

A New Paradigm for Ethics in IS Research (Working Title)

Work in progress paper to RISO Group

Greg Heath

The aims of the Paper

The purpose of doing research is to discover/create new knowledge. The purpose of the creating new knowledge should be to “do good”: to make the world a better place to live in. However, “doing good” or “doing the right thing” is not always easy to discern. This is particularly so when at the cutting edge of new knowledge and under pressure from funding bodies or research directors to produce on time and on budget.

Research in universities and other organisations, both government and private has become highly regulated. Ethics approval and ethical impact/declaration statements have become standard practice with ethics committees maintaining a high degree of control over the research process. This is, by and large, a good thing as it prevents extreme experiments and provides a significant level of accountability. However, the facts of the matter are that it easy to comply with the prescriptive provisions ethics protocols and yet conduct research that does not necessarily promote “the good”.

The contention of this paper is that formulaic approaches to research, and particularly research in IS do not get the root of being ethical in research.

The claim of this paper is that good research, both methodologically and ethically, springs from a research culture in which “doing good” is firmly rooted as a matter of practice. Understanding the corporate cultures and organisational networks is a complex business, but it is this understanding that will provide the keys to understanding good practice in research. It is only in an environment where sound networks of practice have been established that research which is ethically sound and advances the good will be incubated.

The State of IS Research

Early statements such as that made in the 1970's by Paul Goodman and others (King R., 1996 p32) that technologists and computer scientists are in fact moral philosophers seem to have been buried by the wave of positivist models of ICT that have dominated research in the last two decades. This is easily accountable given the dramatic development of hardware and the science that underlies it which stems largely from empirical, evidence based, research. Another factor is the large capital investment in major systems that are results oriented and thus seek to quantitatively measure return on investment rather than qualitative changes to workplaces and patterns of living. The aim of such research has been

to answer the “how come?” and “how much?” questions rather address issues of understanding and interpretation.

Now there is clear evidence that research in IS is shifting from an emphasis on the science to an emphasis on the interface with the users. This requires, first of all the use of qualitative methods in research but also more interpretive, less formulaic, ethical provisions. Whilst, alternative theoretical approaches exist in philosophical analysis and organisational research these have not been employed in anything but the periphery of research. The failure to be more adventurous in ethical evaluation of research is starting to have a restrictive impact on the scope of research, particularly interpretive research. In Goodman’s terms it is time to bring the moral philosophers back.

The aim of research is to produce new knowledge. However, the production of knowledge is never context free. There is always a long list of questions surrounding any piece of research. These questions include: what is the purpose of the research?(teleology) What are the epistemological bases of the research? What is the social/cultural/psychological/political context of the research? What is the likely impact of the research? And so on. Each of these contextual issues affects the methodological and ethical modality of the research.

Seen from this point of view positivist research can be seen as research that is contextualised in a particular way. Claims to objectivity in “scientific” or positivist research are claims about the context of the research and have little or nothing to do with issues of rigour, nor with the robustness of the research process, nor the usefulness of the outcomes. The so called “objectivity” of the research comes from the implicit sharing of the context of the research which is taken for granted within a particular community of researchers. It is as it were an unspoken agreement about what is to count as evidence, rationality and warrants for drawing certain conclusions. The positivistic paradigm also presumes a particular ethical profile that is, broadly speaking, the familiar research ethics profile.

When research is contextualised in other ways the conventional ethical paradigm becomes somewhat misplaced and we have to look for alternatives to cope with research that is contextualised differently. This has been recognised to a limited degree in some IS research (Rogerson, Weckert and Simpson) and in the AoIR paper on internet research where the importance of judgement in ethical decision making is recognised.

In information systems themselves there is a strong tension between control and diversity (anarchy). There are the strong centralising systems (SAP) where uniformity and control takes centre stage and socially networked systems where adaptation and diversity rule. It might be expected that similarly strong ethical principles would apply to research in the centralised systems but that something rather different would apply in the diversified systems. This is also reinforced by

the fact that the technology is by its nature deterministic but persons as users of the technology are by their nature self-determining.

New IS research is almost by definition at the forefront of the creation of new paradigms in research methods and research ethics. This is because of the implicit dispersal and diversity in such systems. Such traditional ethical prescriptions such as confidentiality, anonymity and consent take on completely new dimensions in a complex technologically mediated environment. Also, the distinctions between the participants and authors of research can become very muddled. From a philosophical subject-object distinction starts to break down.

New Knowledge Production

One productive avenue for reformulating approaches to ethics in IS research comes from the work of Gibbons, Scott and Nowotny. In the books *The New Knowledge Production* and *Re-Thinking Science* they set out an agenda for the reconceptualisation of knowledge in a postmodern world.

But what is the new knowledge production; how can it be characterised? It is characterised by Gibbons et al¹ as knowledge that is produced in:

- the context of application
- is transdisciplinary
- is heterogeneous in terms of the skills and experience brought to it,
- is produced in diverse sites
- is characterised by the production by teams
- is subject to social accountability and reflexivity
- is subject to the quality control of market acceptability as well as peer review
- is global or non-localised.

Gibbons et al characterise this form of knowledge as **Mode 2** knowledge production. As such they distinguish it from the more familiar **Mode 1** knowledge which is the familiar knowledge production characterised by the era of modernism and traditional university research.

Mode 1 knowledge production is characterised as being

- Discipline based,
- Carries a distinction between pure (or fundamental) and applied,
- Often produced by individuals
- Produced in universities or traditional research centres
- Is inherently local or localised.

The epistemological bases of Mode 1 and Mode 2 are quite distinct. This feature is not discussed by Gibbons and friends in any depth and needs to be expounded to give more substance to the distinction.

Mode 1 knowledge is based on traditional notions of objectivity of knowledge. These might be either rational or empirical in kind, but in either case depend on the notion that knowledge must be based in some form of objective reality. It has traditionally been this base which has given legitimacy to Mode 1 knowledge; validating it against the test of objective truth or correspondence with an objectively real world.

Challenges to the validation of these traditional forms of knowledge in the second half of the twentieth century have taken their toll to the point where researchers in many disciplines have abandoned claims to objectivity and rely on postmodern conceptions based on networks of interlinked relativities. This epistemological approach underpins mode 2 knowledge. But, I propose, that much more realistically mode 2 knowledge can be based on the distinct epistemology of pragmatism. Pragmatism and its associated characteristics give strong support to Mode 2 knowledge.

Pragmatism is more than the simple theory that whatever works is true. Rather it is a theory of truth based on the principles of consensus. The classic statement of pragmatism by its founder the 19th Century American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce is that what is true (or real) depends agreement between groups or communities of informed practitioners. Peirce, a rather eccentric and, in later years, reclusive character, had in mind here the community of scientists. His claim was that within a community of scientists who were genuinely inquiring into the truth of a matter over time, consensus would lead to the truth. The question as to whether or not the answer was objectively the “right” answer would need to be seen in the context that there was no closer approximation to the truth than the one at hand.

Peirce, like his philosophical idol Kant did not deny the existence of an objective reality. What he said was that this had to be interpreted through human understanding to be accessed at all, even if only partially. An important aspect of his theory that leads into the communicative theory is that understanding and the resultant knowledge generated, can only be achieved in the context of undistorted communication. That is that it must be the intention of members of the community of investigators to reach the truth of the matter in hand and not to take strategic positions that would distort the outcome.

It is clear that pragmatism as an epistemology supports Mode 2 knowledge production in that it provides a framework whereby the more diverse the inputs into knowledge production the “truer” the knowledge is likely to be.

Mode 2 knowledge production and indeed Peirce’s theory of pragmatism were developed in the context of scientific knowledge, where the knowledge frameworks have been uncontested. To an extent the humanities and social

sciences, except for the strict behaviourist/functionalist theories have always been closer to Mode 2 or a mix of mode 1 and 2 in their production of knowledge.

It is clear that IS research much more closely fits the mould of Mode 2 knowledge as its produced in its context of application, is distributed, global and heterogenous in skills and knowledge.

There is another reason why IS research is closer to Mode 2 than Mode 1 knowledge production and this is to do with the use of the information; its transformation into knowledge. To see this we can draw on Aristotle's conception of *nous* the capacity that humans have to transform information into knowledge by the infusion of meaning into data or information. This process is inevitably intentional in the philosophical use of the word, in that it is contextualised for the purposes of communication.

If IS research can be located in Mode 2 knowledge production what are the implications for research ethics? First, if knowledge is to be produced in the context of its application then a view of ethics must be developed that can be effective within the context of application and fulfil the other characteristics of Mode 2. Here, I think it is appropriate look to an updated, perhaps post-modern version of virtue ethics.

Two Suggested Approaches to a New Research Ethics

More traditional or prescriptive theories of ethics are suited to traditional research modalities with their lineal rationality but the idea of prescriptive code of ethics does not fit IS research which involves human or cultural interaction.

One response might be to adopt a radical postmodern position and abandon any claim to other than a localised morality and that the claim that all ethics is personalised and subject to negotiation as Bauman says, "What we are learning ... is that it is personal morality that makes ethical negotiation and consensus possible, and not the other way around." (Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* 1993 p.34). This is not just the relativistic social construction of morality, it is rather the claim that morality is an essential part of the social construction. Consequences of this for research are; first, that ethics has to be built into the research methodology itself and second that each piece of research, and indeed each instance of the research activity such as an on-line survey, has to negotiate its local ethics based on an understanding of trust between the researcher and the researched.

An alternative developed approach is the application of Actor Network Theory (ANT) to providing a basis for research ethics. According to Tatnall and Gilding,

ANT explores the way that networks of relations are composed, how they emerge and come into being, how they are constructed and maintained, how

they compete with other networks, and how they are more durable over time. It examines how actors enlist other actors into their world and how they bestow qualities, desires, visions and motivation on these actors.

(Tattnal and Gilding 1999, p.995)

ANT relies on the performative interactions of 'actors' within an organisation and sees their roles and positions as mutually self defining. In ANT an ethical evaluation applies to the total organisation and the self-referencing systems the actors generate. ANT has been applied to a corporate setting (Usher, R 2007) but not to research. It clearly does have possibilities for evaluation the totality of research projects in a networked context.

ⁱ Gibbons et al., The New Production of Knowledge