Reflections on being SIGCOMM Chair 2013-2017

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses my personal view of being Chair of SIGCOMM from 2013 to 2017.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **General and reference** → *Surveys and overviews.*

KEYWORDS

Reminiscences, SIGCOMM Chair

It's been a couple of years since I stepped down as Chair and perhaps an ideal time to reflect on my experiences: not so remote that the memories are blurred but not so recent that they are still raw.

I was elected Chair in 2013, taking over from Bruce Davie, and lucky enough to have a superb set of colleagues in the Exec Committee (EC). With the two other elected leaders being Renata Teixeira as Vice-Chair and Joerg Ott as Treasurer, I had a pair of dependable, wise, and thoughtful colleagues who made it easy to work as a close-knit team. Our other EC colleagues, including Yashar Ganjali as Conference Coordinator, Dina Papagiannaki as CCR Editor, Olivier Bonaventure as Education Director, and last but not least, Hamed Haddadi as Information Director, rounded out the team with their excellent skills.

That said, the one take-away I have for future Chairs is that with this position, the buck truly stops here. Any problem, large or small, that cannot be solved lower down in the hierarchy eventually slouches its ugly way to the top, where decisions need to be made, and made knowing that all choices are bad, but some are less bad than others. As examples, I will touch on two problems that took more than their fair share of my time.

One of the biggest unexpected problems I ran into was the Zika virus in 2016, which, unfortunately, hit Brazil hard in the very year that we decided to hold our conference there. Of course, at the time of site selection in 2014 there was no such problem on the radar. Yet, by February 2016 it was clear that we could not possibly hold the conference in Salvador, the epicenter of the crisis. We decided, therefore, to hold it more than 1500 km away in Florianopolis, which has much cooler weather and few mosquitoes, and hence nearly no Zika (during 2016, there were more cases of Zika in Los Angeles than Florianopolis). Nevertheless, a small but vocal minority insisted that we needed to move the conference to another location, preferably in the USA, which turned out to be logistically impossible, since no one would volunteer to organize an event as large as Sigcomm with a runway of only five months. So, the only two alternatives left open to us were to cancel the 2016 edition of the conference or soldier through, braving intemperate language by those who felt we were not being sufficient sensitive to community concerns. In the end, the conference was a success, despite some presentations being on video, and the attendees loved the more intimate atmosphere as well as the beach setting. But I went through more than one sleepless night, as did many of the other organizers, before the event ended.

A second problem that also took much effort to handle was to deal with a paper that had collected data using what some might argue were not-quite ethical means. This issue was raised in the Sigcomm PC meeting, then made its way to the PC Chairs, the General chairs, to the Technical Steering Committee, and finally to me. Again, this was a problem with no easy answers. The authors had gone through ethics clearance in their respective institutions, so the work was in the clear from their perspective. Yet, it looked like the research might potentially have caused harm to subjects who had not given their informed consent. So we did not want to set a precedent by accepting this paper to the conference unremarked. In the end, after numerous rounds of phone meetings and consultations, we accepted the paper, but insisted on accompanying it with a statement of our concerns. This is the sort of creative solution that the job demanded!

I was lucky not just in the excellence of my team but in having inherited a very healthy bank balance, arguably too healthy, since these funds came, after all, from the registration fees of the community. Hence, we always were looking for ways in which to give back money to deserving initiatives. During my term, we agreed to financially sponsor two conferences: ICN and SOSR and zeroed out the contingency line item for all sponsored conferences. We also provided generous funding for summer schools, childcare at Sigcomm (which, sadly, turned out to be an organizational black hole), national networking summits, and the SIGCOMM Networking Systems award. Recognizing the effort made by volunteers in organizing conferences, we tried to reduce their workload by out-sourcing tasks such as registration to a paid helper, MeetGreen. While we were not successful in significantly shrinking our bank balance, these initiatives, I felt, were helpful to the community at large.

Some other initiatives we took were to create an Industrial Liaison Board, ably run by past Chair Bruce Davie and Vice Chair Renata Teixeira, and convincing ACM to adopt the hosted version of HotCRP for all ACM conferences. A less-known and somewhat more unfortunate initiative was to come up with a comprehensive anti-harassment policy, which eventually was adopted by ACM in

a slightly modified form, to respond to some endemic issues with our conferences.

I have been associated with SIGCOMM in one way or the other since 1989 and I have made many good friends as well as a good number of close acquaintances under its auspices. So, although it was a lot of work, and often work that was urgent and all-consuming, I mostly enjoyed my time as Chair, in that allowed me to give back to a community that has given me much. I hope that I helped to make a positive, albeit small, impact on the community.

I'll end this note with an eye to the future. It appears that computer communication is no longer a 'hot' topic these days; the focus has moved to topics such as robotics, AI, big data, and deep learning. Consequently, there has been a decline in the number of both researchers and students interested in the area, compared to the situation some years ago. I expect this to be reflected in the numbers of papers and attendees at our conferences and workshops. This is probably a healthy change for us in the long term, in that it will result in a consolidation of research areas rather than a rush to publication based on overly-speculative and perhaps less well-grounded work. When networking research becomes 'hot' again, as well it might, it will be able to build from this strong base and from a half-century of great work that our community has accomplished.