Conferences – Bad in theory?

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Conferences vs. Journals: The wrong question

• There are good conferences and bad conferences
  – There are also good journals and bad ones
  – Don’t generalize from “some conferences are bad” to “conferences are inherently bad”
  – *Blanket* statements of the form “conferences do not do careful reviewing” are unsupported by evidence

• Setting up the debate as “conferences vs. journals” misses the point:
  – Both are necessary vehicles
  – Both are broken in their own ways
  – Perfection in peer-reviewing is a chimera
Who likes what & why?

• Theory people seem to like journals
  – Multiple review rounds with author feedback
  – Unhurried, in-depth reviews are easier

• Systems people seem to like conferences
  – Timeliness and exploration of alternatives
  – Highly selective conferences have impacts as high as good journals (Chen & Konstan, CACM 2010)
  – Good conferences take “wrong” papers
  – Deadlines can be useful to spur progress
Top 5 signs of a bad conference
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4. Everybody but the speaker and session chair are on Waikiki beach
Top 5 signs of a bad conference

1. They didn’t accept my paper
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3. Has a history of accepting papers generated by Markov processes
4. Everybody but the speaker and session chair are on Waikiki beach
5. Submission deadline extended – 4 times
What makes a conference good?

It’s a social process:

• Carefully chosen PC
  – Famous people aren’t always the best
  – Use peer pressure to promote good behavior

• F2F PC meeting with lots of discussion
  – NEVER make PC-meeting decisions based on the scores

• PC chairs who aren’t afraid of being wrong
  – Push PC to take interesting rather than safe papers
  – I want to hear: “Why did you accept that crap paper?”

• Shepherding of every accepted paper

• Strong community support
  – Only a few conferences can be “must-attend” – 500+ people
  – Get enough student travel funding
What can the community do?

• Avoid creating too many conferences
  – Dilutes paper quality and adds PC workload
  – Use workshops for narrowly focused topics, and be honest about the difference
  – Do we need a way to “accredit” the good conferences?

• Figure out a “CS arXiv” model
  – Perhaps this means giving up double-blind reviewing for conferences?

• Make “remote attendance” a really good option
  – Are we the cobbler’s children for telepresence?

• Teach grad students how to write really well
  – Well-organized papers/paragraphs enable good reviewing

• Accept that theory and systems people are different
Practices from the best systems conferences

• Multiple review rounds (sometimes 3)
• Detailed reviews ("journal quality")
• Lots of online discussion before PC meeting – avoid score-focused decisions
• Pre-selected discussion leads
• Sometimes: author rebuttals accepted
• Relatively long papers (12-14 pages)
• Mandatory shepherding
Ideas for improving conference reviewing IT

• Global registry of CS papers
  – Avoid re-reviewing the same paper 10 times
  – Avoid simultaneous-submission problems
  – TurnItIn.com for CS papers?

• Global registry of reviewers
  – Recognize people who are doing the work
  – Help PC chairs choose good reviewers
    • But not a “black list” – legal/ethical issues here