7 TRUTH, JOURNALS, AND POLITICS: The Case of the *MIS Quarterly*

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Abstract   In this paper, we want to demonstrate the way in which regimes of truth at the *MIS Quarterly* (MISQ) have made it possible for certain types of research to be published there, and others not. The importance of this claim lies in the fact that publication in MISQ is often seen as an indication of status. Furthermore, publication in MISQ also plays an important role in decisions about tenure and promotion. However, the aim of the paper is not to rid MISQ of regimes of truth—this is not possible. The paper will argue, with Foucault, that all institutions always already have their politics of truth. The production of truth is always intimately tied to relations of power which itself depends upon truth for its sustenance. The aim of the paper is to show this intimate connection between truth and power. In particular, in the case of MISQ, we want to question the often-implied legitimacy and status that the MISQ has over and against other high quality journals in the field. Foucault argues that power is most effective when it hides itself. This paper is an attempt to make its face more public and open to scrutiny.

1   INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that academic journals play an important role in shaping a discipline. Equally, it is generally known that many decisions about the academic careers of university faculty are intimately tied to publication and participation in the so-called leading journals of the field. It would, therefore, be reasonable to argue that these journals should be free from politics; that these journals ought to allow for a level playing field in which networks of power and influence are limited, if not illuminated. Yet this does not seem to be the case as the recent widely published row in economics

illustrates (Jacobsen 2001). There have been some, like Habermas (1979, 1984, 1987), who have argued that it is only in an apolitical space of rational debate that a discipline can flourish. They argue that all participants must be equal in making and defending truth claims. Although we may want this to be true—and we are not sure we do—we do not believe this will ever be the case. We want to argue, using Foucault (1977), that truth is always a very mundane human affair. As such, human institutions are directly implicated in its production and circulation. With truth we mean statements or claims about the state of affairs *that we want others to accept as true*. We, like Foucault, are not here interested in absolute truths that are supposed to exist, or not. Every individual may believe what he or she wants—this of no concern to us in this context. However, when someone makes truth claims—about the validity of certain types of research over and above other types, for example—with the expectation that others or we should accept them as such, then truth becomes directly implicated as a human affair. As such, our concern with academic journals as spaces where truth claims are proffered is not directly a concern with the validity (or not) of a particular ontology and epistemology. Rather, our concern is with the way in which any particular ontology and epistemology becomes constituted as more legitimate than others equally valid—especially when it has a material bearing on issues of tenure and promotion. It is important to say from the outset that the claim that a particular regime of truth is operating is not necessarily a claim that there exists an intentional strategy or some sort of a *conspiracy* or plot to this effect.

We will structure the discussion as follows: first, we want to explain the intimate connection between the production of truth and the mechanisms of power that sustain this production using the Foucauldian notion of regimes of truth; second, we want to outline the way in which regimes of truth functioned and function in the *MIS Quarterly* (MISQ); and finally, we want to discuss some of the implications of our analysis.

2   KNOWLEDGE AND POWER: THE CONSTITUTION OF REGIMES OF TRUTH

In opposition to the modern view that knowledge gets produced in a zone where power is suspended, Foucault argues that any attempt to separate power and knowledge is futile since the production of knowledge is political all the way down. To separate knowledge and power would be to claim that we could separate statements of fact from the values and mechanisms that constitute them as such. Latour (1987, 1993) has convincingly argued that what we find *in practice* is that "facts do not speak for themselves." Facts are produced as facts because we value them as such. It is institutional mechanisms and practices that give facts a voice in the first instance. They become constituted as facts through processes, procedures, and discursive practices that produce them and are likewise produced by them. For example, in the modern scientific regime of truth we value scientific method and, therefore, we judge its products to be facts. We do not value intuition and, therefore, we judge it products to be speculation. One could say that facts are merely legitimized value choices accorded that status through the prevailing institutional mechanisms. Thus, for every *recognized* fact (or set of facts) one could always, in principle, find the institutional mechanism that accords it that status and

which is itself dependent on that status. For example, the valuing of profit becomes sedimented as facts in the income statement and balance sheet of the company, which are themselves necessary to sustain that value. Through the rituals of accounting practices and stock exchanges, the income statement and balance sheet become constituted as truth at the expense of equally valid alternative values, such as environmental or employee concerns. Nietzsche (1967) writes in *Will to Power*: "But what is truth? Perhaps a kind of belief that has become a condition for life" (p. 248)—or as Foucault later articulates it more clearly, truth simply means beliefs that have become a condition for that institution to sustain itself as that which it believes it is.

Every attempt to secure knowledge in a zone outside of power will itself become a resource for power. For we should, as Foucault argues, "admit rather…that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (1977, p. 486). The linking of power and knowledge through discourse gives rise to what he calls *regimes of truth*. A regime of truth is the institutional infrastructure for the production and circulation of *truth claims*. Truth is produced in and through institutionalized discursive practices—in our discussion below, for example, we will look at editorial statements and other claims made in the MISQ as such discourse. Discourse here is understood as a particular way of talking, of making statements or claims, about the state of affairs. Truth, as pointed out above, is understood as claims about the world that are proffered as valid claims within a particular regime of truth—claims those that make them *expect us to accept* as valid. Foucault (1977) argued that each institution or society has its "regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth." A particular regime of truth is constituted through a set of mechanisms and discursive practices which legitimizes claims and is itself dependent on the legitimacy of those claims. In *Power/ Knowledge* Foucault (1977, p.131) mentions the following mechanisms and practices that constitute a particular regime of truth:

- *The types of discourse that it accepts and makes function as true*. Clearly, not all discourse in institutions functions as truth claims. For example when we present this paper at an academic conference we are proffering truth claims in a way we are not when chatting to a colleague in the corridor about the paper.
- *The mechanisms and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statements*. Once we occasion certain discursive moments as instances of truth making, we must set in place the mechanisms for identifying true statements from false statements. How will these be verified?
- *The means by which each is sanctioned*. Truth is not produced if it is not sanctioned. Presenting the paper to our peers at an academic conference is one of the practices to sanction the truth claims we are proffering.
- *The techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth*. In distinguishing true from false statements, and in sanctioning these, careful attention is given to the techniques and procedures used in the construction of these truth claims.
- *The states of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.* In institutions, the charge of acknowledging truth claims is carefully distributed and controlled. The auditor is charged to make claims about the financial status of the

organization in a way that the marketing manager is not. However, to make these statements the auditor must be at least a certified accountant. Likewise, we normally require professors as examiners of Ph.D. dissertations.

In regimes of truth "[truth] is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which it induces and which extend it" (Foucault 1977, p. 133) Power, through micro-practices and mechanisms of meaning, membership, and discipline (Clegg 1989), structures and restructures discourse, a way of talking about the world, in a discontinuous and diffused manner. Owing to the non-egalitarian and diffused nature of the relationship, such discourse gives rise to a particular regime of truth. The regime of truth in turn produces discursive resources in support of the very power relations that constitutes it. Power and truth are co-constitutive.

If claims of truth are always already within an existing sets of power relations, as Foucault claims, then we can only exchange one regime of truth for another. In knowledge production, which is a fundamentally social enterprise, we can not escape power (as proposed by Habermas [1984, 1987] in his ideal speech situation). Every ideal speech situation will always already assume a regime of truth for its very existence. Of course, we could say that in some cases power relations can become systemically asymmetrical as in a dictatorial state or monopolistic market, although Foucault will deny this. He would argue that even the king is only king because of a whole network of alliances that must constantly be serviced and secured. Even the big positive research programs in the natural sciences—that supposedly produce objective, value free truth—must make deals and produce the appropriate truth to secure funding, publications, and so forth.

Let us consider the notion of a regime of truth more closely by developing contrasting examples of the regimes of truth in different institutions. In Table 1, we present a comparison of the *publication of a paper in a peer-reviewed journal* (in scientific institutions) with *the publishing of the annual report of a public company* (in the capitalist enterprise), with *the delivery of a sermon in a church service* (in the Christian church). The table aims to show that each of these institutions have an identifiable set of institutional mechanisms and practices to produce what will be considered truth in that particular institution. Although these mechanisms and practices differ widely from institution to institution, they serve essentially the same purpose: namely, to ensure the production of truth in a manner that would sustain the institution as that which it claims to be.

In the table, we can observe the interplay between power and knowledge (in and through truth claims). Through a set of mechanisms, techniques, and sanctions, the truth is produced and confirmed as such. The mechanisms and practices are constituted through relations of power in such a manner that the truth produced would maintain and sustain these very relations of power. It is this relation between power and truth that stabilizes the institution (one can think of Kuhn's [1970] studies here; however, from this perspective we should say that his paradigm shifts are more shifts in power than shifts in epistemology/ontology). Any regime of truth, irrespective of its power relations, is always under threat. As Kuhn indicated, such shifts in power might be evolutionary or revolutionary, but regimes of truth are never fixed. Nevertheless, they do not necessary represent a conspiracy or a plot of some sort, as mentioned above. Their

Table 1. Regimes of Truth in Different Institutions

Regime of Truth	*Institutions of Science*	*Capitalist Enterprise*	*Christian Church*
Types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true	*Publishing a paper in a peer reviewed journal,* Defending a Ph.D.; presenting a conference paper, etc.	*Publishing the annual company report,* AGM, annual employment review, etc.	*Delivering the sermon,* administering the sacraments, counseling a member of the church, etc.
Mechanisms and instances for distinguishing true and false statements	Scientific argument and proof, (dis)agreements in viva, using canonical texts/authority, etc.	Review by the auditors, economic argument (efficiency, profitability), appealing to canonical texts (Porter, etc.) or consultants, etc.	Review of sermon by the church elders, use of canonical text for authority, appealing to a higher church authority (for example, the bishop), etc.
The **means by which each is sanctioned**	Review by peers, publication in journal, citation in subsequent papers, citation, and journal indices.	Report presented to the board of directors, delivered at the AGM as the official financial position of the company, reaction of stock exchange, etc.	Sermon delivered as part of liturgy, starts with (or follows) the reading from bible, sermon starts or ends with "so says the Lord."
Techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth	Scientific method/research method	General accepted accounting practices (GAAP), audit process, strategic planning, etc.	Biblical exegesis, interpretations of church edicts, etc.
The **states of those who are charged** with saying what counts as true	Reviewers must be recognized experts in their field, editors must be seen to be objective, acting on behalf of academic community.	Auditor must be a chartered auditor, managing director acts *ex officio* on behalf of the shareholders, etc.	Must be a licensed minister or religion, and an appointed leader in a congregation

origins and sustenance are often due to contingent events that are seized upon as resources for the play of power. The "logic is clear, the aims decipherable, and yet it is often the case that no one is there to have invented them" (Foucault 1977, p. 486). The local tactics may link together and combine into overall strategies that create the illusion of grand design but are in fact outcomes of very local contingent actions.

Every claim to truth whatsoever always implies a regime of truth for its force or validity. Some regimes of truth may be subtle and mobile and others more explicit and fixed. For example, in a family, husband and wife have the ability to make truth claims in a way that children cannot. This is because of the relations of power constituted by

their access to resources of power, such as the sanction by society of their role as parents and guardians. Yet, this regime of truth is continually open for dispute and maneuvering in a way that a court of law is not. Thus, no claim to truth can be made outside of a regime of truth—not even in the intimacy of a family. The production of truth is never outside of power.

It is also the case, however, that in some instances, there are *blocks* in which power and truth, as claimed through resources of communication and objective capacities, constitute *regulated and concerted systems*, or disciplines, in an enlarged sense of the word. In this regard, Foucault (1994) refers to monastic, penitential, medical, and technical disciplines as examples. Certainly the general understanding of information systems as an academic discipline would fall within this definition. For even given its, in some quarters notorious, lack of consensus as to what rightfully constitutes the discipline, there are nonetheless powerful regulatory processes that ensure aptitudes and particular types of behavior, across and within institutions in which the discipline is taught. Indeed, it has been a specific objective of academics within the discipline, since the mid-1960s at least, to "be a profession" (Dickson 1982, p. v), as much as medicine or engineering are professions.

Within a discipline, the specificities of power relations are made clearer, perhaps, than in less regulated regimes of truth. And yet they cannot by any means be said to be fixed or unidirectional, since it is easy to see that "all forms of dependence offer some resources whereby those who are subordinate can influence the activities of the superiors" (Giddens 1984, p.16). Foucault, in fact goes further than this: "Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are 'free.'" Power relations exist where individuals have a field of possibilities, however sparse these may be, and even though the power relations are inscribed in the more or less permanent structures underpinning that field. In any relationship of power, "a whole field of responses, reactions, results and possible inventions may open up" (Foucault 1994, p. 340). This implies, then, that intertwined as they are with power, the mechanisms used to produce truth in any discipline are inherently contingent. Through intentional and unintentional moves, these regimes of truth are continually shifting, opening spaces for certain types of research to become legitimate and others not.

Within information systems as a discipline, the *MIS Quarterly*, as a leading journal, is one of those mechanisms used to validate both the truth claims made by the discipline, and the discipline itself. Further, in so far as the MISQ is a regulated and concerted "conduct of conduct" or leader of behavior in the production of truth, it can itself be said to be a discipline, in Foucault's enlarged sense of the word. In the sections that follow, we want to analyze some of the mechanisms that constitute the regimes of truth of the MISQ, with a view to showing, first, that these do in fact operate and, second, just how contingent they are. Our analysis is by no means comprehensive or complete. It merely suggests some outlines of such an analysis.

3   REGIMES OF TRUTH AT THE MISQ

The MISQ was established in 1977 with Gary W. Dickson as Editor-in-Chief. Dickson's tenure lasted six years. Thereafter, editors were appointed for three-year

terms (see Appendix A for the list of past and present editors). For the analysis, we focus on the period between 1981 and 2003 since we have access to journals only from 1981. Dickson's "Apology of a Retiring Founding Editor (6:4)[1], does, however, give us some insight into the workings of the journal in the first five years.

Obviously, there are many elements that constitute the regime of truth at the MISQ, or any academic journal for that matter. We as academics are quite familiar with these. They are the editors (past and present), associate editors, the mission or scope of the journal, editorial statements, the review process, keyword classification systems, and so forth. In the regime of truth no one person pulls all the strings. One may be tempted to think the editors do have many of the strings in their hands. Nevertheless, as Foucault argued, the king is only king as long as he can maintain the alliances that legitimize him as king and are themselves dependent on the legitimacy of the king as king. Editors have to continually defend their own legitimacy in the face of previous editors, associate editors, authors, and readers—to name but a few. Thus, to really get a picture of the regimes of truth at MISQ, we would need to trace a multiplicity of relations, statements, codes, processes, and mechanisms operating there. When we do this, we will see that these are multiple, mundane, and contingent. Nevertheless, they do weave together a fairly coherent network of resources for the execution of power that allows certain papers to be judged as true, valid, and legitimate and others not.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to do such a detailed analysis. We are further conscious that, even were it not, "the analysis of power relations…cannot be reduced to the study of a series of institutions" (Foucault 1994, p. 345). Power relations are rooted in the whole network of the discipline. What Foucault does suggest is that a "certain number of points be established." We will attempt to trace some of the power relations constituting this regime of truth by addressing some of these points in the MISQ. In particular we will focus on the types of objectives pursued, in the form of the scope of the journal; and the instrumental modes of action, or rules, in the form of the definition of legitimate research method, as these have shifted over the past 20-odd years.

3.1 The Shifting Scope of the MISQ: From Managerial Issues and Practice to Technology and Organizational Research Problems

When the MISQ was established in 1977, its scope was described as "Our major goals are to be *managerially oriented* and to offer something of benefit to the practitioner. At the same time, we intend to provide a vehicle for *researchers working in the information systems field to communicate with each other* and with practitioners." This objective is not surprising as the MISQ was at the time a cosponsored project of The Society for Management Information Systems—later to become the Society for

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[1]We will only refer to the volume and issue number (volume:issue) in referencing the editorial comments of the editors. The editorial comments are usually only three to five pages so the text being referenced should be easy to locate.

Information Management—and the University of Minnesota's Management Information Systems Research Center (MISRC). In fact, as Dickson noted upon his retirement, "we wanted a journal in which MIS academics could publish while our primary source of funding was a society of information systems practitioners" (6:4). This dual focus of managerial orientation as well as research forum arose from the task of specifying a product that could satisfy both groups. Initially, this dual focus was maintained by establishing a two-section journal, and by appointing both practitioners and academics as consulting and associate editors. As it evolved, it became articulated as the tension between rigor and relevance.

William King, on his appointment, suggested that his objective was to improve on the "quality and credibility of the journal" (7:1), with the expressed intention of improving its scientific credibility and its use in tenure and promotion decisions (7:2). At the same time, he was anxious to "recognize the importance of *both* research and applications." However, it is certainly the case that King succeeded in raising the profile of a struggling journal,[2] not least by nurturing credibility for MISQ as an *academic* journal, personally lobbying universities to recognize it in promotion criteria (9:4), and getting it listed on databases like ISI (8:4). He also dropped the practitioner-only consulting board for "turnaround-time on review" reasons (9:1), and the number of academics on the associate editors board increased. The journal became steadily more academic in its focus, in that the in-coming third editor, Warren McFarlan, suggested that "sound research-based articles" were now at the "very core of the journal's editorial philosophy." (This despite the fact that neither the editorial policy board, nor the official editorial policy per se, had changed at all over this time.) And while McFarlan seems to have confined himself in editorial statements to reflecting on practically based tools, approaches, and insights, it was in his tenure that Izak Benbasat was appointed (without comment) as Senior Associate Editor of Theory and Research (11:1). Under Benbasat's "primary editorial responsibility for all papers classified as Theory and Research," quantitative, positive research started to dominate the journal.[3] The split in the editorial board between Research and Theory and Application was dropped in the final year of McFarlan's editorship and a single all-academic board established. Nonetheless, much as Dickson had done, McFarlan closed his editorship with a comment on the tension between theory and practice, and a plea to practitioners and academics to "establish a dialogue" (12:1).

James Emery, too, highlighted the need to "provide a forum for materials addressing the information systems field in both theory and practice…[hopefully] thereby, to unite the efforts of those teaching and doing research in this area with those applying information systems to organizational problems" (13:3). This, however, was to be done with an emphasis of adding to the body of knowledge, as the screening of application

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[2]A "hand-to-mouth" editorial existence forced the late production of the first two issues of volume 7 (8:4).

[3]A detailed classification of all papers published in the period under discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, for reasons of length, but a review of all empirical research papers published in this period shows them to be positivist, and overwhelming quantitative.

papers became more rigorous through the application of the criteria of generalizability, delimitations of scope, and reference to the existing literature (13:4). Where application papers were published that did not "satisfy the standard criteria for research"—and these were now presumed to be understood—their inclusion was explicitly justified (14:4). Unsurprisingly, having become a recognized academic journal, relevance to the practitioner community now emerged as specifically problematic. Emery closed his tenure by suggesting that "practitioners must also bear part of the burden of translating theory into practice" (14:4).

In the tenure of Blake Ives, this tension became even more apparent. He argued,

> The business school is a professional school with obvious linkages to the business professions. Drawing a parallel to the business school, a colleague recently asked what we would think of medical schools whose research did not address the treatment of disease? Too often business school research addresses problems of little relevance or, equally damaging, fails to be tested in the world of practice. (16:1)

The managerial concern of MISQ was also highlighted by his incoming Senior Editor of Theory and Research, Gerardine DeSanctis: "One of the most distinguishing characteristics of the *MIS Quarterly* as compared to other journals devoted to information systems is its emphasis on management." Nevertheless she explicitly broadened the definition of management to "include management of public and private organizations, government and labor organizations, and professional and social societies." She equally made it clear that "[a] managerial emphasis does not mean that every paper will have direct implications for practicing management, nor does it mean that every paper in its entirety will appeal to all readers…we do not apologize for publishing papers that fail to reap so-called 'real world relevance.' The *potential* for relevance is what matters" (17:1, emphasis added).

In 1995, when Bob Zmud took over as Senior Editor, the MISQ was unbundled as an automatic subscription benefit with the Society for Information Management (SIM) membership. The institutional arrangement that had demanded both Theory and Application in the first instance was dissolved, and a major practitioner audience was lost. With this change in mind, Zmud suggested that a move away from practitioners concerns had now become possible although he did not support such a move: "this changed relationship also raises the possibility that the *Quarterly*, given a potential of fewer practitioner readers, could redirect its direction toward the academic community and away from the practitioner community. I wish to state as strongly as possible that this is not my intention"(19:1). This stated commitment became less apparent as he sought to improve the theoretical foundations of the papers in MISQ. As for the scope of papers appropriate for the journal, some minor but important shifts are also noticeable. He saw the MISQ editorial objective to be "the development and communication of knowledge concerning both the management of information technology and the use of information technology for managerial and organizational purposes" (19:2). He clarified "the operative terms…are: management, information, and information technology.…Notice that who exactly is involved in the act of managing is left open." This emphasis on *managing* rather than *managers* is important as it opened up the horizon

for research that is less managerialist. Toward the end of his first year as Senior Editor, Zmud made a strong appeal for theory as the foundation of all MISQ papers: "Adequate theory development is a fundamental requirement for all manuscripts submitted to the *Quarterly*.…All manuscripts submitted to the *Quarterly*—this includes both 'Theory and Research' and 'Applications' articles—must have a theory section" (19:3). He also indicated what he did *not* want to see in MISQ: "pragmatic descriptions of information systems applications, methodologies, or practices; formal descriptions of information systems applications, methodologies, or practices; replications of prior studies; and criticisms of prior studies." These topics, especially the first two, were very much "the stuff" for MISQ in the 1970s and 1980s. As the theory focus of MISQ grew, Zmud introduced an interesting new distinction between *weak relevance* and *strong relevance*. He explained: "An article can be said to demonstrate weak relevance when the research questions being examined *touch on* organizational phenomena that are clearly of interest to practice, and I expect all articles submitted to *MIS Quarterly* to minimally demonstrate weak relevance" (20:3, emphasis added). He further clarified that strong relevance is accomplished when "(1) using the concerns of practice (rather than scientific literature) as the primary motivation behind the research effort being described in an article, and (2) clearly discussing the meaningfulness of the article's scientific contributions to the executive audience" (20:3). In his last year as Editor-in-Chief, Zmud made an rather unusual appeal for pure theory papers: "I wish to encourage the *MIS Quarterly* readership to consider submitting manuscripts whose primary contribution lies with the theory being developed and articulated" (22:2). Zmud's commitment to move MISQ toward an academically and intellectually respectable position was most clearly demonstrated when he suggested in his final Editor's Comments that the Research/Application divisions, long at the heart of MISQ's dual focus, be abandoned. As Zmud left office, MISQ had become a journal with a strong emphasis of theory in which most papers had only weak relevance. This is a very significant distance away from the happy marriage of its early years.

In his inaugural editorial comments, Allen Lee confirmed this direction: "I am more than happy to accept the responsibility…to secure *MIS Quarterly*'s place among the *best research journals in the academic field of MIS.*" (23:1, emphasis added). Maybe it is a Freudian slip but there is no mention of the other half of the relationship here. He also announced the consolidation of the Theory and Research department and the Application department as suggested by Zmud. The new department was to be called Research and publish "Articles that are 'pure theory,' articles that empirically test or illustrate theory and articles that apply existing theory." In his second editorial comments (23:2), Lee argued for a further broadening of the editorial scope to include social and political dimensions: "authors can make their papers more likely to be compelling and significant if they additionally attend to the *social and political dimensions* of their craft," and not only on the "traditional 'objective' (cognitive and intellectual) dimensions of research" (23:2). The push toward theory-driven work that is academically and intellectually rigorous and legitimate at the expense of that which practitioners may want and find relevant surfaced again toward the end of Lee's second year. In his editorial comments, the actual commitment of MISQ was made abundantly clear:

> Must all instances of information systems research [that which MISQ publishes] be directly consumable by and have immediate relevance to

managers, executives, consultants, and other practitioners? Must all infor-
mation systems research be targeted at practitioners? Absolutely not!" (24:3)

He explained—quite correctly in our view—that the relations of power in academic
institutions that govern decisions about tenure and promotions (its regime of truth) are
not commensurable with those expected in business practice. In our view, he identified
the most important problem that plagued MISQ from the start: The regimes of truth of
academia are not commensurable with the regimes of truth of business practice. He
therefore proposed that a new and different journal be established for the now-alienated
and illegitimate half brother—the *MISQ Executive*: "This line of reasoning has moti-
vated me to work with Jeanne Ross and Michael Vitale in pursuing the possibility of
starting a new *MIS Quarterly* publication (other MISQ publications are *MISQ Discovery*
and *MISQ Review*) whose mission would be the publication of *research that would
appeal immediately to managers, executives, consultants, and other practitioners*. The
organizational change would involve the *instituting of new editorial and reviewing
norms, emphasizing practicality and relevance.…*Plans are still at a preliminary stage
for the new publication, tentatively named *MISQ Executive*" (24:3, emphasis added).
In fact, as it was launched in 2001, *MISQ Executive* seemed to look very much like the
original MISQ: "targeting two audiences: information systems practitioners and infor-
mation systems academics" (26:2). With this move, MISQ finally shed its dual focus
to become an exclusively academic journal.[4] This was not seen as a problem, as there
will "always be a place for the theory-oriented, basic research of the kind that now
predominates in *MIS Quarterly*" (24:3).

Taking up his tenure, the current editor, Ron Weber, similarly commented that,
"Clearly we need to publish the best research undertaken within the information systems
discipline," in defense of the MISQ's position "among the very top journals" in all three
of the fields of information systems, computer science and management (26:1). He
further extended the research scope of the journal to include the managerial and
organizational implications of "the full gamut of topics that command the attention of
researchers in the information systems field" (26:1, emphasis added). A significant
institutional change occurred under the editorship of Weber, with the establishment of
an alliance between the Association for Information Systems (of which Weber is a past
President) and the MISQ. This alliance was driven by economic imperatives. Once
again, the costs of maintaining a journal had become prohibitive for the independent
journal, such that MISQ faced an uncertain future. In this case, however, the alliance
created a tension not between theory and practice, but rather between two journals that
"seek to publish high-quality research papers," namely MISQ and the *Journal of the AIS*
(26:3). The effect that this may or may not have on the scope of each journal will be
interesting to observe. Weber has, further to this development, editorialized on the need
for IS researchers to identify and research the "deep, substantive problems" in the field
(27:1). He argues that MISQ has prioritized rigor *over* relevance, but now relevance has

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[4]A small, but telling, detail in the academic evolution of the journal is the switch from only
the month and year of publication appearing in the footnote of each page, to a volume,
issue/month and year footnote, more typical of purely academic journals.

taken on a different meaning. Weber is apparently precisely not concerned with relevance to practitioners (as the abolition of executive overviews in the same issue indicates), but with "the most important problems," those that have longevity. In this editorial, Weber appears to address the nature of information systems as a discipline, MISQ being the leading research outlet in that discipline, while acknowledging in this, and his following editorial (27:2) that this has been an ongoing debate since at least the mid-1980s. He further determines the purpose of the MISQ as being to defend, or perhaps establish, depending on one's position, the core of our discipline, and not to "stretch the boundaries of our discipline to an extreme" (27:2). Thus the current editor has quite clearly articulated MISQ's role as defender and protector of the *research* scope of IS as a discipline.

In this narrative, we have traced the shifting editorial scope of the MISQ. We aimed to demonstrate that this shift happened through many individual statements in the editorial comments, and perhaps also gradual changes in the structure and constitution of the editorial boards, as well as the MISQ's institutional arrangements. We would claim that this shift was not a plot or a strategy in the minds of the editors as such. Nevertheless, papers that were very legitimate bearers of truth in the 1970s and 1980s would not get a second look by the editors today. Likewise, most executives reading MISQ today would probably now agree with the quote from Blake Ives in (16:1) in his editorial comments of 1992: "They say nothing in these articles and they say it in a pretentious way." In the following section, we will consider how research methodology as the legitimate techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth also shifted.

3.2 The Battle of Method at MISQ: From Positivism to Pluralism (of Some Sort)

In the first 10 years of the MISQ, method was not seen as an issue—mostly because rigor in research was not the only criteria for the acceptance of papers. Many papers that were seen as highly relevant were published irrespective of their theory and their research methods. We can thus see that the points of power relations are not only contingent, but also intertwined, as the *scope* issue directly affected the *method* issue. It was furthermore evident to most in the field that the positive methods of the natural sciences were the way to do scientific research. Thus, the issue of method, where it arose at all, was self-evident and quickly subsided again. It was with appointment of Benbasat as the first Senior Associate Editor of Theory and Research in 1987, that method became articulated as an issue, as the first papers actually reflecting on positivist research methods were published (Benbasat, Goldstein, and Mead 1987; Culnan 1987; Culnan and Swanson 1986). As noted above, the editor at that time, McFarlan, did not discuss questions of method at all. It was first in the tenure of James Emery that the positive methodological criteria for a paper in the Theory and Research category were clarified:

> It should be based on a set of well-defined hypotheses, unbiased and reproducible procedures for collecting evidence that supports or refutes the hypotheses, and sound analytical procedures for drawing appropriate

conclusions from the evidence. The research often involves the collection of considerable quantitative data through such means as laboratory experiments or survey instruments. The data are then subjected to statistical analysis to draw the appropriate inferences from the research (13:3).

Emery did, however, hint that there might be an alternative: "High quality research need not be limited to work generating large quantities of data that can be statistically validated, however: a well constructed case study can also meet the tests of rigorous research." The emphasis on positivism is not surprising as it is clearly evident in the work of Benbasat and Ginsberg as Senior Associate Editors of Theory and Research. In the tenure of Blake Ives, DeSanctis—also as Senior Associate Editor of Theory and Research— made a plea for strong theoretical and empirical work that would provide "fresh theoretical ideas about causal relationships in order to facilitate understanding and prediction of events in the world" (DeSanctis, 17:1). This is in *opposition* to the dominance of managerial frameworks: "Frameworks are useful systems for identifying and organizing variables for scientists to study; but they do not lend good insight into cause/effect relationships, nor do they articulate the properties and behaviors underlying phenomena" (DeSanctis, 17:1). She also started to open the door for other research approaches: "On the empirical side, we welcome research based on positivist, interpretive, or integrated approaches. Traditionally, *MIS Quarterly* has emphasized positivist research methods. Though we remain strong in our commitment to hypotheses testing and quantitative data analysis, we would like to stress our interest in research that applies interpretive techniques, such as case studies, textual analysis, ethnography, and participant/ observation" (DeSanctis, 17:1). In spite of this declaration of openness and a restatement of this commitment of "openness with regard to the research methods" by Zmud (19:3), they seemed not to receive other approaches as submissions. Zmud explained: "We truly believe the *Quarterly* is not biased against manuscripts that adopt other than positivistic perspectives and methods. If it seems that positivistic articles tend to dominate the *Quarterly*, a sound explanation does exist—the majority of submitted manuscripts adopt such a perspective. We strongly encourage a variety of research approaches" (19:3). These are very interesting statements. They show us that the editors do indeed not have all the strings of the regime of truth in their hands. They can only work with the resources available. If they do not get non-positivist submissions, they cannot enact a shift in the regime of truth, even if they want to.

In an attempt to establish a new, more pluralistic, regime of truth it was decided to create a special issue on "Intensive Research in Information Systems: Using Qualitative, Interpretive, and Case Methods to Study Information Technology"—under the editorship of Lynn Markus and Allen Lee. The first articles of this special issue appeared as volume 23, issue one, the first issue of Lee's tenure. Other attempts were also made to increase the legitimacy of non-positivistic research such as the publication of Michael Myers' site on "Qualitative Research in Information Systems" in *MISQ Discovery* (21:2). One can only speculate about why it required such explicit effort for the editors to change the regime of truth with regard to method. We would venture to say that we must not forget that the MISQ itself operated in a regime of truth of management schools (where tenure and promotion decisions were made). Maybe this regime of truth still valued positivist research and, therefore, the authors continued to produce positivist

research in spite of the attempts of the editors to preach pluralism. The regime of truth of methodological pluralism is sealed in the editorial statements of Allen Lee at the start of his second year. He concluded, after reviewing some examples of published work in MISQ, that the "*MIS Quarterly* welcomes: the research would (1) be positivist, quantitative, and mathematical, (2) involve a rationalistic/economic decision-making framework, and (3) conduct hypothesis testing," also that the MISQ welcomes "(1) qualitative, interpretive, and case research, (2) a historical framework, and (3) theory building" (24:1). More pluralistic than this one cannot get—besides allowing speculative philosophical essays (like this one).

Recently there has been continued evidence of such pluralism—there were, in our estimation, three interpretive papers *about* research in 2001 and 2002 (Baskerville and Myers 2002; Orlikowski and Barley 2001; Schultze and Leidner 2002)—while the special issue articles edited by Bob Zmud on "Redefining the Organizational Roles of Information Technology in the Information Age" appearing in September 2002 and June 2003 contained a number of papers that address more interpretive issues. Interestingly, Weber has explicitly dismissed methodology as a concern, because he is concerned very much with the problem of the problem (that is, scope). He suggests that "we need to change some deeply ingrained mindsets,' specifically, the way in which "our identity as researchers is a function of the extent to which we can flex our muscles using a particular research approach or method." He identifies this mindset as "a vestige of the old 'methodology wars' that occurred long ago in our discipline," and concludes "it is time to forget and move on" (27:1). Clearly the methodology wars have, in the view of the editor, been won, or least there is some kind of truce declared.

We hope to have shown here how the regime of truth with regard to method has change over the tenure of the last four editors of MISQ. It ought to be clear that work, legitimate early on in the 1970s and 1980s both with respect to scope and method, will no longer be legitimate, or not. Nevertheless, there is still a strong emphasis on empirical work. Thus, critical and speculative work will still find it hard to get an audience in MISQ. This analysis of the regimes of truth of the MISQ is still very superficial. We have not analyzed the editorial board, the relationships between the editorial board members, the way in which Senior Editors are chosen, the actual reviewing practices, and so forth. All of these may, to a lesser or greater degree, have shifted the regime of truth of the MISQ in a particular direction rather than another. We want to conclude the paper by looking at some of the implications of the analysis.

4   TOWARD A BETTER POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE

We first want to comment on a philosophical issue then say more about academic publishing. If we admit that truth is not some essential ontological claim—as the moderns assumed—but rather a claim for legitimacy of epistemological categories, does this mean we are now adrift in a sea of relativism in which anything goes? We would claim not. For as much as we want our truth claims to be recognized as such, we will have to appeal to the regime of truth that operates. We can claim all sorts of things about MISQ, but in as much as we want to publish our work there, we will have to address ourselves to the regime of truth that operates there, likewise for all other journals and

discourses of science. Every form of relativism (or fundamentalism) will eventually be mediated by the regimes of truth that operate in the institutions where it seeks legitimacy. We do not have guarantees nor an ultimate foundation or meta-narrative that we can appeal to for the legitimacy of our truth claims *outside of power*. Nevertheless, this does not mean truth is an arbitrary process. Likewise, from an ethical point of view, every person will have to mediate and reconsider their values subject to those regimes of truth where they seek legitimacy. Thus, contrary to Feyerabend (1993), *anything* can simply not go—absolute relativism, like fundamentalism, is simply not a political option in the production of truth. Bad research will be rejected wherever it is presented. The issue is rather that good and valid research (depending on your criteria) may find a home in some journals and not in others. If all journals were equally relevant in promotion and tenure decisions, then this might have been the end of it—unfortunately it is not. We now want to return to the issue of academic publication. What does the politics of truth mean for research and publishing in academic journals?

It is important to realize—and tell our students—that academic publication is first and foremost a political rather than a pure epistemological issue. Obviously epistemo-logical considerations are also important, but they can never be seen separately from the regime of truth within which the ultimate truth claims will be made. We claim that all research must be *reasonable* (as opposed to *rational*). And by this we mean it should be congruent with the regime of truth in which it locates itself. If you do positive research and want to publish in a positivist journal, you must adhere to that regime of truth. Likewise, the interpretivist must be congruent with that regime of truth. Ironically, even the post-modernist must appeal to a regime of truth for legitimacy. This implies that the researcher must make a significant effort to know the regime of truth to which she will eventually appeal. This is not easy. Foucault has taught us that power is only effective if it hides itself. Thus, the power relations that make up the regime of truth will be reluctant to spell out in detail what constituted legitimate claims as that would limit their room to manoeuver. It is, therefore, often necessary not so much to know the scope and aims of the journal as to know the particular dispositions of those who make the important decisions. Furthermore, the journals also seek legitimacy within the academic community. They themselves will, therefore, have to address themselves to *that* regime of truth. To the extent that the modern positivist regime of truth is still dominant, they will have to be seen to be scientific—at some level of analysis. Knowledge production is a complex set of power relations within and between regimes of truth that the experienced researcher must learn to negotiate. Publication in academic journals is an experience in disciplinary power, in Foucault's terminology. As we all know, we must be seen to address the reviewer's comments, even when we fundamentally disagree with them. Thus, a publication in MISQ, or any other journal, is not necessarily so much an indication of quality as it is an indication of compliance with the regime of truth that operates there. Indeed we often bemoan the quality of the work published in MISQ. Yet, the editors cannot fail to agree to publish work that obviously conforms to the disciplinary processes that make up the MISQ—scope, method, reviewing, etc.

What we have said about MISQ is equally true for other journals such as *Information Systems Research*, *Information and Organization*, *Journal of Management Information Systems*, and so forth. We would argue that it would be very difficult if not impossible to publish a purely positivist paper in *Information and Organization*—even

if the editor might wish to. We need to admit that since knowledge production—in the form of publications in this case—is a fundamentally social process, questions of epistemology cannot be separated from questions of politics. This is not bad—indeed it is the very condition of its ongoing possibility. However, it is dangerous, as Foucault has argued. It is our duty to continually disclose this politics of truth and to subject it to ongoing scrutiny. It is when power becomes hidden *and* systematically asymmetrical that it becomes bad. It is our belief that the systemic dominance of the MISQ in university rankings is bad for the field—our evident institutional silence on this politics of truth is even worse. It is our moral duty to continually challenge any attempt to institutionalize rankings of journals that tend to favor certain regimes of truth and not others—especially as this may have material consequences for those equally legitimate researchers on the outside.

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Appendix A

MISQ Editors from 1977 to 2004

Year	Vol.	Editor-in-Chief	Senior Editors
1977- 1982	1-6	Gary W. Dickson	
1973-1985	7-9	William R. King	
1986	10	F. Warren McFarlan	
1987-1988	11-12	F. Warren McFarlan	Izak Benbasat
1989	13	James C. Emery	Izak Benbasat
1990-1991	14-15	James C. Emery	Michael Ginsberg
1992	16	Blake Ives	Michael Ginsberg
1993-1994	17-18	Blake Ives	Gerardine DeSanctis
1995	19	Robert Zmud	Izak Benbasat, Gerardine DeSanctis, Allen Lee, Blake Ives
1996	20	Robert Zmud	Lynda Applegate, Izak Benbasat, Sirkka Jarvenpaa, Allen Lee
1997	21	Robert Zmud	Lynda Applegate, Sirkka Jarvenpaa, Allen Lee, Blake Ives, Kalle Lyytinen, Ron Weber
1998	22	Robert Zmud	Lynda Applegate, Blake Ives, Sirkka Jarvenpaa, Kalle Lyytinen, Rick Watson, Ron Weber
1999	23	Allen Lee	Lynda Applegate, Cynthia Beath, Sirkka Jarvenpaa, Kalle Lyytinen, Rick Watson, Daniel Roby, Ron Weber, Robert Zmud
2000	24	Allen Lee	Cynthia Beath, Michael D. Myers, Daniel Roby, Rick Watson, V. Sambamurthy, Jane Webster, Kwok-Kee Wei, Ilze Zigurs, Robert Zmud
2001	25	Allen Lee	Cynthia Beath, Michael D. Myers, Daniel Roby, Rick Watson, V. Sambamurthy, Jane Webster, Kwok-Kee Wei, Ilze Zigurs, Robert Zmud
2002	26	Ron Weber	Ritu Agarwal, Allen Lee, Michael Myers, V Sambamurthy, Peter Todd, Jane Webster, Kwok-Kee Wei, Ilze Zigurs
2003	27	Ron Weber	Ritu Agarwal, Deborah Compeau, Allen Lee, Michael Myers, Rajiv Sabherwal, V Sambamurthy, Carol Saunders, V. Storey, Peter Todd, Jane Webster, Kwok-Kee Wei
2004	28	Ron Weber	Ritu Agarwal, Deborah Compeau, Allen Lee, Lars Mathiassen, Michael Myers, Rajiv Sabherwal, Carol Saunders, Veda Storey, Peter Todd, Bernard Tan, Dov Te'eni