Mini-Track Introduction for "Knowing What We Know"

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1. Introduction

Research in the Information Systems discipline has strongly emphasized theory development over other types of scholarly contributions. While this has enabled our discipline to develop novel accounts of phenomena in the "digital age," it has hampered our ability to grasp what we know as a stepping-stone to the future progress we hope to achieve. In this sense, an overemphasized focus on novelty and theory obscures the value of understanding what is known and what is worth knowing [1]. The lack of such understanding challenges researchers to make sense of an increasingly fragmented intellectual infrastructure, to anchor their work appropriately, and to make meaningful progress in advancing the field.

Given the disciplinary orientation to novelty and new theorization, it is odd to observe that the growing body of discussions on the nature and role of theory in IS research [such as 2, 3, 4] provides little discussion of this fragmentation and even fewer suggestions on how to overcome it. This is particularly surprising because the impacts of the fragmentation can be quite severe. While it has long been recognized that theory influences what we know and how we know it [e.g., 5, 6, 7], it is important to recognize that the understanding of what theory is and what role it serves in the research process, as well as the potential theory holds for a domain's future directions, can be quite different across different discourses in IS research [8]. As a result, IS scholars will likely find themselves in very fine-grained discourses that find little common ground to sustain productive discourses that advance what we know overall. Additionally, such fragmentation also spreads our discipline's resources thin rather than combining our efforts around well-defined grand challenges. This is partially fueled by what is increasingly recognized as more and more salient construct identity problems in IS research [9, 10], but can just as easily be observed in a lack of meta-narratives of our field and a lack of verisimilitude for most of our theories.

While some early thinking to address these challenges has emerged [e.g., 9, 11-13], our mini-track's aim is to encourage work that will help recognize, discuss, and provide coherence in our discipline's intellectual infrastructure. In particular, we encourage thinking that engages with the type of disciplinary infrastructures other fields have successfully progressed (e.g., metaBUS, the Human Behavior Project, Medline and the Biological Science Database), which will enable the IS discipline to better know what it knows.

Following our call for research along these lines, we are happy to offer an exciting six-paper program on *knowing what we know* in IS research. The papers we have accepted after careful analyses by our dedicated reviewers and often heated debates amongst ourselves discuss two perspectives of the debate we had hoped to fuel.

First, our contributors allow us to focus on broad, disciplinary challenges to knowing what we know. This entails fundamental questions regarding the basic motivation for the work we do (and the implications this has on the kind of contributions we are able to make as well as what we miss because we choose to look elsewhere) as well as regarding some inherent problems in our discipline's theorizing that have, to date, not been discussed in the depth they would merit. Looking at these disciplinary challenges also allows us to think about infrastructures and artifacts needed to address the fragmentation and to discuss the potential impact these may have on the job of a theorist and the very practice of theorizing.

Second, we more specifically look at concepts and theorizing tools that can help improve what we know and how we know it. In this perspective, we look at fundamental concepts used in our theorizing and critically reflect on their origin as well as on how they have been appropriated and advanced in our discipline's work. In this perspective, we are also able to look at ways of representing what we know. This helps understand how making knowledge formal and explicit impacts our discipline's ability to engage in a fruitful discourse on some of the concepts and ideas

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that are likely at the heart of the ongoing transition into the digital society.

While we are looking forward to an exciting program, our overall experience with the mini-track also highlights the urgent need for further discussion in this domain. Even though we had explicitly called for the development of theory ontologies, approaches to theory integration, introducing tools that support cataloguing and synthesizing our discipline's conceptual infrastructure, and meta-analytic/review approaches to building cumulative theory, only very few submissions took on these challenges. We hope that the debate we will have at HICSS 2020 contributes to laying the foundations that, in turn, will inspire more work that engages in critically reviewing, meta-theorizing/meta-analyzing, and interrogating the theory discourse. In the end, such theory synthesis or integration will inform social and behavioral sciences research with a better understanding of fundamental theories across disciplinary boundaries, help organize our theories to be accessible to practice, and increase our understanding of the philosophical commitments represented in their contextualization and use.

Of course, any progress we make on this journey this year will be made thanks to the commitment and efforts of all those involved in the mini-track. Specifically, we would like to thank the many contributors who decided to submit their work for consideration – independent of whether we accepted their work or not – and our many reviewers. We have enjoyed the privilege of being a part in the many intense debates and hope that everyone taking part in making our mini-track happen is taking away some inspiration that will contribute to our reflection on knowing what we know in the future.

2. References

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