

Reviewing Conference Papers

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In 2008, I was program chair for WikiSym, the ACM Symposium for wikis. I think I was asked to serve in this post because WikiSym is a relatively young conference and I've had a good deal of experience on related program committees¹.

When I chose the WikiSym program committee, I made a special effort to include an exceptional diversity of professional and scholarly accomplishment in order to reflect the diverse interests of the Wiki community. That meant the Program Committee included a number of business leaders and professionals who don't usually participate in academic conferences, much less on program committees. To help them, and to keep everyone on the same page, I wrote this discussion of reviewing.

In computer science, conferences are often the primary medium of scientific communication, and conference submissions are reviewed at least as stringently as journal papers. Despite the importance of the process, not much has been written on the subject.

On the Purpose of Refereeing

The primary duty of the program committee is to ensure the integrity and the reliability of the research literature. People who attend the conference, or who consult its Proceedings in the future, must be confident that the results reported here are honest, accurate, and may be relied upon.

Note that this is quite different from the duty of a commercial conference such as TED or CES, which must consider first what might best attract and entertain its customers. We would very much like to

have an exciting and attractive program, but it is much more important, for us, that the research reported here be of the highest quality.

One clear consequence is that we don't particularly care who wrote a paper or where they work.

Some conferences practice *blind reviewing*, withholding the name of authors from reviewers. I find this sometimes leads to unproductive speculation and that it is helpful in some cases to know who is writing, in order to understand exactly what they mean to say.

DIFFERENCES FROM BOOK AND FILM REVIEWS

Newspaper and magazine critics help people spend their time efficiently, guiding them toward the most rewarding books and films. Critics also help us understand how art functions and guide creators toward more useful and effective approaches.

But most of all, critics sell papers.

The violence and vituperation of newspaper criticism is seldom productive here.

DIFFERENCES FROM GRADING PAPERS

Conference reviewing has a certain pedagogical flavor. Many contributions are written, in whole or in part, by graduate students and postdocs. Others come from people new to the field. Part of the reviewer's role is to identify weaknesses in papers that can be remedied through additional research or better writing, and also to indicate unproductive lines of work that are unlikely to yield useful results.

But the instructor's first job is to instruct the student. The referee's job is to assemble the best available research, to show authors how it might be most effectually presented, and to help authors of unsatisfactory papers to improve them or to understand why their approach needs to change.

¹ Notably the ACM Hypertext Conference on whose program committee I've served some seventeen times (including two stints as co-chair