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Online Conferences: A New Paradigm for Periodical Studies?

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In spring 2020, during the cataclysmic first wave of COVID-19, academic conferences across the world were postponed or cancelled. A rare exception was in the field of periodical studies: an asynchronous online conference, *Future States: Modernity and National Identity in Popular Magazines, 1890–1945*, co-directed by Andrew Thacker (NTU) and myself, which opened on schedule and ran for three weeks (30 March–17 April 2020).¹ A selection of five papers from the conference forms the body of this special issue of the *Journal of European Periodical Studies*, and these are introduced below. But, given the spate of online academic events that have followed — including the highly successful 9th ESPRit Conference (14–17 June 2021) — I propose first to offer some general thoughts on the *Future States* conference model, in the hope that our pioneering approach may be of interest. Christian Bachmann and Nora Ramtke, elsewhere in this issue, relate their own experience as organizers of the ESPRit event, which adopted a slightly different but overlapping conference model.

What seems beyond question is that the online conference, in one form or another, has now *arrived*: there can be no reflexive return to the old model of in-person international conferences, in which the environmental costs of long-haul flights, in particular, were largely discounted. Online conferences have demonstrated their viability, and will, surely, remain part of the landscape in the post-COVID era, presenting a continuous challenge to established models of academic practice. What, after all, are conferences for? Are they for the exchange and examination of new ideas and research findings, for the building of social and scholarly networks, or for conviviality? As researchers in the era of climate crisis, we need to ask these questions anew, and follow through on their implications. Can we achieve our research goals more economically and with lower environmental impact, and can we build conference models that are more socially and geographically inclusive? I will argue that the asynchronous online conference, or *NCNC* (nearly carbon-neutral conference), offers both a response to these present-day dilemmas, and a potentially transformative new model of scholarly debate.

Future States was a response, initially, to my own anxieties about the carbon costs of international conferences. The conference theme was the dialectical construction of modern national identities in the popular print cultures of different countries; magazines beyond Europe and North America — Asia, the Pacific region, Latin America — were a particular focus. Such a theme might, typically, call for a two- or three-day physical event, with some participants flying in from across the world to give papers — an environmental cost that seemed, to me, prohibitive. The solution, which made the conference viable without any reduction in its thematic scope, was the *NCNC* model, pioneered in 2016 by Ken Hiltner and colleagues at UC Santa Barbara. In Hiltner's

1 The conference website is still available at www.futurestates.org.

calculations, published in his online NCNC Guide, the switch from physical to online can reduce an event's carbon footprint 'by a factor of 100 or more'; UCSB's annual emissions, purely from faculty and staff flying to conferences and meetings, are reckoned at '55,000,000 pounds of CO₂ [...] equal to the total annual carbon footprint of a city of 27,500 people in the Philippines'.² UCSB is, one suspects, not atypical among wealthy universities in its devotion to the aeroplane, and Hiltner's rough figures make for uncomfortable reading. The pivotal question, then, is can online conferences match physical gatherings, at least in terms of their scholarly rigour and research outcomes; for sociability, we will have to concede, in-person events win hands down.

In the NCNC model, panellists record their presentations (papers) in advance of the conference launch; these might be PowerPoint recordings, video presentations, or some combination of the two. The recordings are embedded in the conference website, and released according to the organizers' schedule. Participants watch the presentations in their own time, and post written comments and questions: in Future States, panels consisted of three or four papers, with a comment thread beneath serving as a panel discussion forum, unfolding gradually over the duration of the event. NCNC presentations and comment threads are, effectively, self-archiving: organisers, with the agreement of their panellists, can leave the website up after the conference closes, or save the proceedings to a permanent database.

The beauty of this model is that, rather than attempting to replicate, imperfectly, the experience of face-to-face events, NCNCs exploit the great advantages of the online world: the capacity to record, replay, search, edit, and archive digital materials. Where physical events promote interaction through a concentrated spatial and temporal unity, NCNCs embody a more expansive temporality: they are conferences in slow motion! Given that the running costs of a conference website are effectively zero, there is no *financial* reason why an event cannot run for two, three weeks or longer: whatever works best to allow conversations to develop while sustaining participants' involvement — Future States ran for three weeks, which seemed about right. Conferences, in this asynchronous mode, can be woven into everyday life, with participants logging in to watch a presentation or respond to a question, and perhaps making multiple visits over the course of the event. NCNCs are thus intrinsically accessible: anyone with an internet connection can participate, from anywhere in the world, fitting attendance at the conference around other time commitments they may have. Future States, and the other NCNCs I have been involved with, have not charged an admission fee, and this could well become standard practice.

The key scholarly advantage of the NCNC model, to my mind, lies in the text-based discussion forums. The comment threads in Future States were simply extraordinary: more than 30,000 words of erudite discussion across multiple forums, including links, posted images, and bibliographic references. The asynchronous model allows users to carefully frame their responses, and this was evident in the quality, extent, and generosity of the exchanges. One of our panellists described the conference as a 'republic of letters', and I like that very much: we were creating a new epistolary practice for the twenty-first century. No Q&A in a physical conference (particularly at the end of a long morning!) could hope to match this, in terms of imaginative reach or scholarly precision. And no need to take notes, as the discussions were all written down.

Future States, the 9th ESPRit Conference, and the many other remote gatherings of the past two years, have revealed both the potential, and the limitations, of virtual events. There is, clearly, no single template for online conferences: both synchronous

2 Ken Hiltner, 'A Nearly Carbon-Neutral Conference Model', hiltner.english.ucsb.edu/index.php/ncnc-guide.

and asynchronous approaches have their merits, and they can also be combined in different ways, or incorporated into the structures of in-person events. As these new models evolve, we can hope that periodical researchers will be part of the process of discovery. As Sally Stein notes, the reading of magazines was a defining aspect of twentieth-century modernity;³ it seems only fitting that periodical studies should be in the vanguard of research practice in the new, digital era.

Papers from the Future States Conference

Future States: Modernity and National Identity in Popular Magazines, 1890–1945 explored the dialectical constructions of ideal modernity in the magazines of countries across the globe, exploring how national cultures drew on — or resisted — currents in international modernism, and also informed and constituted this global culture. Five of the conference papers have been selected for this special issue of the *JEPS*; a further selection will appear in a forthcoming edited volume, *Magazines and Modern Identities: Global Cultures of the Illustrated Press, 1880–1945*, Bloomsbury, 2024.

Future States sought to capture what Partha Mitter calls the ‘decentred’ modernism of the global twentieth century:⁴ papers took in the modernist magazine cultures of China and Mexico, the Soviet Turkic states, Canada and Australia. Whilst the present selection focuses, necessarily, on European periodicals, the articles reflect the themes of nationalism, internationalism, and transnationalism, that formed a unifying thread through all the conference papers. Carey Snyder’s article, on the London-based weekly the *New Age*, presents, as a case study, the magazine’s coverage of the so-called ‘black peril’ — the purported upsurge of black men raping white women in South Africa — played out in the conflicting correspondence in its letter pages of 1911–12. The topic encapsulates the tensions over colonialism and race politics that define this era; Snyder deftly points up the constructive role of the magazine itself as a liberal, internationalist forum for contentious and high-profile debates, a role that allowed this small-circulation title to punch above its critical weight.

The constructive role of *Illyustrirovannaya Rossiya* [*Illustrated Russia*] (1924–39), the weekly newsmagazine of Europe’s Russian exile community, lay in negotiating a middle ground between cultural assimilation and preservationism. Phaedra Claeys’s article notes the remarkable absence of nostalgic content in this inclusive middlebrow title, which emphasized the individual reader’s responsibility to preserve Russian culture while awaiting the longed-for return to a post-Soviet motherland. *IR*’s editors, in Claeys’s account, argued for a pragmatic realism emphasizing family life and the preservation of Russian language, rather than appealing to a romanticized Russian past. This pragmatism contrasts sharply with the magazines of another dispossessed community from the same period, Ireland’s republican revolutionaries, explored in Elena Ogliari’s article. The juvenile magazines of nationalist Ireland, *Our Boys*, *Fianna*, *Young Ireland*, and *St Enda’s*, built their propagandist appeal on visions of a heroic, romanticized Irish past, and the myths and legends of its early Christian, pre-colonial period. Modernity, in Ogliari’s reading, appears so bound-up with British rule as to be unavailable to Irish republicans as a ground of meaning and identity: only by recovering, or constructing, an idealized past could Ireland’s young rebels discover their authentic selves, and their revolutionary purpose.

3 Sally Stein, ‘The Graphic Ordering of Desire: Modernization of a Middle-Class Women’s Magazine, 1919–1939’, in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. by Richard Bolton (London: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 145–62 (p. 145).

4 Partha Mitter, ‘Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery’, *The Art Bulletin*, 90.4 (2008), 531–48.

The final two articles from *Future States*, on magazines from the post-1918 and post-1945 periods, describe quests for national identity built on cultural revival rather than revolutionary action. The Belgian review of art and literature *Sélection* (1920–33), discussed in Chara Kolokytha’s article ‘Le Génie du Nord’, represented the vision of its editor André de Ridder, of a universal Nordic culture combining elements of Flemish expressionism and French rationalism. *Sélection* was one of many artistic periodicals launched in war-torn Belgium in the post-armistice period, a wave that exemplifies how culture was enlisted across Europe as a tool of national revival, despite the traumatic economic and social conditions of these years. A similar urgency emerges in Anne Reynes-Delobel’s account of the French literary digest *Caliban* (1947–51), founded on humanistic ideals of internationalism and the pursuit of world peace. *Caliban*’s editors sought both to engage with current philosophical and social trends, and promote the universal values expressed in timeless novelistic masterpieces. As Reynes-Delobel describes, this idealism would, by the early 1950s, fall out of step with the brash consumer culture of the post-war era, exemplified by the popularity of American hard-boiled crime fiction. Whilst the magazine’s editors sought to define an internationalist culture based in European novels, Soviet cinema, or jazz music, 1950s readers were, it seems, drawn more toward adventure stories, and the less demanding selections of *Reader’s Digest*.

Tim Satterthwaite is a Lecturer in Cultural and Critical Studies at the University of Brighton. He completed his PhD at the Courtauld Institute of Art in 2016; his doctoral study, on European interwar magazines, formed the basis of his first book, *Modernist Magazines and the Social Ideal*, published by Bloomsbury in 2020. He is currently co-editing, with Andrew Thacker, an edited volume, *Magazines and Modern Identities: Global Cultures of the Illustrated Press, 1880–1945*, Bloomsbury, 2024.

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