

A Conference Panel – but not as we know it!

Tom McEwan (Chair)
Napier University Edinburgh
Edinburgh, EH10 5DT, UK
t.mcewan@napier.ac.uk

David England
Liverpool John Moores University,
Liverpool, L3 3AF UK
d.england@ljmu.ac.uk

Eamonn O'Neill
University of Bath
Bath BA2 7AY, UK
eamonn@cs.bath.ac.uk

Nick Bryan-Kinns
Queen Mary, University of London,
Mile End, London. E1 4NS
nickbk@dcs.qmul.ac.uk

Janet Finlay
Leeds Metropolitan University
Leeds LS6 3QS, UK
j.finlay@leedsmet.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This panel will take the form of a public debate about whether the conference of which it forms part has a future. Academic conferences are increasingly hard to cost-justify and growing awareness of the environmental impact adds to the negative aspects – especially when the HCI community have developed so many tools and techniques to afford virtual collaboration, dissemination and critique. Yet participants continue to enjoy conferences and some would seem them as vital to the sustainability and coherence of the discipline. It is chaired by the chair of HCI2005 [3], and features as panellists the chairs of HCI2003 [1], HCI2004 [2], HCI2006[4], HCI2008, and is intended to feature vibrant contributions from other delegates. The motion to be debated is **“This conference believes that the conference has no future after Sept 5th 2008”**.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.7.2 Organizations

General Terms

Human Factors.

Keywords

British HCI Conference.

1. Introduction

1.1 "British HCI ... what is it good for?"

The British HCI Series of conferences have been running annually for over 20 years, occasionally merging with Interact. It has established a reputation as an international conference - more than half the papers are from overseas, and the social programme is usually much enjoyed. Attendees, however, are mainly UK lecturers and professors - the proportion of industrial attendees has been in steady decline since 2000. Delegates typically come from around 25 countries, but around

80% are UK-based.

There is an ongoing debate as to whether, academically, it is an excellent conference or merely a very good. It is certainly a very competitive conference to gain acceptance for - the committee typically reject 70% of submissions. Reviewers' comments and ratings, at least in 2005, indicate that there are very few totally incompetent submissions (certainly fewer than some we receive to review for higher profile international HCI conferences). There remains consistently, however, disappointingly few contributions from what used to be called 5-star HCI experts, who appear to save their work either for CHI, or for more specialised conferences.

There is also a debate about its impact. The 2006 Volume 1 proceedings, the last to be published by Springer, had only a single citation in the entire volume of any paper from any previous British HCI conference. Is this a write-only conference?

As university budgets tighten there are fewer institutions willing to pay for a student, let alone an academic to attend to present only a poster or a short paper. Given the growth of online communities, and the pressures to minimise carbon footprints, is there still a case for 2-300 people to travel from around the world to spent 15-30 minutes describing their work?

The conference budget is precarious as well. Is there still a case for public money to be used to pay £60 a head for a lavish dinner every year? Would academics pay for their own food if they had to? Should the meal be declared as a taxable benefit? Each year 12 doctoral consortium students and 15-20 student volunteers receive free entry to the conference, accommodation and the full social programme, all of which has to be paid by the full-price delegates (a dwindling band of around 100). This (and the fact that other student delegates can attend at marginal cost price) is thought to be an investment to build the HCI community of tomorrow - but how many of these individuals do go on to publish in HCI?

The contrary view is that nothing beats face-to-face in sustaining a community. People who are overloaded with email and unresponsive can be much more open and available over coffee or a glass of wine. Books get launched, research consortia get assembled, teaching ideas get exchanged, serendipitous conversations unlock doors and remove barriers. Additionally as more "spin-off" conferences emerge in specialist areas of HCI – mobile, user experience, interaction design, ambient, tangible – if there is not a single annual expression of the "wide church" of HCI, does HCI itself have a continued coherence?

© T. McEwan, N. Bryan-Kinns, D. England, J. Finlay, E. O'Neill 2007

Published by the British Computer Society
Volume 2 Proceedings of the 21st BCS HCI Group
Conference

HCI 2007, 3-7 September 2007, Lancaster University, UK
Devina Ramduny-Ellis & Dorothy Rachovides (Editors)

1.2 Panel structure

The panel chair will be a roaming moderator seeking out contributions and questions from the floor, after each of the panellists have put forward their positions in 5-minute statements at the start. Panellists will be encouraged to give short responses (less than 60 seconds) to each question from the floor.

The final twenty minutes of the panel will consist of three minute summary statements each, by Finlay and England in favour of the motion and by O'Neill and Bryan-Kinns against, after which those present will vote on the motion.

2. Position Statements

2.1 Janet Finlay (Chair, HCI2004)

Twenty-one years ago, when the conference started, human-computer interaction was a fledgling discipline with a multi-disciplinary but fairly coherent community. In those early days the conference sustained and facilitated the growth of that community at a time when attendees had little support for their curious obsession with user-centredness outside. It was also a time of plenty in academia, when budgets for conference attendance did not have to be justified above the demands of other "core activities". Times have changed.

The community has grown and fragmented and most now have their own specialisms - mobile, CSCW, ubiquity, design, education etc. - with their own conferences of choice. HCI is now the primary community for very few. And with ever tightening purse strings for both academics and practitioners, it is becoming more and more difficult for many to justify attendance or involvement.

I have been attending HCI regularly since 1991, was conference chair in 2004, programme chair in 2002, local chair in 1996 and have been involved in the organisation of several others. From a personal perspective I enjoy this conference as many of us do. But an annual "jolly" for a dwindling community does not a conference make. The HCI conference in its current form has no future - we need to look at alternatives before it is too late

2.2 Dave England (Chair, HCI2008)

Some words that stuck with me from my first Mechanical Engineering tutor were "Engineering is about improving the quality of life". That led me to take an interest in HCI in 1984.

The question is, whether HCI is still improving the quality of life in 2007, or more specifically is our conference making a significant contribution?

Have most of the general problems been solved by the adopting of industry and marketing standards? And have most of the user population simply adapted to those standards, no matter how sub-optimal they may be? And has the quest for "hard science to drive out soft" led to more papers with good methodology that say more and more about less and less? If we did a meta-analysis of papers with good stats versus the most cited papers would we find a correlation?

To paraphrase Don Norman, should $p < .05$ be considered harmful to the wider picture and potential contribution of HCI? Should we instead look to the Arts and Humanities to ask the "big picture" questions even though the answers may be, in the short term, less clear?

2.3 Eamonn O'Neill (Chair, HCI2003)

At first glance, the British HCI conference seems to be very successful. It has run for a couple of decades - in HCI terms, since the dawn of time. A large proportion of the papers, typically more than half, are international.

There are a healthy number of submissions and the acceptance rate is low. So what's going wrong? Industrial attendance has waned in recent years but that is true of many similar conferences around the world. These are primarily academic conferences and the British HCI Conference holds its own amongst them.

But there's a clue to the problem in the name: the conference shoots itself in the foot by calling itself the British HCI conference. Delegates are overwhelmingly UK academics: given restricted budgets, overseas researchers are perhaps not being attracted to attend. At the same time, some leading UK based academics are more attracted to other conferences, often overseas. Calling it the British conference makes it seem parochial and risks having less international impact. Similarly, the lack of online publication has reduced impact and correspondingly discouraged high quality submissions. Online publication is now a reality.

Internationalise the branding and we may well have a successful conference for many more decades.

2.4 Nick Bryan-Kinns (Chair, HCI2006)

As far as I understand it, in the dim and distant past HCI started out as an innovative blend of Computer Scientists, Psychologists, and Ergonomists. Excitement and drive came from establishing a new field in which to park our campervans and pitch our tents of knowledge to shed new light and understanding on how we use these things we call computers. But, innovation needs change.

Yes, of course there is a need examine problems in depth - navel gazing if you like - this helps us to be sure that our tents are pitched in the right field, and that there isn't some huge bull about to come charging in. But tents and campervans are inherently movable. They need to move or they become rusty and mouldy. In the past people have moved to find new fields such as CSCW and UbiComp.

We need to keep on moving. HCI is becoming like Stonehenge - people return once a year to conduct mystical ceremonies with high priests, but if all the high priests' campervans become rusty and immovable who will come, and how will they get here?

3. REFERENCES

- [1] O'Neill, E., Palanque, P., & Johnson, P. (Eds.) (2003) People and computers XVII: Designing for society. Proceedings of HCI 2003. London, UK: Springer-Verlag.
- [2] Fincher, S., Markopoulos, P., Moore, D., & Ruddle, R. (Eds.) (2005). People and computers XVIII: Design for life. Proceedings of HCI 2004. London, UK: Springer-Verlag.
- [3] McEwan, Tom; Gulliksen, Jan; Benyon, David (Eds.) (2006). People and Computers XIX - The Bigger Picture. Proceedings of HCI 2005. London, UK: Springer-Verlag
- [4] Bryan-Kinns, N., Blandford, A., Curzon, P., Nigay, L. (Eds.) (2007) People and Computers XX - Engage. Proceedings of HCI 2006. London, UK: Springer-Verlag.