
COMMENT AND REPLY

Live streaming at international academic conferences: Doing rather than talking

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Reply to Kamil Łuczaj and Magdalena Holy Łuczaj (2019). Live streaming at international academic conferences: Cooling down the digital optimism. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/elementa.435>

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At first glance, the response by Łuczaj and Łuczaj gives the impression that they and we are in conflict on a series of central issues. In fact, their goals are essentially the same as ours, although they use different terminology and refer to different literatures. Rather than exchanging epistemological missiles, we should be supporting each other and moving rapidly toward practical solutions. Nothing is more urgent than the need to address the global climate crisis, and all academics in all disciplines can play a role. We no longer have time for sophisticated intellectual discussions and debates unless they are accompanied by practical solutions.

Our reviewers complain that we “extrapolate (our) experience in the Global North to the entire academic community.” Our experience is indeed primarily based on conference traditions from the global North, but the same surely applies to our reviewers and most colleagues reading this text. Initially, we had no choice but to extrapolate from that limited experience. But if our proposed alternative conference formats are adopted, an increasing number of colleagues from the global South will be included in global academic enterprises of all kinds at the same level, and they will increasingly play leading roles. We want to enable that transition by reforming infrastructures.

Under the heading “Essentializing races,” our reviewers claim that our “narrative of privileged academics is another example of a ‘grand erasure’ of experience and social process characteristic to the Global South.” On the contrary, we are trying to solve some of the problems that arise from such a narrative. We agree that a “grand erasure of colonial experience” has been happening for decades in academic disciplines and their conferences, but that is not all. In addition, the carbon emissions of the global North, including those of academic conferences, are now physically destroying the future for everyone, but primarily for the global South.

Our claim that “AGW may be considered racist in the sense that the main perpetrators are or were white and the main victims are or will be non-white” is correct as it stands. It could be improved by placing the word “white” in inverted commas, given that the skin of “white” people is actually “colored.” We agree that race is a social construct; in fact, skin color is a social construct when it is categorized as “black,” “white,” or “colored.” Similarly, we agree that race and ethnicity are subject to social labeling, boundary work, and symbolic violence, but these detailed questions are beyond our scope. Instead, our aim is to move rapidly toward practical solutions, developing conference formats that will enable colleagues from the global South to participate on the same level as we do.

Under the heading “A universal academic privilege,” our critics complain about our expression “global academic community.” They are right that this community barely exists, but in truth any “community” has fuzzy edges: people may feel they “belong” to any number of overlapping communities, which recalls the sociological concept of boundary work. Belongingness to an “academic community” depends on how we define “scholarship,” “science,” or “research.” We must nevertheless identify or construct “communities” in order to understand complex social interactions.

We agree that “global knowledge production” has centers and peripheries. That is exactly our point: We want to bring “centers” and “peripheries” together by enabling colleagues with fewer financial resources to participate at the same level. New virtual and semi-virtual conference formats can end the tradition of scholars from the Global South having to “participate at a distance.” Rather than merely theorizing about this problem, we are actively trying to solve it, bringing the “peripheries of global knowledge production” toward the center. That is also our proposed solution to the problem of “scholars in specific, highly populated areas.”

We agree that the surface transport situation in Europe is better than the United States, but the difference is smaller many suggest. The solution is to actually use and promote the system (e.g., including Greyhound buses) rather than to complain about it. Public surface transport must urgently be improved almost everywhere; the question is not whether that will happen, but how long it will take.

Our reviewers ask, “Why would environmental protection be significantly more critical than cancer research?” A possible approach is the utilitarian criterion of the greatest good for the greatest number. An effective altruist might try to estimate the number of lives that can be saved by different strategies. Although it is clearly important to fund cancer research, we should also remember that such research tends to primarily benefit the global North where life expectancies are high, whereas global environmental protection tends to primarily benefit the global South where people are more environmentally vulnerable.

Our reviewers claim that we “assume that all young scholars have the financial resources” to present at international conferences. Our argument is the opposite: “At regular conferences, . . . many cannot afford the cost of registration, travel, and accommodation.” We want anyone to be able to attend academic conferences, based only on academic merit. How that merit is evaluated can easily be affected by cultural biases, so we should strive for global balance and representativity among peer reviewers. We agree that precarious academic positions should be better funded and that early-career researchers need more security. If universities spent less money on academic travel, they could spend more on early-career researchers.

We don’t understand the first paragraph under the heading “A simple economic reason or the cultural conundrum?” We are actively trying to solve the problems addressed in this section. We agree with and support the use of terms such as “asymmetrical translation,” “claim of universality,” “reading from the center,” “gestures of exclusion,” and “grand erasure”; these are exactly the tendencies that we oppose. We do not have “unwavering faith” that electronic conferences are the ultimate solution, and no one would be more delighted than us if our reviewers could propose promising new practical solutions to the problems that they themselves addressed.

It is interesting and appropriate that the authors of this critique are from Poland. Semi-virtual conferences in our research area, music cognition, are currently giving Polish colleagues in that area the opportunity to move closer to (or become) perceived centers of research. We recently co-organized a conventional music cognition conference in Katowice, the first of its kind. Most participants were Polish and the conference was bilingual. The 2021 global conference of the European Society for the Cognitive Sciences of Music will include a hub in Bydgoszcz alongside hubs in Azerbaijan, Colombia, India, South Africa, and Lithuania.

Regarding language: Prior to the multi-hub ICMPC/ESCOM conference in 2018, we negotiated with colleagues in South America about the use of the Spanish language, considering different approaches to simultaneous

translation and practical ways to help all academic participants (including English speakers) become fluently bilingual and multilingual. At the abovementioned conference in Katowice, the first author gave a talk about the importance of promoting bi- and multilingualism: Local languages are important for cultural reasons, and English is needed as a global lingua franca—a “necessary evil,” given the U.S.-UK hegemony. The authors of this text mix German and English in our everyday work.

Our reviewers accuse us, somewhat mysteriously, of “biased presuppositions, instead of unbiased observation” in our section on “the moral potential of academics.” It seems that our reviewers were mainly offended by our expression “a hypothetical qualitative study,” but that can only be a simple misunderstanding. The word “hypothetical” means “imagined or suggested, but perhaps not true or really happening” (dictionary.cambridge.org). It does not refer to a “hypothesis.” We agree that hypotheses are problematic in qualitative research.

Our reviewers are right that “traditional on-the-spot conferences are not always effective places of knowledge exchange.” But we did not “neglect the argument that for many attendees, the primary reason for participating is networking.” On the contrary, we wrote that “there is widespread agreement about the importance of presenting research at international conferences and meeting influential colleagues personally.” This has always been a central issue, and for that reason, we are continuing to explore approaches to “virtual socializing.”

Under the heading “Enlightenment’s optimism cooled down by COVID-19,” our reviewers claim that we “believe that electronic communication will ‘improve the conference experience for individual participants.’” In fact, we wrote that, “Emerging technologies can be used to (. . .) improve the conference experience for individual participants.” That is valid given that the proportion of virtual content in future conferences is bound to rise steadily for environmental reasons. Examples of using emerging technologies include different forms of virtual socializing or mixtures of real and virtual interaction.

Regarding the effect of COVID-19, we share our reviewers’ frustration with fully virtual conferences. This is why we are promoting a semi-virtual alternative, in which people interact physically within hubs and virtually between hubs. Apart from that, the experience of COVID-19 has confirmed the need to try out virtual conferences of all kinds, with their various advantages and disadvantages. No one is denying that there are problems.

In their concluding section, our reviewers accuse us of claiming “universal applicability of the proposed solutions” and presenting electronic conferencing as a “Holy Grail” or “golden solution.” But they do not propose any alternative. Our proposal is a practical way to achieve three goals, formulated by our reviewers as follows: “mitigate the harmful impact of international flights, expectations to allow truly global cooperation, and decrease inequalities.” Our approach recognizes that “some of these problems are more severe for the inhabitants of certain regions” and provides practical solutions.

At the end of our 2018 multi-hub conference, we asked participants to evaluate their experience and make suggestions. That generated a lot of qualitative data. After careful examination, we realized that the data did not contain useful new ideas that we could implement in future conferences. That was disappointing because the aim had been to generate such ideas. Our reviewers seem to have fallen into the same trap. Although they addressed several important theoretical issues, for which we thank them, they sidestepped the urgent *practical* issue of reducing emissions.

We respectfully ask our reviewers to temper their urge to expose formal academic weaknesses and pursue sophisticated, theoretical scholarship, and instead open their hearts and minds to the staggering dimensions of the problem at hand. Humanity is facing a global climate crisis that has the potential to cause unprecedented suffering and ultimately destroy the supreme achievements of human civilization. As we wrote: “We are experiencing the earth’s sixth mass extinction event, to which AGW is a major contributor . . . Likely consequences include increasing ocean temperatures and acidity, the irreversible destruction of all coral reefs . . . melting polar ice and glaciers, rising sea levels, and more frequent dangerous storms, floods, droughts, heat waves, and bushfires.” The first author recently argued in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* that, in an order-of-magnitude estimate, a global temperature increase of “only” 2 °C will cause a billion premature human deaths over a period of a century.

We can try to objectify this problem, but it is also intrinsically emotional, and we must be sensitive to that.

The issues at stake are far more important than the hair-splitting that often goes on in academic discourse—to which we have contributed many times ourselves. The threat of human self-destruction is a new and unique situation that demands a unique response. Young people and future generations have a right to inherit an inhabitable world. As educated, privileged individuals, we have a moral obligation to take responsibility for the world that we will leave them after we die.

Academic discussions will always have their place, but right now, time is running out. To have a reasonable change of reducing the worst future impacts of climate change, we must now trust both the objective arguments and our intuitive feelings of global responsibility, and act. We respectfully ask our reviewers and other readers of this text to support our project in a practical way, actively and constructively contributing to solutions by pushing for a radical reform of conferences in all academic disciplines (each of us starting with our own). That will allow us to simultaneously do two things: reduce emissions drastically (preferably by 90% and not merely 10%) and include colleagues from all over the world in our conferences regardless of financial means. On that basis, we can also work politically to convince non-academics (e.g., in business and tourism) to sustainably and continuously reduce their flying, so that the aviation industry can achieve sustainability in the coming years and decades, along with other fossil fuel industries.

Competing interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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