
Chair’s Letter

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Dear IR community,

Looking back at my previous Chair’s Letter, written in November of 2019, I think to myself: what a difference six months can make in the world. As I write this, we’re in the middle of a global pandemic, and with it facing the prospect of staying home for months ahead, taking on new roles and responsibilities at home and at work, and navigating huge changes in how we connect and organize our teams and communities. Obviously there is much to figure out as we move forward, but let us view this—as much as possible—as an opportunity for growth. The whole IR community is in our thoughts, and we sincerely hope that everyone is managing during this crisis.

Shortly before the world locked down, I was able to attend both AFIRM 2020 in Cape Town and (briefly) WSDM 2020 in Houston. Though it was a 40-hour trip between them, I’m glad I did! It’s always good to see everyone, talk research (and more), and appreciate the work it takes to pull off a successful event. Thanks and congratulations to the organizers: for AFIRM, General Chairs Hussein Suleman and Tamer Elsayed and Program Chairs Tanya Berger-Wolf, Fabrizio Sebastiani, and Maria Keet; for WSDM, General Chairs James Caverlee and Xia (Ben) Hu and Program Chairs Mounia Lalmas and Wei Wang. Check out the report from AFIRM in this issue!

Although AFIRM, held during the last week of January, seemed to be unaffected by the growing crisis, many of WSDM’s authors and attendees had to cancel their travel plans. This turned out to be a sign of the future: about a month after WSDM, the organizers of CHIIR 2020, General Chairs Luanne Freund and Heather O’Brien and Program Chairs Ioannis Arapakis, Orland Hoeber, and Irene Lopatovska, made the difficult decision to cancel the conference as the incidence of COVID-19 in the US and Canada began to rise to dangerous levels. We were all very disappointed to have to cancel the conference. We are working on a way for authors of CHIIR 2020 papers to be able to present their work to a larger audience.

Since the cancelation of CHIIR we’ve seen conferences traditionally held in the spring shift to fully online events, including events that have strong IR community participation such as the iConference, ECIR, and the Web Conference. Our own co-sponsored spring conference JCDL 2020 first delayed to the summer, then shifted to fully-online, as many other conferences throughout the summer are doing. Looking ahead to the fall, ICTIR 2020, CIKM 2020, and more of our related events such as CLEF 2020 and RecSys 2020 have made the decision to transition to virtual events.

As of April 24, we have decided that the flagship SIGIR conference will go fully online as well. Obviously this is unprecedented for the 43-year-old conference. There is much to be determined about how to make it work best. There are new questions about how to make it accessible and inclusive across time zones, to members of our community with family and other obligations, to those with unreliable internet connectivity; we cannot take it for granted

that going online means more people can attend. We need to find ways to support interaction, community-building, networking, especially for people new to our community. We want to make sure that authors of accepted papers (congratulations to them!) are able to present their work to the audience they deserve. We now have some model events to look to—in particular, ECIR 2020 did an excellent job of taking the conference online on short notice—so thankfully we do not need to make these decisions from scratch. I’d like to recognize the organizing team, Jimmy Huang, Yi Chang, Xueqi Cheng, Yiqun Liu, Vanessa Murdock, Jaap Kamps, and Ji-Rong Wen, for all the work they’ve done.

I also want to welcome our new SIG volunteers. Taking over as co-Editors of SIGIR Forum—as of this issue—are Josiane Mothe, Julián Urbano, and Tirthankar Ghosal. Our new Awards Chairs are Ryen White, Hannah Bast, and Gianluca Demartini. Jaap Kamps, formerly the Executive Committee Vice-Chair, will remain in a volunteer position as Conferences Chair, liaising with the steering committees and General Chairs of our sponsored and co-sponsored events. Alistair Moffat is now Chairing the CIKM Steering Committee, and Chirag Shah will Chair the CHIIR Steering Committee.

The new Awards Chairs have already pushed forward an initiative to create a new SIGIR Academy, to recognize sustained contributions to the field. You can find an announcement—as well as a call for nominations—within this issue. A group of inaugural members, consisting of Salton Award winners and ACM Fellows, will be inducted in the Academy class of 2021 along with 3–5 new members.

Two initiatives begun during the previous Executive Committee’s term continue to roll out: replicability and reproducibility badging, and our new branding and website. The Badging Task Force led by Nicola Ferro completed a policy document which we will begin implementing by forming a standing committee to review work for replicability and reproducibility. The Web Task Force led by Diane Kelly continues to assemble content and design templates for a redesigned sigir.org website.

Finally, as I mentioned in my last letter, we are taking steps to increase transparency about the Executive Committee’s activities. Our meeting schedules, agendas, and minutes continue to be public¹. We are also taking suggestions from the community for agenda items for our meetings².

Stay safe,

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¹In a Google Doc linked here: <http://bit.ly/SIGIR-EC-agenda>

²In a Google Form linked here: <http://bit.ly/SIGIR-EC-form>