The Munich Internet Research Retreat (MIRR)

ABSTRACT

This article describes the format of a rather young series of research retreats and our efforts to improve their outcomes and the experience of our participants. The MIRR (Munich Internet Research Retreat) is a two-day gathering of Internet researchers from academia and industry from the Munich, Germany area. The goal of the retreats is to provide a forum for researchers to exchange ideas, get feedback on their current work, and enlarge their professional network. MIRR is organized in a highly interactive style. We limit ourselves to about six short talks and dedicate most of the time to poster sessions, group discussions, and breakout sessions. After the inaugural event in November 2016, MIRR took place for the second time in May 2017. Further successors are planned every six months. Presentations delivered during the seminar are made publicly available [3].

1. INTRODUCTION

The Munich Internet Research Retreat (MIRR) originated from informal discussions of different research groups at Technische Universität München (TUM) and a team at the Munich branch of NetApp[4] on diverse topics related to networking. In these meetings, PhD students and postdoctoral fellows (postdocs) presented their respective research, including both work in progress as well as polished results. The meetings created an informal setting for intense and rich exchange among participants. We realized that there was notable potential in reaching out further, which eventually led to the instantiation of the MIRR.

The main mission of the MIRR is to ensure mutual awareness of different teams working on current (complementary) topics in networking. Our scope ranges from network measurements, to systems engineering, to security and privacy problems in networks. We want to lay the foundations for establishing, broadening, and deepening cooperation among a variety of groups doing networking research. In order to foster easily sustainable relationships, our initial scope has been deliberately limited to the area around Munich (which may reach as far as 400 km in some cases). As a common denominator, we target like-minded teams within the region, where the common mindset stems from practical research in networked systems, paired with interest and efforts in the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), the Internet Research Task Force (IRTF) and the ACM SIGCOMM and SIGMOBILE communities.

The purpose of the MIRR is threefold: 1) We seek to provide recurring opportunities for companies to get in touch with research groups that have expertise in fields relevant to the former. 2) We aim to support researchers in understanding current and emerging research and engineering problems from the commercial development and deployment perspectives. 3) We like to offer reality feedback to academic researchers and out-of-the-box ideas to those from industry. Overall, we hope to foster future bi- or multi-lateral collaboration between academics and industry.

Towards this mission, the 1st MIRR retreat was organized on November 24–25, 2016 at the TUM Science and Study Center in Raitenhaslach, Germany[1]. A 2nd iteration of the MIRR was organized at the same location and held on May 23–24, 2017.

2. RETREAT FORMAT

The main concern while organizing the retreats is to create an opportunity where researchers meet each other and discuss about their work. We try to put this goal into practice with the approach described below. Some selected elements were adapted from seminars held in the renowed Leibniz Center for Informatics in Dagstuhl[2].

1) We hold the MIRR in the TUM Science and Study Center in Raitenhaslach, a former monastry, away from the daily activities of our participants to ensure focus. We also include an overnight stay and a social dinner to foster continued interaction and allow for digesting ideas. 2) The seminar is by invitation only. We put an emphasis on the industry and hand pick PhD students or post-docs with matching topics. This helps with obtaining a compatible and energetic mix of people. 3) We limit the number of participants to ∼40 to maintain interactivity and allow all participants to meet one another. 4) MIRR is organized in a highly interactive fashion. So far we limited ourselfs to about six 20 minutes talks which allows us to dedicate most of the time to more interactive formats. Each participant is requested to bring two slides that include his/her photo, current research focus, and questions that he/she likes to discuss during the retreat. Furthermore, participants are asked to bring a poster. Posters provide variety and introduce the participant's research in a more personal and interactive manner than talks would achieve. Furthermore we emphasize discussions both in the plenum as well as in small subgroups (breakout sessions). For breakouts, participants first agree on most relevant topics or questions brought and form groups with sizes between three to max. eight persons. Outcomes and results of the breakout sessions are later shared and discussed with the plenum. For our tentaive agenda, see table 1. 4) Because we know that everybody's time is scarce, we organize each retreat in a way that it occupies just two days including arrival and departure. With a target of two workshops per year, presently scheduled for May and November, we shall be able

Table 1: Tentative MIRR Agenda

Day 1	
10:00	Welcome and self-introduction of participants
12:00	Lunch
13:00	Poster session 1
14:00	Talk session 1
16:00	Poster session 2
17:00	Breakout sessions
18:30	Social dinner

Day 2	
09:00	Reports from breakout sessions
11:00	Talk session 2
13:00	Lunch
14:00	Closing discussion and evolving the retreat
15:00	End

to continuously engage with a growing regional community even if individuals cannot participate on every occasion. 5) Organization directions are shaped by the feedback of the participants, keeping the format constantly improving. We present the feedback of participants in section 3.

3. EVOLVING THE RETREAT

The last action point on the MIRR agenda is collecting feedback of our participants. In this section we want to summarize most often suggested ideas for improvement, praise, and critics from the 2nd MIRR.

The by far most often suggested improvement was to increase the amount of interactive elements in the agenda. Participants liked both poster and breakout sessions with a preference towards the breakouts as some persons proposed to have even two slots for breakout sessions.

Further interesting feedback was that participants would have liked to have the opportunity to prepare for the retreat in advance. For preparation they suggested to collect, publish, and refine topics of breakout sessions days or weeks ahead of the actual event, for instance, via mailing groups or more modern online discussion systems. Furthermore, a leader of the breakout session shall be elected in advance, how presents the topic to the plenum before the breakout session starts.

The just described online interaction might be even beneficial as it could help to "break the ice" between participants who are (quoting here) "shy IT guys who mostly have not met before".

Making introduction slides of participants, abstracts of talks and posters available before the event was also proposed by some participants. This step might prove helpful to cherry pick partners for discussions.

Both, representatives of academia and industry, stated that the participation of industry was too low. This is true for the number of persons (so far the academia to industry split was about 80% to 20%) but also for active contributions of representatives of companies, i.e. talks or topics for breakout sessions. Participants suggested that short industry talks that describe problems or open questions could be a good starting point for breakout sessions.

Participants enjoyed also the talks but felt that shorter talks of max. ten minutes would be enough to spark further discussions in smaller groups after the talk. Spending less time for "compulsory" talk sessions might also mitigate a potential weakness of the MIRR format pointed out by a participant: the participant felt that the scope of the retreat was too wide. While we understand the problem, we also see the advantage of getting to know work of other fields of network and Internet research as this can help to break out of ones own "mental filter bubble" and broaden ones overall knowledge. However, the amount of time for non-relevant content spent by an individual participant can be decreased when time is shifted from compulsory agenda points to such ones that can be picked by the participant individually.

Feedback by another person clashes somehow with above observation: the participant proposed to include talks in tutorial style. While some agreed, other participants pointed out that such talks would spend some time not available anymore for group work. This finding led to the proposal of having parallel tracks for talks.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The overall feedback of our participants has shown, that the 2nd Munich Internet Research Retreat that took place at May 23–24, 2017 was successful. All the presentation material and contact information of presenters are available online [3]. A follow-up retreat will take place in November 2017. The readers are encouraged to contact the organizers to learn the exact day, about topics and about the organization.

The organizers of the upcoming MIRR will incorporate as much of the feedback of participants as possible to further improve the event. Talks shall be no longer than ten minutes and have the character of lightning talks, i.e. talks about work in progress and open questions instead of polished, already published results. Furthermore, we will prepare agenda and topics of the upcoming MIRR in a more interactive manner by including our participants. This step will ensure that all participants will find a suitable breakout session and come preloaded with knowledge.

5. REFERENCES

[1] 2017-05-30. TUM Science and Study Center Raiten-haslach. Webpage, last visited 2017-05-30. URL: https://www.raitenhaslach.tum.de.

[2] Leibnitz-Zentrum für Informatik Schloss Dagstuhl. Webpage, last visited 2017-05-30. URL: http://www.dagstuhl.de.

[3] Munich Internet Research Retreat 2017. Presentation Materials: https://www.cm.in.tum.de/en/mir/2017.

[4] NetApp, Inc. Webpage, last visited 2017-05-30. URL: http://www.netapp.com/.