Opportunities and Possible Issues in Interdisciplinary Cooperation

(Discussion Note)

Tyng–Ruey Chuang\textsuperscript{1,2}

\textsuperscript{1} Institute of Information Science, and
\textsuperscript{2} Research Center for Information Technology Innovation
Academia Sinica

I wish to offer some thoughts on interdisciplinary research collaborations based on my experience in the last 10 years working with sociologists, legal scholars, ethnologists, geographers, and to some extent “policy people”. Computer scientists in a research institute like Academia Sinica are usually involved in interdisciplinary projects as they are thought to have the skills and be equipped with the tools to work on research data. By its nature, the data to be looked into often is not well understood and in many cases not yet made available. The general expectation, I think, is that the computer scientists get to work on interesting datasets and at the same time contribute to valuable projects. They are rewarded for that.

I think we need to re-examine such expectation and to move beyond that. There are several aspects of an interdisciplinary research collaboration we can look into. Here are a few questions both sides — the computer scientists and the social scientists — can ask themselves during a collaboration.

– Research data: Why are the research datasets valuable, and how better to facilitate their reuses in and for the larger research communities?
– Nature of the project: Does the joint project end when the funding dries out, or are people in it for the long haul? For the people who are involved, is the project a service, or a research gold mine?
– Peer recognition: What kinds of output are expected from the research collaboration, and how do your peers recognize such results?

These are critical questions looking for answers, and of course I have no good answers. I would like to emphasize, however, that interesting research problems do arise from interdisciplinary collaborations. I think there is a need to put these research problems in a larger scope so that researchers from the many disciplines can appreciate the importance of these problems and to work on them as well. But quite often we see these problems as inconveniences to be fixed in order for the project to proceed. Working on interesting research problems together, instead of just collaborating in funded projects, I think, shall produce results that are more significant and better recognized.