



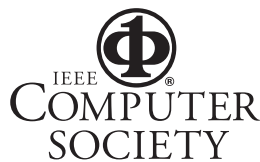
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On “Write-Only” Conferences

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On “Write-Only” Conferences

Recently, Frank Dignum used the term “write-only conference” to describe a call for papers I sent him.

This type of conference’s organizers aim to attract as many delegates as possible by choosing exotic locations, having

inclusive calls for papers, and accepting papers with little scrutiny. They often hold numerous parallel, unrelated conferences to achieve economies of scale and maximize profit. But few people read such conferences’ proceedings, and I rarely see citations of papers published in them (apart from self-citations, perhaps). And it’s questionable if reviewers even read the papers. Indeed, a recent scandal identified cases of acceptance without review in which a randomly generated paper was published (see <http://pdos.csail.mit.edu/scigen>).

These conferences are dangerous because they superficially look like respectable scientific conferences—sometimes even better. Some of their organizing bodies even have their own press, membership and fellowship programs, awards, and so on.

These conferences are bad in more ways than one. They enable academics to waste taxpayers’ and fee-paying students’ money on mere holidays and to build up their resumes with low-quality work. In institutions in which promotion committees know no better, this could enable a mediocre researcher to outrank peers who publish high-quality papers in tough conferences’ proceedings. Finally, write-only conferences undermine the scientific process by failing to fulfill their important role in knowledge creation: that of genuine scrutiny and discussion.

I propose that the main indication of a good conference is its supporters. Good conferences are driven by their leading academic community (not by peripheral communities), which includes the main organizers, program committees, and people who submit to and publish in these conferences. Leading academics want to maintain their reputations, not just get promoted. So, they support only conferences that maintain high quality.

A good conference produces things that people want to read, build on, and cite. One measure of this is the CiteSeer estimated impact of publication venues in computer science (see <http://citeseer.ist.psu.edu/impact.html>). But, this is difficult to assess for conferences only a few years old and impossible to assess for first-time conferences.

Good industry and public-sector representatives sponsor only conferences that can potentially produce knowl-

edge that can benefit their industries or societies, or at least make them look good in doing so.

Good publishers publish proceedings only after making sure that people actually want to read them. I’m always suspicious when a conference’s organizing body also publishes its proceedings, because they might be breaking even through registration fees anyway. Moreover, good publishers have a reputation to preserve, so they might publish high-quality content even if it minimizes sales. Good proceedings publishers include the IEEE, the ACM, the AAAI, Springer, IOS Press, and Morgan Kaufmann.

A colleague recently emailed me the call for papers of the 4th International Conference on Intelligent Information Processing and asked if I thought it was a write-only conference. I hadn’t heard about it, so I investigated it.

I checked the organizing and program committee and saw familiar, respectable names including Toru Ishida, Jim Hendler (this magazine’s editor in chief), Jiming Liu, Ron Sun, and Ed Durfee. Had I not known these names, I would have probably tried to skim random papers by randomly selected organizers and program committee members. Although the keynote speaker wasn’t listed yet, I found out that IJCIIP 2004’s keynote speaker was Ian Horrocks, a recognized name in Semantic Web and description logics research.

The second criterion was difficult to assess, given that the conference has been running only since 2000. However, a quick Web search showed at least some citations.

The conference Web site mentioned the International Federation for Information Processing, which seemed to be a respectable nonprofit organization. The conference is based at the University of South Australia, which is ranked in the top 200 worldwide by the Times Higher Education Supplement (www.thes.co.uk/worldrankings).

Finally, the Web site stated that Springer will publish the proceedings. Springer also published the 2004 proceedings, so they tried the conference before and decided to support it again. My conclusion is that it isn’t a write-only conference.

I hope this is a reasonable, useful heuristic to avoid publishing in write-only conferences. Even better, I hope that write-only conferences reform to become read-write conferences (that is, that people will want to read their proceedings). Finally, I hope that this isn’t a write-only letter. ■

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