2012 Virtual Conference of the International Communication Association, May 14-June 8

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, interest in virtual trade shows, virtual conferences, and other online events has been visibly growing. Virtual conference technologies allow for sharing presentations, facilitating discussions, stimulating conversations, and providing networking opportunities to large groups of people and over prolonged periods of time through interactive environments that are user friendly, multimedia rich, and multilingual. These technologies grew from audio, video, and other teleconferencing tools and applications that have been employed by businesses and home users for holding virtual meetings since the 1990s. Advances in Web 2.0, powered by social interaction technologies and the nearly universal adoption of broadband with the associated bandwidth management capabilities, has triggered the convergence of stand-alone applications into comprehensive platforms. A flock of start-up companies came forward, from which formed the providers of virtual conferencing software and services such as Unisfair, On24, Inxpo, 6Connex, Digitell, and Altadyn.

Two approaches to virtual conferences have surfaced: online-only and hybrid, in which the online component serves as a compliment to the face-to-face event. Several virtual event platforms emerged ranging from asynchronous discussion boards, live chats and webcasts, to fully 3D virtual worlds. The latest addition is the creation of a social network for a given event's audience that is integrated with the event program and incorporates mobile apps. For example, during the 2010 World Education Congress of Meeting Professionals International, more than half of the 1,500 attendees chose to join the social networking community created for the event by Pathable (Shapiro, 2012). According to Joerg Rathenberg, Senior Director of Marketing at Unisfair, by 2010 "virtual events have evolved from the early adopter status to becoming widely used" (as cited in Market Research Media, 2010).

To date, virtual conferences have been mostly corporate events that have typically taken place in industries such as computer and IT, health care, and financial services. However, the Smithsonian, the American Association of Museums, American Library Association, New York City Department of Education, and nonprofit organizations such as EDUCAUSE

also conduct virtual conferences. Until recently in higher education, web-based lectures, presentations, seminars, and training workshops have been more common than large multi-day conferences. What follows is a report about a three-week long 2012 Virtual Conference of the International Communication Association, held May 14-June 8 in conjunction with the physical convention in Phoenix, Arizona, held May 24-28. The author, who served as a respondent for the Communication and Technology division, shares her observations and insight and reflects on the future of virtual event technology in academe.

ICA VIRTUAL CONFERENCE 2012

International Communication Association (ICA), with its 4,300 members across 80 countries, incorporated a virtual conference component for the first time during its annual 2011 convention in Boston, Massachusetts. In 2012, ICA Virtual became part of the 62nd annual ICA conference held in Phoenix, Arizona, on May 24-28. The virtual conference opened 10 days before the physical convention and continued until 10 days after the conference, from May 14 until June 8. Registration for the virtual conference was complimentary for all Phoenix conference participants; additionally, the option to register only for the virtual conference was available for a nominal fee.

Conference Overview

ICA Virtual Conference 2012 (Figure 1) offered communication scholars across the globe the opportunity to participate in conference events regardless of their geographical location. It enabled access to 3 keynote addresses, 20 live stream sessions, 44 preselected research papers, virtual reading room, and common space for discussion and interaction. After logging in to the virtual conference website (http://www.ica-virtual.com), one could instantly access the pre-recorded keynote presentations by prominent

international scholars which remained available for the duration of the online conference:

• "Reporting Global Change: Too Much America" by Hans Henrik Holm, the Danish School of Media and Journalism.
• "The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Organization of Protest Politics" by Lance Bennett, University of Washington.
• "Understanding the Relation Between Risk and Harm: Theory, Evidence and Policy From the Study of Children's Internet Use" by Sonia Livingstone, the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Among the sessions that were streamed live using the Adobe Connect platform were panels focused on the theme of the conference, *Communication and Community*, for example, "Challenges of Researching on/With Communities of Practice," and lectures of interest such as "Civic Literacy in a Networked Age," "Communication in the Management and Performance of Knowledge," and "Infusing Social Signals into Search." With the use of the Adobe Connect mobile app, participants could watch all live-streamed sessions on their mobile devices.

In addition to keynotes and plenary sessions, ICA Virtual 2012 featured 8 pre-recorded publishing workshops (same as last year) and 2 professional workshops:

• "Lost in Translation - Navigating Between Academic & Applied Worlds" by J. Alison Bryant, PlayScience, LLC.
• "Getting Funded: Notes From the Trenches" by Marshall Scott Poole, University of Illinois.

Site Navigation

Navigating the ICA Virtual 2012 site was not too easy. Although several navigation links were available across the top of all pages (Home, About, Presentations, Papers, Program, and Join ICA), finding the right paper was far from
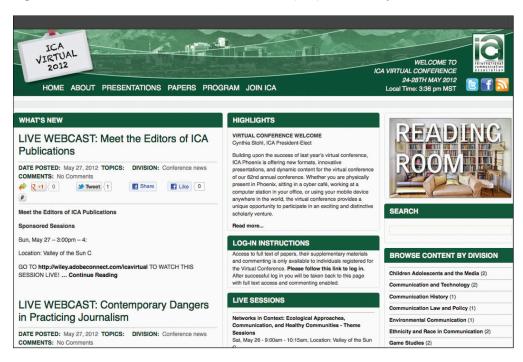
Figure 1. International Communication Association (ICA) Virtual Conference 2012

intuitive and required too many clicks. The 44 preselected papers could be accessed through two lists organized by title and by author under the "Papers" menu item. It was not explicit that the "Browse Content by Division" bar on the right side of the screen also gave access to the same papers. The "Program" navigation link at the top contained a PDF file with the full conference program, but there was no PDF that contained a list of keynotes, the schedule of sessions to be streamed live, extended sessions, and available papers, all in one place for just the virtual component of the conference. Even though a site search function was available, it appeared to be related only to the reading room, as the search field was located right under the reading room graphic (as shown in Figure 1). Searching the entire site would be easier if the search box was placed at the top of every page.

Online Discussion

I was honored to serve as a respondent for the Communication and Technology division (CAT) during ICA Virtual Conference 2012. As a respondent, I provided commentary, asked questions, and engaged in asynchronous discussions with the panel authors at a time that was convenient for me. In addition to the discussion area adjacent to each particular paper, recent comments appeared automatically in a special column as soon as they were entered, which was useful. Some discussions were more active than others, but they were impossible to locate without viewing all papers. Perhaps a different, forum-like design with the most-read and most-discussed topics automatically moving to the top would enhance asynchronous communication. Among other things, I was surprised to see an anonymous response to one of the papers; an anonymous comment didn't fit with my understanding of the nature and the purpose of an academic discussion.

Twitter updates added a level of immediacy for those who prefer shorter and faster conversations. Participants were able to share their tweets about the conference using the *#ica12*

hashtag. The tweets automatically appeared in the virtual conference's website Twitter feed box and could be viewed by all participants, physical and virtual. Examples of Twitter feeds included:

The Virtual Conf has some great papers, take a look goo.gl/Dk2ih and comment before you head home #ica12.

This year's #ica12 #ica_cat has much more student and young scholar participation.

Love the idea of mentoring at all diff levels of academic experience #ica12.

That's a wrap thanks for coming to PHX! It was an awesome conference. The ICA office is back next Monday. See you next year in London!

Social Interaction and Engagement

Designers of an online conference should consider how to maximize opportunities for social interaction and engagement in a virtual setting. For example, live chat was available for everyone during the plenary sessions streamed with Adobe Connect, but I didn't notice much activity. Perhaps this is a case where asynchronous communication tools such as blogs and forums on specific subjects could be more effective. On the pages of *Meetings and Conventions Magazine,* Brad Scholz (2009), creative director at MossWarner, a Connecticut based sales communications firm specializing in meetings and events, cautions that before selecting a virtual conferencing platform, it is necessary to closely examine the event objectives and plan extensive audience engagement strategies. Virtual engagement is a new area with its own peculiarities, secrets, and best practices that need to be carefully evaluated to avoid potential problems. Digital event strategists recommend varying presentation formats with quick polls and live interactive question and answer sessions, as well as using icebreakers, break-out rooms, social games,

and personal, one-on-one chat with experts to keep attendees interested and the content and delivery engaging (Vlk, 2010).

Virtual Reading Room

The virtual reading room provided free access to sample articles from 25 leading communication journals published by Sage, Taylor & Francis, and John Wiley & Sons. Labeled "The Reading Room" but missing a brief description of what it entailed, the ICA Virtual Conference reading room section of the website most probably remained unnoticed by many and could have been among the least visited aspects of the online conference. It opened in a separate small-size window without standard back or forward navigation buttons, and if a user followed a link to a specific publisher's site, there was no way to come back to the reading room other than by returning to the ICA Virtual homepage again. Once opened, the reading room could remain hidden under other windows, preventing the user from accessing it again.

The selection and quantity of sample articles in the reading room didn't appear to follow any particular logic. For example, there were 18 articles available in full-text PDF format free of charge from ICA's leading journal, the *Journal of Communication*, and 20 articles could be downloaded from the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*. Several journals provided only two articles, for example, *Information, Communication & Society* and *Political Communication*. Only one free article was made available from *Electronic News*, *Television and New Media*, *Mass Communication & Society*, and *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*. In terms of topics, however, an increased interest in social media applications was apparent.

It is important to ensure that the design of the reading room supports interaction with publishers so characteristic of book exhibits at academic conferences. Indeed, social interaction technologies and Web 2.0 offer endless opportunities for just that. For example, participants can chat one-on-one in real time with

publisher representatives, interact with people they met during the conference, preview and order new titles, and perhaps even win a "door prize." International publishers, e.g., Wiley-Blackwell, are already addressing the issue of digital book exhibits at academic conferences by offering eye-catching digital displays, interactive touch screens, e-reader rooms pre-loaded with journals and books, micro-sites for conference attendees, RSS feeds, QR codes, as well as mobile apps featuring discipline-specific publications (Dugan, 2012). Such initiatives can lead to virtual book exhibits created exclusively for an event, which can enhance the overall experience of participating in a virtual conference. There is no space limit in a digital conference book display and it can remain open 24/7, unlike traditional book displays at physical conventions that typically work 9-5 and often just noon to 5. To me, the book exhibit is always a must-go and a favorite part of any academic convention. However, there is only a limited amount of time that one can allow for the exhibit at a face-to-face conference, given all other opportunities for engagement with the discipline and interaction with colleagues from around the country and beyond.

CONCLUSION

As a major international professional communication association, ICA aims to promote communication scholarship and practice worldwide, utilizing its conferences, journals, and network of professional relationships. According to Larry Gross (2012), ICA President and Professor of Communication at University of Southern California, communication scholars are uniquely poised to help explore solutions to pressing societal problems by asking relevant questions and conducting sound research. Since its emergence in 1950, the association has grown in membership and scope to embrace scholars, practitioners, teachers, and students with the mission of advancing communication as a discipline which focuses on the content, forms, modes, consequences, and other aspects of human and mediated communication. The ICA Virtual Conference is still a new enterprise and experience for its organizers. Experimenting with online event planning and execution is the right strategy for ICA, which can increase both its membership and conference attendance.

The physical conference held in Phoenix was obviously much broader in scope, featuring more than 400 competitively selected panels (about 2,000 papers), plenary debates, and special events. Among the events not included in the virtual conference were several master classes by renowned communication teachers, preconference seminars, an interactive poster session, documentary films, and tours of the state-of-the-art facilities at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication located only minutes away from the conference site in downtown Phoenix. A virtual 3D tour highlighting the school's New Media Innovation Lab, state-of-the-art TV studios, and digital editing suites would undoubtedly be a welcome addition to the virtual conference for those unable to attend the Phoenix convention, but thus able to enjoy the benefits of telepresence.

It is clear that a new virtual event industry is growing right before our eyes. This growth is driven by recent advances in social interaction technologies and the need to address the challenges of time, cost, and fatigue of in-person events. New exotic vocations such as digital event specialist and digital event strategist have emerged as a reflection of that need. According to Market Research Media (2010), between 2009 and 2010 the virtual conference and trade show market has more than doubled and a 56% annual growth rate is expected through the year 2018. The virtual event market opportunities in 2013-2018 are estimated at $18.6 billion.

Virtual trade shows, conferences, and other online events rely heavily on the intrinsically social nature of human beings. A recent survey of professional event attendees conducted by the Virtual Edge Institute (2011), in conjunction with the Professional Convention Management Association, uncovered that the vast majority of respondents across different age groups are at ease with connecting and networking with

strangers regardless of setting – both physical and virtual (80%), comfortable using webcams to chat and meet others (70%), and ready to use avatars in 3D environments during online events (65%). More importantly, nearly all respondents (94%) stated that they would like to have an option to access event content before and after the meeting (84%). Virtual conferencing technology provides a perfect venue for all of the above.

It seems that higher education is slowly catching up to the lead, with professional academic organizations as the front-runners. Although totally replacing face-to-face conventions with virtual conferences is not yet on the agenda, there is no doubt that the virtual component, especially in the form of hybrid events, will continue to grow due to the level of flexibility and the numerous benefits virtual events can provide to participants. Overall, virtual conferencing is an efficient and cost-effective technology that provides a feasible alternative to location-based meetings and, if current trends continue, has the potential to dramatically change the future of academic conferences.

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