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Does ERA spell the end to the era of IS methodological and research pluralism?

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Abstract

Methodological pluralism has been slowly developing in Information Systems. However, this development is fragile and only interpretivism has made any inroads into the major journals. We argue that the new Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative and other pressures to publish will stymie this budding but fragile methodological and research pluralism. The pressure to publish in ranked journals will lead to greater conformity in methodology and in research areas. We conclude that pluralism will be under threat and suggest that pluralism needs to be surveyed and debated in the journals.

Keywords:
Journal rankings, research methods, research quality, ERA, research pluralism

INTRODUCTION

It would be safe to presume that all Australian academics are aware of the personal implications of the newly introduced Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) Initiative (ARC, 2010). The ERA aims to provide a discipline-level evaluation of research strength through a number of measures including publication in ranked journals and conferences.

The United Kingdom and New Zealand have similar systems, the RAE and PBRF respectively. In the United States of America (USA), there is no overarching government approach but each university department may have developed its own ranking systems of journals (Adams & Johnson, 2008). The upshot of these auditing systems is that if an academic succeeds in getting published in the top journals and conferences then the academic’s career will advance. Failure to gain publication in high-ranking journals may mean relegation to teaching, failure to meet probation terms, lack of promotion opportunities, or worse.

In this paper we wish to argue that:

• these circumstances provide new and increased pressure on academics to publish and to publish in approved publications;
• lists of approved publications are generally methodologically and research area conservative or ‘mainstream’;
• the combination of pressure to publish and the lists of approved publications means that academics will begin to research and publish to reflect what they see as ‘safe’ or better prospects; and
• publications and conferences will be under pressure to ‘sanskritise’ further reducing publication avenues for unorthodox views.

Research in Information Systems is not immune these changes. This may lead to the loss of a methodological and research area pluralism in Information Systems in Australia as evidence suggests has occurred in countries that employ such metrics and pressure to publish (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Chen & Hirschheim, 2004; Gallivan & Benbunan-Fich, 2007; Hirschheim, Klein, & Lytinen, 1996; Özbulgin, 2009; Powell & Woerndl, 2008). We are particularly concerned that this reduction in methodological pluralism will mean qualitative research will be adversely affected and may be limited to the use of Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) and grounded theory. We conclude that methodological and research pluralism is under threat in Australia. However, before we discuss these points, we wish to provide a brief survey of methodological pluralism in IS and to a lesser extent some comments on research area pluralism.
METHODOLOGICAL AND RESEARCH PLURALISM

This paper is based on the premise that methodological and research pluralism within Information Systems is a good thing that reflects the pluralism and vitality of its base disciplines, and the social sciences in particular (see also Chen and Hirschheim, 2004). Pluralism can refer to differences in underpinning methodologies and their views on reality and knowledge (methodological pluralism). It can also refer to the differences and varieties of what constitutes Information Systems research problems and the breadth of the discipline (research pluralism).

Finally, it can also refer to who gets published and who makes the publishing decisions: what countries, gender, universities, ethnic backgrounds and so on are overrepresented in editorial and organising roles, publications and conferences (publication pluralism). This paper only touches on this issue of publication pluralism.

Defending pluralism is a little like defending free speech. Just as there are political or other opinions we might find opposed to our own but we may wish to defend a person’s right to hold and express such views. Defending pluralism in Information Systems means defending the right of fellow colleagues to hold methodological views of the discipline quite counter to our own. From this point of view, pluralism is the weapon to counter discipline ‘groupthink’. An insular homogenous discipline will reinforce the same worldviews and produce what Vandana Shiva refers to as ‘monoculture of the mind’ (Shiva, 1993).

Methodological pluralism is essential to the vitality and growth in Information Systems (Banville & Landry, 1989; Chen & Hirschheim, 2004; Hirschheim, et al., 1996). Indeed a ‘monistic’ view of Information Systems is ‘inadequate’ and a ‘continuous commitment to paradigmatic pluralism is critical’ (Chen and Hirschheim, 2004: 228-229). As IS draws upon its base disciplines, the pluralism of those disciplines should be reflected in Information Systems. Similarly, research pluralism provides the basis for the growth and change in what constitute important Information Systems problems in response to changing technologies and organisational, business and social expectations and circumstances. A discipline does indeed require a core set of orienting or underpinning research problems but there is a danger of ossification should new circumstances not bring new problems and problematisations or new ways of thinking about problems and ourselves (Miller & Rose, 2008).

Methodological pluralism refers to the openness to publication and grants for researchers coherently following one of the four principal methodological theories and their particular views on the nature of reality, the means of our knowledge of that reality, and our relationship to that knowledge. These broad methodologies are positivism, interpretivism, critical theory and postmodernism. It is not the purpose of this article to explore the differences, subtleties and often the mutual miscomprehension and misunderstandings of each approach. In summary, we take positivism to be the view that underpinning nomothetic laws underpin and explain human behaviour and these laws can best be identified through objective methods that attempt to avoid the views of the researchers and subjects that might bias the results. Interpretivists on the other hand argue that humans act according to their understandings of the world, not according to some underpinning law. The key task of the interpretivist is to identify and tease out what these often contradictory, complex and contextual understandings are. Postmodernists question not only the objective nature of our social world but apply their scepticism to the ontological status of human agent. For them the human agent is not in itself a coherent subjectivity but is itself constructed. To put this another way, whereas truth is ‘out there’ in the world for positivists and truth is ‘in’ the understandings of the human mind for interpretivists, for the postmodernists, truth is itself a fabrication. For the postmodernist researcher the key focus is to disclose this fabrication.

Finally there is critical theory. We have left this last even though it was developed prior to postmodernism, and arguably, interpretivism. We suggest that critical theory has its own history where there are positivist, interpretivist and postmodern influenced methodologies within that history. However, underpinning critical theory is the view expressed by Marx that the point of research is not to understand the world but to change it (Marx, 1977). The aim of critical theory is to demystify our social relations and to raise consciousness of what is ‘really’ happening.

Methodological Pluralism in IS

Although IS has a tradition of conducting what Gallivan and Benbunan-Fich (2007) call ‘research on research’ few studies have investigated research paradigms and methodologies (Chen & Hirschheim, 2004). An important exception by Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991), investigated the philosophical assumptions underpinning 155 IS articles published between 1985 and 1989 in four top USA publications. They found 96.8% of articles were based on the positivist tradition, 3.2% were interpretive studies and there were no critical studies at all. Orlikowski and Baroudi did not examine postmodernism.

This study and others like it prompted a major debate in the 1990s concerning the methodology of the discipline (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991; Weber, 2004). At stake was a fight for recognition and publication of qualitative and interpretative research in the main US Information Systems journals such as MISQ, Communications of the ACM (CACM) and Management Science. As Weber (2004) observed, the debate was often marked with
vituperation and mutual hostility and incomprehension between the mainstream positivist position and those wishing to pursue and publish non positivist research.

Possibly one of the most important turning points in the struggle over methodological pluralism was the appointment of Allan Lee, a qualitative researcher to the position of editor-in-chief of MISQ, arguably the premier IS journal in the USA and his announcement that the hitherto ‘bastion of quantitative and positivist research’ now boasted a representative team of editors and reviewers across the methodological divide (Lee, 1999). Lee’s first edition (MISQ, 23(1), 1999) showcased qualitative research.

While examples of qualitative work are now easier to find, determining how much real progress has been made is difficult since studies evaluating methodological approaches are rare, tend to be narrowly focused on particular publications, and use different frameworks to analyse articles. There does however seem to be distinction between American and European methodological pluralism. American based journals are far more likely to be positivist.

The most recent multi-journal study examined 488 IS articles in five top US journals between 1995-1999 (Vessey et al. 2002 ). The authors categorised the methodological approach of the articles in a more fine grained way than the earlier study so direct comparisons between positivist articles across both studies is difficult to make. However, Vessey et al. (2002 ) found that only 4.7% of the studies were interpretive - slightly more than the earlier study Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991). Neither Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991) nor Vessey et al. (2002) identified critical and postmodern studies.

A much broader study by Chen and Hirschheim (2004) evaluated 1,893 articles published in four European and four US outlets between 1991 and 2001. Although the authors only categorise articles as either positivist or interpretivist, this work showed that overall 81% of published research in these top IS outlets take a positivist approach. Evaluating the difference between European and US outlets, Chen and Hirschheim (2004) found that US outlets are more orthodox with 86% of research being positivist, while in European outlets approximately two-thirds of the articles are positivist.

By contrast, at least for some journals, there has been a growth in interpretivist methodologies in Europe. For example, the most recent study that included a survey of methodological approaches was conducted by Avison et al. (2008). This study reviewed articles published in the Information Systems Journal (ISJ) during the period 1991 to 2008. The study found that approximately 71% of the papers were interpretive, the remaining 29% were categorized as positivist. However, as the authors comment the large number of interpretive papers is explained by the fact that the journal was established to provide an outlet for interpretive research. Another single journal study by Dwivedi and Kuljis (2008) examined all papers published in EJIS from 1997 to 2007. They found that 34.4% of papers were positivist, 64.9% interpretive and 0.7% critical. A significant proportion of these articles (14% of the total) were published in one year, 2006. Whether or not EJIS is typical of European IS journals is not known but is one of the most highly ranked journal according to most rankings in Europe.

The dearth of critical and postmodern articles in both Europe and the US is concerning, particularly given the widespread use of these methodologies in the IS base disciplines. It is unclear at this stage whether this reflects editorial policy, current research topics in IS or researcher confidence in these methodologies.

Problems with methodological pluralism in IS

The growth in non-positivist publications, especially in Europe, and not least the editorial willingness to boast pluralism appears encouraging (e.g. Avison et al. 2008). However, to repeat it is clear from these publications that nearly all the growth has been in interpretivist work. There are few critical theory studies and possibly none or at least very few postmodern studies published in these main journals. Methodological pluralism seems to have been confined to interpretivism in Information Systems. This is disappointing.

Özbilgin (2009) does provide a cautionary note to the celebratory tone of many the journal editorials regarding their pluralism and questions whether the small numbers of interpretive studies is a form of tokenism that result in a marginalisation of interpretive and other non positivist studies. He suggests that because so few of these papers are accepted it only serves to highlight how marginal they are and simply allows publishers to claim they are pluralist (Özbilgin, 2009: 4).

We suspect that the pluralism of IS, particularly in Europe, is not simply tokenism and there is a genuine attempt to broaden the research methodology in IS. However, Özbilgin (2009: 4) cautions that disciplines such as IS with “a legacy and dominance of mathematical logics and positivist traditions” will continue to struggle developing methodological pluralism.

In addition, as we argue later, the pressure of ERA will be towards orthodoxy and positivism which may mean that interpretive work is restricted to grounded theory and to and to computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). Most CAQDAS is based on grounded theory (Mangabeira, 1996). The widely used
software nVivo is one major example. There is some evidence for this increasing reliance of CAQDAS in some areas of social sciences and management and administration research (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Fendt and Sachs 2008). Indeed as early as 1996, Coffey and Atkinson, expressed concern over an emerging ‘hegemony’ of grounded theory and CAQDAS in the social sciences. This may well be the case with new researchers and those new to interpretivism since Fielding and Lee (2002) reported that CAQDAS was adopted by users who had a limited social science background. Johnston (2006) observed that CAQDAS is a common starting place for PhD students and there is a growing demand for courses in CAQDAS.

It would appear, in summary, Information Systems tends, with towards a large positivist rump and that such alternatives that there are, are confined to firstly interpretivism and possibly towards one method of interpretivism, grounded theory and CAQDAS. This requires empirical investigation including comparisons with European and American based journals and this forms part of an ongoing study.

Research pluralism

Our second concern relates to research area pluralism. As discussed above, there appears to be greater pluralism in the European literature than the USA literature (Chen & Hirschheim, 2004). One thing that concerns us however is that the substantial majority of Information Systems literature covers what may be broadly described as commerce: the development of more efficient and effective information systems in businesses, eBusiness, eCRM and so on. It has not only primarily a business focus but a big business focus. This not unsurprisingly reflects the history of the discipline, which emerged from electronic data processing where only large companies owned and operated computers.

Now in the time of ubiquitous computing, business, let alone large businesses do not have the sole or primary use of computers. Information Systems as an area of research has out grown business. The discipline, as reflected by its research articles, has not. At least at this broad level of research area, IS is not pluralist.

While few studies have looked at this issue, Vessey et al. (2002 ) analysing articles published between 1995 and 1999 in top US outlets found only 1.6% of articles focused on societal issues and the vast majority (65.6%) take an organisational perspective. In Europe, Galliers and Whitley (2007) analysed 1,292 papers published in the proceedings of European Conference on Information Systems (ECIS) between 1993 to 2002 and found 14% focused on societal issues. This would suggest a growing interest in the broader societal aspects of IS but we suspect the ECIS figure represents a more liberal European conference perspective. Business and organisational issues nevertheless remain paramount in both the Europe (Dwivedi & Kuljis, 2008) and the USA.

Research pluralism in the discipline has been understudied and under debated. This paper intends to contribute to such a debate and the relationship to business and instrumentalism more generally. Concerns with efficiency and effectiveness of business are important but not to the virtual exclusion of social oriented research work.

Publication pluralism

Özbilgin (2009) and others (for example Avison, Dwivedi, Fitzgerald, & Powell, 2008; Gallivan & Benbunan-Fich, 2007) have identified geographical location of researchers and the context of their studies as important indicators for inclusion in high ranked journals and for citations. Jacques and Sebire (2010) identified that the presence of a country name in the title reduced the citation of an article for medical journals. Location of the researcher or study would appear to matter for nomothetically inclined subject areas such as medicine. It would seem very likely that geographical location would be far more important to context sensitive disciplines such as Information Systems. Indeed, researchers on the geographic periphery (ie not USA and Anglophone Europe) may find it difficult to get their research published in the high ranking USA and Europe journals (R.D. Galliers & Meadows, 2003), although as Avison et al. (2008) and Wilcocks et al. (2008) point out, the European journals are more open to publishing articles outside of the US and Europe. The upshot is that the antipodean researcher’s work is to some extent handicapped in the race to publication.

ERA AND THE PRESSURE TO PUBLISH

It may be said that academics have always had pressure to publish and the American phrase ‘publish or perish’ immediately springs to mind. The image of Casaubon, the scholar who spends his life trying to find the key to all mythology but dies prior to finding and publishing the key, haunts many academics. However academics worldwide are under increased pressure to publish as a result of research auditing systems. Unlike the pressure on Casaubon, this pressure to publish is largely exogenous to the university and arises from government approaches to increase accountability and performance in the university and to establish market competition between universities. Simply put, universities are paid to undertake research and the government wants to see results. Universities with high research profiles are believed to have higher prestige and are more competitive in the market place for students. In Australia, the pressure has intensified as a result of the emerging higher
education market with the level of research, grants won and so on used as a means of distinguishing the excellence of the university (Usher, 2006).

The impetus in Australia for increased publication by academics and stricter controls on what can or should be measured as research has been building for some time (DEST, 2006). The most recent initiative has been the Government ERA. Under ERA, journals and conferences have been ranked by expert panels on the basis of quality. Each university has its own response to this development. Overall, however, it would appear that many universities are insisting that staff must publish a minimum number of articles in ‘high quality’ journals to meet probationary requirements, avoid an increased teaching load, and gain promotion.

There is much anecdotal evidence and editorial opinion but unfortunately as yet little systematic research to support this view that Australian academics are ‘under the pump’. An as yet unpublished study by Coulthard et al. (2010) revealed considerable pressure in three Australian universities and to some extent a form of ‘research anxiety’ among staff to publish and to publish in high quality journals.

Pressure is not only placed on academics and the universities but also on journals and conferences. To attract publications, the journals and conferences will need to be ranked highly. One Australian journal, the fledgling Deakin Business Review has been scrapped because it was not ranked. Academics are being advised not to submit articles to low ranked journals and conferences. An academic publication record of predominately ‘C’ journals could suggest a low quality researcher.

This pressure does not only apply to where to publish but also what and how to publish. In the face of the insistent pressure to research, the researcher must ask, or be advised to become far more instrumental and strategic in their research to maximise their publication success. Not surprisingly, the most likely course is one that follows the editorial lines of high quality journals and conferences.

**The constitution of quality journals and conferences**

As much as we might wish that quality journals and conferences reflect the acme of research in the discipline, they actually reflect exemplary research at the *centre*. By and large, high quality journals reflect an orthodox, mainstream view of what to research and how to research it (Adler & Harzing, 2009). This is essentially the result of scholarship or research being a community of practice (Latour & Woolgar, 1986; Wenger, 1999), or a community of intelligibility (Gergen, 1994). What constitutes good research is that respected practitioners consider it so. What constitutes a good journal or article is that expert panels, who have succeed in publishing or aspire to publish in the journals, consider it so. High citations reinforce this. As Kuhn (1970) is at pains to demonstrate in his seminal work, this is *normal science*.

Low ranked journals are more at the margins of the discipline. Adler and Harzing (2009) argue that because articles published in new journals remain invisible to most citation indices, they also remain invisible to almost all ranking systems. Such invisibility dramatically skews scholarship, as it implicitly encourages orthodox research that asks familiar questions using accepted methodologies rather than research addressing new, often controversial questions that are investigated using innovative methodologies.

To our knowledge, a systematic study of the content of these high ranked journals has not been undertaken. However a prima facie view of the ranked ERA journal suggests that lower ranked journals are more specialised or qualified in their journal name and are named after more recent developments in the discipline. They are also more likely to be geographically peripheral from the USA and less likely to be owned by a commercial publisher. While low quality abounds in these journals they are places of growth, reinvigoration and change in the disciplines. There can of course be, and there are, ‘paradigm shattering’ and unorthodox research in the high quality journals. This underscores the importance of providing and nurturing a methodological pluralism in such journals.

It may then be the case that researchers will decrease publishing in lower rated journals and conferences. Funding may be reduced to academics to go to low ranked conferences, further isolating new or different research. Such journals and conferences may respond by a form of ‘sanskritisation’, by essentially mimicking the implied or stated editorial lines of the highly ranked journals. We wryly noted for the coming Australasian Conference on Information Systems (ACIS) 2010 conference that specially mentions that:

ACIS 2010 will be dedicated to the definition and establishment of Information Systems as a discipline of high impact for the *scientific community* and IS professionals. The focus will be on approaches that facilitate the identification of research questions of significant relevance that are studied following *sound research methodologies and lead to results of measurable impact*. (ACIS, 2010 emphasis added).

This suggests not only a tightening of what is considered a sound research methodology but suggests that such a methodology is one that is measurable. ACIS is an A rated conference, and it plans to stay that way. This
statement by ACIS suggests a privileging of the of the positivist tradition of research. It would seem that methodological and research pluralism is under substantial pressure following the introduction of journal ranking systems. Özbilgin (2009) suggests that this is the case in the field of business and management studies. Indeed Özbilgin goes further to suggest, “the current hegemonic order in journal publishing encourages cloning and inbreeding. Even more worrisome is an engagement with questions of marginal relevance. This trend presents a tyrannical challenge against ethical, purposeful, meaningful, and engaged scholarship.”

PUBLISHING SAFELY: CHANGING RESEARCH METHODS AND TOPICS

Our argument thus far is that Information Systems has developed a nascent but tenuous methodological pluralism largely based on positivism and interpretivism. We also suggest that there could be greater research topic pluralism, most notably in the non-business information systems area. We have demonstrated that there is currently enormous pressure to publish in high ranked journals, which by their nature will be inclined to a conservative centre in terms of methodology and research area. We also suggest that in order to survive, lower ranked journals and conferences may become more orthodox in terms of content and methodology. However, the next question to be asked is whether individual academic research will change and become more orthodox as a consequence of these pressures. Will researchers work in ‘safe’ and ‘orthodox’ areas using ‘safe and orthodox’ methods? Will the fledgling methodological pluralism in IS be abandoned? Is it likely that IS research will continue to be confined to business and organisational research. We suspect the answer is unfortunately and unequivocal yes.

In the first instance, researching in ‘safe’ ‘orthodox’ or conventional areas has no doubt been the mainstay of the university. Following Kuhn (1970), it is as we suggest earlier, normal science. What we suggest is the pressure to conform has intensified. Bennis and O’Toole (2005) argue that the current emphasis on journal rankings is directly responsible for retarding the publication of relevant management knowledge. Scholars seeking to publish in top journals “tend to tailor their choice of topics, methods, and theories to the perceived tastes of the research community.” A likely result . . . is stagnation in the advancement of management knowledge and a disconnection from the needs of the business community” (Bennis and O’Toole, 2005).

Powell and Woerndl (2008) in their provocatively titled article ‘Time to stop researching the important things?’ make a similar case in the IS literature. They argue that journal rankings and in particular those based on citation indexes, result in researchers in new or small areas of studies garnering fewer citations than those working in a currently fashionable area. They show that articles that cite Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) typically represent the most important business grouping of a national economy, they have a higher citation index than those that cite Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs). They further point out that even though SMEs represent the most important business grouping of a national economy, they are often rated only 91 out of a total 7,714 articles published in ten highly ranked IS journals. The career conscious IS researcher is well advised to stick to the fashionable, rather than what they see as important.

ERA and the pressure it places on researchers to publish in a restricted set of highly ranked journals may then have the effect of not only reducing research pluralism but also lead to stagnation. Important work may come second to ‘safe work’. As well as a restriction of research area, there will be pressure to undertake conventional methodological research (Bennis & O’Toole, 2005; Powell & Woerndl, 2008). Chen and Hirschheim (2004) in their exhaustive study of the methodological trends in major IS journals summarise the outcomes of these pressures on the academic as follows:

While under the pressure of tenure and promotion, researchers would tend to choose a less time consuming approach – positivism – to avoid perishing. This might help explain why interpretive influences are still marginal and likely to continue to be this way. As such, for a pluralist research tradition to be established, both the publication and tenure and promotion systems might need some modifications. The reason that most researchers employ a less time consuming approach is because for tenure and promotion, the quantity of publications counts.

The less time consuming the approach, the more productions are possible; the more productions, the better the chance for tenure and promotion. While the tenure and promotion system values the quality of publications as well, it is difficult to get tenure at a good school without suitable numbers of publications. In the existing system, researchers are more concerned about how to get a research project published rather than asking significant research questions. Many research papers fail to address meaningful issues as they are too difficult and take too long to publish (Chen and Hirschheim, 2004:225).
If Chen and Hirschheim (2004) are correct, we shall see a stifling in non-positivist research. In addition, we suggest that there may well be a virtual total abandonment of non-interpretivist methodologies in the discipline that will leave CAQDAS and grounded theory as the sole alternative to positivism.

CAQDAS and grounded theory may survive for the following reasons. Firstly, grounded theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss in response to the entrenched positivist tradition in the US in the 1960s. It directly addresses the concerns typically made by positivists concerning issues of rigour, reliability, researcher bias and replicability. There would appear to be less mutual incomprehension between positivism and grounded theory as a consequence. That it is an American methodology is also likely to be of no small consequence. Secondly, as Fendt and Sachs' (2008) found in their review of user experiences with grounded theory it is most commonly used by neophyte qualitative researchers. Grounded theory above all provides a detailed method that can be followed.

CAQDAS is also popular with neophyte researchers (Johnston, 2006). It retains the advantage of grounded theory, but adds, at least in appearance, the certainty of computers (Lyotard, 1984). It appears more objective, less prone to bias and misrepresentation. Finally, it promises speed. It seems very likely that CAQDAS, based on grounded theory will become the orthodox alternative to positivism. It will become hegemonic, as Coffey et al (1996) warned with fewer researchers being familiar or interested in exploring alternative methodologies.

Our argument is not with CAQDAS or Grounded Theory or even positivism but with the demise of pluralism. However, constrained with the response to publishing pressure not only will other forms of non-positivist enquiry be abandoned but we suspect that there will be pressure for those working with CAQDAS and grounded theory to use these methods in a manner akin to a fairly basic cookery book, a form of vulgar ‘computer aided grounded theory’. However we shall have to wait and see.

CONCLUSION: FURTHER WORK

We do indeed suggest that ERA spells the end of methodological pluralism in Information Systems and also, as Powell and Woerndl (2008) put it, the ‘end of important work’; at least for the time being. The managerialist urge to measure and account and to improve productivity, may well lead to conformity in the discipline of method and content. Just as we currently routinely admonish our PhD students to “play safe” to ensure their PhD, we will be cautioning our peers to do the same in their research for the sake of their career.

We are, nevertheless, acutely aware that our thesis is little more than a worked up hypothesis. It needs testing against the past and future journal and conference publishing trends. In particular, it needs testing for Australian publications and conferences. To this end we propose to undertake in the first instance a content analysis of AJIS and ACIS to determine the changes in methodological and research pluralism.

This study will attempt to chart the areas of research and underlying methodology of ACIS conference papers over a ten-year period and how these areas translate (or not) into AJIS. This will help chart the pluralism or ossification of the discipline. A second study will examine the publication of Australian-based authors and whether Australian research themes and methodologies translate into the most highly ranked IS journals. This will shed light on the issues of publication pluralism touched on in this paper. Another approach may be to undertake interviews or focus groups with academics to identify any pressures towards orthodoxy as a result of auditing processes such as ERA.

Of course, such studies will be a little like identifying that the horse, has indeed bolted and that perhaps it may have been wise to have invested in a gate. What is required is a greater discussion within the journals and conferences of how and to what extent the combination of intensified research pressure and journal rankings may stifle innovation and disciplinary growth. This should be a particular concern of non-positivist researchers.

We also need to look more closely at how the editors, publishers and conference organisers can constructively withstand the pressures towards conformity. It may be that the journals themselves take a greater initiative to encourage methodological and research pluralism, and work at the margins through a greater use of special issues with guest editors who specialise in those area. This may be at the potential cost of the loss of citations.

However, the cost to society may be greater because what we see here, worked through from the general policies of ERA to the choices of method employed by the academics is the disciplining of the Australian university. What academics research and how the research is conducted will be successfully brought under the governance of the state (Miller and Rose, 2008). From that perspective, ERA will be successful even if by doing so it promotes mediocrity and conformity. That will be a different, possibly less important, problem for government to solve than one of accountability and transparency.
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