

# **THE VIEWPOINT COLUMN**

**BY**

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# THE ROLE OF AN INVITED SPEAKER AT A CONFERENCE

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I recently attended a meeting during which the topic of invited speakers at conferences came up. As part of the ensuing discussion, a colleague mentioned that, in an ideal world, an invited speaker should “engage with the conference”, as typically indicated in the message of invitation they receive from the conference organisers. However, in the opinion of that colleague, experience shows that it is increasingly common for invited speakers to show up at the conference to deliver their talk, stay for a few hours and then fly back home. Another colleague stated that they would rather have more contributed talks and fewer invited talks at conferences, if any at all, as they prefer to hear about the latest developments in their specific research area rather than listen to a longish talk devoted to a topic that is not directly connected to their main scientific interests. On a similar note, I recall meeting a colleague from “Volume A” theoretical computer science on my way to attending Xavier Leroy’s<sup>1</sup> invited talk at ICALP 2016<sup>2</sup> and asking him whether he was coming too. His reply was “No. That would be like going to a talk in the life sciences!”, or something in that spirit. I suspect that several “Volume B” colleagues would have given me a similar answer if I encouraged them to attend a “Volume A” keynote address.

These are all valid observations and points. However, in the humble and probably old-fashioned opinion I aired during that meeting, invited talks should be one of the occasions in which the whole research community of reference for a conference comes together, learns something from some of its leading or up-and-coming scientists who are also excellent communicators, showcases role models to its younger scientists, celebrates the unity of theoretical computer science (broadly construed) and possibly sows the seeds for serendipitous cross-fertilisation of

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<sup>1</sup>See <https://xavierleroy.org/> for his web page.

<sup>2</sup>The slides are available at <https://xavierleroy.org/talks/ICALP2016.pdf>.

ideas between its sub-fields.

So, assuming anyone shares my Jurassic viewpoint on the role of invited speakers at our conferences, how should a “model invited speaker” behave to repay the investment that their research community made in inviting them, to justify the trust placed in them and to do themselves and their work justice? To answer this question and to express my views in a hopefully convincing way without being too boring, let me instead describe the behaviour of an invited speaker, whom I will call Prof. X (no relationship with Prof. Charles Francis Xavier<sup>3</sup>), that I would consider to be the antithesis of a model keynote speaker at a conference and possibly a nightmare for the conference organisers and participants.

**Before the conference** Having received an invitation to deliver an invited talk at a prestigious conference from its organisers, Prof. X looks at their schedule and realises that they might have time to attend only one conference day. Despite their lack of time, Prof. X accepts the invitation, but does not inform the organisers that their participation will be limited to at most one conference day. Close to the conference dates, when asked about their travel plans, Prof. X finally tells the organisers that they will arrive the evening before their talk is scheduled and that, due to other engagements that cannot be moved, they will have to leave the conference after having delivered the talk. Unfortunately, the travel costs are high and Prof. X does not have a research grant that can cover the cost of airfare.

**At the conference** Prof. X arrives at the conference venue at 8:55 AM, five minutes before their talk is scheduled, rushes to the dais and connects their laptop to the projector. Fortunately, there are no technical problems and the organisers and the session chair sigh in relief. Prof. X delivers their invited talk, making sure that the talk has no clear, take-home message, carefully eschewing the context for, and the high-level ideas behind, the research covered in the talk and focusing solely on the most technical aspects of the work. Apart from a handful of conference participants who are deeply familiar with Prof. X’s recent work, the majority of the audience is lost already after the title slide.

Despite several signals from the session chair, Prof. X’s talk runs ten minutes overtime, leaving no time for questions from the audience and shortening the subsequent coffee break. While the audience streams out of the lecture room and heads for what is left of the coffee break, two PhD students approach Prof. X since they’d like to ask some questions related to the presentation that are relevant for their doctoral research. Unfortunately, Prof. X has no time for them. He has booked a taxi to the airport and the driver is already waiting.

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<sup>3</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Professor\\_X](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Professor_X)

**After the conference** As soon as Prof. X is back in their office, they send a reimbursement claim to the conference organisers, including items that were not mentioned by the organisers in their letter of invitation. Prof. X also reads an email from the two PhD students who approached her/him after the talk. The email contains some clearly worded questions related to Prof. X's work and explains how those questions are connected to the students ongoing research for their doctoral studies. Alas, Prof. X never replies.

Of course, what I just wrote is a caricature and there are nuances and exceptions that I have swept under the carpet. Indeed, many of us need to balance family life and the ever-increasing demands of our academic work<sup>4</sup>, as well as attending conferences with our teaching obligations that may make it hard to reschedule lectures or to find a colleague who is willing to cover for us when we travel during term time. However, to my mind, being invited to deliver a keynote address at one of our conferences is a great honour and also a great responsibility. Next time we are asked to be an invited speaker, perhaps we should accept the invitation only if we can attend most of, ideally all, the conference and contribute to its success by attending talks, asking questions, discussing with colleagues during the coffee breaks and mentoring the junior members of the research community. Moreover, when we know that, mostly likely, we will only be able to be at the conference for a day or two, let's inform the organisers right away and ask them whether what we can offer is agreeable to them.

If we accept to deliver a talk, let's make sure that we give the audience something to take home<sup>5</sup> and that we highlight the message we want to convey repeatedly, following the motto "tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, and tell them what you've told them." Having a slide deck on some topic is not the same as having a message and an engaging story line to deliver that message to a broad audience. In fact, in my humble opinion, what I just wrote applies to every talk and most of us would benefit by paying heed to Gian-Carlo Rota's<sup>6</sup> four requirements for a good talk:

1. Every talk should make only one main point.
2. Never run overtime.
3. Relate to your audience.
4. Give them something to take home.

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<sup>4</sup>Conference organisers might consider offering some form of childcare. I feel that doing so would help to increase diversity amongst the conference attendees, by making it easier for colleagues to attend even when they have young children.

<sup>5</sup>See <https://www.ams.org/notices/199701/comm-rota.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup>See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gian-Carlo\\_Rota](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gian-Carlo_Rota).

However, even a model invited speaker is nothing without an audience! To my mind, we should strive to attend every invited talk at the conferences we attend, even those in research fields that aren't exactly our own. Doing so will expand our horizons and nurture our intellectual curiosity at the small price of at most one hour of our time. Who knows, perhaps the message delivered by a model invited speaker will turn out to have some relevance for our research at some point in the future. Even if that never happens, we will have learnt something we did not know before attending that talk, which I believe is worthwhile in itself. Moreover, to my mind, we should give our students and junior colleagues a good example. If we do not attend (invited) talks ourselves, why should they?

As Rota wrote in his thought-provoking piece "Ten lessons I wish I had been taught"<sup>7</sup>,

"The advice we give others is the advice that we ourselves need."

For the little that it may be worth, I will try to heed the aforementioned advice myself.

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<sup>7</sup>Available at <https://www.ams.org/notices/199701/comm-rota.pdf>.