishment of two fine journals: *Communications of the AIS* (with Paul Gray as Editor), and *Journal of the AIS* (with Phillip Ein-Dor as Editor). (Hank Lucas was Editor-in-Chief of both journals.) At the time, we concluded that the effort required and the risks involved in establishing an alliance with the *MIS Quarterly* seemed too daunting. AIS was already in the process of trying to effect alliances with ISWorld and ICIS. Expending resources to establish yet another alliance seemed unwise.

In the June 2001 issue of the *MIS Quarterly*, Allen Lee, as then-Editor-in-Chief, announced a "Twenty-Fifth Year Strategic Review of the *MIS Quarterly*." Allen wisely saw the need for the *MIS Quarterly* to take stock and to prepare for an uncertain future. He and Gordon Davis appointed a three-person review team: Blake Ives (Chair), Lynda Applegate, and myself. The review, and a number of other factors, all seemed to conspire to make the time for an alliance between AIS and the *MIS Quarterly* suddenly ripe. In this light, I flew to Houston for a meeting on Saturday, October 13, 2001, with Gordon Davis, Blake Ives, and Eph McLean. The meeting had two objectives: first, to determine whether an alliance between the *MIS Quarterly* and AIS had merit; and second, if so, what form the alliance might take.

At ICIS 2001 in New Orleans, Blake, Lynda, and I presented our proposal for an alliance between AIS and the *MIS Quarterly* to meetings of the AIS Council and the Senior Editors of the *MIS Quarterly*. We received critical yet constructive feedback from the AIS Council and the Senior Editors of the *MIS Quarterly*. Overall, however, we had strong support from a significant majority of our colleagues to proceed with the alliance. By May 1, 2002, the deed was done.

Structure of the Alliance

The structure of the alliance is relatively straightforward. AIS will pay an annual fee to the *MIS Quarterly* in return for the right to make all current and past issues of the *MIS Quarterly* available to its members. The journal will be accessible in online format only. At least for the moment (and perhaps indefinitely), AIS members wishing to obtain a print version of the *MIS Quarterly* will have to take out a separate subscription (currently discounted for AIS members). The online version will be available "free" to AIS members as part of the package of services offered by AIS to its members. It will be password-protected and resident in AIS's eLibrary.

An important feature of the alliance is the establishment of an AIS-*MIS Quarterly* Policy Committee. The Committee has significant operational and strategic responsibilities associated with the alliance. For example, it will monitor the *MIS Quarterly's* manuscript review performance and its finances. It will also seek to ensure that the *MIS Quarterly* responds in a timely fashion to opportunities and threats that arise. The Committee does *not* have responsibilities for editorial matters, however, nor for selection of members of the *MIS Quarterly's* Editorial Board. These remain with the Editor-in-Chief of the *MIS Quarterly* (who takes advice from the Senior Editors of the *MIS Quarterly*).

One important responsibility of the Committee is the selection of the Editor-in-Chief of the *MIS Quarterly*. In making this decision, presumably the Committee will take advice from key stakeholders in the *MIS Quarterly* and AIS.

The Committee has five members. AIS and the University of Minnesota (the latter being the owner and copyright holder of the *MIS Quarterly*) each appoint two representatives. One of AIS's representatives must have been a Publisher, Senior Editor, or Editor-in-Chief of the *MIS Quarterly* at some time. The fifth member of the Committee will be the Editor-in-Chief of the *MIS Quarterly* (or her/his designee). The Chair of the Committee will rotate biennially between AIS and the University of Minnesota.

Beside myself, the inaugural members of the Committee are:

- AIS Representatives: Blake Ives (Chair, Past President of AIS, and a past Editor-in-Chief of the *MIS Quarterly*); Cynthia Beath (AIS Vice-President, Publications and a past Senior Editor of the *MIS Quarterly*)

- University of Minnesota Representatives: Gordon Davis (Publisher of the *MIS Quarterly*); Rob Kauffman (Chair, Information and Decision Sciences Department, Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota)

The alliance contract provides for either the University of Minnesota or AIS to terminate the alliance. If such a decision were to be undertaken, the University of Minnesota retains full rights to the journal. The journal would no longer be available to AIS members via the eLibrary.

Some Benefits of the Alliance

It is not my prerogative to spell out in detail the benefits I believe will accrue to AIS. In a nutshell, however, AIS members now have easy access to a leading international information systems journal. While the *MIS Quarterly* is already available through a number of online journal database providers, only through AIS's eLibrary are the most-recent two years of the journal available. Moreover, some AIS members may not have access to online journals through their libraries. Economies of scale arise because the costs of producing the journal are spread across a larger number of subscribers. While the journal is offered "free" to AIS members, clearly some part of the membership fee covers the annual cost of the alliance arrangements. The cost per member is relatively small, however. In addition, as the membership of AIS increases, the cost per member of the alliance will decrease further. Aside from the discounted subscriptions on various journals that it offers to members, AIS now has a strong portfolio of journals that fall under its auspices: *Communications of the AIS*, *Journal of the AIS*, and the *MIS Quarterly*.

In my opinion, the benefits of the alliance from the perspective of stakeholders in the *MIS Quarterly* are compelling. From the viewpoint of authors, their published papers are now likely to be read by a larger number of colleagues. For AIS members, the journal is now easy and cheap to access. I predict, therefore, that on average each AIS member is likely to read a greater number of papers in the *MIS Quarterly*. Furthermore, because AIS is an international organization, a greater diversity of colleagues is likely to read papers in the *MIS Quarterly*. Hopefully we will break the national and cultural boundaries of the cohort of colleagues that constitutes the journal's traditional readership. The *MIS Quarterly* already has a high citation rate. The alliance ought to lead to an even higher citation rate.

An important outcome of the alliance is that the Editor-in-Chief is now accountable to the AIS-*MIS Quarterly* Policy Committee. As the incumbent Editor-in-Chief, I welcome this initiative. One principle I hold dearly is that we must all be accountable to someone for our actions. The clearer the lines of accountability, the more effective they will be. Colleagues often remark to me that journal editors are powerful individuals.

I have never held this view. Far from being a master of my colleagues, I am in fact a servant of my colleagues. As the Editor-in-Chief of the *MIS Quarterly*, in effect I act as trustee for the journal. Unless I act appropriately, I can quickly undermine the reputation of the journal. Should this outcome occur, my colleagues would be quick to censure me. With the Policy Committee now in place, colleagues have a clear means of voicing concerns about my actions. I must then justify my actions before the Policy Committee.

Some Economic Imperatives

Pragmatically, perhaps the most-compelling reasons for the *MIS Quarterly* to form an alliance with AIS are based on economic imperatives. This comment may seem incongruous, given the journal's high reputation within the information systems discipline. The future of many journals is now under threat, however, because technological developments are bringing about major changes in the structure and dynamics of the journal marketplace. For instance, new technology has enabled the creation of online databases that provide user-friendly, powerful interfaces to journal contents. As a result, researchers now have expectations that they can use search engines, identify articles that are relevant to them, download the articles, and print them. Many no longer want to visit libraries, seek out the hard-copy version of a journal, and then photocopy the relevant article. They deem the cost in terms of time and effort to be too high. Many also no longer wish to subscribe to journals. If they can access journal contents through online databases and their libraries pay for the cost of this access, they have little incentive themselves to pay for a subscription to the journal. Indeed, Tenopir and King (2001) report that the average number of personal subscriptions per scientist has halved over the last 20 years (see http://www.nature.com/nature/debates/e-access/Articles/tenopir.html.)

Journals now face a conundrum. If they do not make their contents available to the online database providers, they run the risk that their readership numbers (and thus their impact) will fall. If they sell their contents to online database providers, however, they face a future where increasingly they lose control over the price they can charge for their contents. Economies of scale and scope mean that only a few online database providers may survive in the long run. For example, to the extent an online database provider offers access to more journals, the fixed costs of providing the infrastructure can be amortized over larger numbers. Also, their services are more attractive to subscribers because they can offer a portal that provides access to many journals. Once online databases attain oligopolistic (and in some cases monopolistic) positions, basic economic theory predicts the outcomes that are likely to occur. Prices will be higher than a competitive equilibrium. In the 1996-2000 period, for example, the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC) found that journal prices increased on average 33.36 percent in the library and information sciences disciplines (http://www.arl.org/sparc/DI/appendixA.html). Furthermore, the owners of online databases will have the market power to force the prices they pay to journals for their contents to minimum levels.

Given this context, we see three trends in the marketplace for journals. First, journal publishers often own the online databases. The publishers have been quick to realize that as owners they will wield substantial power in the marketplace for journals. Second, the publishers have also been quick to realize that benefits accrue from owning a larger portfolio of journals–hence, the rash of mergers and takeovers that we have observed among publishers over the last few years. Third, many journals that were previously independent are now the "property" of publishers, presumably because they lack the power to survive.

As individual researchers drop their subscriptions to journals, the outcome is that their libraries are increasingly subsidizing their work. Whenever the ultimate consumers of services are not paying for the

services they consume, basic economic theory once more tells us that undesirable outcomes will occur. For a start, over-consumption of services will occur, which in turn will lead to over-production of services (i.e., too many journals will exist in the marketplace). Some libraries have now responded by ceasing subscriptions to some of the more costly online databases. Some have also formed associations to exert pressure on publishers to curb journal price increases (see, e.g., http://www.arl.org/sparc/).

One way in which libraries might respond to the financial difficulties they face is to charge individual researchers whenever they use online databases. If this situation were to occur, individual researchers would have to allow for journal access costs in their research budgets. For two reasons, however, it is unclear whether this approach would be successful. First, by way of analogy, in the past, many universities have tried to charge individual researchers for their use of computing services. These attempts have met with mixed success. Because of the difficulties that have arisen, often these chargeout schemes have been abandoned. As a result, universities have continued to subsidize individual researchers by providing them with free computing services. A similar outcome might occur with provision of online database services. Second, if libraries begin to charge individual researchers to access online journal databases, researchers then have incentives to go directly to the providers and pay the prices charged by the providers. What cost-effective role can a library play once it begins to charge for online database access services? It is an intermediary whose costs must be met, yet it is unclear what value-adding services it can provide over and above the services provided by the owner of the online database. Unless the library's costs are subsidized, presumably their costs to provide access to online databases will be higher than the costs charged by the owner (to cover the additional costs of operating the intermediary).

Here, then, is the bottom line. I believe that independent journals like the *MIS Quarterly* (journals not affiliated with a professional association or a private publisher) will find it increasingly difficult to survive. One solution, therefore, would be to sell the *MIS Quarterly* to a publisher. Given the high standing of the journal, presumably an attractive price could be obtained. The downside to this solution is that the price of the *MIS Quarterly* most likely would increase substantially. This outcome is antithetical to those of us who hold dearly to traditional values of scholarship, especially low-cost, widespread dissemination of ideas. It also flies in the face of the stance taken by the University of Minnesota since the inception of the *MIS Quarterly*. The University has never sought to make a profit from the *MIS Quarterly*. Rather, it has levied subscription fees with the purpose of covering only the costs of the journal. The goal always has been for the journal to play an important service role within the discipline.

An alternative solution is to affiliate the *MIS Quarterly* with a professional association. The primary advantage of this solution is that the costs of running the journal are spread across a large number of scholars via a component of their association subscription fees. The survival of the journal then does not depend on the level of fees it can negotiate with the online database providers. Rather, any funds the journal obtains from the providers can be used to offset the costs borne by members of the association to maintain the journal. Hopefully, an association is also better placed to negotiate access fees for its journals than the journal acting alone. This is the solution we have adopted via the *MIS Quarterly's* alliance with AIS.

In case the alliance appears to be the outcome of pure self-interest on the part of the *MIS Quarterly*, on one matter let me be clear. If a major journal in the information systems field fails for some reason, the consequences will be undesirable for all of us in the discipline. Aside from the impairment that will occur to knowledge dissemination within the discipline, it takes substantial time to establish the reputation of journals. In the absence of good standing, publications in a journal are unlikely to have much impact on the decisions made by promotions and tenure committees.

Some Costs and Risks of the Alliance

Again, it is not my prerogative to examine in detail the costs and risks of the alliance from the perspective of AIS. In brief, however, the most-obvious cost is the annual compensation paid by AIS to the *MIS Quarterly* for the right of online access by its members to current and past issues of the journal. AIS also bears the cost of providing the infrastructure to make the journal available to its members via its eLibrary facilities. Potentially this cost and the alliance in general may inhibit AIS from undertaking important initiatives that otherwise it would wish to pursue.

An important issue canvassed during our discussions on the alliance was the place of the *MIS Quarterly* vis-à-vis AIS's two existing journals—*Communications of the AIS* and *Journal of the AIS*. Fewer concerns arose about the relationship with *Communications of the AIS*. The missions of *Communications of the AIS* and the *MIS Quarterly* are different. The former seeks to provide fast publication of both professional and research material that is of interest to the discipline. To achieve the goal of timeliness, material submitted to the *Communications of the AIS* is not subjected to rigorous review. *Communications of the AIS* has quickly established a firm footing in a particular niche within the information systems discipline.

The relationship between the *MIS Quarterly* and the *Journal of the AIS*, however, is more complex. Both seek to publish high-quality research papers. One point of difference is that the former has always been a print journal, while the latter has always been an electronic journal. Nonetheless, this difference is not substantive in terms of the roles the two journals might play within AIS. In this regard, I have had discussions with Sirkka Jarvenpaa, the current Editor of the *Journal of the AIS*, on how the two journals might support rather than undermine each other. The matter is not straightforward, and our discussions are ongoing.

An important exposure for the *MIS Quarterly* is potentially a decrease in its subscriber base. We expect that some members of AIS will cease their print subscriptions and rely instead on their online access. The impact on subscription revenue, print runs, printing costs, and mailing costs is unclear. Thus, the economic consequences of the alliance are still uncertain. More salient, however, are our concerns about the *MIS Quarterly's* viability if the alliance at some stage were to be terminated. If our subscription base has been undermined by the alliance, our ability to restart as an independent journal will have been compromised. As I indicated above, the resulting problems would not be the *MIS Quarterly's* alone. The information systems discipline overall would feel the impact.

The loss of some part of its subscriber base may also mean that the *MIS Quarterly* is less attuned to its market. We now regularly obtain feedback from subscribers as to what they like and dislike about the journal. Often when subscriptions are terminated, colleagues also provide us with reasons. At times the feedback is painful, but it has the positive effect of forcing us to reflect hard on our practices. With the cost of the *MIS Quarterly* essentially bundled in with the AIS membership subscription, AIS members might be less concerned to provide the sorts of feedback that enable the *MIS Quarterly* to remain on track.

The *MIS Quarterly* also has never operated under the auspices of an association. Independently it has developed policies and procedures that somehow engender substantial formal and tacit knowledge among members of its Editorial Board, especially its Senior Editors, about how the *MIS Quarterly* should operate. Many Reviewers also acquire this knowledge through the feedback they receive on review outcomes and their interactions with Senior Editors and Associate Editors. These formal and informal processes and the resultant knowledge and culture are the foundation of the *MIS Quarterly's* core competencies and its competitive advantage. One risk we face is that processes and procedures imposed by AIS with the best intentions unwittingly begin to undermine the *MIS Quarterly's* core competencies. To some extent this

concern is mitigated through the Editor-in-Chief still retaining complete authority over editorial matters and the appointment of the Editorial Board. Nonetheless, both AIS and the journal must be diligent if we are to avoid such an outcome occurring.

Overall, however, I believe the likely benefits of the alliance far outweigh the likely costs of the alliance. I am confident the *MIS Quarterly* will have a greater impact as a result of the alliance and thus be even more attractive as an outlet for the highest-quality research. I am confident, also, that AIS members will value highly their easy access to the journal.

Acknowledgements: Some Major Players in the Alliance

The alliance has come about through the hard work of many colleagues. In particular, the following individuals played key roles: Lynda Applegate, Cynthia Beath, Jan DeGross, Rudy Hirschheim, Sirkka Jarvenpaa, Hank Lucas, Reagan Ramsower, Sam Spears, Mike Vitale, Rick Watson, and Bob Zmud. I would like to acknowledge four colleagues, however, who played special roles in bringing the alliance to fruition: Gordon Davis, Blake Ives, Allen Lee, and Eph McLean. Finally, the Senior Editors of the *MIS Quarterly* and the members of AIS Council all provided insightful and constructive advice when the terms of the alliance were being considered. To all these colleagues I am indebted for their support and hard work. Time will tell whether we have made astute decisions. For the moment, however, I am optimistic that the alliance will bring great benefits to both AIS and the *MIS Quarterly*.

Announcement of Special Issue and New Special-Issue Policy ▰▰▰

Following the Executive Overviews, and appearing as the first item in this issue, is an introduction written by Bob Zmud to the *MIS Quarterly's* Special Issue on "Redefining the Organizational Roles of Information Technology in the Information Age." The Senior Editors for the Special Issue are Jeff Sampler, Al Segars, and Bob Zmud. On behalf of the *MIS Quarterly*, I extend our sincere thanks to Jeff, Al, and Bob for the outstanding work they have done. The first paper from the Special Issue appears in this issue of the *MIS Quarterly*. Other papers from the Special Issue will appear in subsequent issues of the journal.

On the matter of Special Issues, the Senior Editors have recently approved a new policy. The details of this policy are available at the *MIS Quarterly's* Web site (http://www.misq.org/policies/SIPolicy.pdf). Colleagues wishing to propose a Special Issue should consult this policy.

Finally, as always I would welcome your feedback on any aspect of the *MIS Quarterly*'s activities (e.g., the Alliance, policy on Special Issues).

Ron Weber
Editor-in-Chief
weber@commerce.uq.edu.au