

Mini-Track Introduction for “Knowing What We Know”

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1. Introduction

As we are writing this, many countries around the world are ramping up their efforts to combat the second wave of COVID-19 infections and are exploring ways to keep their societies and businesses open while observing necessary public health measures. And while the time to reflect back on the experiences we have made recently seems to still be a long way off, we are confident that one lesson will ring strong: Digitalization is a key component to addressing numerous challenges of the human condition.

While we think that this is true for a variety of grand challenges we are currently facing—from pressing environmental concerns to escalating social crises—the COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the long overdue need to accelerate the digitalization of society and the economy. Necessary efforts range from the building of resilient infrastructures to issues such as organizational and governance structures that facilitate distributed, virtual work and the building of individual skills and organizational capabilities that are truly augmented by advanced communication and collaboration technologies. Similarly, areas such as health and safety or social security will have to be rethought fundamentally if we seek to keep them relevant in the Digital Age. And while each of these domains requires leading edge insights, the current crisis has also revealed how important coherent approaches are if any meaningful impacts are to be expected.

This insight is not only true for corporate strategy and public policy, but it also shines an uncomfortable light on the role Information Systems scholars can play in combatting the current crisis. While we agree that information systems research has produced insightful individual studies, it is not yet clear what key intellectual contribution our discipline brings to the table of the no doubt interesting conversations that need to be had. What are the overarching insights into the ongoing digitalization we can provide?

Even though it might be tempting to think of these questions as unnecessarily provocative, one motivation has driven us towards establishing and evolving this track: The desire to keep the IS discipline from slipping into a Tower-of-Babel-like state that leaves us fragmented enough to be consumed by other disciplines in the business school and beyond. A good example is the increasing appreciation and proficiency in data-related matters we see building up in Marketing or Operations Research and the reemergence of an old question: What do we need dedicated IS units and programs for? This question is made even more timely by

the unavoidable advent of the *post-digital age*, that is, a time when all phenomena will have become so naturally and inherently digital that people claiming to be experts in the digital will be seen as relics (comparable to those who would claim we need a corporate *electrical* strategy these days) [1].

Last year, on this occasion, we shone a light on the dangers of theoretical fragmentation and shared our vision of seeking approaches to overcome this increasingly salient issue [2]. In fact, this is the core *raison d'être* for this track and a search for grand themes in IS research has been at the heart of our efforts for a long time [e.g., 3]. As we have argued elsewhere, we think that it is important to maintain a meaningful conversation that is integrative in nature rather than providing a theory for everyone [4]. We strive to position this track as the platform to inspire and bring together those efforts that seek to find the Babel Fish (with credits to Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*).

Such an ability to relate our findings to one another will be crucial in the post-COVID world because only if we are able to build on each other's findings can a true discipline emerge—a comment as true today as when it was originally shared by Keen in 1980 [5]. Especially if we, as a discipline, expect to have a seat at the table when humanity is facing its next grand challenges (for inspiration, see the UN's sustainable development goals), we need to be able to not just produce individual pieces of insights and understanding. Rather the ability to build on each other's work is crucial in order to offer sound advice and valuable input in those discussions that seek to overcome and master the many challenges that the immediate future holds for us.

Currently, however, we feel that our discipline's abilities to understand and build upon what we know is hampered by an increasing desire for novel and sometimes ephemeral research. While we are delighted to have been able to pick interesting papers that resonate with our scope and aim, we also attest that finding what we are looking for has become more difficult over the years. And while we freely admit that this might in part be to difficulties in expressing what it is that we would love to read, it also seems to be symptomatic of our discipline's preoccupation with highly specialized and disjointed research endeavors—not to say inability or unwillingness to work towards a greater whole. In this, we do not mean to criticize earlier ideas arguing for a vibrant “market of ideas” as the intellectual center of our discipline in order to safeguard a functional level of plasticity in our theoretical core [6], neither do we seek to call into question the “adaptive instability” others suggested [7]. But we do believe that *knowing what we know* is an essential and complementary capability to help us work towards the Babel

Fish rather than the Tower of Babel; avoiding unnecessary redundancies of efforts, reinventing the wheel, or simply leaving contradictions in our own research unattended to.

In light of this critical reflection, it is no surprise that we have decided to be very rigorous in paper selection this year. We are all the more delighted to have been able to identify three papers that manage to resonate with and reflect our thinking, albeit approaching it from very different angles.

A first angle is to investigate to what extent machine-learning based approaches can help with the cognitive and resource constraints that can plausibly be argued to keep us from going after *knowing what we know* more. Having built up a bit of a history here at past installments of our track [e.g., 8, 9, 10], we are especially delighted to add a methods-angle to this mini discourse community. We are confident that it is efforts like this that will support our fight against theoretical fragmentation by, at the very least, making us run out of plausible excuses soon.

Complementarily to this matter, we are also happy to be able to present a conceptual approach to visualizing, organizing, and accessing knowledge about information systems in organizational settings. It is contributions like this that lay the groundwork for us to be able to develop the conceptual infrastructure needed to relate the different pieces of the Information Systems puzzle to one another. Any paper addressing this angle must be appreciated because the often political debate on what *knowing what we know* means in practice is in full swing—with many works going in that direction receiving a lot of scrutiny regarding their position on pluralism vs. unificationism [11].

Our third paper this year was chosen because it represents one of the many laudable efforts in our discipline to really show *what we know*. This paper managed to position itself very nicely, because the authors' efforts are coincidentally dedicated to organizational robustness; a subject that could not be more in line with our comments on contemporary events shared earlier.

Taken together, we are hoping that giving a stage to these efforts will not only allow the respective authors to present their work but will also help them expand their work's impact. This impact, we propose, must be at least twofold: First, we believe that work of the *knowing what we know* type is timely because it helps us to focus our efforts on updating and improving the way we do theorizing—an often called-for effort [e.g., 4, 11, 12]. This seems to be particularly important in light of ever more outspoken criticism towards the very *concept* of theory [e.g., 13]. In contrast to this, we are hoping that our authors' work will join the ranks of those who would argue for a stronger focus on the *practice* of theorizing instead [14]. Second, expanding this thought, we are hoping that our authors' work will also help us to inspire more work like this and help to rally additional minds behind our efforts to improve *knowing what we know*.

Our authors' work and the contributions we see in it notwithstanding, one thing remains: the fact that we today, in 2021, can only echo Keen's [5] often-cited call does not reflect well on the progress our discipline has made to counteract and even overcome the ever more pressing issue of theoretical fragmentation [e.g., 2, 15].

2. References

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