A behind-the-scenes look at how Cell Press creates special issues

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http://crosstalk.cell.com/hs-fs/hubfs/Headshots/meghan-gaucher.jpg?t=1478274396864&width=30&height=30&name=meghan-gaucher.jpg Posted by [Meghan Gaucher](http://crosstalk.cell.com/blog/author/meghan-gaucher) | Published April 08, 2016, 09:00

[](https://www.flickr.com/photos/ashleymackinnon/7645861006)

Cell Press' work environment is shaped by the supportive employees and the open communication. All departments work differently, but we all depend on one another. It's like a game of Jenga. Similarly to a sturdy stack of Jenga pieces, each department is reliant on the next, and without one, the whole publication process can collapse.

As a curious colleague and a nonscientist, I've recently been learning more about the company by making connections with coworkers and asking questions. What I had no idea about are the collaborative efforts made by editorial and Production journal teams to create and put together special issues in parallel with the efforts of the Art department, the Press Office, and the Business Development office.

**Conception: One year out**

*Cell*'s [recent special issue, Biology of Communication](http://www.cell.com/cell/issue?pii=S0092-8674(15)X0006-7), came out on March 10th. Its theme was introduced by Editor Steve Mao, who starting in early January led the *Cell* team in creating the contents of the issue. The recruited articles in the issue explore communication at all levels of life, including biology and how communication works—and why it fails.

"The theme of communication was inspired by the success of the special issue that came out in 2014 [on the future of biology](http://www.cell.com/cell/issue?pii=S0092-8674%2814%29X0007-3), which invited a large range of articles from different areas of research,” Steve explains. "Communication is something that we can all relate to and is a prevalent topic in the publishing world. What is the future of communication in the sciences, and how can we communicate science more clearly?"

Special issue topics are chosen a year in advance of the online publication date. The Editors at *Cell* first met to share and discuss themes for the 2016 special issue in January of 2015. Editors take into consideration ideas like timeliness, relevance, the future of science, which scientists they want to feature in the issue, and big strategies they wish to highlight for their audience. All the pieces in the special issue are recruited and chosen by the Editors, who try and fit each paper to a topic within the theme.

The five topics under the umbrella of "communication in science" include the following principles: analysis, conversations, voices, commentary, and perspectives. The themes create a framework for the Editors to use in order to group and match the articles they recruited. As Steve explained, the revision process continues, papers are sometimes moved around from topic to topic depending on reviewer and editorial feedback and the implications of the revisions.

[](http://www.cell.com/cell/fulltext/S0092-8674(16)30192-1)

**Recruiting authors and articles**

Once the theme and subthemes are chosen, the Editors recruit two to three pieces each and then commission the authors, with an editorial goal of all papers being recruited by September. Commissioned papers involve a lot more work on behalf of all parties involved, including the Production department, the Arts department, and of course the Editors. The engagement component of the publication process is an immensely important piece when creating the special issue, as authors must be timely and communicate with a variety of liaisons throughout the process to make sure their figures and writing accurately reflect their findings and, in turn, the theme of the issue.

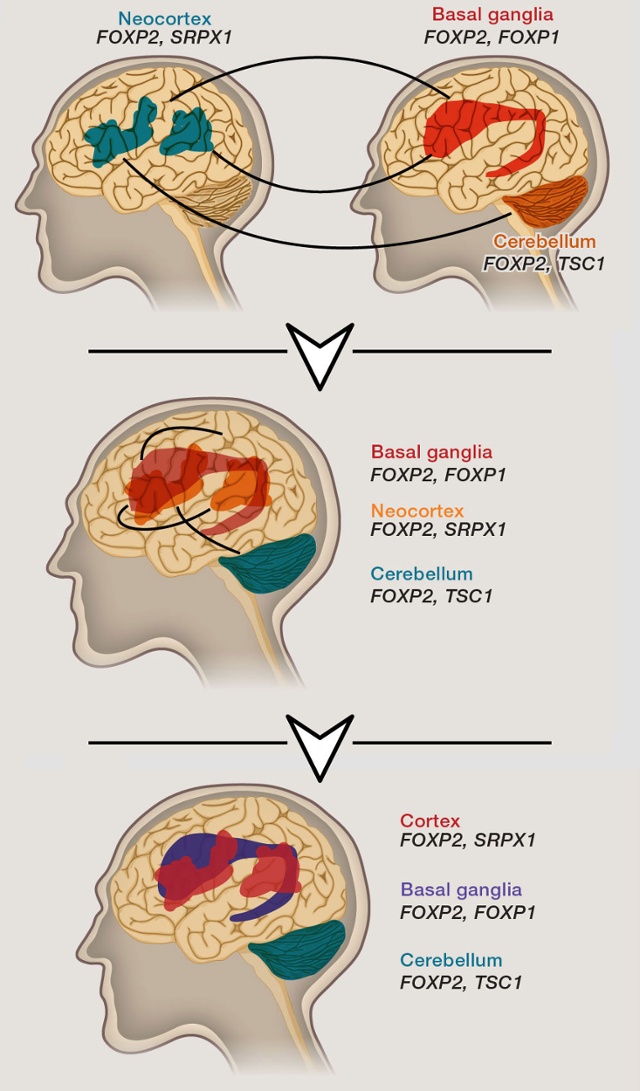
"We typically recruit authors to write pieces for the special issues based on leadership in the field, gender, country of origin, seniority, and other similar factors," Steve says. "We reach out not only to academics but also to those in other areas of studies and business that use communications in their day-to-day roles, including pharmacologists."

During the fall, months after papers have been commissioned and chosen, the editors sit down with their journal's Managing Editor and Copyeditor(s) and the arts team to set up a schedule to space out all the articles—as well as figures and images—into batches. For this *Cell* special issue, Editorial Assistant Sara Yow and Editorial Ops Supervisor Jared Graves, the core of [*Cell*’s Editorial Operations team](http://www.cell.com/cell/editorial-board), worked hard to chase authors and reviewers to make sure all materials are completed in a punctual manner. After the standard review process, authors edit their articles into prime condition with help from the journal's Production staff and Copyeditors.

**The art team's role in special issues**

Meanwhile, behind the scenes in the Arts department, Illustrator Kip Lyall and Managing Illustrator and Designer Yvonne Blanco are handling images for the Leading Edge section of the issue-including the Snapshot. The Cell special issue consists of front matter article types, the figure number is much larger than regular issues for the Arts department to handle. Trina Arpin, the Managing Editor of Cell, and Yvonne outline a schedule to process the large quantity of figures, which are split up into batches of five sets, which averages to about 15 to 20 figures per set.

"The main difference is the amount of figures we work on for a special issue," Kip points out when I ask him about the Arts department's contributions to a regular issue versus a special issue. Regular issues usually have 8–12 drawings which are processed within a two-week timeframe, whereas special issues have 40–60 within the same time frame.   
  
Kip and Yvonne's role at Cell Press is to communicate scientific ideas in a way that is both legible and scientifically pleasing. Kip and Yvonne meet with the editors to discuss the figure before the image is even touched. After the figure is redrawn, Kip and Yvonne work with the authors to revise the figure and make sure they are satisfied with how their ideas are portrayed. Editorial feedback and explanations provide answers for the Arts department that allows them to add value to a figure.



"Discussing the figure with the editor is paramount because they are able to provide insight into nuanced mechanisms that give us, in the Arts department, a better understanding of what to draw,” Yvonne explains.  "Does this visualization properly express the idea expressed in the paper? Is there anything that we can add–a cutaway, a different angle, a zoom inset that shows an interaction in depth, a background element that shows context*—*that will improve the understanding of the mechanisms at play?"

Kip and Yvonne often see the same images over and over again, which builds on their knowledge. Input from the editors to explain concepts and processes is highly valuable. "We work with the editors and authors to make sure the images portray the story," Kip explains. "For example, we reconceptualize figures by adding arrows to make sure the flow of a process or cycle is clear." Yvonne and Kip work on the batches of figures while processing their standard workload alongside other projects that provide support to other journals in the Cell Press family. There is a great deal of effort put forth in order to reconceptualize images that goes beyond adding arrows or changing colors. Marketing and sales projects are amongst other work that the Arts department manages in addition to the large quantity of special issue figures.

**The cover**

The special issue cover is often created by authors or drawn by a hired artist; however, the Biology of Communicationcover was an exception. This year, the Arts department helped create the image. *Cell* Editor Bob Kruger thought of the idea of the "at" symbol (@) and wanted to make it look like a cell. The *Cell* editors, stumped for ideas, asked the Arts department for help. This was when Yvonne proposed using bacterial art to portray the @. A scientist could create the symbol in a lab, and an editor could take a photo of it, she suggested.

"I thought it was a great way to get our editors, who are scientists, involved in making a work of art; using their specific knowledge to create something that unifies the worlds of art and science,” says Yvonne.

That's what makes issue covers so gratifying: they represent the merging of different people at Cell Press, including scientists and nonscientists, to create a single piece of art. Editor Cindy C. Lu volunteered to handle the cover creation for the *Cell* special issue. She was able to get into a lab, work with an agent to create the bacterial image of the @ symbol, and take a photograph for the cover.

The images and themes of the special issue are used by Business Development and the Press Office to draw attention to the issue's launch. All new issues of Cell Press journals, not just special issues, receive promotion, but for Biology in Communication, our teams used a carefully crafted approach to reach the broad audience that would be fascinated by this topic that affects us all.

**Final thoughts on special issues**

The time, effort, and talent put forth by our colleagues to create special issues are sometimes overlooked. After all, we put out several special issues every year. But after talking with coworkers involved in this year's *Cell* special issue, it's hard to dismiss the extent of care and passion involved, and the importance of the work.

We are moving forward in an ever-changing world, and technology and science are increasingly a part of everyday life around the globe. As we publish more and more special issues that relate to a broader audience, let's keep asking questions. How are science findings communicated? How does our audience interact with and absorb the materials? And who is left out that needs to be reached? The research presented in special issues shows a remarkable assimilation of real-world ideas and issues that trickle down to our daily lives.