

Communications-Report: (Workshop 20.05.2015 Milano)

Mixed Criticality Cluster: Communicating to the wide audience and lay public

Three Projects presented at the Block review for the Mixed Criticality Cluster

Title:

“Tell me your story” - communicating achievements in the area of “mixed-criticality systems”

Objective:

This workshop was set up to work on the topic of communicating computer science to the lay public.

Setup:

1. Each project had to prepare a presentation that helps the common public understand what their projects are about.
2. Short Feedback was given to each presentation.
3. Key Note with input and inspiration on communicating science in general to the lay public.
4. Short group work on common messages
5. Quick presentation of the results
6. General Feedback

Observations:

The groups were well prepared and very disciplined regarding the timing. One groups presented a video, the others used powerpoint. Watching the presentations from the viewpoint of a journalist or lay audience there were 2 out of 3 presentations still very technical and hard to understand.

They seemed to be just short versions of the presentations of the normal technical presentation.

Too much information on the slides, not enough visualization. Some of the visualized items with no meaning to the lay public. A lot of technical terms without any explanation. The one presentation consisting of a video (CONTREX) was already inspired by the Oslo workshop (William Fornaciari had attended the Oslo Workshop and suggested this way of explaining the project) and thus a nice example for good communication with the lay public.

DREAMS

There was a short explanation part with visualization in the beginning. But nonetheless this presentation was addressed to people who are at least interested in computer-science (1st. semester?) Using a lot of technical terms right from the beginning, much information on each chart.. The public was not educated about the problem – how does this relate to the world of the citizens? Where does it lead? What is the vision or goal of this project? In the end: confusing.

PROXIMA

Also here: it might be addressed at IT-students at university, but not at the lay public. There was an easy-to-follow –structure with step-by-step explanations. But the last two slides were a complete information-overload with too many words and technical terms on them. Again there was missing a vision: where do we go and why? How does this relate to my world?

CONTREX

CONTREX came up with an easy to understand comic-video. It was very funny on some parts, but still introducing the complex problems very precise they are facing. Very well done. If you saw this video you understand the problems with mixed criticality systems. This is a good base to start with. After that people can follow much easier. It would have been even more impressive, if there would have been also an explanation on how CONTREX is dealing with those problems and what the topics are, they are working on.

The group work at the end of the workshop worked out fine – regarding communication between the scientists. There were vivid discussions between the members of all different groups and a lot of short presentations of common messages in the end. This might be a good starting point for a closer look at communicating to the lay public.

Suggestions for improvement:

The wide audience needs to be educated about the complex problems in the computer science. Thus it is important to explain the problem – before they will be interested in a solution. The audience needs examples that relate to their world - and “the big picture”-outline to get an idea about the relevance of the topics. Scientists should be encouraged to do more storytelling and need to be more sensible about technical terms.

It is easy to work on key messages, visualization, story and explanations. If you know, how to do it. It is important to define communications goals and an adequate target group to address. And it is necessary to define the channels to choose for the message. It is sensible to the projects to work on communication plans and timelines. Not as a one-time-effort, when the project ends. It should be a continuous process during the whole project.

But this does not mean that it has to be very expensive! The Contrex Video was made by a group of students with a software, anyone can get on the internet.

But the scientists need the feedback from communication experts who work together with them on their performance. There are easy-to-adopt skills and techniques that could help to make communication more effective and successful. These skills can be learned in workshops, designed especially for these problems.

Conclusion:

It is hard work to find a good balance between technical information and an easy-to-understand-performance. The CONTREX video was a first example for There is a growing awareness among the scientists, but there is also a lack of techniques and resources to go out and communicate in a good manner. It is recommended, that each project would address at least one person that is in charge of communications. There should be workshops to provide these persons with basic education and skills in communicating their topics to the lay audience.

Every project should define a communications-strategy right in the beginning of the project. This should be revised and eventually changed during the process.