

European Computer Science Summit 2010 – Prague

Informatics – The Changing Landscape

Panel: Future of the European Scientific Societies in Informatics

(Panel held October 13, 2010 – Summary)

Panel members:

Franco Accordino (*European Commission*), Vasile Baltac (*CEPIS*), Brian Bigalke (*European Alliance for Innovation*), Keith Jeffery (*ERCIM*), Jens Knoop (*EAPLS/EASST*), Bertrand Meyer (*Informatics Europe*), Burkhard Monien (*EATCS*).

Moderator: Jan van Leeuwen (*Informatics Europe*)

In the ECSS-2010 program

In the ECSS-2010 program Wendy Hall (ACM Europe) (*The Role of Learned Societies in the Digital Age*) and Franco Accordino (EC) (*Digital Science and Its Impact on Scientific Societies*) gave talks which introduced and highlighted aspects of the current and future roles of the professional societies in Informatics/ICT.

Wendy Hall described the UK Royal Society as an illustrious example of a Learned Society ('to expand knowledge, support science and guide policy all over the world'). Among the current developments she mentioned e.g. the BCS becoming *The Chartered Institute of IT* ('promoting wider social and economic progress through the advancement of information technology, science and practice'), with the *BCS Academy of Computing* as its Learned Society dedicated to 'advancing computing as an academic discipline'. She also mentioned ACM's new, dedicated initiatives for its members in e.g. India, China and Europe, led by special councils like the ACM Europe Council. She indicated that the evolution of the learned societies today is driven by the web and that any (new) society must offer services to earn its place. Franco Accordino gave an excellent view of how science is evolving in the digital era. He argued that the development of 'digital science' leads to many questions which require continued reflection and consultation (and action) of the scientific community.

The slides of the talks by Wendy Hall and Franco Accordino are posted on the ECSS 2010 website.

Background for the panel discussion

Europe has many professional and scientific societies in Informatics and, more generally, ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) or ICST (Information and Communication Science and Technology). The field is quickly evolving, and there is a widespread realization that the Informatics/ICT community needs to join forces, not in the least at the European level.

From the European perspective, research and innovation in Europe face many challenges 'which burden the access of ideas to market', including amongst others fragmented research systems and markets, under-use of public procurement for innovation and slow standard setting (cf. Europe 2020 Strategy for an 'Innovation Union'). One may argue (cf. the talk by Franco Accordino) that the scientific and professional societies in ICT have an important role to play, by acting together in mobilizing researchers and conveying and disseminating ideas.

As a step towards this goal, the European Computer Science Summit 2010 in Prague included a special *panel* to assess the current situation of the scientific societies, with their strengths and weaknesses, and to examine their possible future evolution in ‘the changing landscape’.

Introduction

The moderator welcomed the panellists and introduced the issue to be discussed to the plenary audience, namely how the interests of the Informatics/ICT field are effectively served (e.g. at the European level) while the ICT researchers and professionals are divided over many, national and international, professional societies of widely differing characteristics. He recalled the EC report *ICT Scientific Societies at the Dawn of the 21st Century: Which Opportunities for Europe?* (2008). Several initiatives and further discussions have taken place since the report appeared, in particular at ICT 2008 in Lyon and most recently in a Networking Session at ICT 2010 in Brussels. The moderator cited one of the conclusions from the 2008 report:

“There was general consensus among the experts that a European society representing ICT scientists and professionals could significantly contribute to strengthening European efforts in the development and promotion of ICT. However, several different opinions emerged over the nature and structure such a society should take.”

Does the panel support this statement from present perspectives? Where do we stand after the 2008 report¹?

Discussion

(Brief summary of a one-and-a-half hour long session.)

(i) After the moderator introduced the panellists (Wendy Hall could not participate due to time constraints), each panellist gave a description of the mission and membership of the organization he represented. In several further rounds the panellists described the activities of their organizations in more detail, emphasizing the commitment to their members and to the advancement of their areas. Some panellists indicated/proposed that their society could take the role of unifying organization, the other panellists stressed the role of their society in their part of the discipline and that their societies would ‘clearly’ maintain their role and independence as long as the members wanted.

(ii) The panellists gave several characterisations of the kind of impact and influence of their organizations, as seen in their respective domains: CEPIS (e-Skills and their promotion and development), European Alliance for Innovation (cooperation between public, private & government organizations within the entire ICT innovation cycle), EATCS and EAPLS/EASST (quality of research and scholarship in their areas of Informatics), ERCIM (strategy and research in IT and Applied Math), and Informatics Europe (excellence in research and education in Informatics). The societies are active in promoting their agendas for their members, they are ambitious, and in some cases expanding their agenda and membership formula to cope with ‘the changing landscape’.

¹Currently a follow-up study is carried out of the role and impact of ICT scientific and professional societies in Europe (project SMART 2009/0061, <http://www.ictsocieties.org/>). The objective of this study is “to identify the needs, opportunities, and options for action to foster European scientific societies in the area of information and communication technologies and to make them more competitive at an international level”. The project will report its finding and recommendations in early 2011.

(iii) New developments (from accreditation of professionals to consorted strategy issues in the ‘Innovation Union’) require increasingly that societies must act in their ‘external domains’ and ‘take part’. The panellists all recognized the desirability and need of contacts across the boundaries of their associations, as practised between various ‘neighbouring societies’ already. However, the need for joint actions is increasing, both by the divergence of the areas and the common interests appearing everywhere, e.g. at the (EC-)policy level. The panellists explored several options and considered e.g. whether a new society might be the answer, as suggested in the 2008 report. It was argued that a new society would be ‘unappealing, heavyweight, time-consuming, expensive, and undesirable’ and that it would immediately split in sub-organizations and -communities again, which are now well-organized. *The panellists unanimously and strongly expressed the opinion that a new society appears not be the way to go, nor that they would be willing to dissolve themselves in favor of it.* On the other hand, it was commonly felt that a lightweight low-cost form of cooperation across the spectrum of the ICT scientific societies, facilitating the exchange of ideas and synergies between them, could be feasible and a possible answer.

Conclusion

The moderator concluded that the recommendation from the 2008 report was *not* upheld by the panel. The panel’s opinions could be summarized as follows, at this time:

- A: it is undesirable and not productive to aim for a new overall society in the ICT field, or to merge the existing societies in one such organization in which their independence and individuality would be lost,
- B: it is desirable to aim for an effective but lightweight platform for closer contact and exchange of viewpoints between the ICT societies on common issues in the development of Informatics/ICT in the ‘Innovation Union’.

The panel stipulated that this means ‘A *and* B’.

Resolve

Aiming to move from vision to action, the panellists agreed that the next step should be a discussion on the actual form, mission and possible realization of the ‘lightweight platform’ for cooperative activity between the ICT societies. It was also agreed that a next meeting should take place within the next two months. Informatics Europe offered to convene this next meeting, CEPIS offered to host it in its Brussels office.

The moderator thanked the panellists for the open-minded and intensive discussions and the audience for its attentive participation in the Session.

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