Realist and Postmodernist Perspectives on Information Systems Research: points of connection

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Abstract

There has been considerable debate in the information systems (IS) literature as to which research methodology is most appropriate to address IS related problems. This paper contributes to that debate by contrasting the post-modernist approach with that of the critical realist. A major strand within the postmodernist perspective is concerned with the various aspects of knowing – that is, it is primarily epistemological in focus. In contrast, traditional realist approaches are more ontological in focus in their acceptance and concern for a reality external to perception. Realist and postmodernist approaches are generally presented as in opposition to each other, yet as this paper will argue, a suitably aware contemporary realist approach to research can accommodate many of the proposals of the post-modernist. Critical realism is presented as such a contemporary realist philosophy in that it takes account of both ontological and epistemological viewpoints. It is argued that such a philosophy has the potential to provide a basis for developing a robust methodological approach to IS research.

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