

Tensions: A Lens for Provoking Debate on Contemporary Information Systems Developments

Alexander Richter

The University of Auckland Business School
Auckland, New Zealand
Email: alex.richter@auckland.ac.nz

Michael Leyer

School of Business and Economics
(and Adjunct Professor in the Faculty of Business & Law, QUT)
Marburg University
Marburg Germany
Email: michael.leyer@wiwi.uni-marburg.de

Stuart Black

Faculty of Business and Economics
The University of Melbourne
Parkville, VIC Australia
Email: stuart.black@unimelb.edu.au

Michael Davern

Faculty of Business and Economics
The University of Melbourne
Parkville, VIC Australia
Email: mjdavern@unimelb.edu.au

This editorial proposes a tensions lens as one approach to developing theoretically grounded provocations in Information Systems research. We argue that tensions become provocative when they reveal relationships that established assumptions obscure. We suggest five analytical steps as flexible guidance for authors: questioning an established assumption, formulating the tension, explaining how it is produced, examining its consequences, and stating the provocative implication. When tensions are made visible and opened to alternative interpretations and responses, they can inform research, design, and action.

1 Introduction

The Editorial group of the *Australasian Journal of Information Systems* is proud of the introduction of a “Provocations” category of article. Provocations are intended to question established assumptions and stimulate debate about consequential developments in IS (Davern & Black, 2025; Black & Davern, 2025). Since the introduction of the category, we have published a number of invited and submitted Provocations. We also see interest in the idea through the numerous submissions to the ACIS 2026 Provocations track.

A year into the program, we have reflected on what has been successful and what has not been as successful. In our opinion, a valued and impactful provocation requires more than presenting a controversial position or criticising an existing practice. We seek Provocations that are well grounded in the relevant literature and provoke a change in the scholarly debates and/or provoke new research efforts.

This editorial proposes a tensions lens, not a theory, as one theoretically grounded way for authors and reviewers to craft and assess impactful Provocations. It can surface the competing demands embedded in contemporary IS developments, reveal the assumptions and consequences surrounding those demands, and provide a foundation for alternative interpretations and responses. The remainder of this editorial develops this foundation.

2 Tensions as a Lens

Tensions have long occupied an important place in Information Systems (IS) research. As IS connects technical capabilities with human practices and organisational context, their design and use frequently lead to competing demands: standardisation vs. flexibility, control vs. autonomy, openness vs. security, or innovation vs. stability. IS researchers have examined tensions through concepts such as dialectics, paradoxes, and sociomaterial entanglement (Robey & Boudreau, 1999; Orlikowski, 2007; Carlo et al., 2012; Putnam et al., 2016). Collectively, this work demonstrates that tensions are often constitutive of how information systems are designed and appropriated.

Contemporary developments in IS make a tensions perspective increasingly important. AI systems and immersive environments can redistribute agency, visibility, and responsibility across people and technological artefacts beyond options from mainly deterministic systems (Leyer et al., 2026). As a result, improvements along one dimension may generate vulnerabilities or undesirable consequences elsewhere. For instance, greater personalisation may require more intrusive data collection.

Tensions vary in their persistence and in the responses they permit. Some are contingent and can be reduced or resolved through changes in design or practice. Others involve contradictory yet interdependent demands that persist over time and require continuing responses (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Importantly, meaningful tensions emerge through interactions among technological artefacts, actors, practices, and their anticipated consequences (Richter et al., 2025). Understanding them requires attention not only to what is in tension, but also to how the relevant sociotechnical configuration generates and transforms that tension.

A provocation can ask what a particular technological development enables, but also what it constrains. The purpose is not necessarily to decide between two opposing positions. It is to make the tension sufficiently visible and understandable so that the IS community can engage with it more critically and constructively.

3 What Makes a Tension Provocative?

A tension is not itself a provocation. It is an analytical lens that exposes limitations in established assumptions that IS researcher should reconsider. A tension becomes provocative when it reveals a consequential relationship that established ways of thinking obscure. Technologies can be appropriated in contradictory ways and simultaneously provide affordances and impose constraints (Robey & Boudreau, 1999; Carlo et al., 2012; Leonardi, 2011). Increasing organisational control, for example, may improve consistency while reducing the local discretion needed to respond effectively to unexpected situations. In such cases, the challenge is not simply to choose or find a stable balance between the competing demands, but to understand how they depend on and transform one another (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Dilemmas and trade-offs can express tensions, but identifying a difficult choice is not sufficient for a Provocation. Authors need to explain how the competing demands arise and what their relationship reveals about an established assumption.

Three questions can help determine whether a tension can support a Provocation.

1. Are there good reasons to care about both demands? If one side is merely an avoidable defect, there is little to debate. For example, sharing patient information across a care team may improve coordination while creating concerns about who can access sensitive information and for what purposes. The tension depends on the access arrangements and clinical practices involved.
2. Does a particular technology and its use bring the demands into conflict? Simply placing two values on opposite sides of a “versus” statement is not enough.
3. Does the tension matter in practice, and for whom? A strong tension affects how agency, expertise, or responsibility are distributed, often benefiting some actors while imposing costs on others.

Tensions do not reside in technologies themselves or between abstract values. An AI system does not inherently create a fixed tension between efficiency and human judgment. That tension takes form through decisions about which activities the system performs, and who remains accountable. The same technological capability may consequently generate different tensions across settings or shift an existing tension from one group to another.

Moreover, tensions develop over time. A system that initially improves performance may gradually alter expectations, and dependencies. Responses intended to address one concern can transform or displace it, while creating new consequences elsewhere. What appears to be a resolution may therefore be only a temporary stabilisation within a continuing process of adaptation and redesign.

Tensions may also form interconnected networks. Hietala et al. (2025) describe multilectical tensions that intertwine technological, regulatory, ethical and organisational demands. They report how interviewees expressed concern that restrictions on data access could limit the datasets available for AI development and increase the risk of bias. This connects questions of privacy and innovation with fairness and patient care. Hence, a provocation can begin with a particular tension and examine how its connections with other tensions change what is at stake. Its contribution may lie in showing what a familiar opposition leaves out and why those omissions matter.

Not all stakeholders have equal influence over how a tension is understood or addressed. Stakeholders might have different pieces of information and not the whole picture or fundamentally different interests (Alford & Head, 2017). Furthermore, stakeholders may bring different histories and values that shape how they interpret a tension and assess its consequences (Davison et al., 2026). An arrangement may appear to balance competing demands at the organisational level because its costs have been transferred to employees or customers. Thus, claims that a tension has been successfully navigated should be examined by asking whose understanding defines success and who continues to bear the consequences.

A tensions lens grounds debate by unsettling simple narratives of technological progress or harm without retreating to a generic list of pros and cons. It asks how opposing outcomes may be produced together, which assumptions make some consequences more visible than others,

and how apparently successful solutions may create new vulnerabilities. Its contribution lies less in resolving a tension than in rendering it visible and open to alternative interpretations and responses.

4 Articulating a Tensions-Based Provocation

Recognising a tension does not automatically produce a compelling Provocation. Simply stating that a technology creates opportunities and risks is unlikely to unsettle established thinking. A tensions-based provocation should develop a focused argument that reveals something neglected or inadequately understood. The following five steps offer analytical moves that may help authors develop such an argument; they are not intended as criteria every provocation must satisfy.

I. Question an established assumption

A useful starting point is a claim that has become influential in IS research or practice, such as that more data improve decisions, automation increases productivity, personalisation benefits users, or transparency strengthens accountability. The assumption need not be wrong. The task is to show what it overlooks (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011).

II. Formulate the tension

Broad oppositions such as “technology versus people” or “innovation versus ethics” offer little analytical leverage. A provocation should identify the specific demands involved and explain why each matters. The relevant tension may not be between AI and human judgment, for example, but between using AI to improve consistency and preserving the situated professional judgment required to recognise exceptional cases.

III. Show how the tension is produced

A tension should be located within a particular sociotechnical configuration. Authors might consider what the system does, what information it makes visible and how people are expected to respond. This moves the argument beyond an abstract conflict between values.

IV. Examine who experiences the consequences and how they develop

Benefits and costs are rarely distributed equally. A system may improve organisational efficiency while increasing administrative work for professionals, reducing employee discretion, or requiring customers to disclose more information. Consequences may also change over time as capabilities, dependencies, and expectations develop. Against this backdrop, a provocation should ask who benefits, who bears the costs, and whether an apparent solution transforms or transfers the tension elsewhere.

V. State the provocative implication

The argument should explain what prevailing ways of thinking fail to recognise and what the IS community should reconsider. A provocation may advance a position or suggest alternative responses, but it need not promise a final resolution. Its contribution lies in changing how the issue is understood and opening possibilities for further research, design, or action.

Authors may develop these moves through conceptual argument, empirical observations, illustrative cases, policy developments, or possible futures. Future narratives can be particularly useful when a tension is not yet fully observable. By placing a technological artefact within a plausible context of actors, interactions, and consequences, they can expose emerging dependencies and conflicts before they become embedded in practice (Richter et al., 2025). The tension, however, must follow from the sociotechnical configuration rather than being introduced merely as a dramatic plot device.

Existing AJIS Provocations illustrate the range of tensions that can generate productive debate. Oshri and Kotlarsky (2025) expose the tension between the external expertise start-ups need for growth and the strategic autonomy they may lose through dependence on service providers. Burton-Jones et al. (2025) place the coordinating benefits of English-language science in tension with linguistic inclusion, epistemic diversity, and wider impact. Richter and Schwabe (2025) challenge conventional definitions of teamwork by asking whether AI can be considered a team member and what this means for roles, collaboration, and responsibility. Bandara et al. (2025) consider the opportunities created by autonomous and adaptive processes alongside the continuing need for strategic alignment, human oversight, privacy, and security. Benbya et al. (2025) reveal how intended technological benefits can coexist with consequences that emerge unevenly across actors and over time.

Finally, Chamakiotis et al. (2025) show how email enables individual flexibility while creating collective pressures for coordination and responsiveness. Their work allows us to illustrative the application of the earlier introduced 5 steps. We do not claim that the authors used these steps.

Steps	Illustrative application
1. Question an assumption	Treating the reassertion of email boundaries as a straightforward answer to overload.
2. Formulate the tension	Preserving individual flexibility while coordinating interdependent work.
3. Show how the tension is produced	Email persistence, response expectations and work across different schedules connect individual choices.
4. Examine the consequences	One person's preferred sending time can affect another person's workload or felt obligation to respond.
5. State the implication	Examine the collective temporal arrangements around email, rather than evaluating boundary advice only at the individual level.

Table 1. *Illustrative application of the five steps using Chamakiotis et al. (2025)*

Not all these articles explicitly organise their argument around one tension. Read through a tensions lens, however, they show how provocations can question accepted assumptions, connect competing demands to sociotechnical configurations, and make their uneven or evolving consequences available for debate.

Potential further Provocations might examine tensions between consistency and professional judgment in AI-supported work; automation and the preservation of human capabilities; personalisation and privacy; transparency and surveillance; openness and security; platform participation and concentrated power; digital sovereignty and global interoperability; immersive presence and personal autonomy; or data integration and meaningful consent. These examples illustrate the range of assumptions, configurations, and consequences that a tensions lens can make available for debate.

What matters is that a provocation moves beyond describing a controversy. It should show how a consequential tension is produced, why existing ways of thinking are insufficient, and what becomes possible once the tension is seen differently.

5 Moving Forward

Contemporary information systems do not simply solve problems. They reshape relationships among control and autonomy, openness and security, and other legitimate demands. The resulting tensions cannot always be eliminated without weakening one demand or creating new vulnerabilities. A tensions lens therefore moves beyond asking whether a technology is beneficial or harmful. It directs attention to how opposing consequences are produced together, who experiences them, and how they develop over time.

For provocations, this lens provides both theoretical grounding and practical orientation. A tensions-based provocation questions an established assumption, articulates the competing demands precisely, shows how they are produced within a sociotechnical configuration, examines their consequences, and identifies what the IS community should reconsider. These moves are not intended to prescribe a fixed format, but to support arguments that are focused while remaining open to disagreement and alternative responses.

Making tensions visible does not require authors to remain neutral or avoid taking a position. It grounds debate by clarifying what is at stake, for whom, and with what consequences. By treating tensions as sites of inquiry and intervention, provocations can help the IS community engage more critically and constructively with the systems and futures it is helping to create.

We offer this editorial as a catalyst for the latent provocations present within our community. While a tensions framing is one potential approach of developing a provocation, the earlier sections should not be seen as prescriptive, or that only tensions-based provocations will be considered. We re-emphasise that the purpose of the AJIS Provocations section is to constructively challenge accepted orthodoxy in our field and provoke new research directions. We look forward to seeing your provocations.

We would also like to take this opportunity to inform our community that the first two authors of this editorial (Alex Richter and Michael Leyer) have volunteered to take the lead in nurturing this important avenue of research activity. Not only will they be handling the provocations formally lodged with AJIS, they may knock on your door with some potential ideas. The Editors-in-Chief thank them for their initiative and look forward to their impact on our community.

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