Reimagining academic conferences: Toward a federated model of conferencing

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Abstract
What should the post-COVID conference look like? In our attempt to answer this question, we first describe the primary functions and affordances of conferences. Our frank appraisal reveals the breadth of reasons why academics attend conferences, and how conference attendance often blends personal and professional motivations. We also elaborate some of the shortcomings of in-person conferences, spanning personal, professional, and societal concerns. Recent alternative (virtual) formats for convening scholars provide means for alleviating some of these shortcomings, but do not seem entirely up to the task of providing a fully satisfactory solution to all that conferencing can be. Moreover, we extrapolate from prior history and ongoing trends to predict that technological solutionism to conferencing is likely to unleash both positive and negative dynamics, some of which will exacerbate current ills in our profession. We then sketch out a values-based approach that can serve as a basis for reimagining academic conferences. This vision promotes a federated model of conferencing, grounded in principles of inclusion, diversity, community, and environmental stewardship.

Keywords
Academic conferences, academic travel, climate change, information and communication technology, online collaboration

Among the many upheavals caused by COVID, a major professional one for academics has been the abrupt cancelation of most in-person conferences, complemented by a rapid pivot to a variety...
notion of online formats. While participating, often enthusiastically, in this shift, many in the academic community seem to assume this is no more than a temporary anomaly and that the tried-and-true pre-COVID conference format will snap back into their lives—if not next year, perhaps the one after that. Listservs are posting calls for conferences at far-away locales that make no mention of virtualization, and the three of us have both received and sent earnest and heartfelt expressions of pandemic solidarity that convey a hopeful message of in-person meetings over drinks at conference X in the near near-future.

In this essay, we question to what extent (or even whether) management scholars should strive to simply pick up where they left off when their academic lives were disrupted in March 2020. One could argue that the academic conference industry is a vestige of an earlier era, remarkably impervious to change. Like printed academic journals (Davis, 2014), large-scale, in person conferences are a legacy of an age when information could not be shared efficiently via screens and networks. Today, the many downsides of conferences are not difficult to enumerate (Spicer, 2005), ranging from non-academic issues (cruelly uncomfortable air-conditioning, un-woke culinary choices) to factors we nominally have more control over (accessibility, diversity, harassment). Of course, many would agree that conferences are not entirely negative, as they do offer many appealing affordances, professional and otherwise. Nevertheless, the in-person conference design our field has long employed appears to be untenable as a default choice, and many appealing alternative configurations are imaginable and seem worthy of consideration and trialing.

With an overview of the pre-pandemic conference as our starting point, our provocation proceeds by identifying some pros and cons of online conferencing, based on our personal experiences and those of others. Our analysis of online conferencing takes as a given that tools and technologies to replace or enhance the conference experience are available and will become increasingly easy to employ, making online gatherings ever more immersive. It is therefore quite likely that the current momentum behind the shift to online conferencing will lead to a future in which many of our gatherings will be entirely virtual. We argue that wholeheartedly embracing this vision carries several risks for our profession, particularly its ethos and cohesion. Instead of passively allowing technological solutionism (Morozov, 2014) to shape the future of conferencing, we argue that management scholars should actively engage in developing a conference landscape that reflects values of inclusion, diversity, community, and environmental stewardship. We conclude by suggesting that a federated model of conferencing that thoughtfully integrates both in-person and online events may be an apt structure for enacting these values.

The functions of conferences

A comprehensive account of the functions of conferences immediately encounters several obstacles. The first is that conferences are not monolithic. They range from the annual Academy of Management conference with its five-digit attendance in a major North American city, to the intimate, invitation-only double-digit gathering of hyper-specialized scholars at a far-flung, almost exotic venue. Our analysis attempts to generalize for all formats, but focuses somewhat more on large, big-tent conferences such as AOM, EGOS, and SMS.

A second, perhaps more serious concern, is that conference participation is a subjective experience. Desires and expectations from attendance are quite different for each person, and vary from conference to conference. To add insult to injury, we three authors are all cis-gendered, heterosexual, tenured white males from English-speaking, research-intensive universities in North America, suggesting that our worldviews largely overlap, and that even cumulatively our perspectives are narrow, perhaps unrecognizable, or even alienating to some of our peers. We have witnessed, but have not had to endure the indignities and assaults encountered by women, BIPOC,
neuro-divergent, and disabled scholars, and can speak of such experiences only indirectly. To address this shortcoming (albeit perhaps insufficiency), our analysis is informed and enriched by generous commentary provided by dozens of interlocutors at different institutions with diverse identities across a range of career stages around the globe.

Within these boundary conditions and subject to these limitations, we believe that for many academics, conferences have a fourfold function. This distinction is, of course, stylized, and in the real world these functions are interwoven. We arrange them in descending order of an “ideal” conference’s functions, or from manifest (the expressly stated rationale) to latent (the less overt, but nonetheless crucial purpose) (Merton, 1957).

**Intellectual development:** Conferences provide presenters with opportunities to receive feedback on works in progress, as well as initial exposure to nascent ideas being pursued by colleagues. Early career scholars can receive valuable advice; more established ones can engage in low-stakes risk-taking by floating new ideas or presenting emergent insights and seeing how they land before putting in all the requisite work for a journal submission. For all scholars, conferences provide a clear deadline by which they must be prepared to present and defend their work in front of a live audience that may be more or less sympathetic—creating the prospect of triumph or public embarrassment that can fuel progress (Gross and Fleming, 2011).

**Career development:** Conferences are a key component of the academic job market, providing schools and candidates opportunities to engage with each other at very little cost. Conference presentations add heft to a CV, particularly for early stage scholars. Many conferences provide a venue for recognizing a wide array of accomplishments in many categories, from best paper to lifetime achievement. A conference can present an opportunity to meet and make a good impression on potential collaborators and like-minded peers, and of course to network more generally, leading to more research outputs (Campos et al., 2018).

**Ancillary professional activities:** Simply by dint of having large numbers of colleagues congregating, opportunities abound for doing work beyond presenting and providing feedback on research. These can include face-to-face collaboration with co-authors, journal and professional association meetings, or organizing and participating in any other activity that builds on having a large mass of scholars co-located for a few days. Field-wide conferences are the one place where almost anyone you want to meet is likely in attendance. By far the most common refrain from our informants was the exhilaration and import of serendipitous, low-stakes encounters and the transformative outcomes they triggered.

**Non-professional activities:** Conferences provide opportunities for socializing, sightseeing, carousing, trysts, and other hedonic routine-disrupting activities. They also offer free or reimbursable meals and alcoholic beverages. Similarly, because schools or grants defray at least some of the costs, some utilize conferences as a jumping off point for family vacations. Many of our informants—whether in relationships or not, with or without children, men and women of different age groups and responsibilities—remarked on the pleasure of extricating themselves from home life for several days to attend a conference.

Beyond these individual benefits, at a field level, conferences appear to serve other, collective functions. Intellectually, they can focus attention, especially when they are dedicated to a particular topic, theory or idea. Management is, by and large, a low-paradigm academic field, and conferences can serve as a coordinating function for setting an agenda and collective sensemaking (e.g. Davis et al., 2005). A particularly powerful conference experience can be seen, often after the fact, as a field-configuring event which triggered a meaningful collective effort on an issue of academic or societal import. Commually, conferences are venues for shaping and sustaining the culture of academic fields, training, and broadcasting community values of “how things work around here,” “what counts,” and what “great” work looks like. They also strengthen the cohesion of groups with
specific interests, and can be particularly helpful for queer, BIPOC and other groups to find solidarity and build networks of support (Nicolazzo and Jourian, 2020).

Finally, for big tent conferences, the flagship annual event serves as the foundation for the business model of the sponsoring organization, financing many of its other activities. Without the annual meetings of the Academy of Management and EGOS, these organizations likely would need to find alternative ways to fund themselves.

The problem with conferences

Even pre-COVID, disenchantment was growing with the traditional conferencing model. Large conferences, such as the Academy of Management Annual Meeting with its 10,000 attendees, can be cognitively overwhelming. But even smaller conferences can take a toll. Ordinary biorhythms are disrupted, not least because of jet lag. Time is lost traveling to and from conference venues. At the conference itself, in an effort to maximize everyone’s time, agendas start early and go late. Exercise, de-stressing and even health and well-being can be an afterthought (Boncori and Smith, 2019), as is time to spend with accompanying family members, or to FaceTime with those “back home.” All told, the pace and duration can be exhausting for all, and even more so for disabled or neuro-divergent academics.

Conferences also have their dark sides. Some things that happen are horrible and criminal, such as sexual harassment and assault (Flores, 2020). Other issues are ignoble and disgraceful, such as exclusionary practices around breastfeeding and other care-related issues (Henderson and Burford, 2020). Even in best case scenarios, many conferences are characterized by gendered inequalities of participation and representation (Ford and Harding, 2010).

Other issues are less stark. At many conferences, there is a buttressing of patriarchy and status markers, or more colloquially, boundary policing and pissing contests. And as much as conference organizers try—and they do—to minimize status differentials and give all participants roughly equal standing, conferences nonetheless are places where a lot of deference is publicly performed to senior scholars, editors, and other shining lights (Ford and Harding, 2008). Lower status participants are likely to be on the receiving end of slights and microaggressions, both deliberate and accidental. Even at its most unobjectionable, a conference can generate unease, for example via the ubiquitous conference lanyard and its attendant interrogation of worth: Who are you? Where are you from? These and other social dynamics can make conferences appear to be loci of domestica-
tion, perhaps also enforcing unwanted conformity (Bell and King, 2010). In particular, conferences are where junior scholars are disciplined, tamed, and formatted.

Conferences are also far less inclusive and accessible they should be (Catalini et al., 2020). Disabled academics often lack access to venues. Travel bans and restrictions can prevent scholars in some countries from attending. Airfare, ground transportation, hotels, registration, meals, and other financial costs are steep and therefore exclusionary. All told, whereas research-active colleagues from well-funded universities in the Global North can afford to go to many conferences, those with fewer resources may not be able to attend at all.

Finally, conferences produce a massive carbon footprint. By some estimates, conferences produce 1000–2000 pounds of CO₂ per attendee, most of which is related to air travel.¹ Thus, for participants who do not travel extensively to present their work, conferences represent a significant portion of their carbon footprint. When aggregated, these individual choices add up. For instance, McGill University found that its air travel totaled over 82 million passenger miles in 2018, constituting 14% of its total carbon footprint², suggesting that emissions are substantial.

Notwithstanding these well-documented, consistently re-experienced downsides, conferences have largely remained inertial and mimetic, ensuring that future conferences replicate past
Online conferencing has advantages

COVID is like a meteor that upended much of life that had been taken for granted, including higher education and conferences. Perhaps the most notable marker of this upheaval is the unprecedented pivot to technological tools in lieu of travel and physical gatherings. Scholars have been running dozens of real-time experiments on how to create engagement around ideas among people who cannot all be physically present in the same room, from one-off webinars to all-virtual conferences. Just as the meteor that killed off the dinosaurs opened up space for mammals to flourish, the disappearance of the in-person conference has led to a flourishing of alternative formats. We consider some emergent insights about these technologically-fueled events here.

Accessibility: In real life (IRL) conferences can make demands that effectively exclude participation by many scholars. Travel costs can exclude those of limited financial means. Researchers with care obligations may be unable to spare several days to attend. Online events, on the other hand, are accessible to whomever can log in, and some organizers have included thoughtful accommodations such as “virtual childcare” online.

Moreover, online meetings can overcome some of the limitations to full participation that are part and parcel of in-person meetings, including hearing, vision, and language. Large screens, adjustable volume, and real-time closed captioning allow greater access to those who might not be able to enter a frigid ballroom, or easily comprehend a speaker at a distant dais. Lowering barriers to access has been notably successful at some events, enabling massive attendance. An event on racial justice at work, hosted by Michigan’s Center for Positive Organizations, had upwards of 3000 “live” attendees, and thousands more have watched the video.3

Inclusiveness and content richness: Online conferences also can help overcome social barriers to participation. On Zoom, without some of the traditional markers of status that shape so much of the interaction in conferences, nobody needs to know that you are a new participant, or learning a new language. Many hosts have become skilled at designing practices that seek to systematically include participants so that conversation is not dominated by a few high-status people. The use of a text-based chat function enables participants to formulate questions at their own pace, and access helpful links to supporting materials. The chat function also creates a useful archive that participants can revisit later, to mull, and perhaps respond to when they have time. Multimodal information sharing is not limited to the chat stream; one of the pleasant surprises of Zoomworld has been the ability to share materials in real time during talks, including links to websites and articles, photos, Google docs for real-time content capture, and more.

Given these and other affordances, a view through rose-tinted glasses suggests the possibility of a utopian future in which new technologies will enable engaging, relevant, topical, inclusive, accessible, equitable, diverse convenings for knowledge sharing, whenever and wherever researchers happen to be, with no need for in-person contact. Some scholars might choose to screen-share Stata during their presentations so that they can re-run analyses implementing the suggestions of audience members in real time. Professional development workshops using cloud-based technologies can crowdsource research questions, or hammer out a special issue proposal for a journal. The possibilities appear to be endless because the technology is becoming more immersive and less glitchy. What might convenings around research look like if they were reimagined with a technologically infused blank slate?
Ongoing engagement: When engagements are freed from the limits of being present on-site, conference organizers can abandon the packed schedule of the traditional conference in favor of more diverse formats. Instead of three 10-hour days, a set of shorter and more intense events spaced out over time may enable greater capacity for reflection, akin to the tempo of a course. The Rutgers Institute for Corporate Social Innovation has created one such format with its QUASI series of (extremely lively) monthly debates. Similarly, even before COVID struck, a group of sustainability scholars began holding the Sustainability Salon, a quarterly brown bag seminar.

Diversity of session formats: Many conferences hew to the traditional 90-minute format for talks and panels. But if organizers are freed from the constraints of in-person scheduling, it becomes feasible to have sessions as short as 10 minutes or as long as people desire. Even sitting still can become antediluvian: Why not go for a walk in the neighborhood during the discussion portion of the session? Similarly, presentations can be beamed in live from non-standard locations, allowing researchers to “show, not tell” their research settings with extraordinary immediacy. One can imagine a presentation on group dynamics in emergency rooms that includes live GoPro footage from the lead physician in the room. Moreover, online meetups allow scholars to connect with people who do not normally attend academic conferences, such as business and labor leaders, expert witnesses, frontline workers, and others. Experts can participate in a 15-minute academic session anywhere in the world when unshackled from in-person attendance.

Timeliness: The COVID pandemic has made clear that the cadence of knowledge sharing should not be bound by annual conferences. Why wait until August to talk about your work? Why not convene meetings on topics of current interest as needed? Just as social movement activists have been able to “convene” street protests at a moment’s notice in response to events around the world, scholars can convene pop-up gatherings to address pressing current issues (e.g. “What we’re learning about COVID-era teaching”).

Yes, but . . .

These and other innovations around the temporality and lived experience of gatherings seem very likely to improve knowledge sharing and create better research outcomes. Of course, faster and more efficient progress is probably not the end of the story. In and of themselves, these changes will do little to change underlying governance mechanisms and power structures that buttress and sustain existing inequalities. For example, many online events continue to be scheduled at (reasonably) convenient times for American, European, and African scholars, at the expense of scholars from Asia.

Indeed, convenings in the COVID era appear to be technologically solutionist (Morozov, 2014), promoting a vision of a bright future enabled by shiny new technologies. Consumers imagine their new smartphones as friendly all-knowing companions that place their social circles and the world’s information at their fingertips. Their day-to-day lived experiences might instead consist of grimly doomscrolling while tuning out friends and family an arm’s length away. Somehow, Black Mirror turns out to be the surest guide for how new technologies will be implemented. It is probably not overly pessimistic to predict that the clear short-term gains that online conferencing has made possible will be countervailed—or worse, eclipsed—by long-term dystopias that will emerge gradually, and overwhelm us eventually. As mere mortals, we have the wisdom to foresee only some of the evils that will be unleashed. These are likely to include the following:

Overload: As the transaction costs for organizing talks and panels goes down, the number of offerings appears to be going up. It is easy for speakers and panelists to agree to show up virtually for a session if they can lay their hands on a clean shirt and navigate the time zone properly. This has prompted a flood of new speaker series, online conferences, and other events—far too many to
By this point it is surely possible to stream Zoom sessions on management research all day, every day, as any remaining gaps can be filled by archived sessions.

**Anomie:** Almost without exception, our informants yearned to go back to real-world conferences, at least occasionally. Spending all day on Zoom is enervating, while in spite of everything, in-person meetings can be energizing. Scholars are not just brains in jars exchanging scientific information. Many of our peers miss being vulnerable, watching colleagues pass by, catching up, sharing gossip, and being stimulated by random experiences. And the nostalgia for conferences is not limited to established scholars who miss the pre-digital days of acetate overheads and mimeographed papers. As one person quipped: “This is not just old fogeys complaining about how foreign the digital world is. Young people seem to be yearning no less than us to experience real world connections.” Informants of all ages and career stages had the same hankering for connecting in person. Although few may have thought of conferences as sites of collective effervescence, their absence reveals that they are.

**Digital divide:** Like travel budgets, access to the latest digital technologies is not evenly distributed. In some U.S. cities such as Detroit, more than half the population lacks broadband access, rendering the promise of virtual reality Zoom meetups moot. Colleagues from underresourced nations and institutions may experience online meetings as even more exclusionary, at least for now. And there is an environmental cost to all those Zoom meetings, which can generate substantial carbon emissions, albeit not at the same level as air travel (Faber, 2021; Mitchell and York, 2020).

**Surveillance capitalism:** Interactions online leave traces that could dampen frank discussions. Political candidates (and academics) have learned that unedited tweets can live on forever. Insurrectionists at the U.S. Capitol building in January 2021 discovered that the GPS on their mobile phones and their social media feeds gave the authorities the evidence they needed to take them into custody. Gaffes in online classrooms can go viral. In the not-too-distant future, we can expect sophisticated analyses of the vast archive of online human interaction recorded by Zoom during the pandemic. (Perhaps technology companies, Wall Street hedge funds, and government agencies are analyzing such data right now.) Our style of interaction will inevitably adapt to the suspicion that we are always being watched and listened to by people we are not aware of. The Chatham House Rules are impossible to enforce in an online context.

**Tribalism:** At a minimum, a greater number of offerings will require well-designed curation tools that enable scholars to identify the convenings with the most potential value. This is surely one of the great entrepreneurial opportunities today: creating an Etsy-like platform for identifying, tagging, sorting, and perhaps evaluating convenings for prospective participants. Platforms for online content offer some potential guidance here. Google is good at pinpointing the most relevant sites based on your search terms, albeit tailored to your ideological bubble. Netflix is skilled at figuring out what movies people might enjoy based on their viewing history. Amazon aggregates quantitative and qualitative reviews, some of which are genuine.

But online marketplaces also offer a cautionary tale. Small groups with niche interests, perhaps grounded in a shared allegiance to a theoretical lens, or interest in particular phenomena, may come to dominate the conference landscape. In this scenario, the Academy will no longer be a big tent, but an assemblage of self-reinforcing cliques, all entrenched around their particular preferred research programs. Boundaries will sharply delineate and demarcate one tribe from another (Gieryn, 1983). With large numbers of offerings, it will be hard to find the time to remain up to date on more than a small sliver of inquiry. Increased specialization, tilting towards unbreachable siloes and the absence of opportunities for cross-fertilization could be the end result. What started as enclaves could easily become echo chambers.
Gaming the system: Much can be learned from the introduction of and increasing reliance upon accessible metrics of academic performance, particularly Google Scholar, and how they changed publication practices and the scholarly enterprise more broadly. As late as 1997, scholars had to visit the library to photocopy journal articles or consult the Social Science Citation Index to see if anyone was reading their work. The Journal Impact Factor (JIF) was an obscure but respectable indicator that editors were vaguely aware of. Today, it is not uncommon for researchers to market their articles via social media to boost their citation counts, and anxiously visit their Google Scholar page daily to monitor their academic net worth. Journal editors use manipulative and increasingly Baroque tactics to boost their journals’ JIFs (Davis, 2014). Many schools provide bonuses for publications, prorated to the journals’ JIFs, and create journal league tables based on increasingly spurious measures of “scholarly impact.” In like fashion, the winner-takes-most status dynamics of in-person conferences could quickly morph into winner-takes-all. One particularly disturbing possibility is that all the horrors of student teaching evaluations would be replicated in “talk evaluations,” viewable to all. The odious status dynamics of IRL conferences could be amplified online, where the rich get richer and the rest are ignored (Merton, 1968).

It is clear that, in a best-case scenario, a world of all-online convenings could be universally accessible, diverse, and engaging. But if prior experience is any guide, it could be atomizing, status-amplifying, and lonely, providing incentives for bad science and undermining our field’s capacity to act as a collective. Such a world would be bad not only for the grand project of science and enlightenment, but also for personal well-being and the collective agency of our scholarly community. In these still-early days of online conferencing, online relationships remain anchored in friendships and acquaintances that began IRL. Many of us have leaned in to try to make the most of virtual connections and small talk during online happy hours. But how many of us eagerly look forward to the next session where we nurse a drink in our basement and do our best to engage in witty repartee with a complete stranger that Zoom’s breakout room has randomly paired us with? Will these forms of interaction yield lasting, strong bonds? As a community, can we be effective institutional custodians of management scholarship if we only ever meet each other on-screen, without other opportunities to build trust and deepen relationships? Absent social structures that strengthen during dinner, happy hour, the opening gala, and the doctoral workshop, will we be able to effectively mobilize to combat the increasing monetization and atomization of scholarship?

Recognizing that this trajectory is at least a possibility, it is incumbent upon scholars to try to implement principle-based choices rather than sitting by and allowing technology to catch the academy unawares.

Values to inform the future of conferences

Upon reflection, the era of the technologically-enhanced conference began not in the spring of 2020 but earlier, when information technology became portable. In most sessions of physical conferences, attendees have their laptops open, and their mobile phones in their hands. Conferences are already, indubitably, hybrid by nature if not by name. COVID has dramatically accelerated technological trends that have been gathering steam for quite some time. One can debate whether enough reflection and thoughtfulness went into our increasing engagement with technology, but now that technology has become central to even the traditional conference experience, it seems clear that this values work (Gehman et al., 2013) is both necessary and urgent.

One approach might be to adopt the lens of sustainability, a rich and evocative concept that encompasses desirable social and environmental imaginaries, as well as longevity and stability (e.g., sustainable competitive advantages). A sustainable model of conferencing would thus imply a lighter environmental footprint, full equity and inclusion, and the nurturing of community, all
made possible by financial viability. In this section, we propose some initial steps that can be taken to pursue these goals, noting that they require engagement at various levels, ranging from individual participants to session chairs and organizing committees.

**A lighter environmental footprint:** By far, the biggest climate impact of conferences is long-distance air travel (van Ewijk and Hoekman, 2020). It therefore seems that 10,000 academics should never aspire to meet in one North American city again. Greenhouse gas emissions can also be reduced through climate-considered modes of transportation. At the grassroots level, such actions are already being taken by OS4Future, a movement of organizational scholars who “walk the talk and apply climate conservation in our own institutions, organizations, communities and private households.” OS4Future coordinates train travel itineraries for scholars making their way to conferences in Europe, promoting collaboration and companionship on the way to and from events. A lesser approach, but one that, applied judiciously, is somewhat helpful, is offsetting carbon emissions from air travel, an individual option that universities can encourage or even stipulate that their faculty purchase. Within university faculties, administrators could harness nudges and incentives to induce academics to make better choices, for example by considering “total miles flown” in the denominator of merit appraisals. Similarly, conference organizers can require venues to make vegetarian or vegan fare the default choice at all dining venues, rather than creating annoying hoops that only the fervent few are passionate enough to jump through.

**Equity and inclusion:** If technology in conferences is indeed the great equalizer, session chairs can adopt new norms whereby all questions are submitted via chat, all the time, whether participants are in the same room, entirely virtual, or a mix of the two. Such norms will not disadvantage scholars attending remotely, and is likely to lead to more participation from less assertive personalities. Further tweaks can be imagined, such as anonymizing the names of participants submitting questions and comments, and prioritizing diversity over status. Technology can easily be developed to unobtrusively facilitate these and other forms of equitable and inclusive participation.

**Financial viability:** The field’s central academic societies (e.g. AOM, EGOS, SMS, ISA, and disciplinary associations) make use of conference revenues to keep running. Payment-free content led to debilitating structural changes in domains such as journalism, bookselling and music; similarly, low or no-cost conferences threaten the revenue streams of the organizations that do the routine but necessary work of community maintenance. It may well be that the costs of an online conference are much lower than a physical one, and that the labor costs are borne by the universities that pay academics’ salaries, but a reduction in or elimination of conference fees may well jeopardize the institutions that bind our scholarly communities. If scholars assess the justness of a conference registration fee primarily as a function of the costs of putting the conference together, they risk starving the organizations that sustain them.

Each of these ideas is perhaps worthy on its own, and some can be applied relatively quickly and painlessly, in an effort to accumulate small wins to build momentum (Weick, 1984). But even together, they fall short of providing a grand, unifying vision of the future of conferences.

**A federated model of conferencing**

One somewhat more ambitious vision for conferencing might embrace federation as an organizing principle enabling cohesion and solidarity while at the same time providing autonomy, allowing adaptability, and encouraging experimentation. Federation, as an organizing principle, recognizes that some central authority is useful, but its guiding precept is to delegate responsibility to partially self-governing units. These are largely left to their own devices in terms of the activities they engage in and how they are structured, thereby prioritizing local preferences. Structurally, in
comparison to unitary governance, federation is more accepting of variation and experimentation, and can enable learning and emulation across entities within the federation. A federated governance model can thus be understood as optimizing between scale and autonomy.

A federated model in the management research community would push participation, decision making and organizing to regional levels, while maintaining coherence at a global scale. This offers numerous advantages. In the context of conferences, such a model would be easier on attendees and the planet (Klöwer et al., 2020), particularly if regional events were held in a central location that is easily accessible by public transport. Jet lag would no longer be a concern for most participants, and even those who could not attend physically would be able to login at a humane time of day. At the scale of several hundred attendees, regional conferences could provide human contact at a pleasant scale, with less anomy than a large conference, while also enabling fluidity and networking as well as the potential for serendipity. At this intermediate size, regional conferences would provide enough incentives for senior scholars to participate on panels and set forth ambitious research programs, while providing compelling venues for PhD students to participate in the academic community, for junior scholars to showcase their work, and for everyone to explore job opportunities. This could result in an equilibrium of incentives combined with an enjoyable experience.

Regional affiliation which stops short of tribalism could also contribute to important academic outcomes. There is greater recognition that our field may not have universal theories and predictions; rather, our explanations and predictions tend to be contingent (Davis and Sinha, 2021). The notion of an omnibus global conference seems inconsistent with the idea that solutions need to be adapted to local circumstances (Parker and Weik, 2014). For example, a regional conference in the North American Rust Belt which takes its context seriously likely would yield scholarship with different theoretical underpinnings, datasets, and points of emphasis than a regional conference in Central America. This would have the benefit of encouraging management scholars to take palpable social problems seriously (Etzion and Gehman, 2019). It may also encourage greater engagement with scholars in adjacent academic fields, as well as regional public and private sector actors who are working on the same issues from complementary perspectives. In sum, local gatherings, local networks, and local knowledge accretion can help solve real-world problems in ways that draw on situated interdisciplinary expertise.

Regional conferences are not antithetical to a global community. With some planning and foresight, a federated model could enable a new way of conducting a global conference. Following the disruption of COVID, astronomers have proposed that a “possible solution to retain the social ‘buzz’ of a large conference while reducing emissions to near zero is to hold global meetings synchronously at a number of regional hubs,” thus enabling both region-specific content and planet-wide presentations to be accessed at the same venue (Burtscher et al., 2020). Hybridization within (all questions/comments in a session submitted via text, for both remote and physically present participants) and hybridization between (regional conferences with worldwide keynotes) will allow participants to calibrate the extent of physical and virtual participation to their liking, and will also bolster an equitable, global community.

A federated model could also support and nurture the establishment of smaller communities, based on an array of shared characteristics. These could solidify around research interests, but perhaps would be even more beneficial for other facets of identity. For academics who find themselves isolated in their institutions, such communities can be a place to find solidarity and build networks of support. They need not meet only at conferences, of course. Robust online tools can expand opportunities for diverse scholars to not only find and engage with like-minded peers, but also to strengthen their collective voice in the academy more broadly.
Finally, a federated model can encourage relatively low-risk experimentation. Our prescription for a regional conference in large measure replicates the experience of a traditional conference format, but over time, participants may be interested in exploring other formats. Akin to the innovations in temporality and interactivity currently taking place in online gatherings, organizers can try out unconfences, PechaKuchas and a host of other alternatives. The conference itself may eventually become less of a punctuated event, and instead one key moment along a continuum which includes pre- and post-conference gatherings, both online and in person. With lower stakes for trying something new, and greater familiarity with local peers and interests, positive innovations are likely to emerge.

Conclusion: As goes the conference, so goes our profession
COVID has inspired many in our community to reflect on conferences and their roles in our lives. Much of the reflection to date has been about best practices for employing the tools that are available, and the lived experience of the virtual conference. But in addition to these quotidian concerns, it is no less important to reflect and debate second-order effects, about the norms and values that we collectively want to encourage and those we want to excise. Our thoughts on the ills of traditional conferencing are inevitably shaped by our personal experiences, thereby informing our particular views on which norms and values should orient the conferences of the future. They serve primarily as an invitation for scholars of diverse backgrounds and lived experiences to articulate their thoughts on these important issues.

Conferences are the invisible college made incarnate, the tangible manifestation of the spirit of the academic community. They are an indicator of something bigger: our broader ability to cohere and maintain what we do as a profession. But in that case, as goes the conference, so goes our profession. If scholars collectively cannot figure out how to get conferencing right, what hope is there for our community more broadly?

Our decisions (or non-decisions) on how we convene will likely have ramifications. The traditional conference format is in equilibrium: it allows young scholars to launch their careers, established scholars to set agendas, and all members of the academic community to feel like they are part of a meaningful whole. If these rationales disappear, then our academic enterprise risks falling apart, together with the benefits that it provides. It is entirely possible that science without offline conferences will look and feel very different than it does today, perhaps for better, but quite possibly for worse. Let’s aim for better.

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Notes
1. https://www.terrapass.com/reducing-carbon-footprint-conference
2. https://www.mcgill.ca/sustainability/files/sustainability/mcgill_ghg_inventory_report_-cy2018_-0.pdf
3. https://positiveorgs.bus.umich.edu/events/race-justice-and-equity-in-the-workplace-and-beyond
4. https://www.business.rutgers.edu/events/quasi-seminar-series
5. https://www.ivey.uwo.ca/sustainability/for-researchers/sustainability-salon/
6. Something similar happened when journals went online, and their number exploded: in 2001 there were 61 “Management” journals indexed by the Web of Science; by 2019 this had expanded to 226, collectively publishing over 11,000 articles per year (authors’ analysis of Journal Citation Report).

7. https://os4future.org

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