



The Year of Living Dangerously

I am writing this column on the first official day of spring while “sheltering in place” in Northern California. In these uncertain times, we are all experiencing the anxiety that comes from an unpredictable situation that we do not control; the shock of seeing, perhaps for the first time, all of the shelves in grocery stores empty; and the stress of working, living, and sleeping in the same place. For some of us, the situation is more dire as we are anguishing over whether we will have food for our children and ourselves next month or as we are fighting for the lives of our loved ones or even our own. I sincerely hope and pray that by the time you read this column in May, the situation will have dramatically improved for all of us.

My term as Society president started 1 January 2020. Two days later, on Friday, 3 January, I received an email from the presidents of three other IEEE Societies informing me that we had 48 h to decide whether we would like to be part of the proposed *IEEE Transactions on Artificial Intelligence (TAI)*. What followed was a series of frantic conference calls and hard negotiations across time zones. By mid-January, we were officially an equal comanager and junior financial co-owner of the new transactions. The official proposal was approved by the IEEE Technical Activities Board (TAB) Finance Committee shortly thereafter and by the TAB publication board in mid-February. I was impressed by the nimbleness of our Society during these frantic times and the pragmatic at-

titude of our executive committee and senior staff, who were laser focused on future opportunities and the expansion of our scope and reach. I was also proud of the fact that a little over 17% of all IEEE journal articles on AI and machine learning, excluding *IEEE Access*, are published in our Society's transactions. The episode also revealed systemic weaknesses in our Society, in particular when it comes to anticipating or identifying emerging IEEE initiatives, or articulating, and taking the lead in, emerging high-impact technical fields. These weaknesses are being identified, discussed, and addressed by several of you serving on our executive committee and various boards. I look forward to sharing the culmination of these efforts in my next column.

On 13 February, a day after we celebrated the approval of the new transactions on AI, the Society held its first critical meeting on the rapidly deteriorating COVID-19 situation. Thanks to the efforts of our staff, the meeting was attended by experts from IEEE Meetings, Conferences, and Events, including experts on conference insurance policies. At the meeting, we formulated and began to implement several contingency plans that took into account a number of potential scenarios, including the hitherto unthinkable possibility of canceling our flagship conference,

ICASSP. This was the first of many, and at times daily, meetings that culminated in our decision to shift two conferences—ICASSP 2020 (4–8 May in Barcelona, Spain) and ISBI 2020 (3–7 April in Iowa City, United States)—to fully virtual events. Moreover, we made the decision to give our conference board and vice president (VP) conferences the

authority to cancel, postpone, or shift to virtual all workshops and conferences scheduled between March and August 2020. Finally, we also suspended all Distinguished Lecturer and Distinguished Industry Speaker talks and events at least

through the end of May to minimize travel and avoid large gatherings.

As you read this column, it will appear to you, as it is clear to me today as I write it, that these decisions were obvious and that the Society had no choice in making these decisions. The reality though is that these were very difficult decisions to make because of the dearth of timely information and rapidly evolving circumstances. Some of us concluded by the first week of March that we had no choice but shift the events to virtual, anticipating the deteriorating situation. Others at the time were still clinging to the hope that we would be able to hold hybrid physical-virtual meetings or postpone the conferences. We were counseled to wait a little longer to maximize our chances of recovering some of our

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large financial losses through our insurance policies. The turning point came on 8 March, when the organizing committees selflessly recommended that the physical meetings be canceled. I was very happy to receive the overwhelming support and approvals of our executive committee, staff, and board of governors of these decisions in the emergency meetings that were called on short notice that week. The ISBI and ICASSP organizing committees, our conference board, Society staff, and VP conferences deserve our utmost appreciation for their hard work and quick reactions under a rapidly deteriorating situation that repeatedly sent them back to the drawing board within hours of completing a given task. I will personally be eternally be grateful

in particular to our ICASSP 2020 co-chairs Ana Pérez-Neira and Xavier Mestre, our VP of Conferences Fernando Pereira, our SPS Senior Manager for Conference Strategy and Services Caroline Johnson, and our SPS Executive Director Rich Baseil for the tremendous effort and the countless hours that they have dedicated to managing the COVID-19 emergency and for what I am confident will be a successful set of virtual conferences.

We continue to work on the virtual conferences, and I hope that by the time you read this column you will have both attended the virtual conferences and concluded that they were a success given the circumstances. The challenge is real: Holding a virtual global event such as ICASSP is an unprecedented move. Time is short, and most of us are sheltering in place or experiencing more stringent lockdowns. However, I have no doubt that our volunteers and staff will succeed.

Several principles were adopted by the Society while working on these virtual events. The Society will not benefit from any surplus from these events. In normal times, the surpluses support you through our activities and member benefits. This year, we will refund all registrations not covering papers and strive to issue some credit for registrations covering papers. The mechanics of the refunds are being worked out. The conference will be open to all, providing an opportunity to all our members and others to sample what ICASSP has to offer. We will be offering our sponsors

the opportunity to recover all their funds as they struggle to handle the financial costs of COVID-19 and a dark financial outlook. Again, these decisions may seem

obvious but were very difficult as they will deprive the Society of the funds it uses to sustain our volunteers and activities. I will update you in my next column on the financial implications of the crisis and our plans to handle them.

The crisis also put on hold several ambitious plans that we had articulated in February. These include a novel disruptive innovations conference that was to be held in the San Francisco Bay Area in October. This new conference will offer a novel format meant to create an innovative ecosystem that consists of venture capitalists, entrepreneurs, industry, government, and academia. Our plans also include innovative educational initiatives and offerings now that we have for the first time a vice president of education. We also developed outreach activities tailored to different locales and industries. I plan to discuss these initiatives in my virtual ICASSP opening talk assuming that situation will allow me to do so, and in a future column.

We will all dedicate our efforts to assist all those in need across the globe in the coming weeks and months.

While dealing with the COVID-19 crisis, we still stand ready to serve you. Our publishing operations continue, our new *IEEE Open Journal of Signal Processing* is ready to accept your Plan-S-compliant and other submissions, most of our smaller conferences and workshops are continuing in virtual mode, and most of our other membership support functions are still available.

Let me conclude by going back to the title of this column. Many of you have undoubtedly recognized this title as the title of Christopher Koch's 1978 novel *The Year of Living Dangerously*. The novel was subsequently made into a film with the same title. The phrase comes from "Tahun Vivere Pericoloso," the title of a speech given by Indonesia's first president in 1964, a year before a coup attempt that threw the country into a period of intense violence. I understand that the phrase is used to refer to people living in danger because of a disaster that could recur, an apt description of what we are all experiencing. If anything, this crisis has demonstrated that we're all in it together, we will succeed together to the extent that we work together, regardless of nationality, gender, religion, political inclination, or other characteristics that are often used to separate us. As we recover from the crisis and immediate fear, we shouldn't forget the less fortunate who will still be suffering from the consequences of this crisis. I hope that individually, as communities and as a professional IEEE Society, we will all dedicate our efforts to assist all those in need across the globe in the coming weeks and months.



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