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Where Have All the Workshops Gone?

My initiation into the computing-research community was a workshop on “Logic and Databases” in 1979. I was the only graduate student attending that workshop;

my graduate advisor was invited, and he got permission from the organizers to bring me along. In spite of the informality of the event I was quite in awe of the senior researchers who attended the workshop. In fact, I was quite in shock when one of them, an author of a well-respected logic textbook, proved to be far from an expert in the subject matter of his book.

Throughout the 1980s, workshops continued to be informal gatherings of researchers mixing networking with work-in-progress presentations and intellectually stimulating discussions. A workshop was typically a rather intimate gathering of specialists; an opportunity to invite one's scientific friends to get together. While conferences were the place to present polished technical results, workshops were a place to see if your colleagues were as impressed with your new results or directions as you were. The pace was leisurely, many presentations were done on blackboards, and it was perfectly acceptable to ask questions during presentations. Organizers may have posted an occasional “call for abstracts,” but never a “call for papers.” In fact, workshops typically had no formal proceedings.

Such informal workshops are almost extinct today. As selective conferences become our dominant way of publishing, workshops have gradually become mini-conferences. Today's workshops have typically large program committees, calls for papers, deadlines, and all the other accoutrements of computing-

research conferences. What they usually lack is the prestige of major conferences. Furthermore, most workshops today do publish proceedings, before or after the meeting, which means a workshop paper cannot be resubmitted to a conference. As a result, today's workshops do not attract papers of the same quality as those submitted to major conferences.

Workshops have become, I am afraid to say, simply second-rate conferences. Yes, I am sure there are exceptions to this, but I believe my description does apply to the vast majority of today's computing-research workshops. It is not uncommon to see workshops where the size of the program committee exceeds the number of papers submitted to the workshop. It is not uncommon to see deadlines extended in the hope of attracting a few more submissions.

I miss the old workshops. Regardless of what one thinks of computing-research conferences (our community is now engaged in serious discussions on the advantages and disadvantages of these meetings), informal workshops played an important role in the computing-research ecosystem. Many preliminary results improved significantly as a result of feedback received from discussions carried out during these gatherings. The disappearance of such workshops is, in my opinion, a loss to our community.

I am a big fan of Schloss Dagstuhl, a workshop facility near the small town of Wadern in Germany. Schloss Dagstuhl

was built as a manor house of a German prince in 1760. It was converted into the International Conference and Research Center for Computer Science in 1989, now called Leibniz Center for Informatics. The first week-long seminar (Dagstuhl workshops are called seminars) took place in August 1990. Since then, Dagstuhl has hosted close to 800 seminars, drawing about 30,000 participants. In addition to week-long seminars, Dagstuhl hosts perspectives workshops, summer schools, retreat stays of research guests, and the like. If you receive an invitation to a Dagstuhl seminar, accept it! The facility offers a good library and an outstanding wine cellar. The rural location facilitates both group and one-on-one interactions. In a nutshell, Dagstuhl is the place to experience the tradition of workshops as informal scientific gatherings. Its contributions to computing research over the past 20 years are incalculable. It is no wonder that the National Institute of Informatics in Japan recently created a similar center in Shonan, near Tokyo.

This brings me to a question that has been bothering me for years. Call it “Dagstuhl Envy,” but why don't we have a North American “Dagstuhl”? There are several facilities in North America to host mathematics workshops, for example, the Banff International Research Station, and these are often used for workshops on topics in theoretical computer science. There is, however, no facility dedicated for general computing-research workshops. It would probably take about \$10 million to build such a facility and approximately \$2 million–\$3 million annually to cover operating costs. These are modest sums in the context of the size of the North American computing-research portfolio and the size of the North American information-technology industry. Can we make it happen?

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