Critique of some trends in the TCS community in light of two controversies*

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Abstract

I criticize the growing influence of some "trade-unionism" attitudes in the Theoretical Computer Science community. I trace these attitudes in the arguments used in two recent controversies which attracted much attention: the controversy on the acceptance rate in STOC/FOCS conferences and the controversy on anonymous submissions (in Crypto conferences). I believe that these attitudes stand in contradiction to the scientific progress and call for their abolishment.

Comment (added in 1998): In retrospect, I think that using the term "trade-unionism" was a mistake. As stated below, what I meant are attitudes focusing on personal benefits to members of a group while neglecting the original goals for which the group was formed. Being entrenched in the political context of Israel, I failed to see that the term "trade-unionism" may carry different than I meant associations.

1 Introduction

The scientific community is a loose alliance of individuals struggling for a common goal: the understanding of reality. This community is always in search of an evasive truth and is very likely to be aware of the temporal nature of its current understanding. Since it is quite difficult to be committed to an ever lasting search of a truth that can never be found, the community's commitment to the search of truth tends to be shaky. In times where the community's commitment to the search is weaker the community becomes more concern of its own well-being and attitudes which can be termed "trade-unionism" flourish. These attitudes further weaken the community's commitment to its original goal (i.e., the search of truth) and a vicious cycle is formed.

The theoretical computer science community is concerned with one of the most important and challenging goals of our time: the understanding of (efficient) computation. However, the "general feeling" in this community is that its current understanding of the nature of efficient computation is very limited. My personal belief is that this feeling is unjustified when putting the achievements and failures of this community in the right historical perspective. Yet, I believe that the frustration of many researchers weakens their commitment to the search of truth. Instead, more researchers seems to be too concerned with their own well-being and the well-being of the community.

*Written on the occasion of failing to convince the Crypto92 program committee to abandon the "anonymous submission" policy initiated in Crypto89.

The purpose of this note is to try to contribute to a change in attitudes. In order to make the rest of the discussion more concrete, I'd like to offer my evaluation of two recent events. These events, which are of importance for their own sake, seem to indicate a common undercurrent which I believe to be wrong and worthy of strong opposition. The events I am relating to are the FOCS/STOC decision to accept more papers and CRYPTO's decision on anonymous submission.

2 The controversy on FOCS/STOC acceptance rate

I have attended most of the FOCS/STOC business meetings in which the issue of acceptance rate was fiercely discussed. I was shocked to notice that the effect of this decision on scientific role of these conferences was not seriously considered (if addressed at all). After all, the *reason d'etre* of these conferences is to fulfil some scientific role (i.e., to provide the community with a fast and widespread communication media). Yet, most people were concerned with the "public relation" aspects of the conference (e.g., impression made on funding agencies), and the "personal benefit" aspects of the conference (e.g., impression made on some shallow decision-makers who count STOC/FOCS papers when making tenure and hiring decisions). The original and essential role of the conference has been forgotten, as well as the fact that nobody understands what makes a conference successful and which changes may affect this success.

The use of the conferences' acceptance lists as a tool in making hiring decisions is indeed a serious issue which deserves special attention. This phenomena represents a shallow attitude towards science, and in particular towards the evaluation of scientific work. Hence, the use of counting (STOC/FOCS acceptances) in making hiring decisions has to be condemned and not accepted. An atmosphere has to be created, in which nobody will dare admit (even to himself/herself) that his/her decision is affected by the (oblivious) counting of proceedings papers or things of the like. The fact that the atmosphere is not like that is the very thing which is wrong, and people's willingness to accept this reality (rather than fight it) is a second wrong. Correcting both wrongs is in our hands! Changing FOCS/STOC format is not going to correct either wrongs but rather legitimize them.

3 The controversy on anonymous submissions

Since 1989, the program of CRYPTO conferences is selected based on "anonymous submissions". Ignoring the question of how effective is this procedure in ensuring "fair evaluation", I'd like to expose two wrong attitudes on which the arguments in favour of this procedure are based.

Firstly, "fairness" of the (selection) procedure is presented as the dominant consideration which precedes "quality" of the essence (i.e., the program itself). There will be people who will object this opinion and claim that one does not affect the other. Instead of entering a discussion on the dependence of these two considerations, I'll refrain myself to asking what should be done *in case* these considerations *do* stand in contrast. It is quite evident from the discussions that many of the supporters of "anonymous submissions" are more interested in whether their paper and/or the papers of their friends "get in", rather then being interested in guaranteeing that interesting/important ideas/works are presented in the conference. Again, the primary role of the conference, as an effective way of spreading good ideas, has been forgotten. Instead the conference is viewed as a contest whose primary role is to award prizes.

Secondly, by saying that anonymity is required to ensure a "fair" consideration of submissions by the program committee, one suggests that program committee members cannot be trusted to make decision based on merit. Furthermore, it is implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) claimed that committee members base their decisions on irrelevant (if not unethical) grounds. This is a very serious accusation: offenders should be somehow punished and the rest should be considered innocent until proved otherwise.

4 Naivete?

Some good people will discard the above paragraphs as being naive. I'd like to defend my position as follows. In general, one may (and sometimes should) struggle for worthy causes independently of the prospects of achieving them. Secondly, I believe, in the human ability to affect the social reality and change it to the better. Thirdly, in a scientific community, and especially a small one as ours, such changes are easier to achieve. After all, if all the good people who told me that I'm "correct but naive" would fight for the above changes it is not so clear that they would be outnumbered.