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Evaluation has always been a strong element of Information Retrieval (IR) research, much of our focus being on how we evaluate IR algorithms. As a research field we have benefited greatly from initiatives such as Cranfield, TREC, CLEF and INEX that have added to our knowledge of how to create test collections, the reliability of system-based evaluation criteria and our understanding of how to interpret the results of an algorithmic evaluation. In contrast, evaluations whose main focus is the user experience of searching using IR systems have not yet reached the same level of maturity. Such evaluations are complex to create and assess due to the increased number of variables to incorporate within the study, the lack of standard tools available (for example, test collections) and the difficulty of selecting appropriate evaluation criteria for study.

In spite of the complicated nature of user-centred evaluations, this form of evaluation is necessary to understand the effectiveness of individual IR systems and user search interactions. The growing incorporation of users into the evaluation process reflects the changing nature of IR within society; for example, more and more people have access to IR systems through Internet search engines but have little training or guidance in how to use these systems effectively. Similarly, new types of search system such as recommender systems and interactive IR facilities are becoming available to wide groups of end-users.

This special topic issue will address the current and future position of user-centred evaluation within IR and reflect the increased interest in, use of, and need for user-centred evaluations. The special topic issue will act as a focus for dissemination in best practice in the area of user-centred evaluations by increasing our understanding of appropriate methodologies, our awareness of the effectiveness of evaluation measures and in raising new research directions in the user side of IR.