Peer review dialog meeting

Martin Schaffernicht [1]

Abstract

This year's "peer review dialog meeting" will take up what participants have articulated last year and what the Policy Council has undertaken in the meantime.

Briefly put: even though the final decision is up to the programme committee, formally deficient papers would be rejected without revision, formally deficient reviews would lead to suspending the reviewer for one year, authors of accepted papers would evaluate the review's usefulness and reviewers would have a discussion forum in order to collaborate.

One conference later, we shall ask how the actual process related to the planned one, on the basis of last year's report and the PC's response to it. We'll also assess how it worked this time, indicate what has been achieved and what seems to need improvement. We shall conjointly set up a set of recommendations, too.

Introduction

This year we'll have the third peer review dialog meeting. This is a chance to critically reflect on what has changed since last year and to elaborate a set of statements for the coming 12 months. In order to help attendees to understand what this session is about (and to decide on their own participation), this documents contains last year's report and the Policy Council's response to it. Interested reviewers are invited to discuss via e-mail: we can set up the meeting according to our discussion.

The Nijmegen report

During the session two kinds of things were surfaced [2]. The first were observable events (facts) that will be reported first. The second type of contributions were points of critique and suggestions and will be presented afterwards.

Events

Events related to submitted papers

- The submitted papers are formally incorrect
- Model-based papers without models
- There have been papers sent to reviewers with author information

Events related to the reviewing

- Refuted papers become accepted
- Accepted papers become excluded
- Some reviews are very thorough, others superficial

Events related to the quality control and its role for the Society

- No member of the policy council participated in the review session.

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[1] Fac. de Ciencias Empresariales, Universidad de Talca, Talca (Chile); martin@utalca.cl

[2] thanks to the participation of Yaman Barlas, Peter Vanderminden, Gloria Pérez, Camilo Olaya and Kristjan Ambroz

Points made with respect to the reviewing process

The reviewing process as such should be made explicit (purpose, stages, procedures, decision points

Reviewers should be reviewed. There are several ways of doing so. For example, the papers' authors may grade the reviews' usefulness. There are conferences where the reviewers have a discussion forum, which enables them to ask and suggest (and exercises some peer-to-peer social pressure).

But also, the programme committee must:

- Monitor the reviews' quality, refute bad reviews (like three-liners) and ban bar reviewers;
- Take the definitive decisions, at least for the plenary sessions.

The review process is only a subsystem. Also important are:

- The composition of the programme committee, which should be designed in advance (why isn't it a criterion when selecting a proposed conference site?).
- A clear policy with respect to the trade-off between the quantity of papers needed for the conference (most of the participant need an accepted paper in order to get the money they need for coming) and the quality.
- A clear sponsorship from the Policy Council (in this respect the absence of its members was interpreted as an adverse signal).

Participants expressed their frustration that despite their efforts as reviewers, the overall quality of the wok presented is not satisfactory (could be better but is not). This was related to the fact that there are two different types of work: on one hand there are applications of SD to a particular case or field, in general model based; on the other hand there are methodological papers which treat aspects of the fundaments, of the method and techniques or of the relationship with other methods. The feeling is that there are too many papers of the first type and too few of the second.

Anyway, in both cases, the review process should be seen as an attempt to improve the papers, such as to have high quality work, and fundamentally it should be understood as a learning process for both authors and reviewers.

The session attendees expressed frustration because they give time and effort to their reviewing work, but they feel left alone with the problem and are afraid that without implementation of the mentioned measures (or other measures with the same finality), their efforts will be in vane. However, they are disposed to keep working on this.

A personal remark of the session chair

There are around 300 reviewers who serve the conference; however, only 6 participated (including the chair). This may mean that it is not an attractive session (as compared to the other sessions), or/and many reviewers do not give a great deal of importance to the possibility to help improving the review system.

Given this and the participants' opinions, critique and suggestions, I believe that the whole process should be improved in the following way for next year's conference.

The PC defines a clear sequence of steps where precise rules are set out:

1. Formally deficient papers are rejected without revision
2. The minimum quality of reviews will be defined and assessed; formally deficient reviews will be eliminated and the reviewer will be suspended for one year.
3. It is made explicit who takes the final decision: the reviewers or the programme committee.
4. Authors of papers that are accepted with minor or major observations shall evaluate the review's usefulness.

5. Reviewers shall have a discussion forum in order to collaborate in their critique of a submitted paper.

Additionally I suggest to formally say "thank you" to the people who participated in the session.

The response we received from the Policy Council

[...] we thank you very much for participating in the Peer Review Meeting at the Nijmegen conference! Although this is only the second time this meeting has happened, it is turning into a very important and resourceful event. I'd like to personally thank you for participating. Since the conference and based on your summary notes, we have discussed the issues you raise with the Program Chairs for future conferences, and with other Society officers.

We do agree that feedback to referees is needed so that they can improve. It is planned to add this feature to the review/submission system this year. We also feel particularly poor reviews, especially those that are unconstructive or ad hominem, could be deleted from the system so that the authors do not see them. We are hoping to add this feature to the system as well, to be used by the program chairs.

Unfortunately, some authors submit their papers incorrectly (for example, including author information). Ultimately, it is up to the author to comply with the submission guidelines.

With regard to refuted papers become accepted, or accepted papers become excluded, program chairs make the final decisions about what papers are in or out, taking the reviews into account, and giving due weight to the views of the thread chairs, but not being bound by them, either for those papers the referees liked or those they disliked.

We will make sure that at future conferences that Policy Council Members, Program Chairs and Thread Chairs are personally invited to participate in the Peer Review Meeting. We realize "quality control" is a very important aspect of our conferences.

With regard to making the reviewing process explicit (purpose, stages, procedures, decision points), please find attached the 2006 reviewer guidelines. We are in the process of revising them for next year. If you have any comments or suggestions, please feel free to send them to Roberta.

The composition of the program committee is indeed a criterion when selecting a proposed conference site.

As you know, there are many factors involved with respect to the trade-off between the quantity of papers needed for the conference and the quality. There is no explicit policy but perhaps, as you suggest, this is something to look into further. We appreciate that you are willing to keep working on this even with the frustrations faced by reviewers.

Working together with the VP Meetings, VP Electronic Presence, current and past program chairs, and the Society office, we will review the following suggested sequence of steps as suggested:

1. Formally deficient papers are rejected without revision

2. The minimum quality of reviews will be defined and assessed; formally deficient reviews will be eliminated and the reviewer will be suspended for one year.

3. It is made explicit who takes the final decision: the reviewers or the programme committee.

4. Authors of papers that are accepted with minor or major observations shall evaluate the review's usefulness.

5. Reviewers shall have a discussion forum in order to collaborate in their critique of a submitted paper.

Again, thank you very much for the effort you have taken to make the conference program better. Please feel free to provide us with additional input.