Analytics of Organized Spontaneity: Rethinking Participant Selection, Interaction Format, and Milieu for Academic Forums

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RUNNING HEAD: Increasing the Odds of Organized Spontaneity

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Abstract
In an effort to enhance the odds of “organized spontaneity” the paper advances analytics for selection of participants, format of interaction, and milieu within which the interaction occurs. The analysis proceeds in a two-part process. First, three creative environments far removed from the present day academic forums – eighteenth-century French salons, the eighteenth-century London coffeehouses, and Mensa – are examined to generate analytical distance from our current practices. Second, with these three locales in the background, current practices are analyzed and following thoughts are offered for deliberation: (1) Low threshold to entry is not necessarily a bad thing, (2) Creative environments require an artful mix of homogeneity and heterogeneity, (3) Sociality, which is essential for a creative environment, limits the extent to which a disagreement can be pushed, (4) The selection-format-milieu interaction greatly shapes the character of what gets produced in a creative environment.

Keywords: creativity, innovation, conference, conversation, food, peer review

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They are memorable times when conferences and other academic forums come to life. The rest of the time academic life proceeds in its own peculiar pedestrian ways. There is nothing remarkable about this pattern. Much of life proceeds that way, even in other creative realms. Perhaps nothing can be done about it. The hard reality is that there is no formula for creative endeavors. There is perhaps also no recipe, as bringing together of the known ingredients does not necessarily generate the spark. Our quest for the magic formula and the futility of that quest is very nicely captured by the following nonsensical Hollywood formula: 50% of the success of a movie depends on the story, 50% on the script, 50% on casting, 50% on acting, 50% on lighting and so on. Similarly, the numbers do not add up for other creative endeavors. Given this reality, it is perhaps a futile exercise I am about to engage in. But the analyst in me is unable to accept the notion that the odds cannot be improved beyond what chance would yield. So, I venture some thoughts on how we may enjoy more memorable times in the course of our scholarly endeavors.

I will play with 3 sets of analytics: (1) selection of participants, (2) format of interaction, and (3) milieu within which the interaction occurs. I will also draw attention to the fact that much depends on the selection-format-milieu interaction. However, on that level, I will not provide any analytics. So, ultimately the mystery of what gives life to academic forums will remain unresolved. Still, this exercise is likely to be fruitful on two counts.
One, it is likely to provoke reflection on the way things have been traditionally done. Two, some new ideas will be on offer for how things could be done in the future.

We will start by generating analytical distance from our current practices. That will enable us to see past the conventions and think things fresh. We will do so by discussing three creative environments far removed from the present day academic forums: eighteenth-century French salons, the eighteenth-century London coffeehouses, and Mensa. They should not be seen as exemplars. They were chosen because in their case, as we will see below, “selection,” “format,” “milieu,” and the interaction between them are legible in analytically fruitful ways.

The eighteenth-century French salons typically revolved around a charismatic and well-resourced hostess. She would hold dinners on a regular basis to which she would invite an eclectic but selective group of writers, artists, and other creative people. For her, such gatherings gave the pleasures of holding court and basking in the attention of talented men seeking her favors. Furthermore, she had the satisfactions of a patron who spots and nurtures talent. For the invitees, an invitation was an opportunity to network and also curry the favor of the hostess, who could even provide a subsistence allowance and connections to influential people (e.g. publishers). Beyond the politics, the gathering also had an intellectual payoff, as it allowed individuals to test their ideas and learn from one another. The mixing of writers, painters, musicians and other artists, as opposed to segregation of each specialty, fueled creativity. The fact that this heterogeneous mix had to interact in compliance with the hostess’ taste created the common code that smoothens interaction. This architecture generated creative conversations; but of a particular kind – witty, charming, and accessible to dilettantes. It, however, had little tolerance for sharp
clash of ideas, as that would deflate the sociability of the salon, take the conversation beyond the intellectual reaches of the dilettante sponsors, and vitiate future invitations. Correspondingly, the Rococo art and literature that got produced was playful and lively but superficial.

While the eighteenth-century French salons were far more democratic than the royal courts that preceded them, they still retained an aristocratic flavor. They were more democratic on two fronts. One, over time even lower class women who had acquired social prominence could aspire to host a salon. It pretty much depended on their wit and charm to attract favor-seeking creative men. Two, unlike in the royal courts, the creative men were not seen as adornments or sources of amusement, as the desire for intellectual engagement was earnest. This shift towards meritocracy in the realm of ideas mitigated the status gap between the wealthy and the intellectually endowed. But it still retained an aristocratic flavor, as the salon revolved around the favors of a personage – the hostess.

Around the same time, the coffeehouses across the channel in London took a radical democratic turn. Here admittance was not dependent on the graces of a social gatekeeper. Anyone could walk in and buy a cup of coffee and join in on the conversation and be accepted more or less as an equal, as long as one maintained the etiquette of the house. The etiquette demanded a particular kind of sociability – mutuality. One was asked to be a good listener, be tolerant of differing views, and not impose one’s opinions on others. This sociability created an overriding layer of civic commonality that tamped down divisiveness inherent in uncontrolled heterogeneity, a product of the extremely low barrier to entry that allowed all sorts of people to wander in. Interestingly, the give and take of coffeehouse conversations among heterogeneous participants led to the
emergence of a new type of commonality – group opinion. In effect, while the salon was an orchestrated body, the coffeehouse had emergent properties (Coser 1970).

Interestingly, these emergent properties were akin to ones we associate with the Internet (The Economist 2003, Standage 2005).

Even here, depth of disagreement had limits, which limited the possibilities of a discussion that challenged the set fundamentals. The disagreement could not be pushed past the point at which sociability ruptured, as the coffeehouse culture did not take kindly to quarrels (Standage 2005). More generally, such restraint is the price of sociability in any context. However, the coffeehouse culture had a mechanism for accommodating heterodox views. Individuals with difficult views could start their own coffeehouses. The divisive tendencies inherent in a heterogeneous mix led to the emergence of coffeehouses centered on particular standpoints and eventually the formation of clubs and thereby much of the vitality of early coffeehouses was lost (Coser 1970).

The coffeehouses furthered the democratic impulse on two fronts. One, anyone could walk into a coffeehouse and listen to, if not participate in, intelligent conversations, which were often quite advanced, as many coffeehouses focused on particular topics – foreign news, shipping, and botany, among others. They were in fact thought of as penny universities, wherein anyone for the price of a cup of coffee could participate in an intelligent discussion (The Economist 2003, Standage 2005). Two, they brought the writers out of their private libraries into an egalitarian arena. Here their interactions with ordinary people reduced the social distance between the writer and the general public. Furthermore, their interactions with other writers generated debate and mutual influence. These new patterns of interaction nudged the writers away from the classical style toward
simpler conversational English, thereby making the literature accessible to ordinary people (Coser 1970).

The third setting, Mensa, is an artifact of statistical selection, in contrast to the social filtering of the French salons and self-selection in the case of London coffeehouse. Mensa, founded in 1946 at the Lincoln College, University of Oxford, has only one membership requirement: a score of 98th percentile or higher on approved IQ tests. Irrespective of one’s stance with regard to IQ tests, what we need to note is that this selection process brings together intelligent people with varied interests at its “gatherings,” which are mainly social events, and that generates a peculiar kind of sociability. Participants cannot talk shop in Mensa gatherings because they come from different professional backgrounds (engineers, doctors, lawyers, accountants, academics, journalists, etc). They are therefore forced to find other topics of conversation. On the other hand, since they are in intelligent company, almost any topic is a viable topic of conversation. Furthermore, for various sociological reasons, the Mensa members tend to come from similar socio-economic backgrounds. This mix of homogeneity (intelligence and socio-economic background) and heterogeneity (interests and professional backgrounds) energizes sociability. The homogeneity creates a comfort level that opens up communication, and the heterogeneity generates the spark. The conversation is witty, lively, and rapidly changing – and superficial (Aldrich 1971).

Each of the three above-discussed creative environments has distinct characteristics. They differ in modalities of participant selection, organization of interaction, and the milieu within which the interaction occurs. Together, this array of different modalities has heuristic value, as it points to a range of possible ways of putting together each
individual building block of the conference. At the same, in spite of all the differences, at a higher level of abstraction all the three environments are similar in one vital way – they all have a systemic quality arising from selection-format-milieu interaction. As we will see, these insights jog us to see past the conventions and develop new perspectives. The following insights are in particular very valuable on that score:

1. Low threshold to entry is not necessarily a bad thing.

2. Creative environments require an artful mix of homogeneity and heterogeneity.

3. Sociality, which is essential for a creative environment, limits the extent to which a disagreement can be pushed.

4. The selection-format-milieu interaction greatly shapes the character of what gets produced in a creative environment.

With the above-discussed locales in the background, we will now analyze academic conferences and other scholarly forums. We will reflect on current practices and try and understand their limitations and blind spots. We will also consider new possibilities and thereby increase our overall repertoire for organizing academic forums. We will start by discussing the selection process and thereafter the organizational templates which structure the patterns of interactions among those selected and the milieu within which these interactions occur. Lastly, we will reflect on the big picture issues that emerge from this analysis.
THE SELECTION PROCESS

We privilege consensus in the selection process. That privileged place is particularly visible in situations where the rules for the selection process are explicitly spelled out. They typically have the following formulation: If there is no consensus, then . . .

As with all conventional wisdom, consensus also has merit. In most realms consensus helps keep the social tissue together and counteracts idiosyncratic biases. But, in the creative realms, consensus works against the truly creative idea – the mold breaking one. The scatter in evaluator scores for mold breaking ideas tends to be extremely high. Some evaluators tend to be extremely enthusiastic and others vehemently opposed. On the other hand, for very understandable reasons, there is consistency in the evaluator ratings for ideas that stay within the mold. That consistency works in their favor in an environment that privileges consensus. The world of piano competitions even has a term for players who tend to win in such environments – “consensus players.” These “cookie-cutter” performers win simply because they offend the least number of jurors (Wise 2009, online). Even in the realm of science, the privileged place of consensus has been challenged on the grounds that science is inherently a pluralistic activity. According to Hackett, “scientists are likely to disagree, and the problem for science and science policy is to make good use of this disagreement, not to treat it as aberrant or embarrassing (or to devise mechanisms for eliminating it). Indeed … consensus is always low at the research front” (1997, p. 54). He goes on to say that instead of pouring effort into “homogenizing” peer ratings we should direct our efforts at making better use of the variability in ratings, which is not only inevitable but also valuable.
The homogenizing bias Hackett talks about often leads to disregarding of the outliers when there is a scatter in evaluators’ scores. In my estimation, in the creative realms, the scatter should be seen the other way around – indicator of possibly something significant. Admittedly not all scatters have indicative value. But in cases where the reviews are in-depth and show reviewer engagement with the work there is need for a closer look, especially when reviews of the negative outliers are also in-depth.

At my end as the editor of The Information Society, I am very alert to the price of consensus and have often thought about potential solutions. I will share how I dealt with the most recent such case, as the approach worked well and may offer insights for further thought.

This particular paper took a great thinker’s framework and reformulated it for our times, as opposed to refining a piece of it. Upon reading it I could see that it was one of the mold breaking papers that provoke extreme reactions. Sure enough when the reviews came in, they were in-depth but scattered. The associate editor, who had supervised the review process, and I discussed the problems such papers face and we were of the same mind. In my cover letter I told the authors that I am very sensitive to the problems mold breaking papers face and I hope they will indeed revise and resubmit. Several weeks later the authors responded that they could not reconcile the reviews, as the different reviewers were saying different things. I told them that I really wanted them to revise and resubmit their paper and offered the following way forward: They should simply respond to the reviewers’ comments as fully as they can. Thereafter, if their revised paper had no fatal flaws, I will accept it for publication even if all the reviewers’ concerns are not
addressed. They would have to acknowledge these concerns in footnotes. The authors came back with a winning paper and we published it.

This conservative bias has expanded with the spread of the journal culture to conferences, as explained by Grudin (2013). With increased rigor, in the journal modality, the conferences have lost the playfulness they once afforded. Conversations with Grudin and the subsequent reading of his work, including the paper in this issue, have comprehensively illuminated the problem to me (Grudin 2011, 2013). A keen insight from an earlier conversation with another colleague is germane here. While we were reminiscing about a conference, I was wistfully telling him how exciting the early years of the conference were and how it had become rather mundane over the years. My diagnosis was that in order to ensure adequate attendance, the organizers had let the standards fall. This colleague came back with a very counterintuitive explanation that the problem was the opposite. The organizers had raised the standards – in the normal way. All that the early conferences required was a short abstract, as opposed to the current requirement of a long abstract. What shines in a short abstract is the “passion” and as the submission becomes longer the nuts and bolts and their intricacies take center stage.

We will now for awhile go beyond the conference-journal nexus, which is important for our current purposes because the peer review culture of the journals has been spilling over to that of conferences. We will talk about funding agencies and institutes of advanced study mainly to delve deeper into the conservative bias in academic enterprise. Thereafter we will return back to the conference-journal nexus.
Funding entities (agencies, committees, etc) talk about “transformative” and “risky” research. But they end up funding very safe projects and are getting criticized for that tendency (DeVita, 2009, Scott, 2007, Harris 2009). In fact some have recommended that the funding agencies should be forced to ring-fence some funds for unorthodox proposals (ABRC Working Group on Peer Review, 1990). In my estimation, one of the reasons why the funding agencies are unable to shake off the conservative bias is their insistence on having the specifics spelled out upfront. The conversation then gravitates towards methodology, often the only common ground among committee members with varied specialties. While the conversations about the fine points of methodology are sophisticated and engaging, what does not get adequate attention is whether or not the idea that inspired the project has groundbreaking significance. Conversely, in contrast, proposals bearing mold breaking ideas look messy, as they are unable to furnish all the specifics. This dynamic leads to funding of projects that are low risk and methodologically sound but uninspired in terms of conceptual contributions. One way to counteract the conservative bias is to intentionally ask for extremely short proposals, as opposed to ones that ask for details after details, because that will force both the applicants and the evaluating committees to focus on the big idea.

We also see this dynamic at work at the institutes of advanced study (IAS). Their mission statements, preambles of their publications, and other such articulations of higher purpose celebrate “risky,” “imaginative,” “playful,” and “even outrageous” thought – explicitly acknowledging the value of such modalities of thought for the advancement of humanity and implicitly spotlighting the limitations of the university. They thereby offer themselves as reinvigorating complements to the increasingly bureaucratic university.
But, when one looks at their activities, one sees no qualitative difference. In the case of selection criteria, our current focus, IAS talk a lot about rigor – just the way the university does. That is odd because if the objective of IAS is to foster different kind of thinking, the intellectual ingredients sought need to be different. In the case of The Information Society, I make it a point to orient the reviewers differently for “Perspective” pieces (position papers such as this one), which are meant to be qualitatively different than the regular research articles. My brief starts as follows: “There are no hard and fast rules for evaluating a Perspective piece. We look for thought pieces, provocative thought balloons, etc … anything that loosens up the mind of the reader and gets new thoughts and ideas of an unusual sort flowing …” Without such a brief, reviewers tend to employ the criteria for research articles, which are inappropriate for Perspective pieces. Analytically the “rigor” of the selection process needs to be separate from the selection “criteria.” One can have a rigorous selection process with criteria that are different than the conventional ones – and more appropriate.

Peer review is intrinsic to the academic project. There can perhaps be no other way of filtering ideas in the world of scholarly research. But peer review need not be the same thing for all the different forums. What has happened over the years is that the practices of research journals have spilled over onto other forums. As Grudin (2013) has persuasively argued, while low acceptance rates may be essential for journals, they can be counterproductive in the case of conferences. Furthermore, there should be a greater tolerance for imperfections in the case of conferences, as the primary value added of a face-to-face conversation is the opportunity for an open-ended interaction it affords. Here the vital ingredient is intellectual provocation and fluidity. If the objective were to
only consume polished products, which could be accomplished by reading the paper, there would be little justification for the expenses incurred in traveling to and attending a conference. Similarly, if the Institutes of Advanced Studies and the like want to really generate thinking – “risky,” “speculative,” and so on – that is constrained in the university, they need to devise appropriate selection criteria, as opposed to being rigorous in the conventional sense. Also, the urge for specificity needs to be kept at abeyance, as extremely short proposals will force both the applicants and the evaluating committees to focus on the big idea.

THE FORMAT
Talks and seminars are a perennial feature of scholarly communities. But the formats are not immutable. We tend to forget the latter.

The “unconference” movement brings to fore the frustrations with the conventional formats and also our inability to deal with the problem head-on. As the name “unconference” indicates, this movement seeks to do away with the drudgery of the conventional conference, and amplify the meaningful exchanges, largely informal, that do occur among the scholars gathered at the conference venue. Its approach has been to cast away programs, keynotes, and other formal elements of the conference, and to open space for the free play of emergent processes. Such efforts have yielded limited success. What is noteworthy here for our current purposes is that unconference organizers have sought solutions in the abandonment of the formal elements, as opposed to rethinking and reformulating them.\v
As an alternative, Christian Sandvig, Michael Traugott and I sought to generate a new interplay of the formal and informal elements in a workshop on mobile communications. We asked participants to lay out the heart of a theory from a far removed field that resonates with the research on mobile communications. This move opened up the discussion space in two very significant ways. One, it brought in mind-expanding inspirations from unusual sources. For example, the workshop participants were taken aback by the parallels between the historical shifts in conceptions of maritime boundaries and changing notions of what is spectrum and how it should be allocated. Two, it decoupled ideas that were being presented from the speaker who was presenting them. That made egos much lesser of an impediment for a free and honest discussion of ideas. Thereby creativity was unleashed in a unique way, as the following comments of workshop participants indicate:

“At first, I was confused. A conference, in my mind, is the place where presenters stand up, go to the podium, and give the lecture. This workshop had no such rule. Instead, it was an unusual place for experimenting with the rules of discussion.”

“The first thing to appreciate in this event is this strategy – a new one to be implemented in future events. This is a radical development and improvement: it removed the narcissist and unidirectional presentations of other conferences, the constraining relationship between ideas and the people who produced them, and replaced them with encouragement of the discussion of ideas, concepts and frameworks.”
“By presenting others’ ideas, participants were less likely to be defensive, and the group was able to have a full and critical discussion.”

Beyond creating the overall architecture of the workshop and gathering the ingredients in terms of people and ideas, we also put in place devices to bring about the creative foment we sought. For instance, one of the group exercises asked the participants to develop syllabi for a new kind of course they would like to teach. We could have asked them to put together the table of contents for a potential book or some other such project. The focus on syllabi was unusual, especially for a research-oriented workshop. We chose syllabi as our vehicle for opening up new ways of thinking because we thought people were likely to be much more playfully engaged in that activity. And we were right.

The reality is that even fun requires organization, especially when it involves a large number of people. Writing about research on leisure, Fine (1989) says, “in those arenas that emphasize the expressive and cultural dimension of human activity … organization dynamics have often been overlooked” (p. 319). In effect, fun does not just happen by gathering people together. The grounds have to be laid for it. The course syllabi group activity set the stage for something creative to arise, as did other activities at the workshop.

In very abstract terms creative environments are a product of “organized spontaneity” (Aldrich 1971). Both “organization” and “spontaneity” are important. For the latter to arise, the former needs to be artful but not over-determined. To attain that artful balance, we could employ the analytics of homogeneity and heterogeneity, as what is needed is the right mix between them. The homogeneity provides a shared code, which eases
communication and comforts people into opening up, and heterogeneity sparks creativity (Aldrich, 1971). In our workshop, the fact that all the participants were steeped in the literature on mobile communication provided the homogeneity that facilitates communication, as the vocabulary did not have to be negotiated, among other things. Our insistence that they read and talk about theories from far removed fields greatly amplified the heterogeneity typically present in a normal conference on mobile communication. The added move of separating the ego of the speaker from the idea presented opened up the space for an honest and fluid discussion.

The above-discussed workshop has been detailed here not as a prescribed solution for the ailments of the academic conference. But as an illustration of the kind experimentation that is needed – experimentation that does not abandon the formal elements of the conference but instead rethinks them.

THE MILIEU

To my amazement, my readings on creative environments – Paris, Greenwich Village, SoHo, Silicon Valley, Hollywood, and many others – kept pointing to a singular commonality: the prominence of cafes, bars, restaurants, and other such establishments. Food and creative conversations seemed to be tied in interesting ways.

But we in the academia do not get it, at least at the institutional level. Universities have policies that place severe restrictions on monies spent on food. That leads to very odd situations. For instance, grant programs directed at increasing interdisciplinary interaction on a campus forbid the use of grant monies for food, which goes against the very grain of a creative conversation, as we will see below. The restrictions on expenditures related to

17
alcohol generate their own peculiarities. For instance, an esteemed visitor to campus can be taken out to an unnecessarily expensive restaurant for dinner but a few dollars cannot be spent on a glass of wine. In such situations, the faculty member who takes the visitor out for dinner often picks up the tab for the wine, and then at the end there is the talk of two separate bills and so on – these reminders of bureaucratic realities dampen the conviviality. The preoccupation with expenditures on food, which are a relatively small proportion of the costs of a workshop or a campus visit, are ironic given the intimate connection between food and creative conversation – the heart of the university enterprise.

In the case of academic conferences, the focus of this forum, my mind does not go past the “conference chicken,” formulaic in its taste and presentation. Along with it comes the predictable conference configuration – participants sitting around circular tables and the speaker intoning from the podium. There is little that is creative in the conversation. The chicken is partly to blame.

The root problem is that the conference food lacks heart. The wine in plastic glasses, the cheese cubes, cookies, and other standard conference fare are like plastic flowers. They are poor tokens of the real thing. The irony is that the real thing need not be expensive. It does, however, have to have a superior sensibility. I will even venture to offer a metric. However, before we get there, we need to first consider the link between creative conversation and food.

Unlike animals that eat solely to satiate hunger, for humans food has long been tied to ritual and sociability. Most visibly, celebrations and commemorations across societies
feature food. Often particular foods come to symbolize the occasion and serve as its focal point. Think of turkey for the Thanksgiving Dinner, mooncake for the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival in East Asian countries, and flat unleavened bread Matzo for the Jewish Passover. As Kluger observes, “To a human, the ritual of eating – the act of pulling up and tucking in, of passing around and helping one-self – is one of the most primal of shared activities” (online).

This ritualized behavior carries over into everyday life. Think of dinners at a favorite aunt’s place and her pies or a variation of that people-food story. Beyond special occasions, the dinner around a dining table has a similar texture. Reflecting on the genesis of the dining table, Kluger (2004) ventures the following thought: “When food was scarce, it had to be guarded, so families huddled close to eat what they had caught or picked. Somewhere in there may lie the origins of the dinner table” (online). Not only does food play a central role in activities that reaffirm inherited and established relationships, it also facilitates the creation of new ones. A shared meal with a stranger has the potential to bring out a shared humanity in a way few other things can. There is much to breaking bread together.

Within the context of a creative conversation, which has an unusual open-endedness, breaking bread together has a special significance. In a creative conversation, as the half-baked ideas are being bounced off each other’s minds, slowly the germ of an idea snowballs into the big one (Figure 1). Sharing of half-baked ideas is then the very heart of a creative conversation.
Whether or not creativity actually occurs greatly depends on whether or not the sharing of half-baked ideas actually occurs. Just visualize an uptight gathering of scholars and contrast that with one laced with humor. Both gatherings may go through the same motions. But the results will be vastly different.

Sharing of half-baked ideas is easier said than done. Our deep-rooted instincts to maintain public face pull against such goofiness. We therefore think through our ideas before we voice them. In effect, we trade in fully formed ideas. The chances of this defensive modality yielding creativity are low, as the pressure to maintain public face keeps the patterns of thought within the widely accepted conventional mode. Also, it forecloses the meeting of minds in ways that are essential for creativity.

Sharing of half-baked ideas occurs when there is sympatico, wherein people feel comfortable to open up. The energies are then directed at having fun and diving into the proverbial deep end, as opposed to maintaining public face. The conferences Castronova (2013) finds stifling stay stuck in the maintaining public face mode, including generating “vita items,” developing contacts, and so on. It is in the informal bar gatherings around the conference venue where the real exchanges take place, because the liquor dulls the instinct for impression management and also signals the temporary lowering of thresholds for socially permissible behavior. The result is that people are more willing to say what is on their minds, whether fully formed or half-baked. The result is a high-octane mix of honesty, playfulness, and sharing of half-baked ideas, when the milieu is laden with good cheer. Castranova seeks to generate the same heady mix that is “silly and thoughtful at the same time” via game playing. I, on the other hand, would not
walk away from the conference but instead rethink it. In the previous section I focused on rethinking the conference format. Here I focus on the conference food.

Delightful food softens the environment in the room. Think of a discordant conversation. Visualize the same people sitting around an appetizing dinner and then replay that same conversation in your mind. You are likely to have difficulty in retaining that hardness in spite of the vividness of your memories of the hard realities of that unfortunate conversation. In my estimation, the presence of food softens the environment by softening the ego, as it acknowledges our shared humanity, fragility of life, and our good fortune that the sustenance is before us. Thereby the shared is accentuated and the ego softened. People then open up and environment gets primed for the sharing of half-baked ideas.

In addition to helping generate sympatico, food also plays another important role – it softens the tendency to over-think. As Csikszentmihalyi (1996) tells us, “devoting full attention to a problem is not the best recipe for having creative thoughts” (p. 139). We see that in the numerous accounts of Eureka moments occurring in the most unlikely of times – on a walk, during a shower, and so on. At such moments, the “prepared” mind is not grinding away at the problem with full attention. It is, on the contrary, only partially engaged, as the pleasurable activity is a happy distraction. That allows the mind to wander off the conventional grooves and make new connections. According to Leslie (2012), “The only cure for overthinking seems to be enjoyment, something both success and analysis can dull” (online). Food is one of the few sources of enjoyment that can be indulged in, while engaging in a creative conversation with a group of some size.
Ironically, the generation of above described sensibilities does not require huge additional expense. In any case, the food will be there – that itself is a perverse confirmation of the point advanced here. What is required is a certain thoughtfulness and care. Based on my experience with workshops and other small group settings, I have settled on the following metric: a noticeably superior sandwich, hearty soup served in a good bowl at the right temperature, and a decidedly good coffee. I use the term “metric” here because other items of that equivalency will also do the trick.

But what about conferences with a few hundred attendees?

It pains me particularly acutely in cities known for good food, when I have to sit through the conference dinner routine – the predictable round tables with diameters small enough to create the illusion of a group and large enough to limit conversation to the people sitting on either side, the dinner speech that is a variation of a well-known theme that made the keynote speaker famous a long time ago, the polite questions and the polite applause, and of course the conference chicken. IX That is tough to take, when I know that around the corner great kabobs, Ethiopian food, and Vietnamese soups can be had for a fraction of the cost of the conference chicken. But then, that would at best be a small group conversation. It would not have the dimension of a large gathering – the few times when more or less the entire community is in the same place. My mind keeps wandering to more joyful ways of having such events … what if we secured hotel space and had a potluck! The great kabobs, Ethiopian food, Vietnamese soups could all be there and we could have vibrant conversations without either liquor or games.
The main reason we end up with conference chickens is the way hotels price their space and services – either pay-per-plate or pay rent for the space. It is convenient for the conference organizers to pay-per-plate, as it makes the task of assigning and recovering costs from the attendees relatively easy. The hotels then go on to serve the conference chicken, a product of the industrial logic of their operations. I think it would be better to pay the rent, levy an entrance charge (aka ticket), and have a potluck.

CONCLUSION

Peer review process, the heart of the academic enterprise, which impacts the allocation of institutional resources, development of individual careers, and the return to the larger society for the investments it makes in scholarship in terms of knowledge generated and disseminated, calls for continuing reflection. That, however, is difficult to do because we are steeped in the peer review process – it suffuses the institutional environment within which we live our everyday lives. What is required is analytical distance, which prompted our visits to eighteenth-century French salons, the eighteenth-century London coffeehouses, and Mensa. They are all are telling us something.

Even in the heyday of the French salon, when the hostess-centric sycophantic culture suffused intellectual exchange, there were striking contrasts – educating ones. For instance, Baron D’Holbach also hosted a salon. But his salon had a very different milieu. There was plenty of food but of simple character – good food, top-flight wine, and excellent coffee. The company included creative men who frequented other salons and also those the hostesses of other salons found too risky to have around their dinner tables. One of the participants thus characterized the milieu: “That was the place to hear the
freest, most animated, and most instructive conversation that ever was … There was hardly a bold and original idea in politics and religion that was not brought forward and discussed pro and con, nearly always with much subtlety and insight” (Coser, 1970, pp. 16-17). His friend made the contrast explicit: “… We were no longer tied to apron strings as at Mme. Geoffrin’s: But that liberty did not degenerate into license” (quoted in Coser, 1970, p. 16).

For our analytical purposes, Baron D’Holbach’s salon is noteworthy for a couple of reasons. One, it shows that the format, while very critical, does not over-determine the creative environment. What matters is how the three design elements – selection process, format, and milieu – interact. The organizing template of the gatherings at Baron D’Holbach’s place was similar to that of the salons then in vogue. But the selection process was much more open, as the more risky types were also welcome, and the atmosphere much more relaxed, with simple and predictable food and what we in today’s language call a “laid-back” host.

Two, as the above quoted first-hand account records “liberty did not degenerate into license.” That points to the defining tension of a creative environment: the maintenance of social cohesion and honest pursuit of the creative breakthrough. The former is essential, as the creative process is a social process. In effect, a break in the social fabric ends the dialog and thereby the creative process. But then, without honesty, which can be brutal, the creative breakthrough remains elusive. The dynamics within creative environments then range from “creativity as a social game” to “genuine creativity.” Since it is usually difficult to directly deal with hard truths, the bias tends to be towards the former. The reason why Castronova (2013) finds the conferences sapping is that they
occur pretty much in the “creativity as a social game” modality. There is hardly any pursuit of “genuine creativity.” They are in many ways assemblages for manufacturing of “vita items.” The reality is that “genuine creativity” can be pursued without an irreparable tear in the social fabric only in very special circumstances that only occasionally rise and for short durations – wherein the participants are so deeply committed to the larger cause that bruised egos are only a short-term discomfort. Here I am often reminded of the following description of the editorial board sessions in the 1910s at The Masses, a Greenwich Village publication.

“The Masses was owned and run collectively by its contributing members. Their goals … were to promote a cultural and political revolution and to do so in a lively, iconoclastic way. Editorial sessions with twenty or more participants in attendance, each with one vote, lasted for hours and occasionally bruised a writer’s feelings, but the gatherings also generated a strong sense of camaraderie and common purpose among the Seventh Village’s founders. An open, everything-is-possible spirit prevailed. Nominally a Socialist journal, The Masses featured an eclectic and often contradictory mix of viewpoints: Marxist, anarchist, feminist, Freudian, labor unionist, pagan, and bohemian” (MacFarland, 2001, p. 192).

There are a couple of things we need to note here. One, the editorial board members kept coming back. They were committed to the larger cause. That allowed for brutal honesty in the discussion. The participants knew that hurt feelings would not create irreparable damage. Conversely, the members on the receiving end knew that their “temporary” critics were committed to the larger cause, and the tables would be turned in the future, as
they may have been in the past. Two, this honesty allowed for a great diversity of ideas to find home on the printed page. One day an idea from one perspective won acceptance and on another day an idea from another perspective won. On the other hand, if maintenance of social cohesion had weighed heavily on the minds of the editorial board members, the likely tendency would have been towards political correctness of some sort and along with that would have come sterile homogeneity.

What the coffeehouses tell us is that low threshold for entry is not necessarily a bad thing. It can in fact be a good thing, depending on the raison d’être of the forum. That runs counter to ethos of the academic community, where selectivity is almost automatically seen as the marker of quality. That also resonates with Grudin’s (2013) very perceptive observation that the high selectivity actually undermines one of the critical functions of an academic conference – community building”, and Castronova’s (2013) celebration of TED talks whose “audience consists of the entire Internet, not the carefully-selected members of your academic tribe who knew what your presentation was about six months ago.”

Mensa directs attention to the central paradox of an academic conference. It has to be an act of “organized spontaneity,” if it is to live up to its purpose. The tendency is usually for the organization of the clockwork sort. That creates efficient conferences but of the type Castronova (2013) finds juiceless. What is needed is the bringing together of elements that create the type of sympatico that is palpable in hobby shops, music stores, collectors stores (coins, stamp, comics, and others), barbershops, and beauty salons. In such atmospheres, people open up and share half-baked ideas, the heart of a creative conversation. Furthermore, they are welcoming of wannabes, especially ones who show
genuine enthusiasm. It is difficult for a conference, an occasional event, to generate the type of described here. But conference organizers should at least try to generate a flavor of it. That would require an artful and varied mix of homogeneity and heterogeneity.

In sum, the life of a forum depends on the selection process, interaction format, and the milieu. The selection process should to be tuned to the raison d’être of the forum, the format should not be treated as a given but experimented with, and the atmosphere should not be weighed down by the conference chicken and associated clichés.
REFERENCES


Figure 1: Open Flow of Half-Baked Ideas in a Creative Conversation

T1

T2

T3

T4

: Time

: Half-Baked Idea
Notes

i Walter Sales, director of *On the Road*, recounted this explanation after the screening of the film at Indiana University Cinema on November 14, 2012.

ii According to Kingsley (1954), the intellectual was “compelled to adjust his style according to the intellectual fashion; he had always to be alert to please his hostess, to write so that she could talk about his book without having read the part which cost the greatest effort and which would constitute its permanent value” (p. 105).

iii For instance, Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences says the following with regard to its fellows selection process: “If there is no consensus among the external advisors, the Scholarship Committee will either weigh up the arguments or ask for another external opinion” (2007, p. 17). Similarly, Indiana University Graduate School 2010-2012 Academic Bulletin says the following with regard to doctoral dissertation defenses: “If the decision is not unanimous, majority and minority reports should be submitted to the dean who, within 10 working days, will investigate and consult with the research committee” (Indiana University Graduate School, 2010, p. 13). It goes on to say that if the consensus is not reached even after the dean’s intervention, the decision will be made on the basis of a simple majority. What is important to note here is that the initial decision cannot be made on the basis of a majority vote and the lack of consensus triggers an intervention by the dean.
IAS is meant to be a source of corrective impulses to the institutionalization of the university. Consequently, how the IAS is situated with respect to the university becomes a salient issue. Some IASs intentionally have no formal relationship with the university. They are proud of this disconnect and their status as separate entities. Yet, they locate themselves within physical proximity of a university and work to foster interaction with it. Others are formally part of a university but intentionally locate some ways off the campus to maintain distance. There are also IASs, like our own, which are both part of a university and located on campus. What is noteworthy here is that they are all very self-conscious of their relationship with the university. In effect, distance – institutional and/or physical – is seen to be essential for opening up a new type of intellectual space that fosters modalities of thought tamped down by the institutional encrustations of the university. The question then arises: Do the IAS really foster modalities of thought that the university lacks the capacity to generate?

Similarly, Castronova (2013) says: “It is a truism among academics that most of the creative work at a conference happens outside the formal sessions, at social gatherings. If this is so, why not drop the formal sessions entirely?” But what he means by “formal” is “conventional,” as he goes on to sketch out an alternate format that is a “formalized social gathering” with a “structure” that facilitates and records exchange of ideas.

The range of perspectives was wide – from neoliberal analyses of self-governance to feminist interventions into queer theory, from the micro-sociology of everyday rituals to the historical geography of the world ocean.
As Arrow tells us, it is ‘easier to communicate with other individuals with whom one has a common approach or a common language, literally or metaphorically’ (1974, p. 42). In the case of Mensa, the members tend to come from similar socio-economic background and that creates a shared code, which facilitates communications among members.

Castronova (2013) finds such enjoyment in games. Stressing the importance of enjoyment, he says: “For Ludium to work, the games MUST BE fun. It is better for them to be stupid and fun than accurate and boring, so long as they are thematically relevant.”

On reading this paper, Lindsay Ems, Managing Editor of The Information Society, emailed me the following: “I couldn't agree more with your thoughts about conference food. As a (mostly) vegetarian, I often feel awkward stares and inquiring (sometimes jealous) looks from other conference goers when I am served ‘the vegetarian option’ and they are stuck with the conference chicken. I feel a little uncomfortable about sticking out, but it often sparks conversations and looks more appetizing than the default entree.” I was delighted when Lindsay gave me permission to quote her, as reactions to her “vegetarian option” resonate with my take on the conference chicken.

Grudin also directs our attention to other drawbacks of high selectivity. It often ends up favoring incremental contributions over original ones, as the former typically employ tried, tested, and perfected frameworks and methodologies and the latter are marked by
rough edges. For similar reasons, it tends to favor narrow discipline based work over interdisciplinary work.