

Opening SIGIR conference

(Wessel Kraaij, general co-chair SIGIR 2007, on July 24 2007)

Good morning, welcome to the Netherlands, welcome to Amsterdam! It's a special honour for the Dutch IR community as a whole to be your host at the 30th annual ACM SIGIR conference.

We are delighted that the conference has attracted so many participants. But this fact also means that that we are really operating at the limits of the facilities that we are using. It will be crowded at times and the plenary sessions are screened in an additional room to accommodate over 600 delegates. We kindly ask for your understanding, as we continue to work hard to make this a successful and comfortable conference for you.

2007 is a memorable year for SIGIR:

On April 4, our community was saddened by the loss of Karen Spärck Jones who has been active in the field of information processing for some 50 years. Karen has been a very influential person in the domain of information retrieval and natural language processing, staying active even after her retirement. This conference will be different without her remarkable presence on one of the front rows. We would like to dedicate this conference to her memory.

The ACM Committee on Women recognized Karen's achievements by naming her as the 2007 ACM Athena lecturer. It is a great honour that Karen did record an acceptance lecture for viewing at this SIGIR conference. I would like to invite everybody and - especially those delegates that never met her - to attend the ACM Athena award session on Thursday morning, where the video recording of her last lecture will be shown.

In 2007, SIGIR also celebrates its 30th anniversary. In life, turning 30 usually means: playing time is over, one has to get serious, make choices and start to think of the next generation.

SIGIR seems to be fully ready for these steps. The conference has grown significantly over the last 5 years, both in terms of the number of participants as in terms of the number of accepted papers, without compromising quality standards. I think it is worth while to reflect a bit on factors that could potentially explain the increased interest in IR and in order to judge whether the high attendance numbers are outliers or whether we are facing a real trend. One of the potential factors is mentioned in Karen Spärck Jones Athena lecture: she observes that IR is not a remote field of computer science anymore, as it was in the 70ies and 80ies, when computing was synonymous with programming languages, operating systems, compiler design etc. She sees the increased interest for Natural Language Information Processing as a natural step forward, in a period where tools and methods are more or less consolidated in computer science. Secondly, Peter J. Denning (a former ACM president) argued in the latest issue of CACM that computing in the sense of information processing is increasingly accepted as a general framework interacting with core processes from natural sciences such as biology, physics and social sciences such as economics and sociology. To a certain extent, both effects might be additive. In other words: since IR has become more central for computing and computing has

become more important for sciences as a whole, IR and information processing in general have the potential to become key areas of study.

Finally, I think the fact that search technology has become so pervasive in almost everybody's professional and private lives is also a strong determinant for the increased interest in our field.

So, indeed the science of (digital) information processing, subsuming IR proper, seems to have a broad impact and appeal for many young researchers. Therefore my conclusion is that the growth of SIGIR is not a temporary phenomenon and that there is a potential for SIGIR to grow even further.

Question is of course, whether growing is necessarily a good thing? Organizing such a conference will become an even bigger challenge for volunteers and significant growth can also change the atmosphere of the conference itself.

Growing might be the best choice though, since rejecting high quality papers for space reasons would eventually hurt the conference (fortunately all accepted papers could be accommodated this year, based on an almost identical acceptance rate as last year). Staying attractive for the new generation of researchers -- (the digital natives) that have grown up with the web, that are used to multitasking on chat-channels, twitter and blogs, and who associate the web with hyped life-style artifacts, -- staying attractive for this group will be a challenge, since several other related conferences do attract a lot of interest and new conferences are initiated in the field. But the fact that there are a lot of hyped technologies also means there will be an even stronger need for a quality community like SIGIR to separate the wheat from the chaff. A second key issue for staying in good shape is to keep the conference interesting for sponsors and to make the link with practitioners. This helps to keep the conference budget healthy, but also keeps the IR research and education agenda well in touch with real IR problems as faced by industry and practitioners.

Let's get back to the programme of this week. The conference has the usual format, so regulars will find it easy to plan their conference time.

There are some novelties though:

On Friday, the first SIGIR Industry Event will take place, promoting the interaction between researchers, vendors and IR practitioners. The programme consists of talks discussing recent R&D results from small and big vendors, from several continents, and a series of research challenges, presented by practitioners. Participation is on an invitation basis.

I would also like to mention the my.sigir2007 community site. This is a closed web environment, only accessible for conference delegates, with a wealth of information about getting around and places of interest in Amsterdam. More importantly (and this is the reason why it is a closed environment), the site enables any of you to post text, slides or photos to your personal weblog, provide comments on program items or provide pointers to additional information of interest.

Finally, I hope you all appreciate the CD-ROM version of the proceedings, which, on popular demand, has been equipped with a **full-text search function!**

I would like to conclude this opening address by thanking the various program committees for creating an outstanding programme, our sponsors for their generous financial contribution and local organizers CWI, University of Twente, University of Amsterdam, Thaisis and TNO for the use of their facilities and support. We hope you will enjoy the great conference programme and have reserved some time to visit Amsterdam and the Netherlands.

Thank you.

References

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- Spärck Jones, K 2007. Natural Language and the Information Layer. *proceedings of the 30th ACM SIGIR Conference, 2007*, pp. 3-7.