Best Practices for Virtual Conferences

Crista Videira Lopes, University of California, Irvine, USA; *Task Force Co-Chair*

Jeanna Matthews, Clarkson University, USA; *Task Force Co-Chair, Member of ACM Council, Former SGB Chair*

Benjamin Pierce, University of Pennsylvania, USA; *Task Force Executive Editor, SIGPLAN Vice Chair, Chair of SIGPLAN ad hoc committee on climate change*

The brave new world of virtual conferences

- Phase I (March-May 2020)
  - ASPLOS, IEEE VR, SAC, …

- Phase II (June-July 2020)
  - PLDI, ICSE, STOC, EC, ISSTA, …

- Phase III (August 2020 and beyond)
  - ICFP, FSE, SPLASH, POPL, …

ACM convenes a Presidential Task Force on virtual conferences…

"Mad scramble"

"Creative chaos"

"Harvesting and consolidation"

A little background

- Proposal for an ACM Task Force on Conference Virtualization from Crista, Benjamin, and Jeanna on March 7
- Cherri Pancake forms *ACM Presidential Task Force on What Conferences Can Do to Replace Face-to-Face Meetings* on March 13
- 27-page report produced April 5 but work continues on live Google doc (47 pages and growing!)
- Other Task Force Members
  - **Blair MacIntyre**, Georgia Tech, USA; **Gary Olson**, University of California, Irvine, USA; **Rob Lindeman**, University of Canterbury, NZ; **Francois Guimbretiere**, Cornell University, USA; **Srinivasan Keshav**, University of Cambridge, UK; **Vicki Hanson**, ACM CEO; **Pat Ryan**, ACM COO; **Donna Cappo**, ACM Director of SIG Services

Five critical things to get right

Technology! No   Technical program! No

1. People
2. People
3. People
4. People
5. People

Five critical things to get right

1. People organizing the conference
2. People navigating through the virtual events
3. People connecting at the conference
4. People sleeping at different times
5. People misbehaving   :-(

People organizing

(Planning and running a virtual conference)

Virtual conference == Videoconference? (No!)

Videoconference   <<<

- Single event, or
- Multiple **disconnected** events
- Focus on audio/visual communication

Virtual Conference

- Multiple **connected** events over the course of a few days
- Social networking is more important than formal presentations
- Communication happens *during*, *around*, and *beyond* the formal sessions
  - Presence and visibility are critical
  - Text chat is critical
  - Ad-hoc A/V is important
- Persistence (of people and content) over the time of the conference

Organizing Committee

- Include tech-savvy members for choosing and configuring platforms
- Identify video-conferencing hosts, who start and manage the conference sessions
- Identify session chairs / moderators, whose role is even more important now (think of them as TV hosts)
- Include plenty of student volunteers

People navigating

(Communicating what's happening where)

Help Participants Navigate the Virtual Events

- Multi-track conferences need to make it clear what's happening now, what's coming, and how participants can join
  - Single track conferences are somewhat easier to manage, but see next part

- Very important: broadcast activities *loudly* and *often*
  - Send out announcements every day, multiple times a day

People connecting

(Networking, bonding, and serendipity)

Informal Networking

- Physical conferences: bringing people to the same location makes it easy
    - Let physical and social proximity do their thing

- Virtual conferences: **social networking needs to be <u>built-in</u>**
    - How will people talk to each other beyond technical presentations?
    - How will people bond?
    - How will newcomers get into the fabric of the existing community?
    - How will social experiences be memorable?

Informal Networking: Suggestions

- Use the organization of the conference itself as a social networking mechanism
- Leave "empty" space in the program for social interactions
- Encourage presenters to be available after their talks for smaller video chats
- Promote the organization of BoFs and other bottom-up events
- Promote the posters and demos tracks
- Engage the social butterflies of your community to lead by example
- Organize mentoring sessions
- Bring famous members for "Ask Me Anything" sessions
- Organize live music events
- Remind people to interact at every opportunity
- Lead by example!

People sleeping

(The bane of timezones)

Know your community

- Who do you want to reach? Who do you want to connect? Where in the world are they?
  - Set the rhythm of the conference to serve your community
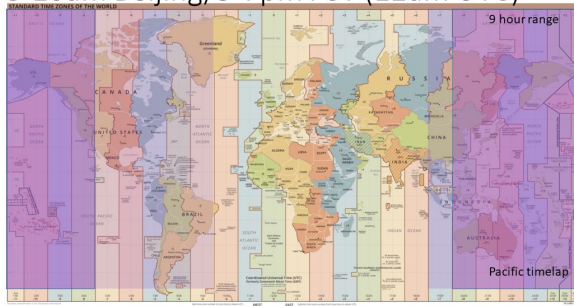 - **Avoid forcing people to be awake in the middle of the night**
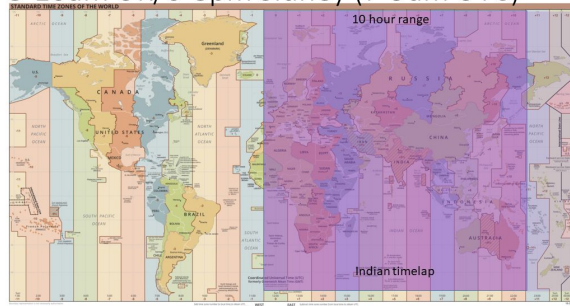   - They won't do it

Some workable approaches

- Single timezone (PLDI)
- Follow the sun: blocks of 3 hours where ⅔ of the world are awake (ICSE)
- Mirrored schedule (ICFP)

Follow the sun

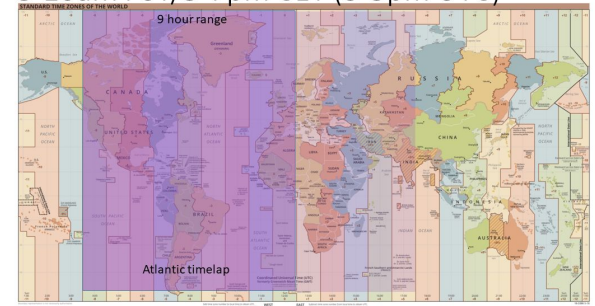**Pacific/2**: 2-hour sessions
8-10am Beijing/5-7pm PST (12am UTC)

Indian/2: 2-hour sessions
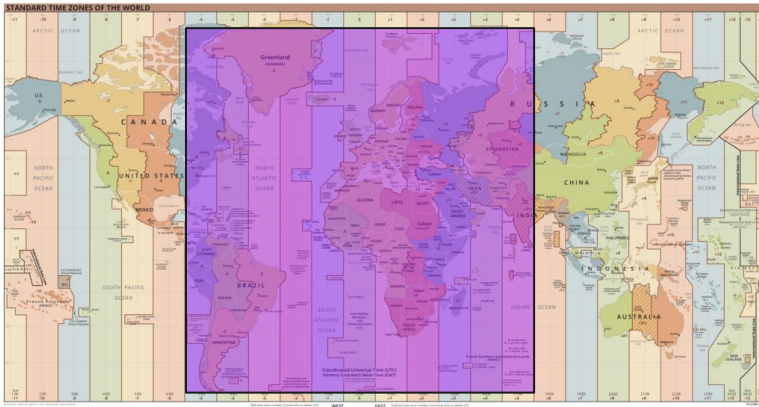8-10am UK/6-8pm Sidney (7-9am UTC)

Atlantic/2: 2-hour sessions
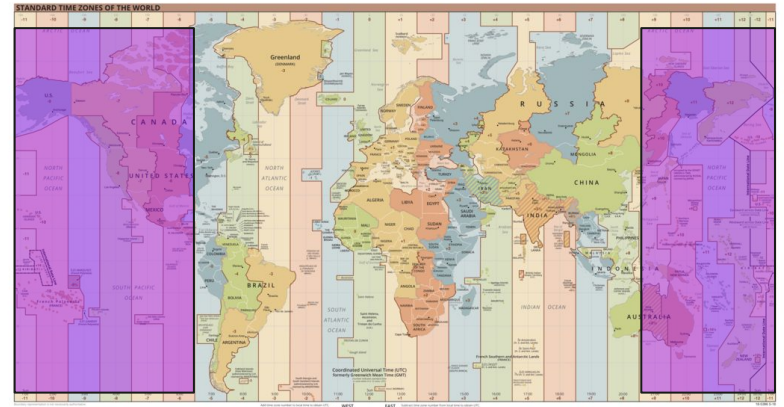8-10am PST/5-7pm CET (3-5pm UTC)

Mirrored schedule

Program

Repeat Program

People misbehaving

(Privacy and Security)

Prepare to deal with disruption

- Stress testing of platforms and meeting configurations from the perspective of a deliberately disruptive attendee
    - Accidental unmuting
    - Disruptive screen share
    - Offensive virtual background
    - Renaming (e.g. to a distinguished member of the community?)
    - Annotations
- Difficult to expect speaker to deal with this!
    - Need staff on hand to deal with disruptions who have actively practiced!

Have an explicit code of conduct

- Explicit code of conduct that lays out expected behavior for host *and* participants
- Hosts
  - Are they recording? How long retained? How posted/shared?
  - How are attendees being observed (e.g. enable Zoom option to track attendee attention?)
  - Will chat log be retained? Host access to private chats?
- Attendees
  - Is it ok to take screenshots or other audio/visual/video recordings? For personal use? For posting?

Wishlist: Survey infrastructure

- Shared core of questions
- Standard collection/aggregation process
- Make it easier to compare/analyze the results of different experiments in different SIGs and conferences

Resources

- [Five Things to Consider Before Going Virtual](#)
- ACM landing page: http://www.acm.org/virtual-conferences
- Virtual Conferences
  - [Live Google doc](#) for Task Force report, with helpful appendices
  - [Discussion forum](#)
- Security and Privacy in Virtual Meetings
  - [US-TPC statement of principles](#)
  - [Longer live Google doc](#)