EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Turning the Corner: The Influence of Positive Thinking on the Information Systems Field[1]

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Prelude

There are good times. And there are bad times. We see cycles in all human activity and the issue in how to deal with these is not to ignore the realities of the period, but it is equally not to further forces that contribute to vicious downward spirals or to "irrational exuberance" in upward cycles. What is called for is a realistic, responsible, and virtuous upward movement built by those who see that can then create a way forward.

Frequently at conferences and colloquia we hear our colleagues lament about the dismal state of the Information Systems field. Often, it is a reaction to trends (e.g., the current IS academic job market) or to a panel session where the question is framed as "Do We Have a Core?" or "How Shall We Deal with the IS Identity Crisis?" We often see articles that begin with "Nothing at the Center" or "Is IS a discipline?" or "The Slippery Slope of MIS Academia". Hearing and seeing such reactions, one might get the impression that there is a general malaise about the discipline. However, despite the reality that there are profound problems that do merit serious attention, we do not believe that couching discourse in a negative affective tone is healthy for ours or for any field.

We wonder what views our colleagues, in their moments of private honesty, hold about the field. Are they consistent with ours? We see a still young field that has grown significantly and globally over the years, and one that has established stable institutional structures and core journals that compare favorably to the best in any field (Grover et al. 2006; Straub 2008; Straub and Ang 2008).

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[1]Dr. Varun Grover and Ms. Pamela Galluch were asked to join me in this editorial to set forth ideas that can help to reshape collective attitudes. The full length article that underlies the editorial was, in early 2008, submitted as an Issues & Opinions manuscript to *Information Systems Research*. We would like to thank Dr. V. Sambamurthy who withdrew the paper from the *ISR* review process and encouraged us to consider *MISQ* as the outlet for deploying a shorter form of the message to the IS community.

We also observe a truly eclectic discipline, one that studies phenomena through exciting research questions on IT and organizational effectiveness, questions that are only going to increase in incidence and importance as time goes by. And we see a community that is growing globally, has established institutional structures (e.g., AIS) and forums (e.g., ICIS), with journals comparable to the best in other fields, research that is improving in quality, and a community that is not afraid to engage in careful introspection. So, we are bullish about the tremendous upside potential of the IS field.

Is this simply a positive spin on otherwise depressing facts and frightening forecasts? Or is it recognition of a genuine need for more positive thinking and self-celebration? Are we just blinded by faith in our progress or paranoically trying to justify our existence? Our response to the latter would be "Perhaps"—but what we see as being more relevant is the tremendous upside in a community that embraces the most important resources of our time: information and technology.

Of course our field has its challenges, and some of these are assuredly substantive. Nevertheless, when contextualized, these issues are not essentially different from those faced by other, more "mature" fields in the business academic disciplines. Arguably though, perhaps due to their entrenched institutional positions, we just do not see these other fields to be exhibiting such defensive postures—where they are continually questioning their *raison d'être*—even though in some cases their own restrictive paradigms place a tight leash on their ability to profoundly influence praxis.

What concerns us most is that negativity breeds negativity whereas success breeds success —where either can become a self fulfilling prophecy. Therefore, the remainder of this editorial is to *impress upon stakeholders of our field that attitudes do matter*. We do not wish to imply that criticism has no place. It certainly does—often as a springboard for reframing our understanding (Avital et al. 2006). But we do wish to posit that there are ways to frame the same facts via a positive and constructive point of reference and in a manner that averts destructive vicious circles, which, contrariwise, can lead to significant damage to the field.

Positive and Negative Dispositions and the IS Field

It has been suggested that positive attitudes help. While we can argue that the more prevalent negative attitudes are spawned by a realism that ties futures to facts, often such dispositions come from the social environment. Individuals purposefully or inadvertently adapt to the attitudes of the people surrounding them. This "contagious" nature of attitudes suggests that when there are high levels of communication between people, individuals develop similarities and express opinions that they would not have otherwise (Burt 1987). The IS field is characterized by high levels of communication, where people work together toward building and disseminating IS knowledge. Its youth makes it highly susceptible to the opinions of its constituents and can create a contagion effect that can dramatically impact growth and prosperity in the field. This occurs because contagion is cyclical in nature and can spiral virtuously (positive attitudes leading to positive actions which lead back to more positive attitudes), or viciously (negative attitudes leading to negative actions which leads back to more negative attitudes) (Masuch 1985).

How can virtuous contagions be spawned in fields? Arguably the most efficient approach would be to start with people that have high network centrality or reputation (Rice and Aydin 1991; Tsai 2001). Mood contagion models have found that when leaders exhibited a positive rather than a negative mood, individual group members also shared in this positive mood and took on more positive than negative affective tones (Bono and Ilies 2006; Sy et al. 2005). Therefore, in the social network, the most central network links are most likely to influence behaviors and should be the most cautious in providing negative feedback that can easily be adopted and diffused throughout the field. IS scholars who occupy these central nodes need to be effective leaders in mentoring by building the leadership potential of subordinates. A successful mentoring process can increase the reputation of the leader as well as the subordinate, and possibly foster growth and positive attitudes toward the discipline itself.

In contrast, vicious circles assume that individuals or groups are constrained by bounded rationality (Simon 1976) and therefore commit acts that may result in outcomes that are irrational and inconsistent with objectives. It is common for vicious circles to interlock, causing negative changes to accelerate within a community. This particular type of vicious circle is a cluster where two or more feedback loops combine. For instance, there could be more than two interlocking negative loops reinforced through communication, as in conferences, the review process, and general interaction between community members—an "A" journal rejection with a discouraging review could cause the researcher to react by talking about how the review process is impossible to navigate. Perhaps this negative talk is then amplified in informational sessions debating whether IS has a core or will diminish

in the near future. Then other researchers begin to question the efficacy of the field along with the first complainant, and investment in research decreases. People succumb to the challenge of publishing and instead take actions like retreating from scholarship, realigning themselves with another discipline, fragmenting into separate subdisciplines only loosely aligned with IS, and reducing submissions and hence the viability of mainstream IS outlets. Many of the new researchers that should be "leaders of tomorrow" surrender to the contagion.

Prescription for Growth

The literature on socio-psychological mechanisms of self-feeding processes suggests that in order to create virtuous circles in the field, researchers must share their optimism and positive thinking. Members of the IS community can steer away from a vicious circle by simply acknowledging the problem and by not being pulled into a negative framing. However, any prescription akin to "be optimistic" is not very useful. Instead, finding an appropriate level of intervention is necessary to counteract a negative spiral and reconfigure a positive spiral that encourages growth. The more connected the negative spirals, the more intervention is needed to adjust the spiral to change course to a positive direction.

Based on the above discussion, we next elicit three general principles that should guide us in the coming years. We follow these with examples of how to turn the corner through an optimistic reframing of disciplinary issues.

Principle #1: Celebrate Success (Institutional Responsibility)

We observe in our field a tendency to highlight issues and failures and less of an inclination to celebrate successes. Perhaps this is reflective of the "if it bleeds, it leads" syndrome from the international media's incessant focus on the negative and sensational. However, it is our contention that celebrations, small or large, can provide strong interventions to vicious circles and can foster positive dispositions toward the field.

Our still relatively young field of IS has much to celebrate. We have a strong, generally collegial community that every year advances scientific knowledge and shares this knowledge with many thousands of students, executives, and practitioners. In spite of being at a marked disadvantage in terms of "A" tier journal space (Athey and Plotnicki 2000; Chua et al. 2003; Dennis et al. 2006; Kozar et al. 2006), it appears that we are starting to have a serious impact on the work of other disciplines (Grover et al. 2006). As evidenced by the consistently high ratings of *MISQ* and other top IS journals on the ISI index, our journals are being heavily used and cited.

How do we celebrate? We have the means in our journals, our conferences, our books, and our universities. Issues and opinion pieces in the major journals can focus on triumphs, certainly not to the exclusion of challenges that need resolution, but much more so than they currently do. For example, why can we not be enlightened as a community on the progress we have made across the board in developing/applying theories to underpin our work? This kind of article could be contrasted with earlier, typically atheoretical work that dominated our major journals. Or why not celebrate articles that highlight the strength of external validity in the IS field, that is, how much we use data gathered in the field and experiments high in "critical realism"?

Within our conference and university structures, there are ample opportunities for celebration. A few years ago at the 25th anniversary of ICIS, we honored those who had attended each and every one of those conferences. Why not have celebrations every year to honor those who have attended 10, 15, 20, and 25 years, irrespective of whether these years were contiguous or not? The point is to recognize commitment, to share in the joy that comes from being a tightly knit community, and, thereby, to generate upward spirals. Such celebration can be replicated in our university settings. How many IS departments are celebrating their own research accomplishments? When several faculty or doctoral students have had a good year by publishing excellent articles in good journals, and perhaps some have won best paper awards, is this not an occasion to celebrate? More than that even, our doctoral students are creating careers, and their accomplishments need to be extolled. Either at dinners at our major conferences or at luncheons at our universities, the act of celebration is the key to upward spiraling.

Celebration serves the purpose of fostering a sense of pride and belonging, raising aspiration levels of hard working faculty who

toil away at pedagogy and research, and increasing the visibility of success stories to external constituents. It also reaffirms the value system based on what we choose to celebrate, serves as an instrument to encourage certain behaviors, and can bring out many deeply hidden success stories that lie dormant in the miasma of daily life.

Principle #2: Provide Solutions (Community/Group Responsibility)

We see the IS field as one that consistently engages in introspection and debate in our various forums. This is healthy in producing lower order feedback (Are we doing things consistent with our goals?) as well as higher order feedback (Are we evolving appropriately with changing needs?). However, often lost in this discourse is the affective aspect of the message. Often we see the tremendous creative talent in our field focus on elegant descriptions of the problem, and less on the solutions. Engaging this talent with solving problems in the field would increase the quality of debate and sound a positive undertone.

With respect to the second principle, the default of conference panels on serious professional topics should certainly not be a negative framing. If anything, the default modality should be neutral or positive, signifying that "we have progressed far, but we need to look at some problems" rather than "look at my data—we don't make sense and we're not going to." Debates should balance critiques with solutions. For instance, titles should not be worded as "The Death of the IS Field," but as "The IS Field: Rebirth or Unhealthy?" In framing the debate, we should ask the following questions:

1. *Is the debate presenting the field and its intellectual contribution in a positive light?*
2. *Does a critique of the field offer directions that increase the value of the field's contributions?*
3. *Is there any portion of the debate framed as a problem for the field lacking a reasonable solution? Can we present a useful direction for change?*

If there is a viewpoint that is detrimental to the field's growth, we need to place the burden on the critic to prove his/her case. This includes setting up debate questions offensively, rather than defensively. For instance, in the "IT Doesn't Matter" discussion (Carr 2003), there has to be room for an intelligent debate on this topic, but it should be set up so that the initial impression is positive rather than negative. The panel should be entitled "IT Does Matter." Nicholas Carr and his supporters can certainly be welcomed to present their views, but they should be countered by those who are highly influential in the field so that a downward spiral does not become inevitable.

Issues and opinion pieces should be required to show solutions like the Dennis et al. (2006) and Kozar et al. (2006) pieces on the need for more "A" journal space. Each of these articles had suggestions for rectifying the very problem areas that they identified. It remains to be seen if these were optimal solutions, but the point is more that these authors were offering ways out of an injurious situation.

In discussing a positive lens to designing information systems, Avital et al. (2006) argue that positive change "builds on emphasizing value and possibilities and forms an alternative to deficit thinking" (p. 524) and "implies a discourse with less regard for rooted conflicts and prevailing problems" (p. 531). They also say that taking this view "is likely to yield an outcome that is based on [an] opportunity-seeking outlook, the best available capabilities, and a desirable future" (p. 526). So, by focusing on solutions rather than sophisticated articulation of the problems, the message that emerges from any unit of interaction should be one of possibilities rather than despair. This creates the energy required to explore and implement solutions and even challenge entrenched structures, rather than retreat into a mode of sustenance.

Principle #3: Act as a Steward (Individual Responsibility)

The basic unit of the IS field is the individual scholar. As we pass the mantle from one generation of scholars to the next, we need to be doing so with pride in what has been accomplished and the burden of responsibility to do even better. Since we partake of the field that we constitute, we are all, in the words of the Carnegie Foundation, stewards of the discipline. The foundation describes a steward as one who

deliberately intend[s] to convey a role that transcends a collection of accomplishments and skills. A steward of the discipline is a person entrusted with care of the discipline by those in the discipline on behalf of those in and beyond the discipline. There are conservative aspects to the term, implying the preservation of the past. A Ph.D. holder thinks about the continuing health of the discipline, and how to preserve the best of the past, the heart and essence of the field, for those who will follow. But there are also important forward looking meanings; stewardship does not imply stasis. Stewards are caretakers who direct a critical eye toward the future. They must be willing to take risks and move the discipline forward. Ultimately, stewards consider how to prepare and initiate the next generations of leaders. And in all their work, they act with responsibility and according to the highest ethical standards.[2]

As stewards, we have a collective responsibility to each other for the vitality of a discipline that deals with questions that are exciting and relevant to business. If we dissipate too much energy in melancholic digressions, we lose out on opportunities. So, we need to recognize and accept our responsibility for looking out for the vitality of the field. This is reflected in the small things we do. Our teaching of graduate courses, discussions with doctoral students, engagement with colleagues within and beyond our discipline, participation in promotion and tenure committees, a rendezvous with the Dean, and a host of other interactions—all represent opportunities to communicate a positive message about the field. If such an attitude is internalized as a disposition toward the field, it will come naturally. If not, then it will require work.

Senior faculty need to do some soul-searching. And the sooner this occurs, the better it will be for the field. They must bear a special burden to reorient the field to tonalities that are upwardly reinforcing. If we can agree that a more constructive framing of problems can benefit the entire field, then it is incumbent on senior faculty to lead us away from darker, unhelpful sentiments and toward enlightening ones.

We find ourselves in our disciplinary life in very few situations where problems simply cannot be resolved. Some problems take more effort and time to resolve than others, such as the current enrollment problems, but proactive leadership can move us forward through jury-rigs and temporary fixes until the long-term issues can be understood and dealt with. The Senior Scholars Forum tends to be one such proactive group, as does the AIS Council. The best role models in these groups should be more widely celebrated as exemplars for other senior faculty. Naysayers and critics without a plan should be met with intellectual resistance. Junior colleagues are the future leaders of the field and they, too, need to find ways to express their responses to challenging times through paeans to hope rather than litanies of despair. It is likely, in fact, that the most truly innovative approaches to both intellectual achievement and community actions will come through the newer members of the profession. We encourage junior faculty and doctoral students to find their own métier and stick to it.

Concluding Remarks

Celebrating success, providing solutions, and acting as a steward entails not falling into a "mood trap" of negative contagious dispositions. Simply steering in the other direction of a mood trap can prevent a vicious circle from starting up, while intervening can enable the vicious circle to transform into a virtuous one. So, in discussions with colleagues that are taking a pessimistic stance on an issue and its implications for the field, we can and should counter by exposing such cynics to other, more upbeat perspectives. Engaging in this form of debate will, at the minimum, raise the quality of the discourse, and just might quell a vicious circle. The clichéd phrase "every threat represents an opportunity" is apt here. Because the emergence of collective dispositions is path dependent (based on prior action), some views are conditional. When an individual counteracts a negative with a positive, collective dispositions reconfigure, and thereby provide a progressive, constructive path for the debate and the field.

We recognize that not all members of our field will subscribe to these views. For some, the proclivity toward negativity is so pronounced that they have either abandoned the field or participate opportunistically without any commitment or stewardship. Perhaps, for these people, the prospect of changing dispositions is futile. For others, there is no negativity in the field and an injunction to be positive to them seems trivial. After all, how could one argue against such an injunction? To them, we hope

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[2]From the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching website (http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/master/sub.asp?key=29&subkey=473), "Preparing Stewards of the Discipline: Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate."

fervently that they practice based on this belief. But, we suspect that a sizable majority are truly engaged in the field and would like to see it thrive. To them we say, let's be a bit more positive in our discourse. Of course, it would be irresponsible and unethical to have misguided optimism or refuse to accept the dangers of a situation when the facts are clearly incongruous with an optimistic forecast. Our plea is more modest. While dispositions will not change overnight, undertaking responsibility at the level of the institution, community, group, and individual, we can chip away at potential vicious circles. To do this we need to engage in introspection, but with a twist, consistently asking ourselves at each level whether we are doing things that can foster positive affect. We strongly note that this is not a plea for squelching debate, but spawning it in a positive, constructive, and responsible manner.

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