

CLEF 15th Birthday: Past, Present, and Future

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Abstract

2014 marks the 15th birthday for CLEF, an evaluation campaign activity which has applied the Cranfield evaluation paradigm to the testing of multilingual and multimodal information access systems in Europe. This paper provides a summary of the motivations which led to the establishment of CLEF, and a description of how it has evolved over the years, the major achievements, and what we see as the next challenges.

1 Introduction

Performance measuring is a key to scientific progress. This is particularly true for research concerning complex systems, whether natural or human-built. Multilingual and multimedia information systems are particularly complex: they need to satisfy diverse user needs and support challenging tasks. Their development calls for proper evaluation methodologies to ensure that they meet the expected user requirements and provide the desired effectiveness.

Large-scale worldwide experimental evaluations provide fundamental contributions to the advancement of state-of-the-art techniques through the establishment of common evaluation procedures, the organisation of regular and systematic evaluation cycles, the comparison and benchmarking of proposed approaches, and the spreading of knowledge.

The *Conference and Labs of the Evaluation Forum (CLEF)*¹ is a large-scale *Information Retrieval (IR)* evaluation initiative organised in Europe but involving researchers world-wide. CLEF shares the stage and coordinates with the other major evaluation initiatives in the field, namely: the *Text REtrieval Conference (TREC)*², the first large-scale evaluation activity in the field of IR, which began in 1992; the *NII Testbeds and Community for Information access Research (NTCIR)*³, which promotes research in information access technologies with a special focus on East Asian languages and English; and the *Forum for Information Retrieval Evaluation (FIRE)*⁴, whose aim is to encourage research in Indian languages by creating a platform similar to CLEF, providing data and a common forum for comparing models and techniques applied to these languages.

¹<http://www.clef-initiative.eu/>

²<http://trec.nist.gov/>

³<http://research.nii.ac.jp/ntcir/>

⁴<http://www.isical.ac.in/~clia/>

This year marks the 15th birthday of CLEF, which began as an independent activity in 2000. The goal of this report is to provide a short overview of what motivated the setting up of CLEF, what has happened in CLEF during these years, and how CLEF has evolved to keep pace with emerging challenges.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 describes the beginning and the first period of CLEF, the so-called “CLEF Classic” period; Section 3 introduces the second (and current) period of CLEF, known as the “CLEF Initiative” period; Sections 4 and 5 give an idea of the spread and extension of CLEF activities by providing a short account of the topics addressed in the conference, tracks and labs over the years together with pointers to papers providing more details; Section 6 attempts to provide an assessment of the status of CLEF in the IR community; finally, Section 7 presents the CLEF Association, the no-profit legal entity committed to sustaining and running CLEF.

2 CLEF “Classic”: 2000–2009

The *Cross-Language Evaluation Forum* (CLEF) began as a cross-lingual track at TREC in 1997 [240], moving to an independent activity in 2000 [193].

The underlying motivation for CLEF was the “Grand Challenge” formulated at the *Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AAAI)* 1997 Spring Symposium on Cross-Language and Speech Retrieval [119]. The ambitious goal was the development of fully multilingual and multimodal information access systems capable of:

- processing a query in any medium and any language;
- finding relevant information from a multilingual multimedia collection containing documents in any language and form;
- presenting it in the style most likely to be useful to the user.

The main objective of CLEF has thus been to promote research and stimulate development of multilingual and multimodal IR systems for European (and non-European) languages, through:

- the creation of an evaluation infrastructure and the organisation of regular evaluation campaigns for system testing;
- the building of a multidisciplinary research community;
- the construction of publicly available test-suites.

CLEF has pursued this objective by attempting to anticipate the emerging needs of the R&D community and to promote the development of multilingual and multimodal systems that fulfil the demands of the AAAI 1997 Grand Challenge.

During what is jokingly referred to as the “classic” period of CLEF (2000–2009), several important results were achieved: research activities in previously unexplored areas were stimulated, permitting the growth of IR for languages other than English; evaluation methodologies for different types of *Cross Language Information Retrieval (CLIR)* and *MultiLingual Information Access (MLIA)* systems, operating in diverse domains, were studied and implemented; a

large set of empirical data about multilingual information access from the user perspective was created; quantitative and qualitative evidence with respect to best practices in cross-language system development was collected; reusable test collections for system benchmarking were developed; language resources for a wide range of European languages, some of which had been little studied, were built. Perhaps, most important, a strong, multidisciplinary, and active research community focussed mainly, but not only, on IR for European languages came into being.

If we had to summarize the major outcome of CLEF in this period with just one sentence, we could safely say that CLEF has made multilingual IR for European languages a reality, with performances as satisfactory as monolingual ones.

3 The CLEF Initiative: 2010 Onwards

The second period of CLEF started with a clear and compelling question: after a successful decade studying multilinguality for European languages, what were the main unresolved issues currently facing us? To answer this question, CLEF turned to the CLEF community to identify the most pressing challenges and to list the steps to be taken to meet them.

The discussion led to the definition and establishment of the *CLEF Initiative*, whose main mission is to promote research, innovation, and the development of information access systems with an emphasis on multilingual and *multimodal* information with various levels of structure.

In the CLEF Initiative an increased focus is on the *multimodal* aspect, intended not only as the ability to deal with information coming in multiple media but also in different modalities, e.g. the Web, social media, news streams, specific domains and so on. These different modalities should, ideally, be addressed in an integrated way; rather than building vertical search systems for each domain/modality the interaction between the different modalities, languages, and user tasks needs to be exploited to provide comprehensive and aggregated search systems.

The continuity with the first period of CLEF on multilinguality and this increased attention for multimodality has led to the definition of a set of action lines for the CLEF Initiative:

- multilingual and multimodal system testing, tuning and evaluation;
- investigation of the use of unstructured, semi-structured, highly-structured, and semantically enriched data in information access;
- creation of reusable test collections for benchmarking;
- exploration of new evaluation methodologies and innovative ways of using experimental data;
- discussion of results, comparison of approaches, exchange of ideas, and transfer of knowledge.

This is reflected in the new tasks offered by CLEF, as described in the next two sections.

The new challenges for CLEF also called for a renewal of its structure and organization. The annual CLEF meeting is no longer a Workshop, held in conjunction with the European Digital Library Conference, but has become an independent event, held over 3.5-4 days and made up of two interrelated activities: the *Conference* and the *Labs*. The *Conference* is a peer-reviewed conference, open to the IR community as a whole and not just to *Lab* participants, and aims at stimulating discussion on innovative evaluation methodologies and fostering a deeper analysis and

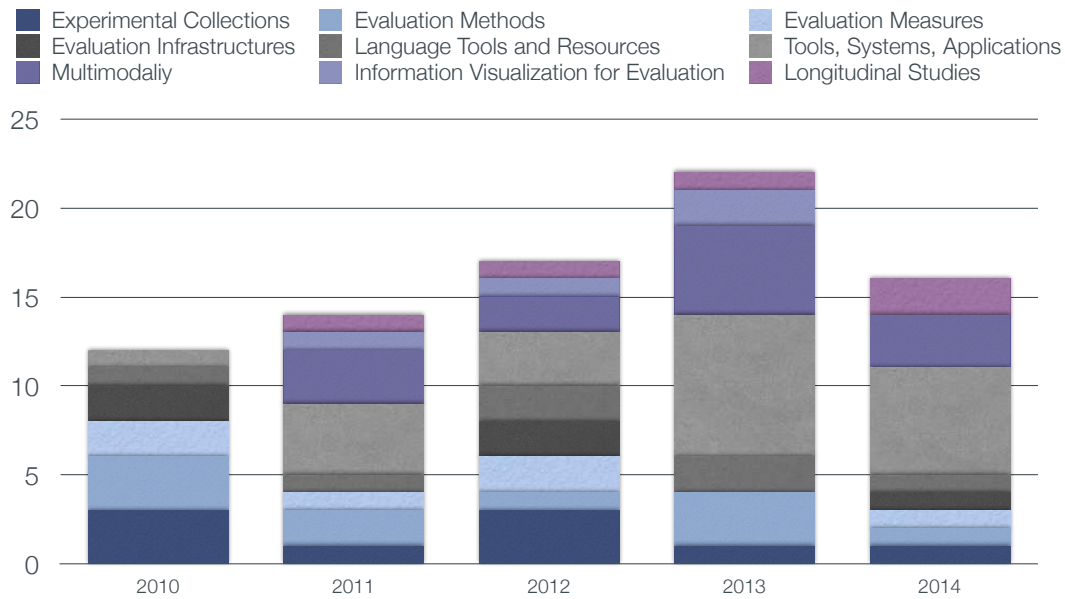


Figure 1: Topics addressed by the CLEF conference over the years and number of submissions for each topic.

understanding of experimental results. The *Labs* are the core of the evaluation activities; they are selected on the basis of topical relevance, novelty, potential research impact, the existence of clear real-world use cases, a likely number of participants, and the experience of the organizing consortium. The *Conference* and the *Labs* are expected to interact, bringing new interests and new expertise into CLEF.

In order to favour participation and the introduction of new perspectives, CLEF now has an open-bid process which allows research groups and institutions to bid to host the annual CLEF event and to propose themes. The bidding process follows a two-year cycle, i.e. in December 2014 bids to host CLEF 2017 will be solicited.

The new challenges and the new organizational structure have motivated a change of name for CLEF: from the *Cross-Language Evaluation Forum*, of the “classic” period, to *Conference and Labs of the Evaluation Forum*, which now reflects the widened scope.

4 The Conference

Figure 1 gives an overview of the topics addressed by the CLEF conference over the years, together with the number of submissions for each topics, as briefly summarized below with pointers to the main references:

Experimental Collections explored different issues concerning experimental collections such as: the creation of collections for Persian and Arabic languages; resource-effective creation of pseudo-test collections for specialised tasks; log-based experimental collections; collections for specific domains, e.g. question answering and plagiarism detection [27, 31, 32, 62, 90, 162, 216, 259, 266];

Evaluation Methods studied core problems related to evaluation methodologies and proposed new methods, such as: the reliability of relevance assessments; living labs for product search tasks; evaluation of information extraction and entity profiles; semantic-oriented evaluation of machine translation and summarization; search snippet evaluation and query simulators [25, 30, 64, 74, 120, 164, 165, 238, 239, 275];

Evaluation Measures dealt with the analysis of the features of the evaluation measures and the proposal of new measures such as: formal properties of measures for document filtering; robustness of metrics for patent retrieval; problems with ties in evaluation measures; effort-based measures and measures for speech retrieval; and extension of measures to graded relevance [15, 17, 48, 78, 91, 153];

Evaluation Infrastructures investigated how to design and develop shared infrastructures to support different aspects of IR evaluation such as: automating component-based evaluation; managing and providing access to the experimental outcomes and the related literature; using cloud-base approaches to offer evaluation services in specialised domains; developing proper ontologies to describe the experimental results; and exploiting map-reduce techniques for effective IR evaluation [4, 112, 113, 117, 150];

Language Tools and Resources continued the CLEF interest in multilinguality by dealing with tools, algorithm, and resources for multiple languages such as: lemmatizers, decompounders and normalizers for underrepresented resources using statistical approaches; named entity extraction, linking and clustering in cross-lingual settings; exploitation of multiple translation resources; and language-independent generation of document snippets [24, 37, 52, 93, 139, 144, 151]

Tools, Systems, and Applications covered the design and development of various kinds of algorithms, systems, and applications focused on multilinguality and specialised domains such as: semantic discovery of resources in cloud-based systems; Arabic question answering; cross-language similarity search using thesauri; automatic annotation of bibliographic references; exploitation of visual context in multimedia translation; sub-topic mining in Web documents; exploiting relevance feedback for building tag-clouds in image search; query expansion for image retrieval; and transcript-based video retrieval [34, 61, 63, 75, 92, 97, 106, 108, 111, 116, 132, 133, 138, 147, 148, 230, 233, 268, 271–273, 275];

Multimodality explored multimodality in the sense described in Section 3 above, i.e. the aggregation and integration of information in multiple languages, media, and coming from different domains, such as: semantic annotation and question answering in the biomedical domain; selecting success criteria in an academic library catalogue; finding similar content in different scenarios on the Web; interactive information retrieval and formative evaluation for medical professionals; microblog summarization and disambiguation; multimodal music tagging; multi-faceted IR in multimodal domains; ranking in faceted search [33, 56, 109, 110, 127, 152, 183, 184, 235, 241, 244, 245, 249];

Information Visualization for Evaluation opened up a brand new area concerned with exploiting information visualization and visual analytics techniques not only for presenting the

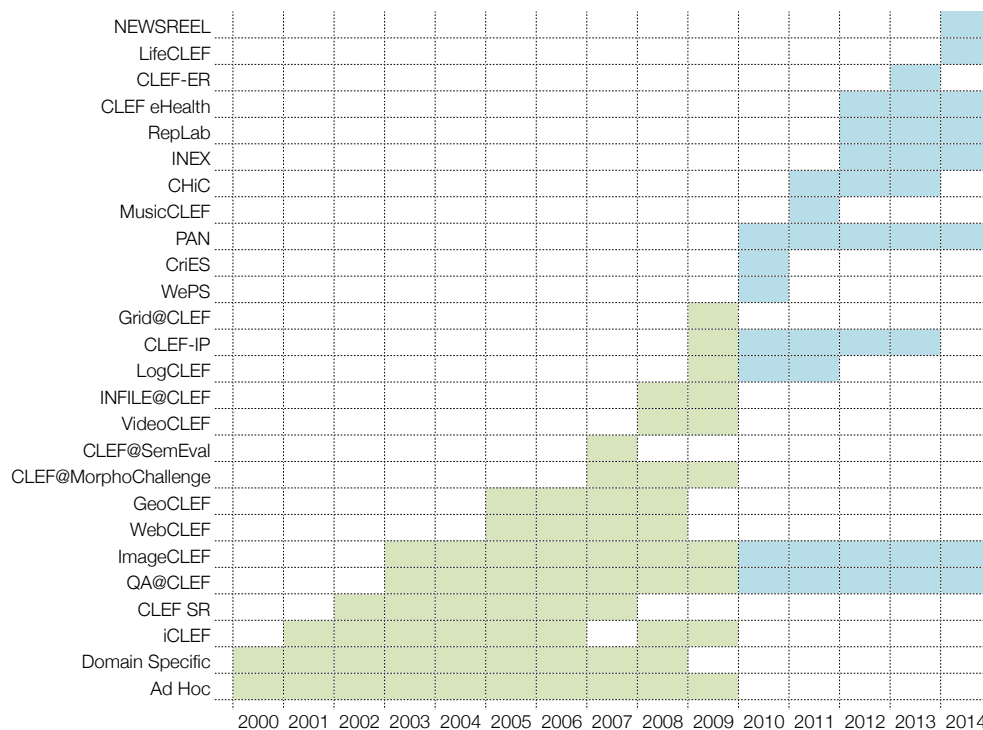


Figure 2: Labs offered by CLEF over the years (CLEF “Classic” period in green; the CLEF Initiative period in blue).

results of a search system but also for improving interaction with and exploration of experimental outcomes such as exploiting visual analytics for failure analysis; comparing the relative performances of IR systems; and visualization for sentiment analysis [19, 68, 143, 263];

Longitudinal Studies conducted various kinds of medium and long term analyses such as: the scholarly impact of evaluation initiatives; lessons learned in running evaluation activities and in specific domains; and performance trends over the years for multilingual information access [82, 163, 176, 254, 257, 270].

5 Tracks and Labs

Figure 2 provides an overview of the tracks and labs offered by CLEF over the years; these are briefly summarized below together with some pointers to relevant literature.

Ad Hoc (2000–2009) focused on multilingual information retrieval on news corpora, offering monolingual, bilingual and multilingual tasks, and developed a huge collection in 14 European languages [2, 3, 41–45, 69–71, 81];

Domain Specific (2000–2008) dealt with multilingual information retrieval on structured scientific data from the social sciences domain [42–44, 134–136, 210, 211, 246];

iCLEF (2001–2006; 2008–2009) explored different aspects of interactive information retrieval on multilingual and multimedia collections, also using gamification techniques [101–105, 130, 180, 181];

CLEF SR (2002–2007) investigated speech retrieval and spoken document retrieval in a monolingual and bilingual setting on automatic speech recognition transcripts [76, 77, 125, 182, 186, 269];

QA@CLEF (2003–2014) examined several aspects of question answering in a multilingual setting on document collections ranging from news, legal documents, medical documents, linked data [55, 88, 96, 154–156, 166, 187–192, 232, 237, 260–262];

ImageCLEF (2003–2014) studied the crosslanguage annotation and retrieval of images to support the advancement of the field of visual media analysis, indexing, classification, and retrieval [22, 50, 51, 57–60, 65–67, 98, 99, 107, 128, 149, 161, 168–173, 177–179, 220, 227, 228, 250, 252, 255, 256, 258, 264, 274];

WebCLEF (2005–2008) addressed multilingual Web search, exploring different faces of navigational queries and known-item search [26, 122, 123, 242];

GeoCLEF (2005–2008) evaluated cross-language geographic information retrieval (GIR) against search tasks involving both spatial and multilingual aspects [94, 95, 158, 160];

CLEF@SemEval (2007) explored the impact of *Word Sense Disambiguation (WSD)* on multilingual information retrieval [1]; it continued as a sub-task of the Ad Hoc lab in 2008 and 2009;

CLEF@MorphoChallenge (2007–2009) assessed unsupervised morpheme analysis algorithms using information retrieval experiments with the goal of designing statistical machine learning algorithms that discover which morphemes make up words [140–142];

VideoCLEF (2008–2009) aimed at developing and evaluating tasks related to the analysis of and access to multilingual and multimedia content with a special focus on video retrieval [145, 146]; it went on to become the MediaEval⁵ successful evaluation series, dedicated to evaluating new algorithms for multimedia access and retrieval;

INFILE@CLEF (2008–2009) experimented with cross-language adaptive filtering systems on news corpora [35, 36];

LogCLEF (2009–2011) investigated the analysis and classification of queries in order to understand search behavior in multilingual contexts and ultimately to improve search systems by offering openly-accessible query logs from search engines and digital libraries [72, 157, 159];

CLEF-IP (2009–2013) focused on various aspects of patent search and intellectual property search in a multilingual set using the MAREC collection of patents, gathered from the European Patent Office [215, 217–219, 231];

⁵<http://www.multimediaeval.org/>

Grid@CLEF (2009) piloted component-based evaluation by allowing participants to exchange the intermediate state of their systems in order to asynchronously compose components coming from different systems and experiment with a larger grid of possibilities [80];

WePS (2010) focused on person name ambiguity and person attribute extraction on Web pages and on online reputation management for organizations [11, 23]; the activity continued in the RepLab lab;

CriES (2010) was run as a brainstorming workshop and addressed the problem of multi-lingual expert search in social media environments [243];

PAN (2010–2014) studied plagiarism, authorship attribution, and social software misuse [16, 20, 100, 121, 126, 221–226];

MusicCLEF (2011) was run as a brainstorming workshop to aid the development of novel methodologies for both content-based and contextual-based (e.g. tags, comments, reviews, etc.) access and retrieval of music [185]; this activity has continued as part of MediaEval;

CHiC (2011–2013) promoted systematic and large-scale evaluation of digital libraries and, more in general, cultural heritage information access systems, using the huge Europeana dataset, aggregating information from libraries, museums, and archives [89, 212, 213];

INEX (2012–2014) was a stand-alone initiative pioneering structured and XML retrieval from 2002⁶; it joined forces with CLEF in 2012 to further promote the evaluation of focused retrieval by providing large test collections of structured documents [28, 29, 54, 137, 236, 253, 267];

RepLab (2012–2014) has been a competitive evaluation exercise for online reputation management systems; the lab focused on the task of monitoring the reputation of entities (companies, organizations, celebrities) on Twitter [12–14];

CLEF eHealth (2012–2014) focused on *Natural Language Processing (NLP)* and IR for clinical care, such as annotation of entities in a set of narrative clinical reports or retrieval of web pages based on queries generated when reading the clinical reports [131, 247, 248];

CLEF-ER (2013) was a brainstorming workshop on the multilingual annotation of named entities and terminology resource acquisition with a focus on entity recognition in biomedical text, in different languages and on a large scale [229];

LifeCLEF (2014) aimed at evaluating multimedia analysis and retrieval techniques on biodiversity data for species identification, namely images for plants, audio for birds, and video for fishes [124];

NEWSREEL (2014) focused on evaluation of news recommender systems in real-time by offering access to the APIs of a commercial system [118].

⁶<https://inex.mmci.uni-saarland.de/>

6 Trends

We present here some data on CLEF; the aim is to attempt an informal assessment of its impact on the research community.

Figure 3 shows the participation in CLEF over the years. An almost constant growth trend is exhibited, a possible consequence of the capacity of CLEF to renew itself and to attract new communities and expertise in addition to core information retrieval activities.

The final year, 2014, shows a drop in participation which is probably due to both internal and external factors. First and foremost, 2014 represents the beginning of a new challenge for CLEF, as is also discussed in Section 7. For the first time since the beginnings of CLEF, the central organisation of CLEF was not supported by any European project in 2014 but was run by a 100% voluntary effort, striving to find a way to become self-sustainable. Encouragingly, we note that CLEF 2014 was able to attain levels of participation similar to CLEF 2010 and 2011, when CLEF started to benefit from the push of the PROMISE Network of Excellence. With respect to external factors, 2014 has represented a transition between the end of the seventh framework programme of the European Commission and the start of Horizon 2020; this may have caused a gap in the funding for research projects.

Figure 4 shows the number of Labs offered by CLEF over the years. It can be noted how the new mechanism introduced for selecting labs is proving effective in restricting the number of Labs run annually, with an average of about 8 Labs per year which allows CLEF to continue successful activities for more than one cycle, typically three years, but also to introduce new activities every year.

Figure 5 shows the number of paper submitted and accepted in the CLEF Conference over the years. We see that the number of accepted papers has changed slightly over the years, almost stabilizing in the last two years, while the number of submitted papers has grown, allowing us to increase the selectivity and quality of the Conference.

The Conference part of CLEF still needs to be improved and strengthened. The challenge is to define its scope clearly so as to guarantee high quality but to avoid useless overlap with both the major venues in the field, like SIGIR, ECIR and CIKM, and also the fast growing ones, like ICTIR. However, a problem we are currently facing is related to communication: CLEF is still mostly associated with its core evaluation activities and therefore, when information is circulated about the conference, it is often viewed as just concerning the evaluation labs even though it actually represents a wider opportunity.

Assessing the impact of an evaluation activity is a very demanding task. In 2010, TREC conducted a deep study on its economic impact [234]. When it comes to the scientific and scholarly impact, we enter the realm of bibliometrics: *TREC Video Retrieval Evaluation (TRECVID)* conducted a study on its scholarly impact [251] and some steps in this direction have been performed for CLEF as well [18, 254, 257]. However, analysing the impact of evaluation activities on system performances over the years is still a research challenge, even if initial attempts have been made for both TREC [21] and CLEF [82].

Such rigorous studies are beyond the scope of the present report, here we concentrate on identifying rough indicators with respect to the maturity and liveliness of the scientific production originated by CLEF.

As far as maturity is concerned, an indicator might be found in publications critically analysing,

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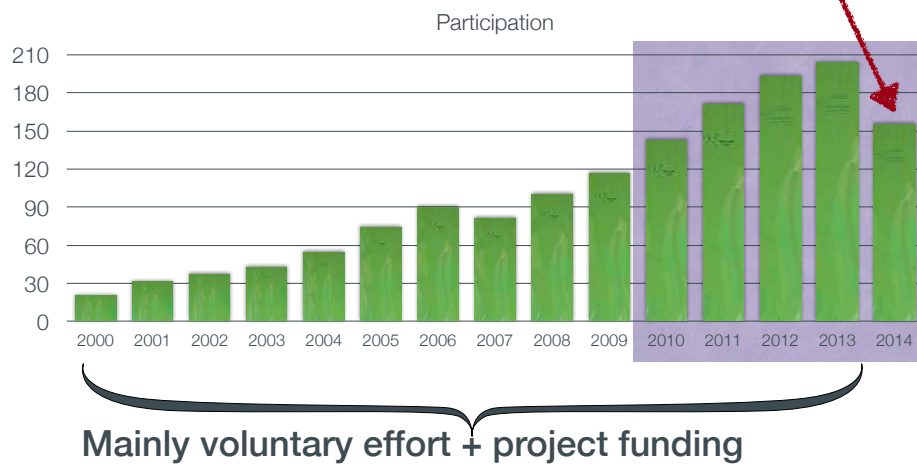


Figure 3: Participation in CLEF over the years (CLEF “Classic” period un-shaded; CLEF Initiative period shaded).

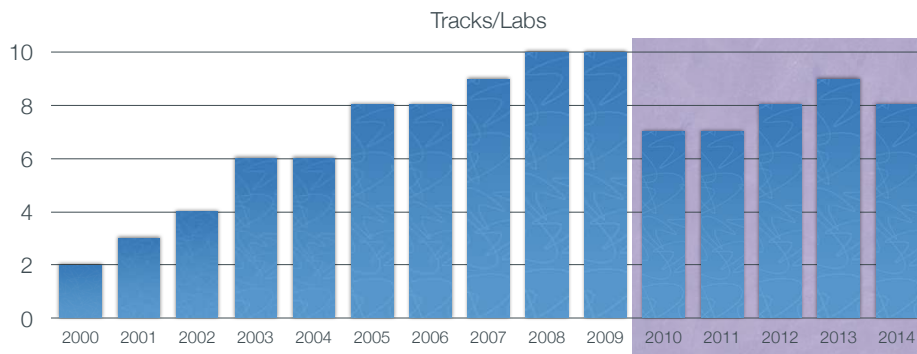


Figure 4: Number of labs offered by CLEF over the years (CLEF “Classic” period un-shaded; the CLEF Initiative period shaded).

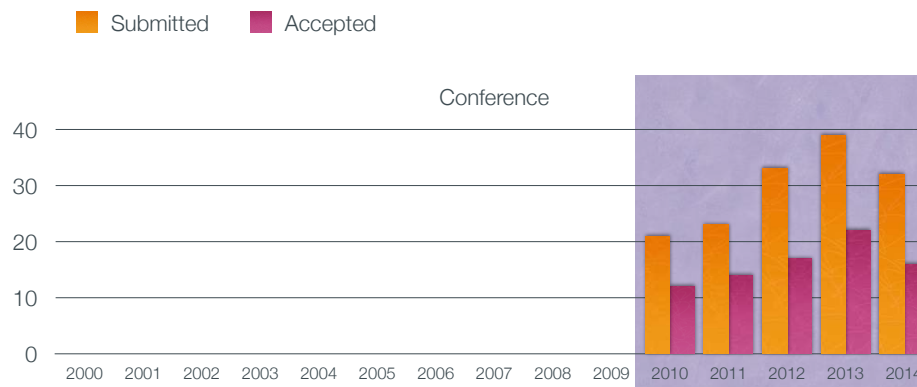


Figure 5: Number of papers submitted and accepted in the CLEF conference over the years (CLEF “Classic” period un-shaded; the CLEF Initiative period shaded).

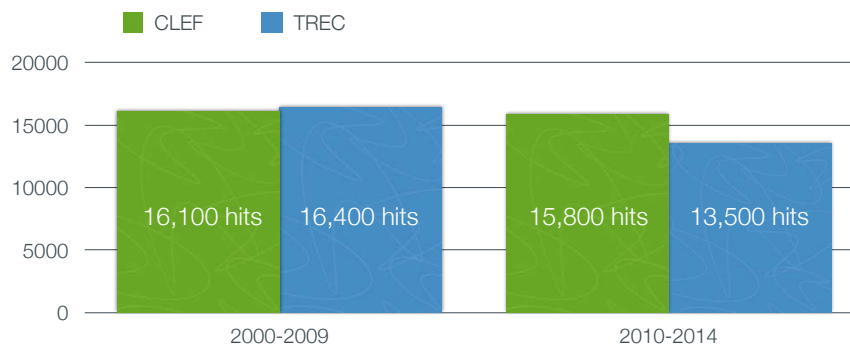


Figure 6: Hits in Google Scholar for the queries “CLEF evaluation” and “TREC evaluation” (CLEF “Classic” period on the left; the CLEF Initiative period on the right).

systematizing, and digesting the achievements, outcomes and experience; this has been done both for TREC [114, 115, 265] and CLEF [47, 167, 194].

When it comes to liveness, a noisy indicator might be Google Scholar. Figure 6 shows the number of hits for the two queries “CLEF evaluation” and “TREC evaluation”, of course a very rough and coarse-grained estimate of the scientific production produced. The goal is not to compare the two initiatives but just to have an idea of whether CLEF presents trends comparable with a leading initiative in the field. It can be seen that both TREC and CLEF exhibit similar behaviour. However, the number of hits for TREC should be considered as slightly underestimated since TREC has two spin-off activities: TRECVID in 2003 and *Text Analysis Conference (TAC)* in 2008, which are not counted⁷.

7 The CLEF Association

The CLEF Association⁸ is an independent no-profit legal entity, established in October 2013 as a result of activity of the PROMISE⁹ Network of Excellence which backed CLEF from 2010 to 2013.

The CLEF Association has scientific, cultural and educational objectives and operates in the field of information access systems and their evaluation. Its mission is:

- to promote access to information and use evaluation;
- to foster critical thinking about advancing information access and use from a technical, economic and societal perspective.

Within these two areas of interest, the CLEF Association aims at a better understanding of the use and access to information and how to improve this. The two areas of interest stated in the the above mission translate into the following objectives:

⁷In particular, the query “TAC evaluation” is extremely noisy bringing in hundreds of thousands of results from the medical domain.

⁸<http://www.clef-initiative.eu/association>

⁹<http://www.promise-noe.eu/>

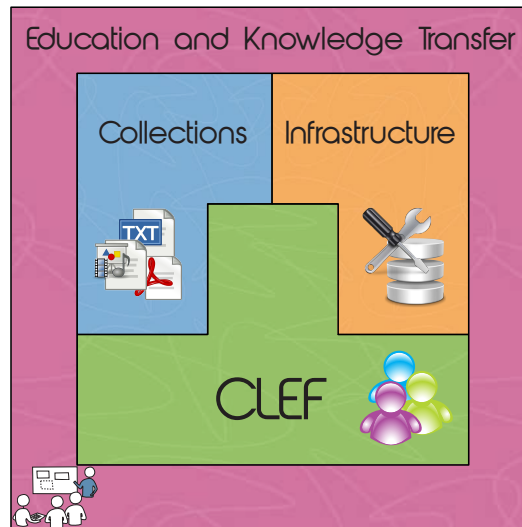


Figure 7: Pillar activities of the CLEF Association.

- *clustering stakeholders* with multidisciplinary competences and different needs, including academia, industry, education and other societal institutions;
- *facilitating medium/long-term research* in information access and use and its evaluation;
- increasing, *transferring* and applying *expertise*.

As Figure 7 shows, the CLEF Association pursues its mission and objectives via four pillar activities:

- *CLEF*: sustains and promotes the popular CLEF evaluation series as well as providing support for its coordination, organisation, and running;
- *Collections and Experimental Data*: fosters the adoption and exploitation of large-scale shared experimental collections, makes them available under appropriate conditions and trusted channels, and shares experimental results and scientific data for comparison with state-of-the-art and for reuse;
- *Infrastructure*: supports the adoption and deployment of software and hardware infrastructures which facilitate the experimental evaluation process, the sharing of experimental collections and results, and interaction with and understanding of experimental data;
- *Education and knowledge transfer*: organises educational events, such as summer schools, and knowledge transfer activities, such as workshops, aimed not only at spreading know-how about information access and use but also at raising awareness and stimulating alternative viewpoints about the technical, economic, and societal implications.

In this initial phase, the CLEF Association is focused mainly on the first pillar, i.e. ensuring the continuity and self-sustainability of CLEF. CLEF 2014 was the first edition of CLEF not

supported by a main European project, but run on a totally volunteer basis with only the support of the CLEF association membership fees paid by its multidisciplinary research community.

Moreover, the CLEF association plans to continue the already initiated activities for promoting and developing shared infrastructures and formats in IR evaluation [5, 6, 9, 18, 73, 83] by also joining forces with relevant stakeholders in the fields as well as stimulating and contributing critical thinking about large-scale evaluation initiative and IR evaluation more in general [7, 10, 79].

An additional example of the activities carried out by the CLEF Association during its first year to strengthen CLEF and extend its reach is the re-publishing of the entire CLEF Working Notes series [38–40, 46, 49, 85, 87, 174, 175, 202–205, 208, 214] under the CEUR Workshop Proceedings (CEUR-WS.org)¹⁰, which provide permanent identifiers for each volume and better indexing by relevant services such as the DBLP¹¹ computer science bibliography and Google Scholar¹².

Support for the Central Coordination of CLEF

CLEF 2000 and 2001 were supported by the European Commission under the Information Society Technologies programme and within the framework of the DELOS Network of Excellence for Digital Libraries (contract no. IST-1999-12262).

CLEF 2002 and 2003 were funded as an independent project (contract no. IST-2000-31002) under the 5th Framework Programme of the European Commission.

CLEF 2004 to 2007 were sponsored by the DELOS Network of Excellence for Digital Libraries (contract no. G038-507618) under the 6th Framework Programme of the European Commission.

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CLEF 2011 to 2014 also received support from the ELIAS network (contract no. 09-RNP-085) of the European Science Foundation (ESF).

Over the years CLEF has also attracted industrial sponsorship: from 2010 onwards, CLEF has received the support of Google, Microsoft, Yandex, Xerox, Celi as well as publishers in the field such as Springer and Now Publishers.

Note that, beyond receiving the support of all the volunteer work of its community, CLEF tracks and labs have often received the support of many other projects and organisations; unfortunately, it is impossible to list them all here.

Acknowledgements

CLEF would not be possible without all the effort, enthusiasm, and passion of its community: lab organizers, lab participants, and attendees are the core and the real success of CLEF.

We would like to sincerely and warmly thank Maristella Agosti, Donna Harman, and Carol Peters (Coordinator of CLEF 2000-2009) for their precious and continuous advice and suggestions during this journey into experimental evaluation.

¹⁰<http://ceur-ws.org/>

¹¹<http://www.informatik.uni-trier.de/~ley/db/>

¹²<http://scholar.google.com/>

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