Early last May, more than 200 people gathered in Washington DC for the fifth annual meeting of the ISCRAM R&D community – with ISCRAM short for Information Systems for Crisis Response and Management. Academics, practitioners, students and policy makers could attend a variety of paper presentations, panel discussions, technical demonstration sessions and – not less important – some excellent social activities. All conference activities, technical and other, were kept on track by the excellent local organizing team of Professors Frank Fiedrich and Jack Harrald of George Washington University.

Traditionally, the conference runs from Monday morning till Wednesday evening, and is preceded by two important events on Sunday: the PhD student Colloquium and the ‘informal getting together’ at a local pub. While the latter is a cheerful opportunity for ISCRAM members to meet up and socialize before the serious work begins, the PhD Colloquium is an intense day of hard work for the PhD students who have been selected to participate. From about 30 participants, 10 students are invited to present their work, and are then given detailed advise or suggestions by their peers and a group of senior researchers in the domain. Under the leadership of Dr. Jonas Landgren (Viktoria Institute, Sweden) and Professor Leysia Palen (Colorado University, USA), the PhD students take back home valuable recommendations on their work.

Equally traditionally, the conference is kicked off by an excellent keynote on Monday morning, this time by Professor Ben Shneiderman from the University of Maryland in the USA. In his keynote, Professor Shneiderman focused on the new opportunities for disaster and emergency prevention, response, and recovery offered by the remarkable social connectivity generated by today’s networking services. Innovative socio-technical systems can be harnessed to strengthen communities in ways that can prevent some disasters, raise resident awareness of dangers, and prepare them to cope
more effectively. Studying these innovative solutions and validating their effectiveness will require new research methods and a fresh outlook that Professor Shneiderman defined as "Science 2.0" – a term which provoked continued discussion at the conference following this exciting presentation.

Following this opening keynote, the conference participants then could move to one of the different parallel sessions that were offered continuously throughout the entire conference program. Each of the sessions provided for a variety of presentations, with a focus ranging from technical to social perspectives and back. In total, the program provided for more than 20 dedicated session themes, including Geographic Information Systems, IT Governance, IT Security, Command and Control Systems, Intelligent Systems, Visualization, Information Overload, Human-Computer Interaction, Research Methods, and Information Systems for Humanitarian Operations.

A most interesting closing of the first day was the panel organized by Professor Murray Turoff (New Jersey Institute of Technology, USA) on « Information Seeking Behavior and Needs of Emergency Preparedness and Management Practitioners », in which selected panelist discussed the findings of a recent report to the National Library of Medicine focusing on the problems of information overload and information seeking by emergency response practitioners.

The second day started with a keynote from Joe Becker, Senior Vice President of Disaster Services for the American Red Cross and leading the organization’s disaster relief. Joe Becker was leading the organization’s largest US relief effort to date for Hurricane Katrina. In his presentation, Joe Becker described the many challenges and opportunities that Red Cross faces every day during a disaster and where the organization is going in the area of technology to better serve America. This talk

Figure 1. SAHANA and Humanitarian FOSS at the ISCRAM2008 demo session (from left to right Chamindra de Silva and Trishan de Lanerolle)
Figure 2. Dr. Gary Klein keynote speech at ISCRAM2008

Figure 3. The ISCRAM2008 Mike Meleshkin Award for best PhD student paper went to the ‘crisis informatics’ PhD students team (from left to right: Sophia B. Liu, Amanda L. Hughes, and Sarah E. Vieweg) at the University of Colorado at Boulder.
was complemented by a panel on “Humanitarian Information Management”, in which Joe Becker, Alta Haggerty (UN OCHA), Markus Goldstein and Samia Amin (World Bank) and Dennis King (US Humanitarian Information Unit) presented their views on this topic and initiated numerous discussions among the participants.

A few hours later, the second highlight of that day was offered by the technology demonstration and poster presentation session held during lunch time. Chaired by Dr. Susanne Jul of INSTEDD, the ISCRAM demo and poster session provided for an unique opportunity to discuss informally and in-depth the design, implementation and deployment of systems, and offered all attendees the opportunity for detailed examination of a variety of implemented systems, and encouraged to expose and address the issues that arise in practical application of theoretical ideas.

The third and last day of the conference started off with the final keynote of the ISCRAM2008 program, offered by Dr. Gary Klein, Chief Scientist of Klein Associates. Dr. Klein is one of the founders of the field of Naturalistic Decision Making. His work on recognitional decision-making has influenced the design of new systems and interfaces, and decision training programs. He has extended his work on decision making to describe problem detection, option generation, sensemaking, planning and replanning. In order to perform research on decision-making in field settings, Dr. Klein and his colleagues have developed new methods of Cognitive Task Analysis. In his presentation, Dr. Klein stressed that while we can access more information than ever before, crisis managers need to go beyond information management. They have to be able to use the information to make decisions, make plans, and make sense of events. Dr. Klein vividly described how people actually perform these cognitive functions and how to take the cognitive dimension into account in developing information systems.

The final memorable moment of the conference was the closing session, in which the ISCRAM community wraps up its annual meeting by awarding those members who made a special professional contribution. For the first time, a best paper award was given at the conference, which went to John McGuirl (The Ohio State University), Nadine Sarter (The University of Michigan) and David D. Woods (The Ohio State University) for their paper “Seeing is believing?: The effects of real-time imaging feedback on emergency management decision-making”. The ISCRAM2008 Mike Meleshkin Award for best PhD student paper went to the ‘crisis informatics’ PhD students team (Amanda L. Hughes, Sophia B. Liu and Sarah E. Vieweg) at Colorado University at Boulder. This group contributed no less than three excellent papers. Last but not least, the ISCRAM Community Distinguished Service Award was given to Professor Simon French of the Manchester Business School for his continued unconditional support to the ISCRAM Community.

Also at the closing session, an announcement was made that ISCRAM will start with its own journal, the International Journal for Information Systems for Crisis Response and Management, or IJISCRAM in short. The new IJISCRAM journal will be published from 2009 onwards on a quarterly basis. The first issue consists of invited contributions by leaders in our community, and from the second issue onwards submissions are invited. This journal is intended to become an active instrument in growing the publication opportunities and publication quality standards in the ISCRAM community, and will strive to provide research results and news as quickly as possible. The Call for Papers is available at iscram.org.

Finally, it was announced that ISCRAM2009 will take place in Sweden in the city of Gothenburg, from May 11 to 13 2009. This sixth edition of the ISCRAM conference will without any doubt build on the success of the preceding editions, and we cordially invite you to contribute or otherwise actively participate in the next meeting of our global community!
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