Going virtual: Academic conferences in the age of COVID-19
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Abstract
In the context of the 2020 world pandemic of COVID-19, many professional and scientific associations have had to change the way that they gather and reorganize their scholarly conferences. For many of them, conferences are a main source of income and important occasions for business meetings and managerial decisions. Yet, with trips and face-to-face encounters banned, the opportunity arrived for going virtual and developing human and technical capacities to provide online environments for virtual conferences. In this article, we analyze the case of an e-conference co-organized by two international organizations at two levels: (a) the decision-making process and (b) the assessment by attendees. Relying on personal, first-hand experience, participant observation, and a post-conference survey, we collected data that allow an examination of the intricacies of the decision to go virtual as well as pros and cons of the experiences of colleagues who presented papers and attended sessions. Consistent with previous studies, we found that scholars value the possibility of having more colleagues participating (providing geographic and career stage diversity), reduction of carbon emissions, lower travel and transportation costs, and ease of watching presentations later (through recordings). On the other hand, academics point to the difficulty of socializing as the main problem, with implications for strengthening academic networks and consolidation of professional careers.

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Introduction
During the first months of 2020, two major professional organizations had to face the uncertainties of a pandemic world to decide how to organize an academic conference. For decades, these associations’
conferences had been in-person, changing host cities between Europe and the United States. However, this joint meeting forced the officials of the organizations, conference chairs and administrative staff to think about whether the conference should take place and, if so, how it should be conducted. The challenge was no small one, given that neither the experience, nor technological platforms, nor academic practices for virtual conferences existed. Moreover, participants could not be expected to have knowledge about how to perform in virtual environments, beyond changes in teaching that had begun to take place since the beginning of the year. To some extent, the success of the conference would depend on how far academics had internalized necessary digital skills and how willing they were to apply them to a new situation. Additionally, to complicate matters further, both associations relied heavily on the conference to keep their finances healthy, which put additional pressure on the idea that the conference — if it ever took place — had to be successful.

In that context, a discussion began about what changes would be needed and how to implement them against the clock. The result was the first completely virtual conference of both associations. This article explores these experiences on two levels. First, after a literature review, we describe the decision-making process, with its twists and turns. Then, we review quantitative and qualitative results of a post-conference survey with closed and open questions. Finally, we set forth some general appreciations, lessons and future challenges.

**Literature review**

Academic conferences were not, for a long time, a serious object of study. The reason for such disdain was that they were thought of as simple instances of knowledge dissemination among expert colleagues who shared a discipline or research problems. Far from the creative phases of the scientific process, conferences were part of the external dimension of science itself (Ziman, 1999). As the field of science and technology studies (STS) questioned the internal/external distinction in science (with concepts such as actor-network or trans-epistemic arena), what had previously been undervalued began to be accommodated in the analyses of science and technology. Among the topics that generated interest were academic conferences.

As soon as they began to be studied as instances within broad, complex and heterogeneous processes, academic conferences provided relevant information to understand the production of knowledge. Adhikari, *et al.* (2019) studied how conferences can provide, through keywords of papers, data on the evolution of a field and themes that gain recognition. Moreover, as Momm and Jöns have shown, academic conferences can contribute to national capacity building “through ‘decentralized concentration’ of knowledge production and exchange, mitigating regional disparities via the decentralization of epistemic communities but reinforcing regional imbalances through the concentration of resources in conference locations, coastal states, and the two southern regions” [1]. Baron, *et al.* (2020), using auto-ethnographic evidence, explored the role of conferences in collaborating with peers and writing scientific papers within what they call the neo-liberalization of academia. Wang, *et al.* (2017) found that conferences play a key role in collaborations, calling ‘conference closure’ the fact that, in general, the organization of a conference anticipates future collaborations among those involved. Fakunle, *et al.* (2019) pointed out the value of conferences as learning sites for doctoral students, while Henderson (2015) highlighted the role of conferences for higher education studies, especially due to the increased importance of mobility and internationalization within the academic world during globalization.

While recognizing their relevance in the process of knowledge production, conferences also materialize biases, asymmetries and problems that cut across disciplines, academic fields, professional associations and any institutional arrangement. Biggs, *et al.* (2018) showed how sexist practices operate in conferences and the perceptions that women have of them according to their level of representation. De Picker (2020) also focused on under-represented groups and studied the challenges that conferences present for people with different disabilities. For their part, Timperley, *et al.* (2020) focused not only on women but also on
indigenous populations and confirmed studies according to which conferences tend to be sites of discrimination and reproduce institutional and post-colonial biases and asymmetries, as in the selection of keynote speakers. Biggs, et al. (2018), De Packer (2020) and Timperley, et al. (2020) highlight the way in which this phase of the production of knowledge needs to be made more representative of the diversity of academic fields.

Well before the COVID-19 pandemic, academic conferences had become the focus of attention of those who advocate an academy with less environmental impact and those who are interested in ways that technologies could be better incorporated into academic meetings. For example, van Ewijk and Hoekman (2021) have noted that “the effectiveness of the reduction options mostly depends on how international the conference is and whether the longest flights are eliminated. We call on conference organizers, universities, academic societies, and funders to further develop, support, and implement multi-site and virtual conference models” [2]. In terms of technologies, Greenhow, et al. (2019) have indicated that back-channel technologies (e.g., micro-blogging, Twitter, etc.) serve to set up learning communities around conferences, with a significant increase in exchanges between participants, while Neustaepter, et al. (2018) have explored the use of robots for telepresence in academic conferences, contributing to the automation of numerous organizational aspects. The technological transformations that conferences are undergoing have led some, such as Spilker, et al. (2020), to suggest new theoretical frameworks, which emphasize the role of conferences in learning. For others, the widespread inclusion of technologies in general (Botha and Ford, 2008) and in conferences in particular demands new digital skills (with their corresponding costs) and this is a challenge for all parties involved and particularly for academics and organizations (Jacobs and McFarlane, 2005).

Already during the year of the pandemic, changes in the ways of organizing academic conferences led to an avalanche of reflections on the pros and cons of this novel practice. Fulcher, et al. (2020) analyzed hybrid (partly virtual and face-to-face) conferences and found five elements that seemed to guarantee the success of virtual meetings: (a) clear identification of goals; (b) deliberate design of structured interactions; (c) use of accessible, intuitive, and widely available technologies; (d) pre-event training with platforms tools; and (e) post-meeting assessment of outcomes. While (a) and (e) refer to organizational decisions, (b), (c), and (d) point to the digital skills that are developed either by participants in advance or by support from the organization before, during and after the conference. For many, these types of conferences have many more advantages than disadvantages, including lower carbon emissions, ease of mobility, lower economic costs and ease of participation. In contrast, others recognize the problems these conferences pose, including the lack of or difficulty in socializing. “The biggest loss is the random interactions, the personal interactions, and, relatedly, the meals. For the random interactions, it’s the ‘running into the speaker in the hall’ and the personal ‘hi’” [3].

Reinforcing these arguments, Roos, et al. (2020) point out that only active participation makes a virtual meeting a conference and not merely a series of webinars, also recognizing the lack of personal contact as the main problem. On the other hand, Taylor, et al. (2020) recognize that the lack of socialization can be particularly challenging for young researchers, since expanding professional networks in virtual conferences requires more proactivity from academics. Salomon and Feldman (2020) and Veldhuijzen, et al. (2020) also emphasize reduced opportunities for mingling and collaboration as problematic, although they highlight as advantages greater inclusiveness, lower costs, ease of organization, geographic diversity of participants and greater ability to cope with stress and shyness for younger academics and students. Finally, and emphasizing the environment of exceptionality, some authors have highlighted that virtual conferences present an awkward situation that forces participants to try to capitalize on it. As Woolston argues, “for attendees, the awkwardness may include moments of less-than-optimal sound and occasional technical glitches. Presenters, for their part, could find it challenging to deliver a talk to a monitor instead of to a live audience” [4].

In the following sections, the exploration of our case study will show parallels with this literature, but also examine the reasons that lead academics to prefer — or not — virtual conferences, as well their interpretations that allow us to understand these perceptions.
The decision-making process

The conference described here (VirEurope) is organized as a combined meeting every four years by two sister organizations whose members are engaged in a common social scientific field. One of these organizations is international in membership, with leadership distributed throughout North and Latin America, Europe and Asia. The other is focused on a broadly defined European region. While each has their own annual or bi-annual meetings, quadrennial joint meetings have occurred since the 1980s and are often among the best attended, creating the largest revenue stream. When widespread shutdowns began to occur, including most university campuses by mid-March of 2020, intense discussions began among the program leadership over what was to have been a physical meeting in former Eastern Europe.

Our point of departure is that while there had been fully online meetings by some scholarly communities before the pandemic, the abruptness of the shutdowns left most academic conferences from March onward in a situation of extreme uncertainty. Owing to the rapid increase in both infections and deaths, clarity was impossible and predictions regarding the end of the pandemic were as numerous as they were unbelievable. The VirEurope conference organizers began weekly online meetings that lasted from March through mid-May to address a series of questions that had never occurred previously. What may, in the end, have been most important to the success of thousands of meetings that transitioned from physical to virtual during the remainder of the year is the simple, contingent fact of their scheduled date relative to the onset of the pandemic.

Conferences planned for March were generally cancelled. Those scheduled for April or May that went ahead were thrown into chaos. One large international conference that went entirely virtual on short notice had a 96 percent drop in attendance, even when they reduced the registration fee to a trivial amount [5]. Other conferences had large, and quite unpredictable drops in attendance. VirEurope had been placed on the joint meeting calendar two years previously (mid-2018) with an August conference date (2020), giving the organizers five months from the earliest shutdowns to the opening reception. Members of the organizing committee witnessed several events during these first three months, generating a healthy dose of realism in the conference planning.

The primary questions for organizers were both financial and logistic, a series of choices that moved during the course of two months through software and interface issues. The meeting was to have been held at a university, through the rental of meeting rooms and audiovisual equipment at two different faculties. Receptions and plenaries involved hotels and even an island palace where contracts had been signed and needed renegotiation or cancellation. What is difficult to reconstruct seven months later is the stuttering realization that the threat was global, serious and long term. While some organizations continued to collect information and speculate the timing of “return to normal” scenarios, the VirEurope leadership quickly and unanimously moved from a hybrid meeting to a full cancellation on 3 April, less than one month after most universities had transitioned to online modes [6]:

You are now probably all acutely realizing how timing and locating matters and what it means to be taking decisions under conditions of multiple radical uncertainties ... But still we all can act — reasonably and responsibly. Under these conditions, we have decided finally to make our conference fully virtual. Given future scenarios of the current pandemic and related restrictions in global mobility, we concluded that it is not reasonable any longer to (techno)optimistically keep organizing the physical event ... From the three options on the table — to cancel, postpone or go virtual, we decided on the third option.
We will migrate the event to the virtual timespace and it will take place in the planned dates.

Importantly, this shift could readily be communicated to potential registrants owing to the fortuitous close of submissions on 29 February, at the same time that coronavirus news began to spread in earnest and lockdowns began to occur. Attendees had already proposed panels and papers before widespread pandemic fears developed, while organizers knew their population of potential registrants.

Knowing the number of potential attendees (about 2,300 persons) helped immensely. The question of prior contractual commitments was resolved more slowly. Some vendors instantly accepted the new reality of the situation — after all, they had invested no resources or effort in a meeting that was still months away — while others offered courteous but untenable “reduced” fees for their non-participation in a conference that no longer had a face-to-face component. Minor “legal issues” never materialized and one relatively small deposit was lost to the pandemic. Financial issues for the original on-site meeting were resolved by mid-April, even as the search for online solutions was pursued through witnessing other conferences, demonstrations by several vendors and intensive discussions among the organizers about the conversion of on-site to virtual conferencing.

Ultimately, there were two primary reasons for the success of VirEurope, with the most important being the decision to “simply” hold a typical academic meeting, consisting primarily of a small (4–6) number of sessions for each of four days, with the number of breakout rooms determined by the number of registrant papers and sessions. While part of our software solution was a sophisticated tool for the pre-recording of talks, this was used infrequently by presenters and primarily used for the plenary sessions. Most attendees, when offered a choice, preferred to give papers synchronously as opposed to pre-recording their presentations — even at somewhat unusual times, given their physical presence in many non-European time zones. Pre-recordings were used by some, but not many, apart from the plenary sessions. For this small number of sessions, the decision was made to use the software tool of one of our principal vendors and pre-record talks that might be witnessed by several hundred persons. This decision is difficult to evaluate since there were so few technical difficulties overall with the conference. That is, had someone recorded their own talk and posted it, it may have worked just as well. It works well for teaching purposes but we had no way of knowing if it would work for this meeting. In retrospect, pre-recordings were an investment in technological safeguards that may or may not be necessary in the future.

The question of software occupied much of the decision time available. It seemed unlikely that one single program or vendor would serve to meet all virtual conference needs, though “turnkey solutions” were available, or at least marketed as such. Particularly given the financial uncertainties of the conference and the need to keep costs low, the team sought a what is sometimes called a “software stack,” or group of programs that work in tandem to achieve a goal — in this case, a virtual academic conference that mimicked a traditional conference as closely as possible. Among the “sunk costs” of the conference was one package used by these associations for submissions and programming. This software had been used for several years, and was often characterized by past program chairs as clunky, old-fashioned and difficult to operate. Still, it worked for the purpose: meeting participants set their password, logged in and entered submissions for entire (pre-organized) sessions or individual papers. Program chairs reviewed (often “lightly”) submissions, then used an e-mail interface to inform submitters of acceptances, make announcements and call for registrations. Following the close of submissions, they used the system to (1) organize papers into thematic sessions; and (2) arrange the sessions into a program by time over the four-day meeting. For the software, the number of simultaneous sessions was unimportant — large or small, the maximum is determined by the number of meeting rooms available in the hotel or conference center.

As indicated, the dimensions of the pandemic became clear at the very end of the submission process, and the decision to go fully virtual was made after the maximum number of attendees was known. The second primary reason for the success of VirEurope was the selection of a registration fee, or, better, the willingness of our participants to support the conference at the chosen level. The organizing committee canvassed their personal networks and consulted the councils of the two societies, their treasurers and
budget committees before setting a fee that was approximately two-thirds of a normal registration fee, but still much higher than those of the other conferences that were observed before setting the registration rates [7]. While the budget for the conference could be estimated within various limits, uncertainties centered on the number of potential participants who would actually register for an online conference, as well as the number of submissions that would be acceptable. The conference leadership well understood that their communications to the membership were crucial.

Many attendees, prior to VirEurope, held an understandable belief that virtual conferences cost little or nothing and registration fees should be accordingly low [8]. This belief accorded with registration fees that some participants had already experienced by the time registration opened in June, three months after the pandemic began. But it conflicts with two characteristics of professional association management. First, many academic associations depend primarily on annual conference registration fees to fund their entire operations. These operations include the publication of journals among other expenses, and many of these have become open access, generating little or no revenue. Membership dues are generally insufficient for operating revenue, and often tied directly to registration at annual meetings [9]. Second, returning to the software stack and limiting this discussion only to areas of significant expenditure, VirEurope conference management already required the following components: (1) the system for submission of abstracts and sessions, already discussed, which provided a framework to organize the sessions according to traditional joint meeting protocols; (2) a system for registration and payment, which would normally provide add-ons such as banquets and social events, but in this case was limited to the purchase of registration that generated password access to the virtual meeting; (3) a system for recording presentations to be assembled into plenary sessions. Each of these could be expected to cost thousands of dollars.

The reader will note that, until now, there has been no mention of Zoom, which was, in fact, our primary meeting platform. However, after the first weeks, there was little doubt for the organizing team, that this joint meeting would be, in the most basic sense, a conference consisting of up to 25 simultaneous Zoom meetings run by session organizers. The use of dedicated Zoom rooms (we needed about 25) was also a significant expenditure, but our management team included this in its bid.

Here, the accident of timing was important as well. In March, many academics were beginning to use Zoom for classes that had suddenly been transitioned to online formats. By August, at the time of the joint meeting, academics worldwide were familiar with Zoom, or, if not, other similar platforms. To press the point, online teaching at many universities already consisted of thousands of simultaneous Zoom classes of various sizes with lectures and screen sharing. The organizing committee fully appreciated this transition and its potential consequences for the joint conference. What was perhaps unexpected was that the extensive and excellent training sessions that were provided by the organizers were, for many participants, often about comforting and quelling anxieties than teaching people how to use Zoom, which most already knew. That is, they were accurately and timely informed that at this upcoming joint conference they could expect and experience an ordinary Zoom meeting in which three to five presenters would be introduced by the session chair, and sequentially screen share their PowerPoint presentations.

Put very simply, if we exclude special sessions such as plenaries and socials, the essence of an academic online meeting is a specific number of links to dedicated Zoom rooms and a schedule linking presentations to those rooms. If a meeting was small, and one person could simply enter all the links for every session into a Web page with the daily schedules, this would substitute for our complex abstracting and scheduling system. In the end, we did use a management team, at considerable expense, to make sure that all sessions were monitored, at a level of one engineer for every five rooms. However, relative to the sociotechnical problems that were experienced, this may have been unnecessary. There was no Zoom bombing. There were no significant problems on entry. There were no significant problems closing the sessions, which would have led to room conflicts with subsequent sessions, even as it would in a physical meeting space. It did seem to provide a level of comfort to meeting participants that there was someone they could chat with, if a problem arose. But the infrequent use of technical support was to help with such matters as audience members who had failed to mute their system. Whether future conferences wish to invest in this support is a question to be addressed on a case-by-case basis, depending on the financial resources of the organizations.
Post-meeting survey

After the virtual conference, it was decided to complete a survey to evaluate this experience. The organizers sent 2,346 invitations by e-mail, 2,338 out of which were delivered successfully. There was automatic confirmation that 1,203 e-mail messages were opened. As a result, 486 responses were available (20.8 percent of the total number of e-mails actually sent). The findings in this section are based on the qualitative and quantitative responses to the questionnaire, designed by staff from one of the associations and reviewed by conference chairs. The questionnaire had 20 queries and sought feedback on three areas: level of satisfaction with the experience of the virtual conference; level of use of available technological resources; and comparison between virtual and face-to-face conferences and between various virtual conferences.

Quantitatively, participants’ satisfaction with the conference was relatively high: 53 percent expressed to be “somewhat satisfied” and 28.9 percent “extremely satisfied”. When asked about satisfaction with the virtual format, 69.7 percent said they were somewhat or extremely satisfied. These satisfaction levels are based on participant assessment of the possibility of intellectual and professional engagement. Among the respondents, 75 percent said they were satisfied with the professional and intellectual possibilities while only 4.4 percent said they were extremely dissatisfied. However, as we will also see below, the social dimension of the conference generated higher levels of dissatisfaction. Overall, 75.6 percent said they were dissatisfied with meeting friends, colleagues and former students; 69.8 percent expressed dissatisfaction in networking with colleagues and 87.9 percent expressed dissatisfaction with speaking at the conference about non-academic issues. In all three aspects, in turn, the levels of extreme dissatisfaction were the highest, 37.9 percent, 37.5 percent and 52.9 percent respectively. High levels of satisfaction may be related to reduced travel and accommodation costs (76.7 percent considered it a major benefit of a virtual conference), reduction of the carbon footprint (87.9 percent), possibility for more academics to access (83.4 percent) and availability of recorded sessions (70.3 percent). Lesser benefits were the opportunity to pre-record presentations (67.5 percent) and a better work/life balance (65.5 percent).

Being a virtual conference, the meeting provided opportunities that were not possible in prior conferences. Thus, 73.1 percent of the respondents said they had watched or would try to watch recordings of sessions, a practice that had never been implemented by any of the associations. On the other hand, 86.8 percent indicated that technical problems related to broadband Internet connections were only a minor problem while 70.3 percent stated that access to session recordings was one of the major benefits of the virtual format. Interestingly, only 32.4 percent considered the same for the opportunity to pre-record presentations, although 67.5 percent considered it a marginal benefit. What was noted, however, is that recording sessions and being able to consult them freely allowed for the challenges imposed by differences in time zones to be mitigated and allowed participants to attend more sessions than in a typical face-to-face conference, a statement with which 84.9 percent agreed.

The questionnaire also contained items that allowed respondents to compare their experiences of virtual and face-to-face conferences and between different aspects of virtual conferences, an experience most academics began to experience from the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020. When the question was put to them directly, only 4.2 percent said that virtual conferences were better than in-person conferences and, perhaps unsurprisingly, 42.7 percent stated that virtual conferences were inferior to face-to-face meetings. Similarly, in a scenario where academics could attend only one conference per year, 77.9 percent said they would go to a face-to-face conference, 7.9 percent to a virtual one and 14.1 percent said they did not have a strong preference. The comparison between virtual and face-to-face also included two questions that addressed geographic distance as a factor. The results show a tendency to avoid academic meetings when
the distance was over 500 miles, which could mean using airplanes as a means of transportation. When asked what their participation would be like if a conference, less than 500 miles away, offered the possibility of virtual and face-to-face attendance, the results indicated that 67.2 percent would go in person, 7.7 percent would go virtually and 24.8 percent would go in either mode (no preference). Given the same options, but for a conference that takes place more than 500 miles away, the results show that 31.1 percent would go in person, 43.7 percent would participate remotely and 22.2 percent would choose one of those two possibilities. In the latter scenario, three percent would not participate directly in the conference. Thus, a significant decrease in interest in participating in person can be observed when the distance involves more complex travel logistics and greater ecological and economic effects.

On a qualitative level, the questionnaire had two primary questions about the main benefits and shortcomings of a virtual conference. Based on those open-ended questions, we used Atlas.TI to find common perceptions and detected two relevant findings. The main benefits of a virtual conference were observed in the temporal axis, while the shortcomings were located in a socio-spatial axis. Put another way, virtuality expands the temporality of the conference: it starts beforehand, runs parallel to work and personal life and ends afterwards. On the other hand, virtuality compresses spatiality, making it a fundamentally technological experience of body and screen, competing with central aspects of the usual conference experience that includes immersion, focused concentration and random encounter. In turn, both seem to demand new digital life skills that, so far, have not fully developed.

Temporarily, VirEurope was not just a four-day virtual meeting, but a more extensive multimedia experience. It began when the organizers made it known that participants could pre-record their presentations. As one respondent noted, one of the strengths of the conference was “the possibility to prepare a presentation in advance of the actual session and therefore to be able to focus more on the other presentations and the discussion” (1.99), while another noted “I loved recorded talks. I loved being able to record my own, and to watch others whose time slots I couldn’t attend” (1.125). Once the conference started, virtuality allowed the possibility of attending simultaneous sessions, one of the main problems of any in-person conference. This was done by easily going in and out of each e-room or by attending an entire live session and watching the other one later (recording). As one participant noted, it was very positive “being able to access the presentations after the conference. So many wonderful talks are missed in the traditional setting when scheduled against each other. While the interactiveness of a live session is always preferable, it was nice to have the chance to at least hear the information at a later date, and ‘attend’ sessions I would never have previously considered” (1.98).

In addition to this extended temporality, the virtuality of VirEurope allowed a simultaneity that is not factually possible in traditional conferences. Among the highlights, some pointed out the possibility of reconciling daily family demands with the requirements of the conference, a result of a less stressful and demanding experience. “Taking notes and be very attentive to (sessions) related close to my work, on the one hand, and listening in to other sessions less of direct interest to me while doing the dishes on the other hand. This flexibility made the event less stressful and exhausting than physically attending a conference is for me” (1.75). Or, as another participant put it more colorfully, “sitting naked in the kitchen and taking part” (1.144). Other attendants, on the other hand, pointed out the possibility of introducing the conference into domestic life (“Scientific discussion at home” [1.70], as put by one of the participants), while some emphasized the compatibility between maternity and academia as one of the most relevant benefits of virtuality: “virtual conferences gives better opportunity for attending as a young mother” (1.155) and “it was very efficiently being at home and participating to a conference and taking care of my child and other stuff at the same time” (1.83). In this context, however, it should be noted that several respondents pointed out the negative consequences of this combination between the domestic and the academic. In particular, they pointed to what we could call fragmented attention: “for the days I was at home or at the office, this does not work! Too many distractions. Have to make sure to remove oneself physically from daily obligations for successful attendance of a virtual conference” (2.80). In the same way, one respondent goes deeper into the problem, with a vision that makes the gender issue, that cannot always be observed, evident:

With online conference, childcare provision is not on
conference holders, but on presenters/participants. With a very active three-years-old dependent upon his parents, I felt it hard to pursue my spouse that I needed to be fully present to conference time while being at home. And because my spouse was also working from home there were so many times that I chose to take care of our child, instead of going to virtual session, whose immediacy was only felt by me. Prerecorded session is really good, but it also made me think “every session will be available for a while even after the conference end, thus it is not an immediate issue to me now. And my spouse needs to be focused on right now. Let’s just take care of our kid.” But I also expect there will be other kinds of works continuing flow-in, thus it is never guaranteed I will have time to sit down and explore missed sessions (2.84).

This last passage allowed us to examine the question of spatiality, which was the core of what respondents considered to be the problem with virtuality. By spatiality we mean the location of certain practices in geographically and physically defined areas, which contributes to the very definition of these practices. Succinctly, the spatiality of an academic conference includes the country and city where it takes place, conference facilities (convention center, universities, etc.), configuration of rooms (size, light, chairs, projectors, etc.) and distribution and availability of common spaces (corridors, cafeterias, lounge chairs, book fairs, etc.).

While it is possible to recognize the benefits of virtuality in overflowing physical space — that is, it makes present what is not present — responses from attendants highlighted the limitations that such overflowing represented for academic work. First, the fragmented attention between logics and demands of diverse and competing spaces (e.g., home vs conference) must be coordinated simultaneously. Second, there was an absence of that immersive experience that several respondents have rightly described as a ‘conference feeling’. Third, the interaction was reduced to a virtual encounter — presentations and questions — and did not transcend to common spaces (which did not exist or may were not sufficiently exploited by the organization). Finally, technological demands (screen fatigue) led to the need for an alternate presence in the conference with a return to the surrounding physical world (unmediated). In short, the main criticism that respondents pointed out to the virtual conference was the difficulty or impossibility of socializing.

Being mentally only half present at the conference due to home office, everyday life and child care. There was no real conference feeling. The social aspect of these conferences simply did not take place. Instead of asking someone a question over coffee, there were no spaces for interaction. In addition, there was a great deal of fatigue from sitting and staring at the screen — a continuation of the daily work routine since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Increased passivity, as it is difficult to speak in large zoom sessions. This is not a criticism of the conference’s conduct by the organizers — for this, great praise. I am more concerned with the lack of social interaction when dealing with virtual media (2.78).

This statement allows us to appreciate to what extent the materiality of meetings plays a more active role than might be thought. From the books that academics examine at publishers’ exhibit tables and that give rise to casual encounters, to the coffee and food shared with colleagues or strangers with whom a bond can be started, materiality was pointed out as an absent element, with obvious implications. As one respondent reported, a central problem was “not being able to actually spend time with friends and colleagues. The missing book fair. The obviously missing lunches, dinners and coffee breaks” (2.108) and another noted more subtly that they “missed the mingling and missed the food” (2.112).
The difficulty in socializing involves more than seeing friends and former students. Some respondents said that without such socialization it was difficult to understand what was happening in the association and in the field: “another thing I missed was being able to see where my 'people’ were heading and using that to help decide what panels to attend” (1.138). Others stressed that without socializing, networking becomes almost impossible: “But the networking, the Q&A, the satisfied feeling of connection and intellectual satiation was not there” (1.161). This was particularly challenging for newcomers to the field or junior academics:

As someone who is not very connected/established in this field, there was little to no opportunity to discuss or connect after presentations. The session I presented at had no time for questions due to presenters going over their time limit and there was no organized way to be able to connect with participants of a session past the allotted Zoom meeting time. It therefore felt very cut off, like talking to a void without really being able to tell how your presentation was received or being able to at least quickly socialize/connect after/at the end of a session (2.83).

Perhaps the main consequence of the lack of spaces for socialization is that much of what is new in the field begins in those moments of random and unstructured encounters, such as the coffee break or the parties organized by journals, publishers or the associations themselves.

Missing out of actually being there (physically); talking to people, brainstorming and having generative conversations. The party with music and dancing. (2.76)

I really missed the follow-up discussions in the coffee breaks and night parties, when you process what have been discussed in the room with your colleagues. It is not only a social moment but of knowledge production. Both are entangled aspects and in a virtual environment does not seem to be possible (2.82)

Without these sites for unplanned interactions, what is at risk is the creative process behind the production of knowledge, that is, the very essence of an academic conference.

Conclusions

Our findings reinforce some of those already discussed in the literature and during the pandemic. First, although problems were noted, organizing the meeting in a virtual format was much quicker and easier than expected. The date of the meeting, economic and technical availability to contract virtual services, as well as predisposition of those involved were factors in favor of the success of the meeting. Particularly important was the experience gained in remote teaching and in scholars' participation in other conferences. This points, on the one hand, to digital life skills that have been developed not only through virtualized academic work, but also through family and personal bonds that, during the pandemic, were mediated by communication and information technologies. On the other hand, as the article demonstrated, these skills are necessary for academic performance in general. Put differently, those who participated in the empirical study take face-to-face academic life as a standard, critically appraising virtual experiences. Only the perception that such experiences will constitute a central aspect of academia in the future will lead
researchers to invest more strongly in the development of their digital skills.

Second, the main problem detected was the difficulty in socializing, a situation that becomes more complex for those who participated in the conference for the first time as well as for students and junior academics. Although some respondents suggested better platforms to encourage occasional and serendipitous encounters, associations still have much to do if they plan to use this format again and not disappoint their targeted audiences in terms of socialization. Insofar as conferences are vital for professional networking, they do not currently reproduce, in virtual mode, what has characterized their face-to-face modality: personal, intimate contact as a way to learn about what is new (colleagues, ideas, journals, publishers, etc.) and to consolidate pre-existing links — that is, trust. The extent to which virtual conferences will require new forms of sociality stemming from novel digital life skills is something that requires further empirical research. So far, however, the platforms and the interactions that they enable do not permit a great deal of optimism.

Third, greater inclusiveness (more geographical diversity, ease for people with young children or disabilities, lower costs for colleagues without funding and/or from the developing world), technological possibilities (above all, being able to watch the recorded sessions afterwards) and lower environmental impact were noted as positive. At the end, there remain legitimate differences of opinion between those whose primary concern is the carbon footprint of conferences, and those who, in common with the first hominids who left Africa, remain curious about the landscape just over that next hill.

The conference studied here was both a participatory and economic success. Both associations were able to generate revenue at registration costs of roughly two-thirds what it might have been if held in person. Likewise, the levels of participation, in terms of the audience at sessions, were similar to those of the face-to-face conferences, although a decrease was noted in plenary sessions that usually serve as a meeting occasion (usually, multitudinous) for members of the associations. Moreover, those sessions that were organized as “socials” had relatively poor attendance. Finally, it was observed that factors that usually condition the presence of audience attendance at conference sessions, such as the day of the week or the session schedule, continued to be relevant to explain levels of participation.

It is easy to say that virtual conferences are “here to stay,” in a general way, but it is difficult to disregard data that demonstrates a clear preference for in-person conferences. Even though our evaluations confirm previous findings about both positive and negative aspects, professional associations will have an easy time if they ignore majority opinion and go completely virtual, whether owing to environmental concerns or pandemic dangers. Once face-to-face conferences are again a possibility, a hybrid model may be the solution that best caters to both constituencies. Such hybridization will require the mingling of digital life skills and our face-to-face, technologically unmediated socialization skills in professional environments, such as academic conferences. Institutional finances rest on funds provided by successful conferences and these will only be considered as such when they achieve a multiplicity of goals, including the dissemination of knowledge, opportunities to share preliminary ideas that allow future collaborations and projects, and non-academic conviviality of coffee, dinners and receptions that reinforce trust and build spaces for socialization.

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**Notes**

5. The conference organizer summarized their situation simply: “We definitely didn’t make any money in 2020.”
6. Before the pandemic began there had been discussions of a “20 percent virtual” meeting, which meant that one paper in each breakout session could be presented remotely, at the discretion of the session chair. The date of the announcement was later than the actual decision in order to inform all parties and vendors involved.
7. Both societies, in their individual and joint meetings, offer discounts to graduate students, junior scholars, retired and unemployed participants, in addition to those from low-income countries.
8. Members of the organizing committee received explicit messages to emphasize that registration for this online conference should be completely free.
9. Most academics have access to journals as part of their university employment and did not need to belong to professional associations for this reason. The turnover in membership is often directly associated with the size of the annual conference, as a result of registrations.
10. The final number of registrants to the meeting (reflecting paid submissions) was closer to 1,800, with non-presenting registrants and other stakeholders accounting for the difference.
11. About half (51 percent) said they are neither better nor worse because they were not directly comparable.
12. Respondents thought, on average, a virtual conference should have a registration cost of about 41 percent of the total cost for face-to-face conferences.

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