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Editorial Notes

Ritu Agarwal,

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Editorial Notes

Ritu Agarwal
Center for Health Information and Decision Systems, Robert H. Smith School of Business, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland 20742, ragarwal@rhsmith.umd.edu

On Getting a Paper Accepted for Publication in *ISR*

I am often asked by young scholars and PhD students "how can I be successful in getting my paper into *ISR*?" Of course my immediate response is that publishing in *ISR* is no different from publishing in any other top journal—the research must be of high quality, both theoretically and methodologically, address an important question, make assertions or knowledge claims that are valid, and pass the journal's hurdles for contribution. But that is not a very satisfying answer for those who wish to get a deeper understanding of how the review process works and what reviewers seek when they evaluate a paper for *ISR*. Despite the best attempts of editors and reviewers, inevitably there is a subjective element to peer review. As Adam Smith famously noted in the *Wealth of Nations*, "Quality, however, is so very disputable a matter that I look upon all information of this kind as somewhat uncertain" (Smith 1776, p. 151).

I thought I would take this opportunity to attempt to demystify peer review in *ISR*. I offer my comments from three distinct vantage points: as an Editor, a Reviewer, and of course, an Author who, like many colleagues, has experienced the joy and disappointment of both successful and unsuccessful submissions to the top journals. In my two years as EIC for *ISR*, and 5+ years as Senior Editor I have carefully perused countless sets of peer review comments (not to mention the hundreds of manuscripts that they accompany.) A lot has been written about review criteria in other outlets (e.g., Kilduff 2007), but every journal has an "identity" or what I would call a reviewer script that captures the essence of the elements that reviewers want to see. I analyzed a large number of reviews for papers submitted to *ISR* to identify patterns and recurrent themes. I abstracted them into conceptual categories of criteria and created an acronym for them: the **F.I.R.S.T.** considerations. Fit, Interestingness, Rigor, Story, and Theory, in no particular order.

The **Fit** criterion attempts to evaluate the paper's alignment with multiple dimensions of the journal's aims. Of course, the phenomenon addressed in the paper must be consistent with the mission of *ISR*. Luckily this is an easy hurdle to overcome as *ISR* has a broad goal to publish across a variety of information systems-related phenomena. Nonetheless, every once in a while an author is not paying close attention and submits a paper that is clearly unsuitable for what the journal publishes. In addition to the paper addressing a phenomenon of relevance to IS, equally important "fit" considerations relate to the level of contribution expected by *ISR* readers. As one of the top journals in the discipline, reviewers and readers envision that every paper published in the journal makes a "substantial" new and original contribution to knowledge. This often translates to very incremental work being rejected—particularly in research streams that are mature and have a robust body of existing literature. Readers want to see work that challenges extant assumptions and drives our collective thinking about the phenomenon in a different direction.

The "I" in F.I.R.S.T stands for **Interestingness**. As an Editor this yardstick is very significant in my own calculus—*ceteris paribus*, interesting papers have a much higher probability of making it through the review process successfully. So what makes a paper interesting? Stephen Barley acknowledged by his colleagues as having written some of the most stimulating papers in management. When asked for his opinion on this matter commented "interesting papers … one thing in common. They differed in some significant and striking way from most of the other papers in academic journals" (Barley 2006, pp. 16–17). I often see positive review feedback of the form "… this paper has some issues but it uses an innovative framing …" or "I like this paper because of the fresh lens through which the authors are studying …" Or, by contrast, a less encouraging assessment that eventually resulted in a rejection: "While the paper is well written and the study is competently done, at the end, I came away with the thought of 'what is new here?' "

There are multiple ways to increase the "aha" quotient of a paper: examine understudied phenomena, pose a challenge to the dominant perspective in a particular research area, use a unique data set or empirical strategy, do the first study on an emerging phenomenon, start with a counter-intuitive assertion, or address a question that is vexing policy makers and do research that has the potential for substantial impact. Of course, I would be remiss if I did not qualify these suggestions with some caveats. Interesting ideas need to be situated within the "web of science" and acknowledge the cumulative nature of knowledge accumulation. Ideas do not exist in isolation and must be located in the community's discourse. Authors must recognize the inherent risk aversion of reviewers and clearly identify where the idea could go next or what new stream of thinking it has the potential to set into motion.

The criterion of **Rigor** is discussed at length in numerous "how to" books and articles on research and I will not dwell on the customary details of what is rigorous science. I will, however, make some observations based on over two decades of experience. Ptolemy asked Euclid if there was an easier way to learning geometry than reading the many volumes of Euclid's *Elements*. The response: "There is no royal road to geometry." Likewise, there is no shortcut to a top publication. Reviewers want to see research that has been carefully executed with painstaking attention to detail, and note that there is an evolving, and increasingly escalating bar for what constitutes rigor in empirical work. Doubtless the details differ across research "genres" and research methodologies—what counts for rigor in survey-based field research is different from rigor in an experiment which is distinct from rigor in interpretive research. Yet there is a striking similarity as well—what is common across all article and research genres is that the overall standards are the same, i.e., reviewers want to be sure that the paper's inferences are valid and reliable. This evidence of the "scientific method" plays out in different ways. In an experiment, reviewers will look for, among other things, the randomization strategy, evidence of internal validity, manipulation checks, etc., in archival data, they may want to be persuaded about construct validity, robustness, threats to inference, and economic significance of findings, and in a case study they would seek clarity in the description of the protocol, the method for making inferences, triangulation of findings, and the like. A more subtle aspect of rigor has an element of **Fit** and speaks to the congruence between the research question posed in the paper and the methodological approach used. Edmondson and McManus (2007) present elegant arguments for why the concept of methodological fit should be an overarching criterion in evaluating the quality of field research. Finally, and most often overlooked ay authors, rigor includes providing the reader (and reviewer) with a crisp and credible rationale for choice of research methodology.

Criterion 4, the "S" in F.I.R.S.T. encapsulates the **Story** in the paper. I have witnessed scores of manuscripts being rejected because authors failed to capture the reader's imagination in the first few paragraphs of the paper. Remember the last spy story or mystery novel or biography you read that was "un-put-downable?" Ideas compete for attention in a crowded marketplace and very few readers will spend the time struggling through a paper that does not flow in a logical fashion. The Nobel Laureate Francis Crick (1995, p. xiii) cogently stated in *The Astonishing Hypothesis* "There is no form of prose more difficult to understand and more tedious to read than the average scientific paper." The structure of narrative is a critical facet of successful publishing; manuscripts must be crafted with sufficient signposts and markers that remind readers where they are in the overall plot. While what constitutes the basic building blocks of a good structure doubtless exhibits variation across genres, research contexts, and methodologies, there are some general "best practices" that recur in what reviewers look for. To illustrate, the introduction must describe why is this interesting? What is the puzzle? What are the surprising or striking findings? The literature review should refrain from being a litany of prior work and offer a value-adding meta-structure. Theory must draw upon prior work, but also refine, extend, and perhaps even refute conventional wisdom. Other sections of the paper will of course follow norms of the article genre. As a general guideline, I encourage new authors to carefully read 5–10 papers in the primary category of work to which their research belongs to get a clear picture of what needs to be part of the story.

Let me also highlight the FEOs (or Frequently Encountered Omissions) in the narrative that frustrate reviewers and frequently constitute grounds for a recommendation to reject. It continues to surprise me as to the number of papers that are submitted without a clear explanation of the data used for the study: the variables, the constructs, source of the data, when and by whom it was collected, etc. Authors' may have been diligent in performing validity tests but negligent about reporting them in the paper. A natural consequence is that reviewers may dismiss the paper for its lack of rigor. Other things that authors often fail to do is to remind readers throughout the paper as to what's interesting here. Finally, authors are best situated to know what the limitations of the research are. No research is perfect in all dimensions, and reviewers tend to be more forgiving if the paper candidly acknowledges what the shortcomings of the work are, highlights how they do not invalidate current findings, and offers plausible ways in which they could be addressed in future work.

Now to the last review criterion in F.I.R.S.T.: **Theory**. This refers, roughly, to the internal consistency of ideas presented in the paper. Although the nature of theory may be different from a study that adopts a perspective rooted in psychology from one constructed in economics, theory is fundamentally the authors' proposed explanation and elaboration for some phenomenon of interest. There are a number of aspects of the theory that are important to reviewers: is the theory rich and compelling? Does it have face validity and pass the reasonableness test? Is it conceptually crisp and elegantly argued? Is it deeply anchored in the knowledge that already exists about the phenomenon? Others have written extensively about what constitutes a good theory (e.g., Sutton and Staw 1995) and I will not repeat those recommendations here. Let me just highlight three problematic issues with theory that are somewhat persistent across papers that are unsuccessful in the review cycle. First, the paper fails to describe what the object of theorizing is—in other words, the phenomenon itself is ill-defined and nebulous. It is difficult to propose a crisp and cogent theory if what one is trying to understand is ambiguous. Second, the theory fails the test of parsimony and neglects to account for alternative explanations. And third, the paper lacks conceptual and operational clarity in regard to the constructs that populate the theory. Reviewers want to read about constructs that are unambiguously defined and placed with fidelity within the network of similar constructs that others have theorized about. Equally they want to see operational clarity: what is the real-world measure used for the construct? Is the measure valid? If using archival data, is the variable used to proxy for the conceptual construct a reasonable approximation?

The F.I.R.S.T criteria provide one glimpse into successful publishing. What else can authors do to improve the likelihood of a positive outcome from the review process? First, spend the extra time it takes to "polish" the manuscript. Reviewers don't want to struggle through difficult to follow prose or constantly confront typographical and other errors of craftsmanship. Second, An oft-overlooked aspect of publishing is the post-review dialog and exchange between authors and reviewers. I see reviewers often express frustration because authors do not respond to concerns voiced with sincerity. Clearly everything that reviewers identify as issues may not be accurate from the authors' perspective and there is no requirement that all the changes requested be implemented. The key for manuscripts that are more likely to go forward is the notion of a constructive and respectful dialog (see Seibert 2006 for an evocative illustration of a revise and resubmit). And of course, editors have a major role to play here in resolving what might be conflicting feedback. In closing, let me just note that I am encouraged by the tone and quality of review feedback that *ISR* provides. Peer review is the pillar of scientific progress and we all play an important role in upholding standards and enforcing quality.

2012: The Year in Reprise

The final volume of the year provides an opportunity to reflect on accomplishments and successes for the journal. 2012 was a good year for *ISR* in regard to the quantity and quantity of research we were able to publish, supported by additional page allotments by INFORMS and resources I raised through sponsorships. With this final volume, *ISR* has published 55 research papers, 17 research notes, and 2 research commentaries in 2012, for a total of 74 articles. This represents a remarkable 64% increase over the number published the year before. What this essentially means is that the journals' backlog is now at an acceptable level and we are able to bring our "product" to market in a timely fashion. Doing so will ensure that the results of our scholarship are widely available to academics, executives, and policy makers and are able to influence their decisions. When I took over as EIC at the beginning of 2011 addressing the backlog was one of my major goals and I am happy to report that it has been achieved. I hope you will all continue to send your best work to the journal as the strength and reputation of the journal is ultimately a function of your contributions!

Continuing the *ISR* tradition of special issues on topics that are timely, relevant, and of interest to scholarly, practice, and policy communities, I commissioned a special issue on "**Social Media and Business Transformation**" with a submission deadline of January 15, 2013. The guest editors for the special issue are Sinan Aral, New York University, David Godes, University of Maryland, and Chris Dellarocas, Boston University. The community's response was striking—*ISR* received a total of 88 submissions for the special issue. As has been the practice in the past, after the first round of review, *ISR* hosted a workshop at the University of Maryland for authors and editors to help authors develop their papers for further review. This workshop had over 50 participants and was an outstanding success. We received a lot of positive feedback from authors that the opportunity to present their research and revision strategy was an invaluable experience for them. The special issue is slated for publication in March 2013 and I expect will have a considerable impact on scholarship in information systems and social media.

The end of the year also marks many transitions for the journal. *ISR* continues its practice of refreshing the Editorial Board to infuse innovation and allow additional members of our community to develop their editorial skills. Editorial board appointments are made to reflect the international scope of the journal, its core mission, and the many faces of diversity in our community as reflected in research areas, preferred epistemologies, methodological approaches, and research genres. *ISR* says goodbye and a heartfelt thank you to five Senior Editors who will be retiring at various points during the year in 2013: Anitesh Barua (University of Texas at Austin), Elena Karahanna (University of Georgia), Arun Sundararajan (New York University), Alok Gupta (University of Minnesota), and Ram Gopal (University of Connecticut). All of you who have had papers managed by them are aware of the countless hours they have invested in helping shape a much-improved final product. I would also like to express my gratitude to a number of Associate Editors who are completing their term: Anindya Ghose (New York University), Kartik Hosnagar (University of Pennsylvania), Bill Kettinger (University of Memphis), Rikard Lingdren (Gothenberg University), Michael Wade (York University), Michel Avital (Copenhagen Business School), Ravi Bapna (University of Minnesota), Anand Gopal (University of Maryland), Karthik Kannan (Purdue University), Dong-Gil Ko (University of Cincinnati), Emmanuel Monod (Dauphine University), Shan Lin Pan (National University of Singapore), Maytal Saar-Tsechansky (University of Texas at Austin), and Weidong Xia (Florida International University).

I am pleased to announce the appointment of six new senior editors: Sanjeev Dewan (University of California, Irvine), Radhika Santhanam (University of Kentucky), Chris Forman (Georgia Tech University), Anindya Ghose (New York University), Hock-Hai Teo (National University of Singapore), and Amrit Tiwana (University of Georgia). Seven new area editors will join the team: Giri Tayi (University of Albany), Yulin Fang (City University of Hongkong), Atreyi Kankanhalli (National University of Singapore), Amit Mehra (Indian School of Business), Xue Bai (University of Connecticut), Paul Tallon (Loyola University), Subodha Kumar (Texas A&M University), and Susan Scott (London School of Economics). Two to three additional area editors appointments will be made during the first quarter of 2013.

ISR recognized the exceptional contributions of authors, reviewers and editorial board members through awards that are presented at the *ISR* reception held at INFORMS each year, in conjunction with the *Conference on Information Systems and Technology* (*CIST*). These include the Best Published Paper award, Best Reviewer award, and the Best Associate Editor awards. I am delighted to announce the winners for 2011. They are:

2011 Reviewer of the Year Award
- Eric Overby, Georgia Institute of Technology
- Greta Polites, Kent State University

2011 AE of the Year Award
- Andrew Burton-Jones, University of Queensland
- Rikard Lingdren, University of Gothenberg
- Jason Thatcher, Clemson University

2011 Best Published Paper Award
- Janice Y. Tsai, Serge Egelman, Lorrie Cranor, and Alessandro Acquisti, The Effect of Online Privacy Information on Purchasing Behavior: An Experimental Study, *Information Systems Research* 2011 22:254–268.

2011 Best Published Paper Runner-Up Award
- Tridas Mukhopadhyay, ParamVir Singh, and Seung Hyun Kim, Learning Curves of Agents with Diverse Skills in Information Technology-Enabled Physician Referral Systems, *Information Systems Research* 2011 22:586-605.

Hearty congratulations to the winners!

In This Issue

The final issue begins with a thought-provoking research commentary (Compeau et al. 2012) exploring a question that many of us have grappled with in the design and execution of research involving human subjects: when are students appropriate to use for such studies? The authors review research spanning two decades and offer useful recommendations for authors, reviewers and, more broadly, the field. Consequential questions of trust in technology-mediated relationships are explored in two papers, Lim et al. (2012) and Liu and Goodhue (2012), in distinct contexts. While the former develops a trust-based analytical framework to guide an analysis of the experience of citizens with the Singapore Government, the latter investigates trust in e-commerce transactions through a lens of humans as cognitive misers. Although not directly anchored in concepts related to trust, in a research note Xu et al. (2012a) explore a somewhat related and significant public policy issue in our increasingly digital world: privacy in the context of location-based services that provide continual and real-time information about individuals' location to sellers and advertisers. They study the effects of different privacy assurance approaches (individual self-protection, industry self-regulation, and government legislation) on concerns for information privacy concerns and offer valuable implications for regulators and technology developers.

The all-important issue of standards that has been the subject of much research in information systems is tackled in Venkatesh and Bala (2012) and Li and Chen (2012). Anchoring their conceptualization in the TOE model, Venkatesh and Bala present a field study on the adoption of standards for inter-organizational business processes by partner dyads in the high-tech industry. To the extent that agreement upon standards and their subsequent adoption is a critical and necessary condition for a range of collaborative and partnering activities among organzations, this paper provides useful insight into the facilitating conditions that enable this. There is much discussion in the popular media today about the challenges facing managers as they develop policies to respond to users' desire to bring their own devices into the work setting. Li and Chen (2012) paper addresses the inherent tension between setting corporate IT standards and giving users the flexibility to make their own choices, and models when it is optimal for an employer to commit to a single standard.

The management of IT professionals and their interactions with users is the subject of the papers Ferratt et al. (2012) and Sun et al. (2012). IT human capital can represent a major asset for some organizations and arguably, can be a source of competitive differentiation. Ferratt et al. (2012) examine the relationship between different strategies utilized for managing IT professionals and job search behavior. Exploring a number of different configurations of IT HRM practices they present intriguing findings related to the synergistic effects of practices in some configurations and not others. In Sun et al. (2012) the authors invoke social capital theory to study the IT-user relationship in the context of user satisfaction with IT service delivery and find, among other things, that select dimensions of social capital amplify the relationship between service quality and user satisfaction.

Unquestionably one of the most profound transformations that IT has precipitated in the past two decades is in the realm of electronic commerce. Transactions on electronic platforms continue to capture the attention of IS researchers, and three papers in this issue explore different aspects of e-commerce. Noting that the diffusion and uptake of B2B commerce has been limited, Langer et al. (2012) study the factors that drive e-channel usage by buyers, and find that channel use is both heterogeneous and temporally dynamic across buyers. They develop a model for "smart" channel allocation that sellers can use to attract buyers and amplify use of the electronic purchasing channel. Kim et al. (2012) pose the question "what motivates individuals to purchase digital items on virtual communities?" Arguing that purchases are driven by a desire for self-presentation, they theorize and find support for the effects of social influence and personal control factors on the desire for on-line self-presentation. Beyond commerce, the Internet platform offers opportunities for promotion and marketing that are unprecedented in their ability to microsegment based on search engine use. Xu et al. (2012b) study the phenomenon of search advertising and how organic listings affect advertisers' sponsored bidding. Their analytical results provide interesting insights into equilibrium outcomes for the search engine as well as for advertisers.

Ketter et al. (2012) tackle the challenge of real-time decision making that organizations are increasingly required to engage in. Their innovative approach to the problem involves the use of historical data to construct economic "regime" models that can be used to observe and predict market outcomes in real-time, thereby informing both tactical (e.g., pricing) and strategic (e.g., finished goods inventory) decisions. The decision choices of an Internet Service Provider (ISP) are examined in Krämer and Wiewiorra (2012) who study the effects of a quality of service tiering regime where the ISP charges for prioritization on a nondiscriminatory basis. Their analysis and findings offers useful contributions to the consequential policy discourse on net neutrality. Niculescu et al. (2012)'s paper focuses on markets for subscription-based IT services where there is substantial consumer heterogeneity in the valuation of such services. Using a combination of analytical and empirical approaches their study provides a detailed understanding of factors influencing service subscription patterns under both perfect and imperfect information dissemination. In a research note on a related topic Pang and Etzion (2012) deconstruct pricing strategies for firms that sell both a product as well as an online service, where the latter is subject to network effects. Their analysis of two pricing strategies, bundle pricing and separate pricing identifies the circumstances that increase consumer surplus and social welfare or cause underprovision of the service.

Collectively these papers reflect the breadth and diversity of scholarship in the information systems discipline and reaffirm *ISR*'s mission of publishing high-quality research that advances knowledge about the effective and efficient utilization of information technology by individuals, groups, organizations, society, and nations for the improvement of economic and social welfare. I hope you enjoy reading them as much as I have.

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