EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Strategizing for Compelling and Significant Research

In this issue's editorial comment, I would like to introduce a framework that scholars might use to conceptualize the social and political dimensions of doing research. Attention to the traditional "objective" (cognitive and intellectual) dimensions of research is, of course, important for research to be valid, but attention to the social and political dimensions is no less important for research to have significance and, hence, to be considered publishable. I believe that authors can make their papers more likely to be compelling and significant if they additionally attend to the social and political dimensions of their craft.

I alluded to this topic in the previous (March 1999) issue's editorial comment where I drew an analogy between information systems and research on information systems. For both, there is a need to manage the emergent interactions between the technology and the social setting. For information systems, the technology takes the form of hardware, software, data, and networks, while the social setting takes the form of people and procedures. For research on information systems, the technology takes the form of our research methods and our established bodies of research knowledge, while the social setting takes the form of the reviewing process, schools of thought, editors, program chairs, reviewers, authors, readers, tenure committees, and funding agencies. If, as scholars, we recognize the importance of interactions between the technology and the social setting in what we study, then we must be no less willing to recognize the importance of interactions between the technology and the social setting in what we ourselves do in our own work as scholars.

Typically, scholars are well versed in the cognitive and intellectual dimensions of research, which cover aspects such as (depending on the genre of research) experimental design, member checking, relative explanatory power, contextualization, and so forth; these are the aspects of research that scholars begin to assimilate when they are doctoral students, that they practice and refine when they are professors doing research, and that referees and editors emphasize in their comments to authors. These are the aspects that scholars consider when they formulate what they call a research design or study design. Undeniably, a good research design is essential to good research. However, to produce research that is not only valid, but also compelling and significant, a scholar might also find it helpful to have a research strategy, which I define as pointing a scholar's attention to the social and political dimensions in his or her research setting.

The history of science and sociology of science are a source of insights on this topic. A less conventional, but more novel and perhaps more practical, source of insights would be a framework with which most all information systems (IS) scholars, in our roles as faculty members in management schools, are already familiar: Porter's (1980) framework for industry and competitive analysis. Whereas the standard use of Porter's framework is to assist in formulating the business strategy for a firm, I propose using it to assist in formulating the research strategy for an IS scholar. In Figure 1, I adapt Porter's framework from Applegate et al. (1996, pp. 85-86).

When teaching MBA students, many of us find Porter's framework helpful for identifying and classifying the external business forces that the environment exerts on a particular firm. When formulating a research strategy, Porter's framework can be similarly helpful for identifying and classifying the external social and political forces that the research setting exerts on a given scholar.

First (at the top of Figure 1), for the research domain or specialty that an IS scholar chooses, the scholar ought to consider how many other scholars would be able to enter the same domain. In other words, what would be the "threat of new scholarly entrants" to the scholar's chosen research domain? For instance, an IS scholar might select a technological specialty that computer science scholars can also study—but then, the IS scholar might find herself in a field crowded with computer science scholars. Likewise, an IS

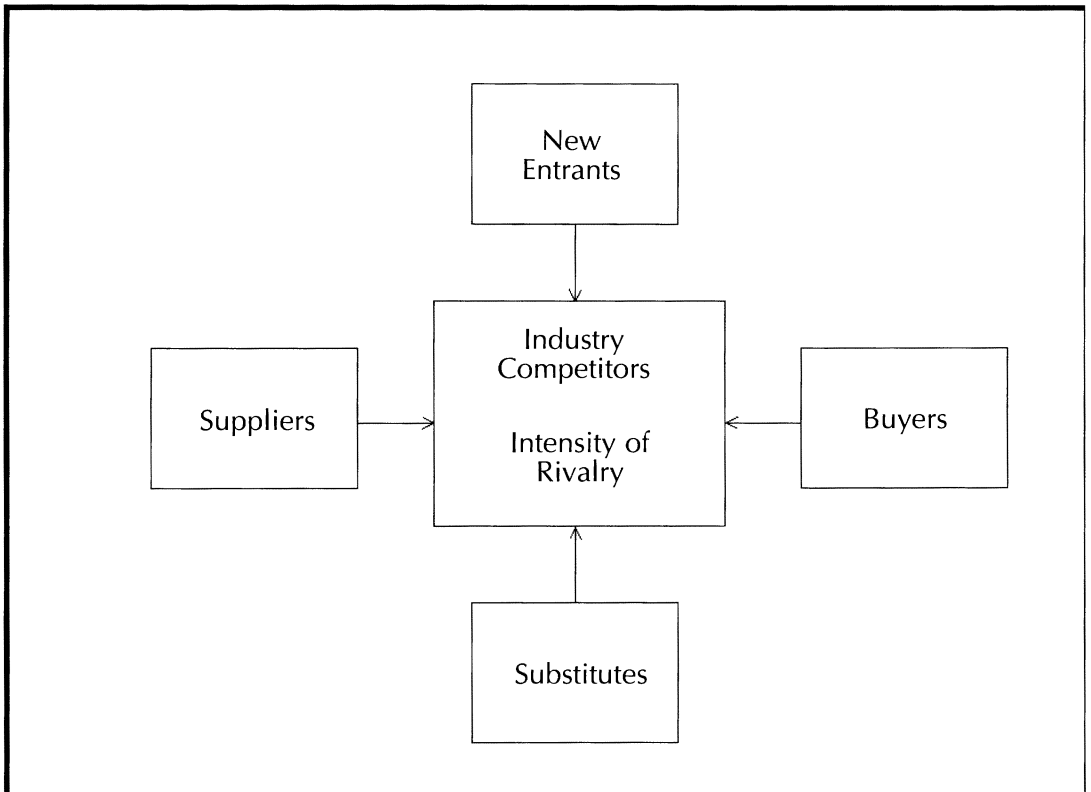

Figure 1.

Note: This figure is adapted from Applegate, et al., 1996.

scholar who chooses a research specialty that psychologists are as qualified to study can find himself in a field crowded with psychologists. On the other hand, selecting a research domain at the intersection of the technological and the organizational would reduce the threat of new entrants to the domain—and within this intersection, a scholar could search for an even finer specialty for which there would be fewer qualified competitors.

Second (at the bottom of Figure 1), an IS scholar ought to consider if other research studies can readily substitute for the research that she intends to publish. In other words, what would be the "threat of substitute research products" in the scholar's chosen research domain? In a research environment where the publications are predominantly quantitative and positivist research, there might be little that could substitute for qualitative and interpretive research. Similarly, in a research environment where publications involving laboratory experiments predominate, there might be little that could substitute for a field study.

Third (at the left of Figure 1), there is the matter of the "relationship with research suppliers," who control access to the resources that an IS scholar requires in order to execute his research. Access to data (such as field sites), time (such as course releases or a reasonable teaching load), and funding (for salary, equipment, assistants) are among the most common supplies that an IS scholar needs, and all depend on the scholar's relationship to his research suppliers. Having the right relationship with the right supplier of data (for instance, a local firm that makes available its managers to participate in an on-site group support systems experiment) can make a scholar's research more compelling and significant than another scholar's.

Fourth (at the right of Figure 1), and (in my view) most important for helping to make an IS scholar's research compelling and significant, are considerations about the "relationship with research buyers" for the scholar's work. Where the scholar is approaching an academic audience, the buyers would include journal referees, journal editors, journal readers, conference program chairs, tenure committee members, external tenure evaluators, colleagues at the same university, and colleagues around the world. Referees and editors are among the most important research buyers because they occupy positions along the critical path of the dissemination of an IS scholar's research. Here, it could be advantageous for an IS scholar to anchor his research in theories with which his audience (reviewers and editors) is already familiar and that it would already recognize as important. Refuting or substantially extending an existing and well-known theory could be compelling and significant. In other words, where a wealth of theoretical work already exists, the scholars who contributed to this body of knowledge constitute an immediate audience for any new paper (such as a submission to *MIS Quarterly*) that would directly address (whether by substantively extending or by boldly challenging) their previous research. In contrast, to present a topic as important simply because "this topic has not been studied before" would fail even to try to tap into what the reviewers and editors might find interesting. Along similar lines, incremental studies and replications generally have much less appeal to research "buyers."

The formulation of a research strategy does not entail somehow maximizing the research significance that each one of the four factors can individually yield. For an overall optimization, tradeoffs are typically required. In my own research, for instance, I found that my heavy teaching load as an untenured professor precluded me from doing field work. As a result, I used other scholars' data and even published some non-empirical (methodological) papers; in doing this, I partly compensated for my lack of a relationship with research suppliers (namely, corporate field sites) on whom I could rely for data. In choosing to pursue interpretivism within qualitative research and, within interpretivism, to do hermeneutical research, I benefited from further diminishing both the threat of new scholarly entrants and the threat of research substitutes. And, most important for publishing, I happened to choose topics that, in being timely, had buyers. My papers on research methodology and my papers on electronic communications apparently met an already receptive audience of reviewers, editors, program chairs, and colleagues at other universities who showed a genuine interest in my work and who offered me advice and even mentoring. I must admit that I did not have Porter's framework in mind when I stumbled on my research strategy; however, Porter's framework apparently provides a sufficient basis for a plausible post hoc reconstruction of how my research strategy worked.

Also illustrating the importance of optimizing one's overall strategy, rather than somehow maximizing each of the individual four factors, is the situation where there is little or no prior theory in which an IS scholar can anchor her research. In this situation, the fourth factor would impose considerable risk and effort on the IS scholar (because the buyers would have no experience in purchasing this new research product and might not even know that they need it), hence suggesting that she design or select an overall strategy where the risk and effort imposed by the remaining three factors (threat of new entrants, threat of substitute research products, and relationship with research suppliers) would be commensurately lower, so that the overall risk and effort would even out to a reasonable level.

For a final example of the importance of optimizing one's overall research strategy instead of individually maximizing each of the four factors, there is the situation in which an IS scholar might further reduce the threat of new scholarly entrants by further specializing her research topic, but to the point where it becomes overly specialized. Such a strategy would diminish the threat of new scholarly entrants, but could also incur new risks and efforts in requiring the scholar to explore new methods, develop new instruments, and perhaps even build a completely new theoretical framework—all in order to pursue the overly specialized research. The new risks and efforts that a scholar would incur in this attempt to reduce the threat of new entrants to her chosen research domain would not necessarily have the effect of rendering a research strategy infeasible, but would need to be balanced by lowered levels of risk and effort associated with the remaining three factors (relationship with research suppliers, relationship with research buyers, and threat of substitute research products).

Editors and reviewers are typically interested in receiving research submissions that not only competently execute their research designs, but are also compelling and significant. The Porter framework offers to IS scholars a way of thinking about how to formulate a research strategy, apart from a research design, by which to achieve research that is compelling and significant and that also points a scholar's attention to the tradeoffs involved in achieving this objective.

Changes in the Editorial Board

Beginning in January of this year, the following four scholars commenced three-year terms as associate members of the Editorial Board: Alan Dennis (University of Georgia), Laurie Kirsch (University of Pittsburgh), Kar Yar Tam (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology), and Bernard Tan (National University of Singapore). They have replaced the following, whose terms as associate editors have expired: Henri Barki (École des Hautes Études Commerciales, Montréal), Sal March (University of Minnesota), Peter Todd (University of Houston), and Ilze Zigurs (University of Colorado, Boulder). All four of the retiring associate editors have done excellent jobs (which, of course, puts them in the running to be a future senior editor!), and we (the senior editors) have selected the newly entering associate editors because, based on their track records as reviewers for *MIS Quarterly*, we know them to be no less able.

Potential authors may take advantage of the composition of the Editorial Board by nominating the associate editors whom they prefer and by sending their manuscript directly to the senior editor of their choice. The choice of associate editor and senior editor cannot be guaranteed because of scheduling and other considerations, but we often manage to honor the author's request. Additional details about submitting a manuscript are available at http://www.misq.org/roadmap/standards.html.

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