

## Objectivity in MIS Research

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### **Article:**

I wish to bring up two issues that seem to hamper objectivity in MIS research. I will call them "Strike it when it is hot" issue and "Elephant and the blind men" issue.

First, the "Strike it when it is hot" issue. MIS research and publications are replete with examples of "hot" topics. The current examples of hot topics are "business process reengineering", "global systems", and "information superhighway". Everyone seems to jump on the bandwagon and starts to write and tout the merits of the new area without serious forethought or scholarly inquiry. This has been true throughout the thirty-year-or-so life span of MIS. As I am sure, readers are aware that over the years there has been shifting euphoria over decision support systems, information resources management, end user computing, expert systems, executive information systems, neural networks, and outsourcing. While there is nothing inherently wrong with this sudden flurry of activity, what typically happens is generation of unrealistic expectations and creation of myths, which are later discarded as more scholarly work is conducted. The result may be disenchantment and sometimes a premature demise of a young field of study. The reaction then is typically something like: "Well, this did not pan out. Let us drop this and move on to something else."

Two examples will serve to prove the point. In recent years, there has been considerable interest in IS outsourcing, and business process reengineering. While earlier reports painted very rosy pictures of IS outsourcing and downsizing, Lacity and Hirschheim explored the various myths associated with IS outsourcing, and found that many of the initially proclaimed benefits were overrated. In fact, I looked into an outsourcing situation myself in a financial institution and found that the outsourcing impacts were rated positive or negative depending on who I asked the question. In the business process reengineering arena, the two 1991 articles by Davenport and Short, and Hammer evoked considerable interest from the MIS community. However, later reports showed that many BPR efforts have actually failed. Moreover, in a recent article, Davenport and Stoddard have addressed the various myths associated with business process reengineering.

What advice can be offered to avoid such embarrassing situations where earlier rosy predictions are essentially negated by more scholarly work? While some level of early speculative work needs to be encouraged into a new field, it soon should be followed by more serious inquiry. There are a few suggestions I would like to offer in this regard. Supplement anecdotal testimony with more representative evidence. Use valid research methods, not necessarily the more complex ones. Another method to provide objectivity into your research is by means of multiple methods and multiple sources of data, what is called "triangulation". Get your evidence by more than a single method. For example, combine a case study with survey data. Or combine interviews with empirical data. Using multiple sources of data leads us into the discussion of the next issue.

Readers should be aware of the "Elephant and the blind men" fable, where several blindfolded men touched different parts of an elephant and each identified the elephant differently. Translated into MIS, a new phenomenon is typically studied from the perspective of only those who have a vested interest in making it look

good. This was true in the early days of computing when efficiency and effectiveness of MIS was evaluated based on data and perceptions of MIS analysts and managers.

No wonder, such studies provided only the brighter side of the issues. More recently, in a *Journal of MIS* article, problems and benefits of expert systems were evaluated using the opinions of knowledge engineers alone. Below, I discuss impacts of IS outsourcing, an area that I have studied in some depth.

Media reports are almost unanimous and at times euphoric in their claims of outsourcing benefits. However, a reporting bias in these reports must be recognized. First these reports are at best anecdotal accounts and second, perhaps more importantly, they are based on the accounts of outsourcing vendors, consultants, and senior executives/survivors in user organizations (i.e., those who remained or were promoted in the organization after the outsourcing act). Naturally, these individuals have a vested interest in making their decisions look good. However, there are typically "winners" and "losers" in an outsourcing situation. The losers are those who are terminated, demoted, or reassigned to other positions. In the outsourcing situation in a financial institution that I referred to earlier, I interviewed two individuals who were on opposite sides of the fence in that one of them was promoted in the organization and the other was terminated. When I talked to them, they gave such diametrically opposite views that at times I felt that they were referring to two different situations. While the promoted individual vividly described all the usual benefits of IT outsourcing, e.g., cost reduction, better control, and strategic focus, the terminated individual, while admitting some short-term cost reduction, indicated that the outsourcing decision was a failure in all other respects, e.g., lack of control, inability to use IT in a strategic manner, and lingering personnel morale problems. I am sure that the truth is some-where in the middle, or perhaps it is a relative truth depending on the perspective of the beholder.

The point of this essay is that much research in MIS, in spite of using fancy research techniques and the appearance of rigorous analysis, takes a superficial, microscopic or inherently biased view. While triangulation helps to confirm results using several approaches, a more fundamental issue is to obtain several perspectives on the research question. A dialectic view suggested above may give two opposing views of the same situation. A more rigorous approach will be to address the same issue from the viewpoint of all stakeholders. For example, the stakeholders in expert system development include experts, knowledge engineers, system developers, system operators, system clients, managers, and possibly even vendors. While such extensive work may be unduly large and infeasible for any individual researcher at any given time, an attempt should be made to include as many views as possible. Some feasible approaches to unravel the truth are: a team approach, spreading the research over time, and collaboration by researchers at different institutions.