

You Must Be Joking... Is Change

Michalis Faloutsos
UC Riverside
Dpt. of CS
Riverside, CA
michalis@cs.ucr.edu

ABSTRACT

It is clearly a time of change. Naturally, I am talking about the change of person in the top post: “Le Boss Grand” Christophe Diot is replaced by “Canadian Chief, Eh?” Srinivasan Keshav. Coincidence? No, my friends. This change of the guards in the most powerful position in CCR, and, by some stretch of the imagination, in SIGCOMM, and, by arbitrary extension, in the scientific world at large, is just the start of a period of change that will be later known as the Great Changes. Taking the cue from that, I say, let’s change.

1. INTRODUCTION

Our core belief that we are perfect notwithstanding, I think we can change for the better. By “we”, I mainly mean “you”, let me be honest here. In fact, I will go on a limb here and say that not only we can change, but we are already changing.

A quick example of change. Typically, I would write these columns weeks in advance, and then take my time in getting feedback from people (people here is mainly Jennifer Rexford), carefully checking the spelling and the formatting. Which, naturally, explains the sheer perfection of these columns.

Not anymore. I waited until the last moment. Keshav sent me an email¹ and then I started without having any specific idea ahead of time. How will the column turn out? No one knows. If you think about it though: how much worse can it really get? The point though is that if this is not change, I don’t know what change is.

Anyway, in our brief email exchange, I mentioned the possibility of Change as a topic and Keshav mentioned the quote: “Be the change that you want to see in the world”, by Gandhi. It is very inspirational, but more work than I planned for. I kind of like more this line: “people don’t do what they believe in, they just do what’s most convenient, then they repent” by Bob Dylan (Brownsville Girl). Some people may call me cynical. More often people call me crazy, which is largely not true. A more accurate description is that I am lazy. And let me tell you, it is surprising how the two concepts, crazy and lazy, can be confused.

Speaking of Bob Dylan, I saw an awesome movie about his life “I Am Not There”. A key artistic point of the movie was that Dylan was played by five or six different actors, including unlikely choices, such as Cate Blanchett, a brown dog, and three old spoons. It was very artistic. The point the movie tried to make was that Dylan changed over time:

¹Technically, the email was titled “Please don’t send a column”, but the real point was to remind me of the upcoming deadline.

style, persona, singing style, religion, sunglasses. Everything was changing. One particular change that I found fascinating: he became famous playing folk music on an acoustic guitar, and then he started played an electric guitar. Impressively, this lead to several instances where Dylan was heckled and booed in his concerts. By people who bought tickets to be there. Crazy!

How is this relevant to us? We have to be careful with change. Could I have found a more inspiring or relevant example to our community? Maybe, but which part of “lazy” did you not understand?

Seriously, can you imagine changing your research style, and have your fan base get mad at you? It is a fear that I constantly live with. Say, you always used to do simulations, and then, all of a sudden, you drop that and start doing implementations and experiments. Or switching from sensor networks to BGP. Imagine the justified outrage of your fans. I am telling you, our lives are not that different from that of famous musicians.

2. CHANGE IN ATTITUDE

Getting serious for a little bit, there is a change that I would love to see. We can become nice. Because right now, we are not nice. In fact, we are miserly and mean. Check your recent reviews and you will see what I am saying.

Reviewer 1

This problem does not exist. Not only that, your solution is naive and it solves a completely different problem. Given that, you should have written a different paper. Stop wasting my time.

Reviewer 2

I tried to solve the same problem and I used a different algorithm. In addition, the results from my simulations exhibit a hidden harmony. It stands to reason that your work is wrong.

Reviewer 3

I hate you. I hate your work, I hate your earlier work, and I hate your future work. I hate your students. Die, die, die.

A key question is: why are we so miserly? Some people say it is a viral thing: misery propagates. Others say it is our bloated egos. To be quite frank, I don’t care why. We have to stop.

You may ask: Michalis, you do understand that there is a need for a selection? Yes. Thus, you can’t be nice to everybody’s paper or proposal. That’s where you are wrong.

See this for example.

“I loved your paper but unfortunately I have to reject it. Don’t get me wrong: it is not you, it’s me. I started liking some other papers recently. However, you definitely made an effort to clearly define an interesting problem, though this came more near the conclusions.

I was also impressed with your mastery of math, although I failed to follow it, again, I am sure, it was my fault. I usually find it useful when one defines the symbols before using them. But this is just me.”

You get the idea. Polite, respectful, positive. And above all: constructive. The question is not whether this paper sucks, the question is what changes (again this word) are needed to make this an acceptable paper. Think about it. The reviewer should feel a kinship with the authors: if you were my children, how would I advise you to improve this paper?

True story, I swear. In another research area, a review for a journal was so constructive that the authors requested from the editor of the journal to ask the reviewer if he wanted to join them in co-authoring the paper. That’s what I am talking about. I have not heard of this in networks. If it has happened to you, I will be happy to report it next time.

I will go one step further: not being nice costs us money. Real, green, ding-ding, \$\$\$, wow, ka-ching money. This is how. Carrying over from the miserly paper reviews, people write mean comments to proposals, in addition to giving low scores. If you have been at an NSF panel, you must have heard of the problem that this creates. If the community itself is butchering their own proposals, our program managers cannot go to congress and ask for more funding:

Dear Senators,

If you see from our records, we were only able to fund 3% of the proposals that were hailed as “abysmal”, when there is at least another 5% that were in the prestigious categories of “horrific” and “irrelevant plagiarism”. It is clear that we need more funding for next year.

Good luck.

By contrast, physicists are supposed to have really high averages, which makes their arguing for more funding easier.

3. MORE CHANGE

I also asked Keshav whether I should discuss the issue of change in CCR. New leader, new ideas, change. Keshav said this would be better suited for an online discussion, so I’d better not. So here it goes.

What would I personally like CCR to do? Here is a list of things that jumped to my mind.

1. Include more funny stuff. My argument here is that laughter is good, so why not have more of it?
2. Start a series of outrageous articles. I think it is time to take the Outrageous Opinions Session and put it on paper.
3. Encourage inflammatory comments and articles. Life is short, we need more controversy. People have made a living by encouraging other people to fight (hello, Jerry Springer, I am sure other countries have their own masters of lameness). We only need to stop short of slander, attacks on family members, and the declaration of fat-was.
4. Have more pictures, especially in color. Occasionally pop-ups.
5. Give free subscriptions to other magazines, namely to National Geographic and MacLean’s, which I like.

Taking this opportunity, I would like to encourage people to email me your suggestions of cool things that CCR could

do. My email address is in the header. All serious suggestions will be discarded.

4. EVEN MORE CHANGE

Change can really change things around. We need to think outside the box or any other geometric shape inside of which we are currently thinking.

Consider haircuts: Tim Griffin shocked the world (ok, maybe it was just me) in SIGCOMM 2005, when he cut his hair² to a style Haute Couture calls “casual terrorist” or “terro-rich”.

Let’s take this further. Why not have some people show up with mohawks or mullets? By the way, the worst description of a mullet-carrier was: “I am all business at the front, party at the back”. I can just picture it: I thought this guy was all serious and boring, but then, he turned around, and oh my God, he is so much fun. Having said that, I have nothing personal against mullets, some suit their owners very well.

Why don’t we push this idea further? How about if Jim Kurose shows up with a shaved head and a nose ring in the next SIGCOMM? I would pay the full price of a tutorial to see this. How about if we use this to raise money? It can go like this: Jim will shave his head, but only if the pledge reaches \$20K, and then we donate the money to charity. We buy computers for underfunded schools, or one-laptop-per-child laptops. Jim, if you are reading this and you are tempted, I pledge the first \$100. The next \$100 can come off the profits of your best-selling book.

Note: Why Jim? I don’t know. I like him. He has been nice to me. I think he cares about people in general. Maybe I don’t know him enough in order to not like him. Who knows? As it is though, I think he is 85% goodness, which is more than I can say for most people I know or myself, for that matter. However, note that this number is a rough estimate, the actual percentage of goodness in Jim can vary. Please send me your numbers, if you have more accurate measurements. I will be happy to post an errata, and show the variance.

Just to set the record straight: I have not socialized this idea with Jim, for which I apologize to him in advance. However, I think it is a great idea and we should do it. Jim, think of the children... or something.

Jim, seriously, are you game?

5. LAST SECTION

Here is my personal pledge for change. In my next column, I will be serious.

I am just joking. The real pledge is to change the style and the participation structure of this column. First, instead of prose, I will use poetry. Second, instead of doing this alone, I would like more people to participate. That’s it: an anthology of poems based loosely on computer networks. TS Eliot meets Jimi Hendrix. It is not quite the same, but it sounds cool. Anyway, send me your poems. Poetic style, length, theme, everything is up to you.

²In fact, the most observant among you may remember my obscure yet loud reference to his hair in my Outrageous Opinions Section in 2005, “Metarouting”, that involved a picture making fun of his new hair style with the comment: “We need a new out-look”. I showed this to Tim before the talk, because I wanted to make sure that I did not offend him. Also, recall that Tim chaired the that session holding a baseball bat.