Planning Virtual Conferences in the Humanities: A Detailed Look at the 9th International ESPRit Conference

Christian A. Bachmann and Nora Ramtke

Planning Virtual Conferences in the Humanities: A Detailed Look at the 9th International ESPRit Conference

Christian A. Bachmann and Nora Ramtke
Ruhr University Bochum
christian.bachmann@rub.de, nora.ramtke@rub.de

In June 2021, the DFG Research Unit 228 'Journal Literature'[1] organized the 9th International Conference of the European Society for Periodical Research (ESPRit) on the topic of 'Periodical Formats in the Market: Economies of Space and Time, Competition and Transfer'. It was the first time this event was hosted in a German-speaking country. On behalf of the Research Unit, a team from the Ruhr University Bochum (RUB) was responsible for planning and carrying out the event, in coordination with the ESPRit Committee. As the COVID-19 pandemic spread in Europe during the Spring of 2020, the conference team agreed to go virtual with the conference, due to the foreseeable legal and logistical difficulties in planning and carrying it out in person.[2] A virtual conference seemed the only format that allowed the team to plan with minimal uncertainties and to protect the health of all conference participants. Accordingly, the conference was logistically hosted by RUB, but it was accessible from all over the world. The 9th ESPRit Conference followed the concept of the nearly carbon-neutral conference, a path it had been on for ecological reasons since the mid-2010s and for which the Future States Conference organized by Tim Satterthwaite at the University of Brighton serves as a best-practice example.[3]

From the outset, planning the virtual conference was flanked by an intensive process of reflection in which the conference team reviewed and adapted its objectives as well as the methods and processes required to achieve these goals. This process of reflection was significantly more intensive than is the case with on-site conferences, which are based on existing experience and logistical support from the host institutions.

1 The Research Unit 2288 Journal Literature is a consortium project funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) from 2016 to 2022 at the Ruhr University Bochum, the Philipps-Universität Marburg and the University of Cologne. The project uses a media-historical perspective to conduct research on journals in the nineteenth and twentieth century. See journalliteratur.blogs.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/gb.

2 The state of North Rhine-Westphalia passed the first Ordinance on Protection against New Infections with the Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (CoronaSchVO) on March 22, 2020, which prohibited events from being held, guests from staying in hotels and restaurants from operating. This meant that there was no legal way to carry out the conference on site, nor was the necessary infrastructure available. With the Ordinance on Protection from Dangers of Infection with the Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 due to Entry into the Country after Determination of an Epidemic Situation of National Significance by the German Bundestag (CoronaEinreiseV), as of May 12, 2021, quarantine regulations were passed that would have effectively prevented those conference participants who were travelling from places considered risk areas from participating in the conference.

3 The conference website is available at www.futurestates.org. See also the introduction to this *JEPS* issue.

The experiences and insights gained are shared in this report in order to assist in planning future conferences.

1. Premises and Objectives of the Conference

The first premise of planning and carrying out the virtual conference was that it had to fulfil the same academic and professional standards as all other conferences held by the European Society for Periodical Research and the Research Unit Journal Literature. As a cooperation event, the conference aimed to fulfil several objectives. First, it was to provide the typical functions of annual conferences for academic societies. Second, it aimed to promote the Research Unit's international networking and visibility, and as a secondary goal, the public image of RUB as the host institution was to be supported.

A second premise assumed that people generally find events enriching if they connect them with sensory impressions and positive emotions, as both promote memory capacity. Because sensory impressions are either non-existent or limited to the screen at a virtual conference, our goal was to design the virtual conference such that it could be 'experienced' in a form that was accessible and memorable.

A third premise also focused on the participants. At an in-person conference, the spatial set-up can encourage participants to join in events that do not necessarily follow their preferences and interests, while at a virtual conference it must be assumed that they will only attend those sessions and events that they select beforehand. This relative freedom of the participants was viewed as an advantage and taken into account during the planning phase. Regardless of whether knowledge transfer is the focus, whether inspiration, feedback or help is sought, whether participants primarily attend for the networking aspect, or whether they are only present to meet up with friends and peers: from the perspective of the conference organizers, all of these reasons were considered equally legitimate and taken into consideration when selecting the formats for academic and social interaction.

A virtual conference also appeared to offer additional advantages, for example with regard to ESPRit's language policy, which aims to promote regional languages in addition to English. It was also assumed that digital formats would offer a valuable advantage compared to on-site conferences when it comes to archivability. Documenting and archiving the ESPRit Conference for the entire research community, as well as providing public access to academic research as part of the European Union's Open Science Strategy, were important aspects of the planning process.

On this basis, a programme was curated that included various formats from which the participants could select elements based on their own needs and interests before, during, and after the conference, and to which they could contribute themselves in several ways at their own discretion and regardless of their motivation. Instead of prioritising one particular purpose from the outset, in light of the impossibility of transferring all academic and social forms of interaction into the virtual space, the challenge for the planning team was to reproduce as many of these functions as possible in a meaningful and accessible way while also tapping the particular advantages of an online event.

2. Planning and Carrying out the Virtual Conference

2.1 Framing the Event

Based on the premises outlined above, the conference team attempted to transfer established conference elements into the virtual space as well as develop specific online

formats. From the perspective of the conference team, a descriptive and recognisable frame was needed that created a sense of connection and commitment. That was why great importance was placed on a professional presentation that conveyed a sense of community. The conference website as a central 'location' for virtual interaction was created with WordPress using the website builder Elementor, which can be used without a great deal of previous knowledge. A WordPress theme designed especially for video presentations was chosen (see Fig. 1).[4] Because we had to use the expertise of a professional web designer to set up parts the conference website, the website and the translations made up the largest expenses for the conference. The conference website's visually complex design meant that there was not enough of the max. 1 GB of webspace remaining to offer elements such as the abstract booklet for download, for example.

A publicly accessible part of the website invited participants to the conference and provided information about the programme, hosting institution and people, while in a password-protected part of the website, registered participants could easily navigate all elements of the conference.

Fig. 1   Home page of the conference website www.rub.de/esprit2021

The goal of the frame was to create cohesion so that individual parts of the online event could be experienced as parts of a whole. This was intended to make it easier for participants to identify with the event and contribute actively. This frame was also conveyed at a visual level, based on the design of the Research Unit Journal Literature, especially because visuality seemed a particularly important element of a conference dealing with the materiality of periodicals.

2.2 Synchronous and Asynchronous Formats

The 9th ESPRit Conference took place between June 14–17, 2021, and was supplemented by a postgraduate workshop on June 11. Registered participants could already log into the conference website starting on June 1, however, to view presentations and comment on them. According to the premises outlined above, two formats were chosen for carrying out the conference:

4   de.wordpress.org/plugins/elementor.

1. Live synchronous contributions were streamed using the video conferencing software Zoom. Livestreams took up no more than 4 to 5 hours daily.
2. Content produced in advance could be accessed at any time during the conference. This included primarily the panels with the participants' presentations that had been recorded in advance and the postgraduates' posters, but also virtual exhibitions, welcome addresses and speaker profiles.

With this division into synchronous and asynchronous formats, the time spent in front of the screen was reduced and the differing time zones were taken into account.

The larger elements of the programme that served to enable the academic interaction of all participants and shaped the character of the conference as an event were streamed live on Zoom. This included the three keynote speeches from Will Slauter (Paris Sorbonne), Ruth Mayer (Leibniz University Hannover), and Corinna Norrick-Rühl (University of Münster), a plenary panel for the Research Unit Transnational Periodical Cultures on the topic 'Space, Time, and Translation in Magazines outside the Mainstream Press, 1910s to the Present' and a roundtable moderated by Évanghélia Stead (Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en Yvelines), in which perspectives from European periodical research were discussed under the title 'European Periodical Research 2020/2030 – Some Voices and Visions'. Except for the roundtable, all live presentations were recorded and made accessible on the conference website on the following day.

The remaining presentations were pre-recorded by the contributors, organized into panels by topic and made accessible for participants as non-public YouTube videos. A comment function on the conference website allowed direct written discussion on this content, and participants used the function actively. In all, the 36 videos and 8 posters received 136 comments. The pre-recorded panels were discussed live during the conference in Q&A sessions, and many participants turned their cameras on. Participants found this approach to be very beneficial, as the videos could be watched at any time and an entire 45 minutes were available for discussion for every panel. This allowed the intensive academic discussion to take up much more time than at on-site conferences. The usage data for the website and YouTube channel show that most of the videos were not watched and commented on in the two weeks before the conference but during the synchronous phase of the conference, especially on the open mornings.

The ESPRit Postgraduate Workshop, at which early-stage periodical researchers could present and discuss their doctoral project, combined synchronous and asynchronous elements. After a professional training session on designing academic posters the participants created a poster on their topic, which was made available to participants in a virtual poster gallery on the conference website. The posters could be commented on in the same manner as the pre-recorded panels. The Workshop, which took place on June 11, served to give a brief presentation of the projects and offered an opportunity for feedback and discussion.

All of the Zoom meetings in the live phase were supported by a student assistant to help out with technical or logistical problems, record sessions if applicable and assist the chairs with moderating sessions, especially with the chat. At the end of the presentation or panel, all participants could switch to a separate Zoom room with several breakout sessions in order to continue their debates after the discussion time had ended. This allowed space to be created for more intensive individual exchange.

2.3 Forms of Social Interaction

For exchanging information, adequate digital formats were found which largely reproduced the function of the on-site conferences. However, this proved much more

difficult for the informal activities of the social programme. To also design the ESPRit Conference as an opportunity for academic social exchange, various measures were implemented.

Conference Gift Package

Around two weeks before the live phase of the conference, the contributors received a package. It included the abstract booklet designed in the conference layout, a few standard giveaways like pens and notepads, but also ingredients for the conference dinner and honey from RUB's Botanical Garden (Fig. 2). The gift package served two purposes. It was intended to generate positive emotions linked to the conference and, following Marcel Mauss's *The Gift*,[5] provide a sign of the organizers' commitment to the contributors while also creating a sense of commitment within the contributors to the conference team that went beyond the typical amount of conference participation. The cost of this was much lower than the usual expenses for beverages and snacks, though there was a comparatively greater logistical effort involved. Some contributors documented receiving the package on their social media channels, which also created attention for the conference – a side effect that would hardly have been achieved by the refreshments served in a conference setting.

Fig. 2   The Conference Gift Package

---

5   Marcel Mauss, *The Gift. The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. by Ian Cunnison (London: Cohen & West, 2016) [1st original edition 1925].

Profile Pages

To combat the anonymity of virtual conferences, importance was attached to giving an informative and visually appealing presentation of the participants on the conference website; they were placed together in the area 'Meet the People'. In advance, speakers and participant were invited to provide a biography, a portrait, photos of their research objects, a brief description of their research interests, and their most recent publications.[6] These profile pages were linked with the subpages of the individual panels and vice-versa so that it was clear who was presenting in which panel.

Under 'Meet the People', the WordPress plug-in ARMember could be used to visit the automatically generated profile pages of all registered conference participations during the entire conference, which ensured the possibility of networking. During the conference, the participants could use virtual backgrounds to show their sense of belonging to the event.

Virtual Exhibitions

To live up to the goal of framing the conference in a visual and coherent way, an external service provider produced a video trailer for the conference.[7] In addition, existing video footage from RUB and the city of Bochum were adapted to the conditions of the conference to give the participants an idea of the planned event location even though they were not physically present.[8]

A cultural programme with city tours, outings, or museum tours is a standard element of many conferences of this size. They enable participants to easily discover the tourist sites of the event location and encourage informal exchange among participants and organizers. In cooperation with the Heinrich Heine Institute Düsseldorf, an optional virtual museum tour focused on the topic of the conference was offered. The official presentation of the city of Bochum was also linked from the conference website.

A virtual book exhibit connected social and academic exchange. It offered participants the opportunity to make others aware of their recent book publications or periodicals research, providing another low-threshold possibility to present their own research and make a contribution to the conference.

Conference Dinner

An optional joint dinner serves to provide social interaction and the informal exchange of information and networking at conferences. As Jacques Derrida said: 'What we are doing here is simply a pretext for talking to one another, maybe for talking without having anything special to say, simply for the sake of talking, addressing the other in a context where what we say matters less than the fact that we're talking to the other.'[9] The participants were invited to prepare a simple regional dish with the recipe provided on the conference website. When selecting the dish, the organizers made sure that it could be adapted to individual culinary preferences and restrictions as well as local requirements such as the availability of ingredients. Only a small group of around 16 people participated in the virtual conference dinner itself, presumably due to general

---

6   We requested this information in a Speaker Information Sheet that also served to provide the declaration of consent for publication of the photos, videos and information on the conference website.

7   'Conference Trailer 9th ESPRit Conference', youtu.be/5MGHnMTx0rU.

8   'Bochum – Virtual ESPRit Conference 2021', youtu.be/2dQMpwxBErU.

9   Jacques Derrida, 'A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event', trans. by Gila Walker, *Critical Inquiry*, 33.2 (2007), 441–61.

screen fatigue, but photos and reports document that some participants enjoyed their conference dinner alone but with the conference in their thoughts. The gift box with the ingredients for the conference dinner hence contributed to the moments of community-building, even if it was not shared spatially or temporally.

Active Break

The team recognized that participants had already spent a great deal of time in front of screens during the COVID-19 pandemic. To give them a chance to move, each day in cooperation with RUB's university sports team, a low-threshold workplace sport programme was offered in selected breaks. We observed, however, that most people needed a break from their screens more than they needed a guided active break.

3. Communication, Accessibility, and Archiving

3.1 Communication

Conference Languages

Academic multilingualism is both a goal and a challenge for ESPRit. As the international language of academia, English provides a way to exchange ideas, but at the same time regional languages can and should be considered at the conferences. The event was therefore planned to be bilingual. German-language presentations and texts were to be translated into English, but not the other way around. Because the costs for simultaneous interpretation of the entire conference would have exceeded the budget, the pre-recorded presentations offered the great advantage that a professional agency could provide English subtitles for the German-language presentations. The abstract booklet and conference website were also designed according to this model (that is, English with translations of the German parts).

The discussions during the live Q&A sessions took place primarily in English, but depending on the panel they could also be partially or entirely in German. Automated transcription (CC) was activated in all Zoom sessions. Even though this does not provide an error-free transcription of what is said, the (optional) use of subtitles can help to take a step in the direction of linguistic accessibility.

Registration

Participation in the 9th ESPRit Conference was free of charge for anyone interested thanks to the financial support of the DFG, RUB, and RUB's Research School, a fact that contributed to the conference's success. Including the conference team, 227 people from 26 countries registered on the conference website, and the majority of them came from Western and Central Europe or North America.

Participants registered directly on the conference website and it proved to be important to ask for all information needed for administrative purposes directly during registration. To prevent abuse, the plug-in ARMember was used to implement a two-step registration process in which each registration had to be approved by the conference team.[10] This meant a high degree of administrative effort, but it was deemed necessary since the links to the Zoom meetings were freely accessible once a person logged on to the website.

---

10   wordpress.org/plugins/armember-membership.

Mailing lists ans Social Media

The conference was advertised on relevant mailing lists and newsletters, on the homepage, and in press releases from RUB as well as on Facebook and Twitter with pre-planned regular posts. Email communication served three main purposes. First, all relevant information about the process had to be passed on; second, the conference team had to be available in case participants had any questions; and third, during the live phase the emails provided a daily reminder of the programme items. Email communication therefore also played a key role in creating coherence. Planning the information items early and ensuring there were clear responsibilities for managing the inbox and mailing lists proved to be very important. The effort involved in keeping the mailing list up to date should also not be underestimated, as the possibility to register even while the conference was ongoing meant that participants were added on a rolling basis. Unfortunately, the plug-in ARMember did not have a function that allowed the team to send emails to everyone from the conference email address.

Helpdesk

Besides the information emails, all relevant information was made available on the conference homepage, and a help desk was set up so that the conference team could be reached during the live phases. Telephone availability turned out not to be necessary, as participants preferred to communicate via email. Especially in the first days of the live phase many questions came in by email on the registration process or or the programme. We also made a collection of FAQs available in advance.

Handouts

When planning the conference, the team took into consideration that individual participants might not be familiar with virtual events. To assist them, various illustrated handouts were prepared. Before the conference, each speaker received instructions in order to ensure that the recording of the video went as smoothly as possible. A general handout explained virtual conference etiquette, as well as how to use the Zoom software. A handout for the chairs outlined the procedure for the individual sessions and the moderator's tasks.

3.2 Archiving and Publication

The idea to archive the website as a conference archive and make it publicly available contributed to the virtual ESPRit Conference not being viewed as a poor stopgap solution. This plan was largely realized, although there were some limitations. Early on, it became clear that it would not be technically possible to host the pre-recorded speaker videos because special server equipment would be necessary. YouTube was therefore used as an alternative. The videos were first not listed publicly but were embedded in the conference website. To keep the administrative effort to a minimum, the comment function was deactivated on YouTube; commenting was only possible on the conference website. After the conference, everyone was given the opportunity to remove their videos if they wished so, and the conference website was made publicly available.

Providing permanent access to the archived conference will be a problem in the long-term, as the website hosting and administration is linked to the Research Unit Journal Literature's funding period. It is therefore planned to turn off the conference

website in the autumn of 2023 and migrate the videos to a YouTube channel managed by ESPRit so that they remain available.

4. Lessons learned

Preparing the virtual conference proved to be more time-consuming than an on-site conference of a comparable size. This was due to two related reasons: the virtual conference required greater effort in the conceptual phase, which then in turn led to a greater internal and external communicative effort. Because this effort was in part due to the inexperience of the conference team and the participants with virtual conferences, it should be less time-consuming in the future as everyone becomes more familiar with virtual events.

Participant registration on the conference website and making the pre-recorded presentations available on YouTube as well as the use of Zoom meetings allow for extensive statistics to be extracted. Of the 227 registered participants including the conference team, up to 100 persons attended the live events at a time; keynotes and plenary events drew the largest number of attendees, as expected, while the live Q&A sessions to the panels varied greatly in the number of participants. At this time (November 2021), the 44 conference videos, including the trailer, have been viewed around 1600 times and watched for a total of approximately 190 hours.

In future, when planning and designing virtual events, these statistics will enable us to better decide how attention is best generated and distributed, and when content is best made available. For example, it can be seen that even though the videos went online two weeks before the live conference started, most participants did not view them until immediately before the afternoon Q&A sessions. Accordingly, discussion took place through the comment function not before but during the conference. The chairs were able to use the comments on the website as a starting point for the live discussions, which were more intensive and went deeper into the subject matter than in the established 'three twenty-minute-papers plus discussion' format. This user behaviour should be taken into consideration when planning future conferences, be they virtual or on-site.

Two additional advantages deserve further consideration. First, the financial costs for planning and carrying out a virtual conference are far lower than an on-site conference of the same size, as there are almost no expenses for catering, accommodation, or travel. Second, by reducing emissions, virtual conferences could make an important contribution to climate protection. Viewed in this light, further development and establishment of virtual formats for academic and social interaction that correspond as precisely as possible to the specific needs of a humanities research community is an essential task for the future.[11]

Christian A. Bachmann is a postdoctoral researcher of DFG-Research Unit 2288, Sub-Project 6: 'New Times. Tempo, Acceleration, and the Pluralisation of Temporal Dimensions in Humorous Picture Stories, Cartoons, and Comics between 1900 and 1930'. He holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from Ruhr University Bochum and has taught at several universities in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. He has published extensively on graphic narrative and visual satire, as well as on the book as a material medium. His most recent monographs are *Little Orphan Annies Transformationen. Medienformatwechsel und mediale Eigenzeit zwischen Zeitung, Buch und Heft* (2021) and

---

11 Cf. the report by Marie Léger-St-Jean, 'Two weeks, four virtual conferences: some thoughts' (2021) popnewseries.hypotheses.org/455.

Pleno titulo. Das Wiener Satirejournal Kikeriki (1861–1933) im Spiegel seiner Titelköpfe (2020).

Nora Ramtke is a postdoctoral researcher, member of the DFG-Research Unit 2288 'Journal Literature' and PI of the Sub-Project 7: 'Collections Formats: Practices of Reprinting between Anthologisation of the Periodic and the Periodicisation of the Anthology'. She holds a PhD from Ruhr University Bochum in Modern German Literature and is member of the ESPRit committee. She is co-editor of a volume on *Reading Journals. Interrupted Reading – Follow-On Readings* (2021) and *Zeitschriftenliteratur/Fortsetzungsliteratur* (2014) and published her dissertation on literary anonymity and onymity with Winter Verlag in 2016.

Bibliography

Derrida, Jacques, 'A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event', trans. by Gila Walker, *Critical Inquiry*, 33.2 (2007), 441–61, doi.org/10.1086/511506

Léger-St-Jean, Marie, 'Two weeks, four virtual conferences: some thoughts' (2021), popnewseries.hypotheses.org/455

Mauss, Marcel, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. by Ian Cunnison (London: Cohen & West, 2016) [1st original edition 1925]