

Sigcomm: A View from the Chair

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ABSTRACT

In my first month as SIGCOMM chair, I have been asked “what is your vision for SIGCOMM?”, “can we make SIGCOMM more transparent?”, and “will you write an article for CCR?”. This article is an attempt to address all three of those questions.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

A.0 [General Literature]: General

General Terms

Documentation

1. INTRODUCTION

When first considering whether to allow myself to be nominated as a candidate for SIGCOMM Chair, and again after being elected to that position, I asked a few people (including several past chairs) what they thought were the main issues facing SIGCOMM at the moment. One issue that came up was the sense that members of the community don't really know what's going on within the SIGCOMM Executive Committee (EC). (See [1] for a good summary of what the EC *does*, which is slightly different.) A desire for greater “transparency” was expressed. Among several suggestions related to that issue was the idea of my writing the occasional article for CCR. I had scarcely been on the job for two weeks when CCR Editor-in-Chief Keshav asked me to contribute an article; with the idea already planted in my head, I agreed to write this editorial note.

The ACM sets the SIG election timetable, and it turns out that the SIGCOMM Chair takes office just as the annual SIGCOMM conference is about to take place. Consequently, in my first month on the job, I've been getting a rapid education in the role of the EC in the lead-up to the conference. Of course, most of the hard work of putting the conference together has been done over the last 12+ months, so there aren't too many demands on the EC at this point. Nevertheless, there are a few last-minute issues to deal with, and I'm hoping to move into a less reactive mode after returning from Barcelona.

I've been attending the annual SIGCOMM conference since 1990 (back then it was called a Symposium), and have attended most of the annual conferences since then, as well as a good number of other SIGCOMM-sponsored conferences and workshops. I've served on the PC three times, and I believe I have the distinction of having chaired the first SIGCOMM Outrageous Opinion Session in 1995. And I suspect I'm best known to a fair number of

SIGCOMM conference attendees for the Outrageous Opinions I've delivered myself over the years. (While it might appear that the OO session has become simply a venue for stand-up comedy—and there's nothing wrong with that—I actually think it can also serve a similar role to that of the Shakespearean Fool[2], getting at some truth that might not be said in a more serious setting.)

I remember my first SIGCOMM conference vividly—well, parts of it, anyway. Dave Clark delivered two talks (he had a paper on Application Level Framing, and also won the SIGCOMM award that year.) Those talks were so impressive—entertaining, energetic, lucid and packed with technical insights that seemed right on the money—that I came away realizing how important it is to be able to present your ideas well (although it certainly helps to have good ideas in the first place too.) I decided on the spot that I needed to get to work on my presentation skills. I tend to think that this experience had quite a significant influence over my career. That 1990 conference was also really my introduction to the SIGCOMM community, which quickly became the technical community in which I felt most “at home”, as I do today. I can honestly say that I look forward to the week of the SIGCOMM conference more than almost any other working week of the year, and this is at least as much for the opportunity to meet with members of the community as it is for the technical side of the conference. (One of my co-workers suggested, only half in jest, that I should actually take the week I spend at SIGCOMM as vacation, since it appeared to be more fun than work. I hope that being Chair doesn't make the week less enjoyable.)

2. A VISION FOR SIGCOMM

A few people have asked me what my “vision” is for SIGCOMM. I find that's quite a difficult question to answer. Here are a few thoughts on the subject, and I hope that by laying out my initial thoughts, I might stimulate others to consider what their desires are for the future of SIGCOMM. I also hope that members of the community will feel encouraged to share their thoughts on the direction of SIGCOMM with me and other members of the EC. (More on the subject of communication among members of the community below.)

First, I want to stress that I see SIGCOMM as a community rather than just a conference, or a set of sponsored conferences. And while there is certainly a lot of passion around improving various aspects of the SIGCOMM conference in particular, I want to be sure that we are thinking about how best to serve and strengthen the SIGCOMM community as a whole, not just how to put on conferences. Of course, many of the ways that we serve the community might be through putting on conferences and workshops. CCR,

which is thriving under an enthusiastic editorial board, provides a significant non-conference opportunity for members of the community to publish both technical work and opinion pieces; I hope that more SIGCOMM members will avail themselves of this channel.

I suspect that many members of the community are not fully aware of all the activities that SIGCOMM sponsors or cooperates with. The set of SIGCOMM-sponsored conferences/workshops now includes: CoNEXT, IMC, HotNets, ANCS (joint with SIGARCH and IEEE), and SenSys (jointly sponsored by six SIGs). We also co-operate with quite a number of other conferences, including NSDI, the Latin America Networking Conference, and several others¹. I would encourage members of the community to be thinking about what other events the SIG might want to sponsor or co-operate with. We shouldn't consider the current list as something static or handed down from on high.

One issue that immediately comes to mind when I consider my vision for SIGCOMM is the relationship between industry and "the research community". I have spent virtually my entire career somewhere near the line between research and industrial development, first at Bellcore (an industrial research lab) and, for the last 13 years, at Cisco. Cisco has no research lab *per se*, but it has been part of my job description from day one to provide a liaison function between Cisco and the external research community. While SIGCOMM has certainly played a part in building bridges between industry and the academic research community, I believe there is an opportunity to do more here. I will sketch a few ideas below, and hope to hear more suggestions from the community in the coming months.

The current set of workshops that are attached to the main SIGCOMM conference, I believe, are functioning quite well at facilitating greater exchange of ideas between the industrial and academic research communities. For example, the PRESTO workshop has managed to attract considerable interest from both groups, both because of the technical topic area (programmable/extensible routers) and because of an explicit effort by the workshop organizers to involve industrial players, e.g., by inviting them to participate as panelists.

I would like to see greater information flow in both directions between industry and academia. For example, I am often asked questions about the sort of research that Cisco is interested in (where "interested in" might imply an interest in funding, or in collaboration, or both). We maintain a website that partially answers that question, but SIGCOMM members don't find out about it unless they ask me². Presumably lots of companies have similar lists or useful sites—surely SIGCOMM could gather that information and make it more accessible to academic members of the community. And of course web sites only go so far as a source of useful information. Perhaps there also would be value in having a special session at the annual conference to enable industrial players to disseminate this sort of information face-to-face.

What about information flow in the other direction? Drawing on my own experience again, people in academia quite often come to me with some idea that they are working on and want to know whom they could talk to about it inside Cisco. This problem is

¹As a new chair, I'm learning what all these different arrangements mean; for example, when SIGCOMM *sponsors* a conference, we're financially responsible for it, and ACM allows its name to be used in the conference title, whereas "in co-operation" is more of a statement of support from the SIG for the technical direction of the conference.

²I'm trying hard not to make this look like a Cisco advertisement, but I assume lots of readers will want to know where to look: <http://www.cisco.com/research> will get you there.

in my experience quite a lot harder to solve than the opposite direction, in part because of the difficulty of finding an expert on any given topic inside a large, distributed company. However, it is often possible to find a relevant expert after a few hops through my informal network of colleagues. Again, it seems that SIGCOMM could help a larger set of academic researchers make that first contact into a potentially interested industrial company, through some combination of meetings at conferences and support of suitable communication methods.

Obviously, these are preliminary ideas, and I am hoping that by putting them down on paper I will stimulate others to flesh them out, or to propose better ones.

2.1 Conference Issues

Much as I argued above that SIGCOMM is more than just a set of conferences, I don't want to neglect what is obviously a very important topic to most of us. There is, to put it mildly, a lot of passion around the annual SIGCOMM conference, especially on the matters of paper selection and PC composition. I don't want to use this column to stir up too much more of that passion, but clearly I recognize that many people would like *something* to change. (Unfortunately, there doesn't yet seem to be complete agreement on exactly what to change, although almost everyone agrees that *their* paper should have been accepted into SIGCOMM.) As long as we have 300 paper submissions to a conference that can accommodate no more than 30 accepted papers, there are bound to be a number of people not happy with the paper selection process.

As this article goes to press (pre-Barcelona, and hence before I have had the chance to speak at the Community Feedback Meeting³) the SIGCOMM Executive Committee has started to circulate a proposal for a Technical Steering Committee[3]. It is my hope—and initial feedback has been positive—that, with a few tweaks, we can produce a solution that will prove satisfactory to the majority of people.

Of course, no amount of new process or fine-tuning of the old process can address the fact that SIGCOMM cannot accept most of the submitted papers. To the extent that there exists any solution to the problem, I believe it lies in the establishment of additional high-quality venues for the publication of networking research papers. I believe we are fortunate to have such venues emerging. For example, CoNEXT seems well on its way to becoming a SIGCOMM-like conference, and I've heard good comments on the high quality of this year's submissions from one of the PC Chairs. The fact that there is time to revise a paper that didn't make it into SIGCOMM, taking account of reviewer feedback, and submit to CoNEXT, means that CoNEXT papers need not be viewed as second-tier, but rather the beneficiaries of one more round of careful review and revision. (It is worth noting that this underscores the importance of thorough, insightful review comments, not just numerical evaluation of papers.)

Clearly, if we want to have more venues of comparable quality to the SIGCOMM conference, we, as a community, need to do the work to achieve that quality. PCs and reviewers have a key role here, I believe. I consider it a positive development that members of the community are thinking hard about how PCs should and do function, and publishing their insights (see, for example, [4, 5, 6]). I hope this might lay the groundwork for further improvement in the quality of our conferences.

³When I first heard that the SIGCOMM Business Meeting had been renamed to the "Community Feedback Meeting" I wondered what was afoot. But it was observed that the term "business meeting" was effectively dissuading many people from attending a session where we really would like to have broad community participation.

3. COMMUNICATION

One last topic that I want to address is that of communication. Given the desire for more transparency from the EC, I certainly hope that we can use all the communication tools at our disposal. Of course, tools don't produce transparency; the EC needs to make use of them, and our members need to know where they are. To that end, let me list the communication tools that I am currently aware of:

- CCR, both print and online at <http://ccr.sigcomm.org/online/>. Hopefully you know about that one, as you're reading it (well, maybe not, if you are reading this as a PDF document, but it was published in CCR). Don't forget that you can comment online as well. CCR's editorial team is always looking for articles, both technical and editorial.
- The SIGCOMM blog at <http://blog.sigcomm.org>. Again, comments welcome.
- The SIGCOMM discussion mailing list: sigcomm@postel.org.
- The SIGCOMM members mailing list (moderated, mostly used for monthly news announcements) at SIGCOMM-MEMBERS@LISTSERV.ACM.ORG.
- The SIGCOMM website: <http://www.sigcomm.org>. Note in particular that you can subscribe to the news feed at <http://www.sigcomm.org/news/RSS> and find our annual reports at <http://www.sigcomm.org/about/annual-reports>.
- The SIGCOMM Facebook group. Sparsely used to date, but you can find a photo of Mark Crovella and me trying to settle the SIGCOMM Chair election by a traditional contest.

We're not on Twitter yet, but it's probably just a matter of time⁴. (The SIGCOMM 2009 Conference—with the twitter name [sigcomm09](https://twitter.com/sigcomm09)—has beaten the EC to the punch on that front.)

4. CONCLUSIONS

As the new chair of SIGCOMM, the most important issue for me right now is that I need to receive input from the community. To that end, I've made a few specific proposals, which are by no means solid at this point, but intended to prompt further discussion:

- Develop a section of the SIGCOMM website to provide information about research interests of industrial players, including funding and collaborative opportunities for academic researchers;
- Hold a session or mini-workshop at SIGCOMM (and/or other sponsored conferences) to foster information exchange among industrial and academic researchers;
- Improve the transparency of the SIGCOMM EC through increased communication in various forums (CCR, the blog, etc.);
- Create a Technical Steering Committee to advise SIGCOMM PC chairs;
- Support the growth of additional high-quality conferences and publication avenues for the SIGCOMM community.

⁴and choosing a user name—sigcomm is already gone.

I hope that you will avail yourself of the various communication tools described above—or good old email to me directly—to provide feedback on these proposals or to make your own.

I am excited to be the SIGCOMM Chair. As I said, it's a community that I greatly enjoy being part of, and it's an honor to be given the role of chair. It is apparent that the job will entail a few challenges. One of those will be collecting and distilling all the different viewpoints about how SIGCOMM should change, and charting a path forward that builds on SIGCOMM's strengths while addressing the concerns of our membership. I also hope that I and the rest of the Executive Committee can help the SIGCOMM community thrive in multiple dimensions: by fostering the growth of high-quality conferences, workshops and publications; by enabling greater co-operation between researchers and industry; by improving communication within the community. SIGCOMM has been the home of a great deal of innovative research over the years, and I hope it will continue to be so. I look forward to working with this community and to hearing your feedback.

5. REFERENCES

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