

Being There: Communication worlds and the rise of the virtual conference

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Paper prepared for the Australian and NZ Communications Association Conference, University of Sydney, 5-7 July, 2017.

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Introduction

Attending conferences, often overseas and often at significant expense in terms of time, energy, interpersonal relations and resources, has become an accepted part of Australian academic life, whether one is a high-flying professor or a newly minted PhD candidate. Aside from the usual grumbling about the cost of conference fees and the tendency for academics from the Northern hemisphere to be rather oblivious to the situation of academics from elsewhere (whether from the Global or geographic South), Australian academics have tended not to question the obligatory nature of conference attendance. As we wrote this paper, ‘out of office’ email replies from colleagues and students in our School indicate that a good proportion of people are taking advantage of the June/July non-teaching break to head to Europe and the UK for the summer conference season.

Clearly the winter flight of Australian academics is in part due to the fact that many academics merge conference attendance with touristic practices, a tendency that we

see reflected in the rise of professionally run conferences not so incidentally held in sunny, coastal locations like Croatia and Sardinia. But obviously there is more than this going on here given that academics quite legitimately travel for a range of other work reasons, whether working on international research collaborations or doing fieldwork.

While universities have been trumpeting to efforts to ‘go green’ very few of them have targeted one of the key contributors to carbon emissions, namely flying. It seems to be largely accepted and expected that to be an academic today one must be mobile and to be mobile one must fly. On the other hand in the teaching and learning space significant innovations have taken place where digital technologies are increasingly employed to offer virtual or remote modes of engagement. In the research space however we have been slower to engage with this for conferences.

As part of a 3-year project on academic practices with a focus on sustainability called Work-Life Ecologies, we have been conducting research into the flying practices of academics and on conference practices, both on and offline. In our survey of Australian academic air travel we found that conference travel is by far the most common reason academics travel. And yet there’s a major price to be paid for conference travel—not only economically and environmentally—but also personally, with major impact on people’s family and dependents. Despite this, conference travel remains a taken for granted part of academic life. This raised our interest in critiquing the implicit normalisation of conference travel by researching emergent alternatives to flying, such as virtual collaborations and online conferences. And we’ve been

interested in the fact that despite the emergence of these alternatives traditional conferences seem to be as normative as ever.

The first thing to note is that conferences are not natural or neutral but might be thought of as an invented tradition. Emerging largely in the second part of the 20th century and supported by travel and touristic infrastructure, the conference, like the development of the lecture as the mainstay of academic teaching and learning, is in many ways an arbitrary development. Traditionally, they bring together people in the same time and place to meet, usually for a short defined duration.

But what might be the intellectual drivers for attending conferences? In our research on how academics perceive conferences versus online meeting alternatives, the key benefit people highlight perhaps not surprisingly is not so much the keynote talks or the conference presentations, but the interpersonal aspects of conference going.

‘Networking’, a term that was much maligned in the 1980s and 90s in terms of its associations with blatant self-promotion, has become a key mantra of the conference experience as these quotes suggest. But ‘Networking’ is clearly something that can be enacted in a range of ways. Indeed today increasingly academics are networking in virtual asynchronic modes via social media and various academic platforms. As new media scholar José van Dijck has argued in the *Culture of Connectivity*, the digital realm can be characterised as offering ‘a new infrastructure for online sociality.’ And yet, despite the centrality of online sociality to many of our everyday lives, the digital turn has still left conference culture relatively untouched.

Here we want to draw upon social practice theory as one useful way of helping us understand both how and why conferences practices developed decades ago have endured. But also how the practices of conferencing might start to transition into new ways of doing intellectual engagement. Social practice theory builds and extends upon the work of practice oriented sociologists and philosophers such as Foucault, Bourdieu and De Certeau. So, in the context of conferences, social practice theory is interested less in individual behaviours and motivations than in understanding conference attendance as a set of practices that are socially reproduced. For SPT thinkers, conferences in a sense do not *pre-exist action* but are produced *through* the practices and activities of social actors, which are also shaped by certain infrastructures and shared knowledge. Using an SPT lens then people can be understood as not just attending conferences but as reproducing this experience as normative through their collective *performances* of conference going. Thus, the sheer number of people going to conferences around the world on a regular basis--that is routinely enacting this practice--confirms its rightness as the way one does things in the academic world.

However, as we have noted, conferences are just about one simple set of shared practices. Instead they consist of a range of intersecting practices or what Theodore Shatzki calls “bundles” of practices. These include the air travel itself, with its associations of tourism and personal travel, taking a break from academic and domestic routines, writing one’s paper on the long plane journey, and socialising with colleagues at one’s destination. And these practices are embedded in a range of infrastructures and materialities - from professional conference circuits to university funding support.

We therefore suggest that part of the reason why virtual conferences have *not* taken off as quickly as some may have hoped is that they tend to focus on just one practice within the conference ‘bundle’, namely the formal presentation and sharing of academic ideas.

In the following sections we briefly discuss some of the emergent ‘alternatives’ to conferences as usual. Firstly we explore the digitisation of otherwise relatively conventional conference formats, and secondly we look at new digitally enabled forms of conferencing.

Digitization of traditional / analogue events

As we’ve noted it’s only relatively recently that conferences are becoming digitized in various ways. Social media is increasingly used by academics to broadcast their experience of attending a conference. A common way to do this is to ‘live-tweet’ the conference, by periodically posting one’s experiences to Twitter. A dedicated conference ‘hashtag’ will often be agreed upon, wherein all conference related tweets can be collated and browsed by those both present and absent from the conference. In some cases, tweets are often playful and funny, suggesting that Twitter has come to be a ‘back-channel’ of conference discourse.

One such phenomenon is ‘Conference Bingo’, commonly distributed & discussed on Twitter, where participants attempt to tick off a series of commonly encountered academic conference phenomena: “Powerpoint presentation fail”, “Snarky comment disguised as question”, “Mobile phone ringing loudly”, and so on. This type of

playful social media use emphasises the notion that ‘the conference’, as an event or shared experience, has both offline and online dimensions.

Broadcasting the academic conference experience is also possible through live-streaming. It is not uncommon for conference presentations, particularly keynotes, to be live-streamed to social media or via a dedicated conference website. This might be done officially by conference organisers. Alternatively, conference participants are increasingly able to do this themselves, through the use of smartphone apps like Periscope, Live-stream, or Facebook Live. This emerging practice has raised questions about the ethics of capturing and broadcasting events to an online audience that have traditionally been more private.

Remote conference attendance can also be performed with mobile telepresence robots. They allow a remote operator to navigate a physical space, whilst displaying a webcam image of themselves on their screen. Using these robots, a remote conference attendee gains a physical presence through the robot, allowing them to inhabit presentation spaces as well as breakout spaces and experience what is said and done at those times.

Telepresence robots were recently used at the Computer Human Interactions Conference (CHI) in Denver, in light of recent restrictions on visas to enter the US. While these digital interventions into conference going suggest different ways of attending and tuning into confs—they still replicate the trad conf as a bounded event set in a specific place.

Digital & virtual conferences

In recent years, a range of new forms of virtual conferencing are emerging. Some of these events are organised for environmental reasons – such as ‘No Fly’ or ‘Low Carbon’ conferences – where one of the key aims is to eliminate the need for bodily co-presence via air travel. For instance, the “Nearly Carbon Neutral Conference” was an entirely online event hosted by the Environmental Humanities Initiative at University of California Santa Barbara in 2016. The conference featured presentations from prominent academics in the environmental humanities like Peter Singer.

The event itself was markedly different from traditional conferences in that it spanned a period of three weeks, with individual presentations broadcast and recorded each day onto the conference website. Participants were encouraged to view these, and engage with the presenters in text based question and answer sessions after the presentations were uploaded. The event claimed to have had a carbon footprint of approximately 1% of a standard conference and to have generated approximately 10 times the amount of discussion that traditional question and answer sessions do.

While events such as the Nearly Carbon Conference offer alternatives to conference going as usual they still attempt to largely replicate the formal aspects of conference practice with key note talks and Q and A sessions. However, as we have pointed out, networking with known and unknown peers is a highly valued part of attending conferences, and one that is not facilitated by most digital architectures that focus on video presentations.

Some of the new digital meeting formats increasingly being used however *do* suggest ways of doing sociality and peer networking in alternative ways online. ‘Shindig’ (shindig.com), which frames itself as an online video event provider is one such platform. Participants converge onto a virtual space, being represented by a live video feed from their webcam in a small window, like most video conferencing software. A larger window is reserved for the event speaker, as well as a facilitator. More interestingly is the potential for participants to engage with each other in small groups, by dragging their camera window toward other people in the Shindig. Another aspect of the Shindig virtual space is that it opens prior to the event starting, and persists for some time afterwards. Participants are encouraged to ‘mingle’ during this time, by engaging with other participants in video chats at either end of the formal presentation.

These features appear promising, insofar as they allow people to network and interact with each other, rather than just pose questions to a presenter replicating the usual conference speaker/audience hierarchy. But it’s not clear to what extent people actually use these features given they require digital competences rather different from the bodily and conversational skills we use to approach and engage others in a physical setting. Are conference participants able to readily ‘mingle’ in a disembodied virtual environment? Are people comfortable having unprompted video chats with other participants on online platforms like Shindig?

Conclusion:

Part of the challenge here is addressing the complex assemblage of social, material, symbolic and embodied competences, beliefs and infrastructures that tend to shore up international conference going as a key dimension of academic mobility. First, the question of materialities:

one of the key differences and one would assume enablers with virtual conferencing is the often lower cost of 'attending'. As we've noted, traditional conferencing is associated with various 'costs'—from the domestic labour enabling academic mobility to environmental to sheer monetary costs. But one of the key barriers to high qual virtual conference is the general lack of widely adopted digital conferencing infrastructures in universities. At the moment then we're tending to see a privatisation of infrastructure with people often 'attending' and hooking up from home, so that domestic space as an extended site of work becomes even further ingrained with the rise of virtual conferencing. The difficulty here is that owing to the fact that virtual conferences are still often 'located' in the Northern hemisphere those that rely on synchronicity place us in the situation of having to hook up at night, again extending the working day.

The second key issue raised by SPT is the question of competences, skills and know-how. As we've suggested traditional conferences involve a certain kind of learned embodiment or conference habitus—mobile and social—whereas the virtual conference relies on a whole new set of capacities and digital dispositions. Including how to interact, participate via online platforms, how to use diff modalities of

communication to connect and network. Reflecting on our own early experiments in virtual conferencing, the digitally enabled 'event' seems to dispose itself to a somewhat different kind of self from the embodied performative participant of the traditional conference arena. Faciality, voice, text as well as collectivity become differently configured in online platforms.

Thirdly and lastly, there is the question of what meanings, forms of affect and symbolic worth are associated with traditional versus virtual conferences. On the one hand the virtual conference offers potential challenges to the easy assumptions of cosmopolitan mobility underpinning many conferences held in the Global North. However, it still remains the case that 'being seen' and 'being there' are more highly valued by academics and their audiences than modes of virtual interaction. Giving a keynote in person still bestows considerable status in a way that an online presentation doesn't seem to. On the other hand technological platforms are starting to shape new forms of collective virtual conviviality and connectivity, though with all the baggage that comes with this (proprietary software/ commercialisation of academic processes/ surveillance/ algorithmic logics of engagement associated with social media etc)

Finally, we would suggest that the 'stickiness' of conference going practices is also related to its links with other practices that are highly valued--travel, tourism, departing temporally and spatially from home and work. This is becoming perhaps more of an issue in pressured, neoliberal work environment where it is increasingly difficult to 'escape', ironically partly due to digital connectivity itself. The virtual

conference faces a hard task to challenge these associations with escape and being there.