

You Must Be Joking... Warns You: Don't Drink and Type

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ABSTRACT

I would like to apologise to both of my fans (which I will call Tom and Jerry respecting their request for anonymity for obvious reasons) for missing my column in the last issue. Their response was extremely flattering although the points of “silence is gold” and “measure twice, speak once, fool you thrice” kept appearing in their emails.

1. JIM GRAY WENT MISSING

It is my sad duty to report that Jim Gray has been missing since Jan 28th, when he went out sailing with his boat alone. The story has received wide publicity with a significant outpour of support and major efforts for his recovery. Jim Gray has been an outstanding researcher with many awards and recognitions, including a Turing award. However, on times like these, one realizes how fragile and ephemeral human life is.

2. TCCC STRIKES BACK

Who needs youtube when you can read tccc? The only difference is that tccc¹ is not on demand. You have to wait for the communal inspiration to address the big problems that our community faces, with solutions devised in five minutes or less. And while drunk. Because nothing else can explain the brilliance of the suggestions that come out.

Warning: The following text may contain language and content that some readers, particularly the tccc problem-solvers, may find offensive. Reader discretion is advised.

I will do my best to not point to specific people, not because I am sensitive, but because I don't have to. The observed phenomenon is best described as mass hysteria. The only thing that comes close to that is the mass hysteria over the monkey-man in India. I am not making this up. Quite frankly, I don't think I could even if I wanted to. Apparently, in some city in India 3-4 years back, according to an Indian colleague of mine, people started believing that there is monkey-man roaming around. Think of an Indian version of the Yeti or something. There was a report first that inspired the easily-suggestible minds to file more reports. So far, nothing different compared to sightings of UFOs. However, in the case of the monkey-man, the hype reached the levels of unwarranted mass hysteria: there was a wide spread panic over the monkey-man, who I note, was not even a gorilla, just a mere monkey. Of course, things

¹See <https://lists.cs.columbia.edu/mailman/listinfo/tccc> for details.

started to get worse when the monkey-man starting claiming human lives! You heard me, the monkey-man claimed human lives. You can easily imagine what would happen if someone shouted “The monkey-man hath cometh, for the love of Ganesh, run” in a busy flea-market at noon. It is reported that many people were trampled to death or fell off balconies. “Sir, why did you jump of the third floor window?” “I had no choice, the monkey-man was coming.” And as the monkey-man kept claiming lives, the scarier its name became, thus increasing its power to inflict panic and claim more lives. In fact, there were people that claimed that they saw him/her/it. It is easy to see that such a spiral of death and fear is a self-feeding loop, a control system with positive gain, a self-fulfilling prophesy of doom, the circle of life (Lion King). But let's not get carried away. This hysteria that nearly eliminated modern India as we know it was finally stopped. I have heard rumors that an IIT undergraduate proved that the monkey-man is equivalent to a weapon of mass destruction, thus convincing its countrymen that it does not exist. Weird stuff, eh?

The monkey-man. Unbelievable.

Anyway, back to mundane topics. The new year kicked off well with a “BAD review(er)s. Is there a solution?” posting. The thread went crazy, of course. There are many good ideas, there are many (way many more) unreasonable ideas, and all around it was tremendous fun to read. The postings had a fascinating mix of: (a) genuine interest and care, (b) self-importance and arrogance, (c) insightful observations, (d) cluelessness, (e) romantic ideas, and (f) a firm belief that unicorns exist. All around, it was brilliant. Of course, as with any good idea, we had some spin-off threads, like: (a) “Bad Reviews”, which attempted to discuss the issue of single-blind or double-blind reviews, but died only with 3 postings, and (b) “Where do bad reviews come from?” which asks the questions: where do bad reviews come from? The insightful first step in answering this question was that bad reviews come from bad reviewers, which I am sure you could not have seen it coming. Of course, if you think about it, we are the reviewers, and using Socratic reasoning², we are also the bad reviewers. But on a second thought, nay, that can't be right.

A really interesting thread was the “Reviewer ratings in EDAS” by Schulzrinne, the king of EDAS³, and for this alone we owe him big. Henning was contemplating adding

²A term I coined just now to refer to logic problems of the sort: “Socratis is a man”, “all men are mortal”, “Socartis is mortal”, “Socratis is all men”, “Socratis, who is your daddy?” etc.

³See <http://www.edas.info/index.php>.

a reviewer score for each person, which is a very good idea, that I don't think it can hurt. If you do not want to consider it, don't. However, Henning made the mistake of soliciting feedback from the community. What a rookie mistake. Although the previous threads were entertaining, this thread is the winner for me. Henning's question is very specific and practical, but it resulted in an unprecedented mass hysteria. I would give it a 0.8 in the monkey-man scale, which is by now the international standard of measuring large-scale hysteria.

You probably think I am exaggerating. As a proof of concept, I highlight some suggestions that were heard. You may say that I take them out of context, misinterpret them, and ridicule them. I answer with another question: so?

There are no bad reviews, just bad papers. How cool is that? Here "bad" reviews means reviews that do not praise your paper. It basically assumes that people are complaining because not all reviews are positive. Of course, even if all reviews are positive, we still have to pick the best how-many percent of papers, but this is something that went unnoticed. I like this approach of defining "bad". Quality is not an issue, what matters is if something pleases me or not. I think we should expand this to everyday life. For example, bad cops should be the cops that give me speeding tickets, and not the cops that are bribed or sell protection. So obviously, if someone says we have to address the issue of bad cops, the answer is, there are no bad cops, just people that speed. It is brilliant. For people to think that, this means that they have never received a low-quality, unjust, unsubstantiated review. I would like to meet these people.

We should pay reviewers \$15 per paper they review. Brilliant. This would definitely encourage reviewers to do a good job. Absolutely. Who would ever make the complicated calculation that by doing a 1000 reviews per year, you pocket a cool \$15K? Sweet franklins here I come. One could argue that 1000 reviews may be too many and take too much time, but they don't, if you spend less than 5-10 minutes per review. And hey, as we already established above, there are no bad reviews, just bad papers.

Taking this a bit further, this give me an idea for the next blockbuster web-service: ReviewsRUs.com. Hey, hey, it is my idea, hands off. My plan is to be the intermediary of reviewing needs and a large semi-skilled population of reviewers. I have even thought of the initial levels of service: (a) basic, where the review uses predominantly meaningful keywords, (b) advanced, where the review paraphrases statements of the paper into questions, and (c) deluxe, where highly literate people read the abstract and cut and paste from a large database of reviewer comments. Clearly, it works best if I am assigned conferences as a whole so that all reviews are of the same level of ... quality. I have not yet decided whether I will outsource my company, but I am waiting to hear from my capital investors about this.

Many things in life are not perfect, deal with it. It sounds kind of philosophical and stoic⁴ that for a moment makes you think. But then, this argument can be applied

⁴In fact, Stoics were philosophers, so this is an element of poor writing. Interestingly, stoicism, founded by Zenon, teaches that self-control, fortitude and detachment from distracting emotions, sometimes interpreted as an indifference to pleasure or pain, allows one to become a clear thinker, level-headed and unbiased (Wikipedia). The word stoicism comes from the greek word "stoa" which means the covered walkway, say around a temple. It is funny to think that stoicism comes from the Greeks, known

everywhere. I can easily imagine a 50,000 year old dialogue:

– It is too cold. I think we can use the fire to warm up the cave.

– Temperature is not perfect, deal with it. And what is this nonsense about cooking food? Enough whining!

The new order: The other point that was made was put so well that I only quote verbatim:

"At last: for those who complaint bad reviewers, you guys should live with them. Please just make your papers much better, which is the only solution; -- STOP COMPLAINTS."

That's when enlightenment grabbed me by the horns. So far, I have been obviously churning out inferior-quality papers, because I did not know any better. I used to just hope for good reviews, and I was getting upset when they were bad, where of course bad here means negative. I have a seen the light at last.

Then, at an unsuspecting moment, and when it was clear that the problem of bad reviews has been either solved by the flurry of messages, or it did not exist in the first place, a new thread was created: "Review Quality of NSF proposals". Initially, I thought that this was going to be yet another mail-storm, and I braced for it. I was so wrong. The were only 4 messages posted on this topic by two people: the original poster⁵ and a professor/ex-NSF program manager, who I happen to know and like. The latter assured us that NSF reviewing, though not perfect, is overall fair. The community seems to agree with this statement since none felt that they had something to add to this.

Anyway, I decided to start a website on reviewing issues, please send me interesting links:

<http://www.cs.ucr.edu/michalis/reviewing.html>

In conclusion, threads like this make this column practically write itself. I love you guys. However, for your own good, don't drink and type.

for their lack of passion and level-headedness. Oh, yes, and we don't care about pleasures either.

⁵Here, I make the leap of faith that english is a language that obeys grammatical rules, so I use the noun "poster" to imply the person that posts something, akin to the noun "employer" being the person that employs someone else.