Editorial Preface

Another Journal?

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Even for academics whose chosen professional task it is to read and do research, it is impossible to keep up with what is published in their fields of interest. A considerable percentage of academic work published in scholarly journals is read by few individuals, if any, and often has little impact. The number of journals is so great that the cost of accessing them weighs down the budgets of our universities and libraries. The important journals, the ones that determine whether their authors are promoted or tenured, tend to be known in the established disciplines and they do not change easily or often. Given this current state, one needs to ask, “Is it indeed necessary to produce yet another journal?” The answer depends on filling a significant niche. The new journal should contribute something of importance that is not easily achieved with publishing in acceptable, established outlets.

In order to answer the question of what the contribution of the International Journal of Technology and Human Interaction (IJTHI) will be, it may be helpful to call to mind the environment we live in. Most people in industrial societies use technical artifacts to travel, communicate, spend their leisure time, work, be creative, and do many other activities. In short, humans constantly interact with technology. While many of the artifacts used today are of relatively recent origin, it has been argued that technology is an anthropological constant and that humans are defined by their use of technology (Gehlen, 1997). Technology consists not only of artifacts — it has a close link with a certain type of rationality and a link between means and ends. It can be seen as a result of scientific investigation, which it facilitates and accelerates. Some attribute technology with many of the problems we face today on an individual and collective level. At the same time, technology is viewed as a solution to many other problems, and sometimes even to the problems it poses itself. However, it is never the technology itself that causes or solves a problem, but always its use by individuals and organizations. Therefore, one of the basic tenets of this journal is to focus on the interaction between technology and humans. This central theme is a recurring one that societies have to deal with and that should be of interest to academia.

We have now established that the interaction between technology and humans is significant. As defined, it includes a broad range of topics and can draw from a variety of academic disciplines. Therefore, this subject should be approached with a cross-disciplinary approach, which is not the same as an interdisciplinary approach. In contrast to interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary contributions require that each article needs to be grounded in at least one home discipline, yet
is accessible by and makes a contribution to at least one research community in another discipline. This implies more openness to new topics. An example would a discussion of the public sphere or other societal macro-issues (grounded in political science and sociology), but that is also of interest to those in information systems (IS) or some other discipline (say education or HCI). By the same token, contributions grounded in IS should contribute to at least one other discipline, for example, IS becomes a reference discipline per the *MIS Quarterly* opinion piece by Baskerville and Myers (2002).

Furthermore, there is an immense need to be theory friendly without losing the focus on practice. While most journals call for practical relevance, they expect each paper to meet both of these goals in each article, which cannot be achieved within the usual page limits. In contrast, IJTHI will welcome contributions with a focus on theory or practice, but not necessarily both within the confines of a single article (If a paper can achieve this lofty goal, it would be most welcome, but there also stands a good chance that one of the established tenure journals will publish it). The editors expect that the focus on theory and practice will emerge across the journal publication stream. From time to time the editors will then commission an invited paper or even a special issue that would synthesize theory and practice in a single paper based on past publications. Of course, if a paper has a theory focus, it would have to give at least prima facie or anecdotal evidence for its practical relevance. By the same token, if a paper just reports practically interesting findings or cases, it would at least have to point to theory that makes these findings interesting. However, this could be done by way of discussion or conclusions without the need to develop it in detail. We feel that this is a new and promising approach to dealing with the triple-horned, Kantian dilemma: Without theory, practice (data) is blind, and with practice (data), theory is empty, but to have it all in one paper exceeds the page limit that both readers and the audience can tolerate.

It gives me particular pleasure to announce that the inaugural issue of the journal lives up to its intention of inter- and cross-disciplinarity, and theoretical and practical relevance. The articles in this first issue all touch on issues related to the field of information systems, but they all transcend the boundaries of the field. Kvasny, Greenhill, and Trauth discuss the problem of feminist projects in management information systems (MIS) research, thereby opening a bridge to gender studies and also to diverse ethic groups. They discuss the representation and construction of gender in IS which should prove useful for understanding why the gender gap in IS and information technology (IT) is an unsolved problem. Alexander looks at the problem of stakeholder identification and classification. The idea of a stakeholder originated outside of the field of IS, but has been warmly received in IS research. Alexander offers a new way of practically dealing with the question of who a stakeholder is and what the stakeholder’s role is. The third article, by George, looks at a completely different field which, unlike stakeholders, has so far received very little scholarly attention in the academic fields of IS or IT, namely, the relationship between IT and religion. Religious beliefs are often at the root of our worldview and thus influence our perception and use of technology. At the same time, religious practices are being deeply affected by the use of information and communication technology (ICT). Finally, Spiekermann offers a discussion of the use of privacy-enhancing technologies (PET), which analyzes empirical data to determine the reasons why people choose to use anonymity technology. By using research approaches and methodologies of IS, this can be seen as an example where IS as a refer-
ence discipline will be of use to other disciplines such as computer or information ethics. On top of these original research contributions, we are happy to present comments by Jacobson, Nielson, Sheffield, Ess, and Weckert, which will enrich the discussion and provide the reader with additional ideas and inspirations.

Let us return from the specifics of the current issue to the question of the fundamental direction the journal will take. Having defined a possible niche that is not well covered in the plethora of existing journals, the remainder of this editorial will focus on the implications of the subject focus of IJTHI (human-social-ICT interaction), the subject needed to achieve the journal’s mission (types of papers, discussion pieces, commentaries, etc.), and the spirit and organization of the review process, which in turn is just one important aspect of the journals role as a communication medium in the interaction with and between authors, reviewers, and commentators.

A journal should not be a static object, but should be similar to a living entity. As editor of the new IJTHI, I do not intend to be autocratic about its content. Rather, the associate editors and I see this scholarly medium as an invitation to promote a discourse with a community of scholars with similar interests. There are, nevertheless, several boundaries implicit and explicit in the development of a new journal. While it is open to many different technologies, its primary focus will be on what is often called ICT. Given the wide notion of technology, this means that we are also interested in questions about the individual or collective use of such technologies, and in theoretical approaches to such use.

A general interest in the use of ICT is not enough to define a journal. According to the “IS Publication Main Page” (Romano, 2004), there are currently 284 journals that publish matters concerning information systems. This probably does not cover all journals, as the more-technical journals regarding software engineering or computer sciences are not necessarily included. At the same time, the journals on the “softer” end that focus mainly on sociological or philosophical research in ICT are not included in the list. An author interested in writing a journal article concerning the interaction between ICT and humans thus has a number of choices for journal submission.

IJTHI sees itself rooted in the academic discipline of information systems. This means that its area of interest is the impact that ICT has on individuals and collectives such as formal or informal organizations. At the same time, the journal aims to overcome disciplinary boundaries that sometimes stand in the way of useful and interesting research. It does not aim to be one more specialist outlet for a narrowly defined group of people interested in one particular topic. IJTHI aims to transcend special interests and offer authors a platform to publish their work to a wider audience within and outside of the field of IS. For authors this means that articles submitted to IJTHI should be thoroughly based in their discipline or area of interest. At the same time their research must also be accessible by scholars who are not members of the same special-interest group. An important aspect of this is that authors should be explicit about their own background and approaches, and that they should indicate why they think their work will be of interest to a particular community.

The field of IS must deal with questions of self-definition, content, and relevant research, as well as disciplinary power and politics. Some suggest that IS is in a state of crisis (Benbasat & Zmud, 2003), while others hold that such a crisis, if it exists at all, is nothing unusual (Ives, Parks, Porra, & Silva, 2004; Hirschheim & Klein, 2003; cf. the list
of articles concerning the “IS Core” in the Communications of the AIS; Robey, 1996). This leads to two important conclusions: First, it is important to communicate with stakeholders outside of the immediate academic community, and second, we need to pay attention to the way we do research in order to remain relevant, understandable, and interesting to both the practitioner and academic communities. These two issues translate into conclusions indicated earlier. First, the journal aims to facilitate communication with interested parties outside of the field. Second, the journal aims to promote research and other papers that do not necessarily follow the standard approach and represent normal science (Kuhn, 1996). We follow the argument of Ives et al. (2004) that the survival of a discipline depends on the ability of creative researchers to develop their novel approaches. We intend to provide an outlet for such novel approaches.

Furthermore, the journal also realizes that quality research can never be accomplished in a vacuum. Information systems are used by humans within organizations. These organizations are in turn embedded in societies and states. They conform to norms, rules, and regulations. Neither information systems nor research about information systems can escape these social realities. Information systems research “is aimed directly or indirectly at improving some aspect of social, technical or organizational activity” (Keen, 1991, p. 37). Or, as Mumford (1991, p. 23) said, “Research is not only to inspire other researchers, it is to make things better for the community as a whole. It has to be utilized to assist real world problems.” This raises several theoretical and practical issues. If IS research is to “make things better,” then we need a way to define what is desirable and what is not. This raises fundamental problems of ethical and political theory. It begs the question of the role of the researcher within the process of research and the role of the research institution within society. None of these can be answered in simple terms, but need to be addressed to maintain a high level of integrity and relevance. IJTHI will therefore welcome papers that deal explicitly with these questions.

In order to shed light on these issues, the journal also invites scholars from neighboring disciplines to contribute. These could be researchers who are interested in the interaction of technology and humans in different ways. Possible examples include sociologists who study the social or organizational impact of ICT, or philosophers who are interested in the moral implications of machine use.

The scope of the journal is thus ambitious. We demand that authors orient themselves in a larger context than their current level of familiarity that their reference discipline allows. We aim to be truly interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary, while reward structures in most research institutions are geared to avoid contact with other disciplines. For most authors, meeting the requirements outlined above will not be a trivial exercise. We must therefore ask the question, “What can we offer authors in return for their efforts?” Some of the answers have already been implied. The journal offers a publication outlet for research that does not follow standard patterns, ontologies, epistemologies, or methodologies. Examples of this are outlined in the coverage of the journal. We would welcome phenomenological accounts of technology, ethical discussions, and research concerning the anthropological consequences of ICT as just a few topics. We are open to quantitative as well as qualitative research and will not require empirical data for a conceptual argument that can convince on the merits of its logic. Briefly, we are interested in submissions that are interesting, well written, and further our understanding independent of whether they fit the typical profile of (IS) research.
Apart from this, we hope to use a creative and developmental style of review. Papers submitted to the journal will be checked for suitability and the potential for success by the editors before being sent out to the reviewers. That means that unsuitable papers should be rejected at an early stage of the review process. Those papers that do make it through the initial screening will then be accompanied by an associate editor who will take a helpful stance. We believe this to be in the interest of the journal as well as the authors’ best interest.

Another advantage of the journal will be the comment section. We hope to be able to provide a comment to each of the main articles. This comment will fulfil the same function that the discussant has in some conferences. It should be a thoughtful comment highlighting some aspect of the argument and will be written by someone knowledgeable in the field, but not necessarily within the authors’ disciplinary background. We hope that this will stimulate the debate that scholarly publications are supposed to engender.

All of this will hopefully create a community of scholars who are interested in matters concerning the interaction of technology and humans, and who are curious to hear new voices and alternative positions. The journal will be open to stimuli from this community and develop according to the needs and desires of its stakeholders.

This editorial should thus also be read as an invitation to participate. If you are interested in becoming an author or a reviewer, would like to edit a special issue, or have any other suggestions that would develop the journal, please contact a member of the editorial board.

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