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What is this thing called IRIS – and what shall we do about it ?

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It is impossible to explain in a few words what the IRIS conferences are or should be. The IRIS conferences (or just IRIS for short) are very much a unique and personal experience, not a traditional conference with a clearly defined purpose and scope. The purpose of the conferences, as stated in for example (Bjerknes *et al.* 1992), are fuzzy, contradictory, and vaguely formulated, but they, and a set of established practices, have contributed to what IRIS is today.

The call for papers for this and next year's IRISs (IRIS 18 and IRIS 19) contains the first signs of a beginning change—or rather refocus—of the purpose and practices of IRIS. This refocus will—according to its proponents—improve the quality of IRIS papers and strengthen the educational (*vis a vis*

Ph.D. students) aspect of the conferences. I sympathise with these goals but the IRIS conferences are not only paper-review institutions and Ph.D. courses. They are other things as well, and a (too) narrow focus on paper quality and Ph.D. education may change IRIS from the unique, multi-faceted, and, by and large, interesting event it has been so far, to an ordinary stop in the world tour of IS conferences, seminars, Ph.D. courses etc.

IRIS is not (and shall not be) unchangeable, but changes must be made openly and after a discussion of their underlying intentions and their possible effects. I raised this discussion at the evaluation plenary in Gjern, but I had to catch a train and could not participate in the debate following my first comments, so this is partly a repetition of what I said in Gjern together with some suggestions for what can be done.

1. The “original“ purpose of IRIS

My first IRIS was in 1991 and I cannot claim to know much about what went on before that. So the following is based on IRIS conferences as I have organised and experienced them for the past four years.

The following excerpt from the 1992 proceedings gives a good idea of what I think IRIS has been (or has tried to be):

“The aim of the seminar is manifold: it is a forum for exchange of ideas and discussions of ongoing research, it helps doctoral students in improving the quality of their first publications, it maintains the contact between institutions doing system development research in practice in the Nordic countries, including the maintenance of personal contacts, and last, but not least, the seminar brings together experienced and novice researchers, hoping to stimulate discussions across the ‘generations’”.(Bjerknes *et al.* 1992)

This is an ambitious and somewhat contradictory statement: IRIS aims to be an idea exchange and discussion forum as well as part of the publication cycle; a Ph. D. course as well as a place for stimulating “discussions across the ‘generations’”; and finally a builder and maintainer of research networks.

There are no “fixed rules” about how to organise an IRIS conference. The organisers of each year’s conference make their own decisions about topics, acceptance criteria, the mix of activities at the conference etc. and they are only responsible to the final evaluation plenary at the conference. But a number of established principles and practices have emerged over the years:

1. A relaxed review policy.

2. Acceptance of a wide variety of papers (position papers, research proposals, loose ideas ..) in addition to the “normal” academic research paper.
3. No participation without a contribution, henceforth called the “Principle of no free lunches” or *Ponoflu*.
4. Many different activities at IRIS (group work about submitted papers, work-shops, talks, panels ...).

These principles and practices have in my view contributed—individually and in combination—to the fulfillment of the IRIS purpose(s). But there are problems of course. The most obvious problems are related to the volume and questionable quality of the proceedings, another problem is that some senior researchers who would like to come, may stay away because they have no time to prepare a contribution. So there is good cause to review the IRIS purpose and the established procedures and practices, as the organisers of IRIS 18 and 19 have done. But I find their suggestions problematic, even though I partly agree with the underlying intentions, because they will promote only some of the purposes of IRIS at the expense of others.

2. The changes and why I don’t like them

One cannot find an explicit statement of the changed purposes of IRIS and the intentions underlying them. But the calls for contributions distributed by the organisers of IRIS 18 and IRIS 19 give the picture. For example:

“IRIS has traditionally formed an impor-

tant forum for young researchers and Ph. D. students to have their research and research papers discussed. The 18th IRIS will stress this orientation. Of course, this means that participation of senior researchers, with or without submitted papers, is encouraged.” (IRIS 18. First Call for Contributions)

In other words, a focus on the educational aspect of IRIS and a farewell to the Ponoflu. Similar statements can be found in the preface to the IRIS 18 proceedings (Dahlbom *et al.* 1995) and in the first announcement of IRIS 19.

The acceptance procedure and the type of contributions accepted are also changing. No more proposals, ideas, position papers or the like:

“All papers must conform to the standard criteria of a scientific paper within the field of information systems.” (IRIS 18. First Call for Contributions)

“Beginning last year, the papers submitted to the IRIS seminar are now subjected to normal peer review” (Dahlbom *et al.* 1995)

The reasons for these changes are not stated explicitly but Bo Dahlbom and Carsten Sørensen (both are members of the organising committees for IRIS 18 and IRIS 19) gave some of their arguments when I raised the issue at the evaluation plenary at IRIS 18:

- IRIS is a unique opportunity to receive substantial feedback on papers. The formal review process ensures (a) extensive written feedback; (b) more beneficial group work because of the higher quality of the papers.
- The purpose of IRIS is to improve quality of research and papers;

- A formal review procedure gives IRIS a higher status (!).
- Some senior researchers whom we’d like to see, don’t participate because they are too busy to live up to the Ponoflu.

I will not engage in a detailed discussion of these arguments, only note that they confirm that the organisers wish to promote paper quality and the educational aspects of IRIS, which also explains why they want to abandon the Ponoflu: There is no need to bother old researchers with the Ponoflu if their primary (only) function is to give feedback and advice to hopeful Ph.D. students struggling with their first papers.

I realise that we can all learn to write better papers, and I agree that the educational aspect of IRIS is very important. But the policies and practices suggested by the present organisers are based on a (too) narrow focus on these parts of the IRIS purpose, and they will, if uncritically pursued, make IRIS a less interesting and creative event than it is today:

First, the changed review policy will most likely improve the quality of the proceedings and the feedback given to participants engaged in *paper writing*; but researchers do more than write and publish papers. We also plan research or we are in the middle of a project. At other times we may just be going through a period of reflection, where we try to get hold of more or less well-formulated ideas, and sometimes (hopefully often) we have something; a result, a discussion, an idea, that we want to publish.

The kind of feedback we need from other researchers depends on where we are in the research process. We are certainly interested in advice on how to im-

prove a paper intended for publication, but we need feedback of a different kind when we mull over ideas, plan research or are in the middle of a project. If we want to test some ideas or a loosely formulated framework, we want to discuss the ideas and the framework, *not* how to change our presentation into a publishable paper. And if we are about to define a Ph.D. project we need to discuss the soundness of the project, the choice of methods, relevant literature etc., whereas detailed comments about the *form* of our project ideas are less than helpful (I know, I've tried it).

So far IRIS has been able to provide different kinds of feedback because of the intensive and very constructive group-work and the variety of contributions accepted. The conferences have thus been valuable for researchers at very different points in the research process.

A more narrow focus on the publication and educational aspects will, on the other hand, make IRIS concentrate on only part of the research process (the publication part) and make it less attractive for researchers (senior as well as junior) who are at other points in the process. The conferences will also be less interesting to attend because the creative discussions of *ongoing research*, *paper content* and underlying *ideas* and *concepts*, will be replaced by advice on how to improve the *formal qualities* of a paper about *completed* research.

Second, the Ponoflu has been a very important characteristic of IRIS. It has meant that everybody contributed—with a paper, a talk, participation in a panel or otherwise. Participation based on formal credentials only (e.g. possession of a Ph.D. degree) has been the exception

rather than the rule. I realise that egalitarian and democratic ideals are not as popular as they used to be—although one should think such ideals would survive longer in the *Scandinavian* systems development community than elsewhere—but I think that the Ponoflu has been very important for the unauthoritarian and open atmosphere at IRIS: Everybody, from professors to Ph.D. students had to be active in the discussions and give, as well as receive, feedback. If we abandon the Ponoflu, the senior researchers will no more be active discussion partners but resume the more traditional—and safe—role as unquestionable authorities and sources of universal wisdom.

In short then, I believe that IRIS, as a consequence of the policies and practices proposed by the present organisers, will cease to be a “forum for exchange of ideas and ongoing research” and that the “discussions across the ‘generations’” will become advisory sessions where the old and wise hand out bits of wisdom to the young and uninitiated. The creative and unpredictable event IRIS is today will, in other words, become more like a Ph.D. course. And do we really need another Ph.D. course in a world full of Ph.D. courses, summer schools, doctoral consortiums, PDC's, (E)CSCWs, CHIs, ECISs, etc., where many of us go anyway?

3. Suggestions

Again, this does not mean that the present situation is ideal and that changes should not be considered. There were, as I wrote above, problems with the way IRIS was organised in the past. The relevant (in this context) problems are:

- Burgeoning proceedings of disputable quality.
- Too few participating senior researchers because of the Ponoflu.

I think that we can handle these problems in other ways than suggested by Bo Dahlbom and Carsten Sørensen: First, by an explicit categorisation of papers into different types (position paper, report of research in progress, project proposal ...) and a review and feedback process that corresponds to this categorisation. Secondly, through a less rigorous application of the Ponoflu.

3.1. *Different paper categories, review procedures and feedback*

The organising committee for IRIS 16 (which I was a member of) tried to deal with the problems of the proceedings, by encouraging the participants to write position papers if they were not able to (or did not want to) write a full research paper. Unfortunately this did not have the desired effect. There were still too many, too long, and too bad (attempts at) full papers. In spite of this, I still believe it is a good idea to encourage contributors to write different types of papers depending on their time, abilities, and the kind of feedback they want, but the organisers have to make the approach explicit and link it to the review process. I therefore suggest that the organisers

1. List (and perhaps explain) acceptable paper categories and the requirements for having a paper accepted within each category (see also point 3);
2. Ask the authors to explicitly state the category of their paper and (perhaps) what kind of feedback they expect

from their working group; e.g. “I have this rather loose idea for a fantastic project but I am not quite sure about the proper theoretical approach and research method. I’d love to discuss it with you but let’s not waste our time with discussions about structure and language”, “I’ve spent three years writing a thesis and this is a paper based on part of it. I am not satisfied with it. Can you help ?”; “I believe we have to rethink the conceptual and political basis for OOA/D, and its applicability within union-centered projects. Here are my arguments, which I would like to discuss with you”;

3. Publish acceptance criteria based on category of paper/contribution and implement a review process where papers can be moved from one category to the next (resp. where the paper is accepted provided the author moves it to another category and changes it to fit the criteria of that category).

This strategy will, if properly carried out, improve the overall quality of the contributions without sacrificing their diversity, maintain the diversity and creativity of group discussions, and maintain the seminar’s value for researchers at different points in their research process—including those who need a *formally reviewed paper* in their CV.

3.2. *Apply the Ponoflu lightly*

It should be clear by now that I am unwilling to replace the Ponoflu with a *carte blanche* allowing senior researchers to participate without a contribution. I do realise, though, that senior researchers have many obligations which make it

hard to find the time needed to write a full paper, so I suggest that we maintain the Ponoflu but allow the organising committee to accept individual participants that haven't made a contribution (this has, I think, always been the practice). But the privilege to violate the Ponoflu should be granted individually and not automatically written on the Ph.D. diploma.

4. Concluding remarks

IRIS was for many years almost the only place where Scandinavian researchers in Information Systems Development could meet and discuss their work. But IRIS is not unique in this respect anymore. The "Scandinavian approach" to systems development research has become high fashion internationally and there are several conferences, where we can present and discuss our work (and see the world too ...). I don't believe that IRIS can face the competition from more prestigious conferences, by becoming yet another Ph.D. course, as the present organisers seem to suggest. Neither do I believe in the other alternative: to change IRIS into something more like a traditional conference.

Instead I think we shall maintain and strengthen IRIS' position as a multifaceted, democratic, and partly unpredictable event, where we can present and discuss both ideas, ongoing research and completed papers; and where everybody has to both contribute and participate actively. And I have given some suggestions as to how this might be done.

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