

Worldwide virtual conferences with local physical hubs

Monday, 28 June 2021 17:00 (10 minutes)

More than 1000 researchers gathered online for the inaugural Photonics Online Meetup (POM, <http://photonicsonlinemeetup.org/>) on January 13th 2020. They simultaneously attend the five hours conference either alone from their personal computer or at their university from hubs distributed across five continents and many time zones.

The organization started in September 2019 with seven members scattered around the world, who mainly met on Twitter [1] and planned the event with web-based instant messaging and one online meeting [2]. As for a typical conference, two co-chairs lead the team and the other members some specific topics chosen by vote for this very first event. Three speakers were invited and a call for papers was launched few weeks later with around hundred submissions for the remaining nine presentation slots. A poster session took place on Twitter with an adapted template few days before the conference to accommodate for the high numbers of submissions.

This online event, retained most of the advantage of a typical conference, from learning from the interesting speakers, sharing results during a poster session, to question sessions, while avoiding most of the downsides of travel, including high registration costs (it was free), long plane travels and, visas, and strains on family-life. It was accessible to all, without limitation of budget, time and nationality. [3,4]

Nevertheless, a big concern was the lack of social interactions occurring naturally during conference breaks. Andrea Armani, co-chair of the conference and professor at the University of Southern California, suggested that local hubs be organised by researchers to give participants the opportunity to attend the conference together. This resulted in the creation of 66 physical hubs around the world with larger or smaller groups depending on the time of day or night gathering 635 persons, more than half the attendees. In the hubs, they were able to exchange ideas directly during the breaks or the talks while eating dinner or breakfast together. At some hubs, poster sessions were organized. This resulted in a combination of a physical and a virtual meeting that was highly appreciated by the participants and reported in some journals. [5]

Finally, such an online conference is not meant to totally replace the existing events, but to propose for some meetings an alternative while being more inclusive even with people who cannot easily travel and still want access to great research results.

[1] Original Tweet from September 7th 2019. <https://twitter.com/R1cc4rd0/status/1170316966307016704>.

[2] Reshef, O.; Aharonovich, I.; Armani, A. M.; Gigan, S.; Grange, R.; Kats, M. A.; Sapienza, R. How to Organize an Online Conference. *Nat. Rev. Mater.* 2020, 1–4.

[3] Pacchioni, G. Virtual Conferences Get Real. *Nat. Rev. Mater.* 2020, 1–2.

[4] Rethinking Conferences. *Nat. Rev. Phys.* 2020, 2 (2), 67–67.

[5] Pile, D. Photonics from Afar. *Nat. Photonics* 2020, 14 (3), 137–138.

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Session Classification: Input and Discussion