

The 6th World Congress of the Bernoulli Society and
the 67th Annual Meeting of the Institute of Mathematical Statistics

Report by Joint Scientific Program Chair
(mildly edited to be self-contained)

This meeting took place in Barcelona over the period July 26-31, 2004. There were more than 700 participants and 122 sessions, made up of 8 named invited lectures (3 Wald, Rietz lectures for IMS; Bernoulli, Lévy, Kolmogorov, Laplace lectures for Bernoulli Society); 5 IMS Medallion lectures; 35 invited sessions; 74 contributed sessions (including 9 mathematical finance sessions held at the Borsa, the Barcelona stock market). The Scientific Program Committee took responsibility for the 35 invited sessions and (in the form of a smaller subcommittee) the 4 Bernoulli Society named invited lectures; as program chair I also arranged for people to chair the various invited papers, and generally liaised with the local organizing committee. As it was my pleasure to emphasize repeatedly throughout the meeting, the local organizing committee did a truly tremendous job on running the congress, and this made my task rather easy!

The purpose of this report is to summarize the actions I took, for the assistance of future program chairs, as a piece of reflective piece of writing; however it should be born in mind that every World Congress is different! Other people's mileage will — and should — vary.

The program committee

The story began on the 14th October 2002, when Prof Varadhan invited me to chair the scientific program committee. This was a late start, forced on IMS and Bernoulli because unfortunate and tragic political developments relating to the original site proposal had delayed the schedule. In discussion with Susan Murphy (then IMS program secretary) and Enno Mammen (then BS scientific secretary) I formulated the membership of the scientific program committee, and also a subgroup of 5 names together with incoming Bernoulli president Dawson, which would be tasked with determining the Bernoulli Society named invited speakers. The lists were approved by end-October, after which I started the process of emailing invitations to join the committee.

In comparison with other World Congresses, this part of the process was telescoped to a very short duration in order to catch up on the delayed sched-

ule. I would have definitely preferred to have started at least a year earlier, and to have spent more time reflecting on the construction of the committee.¹ To save time, I took the membership suggestions of IMS/Bernoulli essentially unchanged, and in fact the suggestions were really good ones and I was most fortunate in this! This was very lucky ... I note here that I took particular care to include the BS scientific secretary, the IMS program secretary, and the chair of the congress local organizing committee. These were especially good decisions, as they ensured good communications.

By 11th November I was able to email a general message to my program committee; laying out the task which we had to perform and structuring the deadlines. These ran as follows:

1. PC members each to email three to five session titles to me, with tentative suggestions for organizers; just one explicit constraint that no member of the PC was to be an organizer of an Invited Paper Session. Deadline noon (GMT) 16 December 2002.
2. I would summarize, leave a period for reflection, then email a call for votes to reduce suggestions to an appropriately sized and balanced subset. CFV to be issued in early January.
3. Results to be circulated and discussed, with further voting iterations (one or two) to optimize subject balance.
4. After agreement I would send out invitations to session organizers.

I also mentioned the named invited lecture subcommittee membership, and encouraged people to feel free to make specific suggestions about other matters.

I made a deliberate choice *not* to call a particular meeting at which the committee could deliberate face-to-face. I knew the previous congress scientific committee had managed to avoid this, relying entirely on email; the shortage of time made it advantageous to follow their pattern. With hindsight, if I had had the time then I would have preferred to arrange a face-to-face meeting at least for the majority of the committee, to have occurred after the initial voting phase; I think this might have helped in the process

¹This varies from views I have heard expressed by Program Chairs of other successful Bernoulli World Congresses, who had a longer lead-up and reckoned 1.5 years would be sufficient. For me 1.5 years was only barely enough ...

of iterating to refine balance *etc.* However in the event, once again, we were lucky and were able to function well by email alone.

The first CFV was issued on 23rd January 2003. There were 75 proposals, which had to be reduced to around 35 (a figure arrived at in consultation with the local organizing committee). I asked for 10 votes from each member, including 1 starred vote to be given extra weight. I also organized the proposals into a tri-partite division Statistics : Probability : Applications. Deadline for reply was noon (GMT) of 6 February 2003.

There then followed a rather complex sequence of iterations of discussion and voting, largely mediated by me: I shall spare the reader the tedious details. I set a threshold to include forty proposals (12 : 15 : 13 in the division above), with 8 proposals at the threshold: the further voting rounds were aimed at refining this selection procedure to reduce to the final 35 sessions, and at determining session organizers. At this stage I checked for gender and geographical bias, which seemed to have been contained within acceptable bounds. Finally I was in a position to check a draft invitation with the local organizers and send copies off to session organizers on 24 April 2003.

I had ensured that I visited Barcelona earlier in 2003, which was an invaluable opportunity to cement trust and friendship with the local organizers, which greatly helped our further cooperation. At that stage we had agreed crucial deadlines for me to communicate session titles and organizer names to the organizers. By this stage we had recovered from the delayed schedule, and the organizers were able to display the agreed list of sessions on their publicity in good time. It would not have been possible to meet this deadline without the cooperation and efficiency of the members of the scientific program committee, and it was a great relief to have achieved this.

There was a price to be paid for the haste. Because we worked so fast, several proposals came to me from outwith the committee only *after* we had succeeded in finalizing the programme. I have mentioned before some particular regrets of mine: not being able to include sessions on quantum statistics, nor on stochastic networks *per se* (though biological networks were included). A major reason for an earlier start would be to give the outside world time to propose expressions of interest to the scientific program chair in good time for these to find their way into the voting process.

The task of the scientific program committee was now largely over: however I still had a substantial amount of work to do, to obtain agreement from the various session organizers. Most replied promptly and positively, and

followed up fast with confirmed names of speakers; however I gained first-hand experience of the concept of the tail of a statistical distribution! In the case of one session the final list of speakers was not finalized till a couple of months before the congress.

Named lectures of the Bernoulli Society

The small subcommittee charged with selection of named lecturers for the Bernoulli Society commenced its work on 27th January 2003. I asked for proposals for each of the lectures by Thursday 6 February 2003, noon GMT, which I then summarized to the group for wider discussion. The CFV was issued on 24th February 2003, and results were followed by careful discussion. I was slightly delayed by other matters, but finalized the list (with back-ups) on 9th April 2003, and proceeded to secure named invited lecturers in good time for purposes of congress publicity.

Sundries and reflections

The above summarizes the majority of the work of the scientific program chair (I also arranged chairs for the various named invited lecturer sessions in May 2004, and spoke several times during the conference at official ceremonies). The results seem to have been good: at least everyone who has spoken to me has said nice things about the program. I have enjoyed the process hugely, and will look back on it as one of the highlights of my scientific life.

For me at least, the congress program was enhanced by a decision I made almost by accident, namely to refine the classic session division (Probability versus Statistics) into a tri-partite division (Statistics : Probability : Applications); in the end each of the three parts was represented more or less equally in the congress program. This helped to ensure representation of modern application areas, and I would commend that division to my successor for the 2008 congress.

I have one major concern for the future. At Guanajuato 2000 we had 500 delegates and a total of 96 sessions. At Barcelona 2004 we had 700 delegates and a total of 122 sessions. While no one has commented negatively to me about the resulting packed program, it does seem to me to be on the edge of viability. I have mixed feelings about this: I thought the large contributed

sessions program added a great deal to the sense of vitality of the Congress and seemed very well attended; on the other hand, further growth would probably endanger the sense of one-ness in the Congress. Some thought should be given to the form of the 2008 Congress: especially since the growing range of applications of our subject causes upwards pressure on the number of invited sessions. I don't have any clear answers here: however now is the time for Bernoulli and IMS to consider this matter. In discussion with others, I have heard only one rather radical proposal: namely to eliminate all lectures except for (say) 20 plenary lectures, and supplement these by poster sessions only. That is probably much too radical! however it might be wise to think of ways to make it more attractive to present posters rather than contribute talks. Perhaps the appropriate action would be to draw this paragraph to the attention of the 2008 scientific program chair, and to assure them that IMS and Bernoulli would encourage any innovative ideas aimed at addressing this issue.

I conclude by thanking IMS and Bernoulli for the privilege of being allowed to form the program for the 2004 Congress: it was a great honour.

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