



香港城市大學  
City University of Hong Kong

專業 創新 胸懷全球  
Professional · Creative  
For The World

## CityU Scholars

### Making a world of a difference

Davison, Robert M.

**Published in:**

Journal of Information Technology

**Published:** 01/06/2012

**Document Version:**

Post-print, also known as Accepted Author Manuscript, Peer-reviewed or Author Final version

**Publication record in CityU Scholars:**

[Go to record](#)

**Published version (DOI):**

[10.1057/jit.2012.7](https://doi.org/10.1057/jit.2012.7)

**Publication details:**

Davison, R. M. (2012). Making a world of a difference. *Journal of Information Technology*, 27(2), 100-101.  
<https://doi.org/10.1057/jit.2012.7>

**Citing this paper**

Please note that where the full-text provided on CityU Scholars is the Post-print version (also known as Accepted Author Manuscript, Peer-reviewed or Author Final version), it may differ from the Final Published version. When citing, ensure that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination and other details.

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the CityU Scholars portal is retained by the author(s) and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights. Users may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.

**Publisher permission**

Permission for previously published items are in accordance with publisher's copyright policies sourced from the SHERPA RoMEO database. Links to full text versions (either Published or Post-print) are only available if corresponding publishers allow open access.

**Take down policy**

Contact [lbscholars@cityu.edu.hk](mailto:lbscholars@cityu.edu.hk) if you believe that this document breaches copyright and provide us with details. We will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

The article is protected by copyright and reuse is restricted to non-commercial and no derivative uses. Users may also download and save a local copy of an article accessed in an institutional repository for the user's personal reference. For permission to reuse an article, please follow our [Process for Requesting Permission](#).

Davison, R. M., Making a World of a Difference, *Journal of Information Technology*, (27, 2) pp. 100-101. Copyright © 2012 (Association for Information Technology Trust). DOI: 10.1057/jit.2012.7.

## Making a World of a Difference

Robert M Davison  
Dept of Information Systems  
City University of Hong Kong  
[isrobert@cityu.edu.hk](mailto:isrobert@cityu.edu.hk)

In this timely and forthright essay, Walsham (2012) cogently engages with several of our field's bugbears: the identity crisis, or lack thereof; what we research, and how; the value that we bring to the wider world, if any; and the way we disseminate this value, if at all. He gently castigates the more extreme proponents of disciplinary rigidity. He also argues persuasively for a pluralist approach to research methods. Given his personal preference for an interpretivist stance, the reflective nature of his essay on where IS has come from and whither it may yet go was both a delight to read and provocative in its implicit challenge to the discerning IS researcher. He sets out an agenda for future research and reiterates the point that "we need a broader ethical agenda of making a better world". I applaud that view. Currently, we spend too much time and energy in self-serving seething in our ivory towers. Instead, there is an ethical imperative to create a better world through relevant research.

In order to make a better world, changes are needed in our research practice. The lack of relevance in our research has long been a focus of concern (Davenport and Markus, 1999). It seems that we are no closer to a solution. Engaging in research that is not only relevant but also ethical, that attempts to ameliorate conditions – not just for listed companies and their shareholders, but also for SMEs and more importantly citizens, especially those in less developed countries – should be a priority. However, as we know from the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), individual researchers conform to the rules of the game that apply to the context where they work. These rules are often unstated yet nevertheless exert considerable pressure, for instance in the prejudices of reviewers and editors for or against specific research approaches. The assertion by the 111 German-speaking professors that the top IS research journals are institutionally biased against design research is a charge that deserves an answer. As a journal editor myself, I notice a tendency for AEs and reviewers to reject what is unfamiliar or questionable, so as not to rock the boat of the status quo, to accept what is methodologically rigorous and theoretically significant. This kind of myopic reverence for orthodoxy and disdain for the new is misplaced. Instead of a deluge of well-done trivia we need an iconoclastic approach to orthodoxy and a flourishing of innovative research that contributes to making the world a better place.

A variation on the 'rules of the game' concerns what Walsham characterises as "the straitjacket of approved journal lists". These lists directly affect the work that we undertake in a number of ways. Firstly, they implicitly seek to regulate our freedom of choice with respect to the venues in which our academic bosses prefer we publish our research. The Gold Standard of SSCI/SCI indexes comes to mind, with potential authors often reluctant to submit to an unindexed journal. A still more rarified standard is that of the UT Dallas list of top Business Schools (and its associated journal list, with only two IS journals represented – so much for the AIS Basket of Six or Eight). Secondly, they act to filter the way we hire, fire, ire and/or promote people. More specifically, by deferring to the supposed authority of such lists, we favour those who can navigate the shoals of the top journals (irrespective of the extent to which the research aims to make the world a better place) and penalise those who can't. Top journals may publish research that makes the world a better place, but it does not seem to be a major objective of many researchers. Further, although journals often have an espoused

objective of promoting research that is both practically relevant and conforming to standards of scholarly rigour, reviewers are not always so broad-minded. In order to inject some certainties into the review process, the pragmatic researcher is unfortunately likely to choose research topics, methods and approaches that are more orthodox and aligned with the status quo, so as to maximise publication potential. Undertaking research that has strong relevance to practice and that might make the world a better place is accorded a lower priority.

Although I find Walsham's arguments compelling, calls to altruism are unlikely to achieve much. Lee (2011) and Myers (2011) suggest that structural interventions will be necessary if we are to improve the situation – a paradigm shift in the status quo no less. Such a revolution in thinking and practice seems unlikely, however, given the preponderant weight of institutional structures that simultaneously support and are supported by the present set of arrangements, not to mention the pegamoid insouciance of most stakeholders for change – why bite the hand that feeds you?

But I am not entirely pessimistic! Visionaries such as Walsham can help to change directions, values, processes. We can create a better world, step by step, project by project. Just as saving the lives of individual starfish makes a difference for each one (Eiseley, 1969), so undertaking locally relevant research in underprivileged communities and developing countries also has the potential to make a difference. We should both undertake research that makes a difference and contributes to a better world, and encourage and reward our PhD students for doing so as well. I challenge our most influential scholars to champion it and our best journals to publish it!

#### References:

- Berger, P.L. and Luckmann, T. (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Anchor Books, New York.
- Davenport, T.H. and Markus, M.L. (1999) Rigor vs. Relevance Revisited: Response to Benbasat and Zmud, *MIS Quarterly*, 23, 1, 19-23.
- Eiseley, L. (1969) The Star Thrower, in: *The Unexpected Universe*, Harcourt, Brace and World: New York.
- Lee, A.S. (2011) In Celebration of Diversity in Information Systems Research, *Journal of Information Technology*, 26, 4, 296-298.
- Myers, M.D. (2011) Is there a Methodological Crisis? *Journal of Information Technology*, 26, 4, 294-295.
- Walsham (2012) Are We Making a Better World with ICTs? Reflections on a Future Agenda for the IS Field, *Journal of Information Technology*, 27, 2, xx-xx.

#### Acknowledgements:

I deeply appreciate feedback received on earlier drafts of this commentary from a number of colleagues globally: Cynthia Beath, Rui Bi, Allen Lee, Maris Martinsons, Lars Mathiassen, Carol Ou, Ceci Wu.