

in the final analysis

“The pump don’t work ‘cause the vandals took the handles.”

—“Subterranean Homesick Blues,” Bob Dylan

Whether historically correct or not, I always think of the Vandals as a tribal people who, along with the Visigoths, applied a brutal coup de grâce to the floundering Roman Empire, sacking Rome and collapsing Western civilization into a centuries-long black hole called the Dark Ages. Today, “vandal” refers not to a rough people, but to a person who engages in the just-for-fun destruction of someone else’s property. That destruction can take many forms, from graffiti to broken warehouse windows to, according to Bob Dylan, pilfered geejaws. If there is a polar opposite to the chaos of vandalism it is the orderly order of science and engineering, where so many of our better angels are served. Members of the field are, quite literally, the architects of our civilization. Still, while we dream our lofty dreams and labor toward their hard-won implementation, we are not immune to having barbarians at our own gates.

Barbarians? Here? Yes, in a way. Within the science and engineering community, I think of them as what we generically reference as “no-show” presenters. No shows are people who submit abstracts to a meeting, are accepted to the program, perhaps even provide a paper to the proceedings, and are then absent when the session chair calls their name to come to the microphone. No excuse, no apology, no advance notice, no forwarding of the presentation for someone else to give. Nothing. Just wonderment and an empty podium for the duration of the anticipated talk.

Now, I’m not talking about people who give the organizers a heads up that they have to cancel, even if it is just an hour or two before the talk is scheduled. I’m not even talking about all people who fail to show up without warning. Without a doubt, circumstances arise when a well-intentioned person through some unforeseen circumstance cannot get to the room or communicate in advance with the session chair. Stuff happens. Heartfelt apologies typically follow. I’m talking about people who never had the intention of participating; the people who are, essentially, vandals of the technical program.

Why is such disingenuousness practiced? Many of us would love to know. We all have theories, but the data are sufficiently mixed such that no hypothesis can be embraced as *the* answer. It is more complex than suggesting that it is presenters from a particular employer or region of the world. Whatever the driver, it is important that our community do what it can to prevent the establishment of a culture where it is somehow okay, or professionally acceptable, to submit abstracts to meetings without any intention of actually giving the presentation and, most damagingly, no intention of letting the session chair know of the planned absence. The failure to provide any notification of withdrawal is the most damaging practice. At minimum, session chairs need a fighting chance to make last-minute arrangements to fill the podium time with something relevant and meaningful to attendees.

So, what to do? Within TMS, our volunteer leadership, Program Committee, and staff are giving this issue considerable focus. In general, attention is being directed toward identifying and engaging at-risk presenters before they become no shows, better equipping session chairs with day-of alternatives to empty podium time, and declining to give no-show presenters a second chance to present at a TMS meeting (a “one-strike” policy is in development). The worthy and ambitious goal is to effectively eliminate no shows from the TMS meeting experience.

Is there anything else that can be done? Sure. Individually, we can use our personal influence to comment disapprovingly on no-show behavior if we encounter an unapologetic practitioner. Peer pressure means a lot. . . . Imagine how nice city walls would look if someone influential just said, “Hey kid! Put down the spray paint can and go to art school!”

JOM

Volume 67

Number 11

November 2015



James J. Robinson
Executive Director

*“We are not
immune to having
barbarians at our
own gates.”*