

Hybrid Conferences in the New Normal: Reality in a resource restricted context.

Karunathilake, I.M.^{1,3}, Perera, B.J.C.³, Amarakoon, P.M.^{2,3}, Ihsan, F.R.^{2,3}, Mudiyanse, R.M.³, Manawadu, M.C.K.¹, Chandrasena, U.¹, Wijewickrama, A.⁵, Silva, L.H.S.C.⁶, Peiris, J.S.M.⁷, Low, W.Y.⁴, de Abrew, A¹

Introduction

The year 2020 was unprecedented, with COVID-19 inflicting an unexpected degree of damage and uncertainty on humanity. During such circumstances, professional organizations have the responsibility of providing accurate and up to date information on the global and local situation, as well as on prevention and management of COVID-19. For many professional organizations and institutes of higher learning, scientific conferences are the main platform for sharing and disseminating information.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, many organizations opted for fully virtual conferences. While virtual conferences have the potential to broaden participation and strengthen focus on technical content, they face serious challenges in promoting social interactions and broadening the scope of discussions.

A hybrid conference combines a "live" in-person activity with a "virtual" online component. It should promote attendee engagement with networking while mainlining high technical quality and adherence to COVID-19 preventive measures (Sox *et al.*, 2017; Sá *et al.*, 2019).

In this article, we discuss our experience in organizing a series of hybrid conferences, which, to the best of our knowledge, were the first hybrid academic conferences on public health and medical education in South East Asia. Since then, other conferences followed, and discussions emerged in the research community about hybrid conferences becoming the norm in the future. Yet for all that, little is known about how to design hybrid conferences and how they impact on the participants' experience.

Given the growing interest in hybrid conferences, we aim to provide insight on organizing similar events in the future and to inform and inspire an on-going conversation around how the networking research community can leverage the opportunities offered by virtual conferencing while minimizing the drawbacks on social interactions.

Our initial experience in conducting hybrid conferences

In early March 2020, the news about the COVID-19 outbreak became increasingly alarming, despite the ongoing restrictions on international and domestic travel. As the total number of confirmed cases rose to 66, the Sri Lankan state imposed a nationwide lockdown on March 20, escalating efforts to slow down the transmission of the disease (Department of Government Information, 2020).

The need for timely and accurate scientific information was greatly felt. Taking into consideration this global concern, the possibility of combining a "live" in person event with a "virtual" online component, the proposed *Hybrid* format, was identified. The first activity of such a nature was proposed as a collaborative activity jointly organized by the Asia Pacific Academic Consortium of Public Health (APACPH) and the Sri Lanka Medical Association (SLMA). In the absence of definitive scientific knowledge, we had only our

¹Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

²Postgraduate Institute of Medicine, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

³Sri Lanka Medical Association

⁴President, Asia Pacific Academic Consortium for Public Health (APACPH)

⁵Chief Consultant Physician, National Institute of Infectious Diseases, Sri Lanka

⁶National Operational Centre for Prevention of COVID 19, Sri Lanka and Commander of Sri Lanka Army

⁷National University of Hong Kong

Corresponding author: Dr. Rizka Ihsan
rizka_ihsan@pgim.cmb.ac.lk

