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Exploring Hybrid: A (hybrid) SIG to discuss hybrid conferences

SIGCHI Executive
Committee
ACM SIGCHI
New York, USA
sigchi-ec@acm.org

Helena Mentis
University of Maryland,
Baltimore County
Baltimore, USA
mentis@umbc.edu

Matt Jones
Swansea University
Swansea, United Kingdom
Matt.Jones@swansea.ac.uk

Pejman Mirza-Babaei
University of Ontario
Institute of Technology
Oshawa, Canada
pejman@uoiit.ca

Stacy M. Branham
University of California,
Irvine
Irvine, CA, USA
sbranham@uci.edu

Adriana S. Vivacqua
Universidade Federal do
Rio de Janeiro
Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil
avivacqua@ic.ufrj.br

Josh Andres
The Australian National
University
Canberra, Australia
josh.andres@anu.edu.au

Naomi Yamashita
NTT Communication
Science Laboratories
Keihanna, Japan
naomiy@acm.org

Priya C. Kumar
Pennsylvania State
University
University Park, USA
priya.kumar@psu.edu

Susan Dray
Dray & Associates
Minneapolis, MN, USA
susan.dray@dray.com

Andrew L. Kun
University of New
Hampshire
Durham, NH, USA
andrew.kun@unh.edu

Kashyap Todi
SIGCHI
New York, NY, USA
kashyap.todi@gmail.com

Neha Kumar
Georgia Institute of
Technology
Atlanta, GA, USA
neha.kumar@gatech.edu

Shaowen Bardzell
Pennsylvania State
University
University Park, PA, USA
sbardzell@psu.edu

Susanne Boll
University of Oldenburg
Oldenburg, Germany
Susanne.Boll@informatik.uni-
oldenburg.de

Cale Passmore
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, SK, Canada
cale.passmore@usask.ca

Luigi De Russis
Politecnico di Torino
Torino, Italy
luigi.derussis@polito.it

Nicola J. Bidwell
International University of
Management
Windhoek, Namibia
Aalborg University
Copenhagen, Denmark
nic.bidwell@gmail.com

Simone Kriglstein
Masaryk University
Brno, Czech Republic
AIT Austrian Institute of
Technology GmbH
Vienna, Austria
kriglstein@mail.muni.cz

Tamara Clegg
University of Maryland
College Park, USA
tclegg@umd.edu

ABSTRACT

In this special interest group (SIG), we follow up on previous conversations around hybrid models for conferences, conducted in open sessions by the ACM Special Interest Group on Computer-Human Interaction (SIGCHI) Executive Committee (EC). The COVID-19 pandemic led to a sudden shift to virtual conferences; as we start to go back to in-person events, it is important to reflect on the types of events we desire, and design these accordingly. With this SIG, we hope to share experiences from previous conferences (successful or not) and discuss potential solutions to pending issues. This SIG will

be led by VP at Large Adriana S. Vivacqua, with the participation of other EC members.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing;**

KEYWORDS

hybrid, conferences, sustainability, design

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1 INTRODUCTION

The recent COVID-19 pandemic led to a switch to virtual formats on many fronts, and academic conferences were no exception. Since early 2020, conferences large and small have been trying different formats for their meetings, redesigning experiences and experimenting with different solutions and technologies to create their online experiences. This generated new possibilities for participation and engagement without the need to travel to a physical site. The situation also created new challenges as well known-formats were adapted to a virtual mode, which led to some innovative solutions.

This special interest group (SIG) follows on ACM Special Interest Group on Computer-Human Interaction (SIGCHI) Executive Committee's previous discussions on hybrid formats¹, where concerns and priorities for the transition to hybrid were discussed. After almost two years of virtual experiences, there are new expectations about conference accessibility, and it seems important to reflect on and discuss the challenges and opportunities, including accessibility, connectivity, time zone coordination, language, networking and socializing, to name a few.

2 GOALS AND PROPOSAL

We would like to engage the community in designing hybrid conference experiences, considering hybrid conferences might become the default configuration in the near future. Each attendance type has its own pros and cons, permissions, restrictions, and long-term consequences. Each attendance type has groups it serves better, serves worse, and larger systemic factors at play. It's important to come together to serve our own community in the best possible way. Where there is relative unity around hybrid conferences being a better option, we are seeing tensions and concerns around "how" hybrid conferences could be done. In previous sessions, we have uncovered tensions around ways that hybrid conferences can increase some inequities while reducing others.

We also intend to extend discussion to consider how hybrid models perform in relation to increasing expectations and requirements for more environmentally sustainable conferencing. Reduced carbon emissions is a much needed outcome for conferencing that involve less air travel in particular; however, online platforms are not without their own carbon costs [4]. We invite contributions that will sensitize the discussion to the issues that must be accounted for in modeling sustainability performance and the solutions that offer potential to address these.

Our goals with this SIG are to:

- Collect challenges and experiences from organizers and participants and reflect upon them
- Brainstorm mechanisms for creating positive hybrid conference experiences that can be experimented in upcoming conferences, including a discussion on networking and socializing, which is a frequently mentioned issue
- Create a list of upcoming "hybrid trials" that we can pay close attention to

To achieve these goals, some pre-SIG preparation will be necessary, and we are planning on collecting experiences and curating this information beforehand, to make the SIG time more productive.

¹<https://nehakumar.medium.com/6215365d9a4>

Many online experiences have a tendency to replicate existing in-person models, and we see a unique opportunity to rethink the conference experience, its purpose and dynamics. Thus, we would like to continue the discussions on forms of participation, emphasizing the experiences of recent conferences (both virtual and hybrid) and plans for upcoming ones. In this SIG we will dedicate time to reflect on what worked/didn't work and to plan for novel experiences, thinking about new conference dynamics and possibilities. Conferences will be encouraged to share their experiences during the SIG and formalize them as blog posts if they haven't done so already.

In the spirit of the theme, this SIG will be held in hybrid mode (if possible) including synchronous interaction with remote participants, multi-site engagements and other configurations that enable wider participation. Experimenting with alternative settings should be a learning experience for participants, generating greater awareness of problems that need to be addressed, and should help us push the boundaries of events. Considering CHI 2022 will be a hybrid conference, the SIG will at the very least offer a link to the conference platform where people who are not able to attend the event in person can participate.

Researchers have been exploring hybrid configurations for many years now. Some have stated that the remote experience will never be equal to the in-person experience, but also that new experiences should be designed, taking advantage of technology [1]. More recently, workshops on hybridity have been held [2][3], to discuss hybrid configurations both at work and at conferences. To further the discussion on the topic, we will invite organizers of these workshops to join us and summarize their discussions and conclusions, focusing on configurations that could be attempted at conferences. We will also invite organizers of recent hybrid conferences (e.g., RecSys) to share their experiences.

3 CONCLUSION

In this SIG, we bring together conference organisers and participants from all experience levels, backgrounds, and conference sizes to learn from their experiences. We believe gathering their learnings is of the utmost importance for SIGCHI today due to the rapid changes in conference delivery, user expectations, impacts on accessibility, and opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous collaboration. Our goal with this SIG is to create a space to build on the collective intellect to synthesise the learnings and inform future best-in-class conference experiences. As one of the outcomes, we expect to write a summary article for *ACM Interactions*².

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