



## EDITORIAL

# Changing issues: sixes and specials

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### Sixes

This is the first of six issues for this volume/year of the *European Journal of Information Systems*. We have increased the number of issues because the continuing success of the journal enables us to offer our readers increases in both the quality and number of papers. The journal's improving success can be measured in three ways.

First an improving impact factor, which climbed to 1.000 last year. Second, against the general trend for journals, we have an increasing subscription list. And third, but not least, an improving ranking in journal league tables. For example in the November 2005 issue of the *Communications of the ACM*, Nerur *et al.*'s (2005) paper clearly places the *European Journal of Information Systems* as the top non-North American Information Systems journal and sixth in the world. This result is consistent with the majority of tables I have seen in the past 2 years.

We intend to keep improving but also to encourage our authors to write papers that are clearly written to disseminate our subject. To help authors, as I recently mentioned in my Editor's View paper (Paul, 2005), we ask of our authors that their papers have the appropriate responses to the following three questions:

- What story are you trying to tell the reader?
- What will the reader know after reading your paper that was not known before?
- Why should anyone believe you?

While clarity and good content in research papers are obvious activities for the editors and associate editors to pursue, we shall continue to offer our readers the benefits of opinion papers, Editor's view papers (at least six agreed for 2006 onwards), and where the occasion warrants it, 'something different'. A good example of the latter is the last issue of the *European Journal of Information Systems*, the 'Personal Reflections on Claudio Ciborra's Life and Work' special issue (Cordella *et al.*, 2005), already acclaimed for its accomplished coverage of the brilliance, wit and humour of this heroic man while advancing through these papers Claudio's and the authors contributions to Information Systems. The success of this special issue naturally leads me into the second issue of this editorial, that of special issues.

### Specials

Last year, the *European Journal of Information Systems* had five issues instead of four, of which three and a half were special issues. We start a new volume with a special issue, and the next two issues at least will also be part or full special issues. This may appear a lot or 'too many' because there are some mythologies concerning special issues of which the two most pernicious are:

1. It is easier for authors to get their paper into a special issue than a general issue; and

2. The quality of papers is either on average lower in special issues than in general issues or that some weak papers get through.

If these statements were true, it would be an unworthy reflection on editors, guest editors, referees and authors, that is, the whole community. I am going to argue in this editorial that both statements are probably false. However, before I do, I would like to relate what I thought I heard said at a recent panel (Gray *et al.*, 2005) of some information systems journal editors at ICIS 2005 (called 'How Shall We Manage Our Journals in the Future? A Discussion Of Rick Watson's ICIS 2004 Proposals'). The panel's subject was essentially that of improving the review process. I took the opportunity to point out that I considered this far less important than improving the quality and clarity of submissions in the first place. Most editors complained of the proportion of submissions that are so poor that they were rejected before going out for review in order not to waste the valuable voluntary time of the expert referees (as I also said in my Editor's View paper in the *European Journal of Information Systems*, Paul, 2005). It seems that most of the best journals reject up to 50% or more of submissions in this way. And the comments made about those sent out for review were not enthusiastic, which is why acceptance rates run at 10–20% for these journals.

Is this different for special issues? Yes, in the sense that a special issue being focussed is likely to receive papers on that special issue topic, which immediately reduces the proportion of inadmissible, irrelevant, content-free papers received (see Paul (2005) for a full description of these). However, in spite of a collection of submissions more focussed than usual, our recent experience suggests that guest editors still easily reject similar proportions without review. And the proportion actually published in the special issue can be even lower than for general issues for the following good reasons:

1. Space is clearly limited by and within the accepted variation in pagination for an issue.
2. The focussing of the call attracts many active researchers in that particular research area to make submissions, which therefore tend to be of relative good quality, and such focussing is less attractive to the speculative submission.
3. The special issue is in the hands of a reviewing process using only researchers working in that field and coming together in concentration.
4. The guest editors are more specialist in the special issue topic than an editor for the journal as a whole can normally be, and they deal with an increasingly composite body of knowledge as the special issue submissions are reduced to their final issue numbers.

So my argued conclusions are that on average special issues should have better quality and also therefore be more difficult to get into. And my recent experience

suggests to me that this has been the case at least in the past few years for the *European Journal of Information Systems*.

To add to the argument, because special issues are on the increase, this reduces the pool of papers available for general submission, and by the same argument that suggests that concentration in a special issue improves publication quality, dilution of the general stream of submissions with the removal of good papers to the special issues should end up with less good papers for general issues. So I am happy that the *European Journal of Information Systems* takes full advantage of this probably systemic change in journal publishing. I expect that of the six issues to be published this year, only one will be a general issue. Of course some of the five 'special' issues, while being made up from quality papers, will not have enough material to fill an issue, so accepted general papers will take the space and hence keep publication for all papers timely.

However, is more special issues what our readership wants? Clearly, better written, better papers must be welcome to readers. I could suggest that the average reader would prefer 'packaged' collections of papers, which provide a more accessible and rich source of material on the special issue topic. And I could suggest that even if occasionally a special issue topic was not of interest, that six issues instead of four would still provide at least as much material of interest as before.

However, I do not know whether this is true or not, and I cannot be sure that my argument that paper quality will turn out to be higher than average with more special issues will be true or not (a logical argument soon vaporises in the face of forgotten factors!). So the *European Journal of Information Systems* will continue to listen to its readers carefully to hear their views on content of interest to them. And on the issue of quality, the editors will look carefully to see if a measure of performance can be found that presents unambiguously the journal quality content over time. We aim to report back on these two matters in about a year's time, and to repeat this regularly as part of our planned improving feedback to the community on all quality issues to do with editing, reviewing and the published journal content.

To conclude, we expect our six issues a year to be each in their own way frequently special to the readership of the *European Journal of Information Systems*; and the special issues in quality terms to become more special. As for evidence – well, here it is, the first of the six issues is this 'Special Issue: Action in Language, Organisations and Information Systems' brought to us by an excellent team of Guest Editors, namely Pär J Ågerfalk, Göran Goldkuhl, Brian Fitzgerald and Liam Bannon. I think you will agree with me that the guest editors have put together a quality issue which has given me more confidence in the special issue changes we have to make as well as the other changing issues we constantly have to address.

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