Electronic News Journal on Reasoning about Actions and Change 208
Vol. 2: *208-212*, 31.5.1998
http://www.ida.liu.se/ext/etai/actions/nj/9805-2/

Protocol of the discussion during May, 1998 on

Article styles and refereeing

Edited by: Erik Sandewall
Linköping University, Sweden

From: Erik Sandewall on 3.5.1998

Two more articles have now been accepted to the ETAI after an extended period of open review discussion followed by confidential refereeing. At this point, I wish to raise some possibly controversial questions that relate to the referee reports, namely: *Is it necessarily the case that articles that are published in this on-line and networked medium ought to be written in exactly the traditional style? Maybe the classical advise for How To Write A Scientific Article ought to be amended somewhat?*

Note however that I am not going to propose using hypertext in extremis, or any other revolutionary new ideas. On the contrary, I believe it's important that articles continue to have their traditional look and feel from a typograhpic point of view, and that both authors and readers feel comfortable with our way of doing things. Reasonable changes to a moderate extent is the key. However, the present topic is revolutionary in another sense: *you don't usually question the opinion of a referee.* Only the transparency policy of ETAI makes it possible. Before I proceed on that topic, first a few words of introduction and background.

The rate of articles in ETAI is not yet very high, but this is not a problem. Since we are using a novel publication paradigm, it is in fact very useful that we get enough time for analysis and discussion with the peer communities before a larger flow of articles begins to come. We also don't have any quota where a certain number of hundred pages have to be filled each year: our publication scheme is completely elastic with respect to volume.

One of the characteristic and unique features of the ETAI is the egalitarian relationship between all actors, including between reviewers and authors. The reviewer/referee in a traditional journal habitually assumes the pose of ultimate authority, and review reports tend to use phrases such as "the article is lacking in the following respects", "the author should better explain how his (her) approach is able to deal with the following problem", and so on. Behind these phrases there is one of our colleagues, and if we met face to face she (he) would not of course use this way of talking.

In the ETAI, open discussion is the basic idea. Ideally, all feedback to the authors should occur in the open debate, and referees should only vote "accept" or "don't accept". In practice, it turns out that several of the referees get to think of possible improvements to the article as well, but even in this case their suggestions are written in the same collegial style as is used in the open discussion. Please take a look at the comments by "Anonymous Referees" for the articles by Thielscher and by Kakas and Miller for some examples of how reviewers and referees so-to-say look the authors in the eyes as they ask questions and make suggestions with respect to the article that's being considered.

It has been interesting and encouraging to see how the authors have reacted when the review comments for their articles were posted on the web, first the open discussion and then the comments by referees. Until now I have only heard positive reactions and no negative comment at all, and I do believe that the civil tone that we have adopted has contributed to that result. (Comments by the authors on this topic would be welcome!)

The intrinsic transparency of the review process gives the authors a chance to answer to the referees. It also gives the rest of us a chance to listen in to the discussion between authors and referees, and this may be very useful for understanding the contribution as well as for evaluating it. An additional advantage is that this provides an entry point to a common discussion about the topic that I mentioned in the introduction: *what style ought to be used in the articles* in our field. Referees are, after all, the guardians of our quality criteria, so they must be involved in any changes of practice. Thus, the following questions are posed both to the present referees, and to the whole readership.

When a referee feels that additional clarification is needed, should this automatically translate into a suggestion to amend the article? The alternative would be that the referee just asks the question, the author gets to answer it, and the question and the answer are posted in ETAI's article interaction page where they are just as easily available as the article itself. Consider, for example, the suggestions of the third referee of the Kakas and Miller article: would you rather have the answers to those questions integrated with the article, or represented separately?

I don't imagine that *all* reviewers' comments for all articles can best be dealt with separately, but maybe for *many* of them this would be appropriate. After all, dialogue tends to be more lively than monologue, and seeing what questions others have asked may be more interesting than just reading passages of an article that provide answers to untold questions.

Do networked articles need to be as self-contained as articles in the classical medium? If an article in a conventional journal forces the reader to refer to another article for essential material (such as background, motivation, or definitions) then it may be very inconvenient for the reader to find the cited material. In the on-line context this is not so: a hot link in an ENRAC-style footnote (as used in the version of ENRAC that uses frames) allows the reader to click her way instantly to the cited material. In this light, what stand do we wish to take on the third referee's suggestions for additional background material in the Kakas and Miller paper?

Naturally, my references to the referee reports is for examplification only: the refereeing for these articles has been concluded, and it's not my intention to submit the recommendations of the referees to a referendum each time an article is up for acceptance. It is also clear that the recommendations of the present referees are perfectly consistent with traditional criteria for high-quality journals in our field. It's exactly for this reason that these referee reports may also be useful as a starting point for an important discussion: can we improve the quality of form without sacrificing (and hopefully also improving) the quality of content in research articles that are published in the electronic medium, such as the ETAI?

Comments from the readership are welcome on both of these questions, as well as on the general issue of how we can make the best use of electronic communication and publication in our area of research.

From: Rob Miller on 4.5.1998

Dear Erik,

First of all, I know I speak for many people when thanking you for the enormous effort you've put into the ETAI and the newsletter over the last year or so. People are clearly enjoying the newsletter a great deal, and it's really become part of the culture of the 'reasoning about actions' community.

Publishing an article in the ETAI has been a very positive experience for Tony and me. We had a great deal of useful feedback, and my initial worries about the subsequent status of our paper, i.e. whether it would be generally accepted as a respectable 'journal' paper, have proved unfounded. (I'm in a good position to judge this, because I recently changed jobs, and subsequently asked my new employers what their attitude had been towards this publication when evaluating my CV.) The question-and-answer sessions in the newsletter and in the online interactions page, aside from being useful and good fun, have provided good publicity for our work. So, in short, the reviewing and debating mechanisms you've set up have worked very well for us.

I therefore have only minor suggestions for changes and additions to the ETAI publication and reviewing process:

1. Encourage authors to include a statement in each ETAI article along the lines of:

   This article is best read in conjunction with the online interaction at http://......

2. Encourage the anonymous referees to post questions on the interactions page during the 3 month period in which they're reviewing the article. In conventional journal reviewing, it's not unusual for referees to ask the authors (through the journal's editor) for clarification on various points, before making a final decision about the paper. I see this as a very healthy process which can easily be mirrored on the ETAI web pages.

3. At present, after the initial 3 month public interaction period, authors are invited to revise their paper if they wish before it is sent for anonymous review. But perhaps it would be better if the anonymous reviewers simply referee the original paper, in conjunction with the answers given to the questions posted online.

   Perhaps the anomymous reviewers could then have 3 options (similar to the options for many conventional journals):

   (a) reject the paper,

   (b) accept the paper but with 'compulsory' revision (and perhaps re-reviewing), or

(c) accept the paper with 'voluntary' revision.

In this way, there would be a maximum of 2 versions of the paper online (the second appearing after 6 months rather than 3 months), so that version control wouldn't be too much of a problem. (We felt reluctant to post 3 versions of our paper in such a short time period, even though our 3rd referee felt that this might have given a better final product.)

As regards the two questions that you posed in the last newsletter, my guess is that different authors will have different attitudes; some will still like to make their articles as self-contained as possible, others will be happy to leave them as starting points for an online discussion. My view is that the ETAI can and should accomodate this range of preferences - hence suggestion (3) above.

Regards, Rob

From: Leora Morgenstern on 4.5.1998

Erik,

I guess I've been lurking long enough, and I should finally just get out there and contribute to the Newsletter in particular on the question of novel publication styles. I may be a bit of a traditionalist with respect both to the issue of background material and to clarifications, and I'd vote for having these incorporated into the actual article. There is still a lot to be said for being able to print out an article and having a clear statement of the background problem in that article. I also believe that the way the author summarizes and presents background work is important; it sheds light on the author's perspective on the work. In the same way, I think it's important for the author to encapsulate the essentials of the dialogues in this forum, and to incorporate them into his article.

As a related point, I think the exercise of writing in a succinct way the background material and the main point of the dialogues serves to clarify the author's thoughts and is not something we want to give up.

Leora

From: Michael Thielscher on 7.5.1998

First of all I can only side with Rob in saying that the experience of publishing an article in the novel way was both exciting and instructive. It took some time for the discussion on my paper to get going, but in the end it proved very useful and led to important improvements. It was, however, never as lively as, say, the discussion on Tony Kakas and Rob Miller's submission. I recently told Rob that I envied the two of them for their paper receiving so much attention. Although his impulsive remark was that there are two sides to everything, I guess that in the end the authors of articles much debated upon can be most happy about the public attention. Thus a lesson that might be learned from the experience with ETAI so far is that the more controversial a paper is, the more is gained by submitting it to the new publication scheme. And of course this holds vice versa: ETAI seems to profit most from controversial papers.

The editor of the Newsletter raised the question whether networked articles should be as self-contained as articles in the classical medium. Indeed the new medium offers new possibilities. If there is a good general introduction to the topic of one's paper, then adding a link might often be a better idea than just copying the contents in one's own words. In this way an article could be made accessible for a readership with truly different background. For classical journal papers, authors always have to struggle with the problem of how much background they should provide. Some papers even include choicepoints of the form "The reader who is familiar with topics x, y, z,... may skip sections a, b, c, ..." The new medium offers the exciting possibility of instead writing "The reader who is *not* familiar with x, y, z, ... should first follow the links l, m, n, ..." This is of course much less time-consuming and can thus be used with virtually no effort to make a paper suitable for almost everyone. Although I doubt that today too many useful electronic links exist which may serve this purpose, maybe sometime in the future there will be.

One suitable supplement to any ETAI paper is readily available already today, namely, the electronic public discussion. I support Rob's suggestion that everyone who downloads an accepted ETAI paper should be strongly encouraged to also print out and append the discussion page. My feeling is that this truly new feature is among the greatest advantages of the novel publication style.