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HUMAN DIGNITY IN DIGITAL FUTURES: TAKEAWAYS FROM PANEL DEBATE

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Abstract:

This paper reports on a panel debate at the 32nd European Conference on Information Systems (ECIS) held in Paphos in Cyprus in 2024. As reflected in the conference theme: "People First: Constructing Digital Futures Together", the debate centered on how to integrate human dignity as a guiding principle for research, education, and community practices in the Information Systems (IS) field. In particular, the panelists discussed the complex interplay between technological advances and human dignity manifested across various contexts from the urgency for IS scholars to investigate the often-unintended consequences of digital technology to the impact of algorithms in digital learning environments for students and the maintenance of respectful digital spaces for IS scholars. With a recognition of everyone's inherent worth and contribution to society – the core of human dignity – this panel report is both timely and important for scholars in the IS field in their pursuit of constructing digital futures that put people first.

Keywords: Human Dignity, Digital Technology, Digital Futures, Flourishing, Information Systems.

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1 Introduction

The rapid advancements in digital technology raise significant concerns for human dignity (Leidner and Tona, 2021). We understand human dignity as the recognition of the inherent worth of all human beings (CBHD 2006). This notion highlights the importance of providing the means and resources for individuals to lead a life of virtue, recognizing individual contributions to society, and treating all individuals equally, respecting their autonomy and freedom (Leidner and Tona, 2021). In IS research, there is an increasing interest in exploring how emerging technologies impact human dignity (for special issues, see for example, Aanestad et al., 2021; Recker et al., 2023), and also a need for our community to address issues like wellbeing, diversity, equity, and inclusion (e.g., Chau et al., 2021; Marabelli et al., 2023; Windeler et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2023).

We, as IS scholars, have a distinct opportunity to address the complex interplay between technological advances and human dignity across various contexts. This includes, for instance, conducting research on the unintended consequences of extensive employee data use on dignity in the digital workplace, or the impact of algorithms on marginalized groups during hiring practices or credit scoring. From a community standpoint, this includes establishing and maintaining digital spaces for safe and respectful interactions among IS scholars, be they journal management systems or social media, to ensure that every scholar feels acknowledged, valued, and heard. Additionally, we should consider the implications of the shift towards digital learning environments on the inclusivity, engagement, and wellbeing of students.

Capitalizing on the 32nd ECIS conference theme: “People First: Constructing Digital Futures Together”, we organized a panel to discuss how human dignity is and should be woven into our roles as researchers, educators, and community members. This paper synthesizes the panel debate and offers takeaways that can guide the IS field towards digital futures with human dignity in mind. With digital futures (in plural), we refer to the multiple potential futures, in which digital technology seamlessly integrates into every aspect of (work)life. We acknowledge that the focus on human dignity in digital futures has broad relevance not only in IS but also across other disciplines. However, viewing this topic from a socio-technical perspective, IS scholars are in a better position to untangle the technological impacts on dignity in these digital futures.

2 Background

We view human dignity as a fundamental principle that should (continue to) guide all our scholarly practices regarding research, education, and community.

Human dignity in research can be seen as a subject of inquiry and a matter of methodological approach. The potential threats of digital technology to human dignity increase the sense of urgency for studying this phenomenon. For example, AI systems intended to support the distribution of welfare payments can worsen inequality, digital platforms meant to promote employee autonomy, flexibility, and equality can lead to marginalization, and algorithms created to support a fair and equal hiring process may result in discriminatory decisions (Noble, 2018; Crawford, 2021; Marjanovic, 2021). We argue that adopting the human dignity lens will enable us to do research on the intersection of digital technology with the full spectrum of human life and experiences (Leidner and Tona, 2021; Leidner et al., 2021). Doing so, we will be better positioned to influence technology's development and use in ways that can address the societal challenges of our times. In terms of dissemination, traditional methods may no longer be sufficient in addressing the societal grand challenges. So, the question is not whether IS scholars should engage directly with discourses that are political, environmental, or highly sensitive in nature, but rather how to engage.

From a method perspective, the nearly cost-free generation and use of digital trace data provide us with vast opportunities to investigate social interactions and human experiences (Andersen and Hukal, 2023). However, the availability of such a large amount of data requires us to think critically about our methodological approaches. A critical concern is the risk of dehumanization in research: individuals may be reduced to mere data points, raising critical questions about the empirical data collection and analyses. Are the digital traces inclusive? Are they representative of the world "out there" (Aaltonen and Stelmaszak, 2023)? Are they marginalizing certain groups of people? How should we approach the issue of consent when we do not have access to data providers?

We regard **human dignity in education** as both a subject to study and a principle for supporting learning. As a subject, it implies that educators incorporate topics and perspectives related to human dignity into the existing IS curriculum. In a society that is becoming more interconnected and reliant on technology, addressing issues such as digital rights, privacy, autonomy, algorithmic bias and fairness, digital ethics, digital wellbeing, digital inclusion, and digital literacy is in line with the broader commitment to respecting and protecting the dignity of individuals (Hamadi et al., 2024). For example, we know that emerging

technology can amplify or reproduce social injustices (Noble, 2018; Crawford, 2021; Marjanovic et al., 2021), and so by including these themes in the curriculum, we can hopefully encourage future generations to reflect critically about and engage with such tools in appropriate and responsible ways.

Besides including human dignity as a subject into the IS curriculum, we should also carefully consider it as we transition our classes into increasingly digital experiences. Compared to traditional physical classroom lectures, virtual sessions may create a sense of psychological distance, making it more challenging for some students to meaningfully act, observe, respond, and interact. As such, they may experience the feeling of exclusion. Furthermore, students can more easily interpret online comments as demeaning, insulting, or harassing (Kjærgaard et al., 2020), hence experiencing affronts to their dignity. Similarly, providing education through a hybrid mode may impact the quality of the learning experience for both those online and present in the lecture hall. In a way, each mode of teaching comes with its own challenges: challenges that will require instructors to attend to the diverse needs of students and facilitate the relations among students so that they treat each other with respect.

We consider **human dignity in community** in terms of both collaborative network building and scholarly flourishing. Over the past years, IS scholars have paid increasing attention to human dignity as a key foundation for building a strong sense of community. For instance, scholarly initiatives have emerged with the ambition to transition from a “publish or perish” to a “passion or perish” approach (Burton-Jones and Stein, 2021, p.iv). This is also reflected on the AIS website, which articulates our commitment to be a community that “…foster[s] dignity, understanding, mutual respect, and that embraces diversity.” This is more important than ever as we move into an increasingly digitized academic landscape (Wright et al., 2023). For instance, in such a context, how do we form collaborative networks that create respect, support, and engagement among researchers — networks that are important in our collective pursuit of knowledge? How can online or hybrid conference formats create a sense of belonging within the research community where scholars feel acknowledged, valued, and heard (Marabelli et al., 2023)?

Furthermore, with the introduction of Roboreviewers, the very scholarly practices of submitting papers, writing reviews, and communicating with editorial boards are changing. These Roboreviewers can expedite the review process and reduce human biases, however, they can also undermine the trust and learning that occurs between authors and reviewers (Weber, 2024). This raises significant questions about the future of the review process, particularly how Roboreviewers incorporate the emotional aspects of scholarly work.

3 Organization of the Panel

The panel chairs introduced the panel topic by highlighting that it is more important than ever to prioritize and promote human dignity to ensure that technological progress is in line with the inherent value of humanity. To set the stage for the panel debate, we defined human dignity and presented a number of questions for debate, such as: “What are the implications for human dignity as individuals increasingly turn to artificial intelligence tools for comfort?”, “Should IS scholars assume a more activist role by directly engaging with political, environmental, or other highly sensitive societal issues related to the use of digital technology?”, “Would depending too much on AI for editorial work risk that we disregard the personal touch that comes from human reviewers during such scholarly exchange?”, and “How do the core educational activities within the IS field both enable opportunities for and potentially hinder human flourishing and dignity among students?”.

We then introduced our panelists, who represented diverse backgrounds and responsibilities. Professor Kai Larsen from the University of Colorado has been awarded for his innovative approach and engagement in education. His insights were deemed useful for providing perspectives on integrating human dignity into educational frameworks when using digital technology. Professor Dorothy Leidner from University of Virginia has been leading discussions on human dignity as a research topic and within our community in various capacities. Her extensive experience helped guide the conversation on ethical considerations and community impact. Professor Mari-Klara Stein from Tallinn University of Technology has conducted research that examines human flourishing through the lenses of digital work transformation, emotional well-being, and work meaningfulness. She has been involved in the MISQ Scholarly Development Academy that supports junior scholars who face systemic barriers and inequities due to their socio-economic, ethnic, or other marginalized status. Her contributions to the panel highlighted the importance of inclusivity and support. Lastly, Professor Edgar Whitley from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) has shown continuous engagement in running workshops for new academics on becoming effective reviewers, demonstrating leadership in ensuring healthy practices among faculty. His participation emphasized the role of ethical review and best practices in the academic field.

The panel debate was organized in two rounds of position statements from the panelists with subsequent audience engagement. The two questions posed to the panelists were:

1. In what ways does the IS field have distinct opportunities for integrating human dignity in research and education?
2. How can we prioritize and promote human dignity in the IS community?

We used Mentimeter as a tool for audience engagement after each round of position statements from the panelists. The panel was recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis and synthesis.

Inspired by Wessel et al. (2021)'s guidelines for writing CAIS panel reports, in the following we present the initial position statements of the four panelists, synthesize the debate into three themes, and conclude by presenting a number of takeaways along with each panelist's afterthoughts.

4 Initial Position Statements

Prior to the panel, each panelist had briefly described their starting point for discussion.

Kai Larsen's position statement took its point of departure in the impacts of digital transformation and the AI economy on societal structures, particularly focusing on research ethics and education. One topic brought forward was the dramatic changes in the educational landscape with the migration towards online platforms. This transition, while democratizing access to education, raises critical questions about the future of smaller academic institutions and the overarching impact on educational diversity and quality. The competitive pressures could lead to homogenizing educational offerings, potentially challenging the intellectual discourse that is so fundamental to human progress. Kai's position statement focused on what these changes mean for learning and teaching, and how they might affect the cultivation of critical thinking and creativity in future generations. In particular, he considered the potential gains such as increased access to education and research opportunities, and the democratization of knowledge creation and dissemination. Emphasizing the importance of addressing these changes while preserving human dignity, Kai questioned how the progress in digital and AI technologies can enhance rather than diminish our humanity.

Dorothy Leidner's position statement highlighted how recent advances in AI are presenting exciting new opportunities to understand the connection between technology and human dignity. As individuals seek solace from AI, ask for advice from AI, and befriend AI, many questions arise concerning not only the inherent dignity of the individual but also that of the AI as it increasingly adapts to the emotional needs of the user. Once technology is capable of not only recognizing but also appropriately responding to emotions, and even displaying emotion of its own, Dorothy argued that we need to carefully consider how the human-

AI relationship can alter human-human relationships. Furthermore, in terms of community, Dorothy highlighted the challenges of simultaneously protecting authors' and reviewers' dignity amid increasing demands and pressures. Finally, in terms of education, Dorothy opened up for discussing the parallels between current concerns over generative AI in education and past concerns about the internet, highlighting opportunities and threats for instructors and students.

In her position statement, Mari-Klara Stein reflected on how the IS field provides opportunities for and potentially hinders human flourishing and dignity, especially for junior scholars, through its core educational activities such as doctoral and junior faculty consortia at conferences, Special Interest Group (SIG) activities, author and reviewer development workshops at journals, etc. In terms of research, Mari offered a few thoughts on the potential of prospective theorizing towards desirable futures (e.g., Gümüsay and Reinecke, 2024) in IS in the hopes of starting a discussion on the topic. In principle, the IS field should be well-placed to engage in imaginative, futures-oriented and values-led theorizing through creative artifacts (design research), simulations, etc. Finally, in terms of community, Mari-Klara reflected on lessons learned from endeavors trying to promote human dignity in the IS community based on her experiences with the MISQ Scholarly Development Academy, which focused on junior scholars identifying as female and on junior scholars from the Global South.

Edgar Whitley was particularly concerned about how the IS community can ensure that human dignity plays a central and sustainable role in all its activities. Having been closely involved with the early development of the ECIS community, and ensuring it represents academics throughout the AIS region, Edgar was particularly attentive to the issues of representation and visibility that can divide the academic community and suppress aspects of human dignity. These issues are likely to continue to be significant as budgets are squeezed. As a journal editor, Edgar was particularly concerned about the consequences of using generative AI tools as part of the editorial review process. Would depending too much on AI for reviews risk diminishing or even disregarding the nuanced insights, respectful tone, and personal touch that comes from human reviewers during such scholarly exchange? In the extreme case, what would be the consequences for academic human dignity if a review package consisted solely of comments from generative AI tools?

5 Emerging Themes

5.1 Revisiting Old Topics with New Perspectives

One theme that emerged from the panel was the renewed focus on revisiting old research topics with new perspectives. Topics once considered well-explored now require re-examination, as the knowledge we have is being challenged by the changes brought about by emerging technologies, such as machine learning and generative AI.

According to Dorothy, IS scholars should revisit old research topics with a focus on human dignity and well-being to better understand the implications of technologies across various domains and areas:

> *"The topics that kind of felt like they were dead for a while like 'virtual teams' or even 'remote work' will re-emerge because we're going to have to rethink them. And as we rethink them, one of the things that we need to do is rethinking what the implications of this are for well-being, for giving the person dignity, and how we can try not to be so oppressive with people through technology."*

In line with understanding the far-reaching implications of technologies, Kai provided an example that shows how algorithms can threaten the dignity of individuals and create social injustice. He described how, in one of his own classes, they have worked on a machine learning project using data from a criminal justice expert who developed an algorithm for a Youth Court in Washington to help judges predict whether a minor would reoffend. He reflected on the outcomes:

> *"We ran a machine learning algorithm on it, and we could not come up with a better R square than that. It was a very, very good model at the end. But then we started digging deeper and we realized that it was not distinguishing between major crime and tiny things like not showing up to a probation office for an appointment. All the original algorithm could predict was minor crimes. So, he had delivered an algorithm that encouraged the judges to send kids of poor families to jail for a longer time."*

In cases like this, people will respond. However, different from previous studies on technological resistance (Lapointe & Rivard, 2005), these emerging technologies, often integrated into organizational routines, require people to know their (digital) rights before they can start to resist or challenge them (Kronblad et al., 2024) with structural inequalities in society affecting even this starting position (Herzog, 2021). Dorothy argued that IS scholars must explore ways of supporting people with the ability to respond: "When people think that an algorithm is making false judgments about them, [it is important] that they're able to then appeal. And is there then in fact an appeal process? Do they know where to go?" Knowing and exerting your (digital) rights is challenging because, as Kai explains, they vary across countries (e.g., US vs. EU),

creating a fragmented legal space. As he puts it: "I suspect it is a mission impossible to make users understand what rights they have and what type of data is being used".

The burden of rectifying wrongs brought by technology should not be put solely on the individual. Technology should also be able to learn from and adapt in the face of errors, negative or unintended consequences, or even injustices that they themselves produce. This requires that we revisit current design theories. For instance, Dorothy described a scenario on how organizations can redesign technology to counteract cyberbullying:

> *"So, a lot of what we think of cyberbullying is really aggressive behavior when we consider it in an organizational context. People might compose messages in a hurry, might be stressed out and might write things that another person interprets as quite threatening and the AI can actually step in and help both the sender and the recipient…I think we'll see that AI is more and more incorporated into emails and in everything we use, where before you send something, the system alerts you: 'your language is a bit aggressive'."*

By revisiting old topics with new perspectives, as IS scholars, we can make a distinct contribution by putting respect and dignity at the core of technology design and use. With this, we can be mindful of creating the futures we desire, as described next.

5.2 Creating Desirable Futures

A second topic that emerged from the panel discussion is a change of focus from the conventional approach of designing technology to meet organizations' current needs and desires to an approach of creating desirable futures through technology. Of particular importance here is the creation of multiple alternative futures to explore and design for (Whyte et al., 2022; Beckert 2021), and the IS field is starting to develop theories through futures thinking (Hovorka and Müller, 2024a; Hovorka and Müller, 2024b). Mari-Klara argued that the IS community, compared to the field of management, has a distinct edge in this regard:

> *"They [management scholars] are talking about prospective theorizing towards desirable futures. But I think they don't go far enough. And here is where we as an IS field have a distinct opportunity because we can also engage in what they call imaginative futures oriented and values-led theorizing … We [IS scholars] can do something with creative artifacts. We can do something with speculative design, which is part of critical design where you're really thinking about designing for the consequences that we want."*

This suggests that rather than predicting technological consequences (i.e., predicting from *what is*), we should be designing for what *we want* those consequences to be. Such thinking opens up new opportunities for embracing a more human-centric approach when aligning those consequences with the desires for the

future. This making of futures (Hovorka and Peter, 2021) can help us overcome the self-fulfilling prophecies that digital technology carries. In fact, technological predictions can often be interpreted as *the* future — conditioning people towards actions that would create that specific future (Giermindl et al., 2022). Dorothy explained:

> *"I would say that we have to be observant of the potential for self-fulfilling prophecies… So, I'm very convinced that we will have new systems where it will be possible to predict what major students would be good at by using various images of their brains. But what happens is that it creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, because then in your head, maybe you want a major in something else, but then you're thinking that you're not going to be good at this. And so, it kind of creates this self-fulfilling move forward. So, I think we may be needing to look at these kinds of issues as they arise."*

However, we should not forget about the futures of our own scholarly community. Putting academics in uncomfortable and / or unusual positions might reveal alternative visions. As Mari-Klara described:

> *"An option would be to engage more of the unusual suspects on panels and in visible positions to get their opinions. The other option is to engage the usual suspects but in unusual topics that they would normally not discuss, and that they might actually even be uncomfortable with or disagree with … so you get them to sort of discuss alternative visions."*

Creating desirable futures — for individuals, organizations, and society— will position us uniquely to engage in future-oriented, value-laden redesigns of our world. Making futures that matter require alternative ways of organizing.

5.3 Alternative Ways of Organizing

A third, and final, topic of the panel reflected alternative ways of organizing our scholarly practice. Panelists emphasized the importance of treating research participants with dignity, respecting their cultural, social, and personal contexts, and engaging with them as human beings rather than mere data sources. Edgar described:

> *"There are situations where the ethical questions are really, really significant. And one important one is, what autonomy do you give to your research participants? Are they just bits of flesh that will give you some data for your study? There was a really good panel at ICIS 2022[1], talking about how you work with refugees. And the person from the refugee center on the panel basically said, "don't come in for a day just to interview these people for your research: treat them with respect, treat them with dignity, engage with them as human beings."*

Even though universities in Europe can legally process personal data under EU GDPR law due to their public interest duty, it is a good practice to have a consent form, which details for participants the research

[1] https://aisel.aisnet.org/icis2022/Panels/panels/2/ - Convert to proper citation as needed

purpose, research plan, and the terms of participation as well as data management plans that protect participants' privacy and confidentiality.

Another scholarly practice that was brought up was our community's editorial practices, and in particular the use of generative AI (genAI) to expedite the review process. GenAI has the potential to produce respectful yet impersonal reviews. Edgar posed an interesting question:

> "*How would you feel if your review package came back with three reviews - One written by ChatGPT, one written by Copilot, and one written by Gemini? No humans involved in that process at all.*"

The core of the debate here centers on the value of the human touch in scholarly reviews, which prompts critical reflections on the absence of human engagement and the lack of contextual understanding. Edgar's argument is that the human element is crucial for maintaining the integrity of academic work itself. However, as Dorothy pointed out, reviewers are overburdened and not recognized for their work - an affront to their meritocratic dignity:

> *"When you see people post that reviewer 2 is so nasty: these are people who have volunteered their time. A lot of them have families, they have responsibilities, they may have illnesses, they may be taking care of parents and yet they work hard at reviewing even though they receive no credit for it at their university. After a few reviews, it's not helping them out either. And so, they become an object. They're "just" a reviewer now. And we need a certain number of reviewers. And I feel that it's good for journals to encourage [briefer reviews], and that too helps to shorten the review cycle. And yet, what all this does is to create more and more papers, and then faster work, and more work for people*."

It is not only reviewers' work that AI has the potential to automate but also the (future) work that our students are being trained for. This poses questions on our readiness in adapting our educational programs and approaches to align with these developments, as described by Kai:

> *"I want to talk about the people we're educating, all those students who are going out and getting jobs in IT. Are they going to lose their jobs because of AI? How are we gonna take care of them? What are we going to do for them? What are we going to do to help them get re-educated? Can we help them succeed in this environment? I think that's going to be very important."*

Besides rethinking the topics being taught, educators also need to revise the educational practices and modalities they engage in to prepare students for a worklife in which they have the right competencies and also will thrive.

6 Looking Ahead

Looking ahead, we offer a number of takeaways from the panel debate that can guide the IS field towards digital futures with human dignity in mind from the three perspectives: research, education, and community. Table 1 provides an overview of these.

	Research	**Education**	**Community**
Revisiting old topics with new perspectives	Challenge the assumptions of well-developed IS theories/topics to generate research questions that put people first.	Inspire students, as part of their learning experience, to adopt a critical mindset informed by human dignity when engaging with IS phenomena.	Expand the spaces for academic exchange and discussions in relation to human dignity in IS research.
Creating Desirable Futures	Use futures thinking or speculative approaches to design for what we want the technological consequences to be.	Incorporate anticipatory discourses and creative artifacts as teaching modalities to make students engage with futures thinking.	Engage IS scholars in conversations that they would not usually partake in.
Alternative Ways of Organizing	As the possibility to capture digital traces increases, be mindful that behind each data point there is a human.	Expand current teaching modalities to help students develop respect and compassion for others while learning about IS phenomena.	Balance the use of emerging technology with a human touch in scholarly practices to alleviate some of the burden on academics.

Table 1: An overview of takeaways from the panel

We conclude this panel report with each panelist's afterthoughts:

Kai Larsen: A quote often attributed to R. Buckminster Fuller states that "We are called to be architects of the future, not its victims." Application of the Gini coefficient (Ceriani and Verme, 2012) to examine the distribution of resources in society can attest to an increase in resources controlled by fewer individuals (a higher score on the Gini coefficient). This is the only surefire and always-constant impact of technology – which is as true for the longbow as it is for the Internet – with equally invariable negative consequences for human dignity. Traditionally, only law – and norms as a distant second – can stem this tide, although Lessig (1999) suggests that architecture/software code can also contribute to this objective and plays to the distinctive skills of IS academics. I encourage colleagues to design artifacts that help shape laws and norms quickly—fast enough to slow down this rising tide before powerful people can drive us toward a Gini

coefficient of 1. This should be the foremost challenge for human dignity scholars, especially those with design science skills.

Dorothy Leidner: Interpreting our roles in research, education, and community through a lens of human dignity inculcates us with an outward focus on how we are treating others in each of these areas and recognizes the importance of each individual to the overall functioning of these systems themselves. In an environment where efficiency and productivity goals dominate much thinking, it behooves us all to reflect on how to make the academy itself more humane, more caring, and indeed, more dignified. Whether in our research, teaching, and/or community service, we can all bring positive energy and sincere respect for those around us, helping create meaningful collaborations and memorable experiences.

Mari-Klara Stein: While engaging with the topic of dignity and technology for this ECIS panel, I came across two illuminating opinions on GenAI on LinkedIn. One, by professor Maja Korica, says *"I don't want to optimise my life, I want to have a good life. This might be a privileged take, but only if productivity is what we value above all. I don't. And I don't think our societies are better for valuing it above all either*". The other, by author Joanna Maciejewska (originally published on X), says "*I want AI to do my laundry and dishes so that I can do art and writing, not for AI to do my art and writing so that I can do my laundry and dishes.*" In designing a future centered on human dignity, one of the biggest challenges we face is designing for outcomes (e.g., the good life) that we have forgotten how to value.

Edgar Whitley: Shortly after the panel took place at ECIS, the AIS Council approved the adoption of the AIS Shared Values for Digitalization[2]. I was a member of the task force that developed these values. Applying the perspective of human dignity is one important way in which members of the AIS can engage with these shared values for digitalization. In particular, it can provide a useful way of identifying and resolving conflicts that might arise between (or among) the different shared values in specific contexts.

[2] https://aisnet.org/page/SharedValuesforDigitalization

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