

E-events Guide (beta version)

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Introduction

For environmental, social, and health reasons (e.g., the coronavirus pandemic), many academics are now looking to videoconferencing technology to host events that have traditionally been done in-person. Those events include colloquia, conference sessions, and workshops. We dub the electronic, environmentally-friendly version of such events 'e-vents.' This guide provides some basic guidelines for how to put together an e-vent and some evaluative discussion of their advantages and limitations.

This guide is a work in progress. Comments are very welcome, and can be directed to Jeremy Bendik-Kamer (bendik-keymer@case.edu) and Colin Marshall (crmarsh@uw.edu).

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1. Good Reasons for E-vents

Point 1: Environmental responsibility, immediate and mediate

Emissions from passenger airplanes are a major contributor to climate change. Many academics accept climate science and the need for drastic institutional changes to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Yet currently, there is some stigma around 'merely' giving a talk through videoconferencing, which makes organizers reluctant to issue such invitations. In the meantime and as a result, academics use air travel extensively for participation in colloquia and conferences. Although reducing their air travel by itself would have a relatively small effect, doing so is a matter of integrity for some academics and could help inspire others to make similar changes – especially students. Those of us

who teach classes related to climate ethics, science, and policy stand to become more credible in our students' eyes if we change our own professional practices in light of the moral, ethical, and civic concerns (especially if doing so comes with some professional costs – see below). By publicly using e-events, however, departments and event organizers signal that they have well-considered, non-financial reasons for encouraging remote participation.

Point 2: Social inclusiveness

Whether due to differences in mobility, family/caregiving obligations, or other personal factors, a significant number of academics are not able to travel regularly. Because of the stigma against remote participation, they are then often not invited to participate in colloquia or conferences, even though remote participation is increasingly common elsewhere in the academy (e.g., job interviews, dissertation defenses). In a different vein: colloquia organizers frequently face the question of whether a speaker will draw a large enough crowd, with the result that there is pressure to avoid less famous speakers. Videoconferencing, however, can be adapted to both large-scale and small-scale settings, thereby giving organizers more flexibility in whom to invite.

Point 3: Benefits for more remote and less wealthy institutions

Academic departments at universities and colleges that are far from large cities or that have limited funding often have difficulty getting speakers to visit, to the detriment of both their students and faculty. Given the stigma against (and lack of precedent for) invitations to give talks through videoconferencing, they therefore often do not have as many colloquia or host as many conferences/workshops as they would like. Wider uses of e-events would reduce that stigma and create a precedent for remote participation, thereby making it easier for departments in such universities and colleges to offer more colloquia and host more events.

Point 4: Flexibility in scheduling and structuring events

With remote technology, several options become easily available that are difficult with in-person events. As one example, speakers can record their talks in advance, then engage in conversation for a Q&A while still mentally 'fresh.' As another example, an online conference could easily be scheduled periodically over several weeks, with comments in written, threaded discussions, allowing for more thoughtful engagement than a one-off two hour in-person session. That is, e-events have the potential to be more useful and productive than traditional in-person events.

Point 5: Comparative immunity to weather and health events

In-person events are often canceled due to weather interrupting travel and health-related events. The latter can include illness on the part of the speaker or one of their family

members, as well as general health crises like the 2020 coronavirus outbreak. Such events are much less likely to disrupt e-vents.

2. Replies to Potential Objections to E-vents

Several objections seem to regularly surface when e-vents are proposed. This section describes the ones we have encountered most frequently, and offers some replies to them. The content of this section overlaps with the Good Reasons for E-vents (section 1 above), but the different ways of framing the material may be useful in different contexts. For example, emphasizing the good reasons for e-vents may be useful in securing support from university administrators.

Objection: These e-vents leave out the important networking opportunities and opportunities to learn philosophy informally.

Reply 1: Informal networking can be replicated to some degree remotely, e.g., by setting up 'coffee' sessions apart from talks. Moreover, technology allows for forms of interaction that aren't easily available in traditional formats, such as Zoom's breakout rooms or extended conversations using message boards.

Reply 2: If networking is about building good relationships, the longer term, more flexible, and face-to-face interactions of e-vents with follow-up conversations by remote technology may actually foster better relationships than ephemeral, enthusiastic interactions in person during short conferences.

Reply 3: Some academics are unable to travel, and so are left out of events requiring in-person participation. E-vents allow for interaction and networking with them.

Reply 4: The fact that these e-vents involve some renunciation lets them be a believable expression of concern for the climate emergency, and so can help inspire others to act in response to the emergency.

Objection: Such events can introduce new stratifications between participants who are 'worth' inviting in person vs. those who are not.

Reply 1: Whatever the risks of stratification caused by organized, academic gatherings, they are likely to be lessened when less institutional resources and time are allocated to them. E-vents, being flexible and lower in cost, lessen the pressure to deliver status for a department's investment.

Reply 2: Stratification can be avoided with some deliberate organizing. There are a variety of ways to avoid such stratification, such as by deliberately inviting speakers of different ranks for remote talks, by offering remote options to all invited speakers, or by offering remote-only invitations based on travel distance alone. As noted above, e-vents can drastically reduce the existing stratification between those who can travel and those who cannot.

Objection: The technology is not reliable enough.

Reply: There are multiple examples of successful e-events and hybrid events (e.g., the 2016 Climate Change conference at UCSB and the 2019 virtual conference on David Lewis at U. Manchester). Any department who can make Skype or Zoom calls can organize at least a small e-vent. No technology is completely reliable, but departments are used to coping with this in other contexts (e.g., projector and microphone troubles for in-person talks). Moreover, remote talks are less subject to weather-related cancelations than in-person ones.

Objection: Academics' flights are only a tiny fraction of global emissions. We should instead save our energy for large-scale political engagement.

Reply: Our actions signal that we are committed as professionals to exploring opportunities for lower-carbon alternatives to usual practices. We can also help inspire our students, colleagues, and other academics to reconsider their practices by demonstrating how easy and rewarding low-carbon alternatives can be. Refusing to fly also gives us more credibility generally, especially since it involves some amount of obvious sacrifice, such as the sacrifice of the fun of informal socializing with old friends (though see above).

Objection: The norms for remote interactions are not clear - e.g., appropriate attire/backdrop, how to moderate conversations.

Reply: A short list of norms can be provided to participants in advance, as has been done already at institutions with online degrees. This includes primers on how to use the relevant technology. We are always already rethinking the norms of social interaction even at in-person events as philosophy makes strides toward greater inclusion. Our community is familiar with this practice by now.

Objection: Replacing some in-person events with remote ones can result in administrators permanently reducing a department's funding for events, once they see that less funding is being used for (e.g.) colloquia and workshops.

Reply 1: Using e-events is almost always cost-saving. As with any cost-saving measure, there is the risk of administrators using it as a justification for reducing a department's funding. But surely that does not mean that departments should never use cost-saving measures.

Reply 2: All the same, it is unlikely that an administration would balk at inviting more speakers and generating more events for less cost per event. That would justify their continued funding at normal levels if not give an incentive to increase it.

Reply 3: Administrators are typically familiar with the benefits of in-person events. Hence, even if a department replaces one or two in-person colloquia each year with virtual ones, administrators are likely to be sympathetic to their desire to maintain a certain number of in-person colloquia.

Reply 4: If a department has some degree of latitude over how they spend their budget, then the costs saved by using e-events could be directed elsewhere. For example, if remote colloquia speakers are still given honoraria, then the savings could be used to have more colloquia overall (for example, the cost of one in-person colloquium could be used to fund three virtual colloquia), or to provide more generous honoraria to speakers.

3. General Advice on Technology and Format

Disclaimer from the main author of this section: In this section focuses primarily on inviting speakers to give talks via video conferencing software rather than inviting them to travel in person.¹ This is a sketch of one possible shape that e-events can take. Additions are encouraged. Please don't presume that e-events should merely replicate the traditional lecture format. New technologies provide an opportunity to rethink traditional lecture and conference formats.

Concerning the technology of the event

- The golden rule: IT (or your Information Technology Support office) is/must be your friend. **Work hard to cultivate a friendly working relationship with someone in IT or its equivalent.** Without their support your potential will be greatly limited.
- **Consider your current technological infrastructure.** Given that video conferencing technology has existed for a while now and is often convenient, many colleges and universities already have some capacities for accommodating these requests.
 - Has your institution invested in a subscription to a platform such as Zoom, Skype, Hangouts, WebEx, etc.? If so, they might be looking for ways to promote its use and justify the investment. Your event could help do that!
 - What sorts of video streaming and projection devices are available? Consider cameras and microphones.
 - You may need nothing more than a laptop on a podium connected to a projector and speakers, and microphones for Q&A.
- **Consider the scale and scope of e-events that your institution is currently capable of handling.** For instance, many job interviews are now conducted via video conferencing; often, smaller seminar rooms are available. Larger conference halls might not be as readily available.

¹ Here is a great example of an alternative style of creating a conference that does not center around a specific event taking place at a set time:
<https://hiltner.english.ucsb.edu/index.php/ncnc-guide/>

- Consider what existing technologies can be adapted to your needs.
 - IT can be very helpful with this. Sometimes what seem like 'big asks' turn out to be easy to accommodate.
- Consider arguments for expanding your capabilities.
 - Environmental philosophers are well equipped to offer normative arguments that might even invoke their institution's public commitments to sustainability.
 - However, often IT departments will have their own aspirations about expanding their services to support more sustainable practices as well. Aligning your goals with theirs adds strength to your argument. Institutions appreciate when they can meet their strategic goals by feeding two birds with one scone.
 - Propose events that can help develop these aspirations. Develop a concrete proposal and ask for the extra funding to simultaneously meet the aspirations of different offices.
 - For example: the philosophy, history and international studies departments wants to put on a seminar series incorporating e-speakers rather than paying for carbon-heavy travel; some money saved through travel expenses can be relocated to invest in IT infrastructure making future events more sustainable (and cheap); and this helps the university meet its strategic goal to reduce carbon, etc.
- **Test the technology.** Set aside time for a rehearsal in the actual space with the actual technology where the event will take place. Check sound and video quality and adjust as necessary. It's not a bad idea to have the speaker connected well-before the event begins.
- **Consider backup plans for when technology fails** (because it always does, even in traditional in-person events).
 - Talk with your IT department to brainstorm problems and their workarounds.
 - Consider a way for the speaker to telephone in if the video fails.
 - Consider recording the talk in advance and other techniques listed in footnote 1.
 - Consider sharing the transcript of the talk, so an organizer can read where the speaker left off in the event of a crash.
 - Have a backup person who can work on reconnecting while this all happens.
 - Some problems will not be unique to video conferencing, but we will need to think of unique ways to address them if we're used to traditional talks.
 - Time notices: how to indicate when the speaker is going over their allotted time or how much time they have left.
 - Difficulty hearing or seeing: this happens in traditional conferences as well, only communicating with the speaker might be more difficult.
 - How to handle Q&A so that the speaker can hear questions and the audience can hear the speaker.

Concerning the format of the event

- (repeat) **Consider the scale and scope of e-vents that your institution is currently capable of handling.** For instance, many job interviews are now conducted via video conferencing; often, smaller seminar rooms are available. Larger conference halls might not be as readily available.
- **Consider the learning and research goals you hope the event to achieve**
- **Consider what kind of framing work can be done prior, during or after the event to enrich its learning and research potential.** For instance, speakers might send a paper ahead of time to read or be sent questions in advance from the intended audience. Notes could be sent to the speaker during the e-discussion via a chat function. A follow up discussion could be had, looping back to the speaker later. Etc.
- Consider switching up the format. Zoom is good for dialogue (traditional lectures are not a dialogue). E-vents can offer you more than traditional lectures.
- Suggestion to add more specific technological details (i.e., a laptop on a podium can work).

4. Recipe for a Simple Virtual Colloquium

It is easy to replace an in-person colloquium with a virtual one. This might be done if a speaker is unable to travel or for environmental reasons. In some respects, a virtual colloquium is not as good as an in-person one. But it can be better in other respects, and many aspects of in-person visits can be replicated online.

Essential equipment:

- Internet connection
- Computer
- Camera, speakers, & microphone
 - For smaller audiences, in-built hardware in a laptop is sufficient. For larger audiences, more powerful speakers are necessary, and external microphones and a projector are helpful.

Software

- The free versions of Zoom, Teams, and Skype all work (and there are other options in addition). A speaker can share their screen, allowing them to show slides while giving a voice-over.
 - A major advantage of these programs is that they also allow audience members to join in who are not physically present in the audience. At an extreme (e.g., when a region is shut down due to health emergencies), all the audience can join remotely, which preempts the need for a project, speakers, or microphone. Note that large audiences often require paid versions of the software (which many universities are now purchasing).
- Backup option: If video conferencing software isn't working, a back-up option is for the speaker to email the slides, which are then managed by a volunteer, and to give the talk using speakerphone (for larger groups, using speakers).

Whatever equipment and software is used, do a test run beforehand.

Some of the most valuable aspects of in-person visits are the informal conversations. A virtual colloquium visit can replicate this by scheduling 'coffee' sessions before the talk.

5. Recipe for a Simple Virtual Conference Session Substitute

All the simple logistics here are the same as for a virtual colloquium.

In the case of a large conference being cancelled (such as an APA divisional meeting), session chairs can contact speakers and commentators to set up an entirely remote event using Zoom or other software. The e-vent can then be advertised (by email, Twitter, Facebook, etc.) to potentially interested audience members. Because this all can be done by the session chair, it does not require the involvement of the organization associated with the meeting.

For organizers interested in going a little beyond the traditional format, virtual conferencing offers important opportunities. For example, talks and comments can be pre-recorded, uploaded to Youtube or a limited-access platform, and a discussion can be held on a messaging board over several days. This can allow for better engagement than normally happens in traditional conference sessions.