Online conferences don't have to feel like substitutes. 4 considerations for making yours better than the 'real thing'

*Academics and event organisers have had to quickly adapt to online conferences. However, they are here to stay. **Mark Carrigan** and **Dave Elder-Vass** argue that digital events offer opportunities to be better than face-to-face versions. They outline four considerations for organisers and participants to embed online events in academic culture, as a superior alternative to many, though probably not all, face to face events in the post-pandemic landscape.*

There's much to be grieved in the absence of 'offline' academic events: opportunities for professional networking, the energy which comes from a gathering in which participants are meaningfully engaged, the sense of recognition you get from addressing a room full of people. The pub.

However, there's also a litany of grievances which any academic will be familiar with, ranging from speakers monotonously reading their papers, audience members dominating with their rambling non-questions to the difficulty of striking up conversation with others at an enormous conference. This laundry list of limitations is probably less sorely missed.

At the moment, how we imagine 'online events' tends to be dominated by our experience of 'offline events'. Given most of us have attended far fewer of the former than the latter, it's understandable we would think in these terms. Event organisers are mostly at a very early stage, finding a good enough solution for a particular event and trying to make it work.

However, if we confine ourselves to reproducing analogue events through digital media, then we will fail to take advantage of the affordances of the digital while also missing out on an opportunity to address some of the obvious deficiencies of face-to-face meetings. This is why it's so important that we think carefully about our approach to online events, in order to establish approaches, formats and standards which help further this transition.

> If we confine ourselves to reproducing analogue events through digital media, then we will fail to take advantage of the affordances of the digital while also missing out on an opportunity to address some of the obvious deficiencies of face-to-face meetings

Four considerations for making your next online conference better than the real thing

1.Planning

We need to develop a conceptual framework for planning online events. For example: are they synchronous or asynchronous, hosted on one platform or multiple platforms, planned from the top down or facilitated from the bottom up? There will be no one size fits all solution because each group is different and each event has different objectives.

2.Platforms

This might involve stitching together combinations of offering across platforms, including finding ways to allow participants to determine their own mode of participation which might not be part of the original plan. Whereas it's easy for interaction to spill outside the confines of what organisers had planned in face to face events, it's much more difficult to do this when reliant on digital platforms.

Organisers will have to think creatively about providing spaces while participants will need to be given some hints about how to make use of them. The simplest and most effective way of providing spaces will perhaps be to identify a suitable public platform for personal interactions and encourage all participants to (a) register on the platform; and (b) provide their contact details on the platform to other participants. That way participants know how to find each other to initiate conversations. Organisers might also establish guidelines e.g. suggest times to be available for interaction, and protocols for starting, joining, leaving and ending them. This will mean developing a literacy about the platforms we are using and recognising when they help us and when they hinder us. There's a learning curve to this process because the physical venues we have mostly relied upon until now have affordances we've been learning to use our entire lives, as opposed to the relative novelty of using a platform like Zoom to coordinate a seminar.

> We must avoid the natural reaction of dismissing online meetings as ineffectual and instead contribute constructively to making them better

3.Participants

At the moment, participants are also mostly at a very early stage, seeing online events as poor substitutes for face to face meetings and learning how to participate in them. Mostly we are unaware of how much we have already invested in learning how to function well in face to face meetings and are only slowly grasping the need to invest significantly in learning how to function well in online meetings. That learning is going to be complicated by the fact that the meetings themselves are not going to be ideal over the coming years as organisers will be learning as they go, including lots of learning from mistakes. We must avoid the natural reaction of dismissing online meetings as ineffectual and instead contribute constructively to making them better, both by influencing organisers' choices and by learning how to participate better ourselves.

4.Networking

It's a real challenge to replace the informal networking affordances offered at face to face events by meeting rooms (before and after sessions), corridors, coffee breaks, opportunities to go for dinner in interesting groups, etc. How can we create both planned and unplanned spaces of porousness? These cannot be replicated exactly but the online environment has huge potential for different but loosely equivalent activities. For example, consider the growth of virtual pubs, online performances and online screenings. The current system works (to the extent that it does) because the organisers (whether intentionally or not) provide spaces in which networking can occur and participants understand how to make use of those spaces to establish connections with each other. In the virtual world, something loosely parallel will be needed.

> Online events are likely to be a dominant feature in the academic landscape for the foreseeable future. This is a transition which was already slowly beginning to happen on both environmental and accessibility grounds

The post-pandemic university

Online events are likely to be a dominant feature in the academic landscape for the foreseeable future. This is a transition which was already slowly beginning to happen on both *environmental* and *accessibility* grounds, with a growing recognition of the carbon footprint of academic mobility as well as the deeply exclusionary character of many academic events.

Over time we will become more aware of the range of different solutions (where 'solution' is not just a technology platform but a whole range of choices about how to configure an event) available and the advantages and disadvantages of each. Eventually we will develop a repertoire of styles of online meeting, and become more skilled at stitching together solutions tailored to fit the needs of each event.

In this sense this is an opportunity to embed online events in academic culture, as a superior alternative to many, though probably not all, face to face events. We sincerely hope there will be a return to face to face events as we transition into the post-pandemic university. But these should be reserved for occasions when they truly serve a purpose, as opposed to being our default option for coming together for thought and discussion.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below

This is an edited version of an [article](#) that appeared on The Post-Pandemic University

Photo credit: [Chris Montgomery](#) on [Unsplash](#)