Conferences on Decision and Control

I'm writing this message around the time of the 49th Conference on Decision and Control (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia. I have attended many CDCs (approximately 20), beginning with Athens in 1986. At that time, with my thesis having been accepted, I was a fresh lecturer (assistant professor), excited about adaptive control, robotics, difference operator representations, and many other things. This excitement was tempered by the trip itself, which seemed endless. The flight time was over 20 hours, and at that stage of my career, I was not adapted to the cramped tedium of intercontinental travel. (Later I learned the art of accepting the inevitable length and lack of sleep that come with the trip.) However, once at the conference, the plane trip was quickly forgotten.

I enthusiastically engaged with many researchers—some very well known, some not so well known, but almost all who I was meeting for the first time. The talks, questions and answers, and discussions afterwards I found very stimulating as we searched for new directions and deeper understandings and debated the best way to do things. It could be argued that at times in past conferences, the arguments were a bit too strong. My first CDC was just after the perhaps more volatile times, when the robustness of adaptive control was being hotly debated. I even heard the joke, or perhaps it is a variant on a joke, that there was a brawl in a bar one night, and then an adaptive control session broke out. However, I didn't directly experience anything that quite fell into that category.

Although it would seem that sometimes the debates may have been "hotter" than desirable, it was certainly a stimulating time. I also suspect that passion for a subject and a deep interest in searching for the truth is not such a bad thing. However, I would add two caveats to this, first, that these things should not be permitted to get personal; and second, even if we firmly hold a view and are willing to defend it, we owe it to one another to listen to different views. That being said, I am happy to let the debates continue.

Unfortunately, travel seems essential for our conferences. The rapid interchange of ideas with a broad range of experts in the field seems impossible (at least at this point in time) without physical presence. Yes, there are a number of teleconferencing, Web-based events, and the like. These are very positive steps towards using information technology to reduce our fossil fuel consumption and carbon footprint. However, at present I think there is a long way to go before these technologies replace conferences. My limited experience of teleconferences is that they are very useful in allowing a short meeting with a few people, when physical presence is not possible. However, they also seem to be a little inefficient due to delays, duplex issues, etc., and are not practical for large or lengthy meetings. We are seeing increased use of things like Webinars, and IEEE Control Systems Society (CSS) had its first trial of a Webinar in December. This seemed to be very popular, and the Webinar was fully subscribed within a short space of time. Further Webinars by our distinguished lecturers are planned for the future, so keep an eye out for further announcements. Increasing use of these technologies seems to be a very good way of allowing many people access to lectures with low cost in time, dollars, and environmental impact. I'm sure in the future we will continue further developments in this area.

While on the subject of technology, there are clearly dramatic differences from when I first started attending CDCs. At those times, the CDC proceedings came in multiple printed volumes and were very heavy to carry. There were of course no laptops or

The CDC 2007 banquet in New Orleans.

CD-ROM proceedings then. These now well-established innovations have made a huge difference, not least to the weight we had to carry back in our bags. Of course, it is great to be able to keep in touch with things, check on e-mails, view the CD proceedings, even work on a paper, finish a presentation, and so on. However, sometimes I wonder whether we are too good at this, and the deluge of e-mails, that of course "must" be answered immediately, distract more than we realize from our engagement with the conference. I suppose others may be better than I at multitasking, but maybe we (and I include myself in this) should reflect a little on how best to prioritize our conference time. But just in case you are worried, I am not proposing that we discontinue WiFi access at our conference—that is part of how things are and it is an essential part of our modern conference environment.

We continue to see increased internationalization of our CDCs. The schedule for the next few years sees

The CDC 2010 banquet in Atlanta.

us in Orlando (2011) for the 50th anniversary of the CDC, followed by Maui, Florence, Los Angeles, and Japan in 2015. (Note that the organizers recently discovered that the previous plan to hold CDC 2013 in Venice had a substantial risk of serious disruption due to acqua-alta (high tides that result in water levels above ground level for many parts of Venice). These acqua alta events have proven to be increasingly problematic in November and December in Venice. Therefore, the CSS Board of Governors recently approved a change of location to Florence for 2013). This move to hold more con-

ferences outside of the United States is clearly justified by the distribution of both CSS membership and CDC attendees, where a little more than half come from outside the United States in both cases. Naturally, I view this as a very healthy sign for the Society.

In closing, I encourage everyone to continue to work hard to make all of our conferences high-quality technical events, and to make the most of the opportunities they provide for debate, interaction, and learning new technical results.

Rick Middleton