

Real-Life Lessons from Organizing a Virtual Conference on ZOOM platform*

Nahum Gershon, schmooz.org

and

Gordana Velikic, University of Rochester

“A session at the conference has just started. The speaker was introduced and when his turn to speak came about, we could not hear his voice. We asked him to raise the volume and when it did not work, we asked him to check all of the little boxes on his screen and we checked ours. Still, we could not hear his voice. After a short minute, we came out with an idea. We asked the speaker to dial my cellphone (luckily, we have WhatsApp). I activated my phone’s speaker and placed it near the microphone connected to my computer. It worked well except that I had to physically hold my phone up in the air for the length of the session. The 45 minutes felt like a century...” (as told by Nahum G.).

This was just one of the unexpected glitches we experienced throughout the conference. The “struggle” to use new media in organizing a conference started several months before...

Before the conference. The conference planning started in the “previous normal” mode. After the first wave of COVID-19 shock passed, we still hopped for the hybrid solution – those that can travel will attend the conference in person, and those that feel more comfortable to stay at home still have benefits of the conference via the Internet. However, as the date draw closer it has been becoming clear that the face-to-face meeting is not an option. Suddenly, we were at the fast track to “all digital”. At that point, we did not know much about virtual conferences and all the layers in between a face-to-face conference and a single virtual meeting, and a virtual conference.

Choosing the platform. Three things influence the choice of the platform: price, capabilities, and marketing, out of which the price is most influential. There are many platforms on the market that support virtual meetings. The most popular is ZOOM. Also, ZOOM has prices listed, and there are a lot of tutorials online. Other platforms have promises about the networking capabilities, and capacities to integrate with several platforms. However, the prices of the other packages were too high for a medium sized conference like ours. So we set on ZOOM.

Once the platform was chosen, we started a series of trial sessions. Thus, when the conference started, we thought that we were 100% ready...

During the conference. Glitches of the live event. As described above, we “lost” a speaker in the virtual space. It’s hard to believe, but similar situations occurred in several other sessions where the panelists could not have their voices heard and even share their screens. The audience was kept in virtual waiting rooms. This would not be a problem if that was what we desired. However, the virtual waiting rooms were not enabled and no notification was issued to warn the session chairs about the waiting line of people eager to join the session. The bigger problem was that the people stuck in the waiting rooms could not contact anyone immediately, as they would during face-to-face sessions. Although due to COVID-19, we have recently become used to attend virtual meetings every day, the meeting gets different dimension when the number of people is not fixed, such as during a conference organization with many participants and a given schedule. We also discovered that a single person can schedule two sessions simultaneously, however, it is not possible for him or her to run them simultaneously. Thus, you need to grant administrative privileges to as many people as you have parallel sessions. Although it seems that it is best to employ a technical expert who is familiar with the platform software, one still wonders if the technical help can prevent ALL of the glitches, as they could not give a reasonable answer what is the cause of a waiting line, if the waiting room option was not active.

Breaking the “Virtual Ice”. Although these incidences were somewhat annoying, they have brought some unexpected elements of suspense to the otherwise uneventful conference. In a face-to-face conference, you physically meet other human beings expectedly or sometime unexpectedly. This includes some old friends and some friends in the making. During the sessions, you sit in the midst of the crowd and have some fun together. This is by and large absent in virtual meetings. You are at home, still have to perform the everyday routine chores and take care of your family. During the sessions, you are physically by yourself (unless you have little children jumping on your lap at home). So, some little breaks in the potential monotony can have some significant benefits. Other ways to break the “virtual ice” is to have virtual breakout rooms, virtual meals with the audience at large or with selected attendees. One could also have virtual receptions (Bring Your Own Drink!).

Engaging the Audience. There are some things that could also be done during the sessions. Having humor used during the talks could be beneficial as well as having a master of ceremonies who could act as a comedian and a commentator. The audience could be encouraged to ask questions using their voice (in addition to submitting written ones). To further enhance actual participation and develop a sense of belongingness, speakers could ask the audience questions and even talk directly to some individuals “sitting” in the audience. There must be a way to show more images of the speakers and the audience and minimize the size and persistence (or the “rule”) of the PowerPoint slides.

Shorter Sessions, Longer Conference. We have realized that it is difficult to sit at home for a few hours or more per day for the length of the conference. Thus, there are some virtual conferences (e.g., IEEE Virtual World Forum on IoT 2020) that tried to use a different model of only 2 hours a day spreading the conference over a period of a number of weeks. The length of the talks might be also an issue and thus having keynote talks last no longer than 30 minutes might have its own advantages.

*These lessons were learned “the hard way” while co-organizing and co-conducting the **Virtual IEEE ICCE-Berlin 2020 Conference**.