

How to organize a virtual academic conference?

By Carole-Anne Sénit

In our last *early career communication*, we shared some [tips on how to organize an academic conference](#). This was all before the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak. From March 2020 onwards, with the increasingly global spread and unpredictable evolution of the pandemic, many conference organizers were faced with difficult decisions on whether and how to go ahead with their conference. As the co-chairs of the [GLOBALGOALS2020 Symposium](#), Frank Biermann, Thomas Hickmann and myself decided to go ahead with the conference and turn it into a fully virtual event. Hosted by Utrecht University from 9-11 June 2020, the symposium eventually gathered an audience of 1,000 participants across many time zones, from Australia to Latin America. Here are a few tips and reflections on the organization of online academic events following from this experience.

1. **Carefully select the software.** Finding good software will depend on your needs: many software now offer different features such as webinars, meeting rooms, and even break-out rooms. Most of the software also include instant messaging and recording options. With 4 plenaries and 32 parallel sessions, we opted for a combination of different tools. On the one hand, we used Zoom Webinar for plenaries, which provided safety features adapted to the format of these sessions with ~150 participants (e.g. all participants except presenters log in automatically muted, with their camera off, and cannot reverse these settings). On the other hand, we used Zoom Meetings for parallel sessions and social events with 20-50 participants: this solution resembles usual videoconferencing and provided participants with more interaction possibilities, which was essential to foster academic discussions within these more discussion oriented parallel panels. Regarding the software per se, although we were initially skeptical about the safety settings and privacy policies of Zoom and the resulting hacking problems that some users experienced, we eventually selected this software because it is the most widely used worldwide, and held the greatest potential in increasing the inclusiveness of our event.
2. **Get to know the software.** Take time to train yourself, your team, and your participants to the online software. Even if the software seems easy to use, it is still important to provide clear instructions to your participants and audience about what they can and cannot do in the virtual meeting rooms. Organize test runs with your plenary speakers ahead of the conference to ensure a smooth connection on the day.
3. **Include technical facilitators in your team.** In each of our 4 plenaries and 32 parallel sessions, one technical facilitator was assigned to explain participation format and help participants with all technical aspects, such as assigning different roles and participatory rights to the speakers (e.g. sharing screen, mute and unmute, etc.).
4. **Get support from the audiovisual department of your university**, if you have one. Our conference was organized at the beginning of June, right after the first wave of the pandemic at a time where lockdown measures were being eased in the Netherlands. We therefore had the possibility to gather the organizing team (respecting the 1.5

meters distance) at the audiovisual department of Utrecht University. The department was essential in providing us assistance with all technical aspects (e.g. fixing the internet connection, providing IT equipment such as external microphones and cameras, and broadcasting our plenary sessions on the YouTube channel of our university).

5. **Invest time in outreach and communication.** The website of your conference is the showcase of your event, and this is even more true when it is organized fully online. It therefore needs to be nice, clear, and well-structured, with all important information such as guidelines for participation, detailed programme, and the links to access the virtual meeting rooms. To prevent any type of hacking, the access to these links was password-protected and we shared the password with registered participants by email 24 hours before the beginning of our conference. Outreach on social media is also extremely important: try to reach not only your Twitter bubble but also other academic and policy networks, from different countries, to increase the inclusiveness of your audience.
6. **Create space for informal discussions.** Discussing your most recent work over a cup of coffee or a beer with other scholars is not possible in online conferences like it is in physical meetings. We did miss the informal interactions and networking opportunities offered by physical events; which are not easily replicable with online formats. But providing your participants with online spaces to socialize outside the formal sessions of your conference is still possible. Fun pub quizzes, or more serious mentoring speed-dating-like sessions are nice options to consider.
7. **Offer plenary sessions in different languages.** Language diversity is important to foster the democratisation of science. Although we lacked both the time and capacities to organize French or Spanish-speaking sessions in our symposium, we feel this would help making such academic conferences more inclusive.

Surely, switching our symposium to a fully virtual event was time-consuming and more time-consuming than organizing a “regular” physical event outside of pandemic times. On the other hand, it has been a great learning experience in terms of managerial and organizational skills. It has also been a great team effort moment, and that is extremely valuable after several months of homeworking in physical isolation.