
Editor's Comments

This is the last issue I will oversee as editor-in-chief. Looking back, it has been a great four years. I'll begin this commentary by thanking the many people who have made this both a fun and very fulfilling period of my life. Then, I'll assess the progress that has been made over these four years, point out a few of the directions I would like to see the *MIS Quarterly* move editorially in the future, and provide a brief discussion of the new role I will be serving for the *Quarterly* beginning January 1, 1999. Finally, I'll conclude with an announcement of an Editorial Board change.

With A Little Help From My Friends

Actually, a lot of help . . . beginning with the invaluable support and counsel of Blake Ives and Susan Scanlan for all four of these years. I particularly wish to acknowledge Blake's help with the March 1995, issue as he did most of the editorial work for the issue (when prior commitments made it difficult for me to immediately "take over" the journal) and Susan's friendly "ticklers" reminding me about when I had to do things.

Undoubtedly, the most important role in carrying out the day-to-day running (on the editorial side) of the *MIS Quarterly* is that of the review administrator. I was blessed with the opportunity to work with three very talented and devoted review administrators: Mark Saarinen, Lydia Conn, and Elaine Pedersen. I am sure the mentioning of these names brings forth fond memories (and perhaps some not so fond!) by associate editors, reviewers, and authors. Keeping track of all the communications dealing with manuscripts and answering questions (complaints?) posed by reviewers and authors is certainly not an easy chore. But Mark, Lydia, and now Elaine have done truly wonderful jobs keeping everyone else sane.

One of the fairly unique characteristics of the *MIS Quarterly* is the fact that there are multiple senior editors, each of who operates autonomously in managing manuscripts and making editorial decisions regarding these manuscripts. This provides authors a choice regarding who they wish to make the editorial decision for their manuscripts. However, if the senior editors are not of "one mind," it could become very difficult for authors to grasp the editorial philosophy and direction of the journal and for there to be consistency across these editorial decisions. The senior editors over the last four years—Blake Ives, Gerry DeSanctis, Izak Benbasat, Allen Lee, Lynda Applegate, Sirkka Jarvenpaa, Kalle Lyytinen, Ron Weber, and Cynthia Beath—have closely worked together in refining the journal's editorial mission and processes. We regularly "chat" about policy issues and are a great source of counsel to one another. I really could not envision a better group of colleagues to have worked with!

The *Quarterly's* associate editors are "where the rubber hits the road" in the editorial process. Associate editors select a manuscript's referees, ride herd over these referees to keep cycle times short, and then synthesize the referees' comments in making their editorial recommendation to a senior editor. One of the core tenets of the *MIS Quarterly* is that it is advantageous to "turn over" the Editorial Board on a regular basis to both infuse new ideas and enable more scholars to play an active role in our community. Because most associate editors serve a three-year term, many (too many to name individually) individuals have served in this capacity during my tenure. Thanks to all of you . . . it has been an honor to have had this opportunity to get to know each of you a little better through our interactions.

Most of the people involved with moving manuscripts through the editorial process have yet to be mentioned—the many authors and referees associated with specific manuscripts. The publishing “game” is not an easy game, with success coming far too infrequently. Careers and reputations are at stake, and people’s ideas and intellectual products are being judged (and, hopefully, improved). I can only commend the vast majority of authors and referees for their understanding and courtesy toward others as well as their commitment to produce the highest quality scholarship possible.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the ability of Jim Wetherbe and Gordon Davis, the *Quarterly*’s executive editors over these four years, to leave the editorial side of the journal alone and yet, be able to step in and take action when asked to do so. And I wish to acknowledge Jan DeGross’s willingness to also step in and help in a variety of (mostly invisible to the outside world) ways.

Getting Better

One always likes to leave a place better off than it was when he or she arrived. I hope that proves to be the case with the *Quarterly* after these four years. I set four personal objectives for myself when I became editor-in-chief:

- to improve the journal’s review cycle times,
- to improve the quality of the reviews authors receive,
- to achieve a consistency in quality for the articles in each issue, and
- to maintain the well-defined focus of the journal.

While I believe each of these has been accomplished, I leave it to others to make a personal judgement.

It is important to provide authors with editorial decisions within reasonable (as defined by the author) timeframes, and we have worked extremely hard toward this objective. While some problems invariably arise (reviewers and editors do travel and do have other things going on in their lives other than your manuscript), most authors seem to be quite satisfied with the turnaround their manuscripts receive. We believe we are the “best in our industry” regarding cycle times, but we certainly are not satisfied. I encourage authors to continue to push us. If a decision is overdue, send a message to the senior editor. This will undoubtedly trigger a series of electronic exchanges aimed at surfacing tardy reviews and recommendations.

At the same time, I wished to dramatically improve the quality of the reviews authors received. Much more effort is now spent by senior and associate editors to identify the most appropriate referees for a manuscript, and to then obtain up-front commitments by these referees to return a review. Referees who do not produce good reviews are not asked to review again, and referees who do produce good reviews become the pool of candidates for open Editorial Board positions. The current system does seem to work—authors regularly comment (regardless of the outcome of an editorial decision) on the quality of the reviews received.

The *MIS Quarterly* has always published articles that stood up against the best work being published in competitive journals. However, I personally had felt that the *Quarterly* lacked a consistency in quality. This is not the case today. I challenge you to take any recent issue and select any article and then argue that it does not represent solid scholarship. Why was this an important issue for me? Because I had heard too many stories of faculty from other business school disciplines holding up an issue of *MIS Quarterly* during a promotion and tenure meeting and arguing that it contained articles that wouldn’t be published in their journals (and they were right!) and hence, that the *MIS Quarterly* shouldn’t be considered a top journal. Such episodes just don’t seem to occur any more.

Finally, these changes have all been undertaken along with a higher-order constraint . . . to maintain the *Quarterly's* established editorial mission of publishing scholarly articles on the management and use of information technology such that these articles do, in fact, contribute to **both** theory and practice. It would have perhaps been much easier to improve the journal by relaxing this constraint—most submitted manuscripts have to be moved, in one way or another, toward this objective, compounding the effort and time demanded of our reviewers, editors, and authors.

Fixing a Hole

But things are certainly not perfect yet. Rather than spend time detailing desired operational improvements, I thought it might be more worthwhile for me to suggest a few strategic directions for the journal. I have four specific recommendations:

- focus on the future more than the past ,
- contribute in significant ways to reference disciplines,
- introduce more context into each article, and
- merge together the “Theory and Research” and “Applications” sections.

Scholarly journals tend to spend much more time looking backward than looking ahead. This shouldn't be surprising, given that much academic scholarship is tightly linked to prior research and to data that have been collected at some prior time period (and, that often involves respondents “remembering” past events, situations, or perceptions). But in a field as fast-moving as the management and use of information technology, knowledge gained about the (even recent) past all too often has little relevance to today, let alone tomorrow. Thus, I challenge information systems scholars to focus their research on tomorrow's technologies, on tomorrow's organizations, and tomorrow's workforce.

The *MIS Quarterly* is acknowledged to be one of the premier scholarly outlets for publishing information systems research. Everyone involved with the *Quarterly* over the years must take pride in this accomplishment. However, just how often is the *MIS Quarterly* cited by authors publishing research in related fields? While such instances are increasing, the citation rate remains much too low. Why is this the case? I don't believe it is because the research being published in *MIS Quarterly* doesn't contribute to other disciplines. It does! But because the *Quarterly's* authors tend to write their articles framed very tightly to the information technology context, few “hooks” exist to ensnare researchers outside our field such that they begin to read and recognize the value-added that does exist. Thus, I strongly encourage the *Quarterly's* editors to think how authors might craft (and title) their manuscripts such that the rich ideas and findings become apparent to scholars in related disciplines.

It has become increasingly clear that the appropriate and effective application of information technology requires the deep intertwining of a given technology with a specific organization's strategic, tactical, and operational objectives, processes, and constraints. As a consequence, it is important that the research published in the *MIS Quarterly* reflects the contextual realities of the phenomena being explored. Does this mean that all research should be qualitative or intensive? Certainly not! Context can and must be richly incorporated into manuscripts regardless of the methodologies being applied.

One of the traditions of the *MIS Quarterly* has been the existence of its two main article sections: theory/research and applications. Over time, the distinction between these two sections has become less and less. One only has to look at the articles in this issue to observe this. Why have the articles in these two sections become more similar? Because editors have worked hard in requiring (1) authors of theory/research articles to make their work more readable and relevant for the entire readership and (2) authors of application articles to provide stronger links to theory, fuller descriptions of methodology, and discussions of how the article contributes to research as well as practice. While distinctions do remain between the two sections, these differences primarily relate to a manuscript's “packaging” rather than its

inherent content. I encourage the new editor-in-chief to continue on this path toward the eventual merging of these two sections, as the merger would both greatly simplify the reviewing process and signify our concern for and capability to publish articles that are both relevant and rigorous.

A Day in the Life

In January, I will be stepping into the job that Blake Ives both pioneered and has capably served in over these four years—that of senior editor for electronic publications. Such a transition on my part also reflects the sad reality that Blake will be leaving the *Quarterly's* Editorial Board. I shouldn't have to remind anyone of the contributions Blake has made over many years of service, but I will anyway! Blake has served in every possible editorial role, initiated the effort to significantly improve the quality of our editorial processes, and initiated our movement into the realm of electronic publishing. His is truly an extraordinary legacy of service to the *MIS Quarterly* and to the information systems field. Thanks from all of us, Blake! You will be very sorely missed.

As the senior editor for electronic publications, I will be responsible for *MISQ Discovery*, for working with Gordon Davis (the *Quarterly's* executive editor) on other electronic publishing initiatives, and for serving in the role of senior editor on submitted manuscripts to *MIS Quarterly*. I very much look forward to maintaining a relationship with the *Quarterly* and to carrying out these new assignments.

Regarding *MISQ Discovery*, I am delighted to announce that this issue describes the third production that has been accepted into *MISQ Discovery*: "Survey Instruments in Information Systems," by Peter Newsted, Sid Huff, and Malcom Munro.

She's Leaving Home

Sirkka Jarvenpaa (University of Texas) completes her three-year tour of duty as an *MIS Quarterly* senior editor with this December issue. In addition to the breadth (topic areas, theoretical domains, and research methodologies) she has brought to the journal and her insights regarding editorial policies, Sirkka has simply been a joy to work with over the last three years. I am sure I speak for each of the senior editors in acknowledging the sizeable hole Sirkka's departure will leave in both our editorial structure and, more importantly, our editorial spirit.

Luckily, we have been able to convince another extremely capable individual—Dan Robey (Georgia State University)—to join the Editorial Board as a senior editor. Having worked closely with Dan in prior editorial relationships, I have the utmost confidence in his scholarship, integrity, and commitment to work with authors in developing manuscripts to their fullest. Again, I am sure I speak for each of the senior editors in welcoming Dan to the Editorial Board.

Bob Zmud
Editor-in-Chief