Submission to the AIS College of Senior Scholars

Exploitation of the eJournal Revolution for the Benefit of AIS Members

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Executive Summary

Since the mid-1990s, ePublishing has enabled prompt publication of research articles, immediately following the completion of content and presentation QA.

AIS's publishing initiative in 1999 committed to the elimination of delays and backlogs in publications.

CAIS and JAIS delivered on that undertaking 2000-2014.

However, since c. 2015, authors and readers have been held hostage by the professional association's own leading journals.

From that time onwards, a backlog 6-12 months in length came into existence, and is in grave danger of being institutionalised.

There is no justification for this breach of trust.

The principle of 'prompt publication without backlog' needs to be re-asserted.

The existing backlog then needs to be worked down within a reasonable timeframe. To the extent that resource-limitations play a role, the journals' business models need to be revisited, and solutions found and implemented.

I propose that the AIS College of Senior Scholars adopt and promote the principle that contemporary publishing capabilities must be applied to serve the interests of IS researchers and AIS members, in order to reduce the delay from editorial acceptance to publication to no more than the time needed to achieve appropriate quality of presentation, and to remove the notion of backlog.

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Introduction

As theorists, we wax lyrical about the benefits of disruptive technologies. This Submission relates to a technology that has long been known to offer considerable benefits to the research community, but that is not being applied with the interests of researchers and readers in mind.

Retrospective

It was clear from the earliest years of the Web that print-publishing would be first complemented by, and then replaced by, alternatives that were initially referred to as 'electronic' publishing, and now more commonly as 'digital' publishing. For academic venues, it was recognised from the outset that this was not just a substitute medium, but disruptive technology opening up many new opportunities.

In 1994, in reference to a leading exemplar, the Electronic Journal of Combinatorics, Rick Watson wrote that "Publication is immediate following paper acceptance and completion of copyright forms" (Watson 1994, p.228) and hence "**published research will be more current**" (p.229). He noted that several hundred newsletters and journals were already published electronically, including one in the IS field, INFOSYS (by Dennis Viehland at Massey), which commenced in January 1994.

During AIS's formative years in 1995-99, the publishing initiative was spearheaded by Paul Gray. It reflected the discussion that Rick Watson had stimulated. The notion of stockpiling papers to await a publication-cycle was to be replaced by prompt publication following acceptance. The architect of the Association's journal publishing program explained that "**Once an article is accepted for publication, there is no need to wait for the next available issue** after such and such a number of publication cycles. Given the nature of the delivery system, **articles will be delivered to subscribers immediately when they become available** ... In analyzing where AIS could best serve its members, it was clear that ... the time delays between acceptance and publication could be minimized ... **We intend to make [rapid turnaround] a hallmark of AIS publications**" (Gray 1999a).

Paul reiterated the argument in his CAIS Editorial at the end of that venue's first year: "**By publishing articles as they are accepted, the delay and backlog between acceptance and publication is virtually eliminated**" (Gray 1999b, p.5).

The launch announcement for JAIS in March 2000 confirmed that this was also to be a feature of the flagship journal: "As an electronic journal, the publication of JAIS will not follow the conventional routine. **Instead of gathering articles into volumes and numbers containing several pieces, JAIS plans to publish papers as they are accepted**" (Eln-Dor 2000).

The importance of this feature was stressed in an early JAIS article: "**The opportunity to accelerate the review and publication process while expanding accessibility are compelling arguments for increased reliance on electronic publishing**. Publishers can produce a specific issue of an electronic journal whenever they want to put information in readers' hands and however frequently they wish" (Palmer et al. 2000, p.5).

Some counter-arguments against the 'publish when ready' approach are in Appendix 1. These relate to cost factors, 'on-line first' copies, and expectations of indexing-services. None of the counter-arguments have merit, particularly in view of the enormous importance of making the results of quality-assured research available on a timely basis.

The undertakings were duly delivered, and were sustained from 2000 to 2014. A report on a discussion of another of Rick Watson's proposals stated that "... we have two e-journals (CAIS and JAIS) ... these journals ... reduce the time from submission to publication significantly" (Gray et al. 2006, p.289). In 2008, in an interim report on developments, I wrote that " ... in electronic-only contexts, ... the original constraints of printing and distribution that gave rise to the concept of an Issue are no longer significant. ... With that, the publication delays that used to arise from queuing are no longer necessary. For example, publishing an article as soon as it is ready for release has been the practice for Physical Review D since 1997 (Smith 2000), and for [JAIS and CAIS] since their inception in 1999" (Clarke & Kingsley 2008, s.3.7).

The Situation in 2020

There appear to have been essentially no backlogs for the AIS' two primary publications, from inception in 2000 until at least 2014.

The first 'Forthcoming' entry in archive.org for CAIS was on 11 February 2017, showing 20 articles. At that point in time, articles were being allocated to Volumes which covered a 6-month period, and contained 20 articles, suggesting a 6-month delay in publication. Recent Volumes appear to retain the same structure, but the backlog appears to be 47, implying 18 months for the most recent approvals. However, no systematic study of the situation at CAIS has been undertaken. The remainder of this section relates solely to JAIS.

It is unclear whether any policy-decision was ever taken by AIS or by a JAIS Editor to build up a backlog. It appears more likely that the backlog arose because drift occurred in journal management.

Whatever the origins may have been, JAIS authors and readers are being penalised by long delays in publication following completion of the review process. Despite the formal undertakings by AIS to its members, and the provision of prompt publishing services for well over 10 years, backlogs now exist, and are even worse than some commercial journals. Information on the current situation with JAIS is in Appendix 2.

I discovered the situation only in mid-2019, when I had an article accepted by JAIS, and discovered that its early availability was to be seriously compromised by sitting in a backlog. I raised the problem with the Editor between June and August 2019. Despite initially indicating a sympathetic attitude to the arguments, the Editor's attitude hardened, and the problem remains.

I held off taking the matter further while the article was in the backlog, in order to allow time for the Editor to take action, and to avoid any perception of conflict of interest muddying the water. The delay in publication was 10 months. In mid-2020, I raised the matter with the AIS President, and then submitted a Formal Complaint to the AIS Vice-President Publications.

The situation in early December 2020 is that a backlog of 36 articles exists, and the volume published has been reduced from 72 (12 Issues each of 6 articles) to 48 (6 Issues each of 8). The delay faced by the authors of the next approved articles is at least 10 months, plus the likelihood of further delay arising from newer articles being accorded priority over theirs. (Of the last 36 articles published, 5 have been accorded priority).

Discussions with the Editor and AIS office-bearers have achieved no progress in the matter. Worse, an originally accidental breach of faith appears now to have been effectively promulgated as a policy.

I am accordingly seeking the support of the AIS College of Senior Scholars in order to drive the changes necessary for AIS:

• to take full advantage of the characteristics of electronic publishing;

• to fulfil the Association's original commitment that AIS publications serve the interests of authors and readers – in both cases, to a considerable extent AIS members;

• to publish all articles as soon as quality assurance of the content and presentation is complete, including full citation-details; and

• to achieve the backlog-free publication of research.

SUBMISSION

The AIS stable of journals was established with the express intent that the professional association lead the way, and prioritise service to researchers and their readers over commercial objectives.

I submit that the AIS College of Senior Scholars should determine as follows:

"The AIS College of Senior Scholars adopts and promotes the principle that contemporary publishing capabilities must be applied to serve the interests of IS researchers and AIS members, in order to reduce the delay from editorial acceptance to publication to no more than the time needed to achieve appropriate quality of presentation, and to remove the notion of backlog".

Appendix 1: Counter-Arguments Against Prompt Publishing

A number of arguments have been put forward in defence of backlogs.

(1)   Cost

Print-form journals incur costs additional to those for an ePublished journal. One way to reduce them is to bundle multiple articles into periodically-released batches,. Journals that are sustaining print as well as electronic formats remain, to some extent at least, subject to that challenge (unless they've trained their customers to pay for the printing). These factors are not relevant to an electronic- or digital-only journal, and hence the disadvantages of batching and backlogs cannot be justified.

(2)   'Online First' / 'Early-View' Electronic Copies

To camouflage bad service, journals that are still publishing in print-form have instituted half-way houses where articles languish, in page-format, but without the imprimatur of final citation details. Researchers and readers are not adequately served by such approaches **<u>unless</u>** the full citation details are available as part of the electronically-published copy, such that the 'online first' copy is indistinguishable from a 'hard-copy eventually' copy.

There are multiple alternative forms for citation, and prompt publication without a backlog can be supported using any of them. In each case addressed below, it is assumed that:

- at least the author-name(s), title, journal-name, and Year of Publication are published (and perhaps season, or month and even day-within-month); and
- a page-numbering scheme is adopted, not so much in deference to the historical origins of printing onto a succession of discrete physical sides of paper-sheets, but as a convenient and still-conventional way of providing quicker access to locations within an article.

(a)   Volume / Issue / Page-Range

As part of the production-editing process, each article can be allocated to a Volume- and Issue-number, and the page-numbers allocated either by commencing at the next-available page-number within that Issue, or commencing at 1 for each article. Some consequential changes arise. In particular:

- any 'Overview of the Issue' that the Editor provides may have page-numbers that are higher than at least some of the articles. On the other hand, the contents-page is not constrained to display items in page-number-order, so the Overview, once published, can be displayed wherever on the contents-page the Editor considers is appropriate;
- each Issue remains open for a period of time until the Editor chooses to close it.
  Three patterns need to be accommodated:
  - **Special Issues**. All articles fall within a particular topic-area, and the Issue may be open for a long period, including across multiple calendar-years. The Editor's Overview may appear at the beginning, prior to publication of the first substantive article, or appear later. The Editors might publish further Interim Reports and/or a final Summative Report to close off the Issue;
  - **Normal Issues**. Articles address any topic within the journal's scope. The Issue is closed when the Editor declares it closed, e.g. because an appropriate count of articles has been reached, or a suitable time-period has passed. Any Overview of the Issue's contents will necessarily be written, or at least completed, after the last article, and hence may bear page-numbers higher than the articles;
  - **Normal Issues including Special Sections**. Articles belonging to Special Sections may be published with page-number-ranges that interleave with other articles. However, there is no need for the contents-page to list the articles in page-number sequence, so there can be separate segments within the contents-page for the different categories.

These are minor inconveniences, or require minor adaptations of practices by Editors. In any case, the Editor's function is to service the needs of authors and readers, and the benefits of prompt publication to the community far exceed such harm as may be inflicted on editorial practices.

(b) Volume / Page-Range

The original concept of an 'Issue', as a bound and separately-distributed volume, is in principle redundant in the case of electronic journals. It can be dropped, provided that page-numbering is sequential from 1 onwards to the end of the Volume, hence providing an unambiguous identifier.

The Editor can present the contents-page for the Volume in any sequence, not necessarily in the sequence in which the articles appeared. The items making up 'Special Issues' and 'Special Sections' can be identified within the contents-page and within the individual units of publication.

(c) Volume / Article-Number / Page-Range

This approach also abandons the intermediate category 'Issue'. By assigning an Article-Number, in sequence of publication, page-numbering can begin at 1 for each Article (or be continuous within Volume, if the Editor prefers). This appears to be the approach adopted by CAIS – except that the assignment of an Article-Number is delayed.

(d) DOI / Page-Range

Subject to some provisos, not only the category 'Issue' but also 'Volume' is redundant. The original conception of a Volume appears to have been a set of Issues bound together; but in many cases a Volume was opened for each year, whether a calendar year, January-December, or for some other period. The Digital Object Identifier (DOI) was designed as a unique identifier. It is appropriate in this case to begin page-numbering at 1 for each article, because the article does not belong to a defined set any smaller than 'all articles in this journal published in a particular year'.

(e) All of the Above

JAIS uses Volume / Issue / Article-Number / Page-Range (continuous within Volume), and DOI. However, assignment of all of them is delayed.

In all of these cases, the electronically-published version is equivalent to the final version, with the citation-details available at time of publication. There is accordingly no justification for electronic journals to have a backlog.

(3) Demands of Indexing Services

The argument is sometimes put forward that indexing services and/or impact-factor services may reduce their valuation of a journal if it publishes other than in reliably periodic Issues. To the extent that this may be true, it is irrational behaviour by such services in the electronic publishing era. To manage risk, an Editor may reasonably wish to pay lip-service to the idea. But that needs to be done in a manner that avoids harm to authors and readers, such as the maintenance of a backlog.

In respect of all of the variants of citation-format discussed above, ways exist in which the appearance of reliable periodicity can be achieved:
(a) Volume / Issue / Page-Range: Determine the policy about when an Issue is closed on a fluid basis, reflecting both the period since the previous Issue and the number of articles;
(b) Volume / Page-Range: Determine the policy about when a Volume is closed on a fluid basis, reflecting both the period since the previous Issue and the number of articles;
(c) Volume / Article-Number / Page-Range: Determine the policy about when a Volume is closed on a fluid basis, reflecting both the period since the previous Issue and the number of articles;
(d) DOI / Page-Range: Advise indexing-services that the journal publishes continuously, as articles complete their journey through the quality assurance process, and no Volume or Issue numbers are assigned. As the industry is committed to DOIs, this is hard for them to argue against;
(e) All of the above: Determine the policy about when Volumes and Issues are closed on a fluid basis, reflecting both the elapsed time and the number of articles.

Appendix 2: The Current Situation with JAIS

I am not aware of any formal decision to abandon the objective of prompt publication after acceptance, and if such a change was ever approved, I am not aware of any consultation with AIS members, or even communication to members that such a decision had been made.

The JAIS site continues to reflect the AIS' undertaking, and the practice 2000-2014, by declaring that its offering "For Authors" includes "Relatively short cycle times and times to publication" (JAIS 2020).

The earliest list of Forthcoming Papers that is evident at archive.org is dated November 2011. It appears that, until at least May 2013, the articles listed there were published that month, or very shortly thereafter. There is then a hiatus in page-content until February 2015.

The backlog problem appears to have been created during 2014. Throughout the period 2014-2018 (Vols. 15-19), it appears that a quota of 2-3 articles per monthly Issue was imposed. This may have reflected the volume of acceptances through the period 2007-2013 (Vols. 8-14). Initially, slow growth in acceptances, as the reputation of JAIS strengthened, may have meant only limited delay. But it appears that there was a failure to recognise that the journal was enjoying a lift in attractiveness, and was experiencing, at least for a period, a near-doubling of the number of acceptances p.a.

Of the 23 articles in the backlog in **February 2015**, 2 were published that month. The other 21 were published at the rate of 2-3 p.mo., with the last of them **enduring at least an 8 month delay** and appearing only in October 2015. The gap between the two dates on the first page of each article became a combination of the elapsed time from submission to approval, plus the publishing delay.

I was unaware of the corruption of the journal's precepts until June 2019. My only previous article in JAIS was in November 2004, with 10 months' delay for two rounds of review, 3 months for me to do one round of major revisions, and a delay of only a few weeks before publication in February 2006.

With a recent article, the experience with the publication phase was far less positive. On 10 Mar 2018, ISP-JAIS-18-0071 was submitted. It required 3 rounds of revisions, with 11 months in reviewers' hands and 3 in our own, and was accepted 6 May 2019 and back in JAIS' hands the same day. After a month, on 7 Jun 2019, we were told of a new policy, whereby authors are responsible for final formatting. My co-author, an experienced Editor, did this, and the finally-formatted version was **submitted on 10 Jun 2019**.

Only after acceptance did we discover that **there was a backlog of an extraordinary 40 articles**. With 6 appearing in each of the most recent Issues (i.e. 72 p.a.), **the expected waiting time was 6-7 months**. Several articles were subsequently jumped ahead of ours, other changes in publishing practices occurred, and **publication occurred only after a 10-month delay**, on 3 April 2020.

This case study is, regrettably, representative of a very large number of articles submitted in recent years to JAIS. The sorry story can be traced by reading successive, long lists of delayed titles, at https://web.archive.org/web/2019*/https://aisel.aisnet.org/jais/forthcoming.html

In early April 2020, the apparent delay confronting an approved article was at least 7-8 months. (There were 26 listed, with a limit of, at that stage, 8 to be published per bi-monthly Issue, i.e. 48 p.a. On that basis, the last 2 would be published in the Nov-Dec 2020 Issue; but that does not take into account any Special Issues or Sections, and any articles that the Editor prioritises).

In early December 2020, there were 36 listed, and hence a minimum 10-month delay already existed for the most recent 4, even if no later articles were prioritised over them. Should 5 more be accepted before early January, the last would face a 12-month delay.

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