

Cambridge talk listing service

Proposal for Cambridge Philosophical Society

Background

The following proposals are motivated by the questions, ‘What do members gain from their membership in the Society?’; ‘How could attendance at Society lectures be enhanced?’; and ‘How could we better fulfill our purposes?’.

Cambridge enjoys a wealth of seminars and lectures on interesting topics, organized by societies, departments, research groups, and individuals. (When I mention lectures, I refer to all lectures other than those associated with taught courses.) How does a curious person – a graduate student or postdoc new to Cambridge, say – find out about these excellent lectures? Some organizations print posters or flyers and circulate them to departments. Some advertise their lectures in publications such as the Reporter, Varsity, and TCS. Many circulate announcements by email. Most organizations have websites on which their lectures are listed. But there is no simple way reliably to find out ‘what’s on?’; nor, the more important question, ‘what’s on in my areas of interest?’

A few organizations attempt to fill these gaps: The CURE (Cambridge University Research Exchange) collates lists of interesting seminars, puts them on a big webpage,¹ and circulates them by email; but how is a newcomer to find these email lists? Furthermore, an enormous email listing this week’s twenty lectures is not the best medium for delivering information. And Duncan Simpson’s funding at the CURE is not guaranteed for the long term. Cambridge University Science Productions is a university society dedicated to furthering science communication and the public understanding of science; they recently created BlueSci (<http://www.bluesci.org/>), a new popular science magazine for Cambridge. Some departments have a web-page containing links to all their seminar-list web-pages (eg Engineering); but it is still a laborious process to click through to all those pages while hunting for a particular seminar. If the user wants to know ‘what’s on this afternoon?’, he has to visit every Seminar page.

Proposal summary

I propose that the Cambridge Philosophical Society should become the organization that enables people to find information about seminars and lectures in Cambridge. We could do this by setting up a web-based service that allows all organizations in Cambridge conveniently to publish their lecture information, and that allows anyone to search through the database in a manner suiting their interests. The website would also serve syndicated ‘what’s on’ information directly into the webpages of many organizations in Cambridge, with each syndicated information stream tailored to that organization’s interests. This web service would become the premiere listings service for intellectually stimulating events in Cambridge.

Why should the Society consider this new activity? First, by helping research groups and societies throughout Cambridge to advertise their lectures, we would fulfill our purpose of enhancing scientific discussion in Cambridge. Second, as the lecture-listing service became increasingly known as *the* source of information about events in Cambridge, so the Society’s profile would increasingly be raised. Third, our service would help new scientific societies in Cambridge to publicise their events; our website would help student-run organizations to maintain continuity as their committee memberships fluctuate. Fourth, once the service is well-established, new beneficial relationships

¹<http://www.bio.phy.cam.ac.uk/thecure/AllSeminars.html>

between our Society's members and other societies might arise. For example, the time might come when membership of the Cambridge Philosophical Society would entitle one to attend the meetings of a range of other societies. Our listings-site's front page would be a highly-sought position. Fifth, and perhaps most important, our database of lectures would provide an intellectual overview of the activity of the University, unconstrained by the conventional boundaries between organizations.

Tentative details

1. The first step would be for Council to establish a new committee, similar to one of the journal committees: the composition of the committee should be flexible, including Council members and coopted local experts. Alan Blackwell, a Lecturer in the Computer Laboratory, is willing to serve as a coopted expert. Alan has extensive experience of human-computer interface design, and led the creation of the Darwin College website. He is also energetically involved in cross-disciplinary research interactions in Cambridge.
2. The committee would oversee the creation and maintenance of a web-based lecture-listing service, and the establishment of relationships with all relevant parties in Cambridge.
3. The principal components of the service would be
 - (a) A database of events, and a linked database of organizations.
 - (b) A website giving ordinary users direct access to the events database, allowing them to browse by subject, by organization, by time, and so forth. We would negotiate with the Computing Service for the use of a memorable URL such as `talks.cam.ac.uk`.
 - (c) An RSS-feed (RSS is a format for *syndicating* the content of news-like sites) which would be used by websites throughout Cambridge to provide personalized 'what's on' content from the events database. For example, the Physics department's website could include a 'What's on in Physics in Cambridge' box in its webpages; this box would be updated continually from the lecture-listings server. The Physics web author would simply add a little piece of html to their web page, once only; then that page will automatically be kept up to date with the latest information from the server. The `talks.cam` website would include instructions for web authors to include this free syndicated content in their pages.
 - (d) A backend allowing organizations to add or edit their own events, including images. Event information would include information about the intended audience for the event, the cost (if any), the venue, whom the event is sponsored by, and links to further information. The topics of seminar series and individual events would be classified by the organization.
 - (e) A syndication service allowing organizations to download selected events from the database in a variety of useful formats. For example, a society could download an HTML page containing their own lectures. Or a local newspaper could download a list of all lectures in Cambridge that are open to the general public.
4. The committee would hope to establish relationships with:
 - (a) All departments and all research groups in the University; we would aim to run such a useable listings service that all research groups would find it easiest to list their research seminars with us rather than manage their own website.

- (b) All colleges.
 - (c) All student societies that organize lectures.
 - (d) The City tourist office.
 - (e) Local listings magazines. (Our content could be syndicated to paper publications as well as to websites.)
 - (f) The University press office.
5. The committee would employ local experts to design the website and the associated software, and would employ part-time student help to maintain the system. **Budget:** The ongoing costs of maintaining the system are not expected to exceed six hours per week at £15 per hour, that is, £4500 per year, plus hardware costs averaging £500 per year.

We estimate the one-off costs of site design and software to be £10,000.

6. **What would be listed at talks.cam.** Since the cost of creating a system for listing *all* public lectures and seminars in Cambridge is the same as the cost of a system listing only scientific lectures, I would recommend that we allow the listings service to be a comprehensive one, welcoming listings of lectures in all disciplines. Indeed I think it would be easiest for us to cover all subjects, rather than having to define a border (how would we handle cross-disciplinary public lecture series like the Darwin College lectures?). I am not suggesting that the CPS should change its own emphasis. But if we want to make a premiere listings service that everyone uses and everyone talks about, it should be comprehensive. The syndicated feeds can each be set to deliver only, say, “Physical science related”, and thus the existence of the “History” or “Politics” talks in the database will not bother those who want to know about science talks only. I think serendipitous cross-disciplinary contacts are one of the exciting possibilities of this scheme. One of the most fun talks I attended recently was a Corpus talk by someone from AngloSaxon Norse and Celtic who was trying to classify the handwriting of 10th century scribes. I’d like such talks to be at the heart of our system, rather than at its fringes.

Future ideas

Once `talks.cam` raises our Society’s profile, we will be able to revisit the question of what we offer to our members.

One simple option would be to offer members the opportunity to subscribe to a personalized email service based on `talks.cam`: members could choose to receive announcements of CPS lectures, for example, 6 days in advance, and a reminder 5 hours before each lecture.

Another idea is to offer to other societies a deal along the lines of ‘we’ll help you advertise your talks, and subsidise a few of your speakers’ expenses in return for our members getting free admission’.