

3 REACH AND GRASP¹

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more important that the IS field pushes back against the hegemony of IS critics outside the field whose arguments masquerade as concerns about academic quality. The anxiety discourse should be replaced by the IS field's aggressive pursuit of new instructional and research opportunities that cross traditional institutional barriers and the pursuit of excellence on academic criteria deemed important by the field itself.

Keywords: Information Systems, identity, legitimacy, theoretic core, discipline, disciplinary, academic politics

19 Abstract

20
21 *The short history of Information Systems suggests persistent anxiety about the field's purported lack of academic legitimacy. A common refrain in the anxiety discourse is that legitimacy can be obtained only by creating a strong theoretic core for the field. This essay takes exception with this view, attributing the anxiety to the field's relative youth, its focus on technology in a technophobic institutional environment, and academic ethnocentrism within and without the field. While developing stronger theory might be helpful, it is*

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?
The Faultless Painter,
Robert Browning
(1812-1889)

22 Introduction

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The 16th century produced two great portrait artists. One was Leonardo da Vinci, whose enigmatic paintings remain an inspiration four centuries later. The other was Andrea del Sarto, the "faultless painter," whose quest for technical perfection caused him to lose touch with the deep inspiration of his art. Browning's poem about del Sarto concludes that greatness comes not from holding tight to what we can grasp, but rather from our willingness to reach beyond what we can

¹Ron Weber was the accepting senior editor for this paper.

1 grasp. There is a lesson in his poem for the Infor-
2 mation Systems field as we grapple with the field's
3 future.

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5 The IS field's "anxiety discourse" has been evi-
6 dent at least since 1972, when *Harvard Business*
7 *Review* published John Dearden's "MIS is a
8 Mirage"—a paper that questioned the funda-
9 mental ideas behind the field. In the years that
10 followed, Dearden's theme was repeated in
11 various forms. At the first International Con-
12 ference on Information Systems, Keen (1980) cast
13 the field in *reference* to other disciplines. The
14 same year, Kling (1980) characterized the field as
15 an *arena* yearning to be a discipline. In 1985,
16 Mumford and her colleagues raised the specter of
17 IS as a *doubtful science* characterized by "poor
18 intellectual and methodical rooting." A popular
19 panel at the 1986 ICIS entitled "Back to the
20 Future: Will There Be an ICIS in 1996?" opened
21 with the concern that IS was "like the dinosaurs...
22 heading blindly toward extinction" (Culnan and
23 Huff 1986). Banville and Landry (1989) found that
24 the field had yet to "be disciplined."

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26 The anxiety was evident even during the halcyon
27 peak of the dot.com era. Benbasat and Weber
28 (1996) warned of a "miasma that spells the
29 demise of the discipline." Stowell and Mingers
30 (1997) asked once again, "is information systems
31 a distinctive discipline?" Straub (1999) answered
32 that IS is "a polyglot discipline that lacks focus,
33 centrality, and theory," doomed to absorption by
34 other disciplines with greater "intellectual clarity
35 and substance." Finally, in May 2003, the
36 *Harvard Business Review* reached back three
37 decades and updated Dearden's aphorism by
38 publishing Nicholas Carr's paper, "IT Doesn't
39 Matter."

40
41 It is difficult to imagine how a field that started as
42 a "mirage" and doesn't really matter could be free
43 from anxiety. Nevertheless, decades later, the IS
44 field still rolls along. How can something so
45 seemingly problematic survive? Our starting point
46 for considering the state of the IS field is to invoke
47 Samuel Johnson's comment about a dog walking
48 on its hind legs—the surprise is not that the dog
49 does it poorly, but that it does it at all.

This essay challenges the anxiety discourse and suggests an explanation for its persistence. We are not and have never been anxious about the IS field, but we know many good colleagues who are. By deconstructing the anxiety discourse, we felt we might be convinced to become anxious. Happily, the results of our efforts reaffirm our initial position, and we continue to believe the IS field has a great future. We do not expect this essay to put an end to the anxiety discourse, but we do suggest an alternative view of that anxiety that may be more productive in formulating the field's strategy. In particular, we hope to show that a fixation on the issues raised by the anxiety discourse imposes serious opportunity costs on the field that it cannot afford.

We develop our analysis in three steps. First, we deconstruct the anxiety discourse, especially with respect to concerns about academic identity and legitimacy. Second, we identify the mechanisms that induce hegemony of other fields acting against the IS field and the tendency of those within the IS field to turn against each other in response to this external oppression. Finally, we recommend a set of actions for defeating the political oppression of the IS field where it exists, expanding the field's promising instructional and research opportunities that cross traditional institutional barriers, and pursuing a commitment to excellence based on academic criteria chosen by the IS field itself.

The Logic Behind the Anxiety Discourse

The foremost concern in the anxiety discourse is the perceived inadequacy of the IS field as an academic enterprise. This inadequacy is typically articulated either in referent terms (respected academics outside the field do not respect the field) or in absolute terms (the IS field does not measure up to some objective standard that other, better fields meet). Fully elaborated, the discourse typically evolves as follows: the IS field is academically weak and its only path to legiti-

1 macy is to make it academically stronger by
2 cementing it around a theoretical core.

3
4 This argument invokes a set of *warrants*:
5 assumptions or beliefs that justify the movement
6 from premises to conclusions (Toulmin 1958).
7 Warrants establish the connection between a
8 writer's claims and the theoretical or empirical
9 support used to back those claims. They often
10 emerge from cultural experiences or personal
11 observations and can be conspicuous or inconspicuous.
12 They are frequently taken for granted by
13 both the writer and the reader. Warrants often
14 include enthymemes, which are categorical syllogisms
15 with one unstated premise that can be
16 reconstructed using the principles of categorical
17 syllogism. The warrants of the anxiety-discourse
18 argument can be stated as follows:

- 19
20 (1) The IS field struggles because it lacks
21 legitimacy.
- 22
23 (2) The IS field lacks legitimacy because it lacks
24 a clear identity.
- 25
26 (3) The IS field lacks a clear identity because it
27 lacks a strong theoretic core.

28
29 By extension, the IS field will acquire identity and
30 legitimacy in good time if and only if it develops a
31 strong theoretic core.

32
33 We find this argument unconvincing on a number
34 of dimensions, which we discuss elsewhere.² A
35 strong theoretic core might help create both legiti-
36 macy and identity in any field, but having such a
37 core is neither necessary nor sufficient to engender
38 identity or legitimacy. Moreover, the anxiety
39 discourse confuses identity and legitimacy, often
40 using the two terms interchangeably or wrongly
41 implying that legitimacy is a precursor to identity.
42 We must untangle these terms if we are to make
43 progress with the objectives of our essay.

44
45 From the Latin *idem*, meaning "the same," *identity*
46 is an impression created by a set of charac-

teristics that make a thing recognizable or known.
The essential attribute of identity is consistency in
character. An iconic claim of the anxiety discourse
is that identity is attained only through the
exclusive ownership of a powerful, general theory.
This claim is refuted by abundant examples to the
contrary. English, for example, is an identifiable
academic field with academic departments, jour-
nals, and conferences. Yet English has no unique
theories of the sort described above. English
gathers its identity from the consistency of schol-
arly study of works written in the English lan-
guage. Information Systems is an identifiable
academic field with academic departments, jour-
nals, and conferences. Irrespective of the IS
field's theoretical status, it has an identity
gathered from the consistency of its focus on the
systematic processing of information in human
enterprise. We, therefore, drop further reference
to the matter of academic identity and focus
attention on the sole issue of concern, academic
legitimacy.

Legitimacy rests on but is not caused by identity.
An academic field has to be identifiable before it
can become legitimate (e.g., alchemy in the 16th
century), but it may also turn out to be illegitimate
(e.g., alchemy in the 18th century).³ Legitimacy is
derived from the Latin *legitimus*, or "of the law,"
and common use refers to practice that is consis-
tent with some norm. Legitimacy defines what is
regarded as appropriate or acceptable. Inevitably,
it is a political issue involving the power to define
and enforce the norm. Academic legitimacy
usually correlates closely with the social salience
of the topic being studied. Academic fields
focusing on salient topics will attain legitimacy
more easily than those focusing on non-salient
topics, because they are of interest to the political
elite who support the academy.

³Alchemy (best known for its quest to turn base metals like lead into precious metals like gold) was once a mainstay of legitimate academic activity. It lost favor as scientific knowledge grew. Isaac Newton and Robert Boyle, as well as most of the founders of The Royal Society of London, were active alchemists throughout their lives.

²See Lyytinen and King (2004).

1 Another important component is the trust-
2 worthiness of the results of the work, typically
3 established through the use of appropriate intel-
4 lectual method. Method normalizes inquiry and
5 allows scientific communities to interpret and
6 judge claims of legitimacy quickly and effectively.
7 Method also lends to establishing the cognitive
8 and/or pragmatic legitimacy of the knowledge
9 produced (Suchman 1995). Conformance with
10 method helps scholars approach difficult problems
11 efficiently over sustained periods of time. Thus,
12 method conformance indirectly assists with
13 establishing the legitimacy of the resulting work
14 (*the cumulative tradition*; Keen 1980). As a
15 general rule, academic legitimacy is the product of
16 an identifiable and socially salient field of inquiry
17 whose practitioners use methods deemed appropri-
18 ate and rationally vindicated within the commu-
19 nity in the execution of their scholarly work.

21 Academic legitimacy is not a constant. New
22 methods emerge as new cognitive and opera-
23 tional capabilities are developed and identified.
24 For example, the availability of unprecedented
25 amounts of computational power over the past
26 two decades has enabled the exploitation of
27 modeling and simulation methods that support
28 scholarly work in multiple fields of science (so
29 called computational science). Previously, this
30 type of work was impossible using only theory,
31 analytical methods, and "strict" empirical testing.
32 In addition, new discoveries can shift a com-
33 munity's attention to unexpected lines of inquiry
34 that have no *a priori* methodological grounding.
35 Therefore, they cannot be legitimated solely by
36 existing method. Quantum theory in physics
37 appeared well before the problems of classical
38 mechanics were resolved, but it quickly became
39 legitimate even though it had little method to
40 support its study.

42 Legitimacy is also affected by changes in social
43 salience. Artificial intelligence has persisted
44 despite setbacks, because the payoff from
45 success would be huge; however, this is no
46 guarantee of permanence. Alchemy's salience
47 sustained it for two centuries before failure to
48 deliver was recognized and the contradictions of
49 advancing knowledge cast it out of the academy.

The anxiety discourse is about the IS field's
academic legitimacy. The more dire aspects of
the discourse suggest that the IS field should
have died years ago. It is clear, however, that the
dog of the IS field is still walking on its hind legs.
It is a stretch to suggest that the field's survival
alone is adequate evidence of its legitimacy.
Nonetheless, it is true that the field has been
sufficiently legitimate to survive three decades in
a hostile environment. This outcome cannot be
due only to the salience of the topic studied, but
rather is also attributable to the intellectual
strength of the IS field. IS research is well con-
ceptualized and well executed like good academic
work in other legitimate fields. Thus, it can make
claims of using appropriate intellectual methods.⁴
The field sets and enforces appropriate norms
through refereed journals and conferences with
their commensurate cultures of peer review. The
field has training mechanisms such as doctoral
curricula and consortia to socialize its members to
consistent application of method.

In addition, the IS field is socially salient.
Academic IS programs were developed and sup-
ported even in hostile institutional environments
because the patronage of employers, donors, and
research funding agencies signaled the impor-
tance of the area. Even after the collapse of the
dot.com boom, the IS field remains socially
essential. Its long-term salience looks undimin-
ished in the midst of the information revolution.

Overall, the IS field seems to have much going for
it. We believe the challenges it faces are seen in
countless other academic fields in one form or
another. Why, then, is the IS field both enduring
and anxious? We suggest three causes: the
youth and volatility of the field's domain of focus;
academic ethnocentrism; and the institutional
politics that surround many IS departments and
groups. A detailed examination of the way these
factors weaken legitimacy is the first step toward
bypassing the anxiety discourse and achieving a

⁴We make this assertion after years of collective
endeavor as reviewers and editors in academic journals
in the IS field and elsewhere. We also recommend the
excellent recent article by DeSanctis (2003).

1 more constructive discussion of the challenges
2 the field must face.

3 **A Road to Safety** ██████████

4 ***The Nature of the IS Field***

5 The most-powerful factor in explaining the IS
6 field's anxiety is its relative youth.⁵ New fields
7 usually emerge in opposition to older and more-
8 established intellectual traditions that have proven
9 ill-equipped to deal with the emerging concerns at
10 hand. Such upstarts are seldom welcome. The
11 medieval academy formed around the "letters"
12 (e.g., philosophy, literature, and theology) that still
13 garner deep academic respect.⁶ The natural
14 sciences emerged in the late Renaissance and
15 early Enlightenment. They struggled for decades
16 to escape the non-scientific traditions of
17 scholasticism that dominated the letters before
18 emerging as a powerful order in their own right.
19 The social sciences emerged in the early
20 industrial age and have yet to reach the powerful
21 status of the natural sciences. University-based
22 professional schools are younger still and they
23 remain subordinate to traditional academics in
24 most elite universities.⁷

25 Young fields are frequently beset by internal
26 schism. The social sciences are notoriously
27 fratricidal, with various fields and subfields
28 challenging the legitimacy of one another. The
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⁵The term *information systems* seems to have been coined by Börje Langefors in the 1965 IFIP World Conference. *MIS Quarterly* and the International Conference on Information Systems—the first premiere research journal and conference—started in the late 1970s. AIS was formed in the early 1990s. The field is about 30 years old.

⁶As a modest example, few elite universities have closed their classics departments, in spite of vanishing enrollments, on the grounds that classics represent the ancient heart of the academy.

⁷*US News and World Report* usually rates Princeton and Caltech in the "top 5," although neither has many professional programs.

professions are worse. Academic medicine has a rich history of battles among chemopaths, osteopaths, alopahs, and homeopaths. The learning-by-doing traditions of experimental engineering are locked in contest with emergent engineering science perspectives. Law schools are torn between educating for legal practice and education in legal theory. Management is fractious, with relatively young subfields such as accounting, finance, marketing, and organizational behavior questioning the legitimacy of even younger subfields such as operations research, information systems, and strategy. The IS field's relative youth seems a good candidate for the cause of the field's anxiety.

Another factor is a basic mismatch between the IS field's close ties to technology and the traditional antipathy toward technology found in management schools that are often the home of IS groups. The social sciences and the management subfields that derive from them have never engaged technology as a mainstream concern. They seldom have close relationships with technology-oriented programs in engineering or the sciences. Technically oriented subfields within management such as IS and operations management are often lumped together and marginalized by other management subfields. Given that the IS field is incontrovertibly tied to technology, the IS field is unlikely to avoid this problem.⁸ At the same time, the IS field's focus on applications alienates it from engineering and computer science, which are more concerned with technology *per se*, are in isolation, and defy everything that is not theory (i.e., formal). The fact that the essence of the IS field lies at the intersection of the technical and the social makes it inherently tense.

The IS field's youth and its shared focus on the technological and social aspects can be seen by contrasting the experience of IS faculty in management schools with those in recently

⁸The recent call by IS researchers to focus more intently on the "IT artifact" is testimony to the close bond between the IS field, the underlying technology, and the challenge this sets for the field and its research agenda.

1 created schools of information science and
2 information technology. Those in the new schools
3 seem less anxious about the legitimacy of their
4 efforts.⁹ These programs bring together faculty
5 from a wide variety of backgrounds that share a
6 coherent interest in and focus upon technology
7 that is not present in most management schools.
8 In addition, most of these schools are so new that
9 their internal cultures have not yet had time to
10 evolve class politics that use academic legitimacy
11 as a political weapon, although they might
12 develop such class politics as time goes on. The
13 point here is that the new schools have a
14 community focus on technology and relative age
15 equality among their different subfields. This
16 reduces conflict and anxiety about the legitimacy
17 of any of those subfields, including IS, as all are in
18 the same boat.

19
20 Taken together, the IS field's youth and its focus
21 on technology are credible explanations for the
22 anxiety discourse, at least in institutional settings.
23 They predispose the field toward political chal-
24 lenges that often materialize in accusations from
25 outside the field that the IS field is not aca-
26 demically legitimate. Yet neither youth nor a tech-
27 nology focus presents a challenge to academic
28 legitimacy. Rather, each exacerbates endemic
29 political tensions and precipitates political acts
30 that arise from the problem of academic
31 ethnocentrism.

32 **Academic Ethnocentrism**

33
34 An important clue to the political aspect of the
35 anxiety discourse can be found in the presenting
36 symptoms of anxiety, specifically the IS field's
37 apparent lack of power in management schools.
38 Recent examples include concern over the
39 removal of key language supporting the IS area
40 from professional AACSB accreditation criteria,
41 laments about the exclusion of IS courses from
42 the politically important "core" of professional
43 degree curricula, and commentary about the
44 relative absence of strong IS programs in some

prestigious universities. Many IS academics in
management schools appreciate these concerns
because they have suffered the arrogance and
hegemony of scholars in other fields within
management schools. This kind of anxiety is easy
to understand. The truly interesting question is
how and why such anxiety gets systematically
wound up in tales of academic legitimacy.

The simplest explanation for this confusion is the
ethnocentrism of disciplines, a concept articulated
in detail by Donald Campbell (1969) as the IS field
was emerging. Campbell wrote the paper fol-
lowing a frustrating period as head of the
interdisciplinary program at Northwestern Univer-
sity. He postulated that interdisciplinary efforts
typically fail due to the fundamental human
tendency toward ethnocentrism. Broadly defined,
ethnocentrism is the tendency of individuals to
affiliate with those with whom they have much in
common and to avoid those who appear to be
different. Ethnocentric behavior need not be
intentional. Those who exhibit it are often
appalled when they are accused of it. The ethno-
centric person need not be openly belligerent or
xenophobic; it is enough simply to be anxious in
the presence of those who seem "other" or "alien."

Academic ethnocentrism is grounded in and
paves the way for hegemonic expectations
regarding intellectual foci, methods of inquiry and
pedagogy, which engender nationalistic behavior
among disciplines. Simon testified beautifully
about this feature in his memoirs when he wrote:

I came to see that disciplines play the
same role in academe as nations in
international system. Academicians typi-
cally live out their whole careers within
the culture of a discipline, rarely shaking
off the parochialism this isolated exis-
tence engenders. (Still later I learned
from my encounters with economics that
disciplines undertake imperialistic ad-
ventures with the same zest as nations
do.) (Simon 1991, p. 173).

Ethnocentrism of this sort is certainly at work
when people from other fields oppress IS profes-
sionals or researchers. We shall return to this

⁹These observations are anecdotal but could easily be
tested using survey research.

1 point later. It is ethnocentrism *within* the IS field,
 2 however, that helps explain why the anxiety dis-
 3 course has coalesced over the past two decades
 4 in the IS field toward concerns of academic
 5 legitimacy. A recurrent theme in the anxiety dis-
 6 course is that the IS field's intellectual scope is so
 7 broad that the field will devolve to a weakly
 8 federated community in which members relate
 9 more strongly to other fields than to IS (Benbasat
 10 and Weber 1996). Moreover, the barriers to entry
 11 for such a community will be so low that weak
 12 entrants cannot be excluded and intellectual
 13 standards will collapse.

14
 15 The IS field has always been broad due to the
 16 diverse intellectual roots of its founding scholars
 17 and the equally diverse issues that, from the start,
 18 have related to the use of IT in human enterprise.
 19 In addition, the field has become increasingly
 20 broad over the years while the IT revolution has
 21 unfolded. Consequently, the field has continually
 22 struggled to identify its center. The inability to find
 23 a "true" center is disconcerting for people who
 24 have a tendency to become ethnocentric. There-
 25 fore, the natural reaction is to *declare* a center
 26 and attempt to persuade everyone to acknowl-
 27 edge it. If everyone in the field acknowledges the
 28 declared center, a sense of academic solidarity
 29 and shared intellectual purpose will follow, and
 30 anxieties might diminish. However, the intellec-
 31 tual agenda of the IS field is constantly changing
 32 for reasons noted earlier, so the center remains
 33 elusive. As a result, a feeling of inadequacy
 34 pervades the field.

35
 36 The perceived inadequacy of the field is usually
 37 articulated as a shortfall against one or both of
 38 two larger ideals: *ideal scope* (i.e., the field is too
 39 heterogeneous) and *ideal theory* (i.e., the field
 40 does not have any theories). These are indepen-
 41 dent issues, but they are frequently conflated,
 42 resulting in deleterious consequences for the IS
 43 field. It is useful to examine these closely.

44 45 46 **What Is the Ideal Scope for Legitimacy 47 of the IS Field?**

48
 49 The ideal scope argument entails the relationship
 50 between identity and legitimacy discussed earlier.

Given that identity is a required condition of
 legitimacy (and illegitimacy), anything that con-
 fuses identity will confuse the subsequent assign-
 ment of legitimacy. The key characteristic of
 academic identity is seen to be consistent atten-
 tion to particular kinds of problems. Too broad a
 range of foci by members of the field can threaten
 identity and, therefore, legitimacy. The question
 then is, how broad is too broad? Currently, to
 come up with a definitive, identity-sensitive limit to
 the breadth of the IS field is impossible; simply too
 much disagreement exists among the field's
 membership to permit this outcome. It is also
 difficult to set the right *parameters* that help define
 such limits by generalizing from the experience
 and success of other fields. For example, what is
 good for physics is not necessarily good for IS as
 it grapples with a different, dynamic domain
 composed of artifacts. The recent effort to
 encourage a focus on the IT artifact is a good
 example of how the field is seeking ways to
 effectively identify parameters that help define
 adequate boundaries *for the moment*. Yet the fact
 that the IS field does have enough identity to be
 considered *illegitimate* by some proves that the
 current degree of breadth is sufficient to maintain
 identity, even if the identity is imprecise.

Elements of academic ethnocentrism can easily
 be mistaken for problems of ideal scope. In the IS
 field, as in other heterogeneous fields, scholars of
 one persuasion often look down on the scholars of
 other persuasions for the "weakness" or "irrele-
 vance" of their scholarly work. Breaking the field
 into homogenous subfields, which no longer talk
 to one another, might solve this problem in the
 short run because animosity declines. This
 happens, however, only at the expense of
 collaborating on problems that cannot be under-
 stood from the perspective of any single subfield.
 We believe that such negative consequences for
 the field have been key determinants in recent
 calls for more diverse, detailed research on IT
 artifacts (Benbasat and Zmud 2003; Orlikowski
 and Iacono 2001; Weber 2003). This dilemma is
 not attributable to the scope of the field but rather
 to the behavior of individuals within the subfields
 for whom ethnocentric biases are more important
 (and easier) than the challenge of the scholarly
 work itself.

1 **What Is the Ideal Theory for the**
2 **Legitimacy of the IS Field?**

3
4 The ideal-theory argument flows directly from the
5 call for better legitimacy, as some highly legitimate
6 academic fields have erected a set of strong
7 theories at their center. The visible example of
8 such fields is understandably attractive to fields
9 that feel less-legitimate. The ideal-theory argu-
10 ment also obtains a powerful warrant from the
11 philosophy of science in the opinions of Popper
12 (1968) and his followers that speak to the minds
13 of many scholars. Popper's original claim in his
14 "Conjecture and Refutations" was that academic
15 legitimacy is derived (or at least ought to be
16 derived) only from the theoretical contributions
17 made by a field. This view is strongly disputed by
18 many subsequent scholars in the philosophy of
19 science. Within the IS field, however, the warrant
20 usually stands uncontested.¹⁰

21
22 Strong theory can be useful to any academic field
23 as it can enhance a field's cognitive or pragmatic
24 legitimacy. However, strong theory is demon-
25 strably not necessary for academic legitimacy.
26 Moreover, no evidence suggests that the creation
27 of such theory *per se* will make legitimate a field
28 that lacks legitimacy (Lyytinen and King 2004).
29 The problem with the ideal-theory argument is that
30 it takes a reasonable position with regard to the
31 nature of academic inquiry and the value of
32 theoretical abstractions. It causes trouble, how-
33 ever, when it directly equates theory with
34 legitimacy and lack of theory with illigitimacy.¹¹ As

¹⁰There are many who disagree with Popper's philosophy of science on strictly philosophical grounds (e.g., Bleicher 1982; Stove 1982), and many others from the sociology of science who claim that, irrespective of the philosophical issues, the behavior of successful scientists simply does not conform to the model implied by Popper (e.g., Latour 1987; Latour and Woolgar 1979; Traweek 1992). For a more detailed discussion, see Lyytinen and King (2004).

¹¹It is important to note (as we demonstrate in Lyytinen and King 2004) that "positive" and "negative" syllogisms of this sort are not symmetrical. The negative one (i.e., that the lack of theory implies a lack of legitimacy) is a logical fallacy (denial of the antecedent) and cannot be defended even on logical grounds.

explained elsewhere, academic legitimacy is a consequence of the social salience of the topics studied, the presence of strong results, and the ability to maintain disciplinary plasticity (Lyytinen and King, 2004) rather than the strength of the theoretical center. To the extent that a strong theory yields legitimacy, it does so primarily by contributing to the ability of a field to achieve strong results. Theory is an input to the process of getting strong results, not an outcome. Nonetheless, a strong theory is not even a necessary input for all fields. In few fields is it alone sufficient to produce or sustain strong results. Why, then, is the call for theory so powerful an argument in discussions about legitimacy?

The persistence of theory as a discriminator in obtaining legitimacy is best explained by its role in the problems of academic ethnocentrism. Theory has acquired exaggerated importance in some academic fields as many scholars live and die by the theories into which they have been socialized (Kuhn 1996). This creates a political climate ripe for abuse. Those who can claim the mantle of theory band together to consolidate their power. They then use that power against those whose work is not fundamentally theoretical in nature or does not concern the correct type of theory. The question of how best to do the work is subordinated to what methods are deemed politically correct for *any* kind of scholarly work. This outcome is a perversion of the original high ideals of the academy, which call on scholars to pursue, develop, and defend new knowledge using whatever means are most appropriate to the task. This distortion of the value of theory readily creates another backlash. Those whose work is not best pursued theoretically respond by refuting any call for improvement in the theoretical state of the field, because they fear subsequent attacks on the quality of their work.

The problem with ideal theory is further exacerbated when the ideal-theory argument is conflated with the ideal-scope argument. Those who criticize calls for improved theory often invoke the accusation that the pursuit of theory will necessarily narrow the scope of the field. This accusation has superficial appeal because doctrinaire,

1 theory-wielding thugs who beat up on their collea-
 2 gues for a-theoretical weakness are usually
 3 narrow-minded people. The negative reinforce-
 4 ment of “theory” with “narrow” obscures the fact
 5 that many powerful theoreticians are also broad-
 6 minded individuals who see value in a wide array
 7 of intellectual approaches to problems.¹²

8
 9 On a substantive level, there is no evidence to
 10 support the claim that the pursuit of theory (or
 11 theories) *per se* narrows the scope of a field. On
 12 the contrary, the strongest of theories tend to be
 13 broadly applicable and enhance multiple lines of
 14 inquiry, as seen in many theories of economics,
 15 psychology, and social behavior. Likewise,
 16 theories of thermodynamics had great influence
 17 across a huge swath of fields, from high-energy
 18 physics to molecular biology. In addition, strong
 19 theories often have metaphorical power beyond
 20 their immediate targets. This can be observed in
 21 the profound influence of quantum theory,
 22 specifically Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, on
 23 fields as far-ranging as philosophy, religion,
 24 literary criticism, and cognitive psychology, or in
 25 the current buzz around complexity and chaos
 26 theory in multiple fields ranging from biology,
 27 physics, meteorology, economics, and
 28 organizational behavior. Good theory does not
 29 narrow fields; people with specific interests narrow
 30 fields. Academic ethnocentrism is to blame, not
 31 theory.

32 33 34 **Recapitulation: Scope and** 35 **Theory in the IS Field**

36
37 To summarize, the ideal-scope and ideal-theory
38 arguments are not helpful to reforming the anxiety
39 discourse. The ideal-scope argument is at odds
40 with the IS field’s tradition of being open to new
41 ideas, as required in extremely rapidly changing
42 fields. In fact, low barriers to entry and exit mean

that smart people can feel free to come and go in
 this dynamic field, thus cross-pollinating IS
 scholarship with other fields. Similarly, the ideal-
 theory argument is at odds with the IS field’s need
 for flexibility to accommodate rapid change.
 Strong theory is important, but not when it is used
 as a political weapon or stymies the need for fast
 cognitive change. The IS field’s rambunctious
 behavior draws fire from incumbent powers, but
 that behavior is natural for a young field: it is a
 good thing, although it is anxiety producing. We
 see this outcome as good for a young field, as it
 shows that we are *different* (although it can be
 anxiety producing). A certain amount of anxiety is
 by necessity built in to the IS enterprise as long as
 the enterprise is working well. As Hegel stated,
 “without passion there is no achievement.” The
 challenge for the IS field is to separate healthy
 anxiety arising naturally from the focus of study
 from dysfunctional anxiety that arises from
 academic ethnocentrism and hegemony inherent
 in academic politics.

Institutional Politics and Hegemony

As we suggested earlier, IS faculty members in
 schools of management are particularly suscep-
 tible to the anxiety discourse. This comes as no
 surprise: they are surrounded by faculty in
 management subfields who have faced their own
 issues surrounding legitimacy. No management
 field is much older than a century. The “modern”
 management school’s focus on finance, ac-
 counting, marketing, and so on did not become
 common until the mid-20th century following the
 rise of professional management as practice.
 Moreover, the roots of management school
 education lie in teaching traditional professional
 practices that were frowned upon by other social
 sciences until after World War II, when manage-
 ment studies became more scientific (see, for
 example, Simon 1991). The difference in age
 between the established management subfields
 and the IS field is only two or three decades, but
 the extra time has given established fields the
 ability to cultivate potent mechanisms of internal
 socialization and enforcement. They keep their
 internal fights under control to exert power and

¹²The dog of the IS field is no less susceptible to Pavlovian conditioning than any other dog. The negative reaction to calls for improved theory is a *learned response* made more powerful through the administration of negative, intermittent reinforcement by narrow-minded and wrong-headed colleagues.

1 direct resources toward themselves through the
2 mechanisms of ethnocentrism. They simply
3 declare that only they are ethnically pure enough
4 to deserve resources. In doing so, they often pre-
5 sent as defenders of the academic ideal and
6 position those who are not their peers as
7 undeserving. They are quick to fire the deadliest
8 shot that can be taken at any academic field: they
9 impugn its intellectual quality. The IS field is often
10 on the receiving end of such attacks.

11
12 It should come as no surprise that the IS field
13 comes under attack from other management
14 subfields; this is the essence of ethnocentrism.
15 What is puzzling is the way the IS field gives in to
16 this pressure by starting to question its own
17 legitimacy, thus playing directly into its opponents'
18 hands. Unfortunately, the IS field's own anxiety
19 discourse turns back on the IS field itself,
20 increasing concerns about the field's identity, its
21 theoretical strength, and its academic legitimacy.
22 By internalizing this rhetoric from without and
23 turning it on each other, the field engages in a
24 phenomenon called *horizontal violence* common
25 to marginalized fields of work.¹³ IS academics
26 start to look at themselves and at each other as
27 the primary causes of their anxiety. Unfortunately,
28 they find much to dislike. They are harshly critical
29 of each others' papers and proposals, they treat
30 publications in major journals as a resource to be
31 rationed rather than a discussion to be promoted,
32 and they grasp at efforts to define the field
33 narrowly around their preferred interests. In so
34 doing, they make it easy for opponents to argue
35 that the IS field is weak because, ostensibly, even
36 people within the field think it is weak.
37 Ethnocentrism from without promotes
38 ethnocentrism from within.

39
40 The nature of the disciplinary game is that the IS
41 field will never get past its anxiety discourse by

improving itself so much that other fields will
accept it as good. As long as other fields get to
define what it means to be good, they can move
the target at will. The IS field should refuse to
play this game on the grounds that it fails on
absolute terms (i.e., the IS field does not fall short
on any absolute standard) and relative terms (the
IS field is no worse than other fields in terms of
academic quality). The argument is bogus, but
when left uncontested, it becomes reified and
powerful. The key to ending the anxiety discourse
and the underlying anxiety that produces it is to
find solidarity within the field and push back
against the oppression from without.

Angle of Attack

We return now to the question of whether the
quest for a strong theoretic core might change the
balance of power and influence legitimacy in favor
of the IS field. We do not believe having such a
theoretic core is necessary to achieving legiti-
macy; if obtained, it will not guarantee legitimacy.
Still, we agree that having a strong theoretic core
might help establish continuity across lines of
inquiry within the field. It also might help develop
a better public image of the field (symbolic capital)
and thus enhance in the long run the field's ability
to handle the design and use of IT in human
enterprise. Unfortunately, the process of estab-
lishing such a theoretic core will probably outlast
the expected careers of the many people currently
in the field and thus will not relieve anxiety in the
short run.¹⁴ Most important, the quest for a theo-
retic core will not reduce the oppression endemic
to the institutional environments of many IS schol-
ars. The focus on the core as the savior is mis-
placed and can even be dangerous. Other angles
of attack will take effect more quickly. We
suggest three.

First, the IS field should become more aggressive
in defense of its own legitimacy by repudiating

¹³The term arose in the study of oppressed occupational communities that internalize and redirect the oppression at each other. The original work on the subject has focused on the field of nursing and is of growing interest in the sociology of work and occupations (Duffy 1995). It can be seen in many other fields, including computer science, environmental science, film studies, and women's studies.

¹⁴This is based on our reading of the histories of other academic fields that have evolved strong theoretic cores (Lyytinen and King 2004).

1 unwarranted accusations from those in other
 2 fields whenever they arise. This must occur at all
 3 levels and must be done consistently to establish
 4 the clear understanding that such oppression will
 5 not be tolerated. This strategy is not new; it is
 6 simply "tit for tat," established empirically as the
 7 quickest path to equilibrium in the theory of
 8 cooperative games (Axelrod and Hamilton 1981).
 9 Its pursuit does not mean the IS field should shy
 10 away from legitimate criticism; on the contrary, the
 11 field should embrace such criticism in the spirit of
 12 open scholarship. At the same time, the IS field
 13 must respond aggressively to politically motivated
 14 attacks masquerading as responsible assess-
 15 ments of the IS field's academic quality.
 16 Ultimately, the IS field must be the sole authorita-
 17 tive arbiter of academic quality for the IS field.

18
 19 Second, the IS field should exploit its expanding
 20 opportunities in both instruction and research.
 21 Much recent anxiety discourse seems to have
 22 been triggered by a dramatic decline in IS enroll-
 23 ments following the crash of the dot.com boom.
 24 This echoes similar concerns that have existed for
 25 some time, most notably the fear that other
 26 management subfields are now competing or
 27 soon will begin to compete for students on the IS
 28 field's turf. The defensive strategy of closing
 29 ranks around a core set of IS topics and fighting
 30 for control of them is a losing proposition over the
 31 long run. The explosive growth in IT applications
 32 across many domains precludes the IS field's
 33 ability to establish such turf, much less control it.
 34 Instead, the IS field should exploit emerging
 35 instructional opportunities in the way it did once
 36 before in response to the explosive growth in
 37 administrative data processing applications in the
 38 1960s and 1970s. As in the past, research oppor-
 39 tunities go hand in hand with instructional
 40 opportunities. Fortunately for the IS field, such
 41 opportunities abound.

42
 43 Despite the dot.com crash, enterprise-oriented
 44 applications of IT continue to grow dramatically,
 45 and enrollments in related programs will continue
 46 to grow globally. Nonetheless, these oppor-
 47 tunities pale in comparison to the rapidly growing
 48 demand for the skills of the IS field that lie outside
 49 the confines of traditional business education.
 50 These new opportunities are in the areas of

manufacturing, science, health, entertainment,
 transportation, and so on. IS academics outside
 management schools are already pursuing these
 opportunities successfully. The large IS popula-
 tion in management schools has much to offer to
 these expanding areas of IS work. Moreover,
 they have much to gain in both research and
 teaching opportunities by engaging them.
 Naturally, the sometimes-myopic institutional con-
 structs of professional education create chal-
 lenges in exploiting such opportunities. Yet, the
 IS field has continually met such challenges since
 it began. Indeed, it has a tradition of following
 opportunity wherever it might lead (see, for
 example, Mason 2004). This type of pioneering
 spirit is needed now and will continue to benefit
 the IS field in the future as it has in the past.

Finally, the IS field will have to work harder and be
 better than its critics. This requirement has always
 been imposed upon the young. In rising to that
 expectation, the young normally create progress
 for all. Creating a stronger theoretical grounding
 for the IS field is one component of this effort, but
 only if it is done without narrowing the field's
 focus. The IS field must engage issues that are
 important to its members and welcome new
 entrants with interesting views and opinions. The
 IS field must embrace and exploit research
 strategies appropriate to the study of those issues
 without allowing narrow methodological orthodoxy
 to be imposed from without or generated from
 within. Contrary to the complaints of critics, the IS
 field has learned over time to set high expect-
 ations of itself. Those expectations should be set
 even higher, but they must be set entirely within
 the IS field, by members of the IS field, and
 calibrated by other fields only when the work in
 those fields directly complements the work of
 individuals in the IS field.

The future of the IS field lies in being tough on the
 field's critics when that criticism is politically
 motivated, following instructional and research
 opportunities irrespective of what institutional
 boundaries must be crossed, and setting and
 striving for tough academic standards on the IS
 field's own terms. This set of challenges is not as
 daunting as it might seem. The survival of the IS
 field over the past 30 years shows these to have

1 been key strengths of the field all along; the same
2 still holds true. The founders of the IS field blazed
3 an exciting trail, but it is not the trail that lies
4 ahead. As Whitehead rightly noted, "A science
5 that hesitates to forget its founders is lost." The
6 spirit of the field's founders provides inspiration,
7 but the shape of the field's future lies in the efforts
8 of a new generation of scholars who must weigh
9 carefully the meaning of the anxiety discourse and
10 its implications for their intellectual agendas.

11
12 A curious contradiction exists between the evident
13 reach of the IS field's ambitions since its inception
14 and the grasp for legitimacy that lies at the heart
15 of the anxiety discourse. The opening quote from
16 Browning's poem and the title of this essay, which
17 was inspired by this quote, can be read in a
18 number of ways. One is a call to reach out and
19 grasp what one can. Another is an admonition to
20 never reach for more than can be grasped
21 successfully. We feel neither serves our purpose.
22 Instead, we suggest that the heart and soul of the
23 IS field's future lies in reaching beyond what can
24 be grasped. Accepting this risk is a tolerable
25 price to pay for aspirations of heaven.

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