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AltRecSys

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AltRecSys: A Workshop on Alternative, Unexpected, and Critical Work on Recommendation

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ABSTRACT

The AltRecSys workshop, held in conjunction with the 18th edition of the ACM Conference on Recommender Systems (RecSys) in Bari, Italy, provides a platform for highlighting “alternative” work in recommender systems. Modeled after alt.chi and the CRAFT sessions at the FAccT conference, AltRecSys offers a space to discuss interesting, preliminary, offbeat, unexpected, and critical ideas in recommender systems that do not (yet) fit well into the kinds of publications and formats for the main conference or traditional workshops. This workshop is not a venue to showcase research advances. Instead, it is envisioned as a forum where researchers, (industry) practitioners, and other associated stakeholders can exchange ideas and together identify areas of study and new questions to expand the discussions and research agendas of the RecSys community in future years. The call for contributions and the workshop sessions are centered around the question “*what are the vital questions, needs, or opportunities that the RecSys community is currently overlooking?*”

CCS CONCEPTS

• Information systems → Recommender systems.

KEYWORDS

recommender systems, alternative ideas, criticism, methodology, discussion, speculative design

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1 MOTIVATION

The first edition of the **AltRecSys** workshop offers a forum for researchers, industry practitioners, and other stakeholders to discuss out-of-the-mainstream ideas in recommender systems. It is inspired by two existing venues in other communities, i.e., CHI (Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems) and FAccT (the Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency).

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The first is alt.chi, which is described on its website¹ as:

alt.chi is a forum for controversial, risk-taking, and boundary-pushing research at CHI. The CHI program committee formed alt.chi to act as a forum for innovative and insightful work that can go unrecognized through the standard review process. Contributions to alt.chi often innovate methodologically, critique accepted practices, or take on controversial questions. Moreover, alt.chi presentations are often innovative in format as well as content, and we wish to encourage authors to consider how they might present their work in alternative ways. Previous years have seen alt.chi contributions presented through theatre, carnival, music, poetry, and graphic novels.

The second is the CRAFT track² at FAccT, which solicits short workshops, panels, and other activities that are intended to provide critical reflection on the structure, scholarship, and impact of the conference.

Reports on lessons learned from both alt.chi [1] and CRAFT workshops [6] highlight that these venues have welcomed unconventional “methods and viewpoints” [3] and served as a space to foster discourse and bring awareness to divergent interests among the community. We attribute this in part to the broad range of attendees.

With the AltRecSys workshop, we aim to bring the structure and ideas inspired by alt.chi and CRAFT into RecSys. This offers the RecSys community a venue to bring attention to and discuss a range of ideas that do not have a natural home elsewhere in the conference.

2 ORGANIZATION OVERVIEW

The **objectives** driving the organization of AltRecSys are twofold:

- To discuss ideas that challenge the community in new, unexpected, and possibly controversial ways;
- To provide feedback to authors with bold new ideas that will help them refine those ideas for further research and eventual successful submission to RecSys, future workshops, or other venues.

Due to the nature of this workshop, we expect a wide range of submissions and discussions. However, to ensure a unified and meaningful outcome for all participants, we ask contributors and attendees to focus on answering the question “*what are the vital questions, needs, or opportunities that the RecSys community is currently overlooking?*”

¹<https://chi2022.acm.org/for-authors/presenting/alt-chi/>

²<https://facctconference.org/2023/cfpcraft.html>

AltRecSys is not meant to be a platform to disseminate the latest research advances in the RecSys area. Instead, we solicited contributions including but not limited to the following:

- Interesting and/or provocative ideas in the recommendation space that are too preliminary for a research paper but would benefit from community discussion.
- Speculative recommender systems domains and applications.
- Lessons learned from negative results, failed experiments, and other outcomes that yield potentially useful and/or interesting insights into recommender systems research or practice.
- Brief perspective essays that document and question foundational assumptions often taken for granted in RecSys work.
- Methods-only research descriptions, to provoke discussion about proposed research designs before they are carried out or results are known.

To foster reflection, and accommodate “alternative”, we elicited several **forms of submissions**, including the following:

- Extended abstracts of up to 500 words describing the opinion, perspective, or idea.
- Short videos of up to 3 minutes.
- Podcasts of up to 30 minutes.
- Panels, where you propose up to 3 panelists and a theme.

In the spirit of this workshop, we have made clear in our call for contributions that we are also open to creative styles of submissions.

These short submissions are intended to focus on communicating the key idea, and enable selection based on the key idea itself and its contribution to a diverse set of perspectives to be addressed at the workshop; this selection model is commonly used in conferences and workshops outside of computer science.

We also designed submission to elicit participation from potential participants interested and knowledgeable about the topic of the conference, but who are not the “typical” academic and industry practitioners regularly attending RecSys.

All submitted contributions are **editorially reviewed** by the workshop organizers to curate a set of contributions that can form the basis of a diverse and vibrant discussion in the workshop.

We **published** the selected submissions on the workshop website³ in advance of the workshop, and publicize them to promote interest in the workshop and set the stage for the on-site discussion. We strongly encouraged workshop attendees to browse accepted contributions in advance to establish a shared baseline for discussion during the event.

3 WORKSHOP FORMAT & ACTIVITIES

Mindful of the fact that the style of the workshop and set of expected contributions are new to the RecSys community, AltRecSys is planned as an *in-person, a half-day workshop*. This is motivated by the fact that the main objective of this first edition of the workshop is to host a highly interactive, and iterative discussion, leading to a description of fresh ideas and topics that the RecSys community should be open to addressing in the years to come.

Interest levels and submission counts were not available at publication time, but pending revision based on interest, we planned the following activities:

Following welcoming remarks, we will form breakout groups so that each cluster of attendees can discuss specific ideas. Each group discussion will be started with the topic of one or more of the accepted contributions. We will do an initial determination of breakout groups in advance of the workshop based on the contributions and will solicit breakout group leads from among the authors of accepted contributions. This will be followed by a brief report-out of highlights and lessons learned, to encourage further networking and discussion during the coffee break and to help the organizers prepare for the final discussion.

For the second half of the workshop, we will use the Fishbowl discussion strategy to involve all attendees in the discussion and refine the ideas that came from the submissions and the breakout discussions. A fishbowl discussion is an active panel format that starts with a seed set of panelists, but when an audience member asks a question of the panel, they take the place of the respondent and thus are on the panel for the next question. It has been used successfully in previous workshops at RecSys, e.g., HealthRecSys [2], to facilitate discussion of the workshop topic and content that is structured but provides everyone with opportunities to both ask and respond to questions. This strategy has also proven to be effective in fostering discussion among individuals with different interests and expertise [4, 5].

The fishbowl discussion engages the participants in further in-depth debate of the ideas and questions raised during the breakout discussions. It will be focused around the question “so what”: *how should the ideas presented affect the recommender systems research and practice, or the ACM RecSys community?* This will help to connect our original motivating question to concrete ideas for advancing RecSys research.

4 ORGANIZERS

Below we provide a brief overview of the workshop organizers.

Michael Ekstrand is an assistant professor at Drexel University. He has organized several workshops for RecSys and elsewhere, including FAccTRec, SimuRec, UCERSTI, FACTS-IR, and FairUMAP. He has also served as General Co-chair (2018) and Program Co-chair (2022) for RecSys itself.

Sole Pera is an associate professor in the Web Information Systems group at TU Delft. She has co-organized workshops at RecSys and related venues, including KidRec, ComplexRec, and IR4Kids. Sole has served as General Co-chair for RecSys (2018) and IDC (2024); she also participated in organizing committees in various roles at RecSys, UMAP, SIGIR, IDC, and CIKM, among others.

Alan Said is an associate professor at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. He has organized a number of workshops and activities at RecSys, e.g., HealthRecSys, RecSysChallenge, ComplexRec, RecSys Summer School, and PERSPECTIVES. He has served as General Co-Chair of RecSys 2019 and has served on organizing committees at, e.g., RecSys, UMAP, and IUI.

³<https://altrecsys.github.io/>

5 SUMMARY

Submissions to AltRecSys 2024 emphasize new, unexpected, and potentially controversial opinions related to RecSys research and the complexities of deploying recommender systems in real-world scenarios. AltRecSys serves as a crucial forum for bringing diverse perspectives together and voicing key community challenges. For more details about the workshop program and accepted contributions, visit the AltRecSys workshop website: <https://altrecsys.github.io/>

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