ANALYZING THE PAST TO PREPARE FOR THE FUTURE: WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW

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A review of prior, relevant literature is an essential feature of any academic project. An effective review creates a firm foundation for advancing knowledge. It facilitates theory development, closes areas where a plethora of research exists, and uncovers areas where research is needed.

In the information systems (IS) field, we see few published review articles. As a result, the progress of our field is impeded. To address this concern, the MIS Quarterly launched MISQ Review several years ago. The clear intention was to accelerate the accumulation of IS knowledge. A particular goal was to advance the state of theory within the IS field. The stated purpose of MISQ Review is to promote MIS research by publishing articles that conceptualize research areas and survey and synthesize prior research. These articles will provide important input in setting directions for future research.1

The lack of theoretical progress in the IS field may be surprising. From an empirical viewpoint, the IS field resembles other management fields. Specifically, as fields of inquiry develop, their theories are often placed on a hierarchy from ad hoc classification systems (in which categories are used to summarize empirical observations), to taxonomies (in which the relationships between the categories can be described), to conceptual frameworks (in which propositions summarize explanations and predictions), to theoretical systems (in which laws are contained within axiomatic or formal theories) (Parsons and Shils 1962). In its short history, IS research has developed from classification systems to conceptual frameworks. In the 1970s, it was considered pre-paradigmatic. Today, it is approaching the level of development in empirical research of other management fields, like organizational behavior (Webster 2001). However, unlike other fields that have journals devoted to review articles (e.g., the Academy of Management Review), we see few review articles in IS—and hence the creation of MISQ Review as a device for accelerating development of the discipline.

One reason we see so few theoretical articles in IS relates to the youth of the field. Another concerns the complexity of assembling a review in an interdisciplinary field. That is, constructing a review is a cha-

1http://www.misq.org/misreview/announce.html
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outline of the review will enable the senior editor to advise whether another author is currently working on the topic and to give broad guidance on the direction of the work.

Writing a Review Article

To assist you in crafting your paper, we indicate the broad structure of a review paper and provide several suggestions on executing your review. We reflect on some pragmatic issues (e.g., what should be included in the introduction to your paper?) and some more ambiguous issues (e.g., how can you justify a proposition?). Throughout, we provide examples from past articles in a variety of fields to give you exemplars of how others have addressed these issues.

Beginning Your Article

In some papers we have received, the topic does not “emerge” until well into the article. Moreover, the contributions are not clear. In contrast, to hook your reader early, the introduction to your paper needs to motivate your topic, provide a working definition of your key variable(s), and clearly articulate the paper’s contributions. Ways of demonstrating contributions include providing a new theoretical understanding that helps to explain previously confusing results, noting that little research has addressed this topic, providing calls from well-respected academics to examine this topic, bringing together previously-disparate streams of work to help shed light on a phenomenon, and suggesting important implications for practice.

The next section of your paper should provide more elaborate definitions of your key variables and set the boundaries on your work. Boundaries include issues like level(s) of analysis, temporal and contextual limitations, the scope of your review, and your implicit values (Bacharach 1989; Whetten 1989). For example, you should clearly state the unit or units of analysis undertaken in the review; however, be wary of trying to go beyond a single unit unless you can provide a strong rationale for a multilevel perspective. Further, if your theory applies only to certain contexts (e.g., types of occupations, organizations, or countries) or to certain time periods, this should be identified for the reader. You also need to support the scope of your review: state what literature and fields you will draw upon and why these define an appropriate boundary for the chosen topic and level of analysis. Finally, identify the values bounding your theory—that is, your implicit assumptions concerning whose interests are served (such as top management, IS professionals, users, or other stakeholders: Bacharach 1989; Iivari et al. 1998).

To show how these suggestions might be implemented, consider Griffith’s (1999) paper on “technology features.” She motivates her topic by providing examples of practice ranging from aboriginals’ use of the steel axe to users’ concerns with Pentium chip errors (p. 472). She then articulates the contributions by (1) outlining past research and highlighting its gaps, (2) suggesting that she will address these shortcomings by proposing new theory, (3) listing academics who have called for this research, and (4) indicating that this research has important implications for practice (pp. 473-474). Her subsequent sections provide definitions of her key concepts and delineate the boundaries on her research (pp. 474-478).

Identifying the Relevant Literature

A high-quality review is complete and focuses on concepts. A complete review covers relevant literature on the topic and is not confined to one research methodology, one set of journals, or one geographic