

Opening up Attendance at HotNets

Jeffrey C. Mogul[†] Bruce Davie Hari Balakrishnan Ramesh Govindan
jeffmogul@acm.org bdavie@mit.edu hari@csail.mit.edu ramesh@usc.edu

Current and (†) former members of the HotNets Steering Committee

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ABSTRACT

HotNets has historically been invitation-only. The SIGCOMM community has recently encouraged HotNets to allow broader participation. This note reports on a HotNets 2015 experiment with a more open attendance policy, and on the results of a post-workshop survey of the attendees. Based on this experiment and the survey, the HotNets Steering Committee believes it is possible for the workshop to support broader attendance, while preserving an atmosphere that encourages free-flowing discussions.

1. BACKGROUND

From its inception in 2002, HotNets (the ACM SIGCOMM Workshop on Hot Topics in Networks) was an invitation-only workshop. Attendance was limited to approximately 60 people, invited by the program committee (PC) chairs, on behalf of the PC, largely but not entirely based on submissions of position papers. Typically, invitees included one author of each accepted paper, the members of the organizing committee, and a few additional people invited by the PC. Companies that provide financial support (above a modest threshold) were invited to send one person, and in recent years the workshop has invited the PC chairs for the following year’s SIGCOMM conference, and, if known, the PC chairs for the following HotNets workshop.

The limited size of the workshop was designed “to help promote a welcoming atmosphere for discussions,” on the theory that allowing the workshop to grow much beyond 60 people would impede free-flowing discussions. Keeping the workshop size small had several other potential advantages: (1) HotNets has always attracted a large pool of high-quality submissions; one might speculate that this was partly because authors knew that only authors of good position papers would be invited, and (2) financial planning for the workshop was made slightly simpler, since it was very easy to predict the head-count (and thus costs) at the start of the planning process.

2. PROPOSALS FOR CHANGE

Several years ago, some members of the SIGCOMM community put forth the argument that HotNets was unnecessarily excluding people from an important

event, either because they couldn’t get past the relatively high bar for paper acceptance (20% in 2011; 21% in 2014), or because they did not happen to have anything to submit. There was some concern expressed that HotNets had become a “clique” (although we know of no specific evidence for this).

Some who opposed the invitation-only policy saw it as an issue of fairness: why should only a subset of our community get to hear the talks? Why shouldn’t all authors get to hear feedback and participate in conversation about their work? Some argued for a principle that all SIGCOMM-sponsored events should be open to everyone unless there is a strong reason otherwise. Does “welcoming discussion” trump all these other concerns?

On the other hand, some people expressed concerns that making HotNets open to an arbitrary number of people would undermine the purpose of a workshop, especially one that has always been focused on debating new research directions, rather than presenting results. Would HotNets lose the very qualities that distinguish it from SIGCOMM and CoNEXT, and that have historically attracted a pool of good submissions?

At the end of HotNets 2013, we surveyed attendees about a number of topics, including several questions about attendance policy. To the question “Should HotNets remain invitation-only?”, 44% responded “yes” (but with some suggesting that more people should be invited), 26% said “no”, and the rest replied “I’m not sure” or “I don’t care.” Of course, this survey was only given to people who had been able to get a HotNets invitation in 2013, so one might suspect there was bias towards preserving the invitation-only model.

We also asked “What is the right size for HotNets?”; 59% said “No more than 100 people”, 34% favored the 60-person limit (or smaller), and only 8% thought the number of people should be unlimited.

At HotNets 2013, 82% of the survey respondents were there as the author of an accepted paper, and 62% had never attended a prior HotNets.

Based on these responses, the community concerns, and guidance from the SIGCOMM Executive Committee (EC), the SC decided to try an experiment: it would enlarge HotNets 2014 to 100 people, with 60 invited by the organizers, and the other 40 via an open process. The SC decided to make the “open” invitations available via lottery, rather than purely first-come, first-served, on the theory that FCFS would favor people from cer-

tain time zones.

Unfortunately, several different problems made the 2014 experiment less than satisfactory. Most important, the organizers originally thought they had obtained a 100-seat room, but (for reasons outside their control) lost access to that room, and were forced to settle for a room that seated approximately 80. We also made the mistake of serializing the start of the lottery until after we knew exactly how many seats would be available (it is hard to predict exactly how many authors and organizers will attend until late in the process, and with only 80 total seats, we thought we should try to find out exactly how many open seats we had). In retrospect, this meant that lottery “winners” were notified relatively close to the date of the workshop, and many did not have time to make travel plans.

We therefore decided to try the experiment again in 2015, but more carefully.

3. HOW HOTNETS 2015 MANAGED INVITATIONS

For HotNets 2015, the PC was asked to invite 60 people, including authors, PC members, other organizers, a few panelists, and a small set of other invitees, at the PC’s discretion (possibly, but not limited to, authors of well-regarded rejected papers). We also asked that this number include invitations to the PC co-chairs for SIGCOMM 2016 and HotNets 2016, but only two of these people were able to attend. We asked the General Chairs to use the remaining 40 slots for lottery seats, as well as for one free registration per corporate supporter (if the contribution was above a modest threshold), and for a small number of local student helpers.

Given our experience in 2014 of having started the lottery too late, we started accepting lottery registrations (we simply asked for people’s names and email addresses) before we knew exactly how many PC-invited people would attend; although we still started this process slightly later than we should have, we received 147 unique entries before the deadline (about a month before the workshop), of which 30 were selected at random and invited to register. A surprisingly large fraction of these 30 “winners” did not actually register, and so we selected additional names at random until we ran out of time. Even after several rounds of lottery-based invitations, we ended up with only 91 total registrants, 25 of whom registered via the lottery. We recommend that, in future years, the lottery process should start even earlier, and the first round of invitations should be sent as soon as the PC announces the list of accepted papers.

We speculate that the upper bound on the actual demand for HotNet seats might not be significantly more than about 150, and might be lower. The demand might also vary from year to year, based on workshop dates and location, and on the economy.

4. VIDEO RECORDING

Several people recommended that providing video recordings of HotNets presentations and discussions

would be an effective way to expand the number of people who could benefit from HotNets, especially those who could not afford the time or expense to travel to the workshop.

We hired a vendor to record the presentations at HotNets 2014, but the on-site operator failed to check the audio quality during the workshop, and it turned out to be totally unusable. The vendor we hired for HotNets 2015 was much more successful (albeit with audio problems during the first talk), and the recordings are available in the ACM Digital Library (<http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=2834050>).

5. SURVEY RESULTS FOR HOTNETS 2015

At the end of HotNets 2015, we surveyed the attendees, asking mostly the same question as in 2013, but with some changes to account for the new invitation mechanism. We received 52 responses (a response rate of 57%), although not all respondents answered all of the questions. Here we discuss the responses to questions about the HotNets attendance policy.

“Should HotNets return to an invitation-only format?” 63% said “no,” 4% said “yes,” 10% said “yes, but invite more people,” and 23% had no recommendation. Of 40 survey respondents who had received explicit invitations, 55% said “no,” 5% said “yes,” 10% said “yes, but invite more people,” and 30% had no recommendation. Of the 11 respondents who attended via the lottery, one (10%) said HotNets should be invitation-only, but with more people; the rest did not favor a return to an invitation-only format. (The fact that lottery winners favored the open format seems unsurprising.) “What is the right size for HotNets?” 65% said “No more than 100 people,” 24% said “60-70 people,” and 12% said “unlimited.” Given our difficulties at getting lottery winners to actually register, we asked how we should manage open invitations in the future. 60% preferred to continue using a lottery, 24% preferred first-come, first-served, and the rest mostly had various suggestions for improving the lottery. (Note that the unknown set of people who might have benefitted from a first-come, first-served policy were not included in the survey, so it might be biased towards people who favor a lottery.)

6. STEERING COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on community inputs, the results of the surveys from 2013 and 2015, and our own collective observations of many HotNets workshops, we recommend that HotNets continue to limit the total audience to no more than about 100 people, with a substantial number of seats available via an open process. We would rather not impose a specific division between invited seats and lottery seats, and instead give each PC some discretion in setting the balance. We believe the community sees the lottery as a more fair mechanism than first-come, first-served, although the mechanism needs some improvement (and creates some work for the organizers).