Looking Back, Looking Forward

Well, here I am again, almost 12 months after my January “welcome to a new year” greeting, now writing my “so long, it’s been good to know you” message.

It’s with sadness that I do this because this has been the quickest and most incredible year of my life. In my capacity as the IEEE Computer Society’s president, I’ve traveled almost 150,000 miles and spoken to thousands of colleagues in nearly a dozen countries, including India, the UAE, Taiwan, Germany, Israel, Spain, Hong Kong, Japan, India, Canada, and, of course, the US. I really regret that I ran out of time and couldn’t also visit our friends in Eastern Europe, Russia, and South America.

But when physical or logistical considerations precluded even more travel, we were very successful in using technology to communicate with more members and nonmembers than ever before. For example, with the help of Rangachar Kasturi, VP of our Member and Geographic Activities Board, 2012 president John Walz went online from the US while I did likewise from Israel so that we could greet webinar attendees in India in real time. On another occasion, we used Skype to deliver a lecture to an audience gathered in India. And when those options weren’t possible, we created asynchronous video greetings to conference attendees in India, Mexico, and Hong Kong.

With discussion boards, e-mails, text messages, and the president’s tweets (@ieeeCSPresident), it seems like there was never a place or time during the day or night when members and I weren’t communicating.

I also initiated the monthly President’s Discussion Corner (www.computer.org/portal/web/the-presidents-discussion-corner/Home), a video blog where I could reach out from wherever I was to members everywhere. In retrospect, my favorite video blog was the one I did in Tokyo in March, just hours before our earthquake ordeal (www.computer.org/portal/web/the-presidents-discussion-corner/Home/-/blogs/sorel-reisman:-march-2011-blog).

IT’S THE MESSAGE THAT MATTERS

All in all, it’s been a busy year. Forging a social-networking-based technology infrastructure that future CS volunteer leaders can use to reach out to our global community of computing professionals was an important contribution in 2011.

But does it really matter what the medium is if there isn’t a worthwhile message to communicate? This year, under the direction of Roger Fujii, VP of our Standards Activities Board, the Board of Governors has approved a new strategic plan, SP7, which articulates the Society’s goals for addressing the needs of 21st-century computing professionals.

In my January president’s message (www.computer.org/csdl/mags/co/2011/01/mco2011010006.html), I wondered what kind of computing world my iPhone-wise, 2 1/2-year-old granddaughter would be living in. Now, at the end of the year, with three more grandchildren messing with iThis and iThat devices, the question is even more pressing for me.

The SP7 strategic plan is an important step forward for the CS as it endeavors to play an influential role in those kids’ future. To support our strategic planning, we’ve been proactive this year in developing many of the programs introduced by other presidents before me, as well as new programs that I also wrote about in January.

While we decided not to develop a new academic advisory commit-
te this year, our Education Activities Board, led by Liz Burd, did increase our involvement in many aspects of academic computing. These included our participation and membership in the K-12 campaigns of Computing in the Core (www.computingintothecore.org); becoming a founding member of the Partnership for Advancing Computing Education, the new worldwide education computing consortium; increasing our participation in the Computing Research Association consortium; and development of the TryComputing portal (www.trycomputing.org), which will be launched in 2012 to provide tools and information related to academic and career paths in computing. And as I promised, we also added student internships to our Build Your Career Jobs Board (http://careers.computer.org/jobs).

Our other boards were no less active, with the Professional Activities Board working under VP Paul Joannou’s leadership to extend our certification programs in IT, and eventually also to systems engineering. Paul Croll, VP of the Technical and Conferences Activities Board, spent considerable time this year reviewing all of our technical committees and conferences, with the goal of optimizing their operations and delivering high-quality products and services to members of our profession.

Under David Alan Grier’s leadership, the Publications Board worked with the CS staff to energize existing publications and deliver new ones, all based on the changing information delivery and consumption trends driven by the many mobile, digital platforms. The January 2012 launch of a multimedia enhanced version of Computer, the Society’s flagship publication, exemplifies these efforts to move toward a digital future. In addition, VP Roger Fujii’s Standards Activities Board is playing a key role in developing the IEEE’s initiatives, including developing standards for cloud computing.

**WHAT ABOUT THE FUTURE?**

Despite all the great things your volunteer leaders have accomplished this year, it would be disingenuous of me if I didn’t share my personal concerns about the future viability of large, traditional, centrally governed, professional computing societies such as ours.

All of us are part of a relatively young industry, as computing has actually become pervasive in society only within the past 20 years or so. Before that, there was value in belonging to an elite society of computing professionals who could share a more-or-less common body of knowledge. But today there may no longer be a unique body of computing knowledge.

The days are past when the CS could assert ownership of the all-things-computing territory in IEEE. Today, every IEEE society and council can rightfully lay claim to some aspect of computing. Without computing, there is no “smart” in the smart grid. What is a “serious” game without computing? And exactly what are a “thing” and a “cloud” when we talk about the “Internet of Things” in the “cloud”?

Because of the ubiquity of these kinds of computing technologies, Web-based social networking is enabling the formation of multiple small, online, globally dispersed special interest groups—both social and professional. We see this beginning to happen everywhere in the proliferation of small, spin-off religious communities, social organizations, and professional groups, not to mention landscape-changing political ones. This phenomenon is becoming so widespread that the financial viability of some large, well-known, national, and even international groups is becoming unsustainable, either resulting in their dissolution or in mergers with their once-upon-a-time competitors.

**THE ROLE OF STCs**

About four years ago, sensing the need to develop a new social networking structure for computing professionals—both members and nonmembers—whose interests were not being directly met by the CS, I proposed the creation of a new kind of social network of special interest groups. Although somewhat similar to ACM SIGs, my proposal differed in several significant ways. These groups would be entirely online; they would be governed under existing CS governance philosophies; they would be able to create their own intellectual property in the form of conferences and online-only publications; and they would exist within an IEEE and CS financial framework.

In the past four years, 2012 president John Walz and 2013 president David Alan Grier have been instrumental in helping to realize this concept with the creation of Special Technical Communities. In 2011, through the stewardship of Dejan Milojicic, creator of the Computing Now portal and a current Board member, we have initiated 10 “pilot” STCs (www.computer.org/portal/web/csd/abs/html/mags/co/2011/06/mco2011060084.htm). I am convinced that as this organizational structure matures, STCs will become a foundational infrastructure of the CS.
I can’t overemphasize my expression of gratitude to these leaders and the STC chairs for their support of this initiative because I believe it’s key to our long-term viability and to enhancing the value we bring to society.

AN INEVITABLE MERGER

These STCs relate directly to the sustainability of professional societies such as ours and of our friendly competitor, the ACM. I’m convinced that the community of computing professionals has nothing to gain by having our two societies continuing to compete.

Early in 2011, ACM president Alain Chesnais and I began discussing how the CS and ACM could work together more cooperatively. In August, we published a “letter from the presidents” in Communications of the ACM and Computer (www.computer.org/csdl/mags/co/2011/08/mco2011080063.html). We solicited suggestions from our members and received many good ideas (http://cooperation.computer.org/portal/web/cooperation). Based on comments, personal e-mails, conversations, meetings, and other communications, the suggestion that seemed to gain the most traction was for us to merge into one organization.

I’m convinced that sooner or later, a merger is inevitable. As my friend and past CS president Oscar Garcia reminded me, the two societies discussed this topic about 20 years ago (O. Garcia, “The Future Is Not What It Used to Be,” Comm. ACM, Oct. 1982, pp. 683-684). But for many reasons, the timing wasn’t right then.

Today, the time is ripe. With the inarguable, permanent economic and geopolitical transformations taking place worldwide, we’re doing a disservice to computing professionals everywhere by not realizing the synergies of a merger of our two organizations. I believe that this new world that we’re just beginning to experience in this second decade of the 21st century demands the formation of a single, well-financed, professional organization that can serve the needs of computing professionals globally, whether they’re our traditional technology-enabling members or professional—and even nonprofessional—computing users.

Combining the ACM’s academic computing strengths; our professional computing strengths; their longstanding special interest group experience; our STC experience; our well-funded, global penetration in all IEEE technology sectors; and the overlapping interests of so many of all our members would create a merged society that, as my grandchildren’s parents say, would be awesome!

As I said at the outset, this is a sad time for me. However, I’m looking forward to the new initiatives of the incoming 2012 Board of Governors under the leadership of John Walz and David Alan Grier and their appointees. And, of course, I’m optimistic about the continued evolution of the STCs as well our ongoing activities with ACM.

But it’s important to note that all our successes, past, present, and future, are surely dependent on the wonderful staff of the Computer Society. I’m going to miss my almost-daily calls with our fantastic Executive Director and my personal trainer and long-time friend, Angela Burgess. It has been a pleasure working with Angela and her superb senior staff, including Anne Marie Kelly, who never takes a day off work; Vi Doan, who knows where all the secrets files are; and Evan Butterfield, my former acolyte.

As the volunteer leadership transitions from year to year, these folks and their staff are the glue between our boards. They’re the keepers of our institutional memory, and they’re the ones who steer us volunteers back from the paths of insanity where we sometimes wander.

To all of the staff members, all my friends and supporters over the years, and the many new friends I’ve made in 2011, the Computer Society’s 65th anniversary year, thank you.

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