

The Challenge of “Engaging with Futures” in Information Systems Research

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1. Learning about and in “future worlds”

Over the past decade, the *Knowing What We Know* mini-track at HICSS dedicated itself to encouraging our colleagues to think about new and exciting ways to synthesize what we know in an effort to prepare for the future. Reviewing our past editorial written on this occasion reveals a journey we and mini-track participants have taken from talking about the ever more prevalent risk of theory fragmentation to efforts toward achieving theoretical integration and establishing scholarly practices that incorporate and advance knowledge synthesis. This discussion has been inspired by two key themes: stock-taking and “futuring.”

In terms of stock-taking, editing the papers submitted in response to past calls has been an exciting opportunity to showcase our discipline’s efforts to consolidate its theoretical superstructure. In past installments of our mini-track, authors did not only discuss questions of how such consolidation can be achieved on a disciplinary level (Soliman & Siponen, 2022), but also demonstrated tools that can help us identify theory (Larsen et al., 2014) and use computational tools to address this almost herculean task (Anisienia et al., 2021; Ludwig et al., 2020; Mueller & Abdullaev, 2019).

While this thrust has been at the heart of our efforts for a while, we must also come to acknowledge that we are still quite a long way from disciplinary practices that facilitate or even enforce theoretical integration and consolidation. Equally, and while impressive progress has been made on the tool side, the “augmented theorist” (Scharfenberger et al., 2021) also seems a long way off such that the task of theoretical integration and knowledge synthesis cannot simply be relegated to machineries that would synthesize an increasing and ever more fragmented theoretical landscape for us.

While min-track contributors have helped us sketch out an exciting trajectory and provided important steps along the resultant path, our experiences in editing this track have also revealed that discussions on theoretical integration and knowledge synthesis are still in their infancy. While problems such as the jingle and jangle fallacies are ever more widely recognized (Dann et al., 2019; Larsen & Bong, 2016; Rai, 2018), the discipline at large spends only hesitant attention. At times, this meant that we had to engage in rather rigorous editorial decisions to keep our programs on track and coherently focused on the knowing what we know theme.

Reflecting upon these experiences made us realize that one issue at the heart of our discipline’s struggle with conceptualizing new phenomenon and new research approaches is the fact that transcending the discipline’s *status quo* is an inherently difficult challenge. While efforts to identify research questions suited for the world we are creating (Demetis & Lee, 2017; Frank, 2017; Hovorka et al., 2013), leaving the well-trodden paths of empiricism to more fundamentally question how both the product (i.e., theory) and practices (i.e., theorizing) of our scholarly efforts need to change if we are to develop ‘next-generation’ theories (Burton-Jones et al., 2018) is a more difficult challenge than we had imagined.

As a result, we decided to pivot the call for this year’s mini-track and face *futures* head-on. Specifically, we shift from “Knowing what we know” – an inherently backward-looking exercise – to “Informing research” – which implies a more forward-looking stance. This resonates with the recognition that forward-looking or even future-oriented research practices are needed to reconceptualize phenomenon that stem from an age where many of today’s grand challenges were created (e.g., economic theories that prescribe systems of economic activity have created the climate crisis and exceeded other planetary boundaries) or that require us to look forward in order to anticipate contexts that are likely to challenge our theorizing (e.g., theories of digital transformations that do not yet address what truly “being digital” will be (Mueller et al., 2021; Parmiggiani et al., 2020)).

This push toward future-oriented research practices is beginning to surface in the IS literature (Chiasson et al., 2018; Chiasson et al., 2011; Hovorka & Peter, 2021; Peter et al., 2020; Slaughter, 2021), and we seek to provide these approaches with a stage and a crystallization point. As our call outlined, this objective is anchored in the increasing prevalence of processes of societal, economic, and individual digitalization that will alter the future worlds we will inhabit. We particularly emphasize this challenge as one where analyses of the *status quo* fail to provide meaningful insights beyond projecting that *status quo* into the future, albeit in a more technocultural version of itself. Rather, we are hoping that the discipline will develop approaches that are more insightful, informative, and instructive to active shapers of digital life worlds – or, even better, that the discipline takes as an active shaper itself.

In this, we continue our mini-track’s mission to challenge scholars to focus attention on new phenomena, disclose new perspectives on phenomena and illuminate research agendas and programs which provide alternatives to theorizing our futures as mere extensions of our past.

As with our previous efforts, this turn out to be non-trivial task. We are confident that this year's papers will help build the emergent futures arena it needs to build the research discourse crucial to advance its ideas and methods.

2. Introducing our papers

As with previous years, the mission we have outlined for our mini-track is larger than anything our program can achieve in itself. We are hoping that the works we present this year will have a two-fold effect: (a) continue to evolve to make their mark beyond their contribution to HICSS, and (b) inspire studies which make forays into the futures our research is producing and strengthen the futures-oriented community. Consequently, we are delighted to identify a set of papers that provide researchers with insights into different facets of futures-studies: from general reflections, to specific methods, to a visioning exercise of other worlds.

First, Fred Niederman from Saint Louis University offers a reflection in his piece on "Why Future Studies Provides a Critical Opportunity for the IS Discipline." He encourages IS researchers interested in aspects of futures and foresight to actively turn toward the discipline of Future Studies to gain both methodological guidance as well as inspiration of what working with futures might look like and what results can be achieved. His paper is a motivational backdrop and sketches out one of the bridges that the nascent research community will have to build in the years ahead.

Second, Katja Thoring from the Technical University of Munich, Roland M. Mueller from Berlin School of Economics and Law, and Hermann W. Klöckner from Anhalt University invite our audience to reflect on the role of the future in designing artifacts. In particular, their paper on "Mind the Future Gap: Introducing the FOD Framework for Future-Oriented Design" lays out a framework for designing future-oriented artifacts in which they address key design aspects from development to evaluation. In effect, they provide a valuable import of future-oriented ideas and methods into our discipline and connect Futures Studies to our discipline's core interest in design-oriented research.

Third, Pernille Rydén from IT University of Copenhagen and Omar A. El Sawy from the University of Southern California invite us to take a trip into a future world. Their paper "Phygitar: Envisioning the Rhythmic Phygital Ecosystem in 2050" is an inspiring example of the kind of forward visioning which carries researchers out of the comfort-zone of the here-and-now and frames new questions of *how it could be otherwise*. While we suspect that some will find the genre of this paper alienating at first, we are confident that the interesting process through which the authors develop the scenario at the heart of their considerations will inspire speculative researchers to follow in their footsteps.

As in previous years, the mini-track's program is focused, and we could not include all submissions. In the resulting set of three papers different aspects of "Informing Research: Engaging with Futures" are disclosed, which collectively contribute to our mini-track's goal of building a foundation upon which IS research can make futures a site of inquiry.

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