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Trip Report: 7th Data Communications Symposium, Mexico City, Mexico, October, 1981

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The 7th Data Communication Symposium, cosponsored by ACM and IEEE, was held in Mexico City on October 26-29, 1981. This symposium traditionally attracts an audience interested in computer communication and data networks (rather than those interested in modulation and signal processing theory). As might be expected, two areas dominated the conference, local network technology and protocol conversion/standardization. Even the analytical and performance modeling papers were mostly on the subject of modeling the performance of alternative higher-level protocol designs. This emphasis represents a shift from earlier symposiums toward topics that are more connected to real problems.

On the other hand that shift toward more relevant problem areas didn't guarantee more relevant papers. The papers on protocol conversion were surprisingly naive in their proposals to solve the world's problems of incompatible protocols by designing translating gateways. Usually, someone had been successful in constructing a special-case translating gateway between two essential equivalent protocols, and tried to extrapolate from this experience to recommend that translating gateways could solve most problems.

A second class of attacks on problems of protocol incompatibility came from various groups working on standards. Again, these proposals were marked by a kind of naive hopefulness that the combination of widespread interest and increasing needs for interconnection would lead to successful standardization efforts, despite strong technical arguments between providers of different kinds of applications. When asked questions about this conflict, one of the standards-setting authors expressed a strong belief that community pressures would prevail and standards would succeed. At the same time, when another author was asked why his company was ignoring the standards and designing its own protocols, he answered that it appeared that the desired function could be implemented far more cheaply by straying from the standards. It would appear that these arguments are far from settled.

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An interesting sidelight of the conference that several participants commented about privately was a notable lack of enthusiasm for the Xerox-Dec-Intel Ethernet. It seemed that no one had anything good to say about the Ethernet, and there were quite a number of people who had negative things to say about it. The feelings were not very well formed, and ranged from cost to engineering difficulty to specific unsuitabilities. A similar reaction occurred to the paper from Xerox describing the rationale behind the 48-bit address field. It appears, from the overall mood of this symposium, that there is not a ground swell of enthusiasm for the Ethernet within the data communication technical community.

One lesson of this symposium should be noted by anyone who takes on future responsibilities for running such activities. To hold such a symposium in the middle of a major city is a mistake, for two reasons. First, the cost of first class facilities is very high. The series of data communication symposia normally makes a large enough profit to provide operating funds for the sponsoring special interest groups for the next two years. This symposium, however, appears barely to be breaking even, despite an unusually high registration fee. Second, the sightseeing and shopping attractions of a large city are very powerful, with the consequence that some sessions were only lightly attended. More important, during the unscheduled times of the symposium, the participants scattered into the city rather than gathering in the hotel lobby to talk. Thus one of the major benefits of the symposium (informal contact) was greatly diluted. Locating a symposium at a small, out-of-the-way place (such as Asilomar) seems to be a far better strategy.

The symposium proceedings, containing 30 papers, can be borrowed at my office. A copy of the table of contents is attached.

SEVENTH DATA COMMUNICATIONS SYMPOSIUM—1981
MARIA ISABEL SHERATON HOTEL
MEXICO CITY, MEXICO
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