

Conference Recovery During a Time of Disaster*

Sorel Reisman

COMPSAC Standing Committee Chair

■ **THIS ARTICLE DESCRIBES** the chronology/rationale for decisions that resulted in COMPSAC 2020 being held neither as a physical nor virtual conference, but as an “unconference” conference. In COMPSAC’s “unconference” format, author submissions were received, collected, reviewed, processed, published, and archived in the IEEE Xplore and Computer Society digital libraries—ultimately presenting the conference content in those libraries as if it had been conducted in a traditional conference format. We hope that this article will be useful for conference organizers who might find themselves facing situations similar to ours as they make plans for the coming year. We also hope that the article will be informational for conference attendees to understand some of the decisions that face organizers during both “normal” times as well as “unusual” times such as those that we will likely be facing for the foreseeable future.

In December 2019, the volunteer organizing committee of the IEEE Computer Society’s annual signature conference on computers, software, and applications (COMPSAC) was conducting its preconference activities, all targeted towards the 2020 conference scheduled for July,

in Madrid, Spain. The National Distance Education University and its next-door neighbor, the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid had agreed to be the venue for the conference. The 2020 website (www.compsac.org) had been launched immediately following the 2019 conference at Marquette University, highlighting a new theme—*Driving Intelligent Transformation of the Digital World*. The Madrid site had been visited, meeting rooms and halls selected, menus for on-site refreshments chosen, hotel room and banquet facilities approved, etc. As well, almost all the infrastructure activities—most never seen or even considered by attendees, were almost complete. These included IEEE’s approval of our budget, deployment and testing of the systems and procedures for handling paper submissions, reviews, and author notifications; testing of registration services; vendor payment services; and program and proceedings publication services. Decisions had been made regarding how/when papers were to become available—both during the conference and in Xplore and the Computer Society Digital Library (CSDL). At the end of 2019 and beginning in January 2020, submissions were being submitted to EasyChair, the web-based conference management software system we used to manage our submissions and their review. In short, things were proceeding as planned for Madrid.

And even as the committee was carrying out its 2020 operational activities, senior

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volunteers were already working toward COMPSAC 2021. A notable aspect of COMPSAC is that the venue moves every year, from Europe, to Asia, to the U.S., and then back to Europe. In January 2020, we were already discussing possible sites for a 2021 Asian conference. In 2019, some of us had already visited Beijing and discussed with Chinese colleagues the possibility of holding the 2021 conference in Beijing, Xi'an, or perhaps Wuhan. So on January 13, 2020, when the World Health Organization (WHO) announced a coronavirus case in Thailand, the news caught our attention—especially because the patient had recently traveled from Wuhan (<https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/13-01-2020-who-statement-on-novel-coronavirus-in-thailand>). But since we were a long way from a final decision about a 2021 Asian venue, we really were not too concerned. Who could imagine how things would change so dramatically in the next six weeks?

In mid-January, with no thoughts about viruses, we were beginning to finalize plans for our annual, two-day Program Committee (PC) meeting to be held in Toronto late in March. The PC meeting is where conference organizers make final acceptance/rejection decisions about long and short papers, select best papers, confer about submissions for the other formats (i.e., workshops, posters, etc.), and discuss session formats and different policies for the upcoming conference. However, within a few days, news about virus outbreaks, in Wuhan and then in other parts of the world was starting to make headlines. And those headlines were alarming. In the next few weeks, we began receiving emails from our international team of conference organizers about their institutions' travel alerts—that they were going to be prohibited from traveling to Toronto for the PC meeting. By the end of February, so many were unable to travel that we decided to conduct the PC meeting via Zoom. At that time, we also started to consider alternatives for the conference should the virus become a pandemic.

A side note: For years it has been common practice among IEEE volunteers to conduct virtual meetings with WebEx, the virtual meeting system that Cisco acquired in 2007. While WebEx tends to be an enterprise-oriented application,

some of us were familiar with the then neophyte, Zoom, the virtual meeting system started by an ex Cisco executive. The notions of self-muting, workrooms, screen sharing, and the now infamous Zoom-bombing were then still largely unknown to Zoom users.

In any case, at the beginning of March, we were completing negotiations and being asked to sign agreements with Madrid locales that we were planning to use for the hotels, reception, banquet, etc., some requiring nonrefundable deposits. On March 11, the World Health Organization declared the virus outbreak to be a pandemic. It was clear then, from the reports of renowned, international scientists that the virus was not going to be gone by July. As scientists ourselves, we decided that we had no choice but to assume that the viability of the July meeting was at best problematic and that we needed to reconsider our plans, especially in light of our possibly losing nonrefundable deposits if we were to sign those agreements.

We were faced with a quandary. Canceling the conference, which was one possibility, seemed to us to be unfair to the hundreds of authors who had written/submitted articles for our consideration. It would also negate the hundreds of hours of review time already expended by our volunteer reviewers. So how could we complete the reviews, send out acceptance letters, and at the same time provide authors with a definite decision regarding the location of the July meeting? We did not want authors whose papers were accepted to immediately buy airplane tickets for a venue that might not take place as planned. At the same time, many other conferences, scheduled for April, May, and June were canceling their venues; few, if any conversations were taking place among other conference organizers about “virtualizing” their conferences. Discussions focused on canceling or delaying scheduled events.

At the beginning of April we decided, before sending acceptance/rejection notification letters to authors, that the fair thing to do was to cancel the physical venue and inform authors about that in their letters. At the same time, we decided to maintain our paper submission schedule, and to process and review papers as they arrived. Our goal was to ensure that

COMPSAC continue its history of producing high quality proceedings for inclusion in CSDL and IEEE Xplore. A break in that annual series could affect the ranking and rating of subsequent COMPSAC conferences.

So, we decided to cancel the physical event, to continue the review process, and to produce a peer reviewed conference proceedings to be included in our digital libraries. After all, at the end of the day we thought that after a conference is over, publication of the papers in proceedings in the CSDL and IEEE Xplore are mostly what remains as the legacy of a conference and the work of the authors. Keynote speakers, welcomes, banquets, etc., are rarely archived in our digital libraries. [Note that as events have transpired since last Spring, more and more conferences have reconsidered how to include such items in conference digital library archives.]

Having made the decision to cancel the physical event, the organizing committee decided to pass on to authors the benefit of our reduced costs for operating as an “unconference.” While some seem to think that there should be negligible costs to organize an event this way, in fact that is simply not the case. There are sunk costs incurred in planning, announcing, and promoting a conference, even if it is canceled. As well, planning for the next year’s conference would already be underway, having also already incurred costs. While we were not sure at the end of March what our 2020 operating costs would be—none of us had been in this situation before—we decided that an almost 50% cut in registration fees would be reasonable considering that authors of accepted papers would not have to incur all the costs of travel to/from Madrid—saving them a significant amount of money and time.

One of the key issues that arose among conference organizers was whether to require authors of accepted papers to submit “recorded” versions of their presentations to accompany their papers. Most of our senior volunteers felt that unless we were prepared to review such presentations to ensure that their content aligned with their papers, we should not make that a requirement. At the time it was not clear whether our various information systems were suitable and

adaptable to allow for collecting, archiving, and playback of such presentations, and we were not sure what specifications, in terms of file types and sizes would be appropriate for such data. IEEE’s policies regarding copyrights and the hosting of these additional kinds of media were not then clear to us. Bear in mind that we were among the first to have to consider such issues. Since then, IEEE and the Computer Society have provided guidance to conference organizers facing similar decisions, and fortunately for those following us, much more specific guidance is now available. For example, it is now clear that it is possible to collect voice-over-PowerPoint presentations and archive them in our digital libraries together with their associated papers. The specifications for such files are now well-defined; copyright issues regarding those files have been cleared up by IEEE; and it is now common practice among virtualized conferences to collect such unreviewed multimedia files and archive them together with their associated, reviewed papers.

Another important issue that the committee discussed was how do we somehow offer registrants the ability to “meet” with each other and to interact with authors of the papers. After all, one of the benefits of attending a conference such as COMPSAC is to provide attendees the opportunity to “network” with other attendees. How might we do that in an “unconference” format? A variety of possibilities are available to address that requirement, including IEEE’s Collaboratec, Slack, open-source forums, etc., but we decided that the effort to adopt one and to provide continuous monitoring of posts was simply not worth the effort.

Through June, more and more conferences faced the kinds of decisions that we had faced earlier in the year. Consequently, IEEE and the Computer Society have developed and launched guidelines to enable conference organizers to address such matters. Today, conferences do not have to be canceled, nor do they have to become “unconferences” because of this ongoing pandemic crisis. More and more, conferences now have the option of becoming completely virtual, with a real conference program, with scheduled, online sessions. Notably, (and selfishly), one of the benefits to our

deciding to be an “unconference” was that we did not have to expend energy and resources to develop, publish, and manage a conference program. Nevertheless, as the tools to provide online sessions started to become available, in late May, we decided to use them to offer one, daily, live, plenary panel during the planned conference days—July 14, 15, and 16. All conference registrants were provided access to these plenary sessions.

As we start to consider COMPSAC 2021, we have decided that if the virus has subsided and the world has returned to normal, we will hold the conference in Madrid, from July 12–16, 2021. We intend to “clone” our original plans with the same team and in the same venue as 2020, but with the completely new conference theme—*Intelligent and Resilient Computing for a*

Collaborative World. So put those dates in your calendar.

If corona virus-related matters continue to be problematic, there are other models now available for us to consider. While I believe that it is likely that we will face similar decisions next February and March as we did this year, we now have more options. With IEEE’s and the Computer Society’s systems, policies, and practices now available, and with the experience (and pain) garnered from other conferences, we will be able to organize completely online sessions, including author presentations with registrant networking and with a published program schedule. So, depending on circumstances, we will be there in Madrid, or we will be completely online, or we may offer a hybrid version. But with a certainty, COMPSAC 2021 will not be an unconference!