

Board Paper: BP_2017_5

Proposal for new method of selecting papers for the conference

Problems

As you are aware, we could not get enough papers to fill all the slots in the allotted 2.5 days of the conference. We got more than enough proposals, of which we shortlisted 50, a higher than usual number. But only 23 completed papers were submitted by the extended deadline. The current set includes full papers submitted in round 1.

Another problem is continuing unhappiness with the review process and the papers that make it through. The Board asked for a revision of the review process at its last meeting. I asked a subcommittee to propose an alternative for 2017 selections, but they did not respond. So we did this year's selections based on a slightly modified version of the scheme we used earlier.

Unhappiness is not limited to the Board. Here is what I heard from a previous best-paper winner who also helped with reviews:

I was not upset but rather concerned. I must admit that I did not use the abstract template, since we were not required to use it in the past, it being more a guide for junior researchers.

Also, one of my papers was a full paper. I thought: why send an abstract if the paper is ready? One of the big risks with abstracts is that the final paper will not be good. Authors may not have the data ready in time for analysis and may be too simple. For me it takes the same time to review an abstract or a paper for conference submission. A full paper review is of course a different matter. I would always prefer a full paper because then I can see the data and the analysis.

I was surprised that our paper titled: "Freemium Internet - Next Generation Business Model to connect next billion" was not accepted given that it addressed the conference topic directly. I asked for the reviewer comments therefore. It was rejected for being too broad, based on the abstract. (It got accepted for ITS today). My hunch was that it may be better to move to a full paper review.

I also felt that reviewing the abstracts as reviewer did not allow me to do justice to the abstracts. Points given for 1st hypothesis and separate points given for secondary hypothesis eg. If a paper only has 1 hypothesis but a very good one then it would compare poorly against an abstract with two hypothesis. It would have been easier for me to recommend an abstract based on a few sentences. The template did not invite any substantive comments given the small space dedicated for it.

My concern is that CPR South misses out on the big policy issues. Last time our OTT paper was rejected, which is still a hot topic in Africa but also Indonesia. This year, our next generation

business model, which is the only way to connect the next billion quickly, with Malaysia and India showing the way. A response to Freebasics but without content limitation or default IDs.

Solution

Instead of tweaking the double-blind, two-stage review process any further, I propose that we adopt a completely different model.

Every year, the Board decides on the ten or twelve most important ICT policy and regulatory topics (in ranked order) the conference will focus on in the subsequent year. From among its members most likely to attend the next conference, the Board also decides on a member who shall bear responsibility for each topic. The administrative partner will ensure that deadlines are kept and the selected paper-givers make it to the conference, but the actual selection will be completely decentralized.

We get rid of all pretensions of objectivity, including double-blind reviews and marking schemes. The person responsible for the session makes the selections, invites papers if needed, provides feedback to improve the quality and so on. The Board Member can moderate the session (default). If she/he wishes to present a paper in the session, another Board Member would have to be appointed to moderate the session. The admin partner will do the overall scheduling and appoint discussants from among Board Members and attendees. In January, the admin partner will send out a call for proposals based on the approved topics, sort the submissions and share with session coordinators.

This was the model used by TPRC until around the mid-1990s, when grant money ran out and they became a conventional academic paper-giving conference. I was fortunate to be asked once or twice to organize sessions.

My proposal differs from early TPRC in two critical aspects:

- They asked who they considered the best person on a particular subject to organize the session. We should not go outside the membership of the Board.
- TPRC solicited abstracts or paper proposals and sent relevant ones to the session organizers. We were told that we were not obligated to accept any and that if we felt the best people had not submitted, we could directly invite them. I propose that we limit the eligible pool to the CPRsouth community (those who have gone through the Young Scholar Program and presented papers at past conferences). Because we have obtained the funds from IDRC with the promise of developing young leaders, it will be inappropriate to spend money on mature, established scholars within our circles. If the session organizer or the invited speaker can cover the costs of the invitee, there would be no problem.

Rationale

In the new design, the central element is the Young Scholar Program (YSP). The conference should continue but only as an extension of the YSP, not as a stand-alone academic conference as it is now. This aligns the activity more closely with IDRC's focus on building young leaders.

We cannot avoid uneven quality when using double-blind reviews in a multi-disciplinary field. By decentralizing discretion to a Board Member who knows the subject the best, we have a better chance of getting papers that address important subjects in a policy-relevant manner and which will serve as exemplars for that year's Young Scholars. This design will make a stronger contribution to the formation of young scholars than the present system.

If the senior scholars who take responsibility for the individual sessions do their work well, high-quality papers that could influence policy may also be produced.

Risks

1. In a fast-changing field such as ours, it is possible that we may miss a hot topic.
2. It's possible that the topic is so cutting-edge, that no one in our pool can write a decent paper on it. As a result, when we advertise the topic we may not get any/enough submissions.
3. A Board Member responsible for a session may not be able to run the process and keep to deadlines.

There is no remedy for 1. Crowdsourced wisdom is best solution. We should keep risk 2 in mind when deciding topics. Invitations are necessary to get quality papers. If Board Members tell the admin partner early about any problems, we can deploy a substitute.

Actions

Ideally, this kind of major change should be discussed at the Board Meeting, not decided on by circulation. However, we need to give you advance warning so that even the non-attending Members can provide their input and, most importantly, their favored topics.

1. We will decide on the proposal at the Board Meeting. We will try to connect non-attending Members via skype, but I cannot guarantee connectivity from Myanmar. So best way to give input would be to email comments that we will circulate to all. Those who will be present need not send emails.
2. We will organize a two-hour session during the conference wherein the Board Members who are present will propose their candidates for session topics in 2018. The topics proposed by non-attending members will be read out along with any justifications provided. If the new model is adopted, this will form the basis of next year's conference. If the Board decides to stay with the present model, it would still be an educative session.
3. We will assume that those attending the 2018 conference are those entitled to travel support for that conference (i.e., those who are absent from the Myanmar event, for the most part). The admin partner will get everyone's input before circulating a list of persons responsible for specific sessions. It will be helpful if intentions/ability to attend the 2018 conference in Africa can be communicated.