

Forum: New Perspectives

Two BSHS online alternatives to conventional conferences

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In 2020, the BSHS hosted two major online events, the first of their kind in our collective experience. The first, a Twitter conference, was planned and accomplished before COVID-19 had quite been established as a serious global issue. The conference was planned, rather, as an innovation in travel-free conferencing, something that has been on the BSHS agenda since the IPCC report of 2018, calling for net-zero-carbon activity in all areas by 2050. As we discussed the Twitter conference, and watched the amazing energy, intellect and resourcefulness of its planners and hosts, we quickly saw that online delivery offered other advantages too – chiefly, wider participation. The pandemic offered the society a chance to take these lessons very boldly into the most important event of our scholarly calendar, which usually takes the form of an in-person annual conference, but this time was executed as an online festival.

As vice president and president of the BSHS, we were delighted by the leadership demonstrated by the mostly early-career researchers who devised and ran these events. The academic world and its broader context are incomparably different from the way things were even at the beginning of our own careers. The twin climate and ecological catastrophes, the deep roots of colonial legacies, and the full extent of inclusivity challenges are apparent now in ways that they were not a generation ago. Combine that with the pressures on the university sector, in the UK at least, and it is apparent that change is upon us in our discipline, whether we like it or not. It is reassuring, and exciting, to see the reinvigoration and reconstruction of scholarship in such competent and committed hands.

As the authors of these two pieces – one about the Twitter conference, the other about the digital festival – eloquently suggest, there is much more experimenting with online formats to be done. It is also clear that reflecting on the affordances and disadvantages of current online forms should help us to think harder about what is distinctive and special about meeting in person. For what reasons will it be appropriate to forgo the advantages of the online form, principally inclusiveness and lower carbon? To anticipate

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those deliberations, we suggest a concentration on which topics require the extended conversations that are currently difficult to achieve online. And, with that word ‘currently’, we enter tricky – and good – territory for our discipline: how should we take a view on the technological change that enables these experiments without stepping into boosterism? Here, online events convened under the auspices of our discipline may be particularly valuable to the welcome guests from other disciplines who attend.

Naturally, as these articles acknowledge, these were by no means perfect events. We have much to learn from our participants – and, indeed, from those who struggled to participate – and from the experiments of other scholarly organizations. Nevertheless, we are pleased to endorse these two articles as an indication of the BSHS’s ambitions as a responsible global leader in scholarship – and we commend them to the wider academic community.