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The structure of the IS discipline reconsidered: Implications and reflections from a community of practice perspective

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ABSTRACT

The motivation of this paper is to advance the recent discussion about the identity of the Information Systems field with a social analysis of its community structures. It seeks to shed new light on the reasons why the field continues to debate its identity and to voice concerns about its recognition by other disciplines. For that purpose the paper adapts selected concepts from the community of practice literature for improving our understanding of the ways in which the IS research community differentiates itself into diverse constituencies, called communities of practice and knowing (CoP&K), and how these interact in the field's complex processes of knowledge creation and dissemination. Our second purpose is to derive some tentative, actionable recommendations for the field from applying the concepts presented in the first part of the paper. The recommendations expand three fundamental ideas: (i) why a continuously updated history of the field could be an important contribution to support boundary spanning and identity formation; (ii) what the nature and role of fundamental criticism is for the IS research community and why it is necessary for the field's future to pay more institutional attention to it; and (iii) how to improve understanding and communication within each paradigm constituency across a broad subset of different CoP&K through building a shared sense of collective historical accomplishments. The conclusions summarize the principal results which follow from our examination of the field's community structures and insist that the CoP&K perspective concomitantly helps to better appreciate the underlying conditions from where the current IS disciplinary challenges have arisen; it also helps to suggest

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new priorities and possible strategies for dealing with these challenges.

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1. Introduction

Discussions about the identity of the Information Systems field¹ and more specifically what should or should not be the essence or 'core' of the discipline can be traced back to at least the first ICIS in 1980 if not earlier. The last several years have seen an abundance of publications on the topic in journals such as *MISQ*, *JAIS* and *CAIS*. King and Lyytinen (2006) have attempted to capture the current state of the debate in their book *Information Systems: The State of the Field*. Recently, *JAIS* has published several commentaries about whether there is or is not an IS core (Lyytinen & King 2006; Mason 2006; Weber 2006). Such discussions are important because they can help promote a recognized identity of IS as an academic discipline. They also help to shape the research agenda of the field. Without a recognized identity some have argued, it is hard to see how the field would develop a cumulative tradition and by extension, how the field would move forward (cf. Banville & Landry 1989; Galliers 2003; Keen 1980). Clearly this is – and has been – a topic of considerable interest and importance to those in the IS field. The motivation of this paper is to advance this discussion.

The *first purpose* of this paper is to advance the discourse on IS identity with a social analysis of the field's community structures. By structure we mean the ways in which a field becomes differentiated into diverse constituencies. This differentiation profoundly affects the communication patterns in a field as a whole and the processes of knowledge creation and dissemination. We contend that an analysis of the community structures which make up a field, such as IS, can shed light on why the field continues to debate its identity and to voice concerns about its recognition by other disciplines. In addressing our first purpose, we apply the community of practice literature as the principal theoretical basis. This helps to understand better the ways in which the IS research community differentiates itself into diverse constituencies and how these interact in the complex processes of knowledge creation and dissemination.

In focusing on the structure of the IS community and its knowledge creation and dissemination practices, it is important to recognize that community structure influences two essential functions: one is *knowledge creation*, the other is internal and external *communication*. Without recognized value-adding knowledge creation there would be nothing to communicate. Without communication, knowledge creation could not be recognized because it would fail to diffuse into the community. Both are needed so that the members of a field can coalesce around a shared and visible identity.

Based on the results of our social analysis of community structures our *second purpose* is to propose some tentative, actionable recommendations for the field. With the above in mind, our paper has two explicit goals. (1) *Suggesting that the IS field is best understood as a network of interacting CoP&K*. (2) *Proposing specific measures*, which could help not only to appreciate the importance of internal and external boundary spanning for moving the field forward, but also to better support boundary spanning. These measures will build on the following three ideas: (i) *why a continuously updated history of the field could be an important contribution* to support boundary spanning and identity formation; (ii) *what the nature and role of fundamental criticism are for the IS research community* and why it is necessary for the field's future to pay more institutional attention to it; and (iii) *how to improve understanding and communication within each paradigm constituency across a broad subset of different CoP&K*. This is a challenge that the field must meet because it has now achieved the status of a multiparadigm science.

With this paper we return to some of the same key issues that were at the core of our earlier analysis of the state of the discipline (Hirschheim & Klein 2003), in particular to the issue of improving internal communication and its effects on internal knowledge creation. However, the current analysis modifies and extends our 2003 analysis in important ways. First it uses a different theoretical lens, i.e. the community of practice literature. This has the effect of leading both to a more optimistic evalua-

¹ We use the terms 'field' and 'discipline' interchangeably.

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