Report Summary of the Ad-hoc Committee on the Historian Column

Committee Members: Salim El Rouayheb (Chair), Matthieu Bloch, Elza Erkip, Tara Javidi, Daniela Tuninetti.

This issue's Historian Column prompted a long and perhaps over-due discussion among Board of Governors (BoG) members regarding the editorial process of the IEEE Information Theory Newsletter (NL) and the handling of contributed columns. Some members of the BoG, including the 2018 Society President, expressed their concerns and reservations about the tone and the content of the latest submitted Historian Column, and thus its suitability for the NL. While the BoG recognized Professor Ephremides' decades of contribution to the NL, many members noted that the Historian Column has been unique in providing him a platform to share his perspective on past events, a position not bestowed on any other contributor.

This committee of the BoG was formed in October 2018 to act as an ad-hoc fact-finding committee and make the final editorial decision on the publication of the submitted Historian Column. The committee collected information on the column, investigated the historical precedents and the formal editorial process of the NL. Moreover, the committee sought input from a wide range of IT Society members, including several rounds of interactions with Professor Ephremides. The committee was unanimous in its findings and final decision. The committee chair will present a detailed report on findings and recommendations during the February 2019 meeting of the BoG in San Diego, CA. The present document discusses the rationale for the final decision to publish the submitted Historian Column unaltered, along with a short summary of the committee's conclusions and recommendations to the BoG.

The committee noted that the proposed Historian Column was perceived very differently by different members of the BoG and the IT Society. Some perceived the column as a thinly veiled attack on members of IT Society and their colleagues in the AI and machine learning communities who publicly criticized Professor Ephremides' support letter in the Princeton Title IX case. Others, in contrast, viewed the column as Professor Ephremides' best effort at providing an olive branch of hope coming out of this rough time. Some members worried that the euphemistic language, lacking specificity, would give the impression that the IT Society as a whole does not nurture transparent dialogue on sensitive matters. Some others, in stark contrast, appreciated the fact that the column does not name individuals, and does not even refer to specific events. Some found the column inappropriate as a Historian Column, and noted the absence of historical content apart from vague references to a golden-era, and

perceived its message as berating new-comers and discouraging to younger generation. The committee reached out to Professor Ephremides and summarized the above grievances; however, he did not acknowledge their validity. Given the limited scope of the BoG's directive to the committee, and lack of formal editorial processes for the NL (which is further elaborated below), the committee did not feel that it had the mandate to pronounce one reading more valid than the other, and thus decided to publish the submitted Historian Column unaltered along with a report summary.

The committee came to two important conclusions. Firstly, the NL should remain faithful to its mission to provide highlights of important technical developments, meetings and events, and to communicate issues of interest to members, such as technical awards and recognitions, as well as pointers to and updates on future events. As such, the content should be tailored for a broad segment of the membership and the NL must not be a platform for debating personal opinions and values. Secondly, and more importantly, the current NL editorial process suffers from several shortcomings and, as a result, the NL is not equipped to handle controversial contributions. The committee noted that the Society Bylaws do not specify an editorial committee for the NL except for the NL editor, and therefore the existing editorial committee cannot act as an agent of the BoG. In addition, there are no formal mechanisms for contributed NL columns and no associated term limits for the contributors. The committee expressed concerns with the vague role and appointment process of the current NL editorial committee, as well as the purely default (re-)appointment of individuals in certain roles, such as the Historian, over multiple decades. The committee concluded that the practice of privileging an individual with a regular column without a formal process is outdated and problematic.

In its recommendations to the BoG, the committee asked the BoG to prioritize a set of bylaw revisions to constitute a formal process for the selection and the appointment of the NL editorial board according to established academic standards and best practices regarding diversity and inclusion. The committee also asked the BoG to guide the newly formed NL editorial committee to institute a set of guidelines for contributed columns, including contributor term limits, and formal ways of reviewing content. The committee strongly recommended that the NL stops the publication of such contributed columns until the formal guidelines are in place.