

EDITOR'S COMMENTS

MISQ, Inc. or an Online Collective? Is There a Journal Personality and What it Means for Authors

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Overview

This editorial takes what I trust will be the controversial position that journals do not have a singular perspective on what should be published, and instead represent loosely formed collectives of individuals with varying motives and interests. Analogously, they are not corporate hierarchies as in *MISQ, Inc.*, but rather Theory Y-styled collectives of scholars. I offer suggestions for what such a perspective means to individual authors who interact with the editorial staff. One useful outcome of proposing such an idea is to open a dialogue within the IS community on the implications of journals as loose collectives.

Statement of the Issue

At conference receptions and other venues, one frequently hears scholars say, fairly generically, that, “Such-and-such a journal does not like certain kinds of work.” Placed in the context of the present journal, such a statement might be rendered as, “*MISQ* doesn’t like ethnographic work” or “*MISQ* doesn’t like design science research.”¹

From a purely linguistic point of view, statements like these are of inherent interest because of what is conveyed by the subtleties of attribution. These statements imply that the journal can be characterized by a single source of attitudes and opinions, almost as if it were a person and, thus, had a personality.

What can be the underlying meaning of such statements? One possible interpretation of these statements is that IS scholars hold an underlying view that the journal is represented by a single individual associated with the journal—let’s say the editor-in-chief (EIC). Alternatively, it is possible that what the sentence means is that scholars think that there are a set of rules or policies governing the journal that are equivalent to a form of “liking” or “disliking” a particular topic or methodology. In the latter case, one would have to believe that the entire editorial board and the reviewers assigned to papers is conversant with these likes and dislikes, subscribes wholeheartedly to them, and that the journal, therefore, can be faithfully represented as having this attitude.

My feeling is that either view is erroneous and leads to many misconceptions about the nature of top academic journals and the process whereby submissions to these journals are either accepted or rejected.²

¹Please note that these are randomly selected examples, neither of which is true. Indeed, *MISQ*’s editorial board has several senior editors (SEs) and associate editors (AEs) in both of these domains. The presence of an SE or AE on a journal board is intended to signal potential authors that the journal welcomes certain research paradigms.

²I am confining my remarks in the following editorial to those journals that have consistently received top ratings in the profession and consequently have a large pool of submissions. It may well be that in journals with fewer submissions, EICs exercise more personal control over acceptances and rejections.

In the first case, the EIC of most top journals, particularly *MISQ*, plays two major roles—neither of which is focused on exercising editorial judgment over every paper submitted to the journal. The first role is that of ambassador, in which the journal is represented to others such as associations, disciplines, university and practitioner groups, and individuals. The second role played by the EIC is that of strategist in which new topics are encouraged and approved (notably in Special Issues), under-served domains are filled with SE (and AE) appointments, and other strategic initiatives pursued. While authors may make presumptions that editorial appointments represent interest areas of the journal—and more precisely the lack of interest in areas not represented by appointed editors—in fact, editorial appointments are meant to cover as wide a diversity of interests as possible, recognizing that IS is a diverse field. Thus, if one were to construct a Venn diagram of all the interest areas in IS overlaid with all the interest areas of the editors, there may indeed be, inadvertently, certain interest areas not covered at any point in time by such appointments. Thus, the third role of the EIC is sometimes to serve as an SE in those cases in which current SEs are not familiar with or, for some reason, cannot handle a manuscript.

Note that none of these roles have anything to do with which specific papers survive the editorial process.³ Whereas an EIC may exercise a light hand in excluding some papers because of what is known as “poor fit,” I would contend that this is less often due to a substantive reading of the submission and more often a judgment about topics wide of the mark (e.g., a paper that was for all intents and purposes a marketing model with its only IS dimension being a cyber setting).

My primary argument in this editorial is that top journals tend to delegate decision-making authority as to which papers succeed and which do not continue in the reviewing process *not* to a single person such as the EIC or to a single set of norms, but rather to a diversely-constructed collective called the “editorial board.” This editorial board is composed of many, many individuals and is in no sense a single personality or “sole” authority in articulating and communicating what the journal likes or does not like. Moreover, it is my belief that academics are the classical case of cats who do not submit well to being herded and that even if there were policies specifying detailed criteria for which papers the journal “liked” or “disliked,” many individualists would not necessarily comply.

But let’s pursue this second interpretation further, that is, the interpretation that rules and policies that are promulgated by the journal (on a website or via editorial board meetings, etc.) are similar to an individual exercising his or her personality and deciding on the fate of papers. Below are the mission statements of the journals taken as a representative subset of top IS journals referred to above.⁴ Let’s list them first and then discuss them as a whole.⁵

MIS Quarterly’s mission (<http://misq.org>)

[The journal invites papers related to] the enhancement and communication of knowledge concerning the development of IT-based services, the management of IT resources, and the use, impact, and economics of IT with managerial, organizational, and societal implications. Professional issues affecting the IS field as a whole are also in the purview of the journal.

Information Systems Research’s mission (<http://www.informs.org/index.php?c=31&kat=-+INFORMS+Journals>)

[The journal] is a leading international journal of theory, research, and intellectual development, focused on information systems in organizations, institutions, the economy, and society. It is dedicated to furthering knowledge in the productive application of information technologies to human organizations and their management and, more broadly, to improved economic and social welfare.

Journal of the Association for Information System’s mission (<http://aisel.aisnet.org/jais/about.html>)

[The journal] publishes the highest quality scholarship in the field of information systems. *J AIS* is inclusive in scope and covers all aspects of Information Systems and Information Technology. The Journal [sic] publishes rigorously developed and

³The exceptions to this observation would be when the EIC was also serving as the SE on a paper. At *MISQ*, for instance, all Issues & Opinions category papers are handled, by tradition and by policy, by the EIC.

⁴I have specifically excluded the mission statements of excellent journals in our field that specialize. *Information Systems Journal*, for instance, focuses on qualitative research according to its mission statement.

⁵The ordering of these journals is entirely haphazard and has no meaning. It also does not claim to be in any sense a complete list of top IS journals. A more complete list would have overburdened the reader to no real purpose. The intention here is simply to show that such mission statements are remarkably similar if we zoom out to the 10,000 meter level.

forward looking conceptual and empirical contributions. The Journal [sic] encourages multidisciplinary and nontraditional approaches.

Empirical contributions may use any appropriate methodology as long as the research is soundly designed and executed. *J AIS* particularly welcomes contributions that provide theoretical insights that advance our understanding of information systems and information technology in organizations and society.

Journal of Management Information System's mission (<http://www.jmis-web.org/profile/>)

The journal is a widely recognized forum for the presentation of research that advances the practice and understanding of organizational information systems. It serves those investigating new modes of information delivery and the changing landscape of information policy making, as well as practitioners and executives managing the information resource. A vital aim of the quarterly is to bridge the gap between theory and practice of management information systems.

The journal accepts empirical and theoretical submissions that make a significant contribution to the field of management information systems. Such contributions may present:

- experimental, survey-based, or theoretical research relevant to the progress of the field
- paradigmatic designs and applications
- analyses of informational policy making in an organizational, national, or international setting
- investigations of social and economic issues of organizational computing

European Journal of Information System's mission (<http://www.palgrave-journals.com/ejis/about.html>)

[The journal] provides a distinctive European perspective on the theory and practice of information systems for a global audience. We encourage first rate research articles by academics, but also case studies and reflective articles by practitioners. We provide a critical view on technology, development, implementation, strategy, management and policy.

Organization Science's mission (<http://www.informs.org/index.php?c=31&kat=-+INFORMS+Journals>)

[The journal] provides one umbrella for the publication of research from all over the world in fields such as organization theory, strategic management, sociology, economics, political science, history, information science, systems theory, communication theory, artificial intelligence, and psychology.

A quick glance at these mission statements indicates that they are broadly worded, encompassing a vast array of topics and methodologies, and generally tend to draw only fluid boundaries around the general phenomenon. All implicitly or explicitly require theoretical advancement. All recognize the importance of information systems, information sciences, and/or information technology. All appear to allow different units of analysis, different methods of analysis, and different theoretical frames.

Assuming for the moment that these mission statements are not supplemented by hard-and-fast policies that prohibit the journal from considering certain topics, then the argument that a particular journal has policies that discount or prioritize some work over others seems not be supported by the openness of these published mission statements.

Why then would an author draw this conclusion—that some journals prefer certain kinds of research more than others? Clearly, a look at published research by journal could seem to demonstrate a leaning toward one type of research over another. This, I argue, is a reflection not of the journal, but of the makeup of the editorial board (typically an ad hoc group) in place when the papers were accepted. A believer in the single perspective might then argue, “But the editorial board is chosen by the EIC and SEs and those that are known to others are more likely to get chosen, so even if there isn’t a singular reflection, there still may be an insularity.”

I would argue that this apparent insularity is only on the surface, similar to a cross-sectional correlation appearing to indicate causation, but with a host of additional variables showing that the relationship is, in reality, spurious. That is, at any point in time, on the *MISQ* board, there are X number of editors rotating off, making insularity more difficult because of sheer numbers. Moreover, at any point in time, there may be a wave of papers published on a similar topic not necessarily because of the interests of the board, but because of

the interests of the large authorial population. Statistically, with an acceptance rate of X percent, more submissions on a particular topic will yield more acceptances in that category (*ceteris paribus*). Therefore, different journals, I contend, do not necessarily appreciate or welcome certain topics more than others.⁶ It could well be a statistical anomaly giving this impression.

A major problem with the singular perspective thesis is the advice that senior scholars frequently give to junior scholars that one should “target” certain journals because they have a different audience that may be more appreciative of one’s work. As you can see from the arguments presented so far, I do not believe that the audiences of our top IS journals differ that much (if mission statements are any guide) as I likewise do not believe that the members of the ad hoc editorial boards currently differ that much. In fact, it would be interesting to see the extent to which the editorial boards of our top IS journals “flow” from one journal to the next over time. Every EIC is attempting to garner a top-notch set of experts for her/his board, but since appointments are usually not in perpetuity, there is a large degree of rotation of membership within the pool of well-qualified editors. This overall pool changes over long periods of time, but all top journals draw from the same well.

Then should one ever target a journal? At the conclusion of a research project, just as the author writes up the results, s/he may determine that there has been a recent spate of articles in a certain journal on a particular topic that deserve referencing and thus target the manuscript to that journal. But this is not the same thing as targeting a research study from the outset to a particular journal. Targeting a particular journal at the outset unnecessarily limits creativity and impact. A research project may have applicability to a broader organizational audience (as with *Organization Science* or *Management Science*) or a more focused IS audience (as with *MISQ*). Deciding in advance that the research project only has potential for one and not the other harms the progression of science and our discipline.

But, if, as I argue, a journal *per se* does not have a personality, then perhaps it has a collective personality. I examine this possibility next.

The Journal as a Collective or Community of Practice

From the above logic, then, I suggest that when people say a journal likes such-and-such, they may be referring to how the “collection” of editors views certain topics,⁷ as in papers that have been published in the past by the journal. I view this interpretation—that editors represent a collection—as equally inaccurate.

There are practically an infinite number of reasons why a paper has been accepted by a journal so to assume that if a certain topic has or has not appeared previously in the journal this will affect future behavior of the editors is “most strange and curious” (as Alice said to the rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*). Whereas there may be a few, reclusive and scholarly individual editors who are intimately familiar with the entire opus of a journal, most are not. Even if they were familiar with the entire journal opus, it is not clear that the mere appearance of a topic in the past in the journal could somehow, in the minds of editors, predicate the acceptability of a given paper in a future issue of the journal with a different set of editors.

Why would it? Papers are not accepted on the basis of whether the broad topic area of a submission has found an earlier spot in the journal, but on whether the submission is of sufficient quality. Quality is judged on much subtler factors such as contribution, clarity of argument, theoretical interest, and practical importance. Nowhere in this list is the criterion that the research domain has been represented in prior issues of the journal.

Whereas I am skeptical that journals have a meaningful existence in the real world as collections, they may certainly be “collectives.” What is a collective? Collectives act in a manner similar to communities of practice in the way they adopt social norms and practices. They can develop a distinctive culture and sense of etiquette. They evolve and adapt over time.

⁶This is particularly so when the EIC appoints editors with an interest in certain research domains. This is a signal to the community that the EIC would like to more overtly consider papers from these domains. The appointments of specialists in the economics of IS and design science research as SEs at *MISQ* in 2008 can and should be read as indications of a broadening of the types of papers that the current collective of SEs will be accepting and publishing.

⁷The word *collection* connotes strong coupling.

Table 1. Characteristics of Loosely Coupled and Tightly Coupled Organizational Designs

#	Loosely Coupled Collective	Tightly Integrated Hierarchy
1	Minimal coordination	Iterative coordination necessary to get work done
2	Direction and focus changes with membership	Membership can change without affecting direction and focus
3	Personal interests not subordinated to hierarchy	Subordinates personal interests to hierarchical organizational interests
4	The possibility of grassroots impact on decisions	Hierarchical decision-making from above

What is also extremely important about the constituency of communities of practice is that their membership typically changes over time. If one ceases to practice a given profession or art, then it makes little sense to continue membership and that is exactly why members drop out and new members join in an active community of practice.

What is clear about collectives, however, is that they do not have a singularity of purpose or a central driving force, such as that exerted by a strong leader or CEO. The roles in collectives are fungible.

Implications of Journals as Communities of Practice

If, indeed, journals are ever-changing communities of practice and editorial boards represent not tightly coupled hierarchies of individuals, but loosely coupled collectives, what are the implications for how you should think about the “personality” of a journal or the many personalities of top journals? More than one might suppose at the onset. Table 1 summarizes the main points of distinction.

If, as I suggest, the *MISQ* Editorial Board operates not as a tightly integrated hierarchical structure but as a loosely coupled online collective, this has several implications, as exemplified by the table. First, editorial board members will not spend considerable time coordinating their efforts; therefore, how one paper is handled by one editorial board member may not be the same as it is handled by another editorial board member. Second, editorial board members will not necessarily and consistently adhere to one focus over time, and as editors rotate on and off the boards, different interests will surface in the journal. Third, this means that individual editors’ personal interests are not subordinated. Thus, individual editors can and will prefer certain types of papers over others. Had a paper been submitted to another editor, the preference could easily change. Finally, because there is no single decision-making body, ideas that emanate from the grass roots community may and likely will have impact.

For authors submitting to *MISQ*, then, these characteristics of loose collectives can work to their advantage. As members of the collectives, they can start grassroots efforts to affect change in ways that a hierarchical structure would not permit. Because opinions in the collective are highly diversified, chances are there will likely be someone somewhere who will listen to and appreciate your ideas. Finally, because membership is fluid, whatever reactions you experience from a current set of editors and reviewers to your work are likely to change over time. So, seizing the opportunity to leverage positive reactions becomes critical to an author’s success.

Being a collective has several disadvantages as well for authors. These include

- Lack of a shared definition or mental model and standards of contribution and method, leading to a feeling of a “luck of the draw”
- Poor accountability among loosely coupled individuals
- Development of “core” versus “peripheral” participants with authority and power limited to the core
- Little recourse for individuals to successfully challenge the core

So, what do you do as an author and reviewer when you are part of this loosely coupled collective? Some of the easier suggestions that put the responsibility for adjusting to the situation squarely and solely on you include

- As an author, submit multiple (but markedly different) papers to various top journals so the rejection of any one paper can be offset by the euphoria of a paper accepted elsewhere.

- Suggest your own editors and reviewers when submitting papers.⁸
- As authors, provide guidance on the type of reviewers to include, not just names but qualifications.
- As authors in a revise and resubmit, consider preparing a two-page outline of the revised manuscript that educates the SE/AE on the new paper. Ask the SE if s/he would entertain such an outline prior to your putting all the work into rewriting the paper.
- Become part of the solution by expanding the reviewer pool (by sending your name to the review coordinator at misqrevu@umn.edu) and periodically reminding AEs about your interest (and expertise) in reviewing, that is if you're not receiving sufficient manuscripts to review).
- As a reviewer, be more helpful and educative in the review process, not just for the sake of the authors, but for the AE and SE as well. As an author, if you really believe that the reviewers/AE/SE do not understand, then gently and politely try to educate them.

But managing a loosely coupled collective is not solely the responsibility of the author. There is some responsibility that needs to be accepted by the core of AEs and SEs. As a field, we could consider some radical approaches.

- Diversity in the collective is a good thing; thus, there may be others in the collective who would find a paper more appealing and interesting than the initial evaluating editor. In a perhaps ideal world, papers sent to *MISQ* and other journals could be hosted within a general pool that AEs and SEs could select from, thus garnering more support from the beginning of the process.⁹ There could be a pool of remaining unselected papers; these would need to be allocated in some way—possibly by suggesting the need for new areas in which SEs are needed.¹⁰
- Other radical transformations include an ombudsman or appeal process for authors. This would allow us to move away from one SE's view of the paper to allow others to examine the paper.
- Shifting the paper to a more public Wiki process ("public" within the review team, of course) would allow others to start influencing both the author and reviewer process and to find areas of agreement about where the paper should go next.¹¹

Concluding Thoughts

Journals are people-intensive organizations, but journals, as entities, do not have distinct, singular opinions and attitudes. Therefore, journals cannot like or dislike types of research, in and of themselves. As a loose collective, editorial boards, therefore, do not speak with a single, common voice.

While this makes publishing complicated, this can be used to the author's advantage. Moreover, taking this notion of a loose collective seriously leads to possible radical redesign of the publishing enterprise. In this, I play the role of gadfly to spark interest (the notion of journal innovation is appealing, but I am not wedded to any of the innovations mentioned above). I hope this prompts a continuing and constructive debate.

⁸The general practice at *MISQ* is to actively solicit this kind of information from authors. This goes into your cover letter. The choice of SE ultimately rests with the EIC, but an author's initial recommendation is nearly always taken seriously and that SE assigned. The choice of AEs and reviewers ultimately rests with the SEs, and, once again, these are typically taken into account at *MISQ*.

⁹When he was AIS President, Rick Watson made this very suggestion. The reality of our adoption of Manuscript Central as the operating platform for online reviewing is that a bidding marketplace for papers is precluded by the system. With the present configuration, the standard practice is to choose a journal first and then the journal assigns a paper to an SE right away. There is no holding tank option where such previewing and auction-like bidding could take place. Ironically, systems restrict our possible actions as well as liberating us. I will hold off a fuller consideration of this idea of a scholarly paper marketplace for another place and time.

¹⁰*MISQ* currently has a mechanism for trying to ensure that authors working in unrepresented research domains will still receive a fair hearing. We welcome authorial nominations regarding SE and AE roles from outside our board when there does not appear to be a good fit within the current editorial board. Naturally, these nominations need to be highly qualified senior scholars in the case of SE role nominations; nominations for the AE role equally need to be well-qualified scholars. The final decision for making such assignments rests with the EIC, however.

¹¹There are clearly pros and cons to such proposals. I raise them here simply to forward the dialogue within the discipline. *MISQ* is experimenting right now, as we have in the past, with Wikis for reviewing. The jury is still out on these experiments.