

(How) Can We Have Korean Perspectives in the Global Market of IS Research?

Youngjin Yoo

Lewis-Progressive Chair in Management
Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University
10900 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, OH. 44149, USA
Tel: +1.216.368.0790, E-mail: Youngjin.yoo@case.edu

Abstract

Despite the growing number of prominent individual Korean scholars who are actively participating in the global IS community and the growing influence of Korean IT industry in the world IT market, the Korean IS community has not been able to become a major voice in the global IS community. Conceptualizing the global IS community as a market place of ideas, I speculate intellectual, socio-cultural and environmental factors that might have contributed to this problem. I offer few suggestions with a hope to stir up new desires and fresh efforts among Korean IS scholars to build strong accumulated intellectual traditions that have global influences.

Introduction

Few years ago, I attended IRIS, the Scandinavian Conference on Information Systems, to participate in a panel on mobile computing. The most memorable session of the conference, however, was not the panel that I was on, but the plenary panel on the Scandinavia tradition of information systems (IS) research. Several prominent researchers – including both senior and junior – participated and offered their assessments on the global impact of Scandinavian IS research tradition. Some members of the panel were teaching in the United States, some were in the UK, while rest were teaching in Scandinavia. While their views differed significantly from one another, they all agreed that there were distinctive contributions to the global IS research community by Scandinavian IS researchers. I was struck by the collective expression of passionate pursuit of their own identity and unique voices in the global IS community. It is not just Scandinavian countries. In fact, a cursory review of global IS research tradition suggests that some countries and regions have more influence on the global discourse of IS research and practice than others.

At the same time, we see growing global influences of Korean IT industry. Companies like Samsung Electronics, LG Electronics and SK Telecomm are highly respected for their innovative products and services around the world. The penetrations of broadband Internet and mobile services are the envy of the world – including much more wealthy and powerful countries. Korean IT market often is regarded as the leading test market of the “latest

and greatest” technological innovations.

Yet, we are hard pressed to pinpoint what is the single most important contribution of Korean IS perspectives to the global IS community. In fact, I am not sure if we have a clear idea of what Korean IS perspectives look like. Given the growing success of individual Korean scholars in the global IS community and the rising influence of Korean IT industry, the absence of uniquely Korean perspectives on IS research is both unfortunate and paradoxical. In this essay, which is highly personal and speculative, I will reflect on the possible reasons for such an absence of Korean perspectives on IS research and offer some possible ways of going forward. In what follows, I will first provide a brief background on the global diversity of IS research community. Then, I will reflect on possible reasons for the lack of Korean perspectives in IS research in the global IS community, followed by few possible ways to enhance the collective visibility of the Korean IS community in the global market place of ideas.

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Background¹

Within the general IS literature, there is a growing recognition that the research community is a diverse community in terms of epistemology, theoretical orientation, and research methods (Benbasat 1996, Lyytinen 1999, Robey 1996). It has been noted that different researchers from different regions have contributed to the diversity of IS research community (Lyytinen and King 2004). For example, Iivari and Lyytinen (1999) have noted the unique contributions of the Scandinavian IS research community to the information systems development literature. They noted that participatory IS system design research has been one of the important contributions from the Scandinavian IS research community. Furthermore, their emphasis on human aspect of IS design and industrial democratic tradition has made important contributions to the general discourse in the IS literature. The Scandinavian IS research conference, IRIS, is recognized as the oldest IS research

¹ This section heavily relies on my earlier paper on Asian perspectives on IS research presented at 2004 PACIS (Yoo, et al. 2004). Please refer to the original article for the detailed descriptions of research method and findings.

conference.

Similarly, Avegrou, Siemer, and Bjørn-Andersen (1999) noted that there are several different traditions in the European IS research community. They found that English-speaking European researchers focus on organizational and social aspects of information systems. On the other hand, German-speaking European researchers focused on the idea of “total automation of the firm” which led them to the development of integrated software systems like SAP.

Motivated by this observation, I have conducted a systematic review of IS research by Asian researchers published in four IS journals that are globally respected: *Information Systems Research* (ISR), *Journal of Management Information Systems* (JMIS), *MIS Quarterly* (MISQ), and *European Journal of Information Systems* (EJIS). Working with two PhD students from China, I identified 162 articles published in those journals from 1980 (when the first International Conference of Information Systems was held) to 2002. Using the classification scheme developed by Vessey et al. (2002), we coded these 162 articles based on five major attributes – reference discipline, level of analysis, topic, research approach, and research method. Then, we compared our results with those reported by Vessey et al. that provided a baseline for our comparisons. Despite the presence of well-known leading Asian scholars working both in Asian and non-Asian countries and their activities as researchers, editors and the leaders of the community – such as the Association of Information Systems, our analyses shows no statistically significant differences between the general IS research community and the Asian IS researchers.

While I have not conducted separate analyses with a sample of Korean scholars, given that Korean scholars were included in our Asian sample, it is all but clear that Korean IS scholars have not been able to establish their own distinctive viewpoints to IS research. This year marks the 15th anniversary of both the *Journal of MIS Research* and the semi-annual conference on information systems both sponsored by the Korean Society of Management Information Systems. We also established a Korean chapter of Association of Information Systems, a worldwide community of IS scholars. There is an efforts undergoing to host ICIS in Seoul in a near future. All of these points to the maturity of Korean IS academic community. It is thus timely for us to reflect upon the past and future intellectual contribution of our community as a whole. Next, I will explore some of the possible reasons that might have contributed to the lack of “collective” influence of the Korean IS community.

Speculations about the Causes

It seems that there are at least three main factors that have contributed to the lack of uniquely Korean perspectives on IS research: intellectual, socio-cultural and environmental.

Intellectual Factors

Many Korean IS scholars are trained by the US and European universities. As a consequence, it is natural

that the theoretical underpinnings and methodological orientations taken by Korean scholars resemble those of Western scholars from whom they learned. Even those who are trained by domestic institutions rely primarily on the materials published by Western scholars. Given the global IS community itself is quite young and goes through its own identity crisis as reflected in the current “core paradigm” and “IT artifact” debates (Benbasat and Zmud 2003, King and Lyytinen 2004), there is nothing wrong to be trained at Western institutions and learning from the writings from Western scholars. The challenge that we face, however, is that it creates strong *path dependent* conditions for our own academic work. Often the theories and methods imported from these countries are taken as the only “global” standards for academic work, discouraging the development of situated and more localized theories that are more relevant for the management practices in Korea. As a result, we became “consumers” of ideas developed elsewhere, only testing the validity and applicability of those ideas within our own local contexts – wherever those local contexts might be. The theories and methods are in a way languages we use to convey our ideas. As Wittgenstein (1953) warned us, language can “bewitch” us with its power – we can only imagine what we can speak. What we need then is more reflexive self-monitoring of our use of languages – theories and methods – as we conduct our own research. Only then, we can engage in more path creating research activities, inventing our own vocabularies faithful to our identity as *Korean* IS scholars.

Then, there is a problem of “mainstream” IS research. The argument here is that in order to gain credibility in the global IS community, we, Korean IS scholars, need to conduct mainstream IS research. In the context of behavioral and organizational IS research that I am most familiar with, this means choosing topics like technology acceptance model (TAM), the theory of reasoned action or media richness theory. While such mainstream topics are certainly important and worthy of our pursuit, the problem of this argument is that it assumes as if mainstream topics are *out there* waiting to be found. The social reality of the IS academic community, however, is that these ideas gained their mainstream status through vigorous competitions in the market place of ideas over other competing ideas (Lyytinen and King 2004). These ideas are there to be contested, challenged and eventually replaced. Like most other social theories, these theories are developed and validated in specific socio-cultural contexts. It is only inevitable, therefore, these theories will break down when such socio-cultural contexts change. Yet, often these theories appear as if they have some types of universal truth in our discourse. What we need here is more open critical discourse on “imported” theories. Although this is particularly true in behavioral and organizational research streams, similar reflective approaches are required for more technical research streams. For example, the idea of enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems is an outgrowth of enterprise data modeling research stream from Germany. ERP is now being implemented and applied all around the world as if it is a

global standard for enterprise data management. Yet, little attention is paid to the fact that all German companies are required to follow the same accounting chart by law, which makes it much less problematic to implement ERP systems in Germany than in other countries.

Socio-Cultural Factors

In order to compete in the global IS community as a market place of ideas, our ideas need to be clearly and coherent communicated in writing through rigorous and consistent publication efforts. This means that our ideas need to be written and published in English – at least until another language becomes the global academic language. Since most Korean IS scholars received primary and secondary education in Korea and learned English as a secondary language, it often acts as a major barrier in promoting our own ideas. While there is no easy solution for this, we as a community need to find ways to support PhD students and junior faculty members – particularly those who are trained in Korea – to write and publish their ideas in English outlets.

Another cultural factor that seems to influence our ability to develop our influence in the global IS community is modesty. Koreans are modest and courteous. While modesty is a virtue that we should continue to cherish in social settings, in the market place of ideas, modesty can be perceived as “not having one’s own ideas”. So often in our writing, we hesitate to use “I” and, instead use “we”, even though it was a single-authored work. In seminars and discussions, even if we disagree with the presented ideas, we often keep such disagreements to ourselves, out of courtesy to the visitor. PhD students rarely challenge ideas of their mentors. Often the order of authorship of a paper is determined based on seniority, not the level of contributions. All of such cultural norms seem to discourage our students and junior colleagues from developing their own strong ideas. Given the strong cultural pressure to the homogeneous conformity in our own culture (Hofstede 1991, Yoo and Torrey 2002), Korean IS community need to deliberately work in order to encourage more critical thinking, vigorous yet civil debates on ideas, and the meritocracy of ideas.

Environmental Factors

Finally, it is only fair to point out that academic institutional environments in Korea make it much difficult for IS scholars in most Korean universities to focus on research. Although I do not have data on the general institutional conditions in Korea (research funding, teaching load, administrative services, and external affairs), it is quite evident that the current circumstances at many institutions do not provide adequate support for active research programs by the faculty members in many universities. Furthermore, despite the relatively small market size, it is rare to see on-going collaborations among IS faculty members from different universities. These institutional environmental factors seem to inhibit the ability of Korean IS community to build its own accumulated intellectual tradition.

Where do we go from here?

The lack of unique Korean perspectives on IS research is not good for the global IS community nor for Korean IS community and companies. The real world IS problems are increasingly complex laden with social, political, technical and cultural challenges. The rapid developments of global IS infrastructure mean that the IS problems are simultaneously global and local. For example, many global companies are implementing a single instance of enterprise-wide to support worldwide operations in tens of different countries and hundreds of different locations. At a global manufacturing company that I recently interviewed, a single upgrade of SAP will affect over 900 facilities in 65 different countries. The magnitude of change management in such companies is just enormous. The issues like global outsourcing, standard developments for emerging technologies, and IT-enabled social, economic and political transformations are awfully complex, yet extremely relevant problems that need to be carefully studied. Unfortunately, predominant Western approaches to IS research based on reductionist, atomistic, and rationality-assumed paradigms are not well equipped to handle these complex problems. It is clear that the global IS community needs more diverse ideas that offer new explanations and designs for this dynamic and complex world. Korean IS community is well positioned to offer its own perspectives on these problems for the following two reasons.

First, Korean cultural and intellectual traditions of synthetic and holistic perspectives can be an important factor here. This might lead us to the development of a dialectic “Korean” perspective that overcomes typical dualisms in the IS research community: quantitative vs. qualitative, positivistic vs. interpretive, and technical vs. social/behavioral. While not all of us may bring in “Yin-Yang” and other eccentric words in our IS research, we can certainly take more holistic and dialectic approaches in our research. That also means to study more Korean companies and to find out issues and challenges unique among Korean companies and society. While it is certainly valuable to point out that Korean companies face the same issues that the US firms experience when they implement ERP systems, it is more valuable to the global IS community to point out idiosyncratic problems that only Korean companies face to demonstrate the boundary conditions of the theoretical perspectives developed in other countries.

Second, as pointed out earlier, in many cases, Korea is the forefront of these exciting new developments providing invaluable opportunity for Korean IS scholars to develop new theories and methods that are necessary to study new problems that information technology creates. “Thumb revolution” – political revolution in Ukraine and Philippines partly triggered by the use of mobile phones – started in Korea couple years before these countries experienced them. Almost everyday, Korean mobile operators introduce new innovations to the market that will

take at least couple years to appear in the US and European markets. The everyday use of the Internet in many different facets Korean life – politics, education, shopping, etc – is simply breathtaking. Such novel problems demand new theories and methods, and Korean IS scholars can make genuine contributions to the global IS communities by studying these new phenomenon that will generate new theoretical insights and methodological advancements.

In order to take advantage of these opportunities, few practical steps can be taken. First, seeing the global IS community as a market place of ideas, we should take the role of sellers as much as buyers going forward. The ideas that are currently dominating the global IS community need to be strategically challenged and contested. It will require Korean IS scholars taking more reflexive monitoring of our own work and our use of theories and methods. As we study new problems, we should continue to attempt to build new vocabularies that will be identified with the Korean IS community. Participatory design by Scandinavia IS community, soft system methodology by the British IS community, user satisfactions by the American IS community are just few examples of local vocabularies that became part of global IS language. The market of ideas self-selects the strong ideas with strong results. The idea that explains the changing world through the use of information technology will gain the dominant power in the market place of ideas, and the door is open to everyone who is willing to participate in the vigorous and competitive trading of ideas. The center of the community will move to where the strong ideas are. Ideas becomes mainstream when we begin to call them mainstream. We need to stop worrying about confirming to mainstream ideas, but to make ours mainstream. That can be done only by having our own strong ideas with strong results.

Participating in the global market place of ideas also means that we need to promote our own market first. We need to promote more vigorous competitions among ideas – ideas that generate strong results. In order to do that, we need to deliberately change some of our traditional norms in creating and sharing ideas. The practice of authorship, for example, needs to be changed in order to encourage junior members of the community to promote their own ideas and take the ownership of them. More collaboration should take place among Korean IS scholars both in Korea and abroad. Korean IS scholars should study more uniquely Korean problems or leading edge innovations in the areas like mobile services or broadband Internet that take place in Korea. When reporting those studies, we should be faithful to the local context and should not attempt to water down the idiosyncratic Korean contexts in an attempt to test a “global” theory developed elsewhere. Instead, we should explore and exploit idiosyncratic Korean contexts in order to build new theories and extend old ones. Recently, I had a pleasure of accepting a paper written by two Korean scholars (Heejin Lee and Sangjo Oh) and one of their their Chinese colleague for an international conference that I organize (IFIP 8.2 Working Conference in Cleveland). Their paper analyzed the dispute between China and the US around WAPI standard (Chinese

standard for wireless local area network security). Their careful analysis of local contexts illuminates the complex geopolitical and technical issues around the development of global and national standards for emerging technologies. Their paper received rave reviews from two prominent senior scholars in the field and is likely heading toward an “A” journal submission. It is only through such careful and painstaking efforts to highlight the unique local contexts that we can add unique value to the global IS community. They could have easily tested well-known Western theories, like TAM or Roger’s diffusion of innovation theory. But, I doubt such a paper would have received as favorable reviews as they did. There are other similar opportunities out there for other emerging technologies, like CDMA (Yoo, et al. Forthcoming), WiBro vs. WiMax and WIPI.

Although I believe we should approach to the global IS community as a market place of ideas, at the same time, we should not fool ourselves by believing that it is a perfect market. Just like any other markets, it is an imperfect market. The transactions of the ideas are not always conducted based on the value and the merit of the ideas. It means that we need to make our ideas more approachable and visible to others so that they might try them. This would require us to align our own local market to the global market. What does this mean? That means we need to make Korean IS journals more available to the global buyers of ideas. At the same time, the Korean IS journals need to become an attractive market place for the members of the global IS community. This might require appointment of foreign scholars in the editorial board, strengthening the review process and radically improving the quality of papers. It may mean a transition of an existing journal currently published in Korean. Alternatively, it may mean that a new journal needs to be established in order to shape our own perspectives. In either case, one can look at some of the leading European journals like Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems or European Journal of Information Systems as exemplars of such outlets.

If we calculate the age of Korean IS community based on the founding of an independent academic society, it is now 17 years old. An increasing number of Korean scholars play key roles in the global IS community. It is time for us to build our own perspectives that critically contribute to the diverse and vibrant global IS community – not as individuals but together as a *community*.

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