Editorial Preface

Special Issues in Technology and Human Interaction

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The International Journal of Technology and Human Interaction has entered its third year and is continuing to grow and attract new readers and authors. From the point of view of the editor in chief, this is clearly a positive development. At the same time, there are issues emerging that need clarification and discussion. One of these is the question of special issues and their place in the journal as well as the organisational questions surrounding them.

Special issues of journals are a constant feature in the academic publishing market. Most journals, from the top rated, established, research journals to new start-up journals or practitioner-oriented journals run special issues. There are good reasons for doing so. Special issues allow putting the emphasis on a particular point and discussing it in more depth than regular issues. This is of interest to the reader because it is possible to come to a better understanding of the topic and it also gives readers several references at the same time. In many cases, special issues also highlight the open questions and important debates concerning a topic. Special issues are also of interest to authors. By publishing in a special issue, one gets a higher level of exposure because interested audiences are more likely to find it. More importantly, authors have the chance of publishing in conjunction with other experts in the field, thereby engaging in an intellectual exchange with them. The guest editors of special issues have the advantage of being able to work with a range of specialist authors in their field of interest. Thus, editing a special issue increases the visibility of the guest editors and helps them interact with others and raise their profile. And finally, special issues are also advantageous to the editor of a journal because they provide a structured way of receiving submissions and are generally more easily managed than normal issues. Overall, one can say that special issues are advantageous for all parties involved. The International Journal of Technology and Human Interaction is no exception to this. Of the 12 issues of the first three years, four were or will be special issues.

As editor in chief of IJTHI, I am thus in favour of special issues. Having had some experience with setting them up, I believe it to be imperative to provide a policy for them. This policy is based on the Idea Group recommendations for running a journal, but they go beyond this and are specific to IJTHI.

1. The first step for realising a special issue of IJTHI is to draw up a plan and write a proposal. Then, the proposal should be discussed with an associate editor (AE) or the editor in chief. At this point, the proposal endorsed by an AE can be submitted to the editor in chief. In this function, I will only accept proposals for special issues if it is clear why the topic is of relevance for the special issue and if it is equally clear that at least one of the AEs has the expertise to guide the guest editor in the field and is willing to support the special issue.
2. In many cases, special issues can arise from conferences or workshops. This is often a good idea because it allows the authors to interact and discuss the topic. However, there is the danger that such workshops will only result in a limited number of papers. If the special issue is to arise from a conference track or workshop, then it is imperative that the call for participation is open and advertised early. It is also important to open the call for authors who are not able to participate in the conference but would like to contribute to the special issue. The aim should always be to attract a maximum number of good submissions.

3. This raises the issue of timing. Some journals require a minimum amount of time between issuing the call for papers and the submission deadline. I will not mandate a specific time but the proposal should show that the timing is realistic.

4. The special issue will only be successful if it is advertised widely and meets with the interest of the research community in question. That means that pure reliance on mass mailings via listservs (e.g., ISWorld) is not likely to be successful. Therefore, the proposal should specify how the guest editors intend to solicit a sufficient number of submissions of high quality.

5. Another question is that of reviews. The resulting special issue can only be as good as the quality of the reviews that will help the authors develop their papers. For that reason, the guest editors should consider the question of possible and available reviewers in the proposal. It can be perfectly acceptable to ask authors to review other submissions. Such an approach seems particularly suitable where authors share expertise of a topic, as is likely to be the case in special issues. However, having such a truly peer-reviewed approach also holds dangers in that authors may recognise each other’s work and review, not on the basis of the quality of the work, but based on other views. The editors need to be aware of such pitfalls and consider them early on. It is of course also possible to use the members of the established editorial review board for reviews of special issue submissions. If this is planned, then the guest editor needs to ensure that enough members of the board have the requisite expertise and express this in the proposal.

6. Another crucial issue is that of the overall time frame for the special issue. The timing should be realistic (e.g., allowing around three months for the first round of reviews, calculating a possible second round of reviews and giving the guest editors the necessary time to read all papers and react to reviews and revisions). It should also be aligned with IJTHI submission dates, which are at the end of each quarter. The proposal should clearly spell out what happens if deadlines are missed or if authors do not adhere to specifications. In some cases, it may be necessary to exclude authors who do not comply with the specifications from publishing in the special issue. Guest editors should consider such unfortunate circumstances in advance and have strategies to deal with them.

7. The proposal must be submitted to the editor in chief. Once a version has been produced that is acceptable to all parties, the guest editors can launch the call for papers. The publisher suggests following these guidelines:
   • Introductory paragraph (approximately 50 words) describing the significance of the subject and its impacts on organizations worldwide.
   • A paragraph describing the main objective of the special issue and its relationship with the journal. Try to make your paragraph very broad and general to attract as many papers as possible.
   • A list of recommended topics (15-20 topics).
   • The contact information to be listed on the call (exact mailing address, telephone number).

8. Once the call for papers has been launched, it is important to keep the AE and editor in chief up to date on current developments. Milestones defined in the proposal (e.g., completion of first round of reviews, deadline for resubmissions, and so forth) need to be observed and communicated. There may
be reasons why the original time plan cannot be followed. In such cases, it is important that the editors of IJTHI know this early to be able to find contingency solutions (e.g., moving forward a regular issue).

9. It is important that the distribution of responsibility remains clear throughout the process. The publisher has clear requirements concerning the documents and files required for publication. Apart from the finished papers as files, these include the copyright agreement in paper form and a short bio of the authors. It is the guest editor’s responsibility to provide all of these by the deadline. Such responsibilities can also be shared (e.g., with the AE), but this should be made clear in the proposal.

Most of the above points are fairly standard and could be applied to most journals. They need to be spelled out in order to avoid misunderstandings, but they will not create big surprises. The special issues of IJTHI based on these guidelines will be characterised by relevant topics and (hopefully) smooth management of the process. In addition, I hope that special issues of IJTHI can be something more, that they contribute to debate in a deeper sense and that they help build a community of scholars with a shared interest in issues of the interaction of technology and humans. I originally hoped to have the journal fulfill this aim by printing a comment after each research paper. This is the first regular issue where this feature is no longer present. I deeply regret this because I think that it was a unique feature of the journal that contributed raising interest among scholars. Unfortunately, I was forced to give this up, due to resource constraints. Identifying and motivating high ranking commentators took up more time and effort than was available.

However, I believe that special issues offer the potential for a more interactive and discursive design. In any case, this will be facilitated by the guest editorial, but there is no reason why further interaction should not be possible. One way of realising this would be to follow my original ideas and print comments after the articles. This might be achieved by asking the authors to comment on each other’s work or it might also be done by asking external experts to comment. This is by no means the only way of achieving this. Another avenue, particularly if the authors meet at a workshop or conference, might be to get the authors to co-author an overview article or produce a thesis paper outlining the most important or most contentious issues. I could also imagine using a special issue in conjunction with other media, for example starting an online forum or blog, or possibly a set of blogs surrounding the topic. There are no limits to how such interactive and discursive features could be included and I hope to encourage potential guest editors to consider such questions in their proposal.

Such innovative design and linkage of special issues would raise the profile of the journal, help promote the guest editor’s profile in the field and provide added value for the audience.

Bernd Carsten Stahl, is currently a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Computer Sciences and Engineering and as a research associate at the Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility of De Montfort University, Leicester, UK. His area of research consists of philosophical, more specifically of normative, questions arising from the use of information and communication technology. The emphasis in this area is on the notion of responsibility. He researches the application of such normative questions in economic organisations, but also educational and governmental institutions. His second area of interest consists of epistemological questions in Information Systems research. He is a member of the editorial review board of the Journal of Information Systems Education and the Journal of International Technology and Information Management. Furthermore he continues to serve on conference committees, such as the Information Resource Management Association Conference or the European Conference on E-Government. He also serves as a reviewer for several other international journals and conferences.