

Strengthening Critical Perspectives: A Call for Greater Openness in Information Systems Management

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Abstract

This editorial is a call to the IS community to mobilize critical perspectives. To this end, this editorial presents the theoretical and conceptual origins of critical perspectives as well as their evolution in IS. Drawing on recent and diverse articles in the literature, the authors argue for the relevance of critical perspectives in illuminating current issues in IS.

Keywords

Critical perspectives; Frankfurt School; emancipation; feminism, bias

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Renforcer les perspectives critiques : un appel à l'ouverture en management des systèmes d'information

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Résumé :

Cet éditorial est un appel à la communauté MSI pour mobiliser ces perspectives. Il présente les origines théoriques et conceptuelles des perspectives critiques ainsi que leur évolution en MSI. En s'appuyant sur des articles récents et variés dans la littérature, les autrices argumentent de la pertinence des perspectives critiques pour éclairer des enjeux actuels en MSI.

Mots clés :

Perspective Critique, Ecole de Francfort, Emancipation, Approches Féministes, Biais.

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“(…) ‘critical’ means an attempt to discover reason’s ‘sources and limits.’ (….) It would be a great error to believe that critical thinking stands somewhere between dogmatism and skepticism. It is actually the way to leave these alternatives behind.” (Arendt, 1989, p. 32).

Introduction

It took Hannah only a few minutes to adopt the new trending application Top Crash¹. A few clicks were enough for her to become hooked. Developed at the Skolkovo Innovation Center near Moscow, the app promises to humiliate, mutilate, and inflict the worst (virtually, “just for fun,” as the promotional tagline claims) on objects, people, or animals designated by its users. Once a name is entered, the AI powering the application scrapes all available online information and generates a 45-second fictional video in which the chosen target undergoes humiliation, physical harm, and potentially destruction or death. The more degrading and violent the scene, the higher the price - though never more than two euros. For users lacking imagination, the AI suggests acquaintances or well-known public figures from politics or the arts, while also generating innovative ways to torture them. The system is trained through click-workers responsible for facial recognition. After the first months of use, statistics reveal that 80% of targeted individuals are women, 65% are racialised, and 74% identify with a non-heteronormative sexual orientation. Requests concerning women frequently involve scenes of rape, mutilation, and ultimately death.

This application adds to an already extensive and highly addictive digital ecosystem. Given the scale of the phenomenon - the number of hours spent scrolling - some companies now attempt to regulate employees’ personal smartphone use. One experiment authorises ten minutes of personal use per hour on site, after which phones must be returned to secure lockers. A chime signals the beginning and end of the allowed period, and scenes of employees rushing to the locker room have been reported.

Confronted with Top Crash and organisational tolerance for personal digital use, a team of IS scholars begins to question which research questions might be most relevant. Should they study the use of Top Crash and its determinants? Ex-post or ex-ante? Acceptance? The mediating role of experience, or the

¹ This application is born (for the time being) from our imagination.

moderating role of age? Its effect on productivity? Or the role of trust and leadership in such a use case? Yet by focusing on these familiar questions, might the team simply reproduce long-standing research patterns? Worse, might they overlook the complexities of conducting research in sensitive or ethically fraught contexts? What about questions relating to alienation risks, embedded biases, ethical dilemmas, or power and emancipation?

The authors of this editorial argue in favour of more open research avenues - specifically, those grounded in critical perspectives.

Preliminary Definition

To clarify what we mean by critical perspectives, we draw on Orlikowski & Baroudi (1991), Myers & Klein (2011), and Masiero (2023). Critical approaches aim to “critique the status quo by revealing deep-seated structural contradictions within the social system and thereby seek emancipation from alienating and restrictive conditions” (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991, p. 6). Emancipation thus lies at the heart of the definition (Myers, 1997).

This broad definition encompasses diverse themes, authors, methodologies, objects, and schools of thought, including Foucault, Habermas, Braverman, Bourdieu, as well as feminist, non-Western, and postcolonial approaches that place emancipation at the centre (Masiero, 2023).

In an analysis of articles published in the “Basket of 8” MIS journals between 1991 and 2021, Masiero (2023) identified 86 articles drawing upon critical theory. She notes a decline in critical studies after 2010 compared to the preceding decade - a paradox given the simultaneous rise of themes central to critical theory, such as power and justice. What about SIM? Our keyword search reveals only a small number of explicitly critical articles since the journal’s creation. SIM is therefore no exception regarding the marginal presence of critical approaches.

The aim of this editorial is precisely to raise awareness and highlight the value of anchoring more IS research in critical perspectives.

We first outline the theoretical and conceptual foundations of critical perspectives, before discussing their evolution in MIS. We then illustrate their relevance with examples of recent research adopting such perspectives.

Origins of Critical Perspectives

To step back from the current state of critical research in MIS, it is essential to distinguish critical theory - rooted in the German intellectual tradition - from the broader set of critical perspectives, which encompass multiple thematic constellations enabling reflection on heteronomy and emancipation in society.

“Heteronomy” refers to the idea that individuals are not free because external forces (structures, material necessities, habitus, etc.) dominate and constrain their behaviour (Kant, 1792). Over time, individuals internalise and naturalise these forms of domination, much like the traditional functioning of organisations in which employees come to accept a form of voluntary servitude (Spurk, 2001). As an heir to Kantian dialectics, critical theory - developed by the Frankfurt School - seeks to illuminate alternatives, helping to deconstruct feelings of inevitability embedded in institutions, norms and doxa (Spurk, 2017).

More broadly, critical perspectives operate like a photographic negative. They sharpen the contrasts of social reality by examining its boundaries. They recover forgotten or abandoned historical choices (Agulhon & Müller, 2024) and shed light on social experimentation (Bazin & Naccache, 2016). Some strands propose alternative societal arrangements - through reform, countercultures, utopias, or radical propositions (Fraser, 2007). Others advocate activist research, involving scholars in collective action (Thébaud-Mony et al., 2012).

Critical perspectives today are rich and diverse. Far from the caricature of the detached critic, researchers drawing on critical approaches often interrogate action - an orientation they share with management scholarship. Critical Management Studies (CMS) is a vast and heterogeneous field, structured for two decades around themes such as academia, alternative organisations, control and resistance, discourse, Foucauldian studies, gender, identity, Marxism, postcolonialism, and psychoanalysis (Spicer & Alvesson, 2024). Recent CMS work has moved far beyond traditional organisations, focusing instead on the lived experiences of marginalised individuals and groups - leading to an expansion of theoretical resources. For example, critical disability studies may rely on Frida Kahlo’s poetry to interrogate impairment, the crip movement (aligned with queer studies), handiparentality, or handifeminism (Madiot et al., 2021).

The main criticisms directed at CMS highlight a decline in innovative ideas, attributed to institutionalised practices that constrain creativity by establishing one-dimensional characters - most notably predictable “usual suspects” such as capitalism, Western domination, managerialism, patriarchy, instrumental rationality, homophobia, racism, New Public Management, entrepreneurship, bureaucracy, performance objectives, or neoliberalism. Studies that become confined within such predetermined narrative frameworks tend to avoid deep engagement with empirical fields, relying instead on material drawn primarily from individual experiences. This, in turn, leads to a weakening of their theoretical contributions (Spicer & Alvesson, 2024).

To address some of these critiques, we argue that management research could benefit greatly from critical studies in IS - namely, work situated at the intersection of the materiality of information and communication technologies and their uses, understood as key mediating devices in both professional and social spheres. Accounting for the situated materiality of technologies invites scholars to move beyond strictly functionalist readings of the digital. It thereby encourages us to conceive information systems as sociotechnical assemblages shaped by tensions and imaginaries, echoing Donna Haraway’s (2006) cyborg figure, which challenges the nature/machine dualism and critiques identitarian and essentialist forms of feminism. Moreover, since technology is never neutral, IS scholars engaging in critical research should be encouraged to foreground the contextual forces at play in their studies, especially when such forces create relations of dependency or tensions in terms of access to resources.

Evolution of Critical Perspectives in MIS

Internationally, critical perspectives in MIS emerged in the 1980s-1990s as reactions against dominant functionalist and positivist approaches. Their theoretical foundations draw heavily from the social sciences, especially the Frankfurt School (Habermas), Marxism, poststructuralism, and Foucauldian analyses of power and governmentality. These perspectives stress the non-neutrality of IS and their role in reproducing - or challenging - structures of power (Arena & Habib, 2025).

In the 2000s, critical MIS research became more structured through collective volumes (Howcroft & Trauth, 2005) and special issues (Kvasny & Richardson, 2006), providing institutional space for themes such as IS ethics (Stahl, 2004, 2008; Hamet & Michel, 2018), organisational domination

(McGrath, 2005), North–South inequalities (Avgerou, 2008), and technological standards (Lyytinen & King, 2006).

Despite this consolidation, the field remained fragmented and pluralistic, marked by theoretical and methodological diversity. Since the 2010s, the community has increasingly emphasised methodological reflexivity and societal impact, particularly in relation to AI, digital surveillance, and algorithmic governance (Mingers & Walsham, 2010; Clarke & Davison, 2020).

In France, the diffusion of critical perspectives has been slower and more diffuse due to institutional contexts less favourable to such work and an academic tradition highly empirical and focused on uses (Arena & Habib, 2025). Early francophone contributions appeared in the 2000s, notably with the AIM 2004 call for papers “IS: Critical Perspectives” and Rowe’s (2009) introduction of emancipation and reflexivity in MIS research. Quite marginal for a long time, the field has gradually become institutionalised through recurring calls for papers (AIM 2004, 2024) and the creation of the thematic group on ethics and digital regulation (GTAIM, 2022).

Recent work highlights topics such as AI ethics, digital commons, sustainability, and societal effects of digital transformation. While resonating with international debates, francophone research retains a distinctive tone - more philosophical, contextual, and grounded in Continental epistemological traditions.

Recent Illustrations of Critical Perspectives in MIS

Critical perspectives help revitalise humanistic values and sociotechnical approaches (Ngwenyama et al., 2024), widely considered an axis of cohesion within the discipline (Sarker et al., 2019). These values - ethics (Myers & Klein, 2011), freedom, and justice (Ngwenyama et al., 2024) - should be more systematically considered when studying digitalisation, datafication, platformisation, misinformation, or digital addiction (Rowe et al., 2020).

Critical perspectives offer alternative, more inclusive, ethical, or participatory ways to analyse sociotechnical phenomena. They illuminate longstanding societal issues - algorithmic discrimination, surveillance, platform-driven precarity, digital colonialism, digital capitalism -as well as embedded power and domination dynamics.

Below, we highlight four recent studies - without claiming exhaustiveness - that illustrate the relevance of critical approaches for the MIS community.

Monson (2023) proposes a critical methodology to study sustainability, foregrounding power dynamics that shape truth production and public discourse. By examining domains marked by opacities and deception, the study invites IS scholarship to interrogate the social and political conditions underpinning sustainable design. It offers pathways for socially responsible IS design and for reducing technological alienation.

Ngwenyama et al. (2023) mobilise Beck's (2009) risk society theory and critical discourse analysis to examine the Danish digital identification system NemID. Their work reveals structural dependencies between public institutions and private actors, generating institutional alienation and shifting decision-making power toward techno-economic structures. This perspective invites IS scholars to view public digital risk management as a site of symbolic struggle and power.

A growing body of work draws on postcolonial theory. Godefroid et al. (2025) show how IT governance perpetuates power imbalances within international organisations, where key decisions remain centralised in Global North headquarters while being imposed on offices in the Global South.

Similarly, Parthiban et al. (2024) propose a decolonising conceptualisation of technoficing, demonstrating how Indian rural micro-entrepreneurs leverage digital tools to mobilise indigenous knowledge and foster empowerment through an embedded theoretical approach.

Conclusion

Raising awareness about critical perspectives within the MIS community opens promising research avenues. At a time when digital technologies deeply shape social interactions and increasingly assist—or direct—human decision-making, stepping back from the immediacy of technological developments is essential. As Michel de Certeau observed, we must move from “the strangeness of what is happening today” to the “discursiveness of understanding” (in Hartog, 2013, p. 17).

This editorial is therefore a call to strengthen critical approaches in IS research, as a way of resisting technological presentism (Hartog, 2013) - the tendency to view emerging technologies as unprecedented and inevitable, thereby erasing the historical depth of managerial and organisational

practices and limiting our capacity to imagine alternative futures. Presentism is closely related to the collective inability to escape technological short-termism, what Hartog describes as the “tyranny of the instant.” Developing critical reflexivity entails recognising that many IS issues unfold over the long term: what appears new is often a reinvention of older responses adapted to contemporary concerns.

Encouraging critical perspectives also means inviting colleagues to submit work that questions the societal implications of digital technologies - on citizens, on workers, and on public decision-makers. As surveillance capitalism becomes an increasingly tangible reality, the need for emancipatory approaches to technology has never been more pressing. This requires exploring alternative modes of technological design, governance, and use.

The francophone IS community - with its strong sociotechnical and critical traditions—is particularly well positioned to contribute to these debates and help shape desirable digital futures.

Finally, promoting critical perspectives means embracing our responsibilities as higher education lecturers: integrating these approaches into our IS and digital transformation courses to train future practitioners and scholars capable of engaging with digital technologies reflexively and responsibly.

Déclaration CRediT des auteurs

Toutes les autrices ont participé à l’écriture de cet éditorial.

Déclaration d’utilisation de technologies d’Intelligence Artificielle Générative

Les auteurs doivent déclarer leur éventuelle utilisation de technologies d’intelligence artificielle générative" dans le processus d’écriture :

- "Au cours de la préparation de ce travail, les auteurs ont utilisé ChatGPT à des fins de copy editing afin d’assurer une meilleure traduction en anglais du propos. Après avoir utilisé cet outil, les auteurs ont révisé et édité le contenu et assument l’entière responsabilité du contenu de la publication"

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