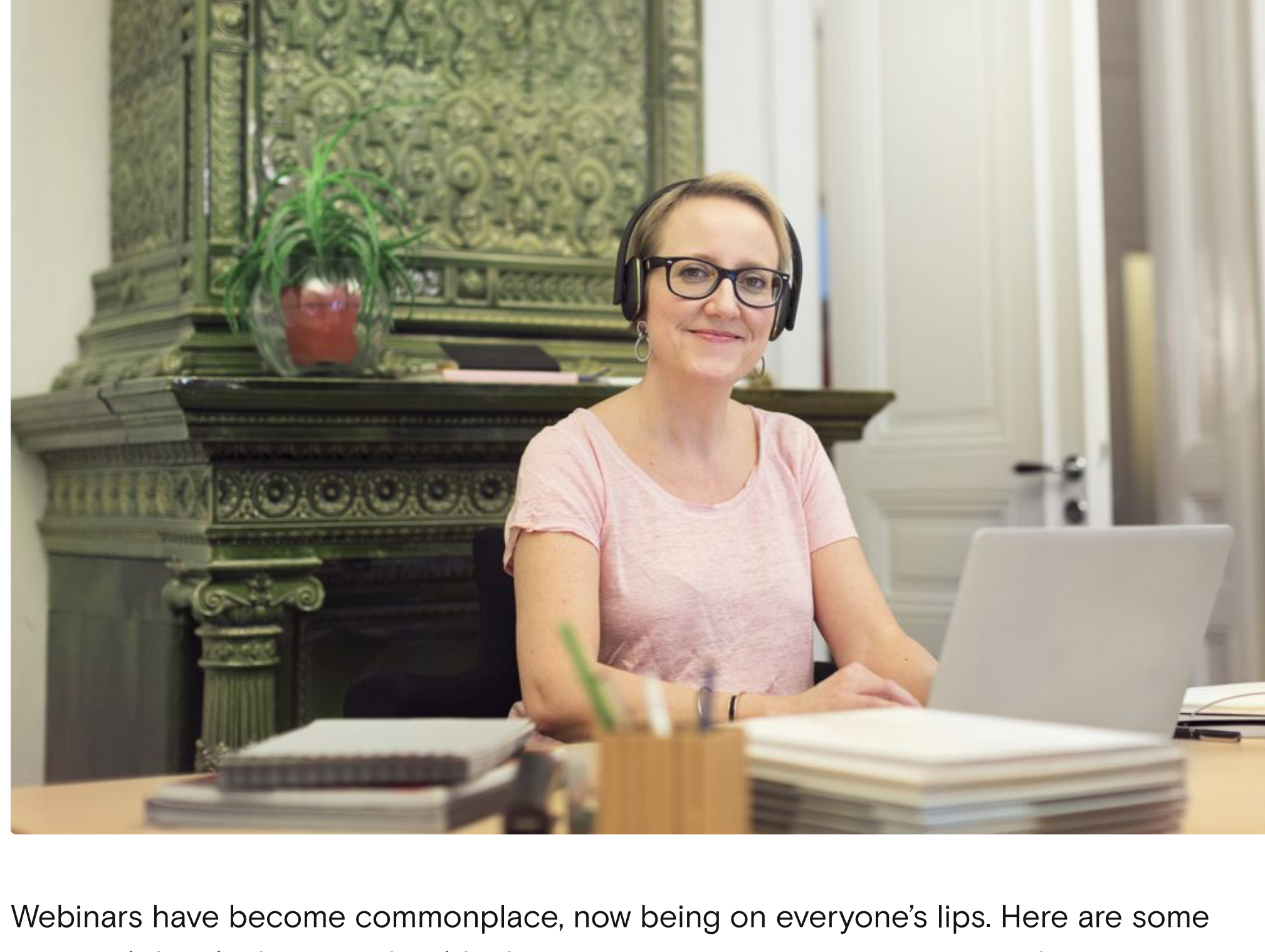


## How to Get Together Online: 9 Pieces of Practical Advice on Organizing a Webinar

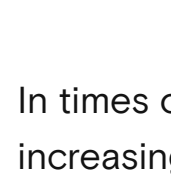
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Webinars have become commonplace, now being on everyone's lips. Here are some practical details that you should take into account as an organizer, speaker or participant of a webinar.



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In times of COVID-19 restrictions, webinars have not only become a buzzword but also a practical reality for an increasing number of us. Multitudinous organizations are approaching us with webinar invitations, and more and more researchers are also involved in arranging them.

A webinar is a seminar conducted online (web + seminar). It is a live event but is often recorded to be watched afterwards.

The core essence of a webinar is that it is a *live event*. The presenters may be located in the same physical room or around the world sitting in front of their computer screens, but they present in real-time online, and the audiences – whether **sitting in the same physical room** or sitting in front of their own screens, or both, as in the hybrid form – are given the opportunity to interact. In addition to this, an online event can be created in different ways, for example, a previously recorded presentation that can be watched asynchronously and commented on afterwards, or a livestream with no possibility for live commentary or interaction. In the strictest sense of the word, these should not be called “webinars” but seminar recordings, streamed events, or similar.

After Nordicom's **recent webinar series** focusing on media and information literacy in the Nordic Countries, organized in collaboration with the Swedish Media Council, I intended to write down a couple of lessons learned for the involved. On second thought, I realized that it would be more useful to share them with all of you in the network. The possibility for low-threshold webinars would essentially contribute to an accelerated spread of scientific information. In fact, sharing research results, methodological advice and practical wisdom related to the researcher's everyday has never been as easy as it is today.

Compared to the situation a couple years ago, when we had to cope with weak sound, freezing video and participants unfamiliar with interacting via a screen, we now have stable, reliable, easily accessible and user-friendly software, thanks to the flagship products on the market: **Zoom** and **Microsoft Teams**. There is also an increasing number of **alternative web conferencing solutions** that are free to use if your institution doesn't have a license: **Google Meet**, **GoToWebinar**, **Zoho Meeting**, **Fuze**, **Whereby**. They do, however, impose varying restrictions for the maximum number of participants and the length of the session, as well as the possibilities for recording and interacting.

Due to the pandemic restrictions, people have now become familiar with using online conferencing technology. Even if the vast majority of them have perhaps still not attended a virtual conference, they have surely participated in meetings, or even interactive workshops and webinars. Now they know much better how to take turns, to mute their microphones, and to interact by using the most common tools.

### For the organizer

Webinars don't have to significantly differ from traditional seminars in their structure and format, but when organizing a webinar it is always advisable to make use of the unique characteristics of online communication. If an event is transformed from physical to online settings, it is worth thinking about whether online events should be more concise, with increased attention to the sense of shared presence and interactivity. In all online events, a carefully planned flow is the key.



#### 1. Plan the flow.

A pre-registration, made with the help of an e-form, is a good solution in many respects. If you can send the link to the meeting room via e-mail, you don't have to share it openly online, which will probably minimize the risk of trolling. You will also have an idea of how many will be participating and who these people are who have interest in the event. Not everyone will show up in the online event, especially if they know that it will be recorded and uploaded online, but organizing an independent webinar without knowing anything about the audience is like going in blind. Having a list of participants also helps to reach your audience beforehand or during the event in a case of severe technical problems.

A common role division is to have two persons: a host and a manager. The host moderates the event, presents the speaker and intervenes if any problems arise, for instance, if a presentation is exceeding the time allowance. The manager follows the chat box, answers questions of a technical character, solves ad-hoc problems and perhaps picks up written questions for discussion and updates social media.

One decision to be taken concerns the question of whether the session will be recorded or not. The recording can be uploaded to YouTube or Vimeo or embedded to a website. Authorities are recommending the addition of subtitles in videos to increase accessibility, which may cause a higher follow-up workload. However, YouTube supports subtitles and translations.

Measuring and reporting the success of the webinar is often in the interest of the organizers. Typically, half of the registered participants pop up, and the number may even be lower the more aware participants are of the session being recorded. This is why views of recordings should also be taken into account in the reporting, to give a whole picture of the attention the webinar received.

#### 2. Hope for the best, prepare for the worst.

The webinar organizer should try to figure out all the possible worst scenarios – not to be focused on negative sides and become scared, but to be prepared.

What may not work properly and what should be included in the emergency plan? The most important question is what to do if the software is not working at the moment the webinar should take place. If the event will not be postponed, which is a less preferable option, an alternative platform should be ready for use and the organizers should be ready to communicate this to the registered participants without any delay. Technical and practical problems may also include poor sound quality, a falling camera or screen-sharing function, or even inappropriate behavior from the audience. If a troll comes in, how will you act and where do you find the remove-user button in the system?

In addition, the plan B should be communicated ahead of time to all speakers involved. If a speaker's connection becomes bad, perhaps they can have the application downloaded on their mobile phone to alternatively connect from there?

#### 3. Turn your webinar into an online resource.

For better communication and an increased impact, it is warmly recommended that a webinar has a permanent webpage dedicated to the event. This allows the webinar to become a resource that can be utilized even after the live event, with presentation slides and additional material being uploaded online and available to view. The webinar can, in other words, become an online resource available for anyone for a longer period of time. For researchers this may be valuable because webinar recordings **can be referred to** in academic texts in the same way as any other online material. Of course, some webinar organizers consciously decide to make their webinars ephemeral, considering them as one-time events.

### Checklist for the Organizers

- Test the connection on the same day as the event takes place. Ensure that your software is updated.
- Before starting (and recording) the session, put an introductory slide on the screen, containing some basic technical instructions and reminding participants of the possible recording of the event.
- Prepare a plan B for the situation of software not working normally. This may be another software or a link mentioned in a pre-written mail to the registered participants that can be quickly sent with one click. Or maybe you will just postpone the event? Even then, it is an asset to have an “emergency e-mail” ready in your draft folder.
- Ask involved speakers to send their slides in advance. In case of technical problems from the presenter's side you can smoothly hop in and share the presentation slides.



### For the speaker

The speaker's role is to deliver the content. Sounds easy, but in reality, the webinar presenters may be encountering more challenges than they had ever anticipated.



#### 1. Adapt your presentation.

An on-screen presentation may require a slightly different kind of approach than an on-site presentation. Presenters should design their slides in a conference-software-friendly way. For most software, this means that you should leave space for participants' videos or the presenter video on the screen. It goes without saying that a lot of text and text in small font size should be avoided.

As in all mediated communication, the rule is to not to speak too fast. Articulate well, especially if your sound quality is poor, and leave pauses between sentences.

Many speakers regard their performance as a monologue but it is worth remembering that even online appearances can be very interactive. You can address the audience, ask (rhetorical) questions, and indicate that you are speaking to them. Remember that there are also a number of interactive tools and you can use: for example, conduct a poll, send participants into break-out groups for discussion, collect participants' opinions or comments in the chat box or an open-access external memo.

#### 2. Design your studio.

While focusing on the content, surprisingly few presenters appear to have dedicated attention to the setup they are presenting in. Working at home offices during the pandemic has resulted in people showing personal aspects of their home and not seeing any problems with it (while, in fact, simultaneously being overtly careful about privacy in social media). However, to give a professional impression, the presenter could take a picture from his or her office or institution and set it up to the virtual background. Virtual backgrounds may also intensify the experience: if delivering a talk about pedagogy, why not have a classroom in the background, or if talking about the change of journalism, why not place oneself in a newsroom?

As some may regard the visual details as irrelevant, the lighting and positioning are very important. Presenters should sit in a position facing a window, letting daylight naturally come in, rather than in a backlit position, which can cause the face to be shadowed. A head-on frontal view makes the presenter seem most present.

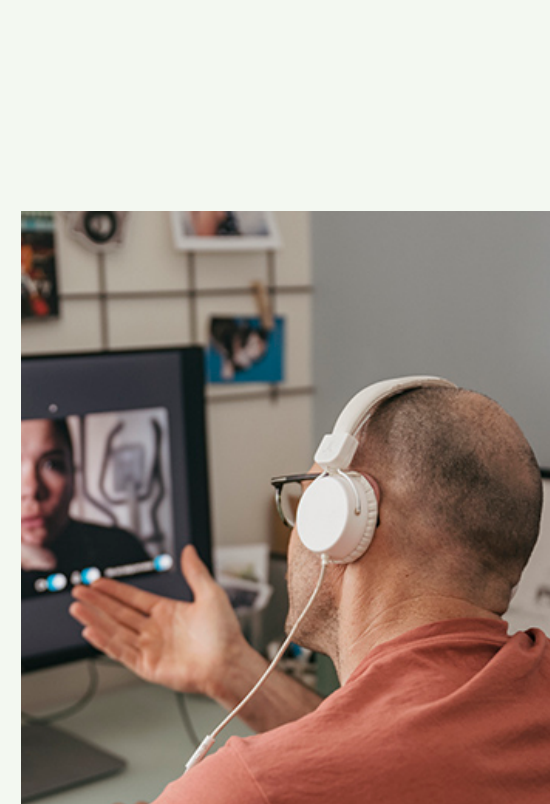
Furthermore, to ensure full focus, the presenter should isolate his- or herself, as peculiar as it may sound, because listening to a presenter with a disturbing background noise is exhausting and frustrating. This means that the presenter should do his or her best to eliminate voices from the outside world: besides selecting a place where you can speak the entire time without being disrupted, you can leave a paper on your office or outside door telling potential visitors to advance from knocking on the door during your speaking time. Maybe also talk to the renovating neighbors upstairs in advance? Mobile phones should be muted, as well as the notification sounds from the e-mail and calendar programs on the computer. And, of course, it would be highly preferable to not to have any family members or noisy pets around – remember the **BBC News interview** where the child suddenly walked in? I also remember the webinar where the main speaker's dog started barking and was determined not to stop...

#### 3. Place your notes in a smart way.

One practical issue for the presenter is how to see your notes if you have them (some extraordinary individuals are bold enough to improvise and produce the entire talk in the passing moment). It may come as a surprise that while sharing your slides on screen you may not be able to access your notes or look at files in any other program on your computer. Therefore, the presenter has to have two screens or computers available, or just print the notes on paper. Notes can also be on a mobile or tablet placed against your screen and you can smoothly scroll down them with your finger. The biggest challenge for the presenter is to direct the gaze towards the camera while following notes. A prompter just behind the laptop's camera would work, fine – but everyone has to find his or her own solution that is feasible in the working conditions of the office or home office.

### Checklist for the Speaker

- Design your slides in a conference-software-friendly way. Test how your solutions work on the screen in the software that will be used in advance.
- Use a virtual background if you don't want to show your kitchen or home office to the world. Make sure that you are wearing clothes that distinguish you from the background and are monochromatic rather than showing multicolored patterns.
- Like the participants, always mute your microphone while not speaking. To create presence – remember that you, as an invited speaker, are in the spotlight and not an ordinary participant even if your video is lined up with the others – keep your camera on throughout the whole session.
- Choose a chair and table that don't make any noise. The microphone is not selective and does not filter out the small noises of a squeaky chair or a creaking table.
- Have a paper and pen at hand for making notes, and a glass of water in case your throat gets dry.



### For the participant

You might not need any advice concerning how to participate online events. However, there are some arrangements and details where you can, in fact, make the event more successful for all.



#### 1. Expose yourself.

In a virtual conferencing room the audience materializes through small details: names on lists of participants and chat discussions, signatures on the video slots dedicated to each participant when the video is turned off, and videos. The sense of shared presence is at its best created through active videos. The ultimate advice for participants is thus: turn your video on. No one cares if you have combed your hair or where you are sitting, no one even notices if you are simultaneously writing e-mails, but it is extremely important for the creation of virtual presence to show that you are there, listening and sharing the moment. Nothing is more discouraging for a speaker than speaking to black boxes. It feels as unnatural as talking to a wall.

When seeing the participants' facial expressions the speaker can also adjust his or her content to the audiences. If the speaker observes that something is not clear or arouses confusion, they can better address the audience and clarify things. Audience efforts may thus contribute to a higher quality of content. Exposing oneself is like stretching a helping hand to the presenter.

#### 2. Show engagement.

Showing oneself in camera and creating presence does not need much effort – but if a participant wants to put even more effort into his or her participation, he or she can also create engagement. A successful event often needs interaction. Participants who (pro)actively write down questions to the chat box, comment on others' questions or reactions, share their reactions through reaction tools (on Zoom there are a couple of emojis to choose) are welcomed by the presenters and organizers with gratitude.

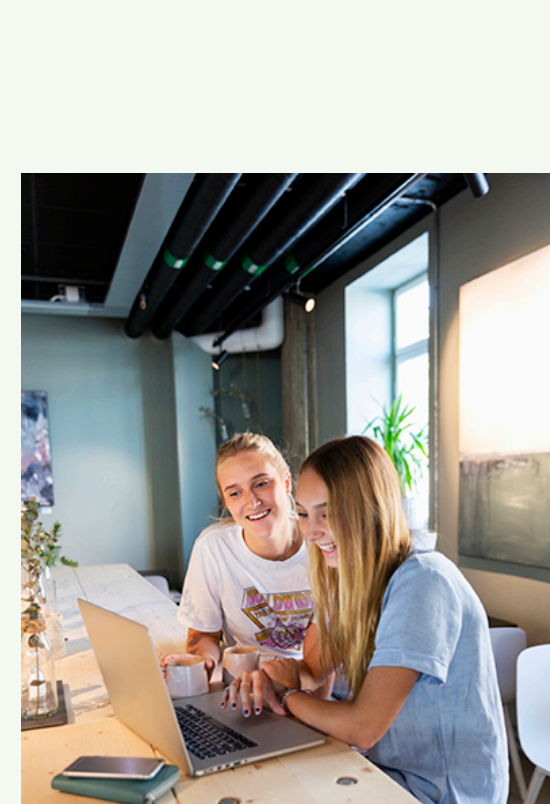
The good thing is that interaction often creates more interaction. One participant can trigger other participants' engagement by lowering the threshold to communicate and interact. This is why some webinar organizers also prefer to choose some “engagement agents” in advance to break the silence, encouraging a selected group of people to be prepared to ask questions and share comments, sometimes even pre-formulated in agreement with the organizer.

#### 3. Connect afterwards.

As webinars are a disembodied form of event, organizers may feel it hard to know how the event was received. Some send a feedback form afterwards, but most organizers are fully aware of the fact that in a time of webinar abundance only few reply. You can still send feedback to the keypersons. The same goes for presenters, who might feel pretty empty after clicking the leave-the-meeting button.

### Checklist for the Participant

- The most participants show up in the webinar room in the last minute, which may arouse some stress for the organizers. Remember that you can log in about ten minutes before and wait online with the microphone muted and the camera turned off.
- Sit near your camera so that the others can see your face and the presenter can observe your facial expressions. Remember that small facial gestures such as nodding or smiling – even if it may feel weird in front of a computer screen – can make a difference for the one who is speaking.
- When writing down questions and sharing them in the chat box, you can also direct your questions to all participants instead of the speaker. This horizontal peer-to-peer engagement adds another layer to the webinar and is a good way of engaging others.
- In seminars, you may go to the presenter afterwards to share your impressions. In webinars, as this part is missing, there is no harm in e-mailing your thoughts and thanks to the presenter afterwards.



### Further Materials

- NordMedia Network's **upcoming and past webinars**
- Webinars in NordMedia Network's **conference calendar**
- Louise Henry: **How to host your first webinar** (video, 2018)
- Podia: **How to run a Zoom webinar** (video, 2020)
- Clay, C. (2012). **Great Webinars: How to create interactive learning that is captivating, Informative, and fun**. Pfeiffer.
- Sharan, S. & Carucci, J. (2014). **Webinars for dummies**. Wiley.

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NordMedia Network is operated by Nordicom at the University of Gothenburg in collaboration with the Department of Information Science and Media Studies at the University of Bergen. NordMedia Network is funded with support from the Nordic Council of Ministers.

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