

An Open Letter to the Informing Science Community

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Introduction

On 1 January 2009, I was granted the great privilege of assuming the role of Editor-in-Chief of *Informing Science: the International Journal of an Emerging Transdiscipline (InformSciJ)*. I thank Scott J. Lloyd for his years of stewardship and congratulate him on his promotion to Director of Publications of the Informing Science Institute. In this letter, I intend to identify what I see to be the mission of the journal and to lay out the philosophy that I intend to employ in my day-to-day decision-making for the journal. By doing so, I hope to make it easier for readers, authors, reviewers and editors to understand the special role that the journal plays within the Informing Science research community and, even more importantly, can play in informing the distinct—and often isolated—broader intellectual communities that contribute to the transdiscipline.

The Mission of InformSciJ

I view the mission of InformSciJ to be as follows:

Informing Science: the International Journal of an Emerging Transdiscipline shall be the principal channel for sharing knowledge about and encouraging interest in informing across a diverse body of researchers drawn from many disciplines and nations.

To clarify what is meant by informing, I refer to Eli Cohen's (1999) definition, which describes the process as follows:

- providing a specific clientele with information
- in a form, format, and schedule
- that maximizes its effectiveness.

I would also like to draw the reader's attention to the specific phrase "channel for sharing knowledge." I used the term *channel*, as opposed to the more specific *journal* or *outlet* because the more experience I gain working with journals, the more I realize that the end-product that appears in print represents only a single aspect of a journal's activities, and not necessarily the most important. What goes on behind the scenes—during the mentoring and encouragement that occurs during the review process, during the conference sessions where we describe how to write for the journal, over the course of editor interactions with potential authors—are equally important parts of knowledge sharing. Furthermore, they happen to be areas where InformSciJ—under both Eli Cohen's and Scott J. Lloyd's leadership—has proven to be extraordinarily effective. Also worth noting is the inclusion of "encouraging interest" in the mission. I do not view this as marketing; I view this as being an integral part of the complete research process. Engaging in research that does not diffuse to where it can be applied is a sterile activity at best.

Publishing in InformSciJ

The transdisciplinary character of *InformSciJ* requires that we be willing to publish a broad array of contributions. In many of our client fields, most published research contributions can be characterized as either theory-building or theory-testing. While submissions of this type are, of course, encouraged, we will also consider a broader range of contributions, including:

- *Synthesis*: An existing body of theory and observations are organized into a more cohesive whole. A literature review may fall into this category, but only if it attempts to propose a novel systematic organization for the existing literature.
- *Illustration*: The meaning or implications of a particular theory are explained and clarified through an illustrative example. In the business literature, for example, nearly all practitioner-directed publications use this technique extensively.
- *Unexplained Observation*: A rich observation, often having properties not well explained with existing theory, that is offered without serious attempt to incorporate it into theory. It is interesting to note that while research of the form “I observed this but I can’t explain it” would be nearly impossible to publish in any social science journal known to me, such anomalous observations often form the basis for scientific revolution (Kuhn, 1970)—such as the Michelson Morley experiment, which paved the way for Einstein’s special relativity.

We must never forget that our transdisciplinary mission demands that we view facilitating informing across the client disciplines as an important form of research. Providing a reader in one discipline with a novel perspective—even if that perspective is not necessarily novel in the discipline of the author—is a necessary part of transdisciplinary knowledge creation.

We will also consider publishing promising research findings that are in their later formative stages—during which the ideas being presented are still somewhat malleable—rather than demanding that all ideas be fully tested. A manuscript that proposes a well developed and conceptualized theory, for example, need not include a rigorous empirical test of the same theory. Accepting submissions that have room for further development is completely consistent with the journal’s mission of mentoring. Selfishly, it also increases the likelihood that we will have the opportunity to publish novel and important ideas before anyone else. Indeed, from the Informing Science discipline’s perspective, the ideal scenario would involve InformSciJ’s publishing of a formative work that is subsequently refined, finalized, and then published in an elite client discipline journal. This scenario particularly serves the “encouraging interest in informing” component of our mission and is a critical part of diffusing our knowledge to client discipline communities.

Although we offer unusual flexibility in terms of the types of research we will consider, there are three immutable criteria for publication in InformSciJ:

1. *The research topic must be explicitly related to informing.* InformSciJ must never become a catch-all for unsuccessful efforts to publish in better known client discipline journals. If the editors and I do not see a clearly articulated link between informing and the topic being covered, it will be sent back with the request that such a linkage be established. To better understand what we mean by informing, potential authors can look at Cohen (2009). Additional insights can be found in Cohen (1999), Gill and Bhattacharjee (2007) and the soon to be published Gill and Cohen (2009).
2. *Only submissions that are properly referenced and well supported from an empirical, mathematical or conceptual/logical standpoint will be considered.* Although we gladly

consider novel ideas and research approaches, these can only be taken seriously if the author has presented a strong case—which may be built upon any combination of empirical, mathematical, or conceptual/logical grounds. High quality formative research may not be complete but it is not sloppy!

3. *All published articles must be written in grammatically correct, understandable prose.* Nothing would undermine the credibility of InformSciJ than publishing articles that appear to have been slapped together. Because this particular requirement places an unfair burden on the many researchers whose native tongue is not English, we will do our best to aid such authors in bringing their manuscripts up to an acceptable level.

Guidance for Authors

The single most important guidance I can offer to potential InformSciJ authors is be sure your manuscript explains how your research relates to informing. This will save you a few weeks time because the first step of our reviewing process is for me to scan the manuscript for appropriateness. If I cannot make the connection with respect to informing within about 90 seconds, I will send it back to you—unreviewed—and request that you resubmit it after making the connection more explicit.

You should also be aware that InformSciJ places a very high value on the timeliness of the informing process. Ideally, this means you should get an Accept/Reject decision within 6 weeks of submitting. To achieve this timeliness, however, we have had to abandon the “Revise & Resubmit” option that most journals offer as a means of postponing the acceptance decision. The implication of this, from a practical standpoint, is that there are four possible outcomes of the review process:

1. *Accept with minor revisions.* The editor will provide you with some suggestions on how to improve your piece, with some indication as to whether or not they are mandatory. It is rare that such revisions would take more than a day or two to make and, typically, you will be asked to return it to InformSciJ within a month.
2. *Accept with major revisions.* Once again, the editor will provide you with detailed suggestions on how to improve your piece and will insist that they be made prior to final acceptance. Such revisions may be quite substantial, and you will normally be given about 3 months to complete them.
3. *Reject, encouraging resubmission.* The editor will provide you with detailed suggestions on how to improve your piece and also suggests that, once you have made them, InformSciJ will be willing to take a fresh look at the manuscript. This is the closest option to revise and resubmit that is available to our editors.
4. *Reject, encouraging alternative outlets.* The editor will provide you with detailed suggestions on how to improve your piece but indicate that alternative outlets might be more appropriate than InformSciJ.

Originally, as an editor of the *Journal of Information Technology Education* (JITE, which employs the same system), I missed the revise and resubmit option. Over time, however, I have come to believe that the benefits of this approach—which include much faster turn-around and much less ambiguity regarding what an author must do to achieve final acceptance—outweigh the cost of initially rejecting manuscripts that show some promise.

Finally, I encourage authors to employ some common sense with respect to submissions. Take the time to format your references according to InformSciJ standards. You may even choose to use the InformSciJ MS-Word template for your initial submission. Unlike publisher-sponsored journals that have resources (and typically publish to make profit from the scientific works of others), the Informing Science Institute family of journals thrives due to the selfless dedication of colleagues who desire to help fellow colleagues improve and flourish. They will appreciate anything you do to make their jobs more productive, even if it has no impact on your manuscript's acceptance.

Guidance for Reviewers

I judge the quality of a review based upon two criteria:

1. How well it makes the case for accepting the manuscript.
2. The degree to which it makes constructive suggestions for improving the manuscript.

Naturally, the relative weight placed on the two criteria depends upon the reviewer's perception of the manuscript's quality.

The first of these criteria, which seems to be nearly the opposite of what one might expect in a "critical review," warrants some explanation. Informing Science encompasses a huge number of client disciplines as well as numerous variations with respect to what aspect of informing is being studied. As a consequence, it is very unlikely that a particular contribution to InformSciJ will exert a genuine impact on more than a handful of people; it is even harder to tell, in advance, what the impact of a particular article is likely to be. Thus, if I *knew* that a particular manuscript would have a major and beneficial impact on the thinking of just one individual unconnected to the author, I would publish it. End of discussion.

Fortunately, I would never require that this demanding standard be met by every InformSciJ contribution—of my 100+ published works, I can only identify a single example of an article that comes even close to meeting that criterion. But, on the other hand, if just a single reviewer makes a strong and well argued case that a particular manuscript *must* be accepted—and that goes far beyond just clicking the "must accept" button on the review site—I would be strongly inclined to see the piece accepted regardless of the other reviewer opinions. Thus, each reviewer should recognize that he or she has the power to almost guarantee acceptance provided he or she is willing to undertake the considerable effort of presenting a strong case to the editor.

With respect to the constructive suggestions, I am definitely not advocating taking an uncritical perspective. It makes no sense to propose solutions without clearly identifying the problems being addressed. Nonetheless, InformSciJ regards its reviewers as mentors. Do not be afraid to impinge on an author's creativity by suggesting possible ways in which a manuscript could be reshaped. My experience has been that many authors welcome such suggestions. Naturally, the time taken preparing such suggestions can be tempered by the perceived effort associated with the manuscript itself. If the manuscript does not appear to be the product of sustained effort on the part of the author, then the reviewer's obligation to expend effort in identifying improvements is correspondingly less.

One comment that a reviewer should never be afraid to make is that he or she does not understand a particular section of a manuscript—a comment made particularly valuable if the obstacles to understanding are identified by the reviewer. Because of our transdisciplinary character, knowledge sharing must be viewed on parity with knowledge creation/validation. Such sharing cannot take place if the concepts being communicated are not explained clearly. Lack of clarity is one reviewer comment that I will almost never allow an author to ignore.

Guidance for Editors

Under my tenure as Editor-in-Chief, InformSciJ will have both Editors and Associate Editors (AE). The duties of the two are identical. They differ only in that AEs will run their decisions by me for approval—which will nearly always be given—with the principal goal of offering suggestions on how to provide quality constructive mentoring to the author. Editors, on the other hand, will communicate directly with authors using approved templates, copying me on their decisions. Thus, whatever suggestions I might offer to Editors will be after the fact and for future reference. My intent is to move all newly appointed AEs into the Editor role as quickly as possible. And, quite naturally, editors of all sorts can always consult me for advice. I view my main role at InformSciJ as one of being a mentor to the editors; I also anticipate that they will also serve as mentors to me on a regular basis.

I see the editor's role as being three-fold:

1. Deciding the best future course for the manuscript,
2. Conveying the review committee's advice and decision to the author(s) with respect to how to proceed on the manuscript, and
3. Mentoring the authors to become even better at writing their research papers.

Both of these roles entail a huge responsibility, since the decision to accept or reject a manuscript is often carries important professional and emotional consequences for its author(s). It can never be taken lightly.

It is up to each editor (as chair of the review committee for the paper) to make that decision; reviewer input is to be taken as advisory only. In particular, average review scores will *never* be used as the principal basis of an editorial decision. Every reviewer recommendation must be qualitatively weighted by factors, such as the amount of time that appears to have been put into the review, the reviewer's apparent expertise with the subject matter, and any prior experience the editor has had with the reviewer. (As Eli Cohen has noted in the past, some reviewers have never read a paper that they liked while others are enthusiastic about every paper.) The only qualification I would make to this is that if even one reviewer strongly supports accepting a paper and has put together a compelling case for acceptance, I would always like to be consulted before a decision to reject the paper is made. This is to ensure consistency with my instructions to reviewers.

With respect to conveying the committee's advice, I see a particular need to reduce equivocality. Doing so is particularly important where a manuscript that requires substantial revisions is accepted. Under such circumstances, the editor should clearly identify what needs to be done in order to achieve final acceptance. This requires providing clear direction in the event that reviewer suggestions conflict, as is often the case, or are ambiguous. The clarity of instruction provided is critical, since we are providing an acceptance, not a "wait-and-see" judgment. That means that if the revision arrives that incorporates all the required changes, we have no choice but to publish it—even if it doesn't turn out as well as we thought it would. Thus, where major revisions are a condition of acceptance, these must be specified as clearly as possible. Naturally, the editor may require another review cycle should the required changes not be incorporated in an acceptable manner. In general, however, I prefer that reviewers not be involved after the first cycle. It slows down the process, reduces the pool of available reviewers, and creates the potential that additional ambiguity will be introduced.

Conclusions

Informing Science: the International Journal of an Emerging Transdiscipline is already a wonderful journal. In assuming the leadership role for the journal, my objective is not to institute a series of radical changes. Rather, it is to ensure that we continue the many excellent practices that

already distinguish us from our peer journals—including a strong culture of mentorship, rapid turnaround, commitment to open knowledge sharing, and appreciation for a wide range of research philosophies and methods—and that we continue striving to exert the greatest possible positive impact upon our readers, our authors, our volunteer staff, and the client disciplines that we serve.

Once again, I express my thanks to my predecessors—Eli Cohen and Scott J. Lloyd—for affording me this opportunity.

References

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Biography



Grandon Gill is an Associate Professor in the Information Systems & Decision Sciences department at the University of South Florida. He holds a doctorate in Management Information Systems from Harvard Business School, where he also received his M.B.A. His principal research areas are the impacts of complexity on decision-making and IS education, and he has published many articles in the areas of expert systems, innovative educational technologies and informing. Currently, he is Editor-in-Chief of *Informing Science: the International Journal of an Emerging Transdiscipline*, an Editor of the *Journal of IT Education* and an Associate Editor for the *Decision Science Journal of Innovative Education*.