



**Responsible IS Research for a Better World
A Special Issue of the Information Systems Journal
Call for Papers**

The notion that there is a moral obligation for researchers to make the world a better place is not new, yet one seldom encounters substantive research that practically espouses such a view. Noting the lack of such research, Walsham (2012) makes an impassioned call to arms in a short article titled “Are We Making the World a Better Place with Information Systems?”. Providing further evidence of the critical need for responsible research, scholars have formed a new virtual organisation named “Responsible Research in Business and Management” (RRBM). RRBM has the avowed focus of “inspiring, encouraging, and supporting credible and useful research in the business and management disciplines” (<http://rrbm.network>).

We suggest that there are many different ways in which responsible research can lead to a better world. Beyond the interests of individual organisations, scholars need to also consider the grander scheme of how research can make *the world* a better place, not only in economic terms, but also socially, personally and environmentally. Occasionally we do come across articles in which it is clear that the authors are pursuing an agenda that aims to contribute to ‘making the world a better place’. Examples include: Zheng and Yu’s (2016) study of the socialised affordances of social media in the processes of collective action, with a detailed examination of the ‘Free Lunch for Children’ charity in China; Tim et al.’s (2017) exploration of how the boundary-spanning competences of social media function as a digital response mechanism in natural disasters; and Díaz Andrade and Doolin’s (2016) account of how Information and Communication Technologies contribute to the social inclusion of newly settled refugees. But these examples are too far and few between.

Apart from articles that demonstrate the beneficial impacts of social media and IT more generally, a stream of ‘critical social IS research’ emerged in the 1990s focusing on the social and ethical implications of technology in organizations and society. Critical IS researchers have explored how IS that was deployed with the objective of increasing efficiency and instrumental rationality often also increased managerial or social control, surveillance and domination, with negative social consequences in organizations and society (see e.g. Howcroft and Trauth, 2005). Thus, the purpose of critical IS research has been to contribute knowledge with transformative and emancipatory potential in order to make a world a better place. Although recognized as a third research stream (Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991; Chen and Hirschheim, 2004) that addressed practically, socially and ethically relevant questions, critical IS research has remained somewhat outside the mainstream. It is pertinent to note that the ISJ was one of a few premier journals to advance critical research by publishing a Special Issue “Exploring the Critical Agenda in IS Research” (Cecez-Kecmanovic, Klein and Brooke, 2008). The ISJ further published a Special Issue on “The Dark Side of IT Use” (Tarafdar et al. 2015) that examined negative phenomena associated with use of IS, phenomena that are often hard to articulate and investigate because institutions are reluctant to acknowledge their existence given their investments in IS infrastructures and IS enabled business models.

Notwithstanding these attempts, it does not seem to be an exaggeration to suggest that, for most IS researchers, the notion that they can make the world a better place with IS is far from both their intellectual comfort zone and their scholarly intentions. For instance, Clarke (2017) suggests that much research in data markets and e-commerce takes the view that consumers' privacy rights are mere barriers to corporate profits: researchers assist organisations to find ways to persuade consumers to give up these rights for as little compensation as possible. Some scholars take this a step further and suggest that customers can be persuaded to disclose confidential and private information voluntarily (i.e. without any compensation) if the organisation is able to establish a dyadic and reciprocal relationship with the consumer. As Zimmer et al. (2010, p.404) note, individuals have the "inherent tendency to socially orient themselves toward another. ... People are biologically wired to respond in kind to polite social advances provided those advances follow socially acceptable guidelines". Organisations can thus leverage these inherent tendencies to solicit private information. But does research that suggests ways in which individual privacy can be undermined really help to make the world a better place?

Meanwhile, research into 'green IS' often takes the view that a green image can help the corporate bottom line, yet fails to consider whether there are any net benefits for the environment (cf. Elliot and Webster, 2017). Similar concerns afflict other instances of IS research, notably in the management-employee tensions that characterise the implementation of enterprise systems. We are not suggesting that IS researchers should shun these topics, but we do suggest that researchers need to consider whose interests they are privileging or protecting: there are multiple valid stakeholders (organisations, employees, customers) that can be the focus of research. As noted in an editorial in this journal, researchers often unconsciously succumb to the interests of the hegemonic forces (usually corporate entities) embodied in the de facto powers associated with the contexts that we investigate (Davison, 2018).

Another example of a missed opportunity to make the world a better place relates to the technology-based start-ups that continue to drive entrepreneurship. McKendrick (2017) suggests that the rapid growth of this sector depends on a variety of technological factors such as: cloud services, low cost open source software, and big data analytics capabilities. In parallel, social entrepreneurship also continues to grow (Zimmer & Pearson 2018), yet there is little evidence that the latter is a focus of IS researchers, who seem instead to be enchanted by the technology. If we are to make the world a better place, it is imperative to study both the technological drivers and the social aspects of entrepreneurship in the context of a broader ecosystem.

In striving to make the world a better place, it is possible that researchers may make impossible demands from the digital economy leading to confusion, policy paralysis and regulatory overreach (cf. Bhagwati, 2004). This research often criticises digital enterprises and initiatives (especially in developing countries) for their generation of unequal outcomes, exploitation of employees, provision of inadequate working conditions and engagement in a host of other unethical practices (Sandeep and Ravishankar, 2018). We suggest that this is a different category of irresponsible research: it usually ignores compelling evidence of how commercial digital endeavours create social impact when such findings are inconsistent with researchers' preferred worldviews. In such research we often encounter situations where researchers claim to *speak on behalf of* beneficiary stakeholders yet provide little evidence that they *speak with* the same stakeholders in order to help them understand the potential impacts of IS on their lives (cf. Peticca-Harris et al., 2019).

In this special issue, we seek articles that both embody principles of responsible research and contribute explicitly to demonstrating how IS research contributes to our understanding of how IS makes the world a better place. Following Majchrzak et al. (2016), we suggest that contributing authors should not limit their research designs and thus contributions to the scholarly community. They should also consider the practical and policy implications for a wide range of practitioners (not only managers) as well as the broader social world. Finally, they can consider the non-human world of the environment, given our focus on making the *world* a better place through IS research.

While the principles for responsible research may be contested, we refer to a number of prominent examples. For instance, the Lund declaration (<https://era.gv.at/object/document/130>) suggests that ‘Europe must speed up solutions to tackle grand challenges through alignment, research, global cooperation and achieving impact’, with a strong emphasis on innovation. We echo this call and hope that contributing authors will consider how they can contribute to grand challenges in innovative ways that will help to make the world a better place.

A more detailed set of principles is offered by the RRBM Network, who note (<https://rrbm.network/position-paper/principles-of-responsible-science/>) that “responsible research depends on an ecosystem that supports, recognizes, and rewards, in a coordinated fashion, the following seven principles.

Principle 1: Service to Society: Development of knowledge that benefits business and the broader society, locally and globally, for the ultimate purpose of creating a better world.

Principle 2: Stakeholder Involvement: Research that engages different stakeholders in the research process, without compromising the independence of inquiry.

Principle 3: Impact on Stakeholders: Research that has an impact on diverse stakeholders, especially research that contributes to better business and a better world.

Principle 4: Valuing Both Basic and Applied Contributions: Contributions in both the theoretical domain to create fundamental knowledge and in applied domains to address pressing and current issues.

Principle 5: Valuing Plurality and Multidisciplinary Collaboration: Diversity in research themes, methods, forms of scholarship, types of inquiry, and interdisciplinary collaboration to reflect the plurality and complexity of business and societal problems.

Principle 6: Sound Methodology: Research that implements sound scientific methods and processes in both quantitative and qualitative or both theoretical and empirical domains.

Principle 7: Broad Dissemination: Diverse forms of knowledge dissemination that collectively advance basic knowledge and practice”.

A broader set of goals has been established by the United Nations. These 17 sustainable development goals (<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>) include several that are salient to the work undertaken by IS researchers. For example, Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities may relate to IS research on Smart Cities, and Goal 13: Climate Action may relate to research undertaken in Green IS.

A final set of ideas comes from the UK Government’s Research Evaluation Framework, which covers five broad areas of relevance including: economic growth; health and welfare; public policy; culture; and quality of life and work.

Recognition of these prominent principles (or others) and a deliberate attempt to adhere to (some of) them in research design and reporting will be taken as one form of evidence that a submitted article is in scope for this special issue. We expect that authors will explicitly address such principles in both the text of their research articles and in the cover letter.

Topics that are relevant to this call for papers include, but are not limited to, demonstrations of how IS can bring about positive impacts in such domains as:

- Poverty alleviation
- Providing banking services for the unbanked
- Enhancing or protecting the environment
- Creating social value for individual citizens, especially in marginalised communities
- Catering to the legitimate workplace needs of employees
- Supporting social entrepreneurship
- Enforcing protection of data privacy rights of individual data subjects
- Developing policies that strengthen the rights of employees and citizens in civil society and the rights of non-human actors (fauna, flora, natural ecosystems) in the environment.
- Contributing directly to one or more of the SDGs (e.g. health)
- Critiquing existing projects as to whether and how they support equity/inequity' (e.g. Aadhar in India)
- Proposing new methodological or theoretical approaches to understanding the 'better world' concept (e.g. critical realism)

The Senior Editors for this special issue are Robert Davison (Managing Editor), Andrew Hardin, Ann Majchrzak and MN Ravishankar. Advisory Cttee Members: Geoff Walsham; Cynthia Beath, Niels Bjørn-Andersen, M Lynne Markus.

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Deadlines: Extended abstracts (1000 words) may be submitted for editorial guidance and feedback before August 31st, 2019. Full submissions are due by March 31st 2020. No extensions will be granted. We expect that submitted articles will be subjected to 2-3 rounds of review prior to acceptance and so that publication of the special issue will be in 2022.

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