

Virtual Alternatives: Video Presentations at Academic Conferences Are On the Rise

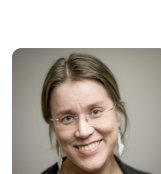
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Video provides an alternative for academics to deliver their presentation at an international conference. Delivering presentations via video is environmentally friendly, cost-effective, and maybe even easier to follow for listeners if the presentation is compact and structured. However, there are some challenges: avoiding typical pitfalls related to the audiovisual format and judging whether mediated interaction compares with discussions in physical space.



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More and more academic conferences are opening up the possibility for presentations via video instead of physical participation. Enabled by increasingly user-friendly technology and triggered by environmental concerns, conference organisers embed special streams in their programmes dedicated to video sessions. The coronavirus outbreak is expected to encourage researchers even more powerfully to switch from onsite to virtual conference participation.

Last year, the IAMCR conference held in Madrid launched an “experimental initiative” to **call for video presentations**. Five working groups and sections accepted presentations in video format, resulting in the acceptance of eleven video presentations total for the entire conference. The practice is continued at this year’s conference, which was **transferred from China to Finland**, with a **joint call** by seven sections and working groups.



IAMCR's 2020 Tampere call and the video presentation channel from Nico Carpentier on Vimeo.

The video presentation possibility was not only opted for to “provide alternatives to address the environmental impact”, as expressed in the call, but also to counteract exclusions that conferences typically have. For example, scholars from developing nations and doctoral students have fewer possibilities to participate and cover travel and participation fees. Video presenters are required to pay only half of the conference registration fee.

The next **NordMedia conference** will be organised in Iceland, which may be a hard-to-access venue for many, not only because of physical distance but also because of high travel expenses. The head of the local organising committee, **Valgerdur Johannisdottir**, does not want to exclude the possibility of arranging video sessions but says that the option has not yet been discussed in the planning meetings.

– I understand that many researchers are concerned about the carbon dioxide footprint. Still, I think that physical co-existence beats long-distance relationships. I would, of course, like to see as many colleagues in Reykjavik in 2021 in-person, says Johannisdottir.

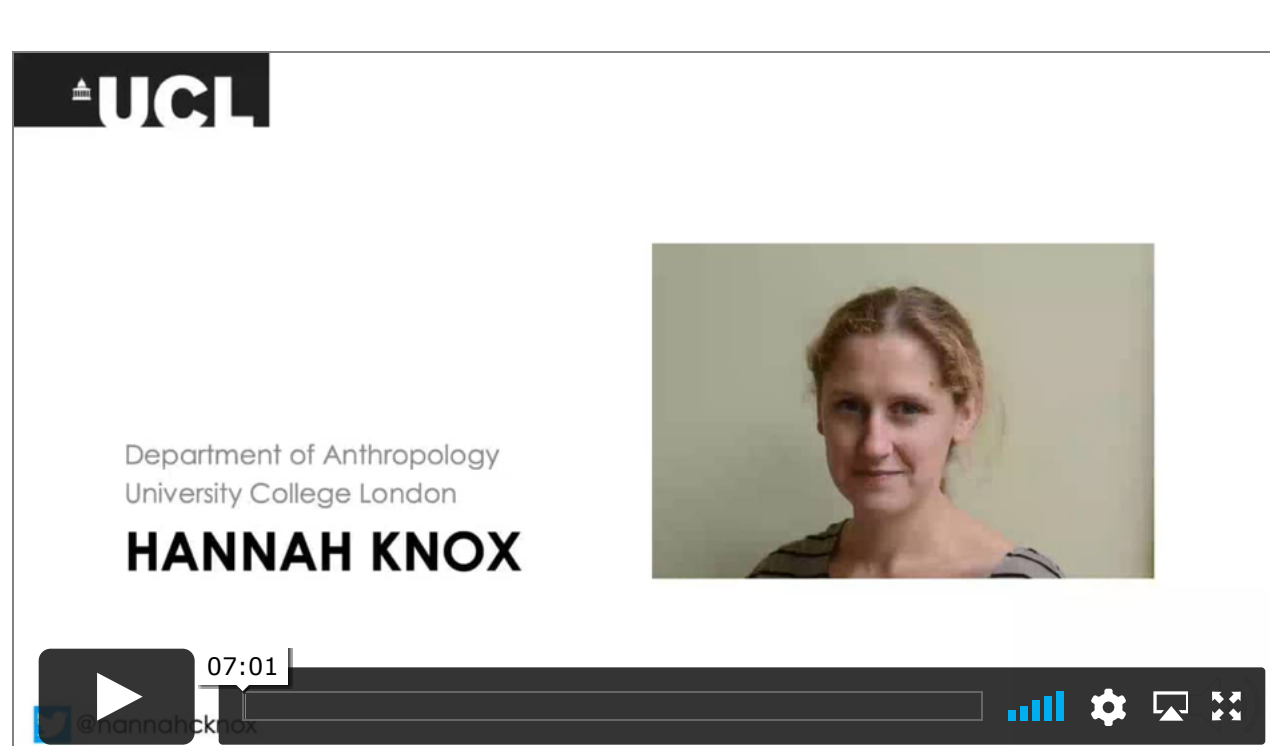
First video, then video call

Even if the technology is easily available, questions remain about the format and about the practical decisions that need to be made.

Browsing through slides may be slightly boring – even in the instructions presenters are often requested to avoid a “talking heads video”. On their webpage, the IAMCR organisers say they “believe that we should also acknowledge and stimulate the creative opportunities that video presentations can offer to conference presenters”. But what exactly are those creative opportunities?

– Creative choices can include, for example, showing some parts of fieldwork in the video presentation, says Professor **Marco A. Janssen**, President of the International Association for the Study of the Commons, which has experience from organising an **entirely virtual conference** in 2018, and there will be **another coming up** this year.

Anthropologist **Hannah Knox**'s video provides an example – here is her presentation entitled “Climate Change and Material Reflexivity: Some Reflections on a Year Without Flying”, delivered for the Society of Cultural Anthropology's annual roundtable 2017:



Climate Change and Material Reflexivity (Knox) from SCA on Vimeo.

– Still, many of presenters opt for the talking head presentation. One of the challenges related to video presentations is that it is a new format and not everyone is familiar with it. It requires some experimentation to find out what good formats are, Professor Janssen adds.

Most conference organisers suggest a screen-recorded video showing a slide set, with the researcher's voice-over. These types of videos are made with a screen recording tool often included in the licences provided by universities; for example, **Camtasia**. However, there are **a number of alternatives** available. One possibility is to make a recorded Zoom session, which compares with a recording of a webinar presentation, yet without any online interaction with participants.

Another possibility is to record a presentation in a classroom or a video conferencing room, showing the presenter. Video presentation instructions recommend framing the speaker above the shoulders and recording with the camera aligned with the eyes. The camera can be put on a tripod or operated by a colleague, but the video can even be made with a **mobile device**. To increase clarity, providing subtitles in the video is also requested.

The maximum duration of presentations in current calls varies from twelve minutes. After the video presentation screening, presenters are required to be available on Skype or an alternative communication channel endorsed by the session organisers – for example, Zoom, Facetime, WhatsApp call, Facebook Messenger Call – to answer questions in a way similar to conventional onsite presentations.

Preparation is the key

Anna Sundermann, a research fellow at the Leuphana University of Lüneburg in Germany, held a video presentation in the Environment, Science and Risk Communication Working Group (ESR) at the IAMCR2019 conference with two colleagues, one of them located in Arizona in the US.

– I chose a voice-over video presentation with an embedded video link because I could easily prepare it on my own, and it was time-efficient and at low cost. Next time, I would like to try other forms, with support of the media centre at my university, but it requires more time, she says.

She thinks that video presentations are a good opportunity to make others aware of your research in an entertaining manner while the manuscript is still being prepared.

– The first steps of the preparations were the same as if I had given a normal presentation. However, I had to do everything on time, and as it was my first time, it took a long time for the text being recorded without mistakes. At last, it felt good to be completely prepared three weeks before the conference and to be able to concentrate on the questions of the audience, she explains.

Still, she realised that there are some disadvantages of not physically being at the conference location.

– The organisation should ensure that the session chairs are well prepared for video presentations. I could not really see how many people in the room were listening to my presentation because my camera did not point in the right direction. The questions were hard to understand as the microphone was not adjusted to the audience, the presenters and me in the virtual conference room. I did not have a good overview and had to wait a long time for my presentation without being able to understand or listen to the other presenters, says Sundermann.

– Besides, there was a sudden breakdown during the presentation, so I could only see the floor and feet of the other presenters. My American colleague, who was online in the middle of the night, completely disappeared at some point. However, I understand that these are all problems of pioneering work.

Sundermann thinks that the video presentations are still new to the audiences, as well, so not only the presenters and session presiders have to be prepared.

– It would be great if you could watch the videos throughout the conference and there would be a permanent blog or a similar site where questions could be sent to the video presenters, she suggests.

Recent Calls for Video Presentations

Conferences across different disciplines in the world that have launched calls for video presentations:

- **Comparative & International Education Society Conference (CIES)**, 22–26 March 2020, Miami
- **VI International Conference on Sustainable Development (ICSD)**, 15–19 April 2020, North Macedonia
- **International Psychological Applications Conference and Trends (inPACT)**, 25–27 April 2020, Madeira
- **International Conference on New Horizons in Education (INTE)**, 2–3 July 2020, Rome
- **6th International Conference on Public Health (ICOPH)**, 9–11 July 2020, Bangkok
- **International Conference for Internet Technology and Secured Transactions (ICITST)**, 8–10 December 2020, London

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NordMedia21 15 October 2020

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