EDITORIAL

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The Space Between Efficiency and Experience

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ABSTRACT

Technical systems are routinely evaluated on one set of measures and experienced on another. A service platform that resolves enquiries faster may also leave the people it serves feeling less heard, and the two findings can be true at once without either being an error. This editorial introduces Sociotechnical Inquiry, a peer-reviewed open access journal for research on the gap between how systems are measured and how they are lived. It argues that the gap is not a measurement problem to be designed away but a substantive finding that disciplinary venues are poorly equipped to publish, because the evidence for it is typically split across methods that rarely appear in the same article. It sets out the journal's scope, its review process, and its commitment to publishing work in which the quantitative and the qualitative disagree.

Keywords: sociotechnical systems, service automation, human–computer interaction, research methods, open access publishing

Why another journal

The case for a new journal should never be that the field lacks venues. It does not. The case has to be that a particular kind of work is being written, is worth reading, and currently has nowhere good to go. That is the claim behind Sociotechnical Inquiry.

The work in question has a recognisable shape. A researcher studies a technical system in use. They collect operational data showing the system performs well against the measures it was built to optimise. They also collect accounts from the people who use it, or are subject to it, showing something the operational data does not capture and sometimes contradicts. Neither body of evidence is wrong. The finding is the distance between them.

Hasan (2026) offers a clear instance. Examining service support interactions handled by artificial intelligence agents and by human agents, the study finds that the efficiency gains from automation are real and measurable, and that they coexist with a decline in the empathic quality of the interaction that efficiency metrics are not built to register. The paradox in that title is not rhetorical. It describes a system that is simultaneously improving and degrading, depending on which instrument you point at it.

Findings of this shape are difficult to place. An operations or information systems journal will want the performance data and treat the interview material as context. A journal in communication or the sociology of work will want the accounts and treat the performance data as background. Both are reasonable editorial positions, and both produce a published record in which the two halves of the finding appear separately, in different venues, cited by different people. The contradiction, which was the point, survives in neither.

What we mean by sociotechnical

The term is old enough to have become loose. It originates with Trist and Bamforth (1951), who observed that mechanising coal extraction had reorganised the social structure of the work underground, and that the productivity problems which followed could not be understood by examining the machinery or the miners separately. Their point was methodological before it was theoretical: certain phenomena only become visible when the technical and social are studied as one system.

We use the term in that narrower sense. A paper is sociotechnical here not because it mentions both technology and people, but because its central finding would disappear if either were removed from the analysis. Orlikowski (2000) describes this as attending to technology as it is enacted in practice rather than as it was specified. Suchman (1987) showed much the same thing about plans: what a system is designed to do and what it occasions in use are different objects of study, and the difference is where the interesting work lives.

Star (1999) adds the observation that infrastructure becomes visible mainly when it breaks. Much of what we hope to publish is the study of systems at precisely those moments — during a migration, after an incident, at the point where a workaround becomes permanent — because that is when the arrangement of technical and social commitments can be seen at all.

Scope

We publish empirical, theoretical and methodological research on the mutual shaping of technical systems and social arrangements. We have no disciplinary preference and no methodological one. We do have a preference for work that takes both halves of its subject seriously, and particular interest in four kinds of paper.

Studies in which methods disagree. If your quantitative and qualitative evidence point in different directions, we would rather read the disagreement than a reconciliation of it. Papers that report an unresolved tension and argue for what it means are welcome here and are often unwelcome elsewhere.

Studies of systems in ordinary operation. Failures and controversies attract attention; working systems do not. Yet the arrangements that hold a functioning system together — the maintenance, the informal practice, the accumulated local knowledge — are where most of the sociotechnical action is, and

they are badly under-described.

Replications and negative results. A sociotechnical finding is bound to its setting, which makes the question of whether it travels an empirical one rather than a rhetorical one. We publish studies that attempted to reproduce a finding in a different organisational context and did not, provided the attempt was serious.

Methodological work. Papers on how to study these systems: research design, access, measurement, the ethics of studying people through the systems that govern them, and the practical problem of combining instrumentation with ethnography without one quietly becoming decoration for the other.

How we review

Every submission is read by an editor before it goes out, and work that is clearly outside scope is declined quickly rather than held. Papers that proceed receive at least two reviews under a double-anonymous process, and we expect to return a first decision within five weeks.

We ask reviewers to assess whether a paper does what it says, not whether it reaches a conclusion they share. For interdisciplinary work this distinction matters more than usual: a reviewer trained in one tradition will often find the other half of a paper unfamiliar in its conventions, and unfamiliarity is not a defect. Where a review turns on disciplinary expectation rather than on the quality of the work, the handling editor will say so in the decision letter.

Reviewers are asked to disclose the use of generative tools in preparing a review, and are asked not to enter submitted manuscripts into systems that retain them. The same applies to authors, who should disclose tool use in the manuscript rather than in correspondence.

Open access, and what it costs

Everything we publish is open access from the day of publication, under a Creative Commons Attribution licence, with authors retaining copyright and full self-archiving rights. There is no embargo and no version of record held behind a subscription.

There are also no charges to authors. We think it is worth stating plainly what this does and does not mean. It means the journal is not funded by its authors, so no editorial decision carries a financial consequence for the journal. It does not mean publishing is free: it means the costs are small, carried elsewhere, and that we have chosen to keep them small. Should that change, it will be announced before it applies, and never applied to work already under review.

We are a new journal and we start with the disadvantages of one. We have no impact factor, no indexing beyond what is automatic, and no track record. We would rather say so than imply otherwise. What we can offer is a serious reading of your work by people who will not ask you to remove the half of it that does not fit.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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