Distance 2020:
Online Conferences and Reimagining the International Academic Landscape

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Introduction: A Collaborative Response to COVID-19

Often motivated by a democratic impulse to broaden participation in intellectual exchange, eighteenth-century thinkers sought new ways of facilitating conversation with networks that traversed large distances. Despite a disciplinary interest in technologies of communication, institutions and eighteenth-century academic societies have historically resisted the opportunities raised by online conferences. However, faced with COVID-19 restrictions, many have been forced to adapt their conferences to an online format. As postgraduates from the Centre for Eighteenth Century Studies (CECS) at the University of York and the Enlightenment Romanticism Contemporary Culture research unit (ERCC) based at the University of Melbourne, we launched "Distance 2020" to address the opportunities and limitations of a born-digital academic conference and engage with the eighteenth-century's preoccupation with networks, distance, and modes of communication.[1]

With campus closures and social distancing measures in place, postgraduates across the world found themselves scattered and displaced from their institutional homes. Feelings of disconnect crystalized our need to bring the eighteenth-century postgraduate community together in a more ambitious way than previously imagined. What we initially floated as a

half-day conference based at the University of York was developed into an international collaboration with the ERCC, entitled "Distance 2020". Over a two-week period from the 3rd - 14th August and on a combined platform that allowed for international and asynchronous engagement, "Distance 2020" was a successful experiment with the online conference format. With 40 presenters and over 150 delegates from around the world, we brought together more attendees than any comparable eighteenth-century postgraduate conference, yet the event was offered at no cost to speakers or delegates.[2]

This article reflects on our experience coordinating "Distance 2020" and how the face-to-face conference model can be reimagined successfully online. We surveyed our delegates, collated and anonymised responses, and gathered engagement analytics to inform our findings. Our aim is to provide a roadmap for future conferences by highlighting both the benefits and the potential pitfalls of the decisions we took. As a group of postgraduate researchers at the beginning of our careers, we are keenly aware of the intellectual and ethical implications of the shift online. We argue that it is not sufficient to consider moving our scholarly discussions to an online setting without also rethinking the support systems that underpin our scholarly engagement.

Distance 2020: Developing a Virtual Model

The conference's theme was in itself a response to the global pandemic and the restrictions on institutions and our research. We encouraged papers to examine how current social and physical distancing might generate new perspectives on distance in the eighteenth century, and how the eighteenth century might better our understanding of this collective moment of crisis. This year, many postgraduates were unable to expand their professional networks and participate in the constructive conversations found at conferences because of enforced distance. As a community already in a precarious position, the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated the disconnect postgraduates frequently feel within academia. "Distance 2020,"

then, was envisioned as a conversational space for postgraduates with a common interest in the long eighteenth century, something that has been lacking during the pandemic and ensuing lockdowns.

Drawing on our positive experience of events that shifted online during the pandemic such as the University of Copenhagen's "Practices of Privacy: Knowledge in the Making" conference, the University of Durham's "Early Modern Seminar Series," and CECS' own research seminars, we developed an online format that would provide the most meaningful experience and networking opportunities for postgraduate scholars. As such, "Distance 2020" was designed from the outset to be an online event. This format allowed us to establish an international partnership with the ERCC, facilitated by CECS director Professor Gillian Russell. Under normal circumstances with a face-to-face conference, this collaboration would have been difficult to establish due to postgraduate financial restrictions, time difference, and physical distance between the two institutions. Our decision to go online bridged these divides to launch what we hope will be an ongoing academic partnership in the years to come. The collaboration proved fruitful, and with a Melbourne representative joining the team, "Distance 2020" began to engage with an international postgraduate community beyond the UK. As organisers, this association became a unique opportunity to collaborate and consider the impact of COVID-19 on early career eighteenth-century scholarship.

Digital Landscapes: Reimagining the Conference Format

One of the primary ways in which "Distance 2020" diverged from the face-to-face conference format was in its two-week duration. On the first day of the conference we released 39 pre-recorded papers and Dr. Mary Fairclough (CECS, the University of York) delivered an opening plenary. Workshops were led by Dr. Miriam Ross (the University of Victoria, Wellington), Professor Jon Mee (CECS, the University of York), and PhD candidate Amy Wilcockson (the University of Nottingham, UK), and we ran creative social events. The

second week consisted of regular live Q&A sessions for each panel, planned over four carefully considered time slots to ensure maximum accessibility for international participation and for those with caring responsibilities (fig.1). The conference was then closed by a final plenary delivered by Professor Deirdre Coleman (ERCC, the University of Melbourne).

(Fig.1) The "Time Zone Navigation" chart provided in our programme

The conference operated on a combined platform of Google Sites and Zoom to support the mixture of pre-recorded and live events, and we developed an intuitive online

user experience to host our programme. This provided equitable access to postgraduate delegates from 59 institutions. We wanted delegates to have enough time to engage with the conference while also maintaining a healthy balance between work and other responsibilities. One of the flexible benefits of not having to plan papers around a strict timetable meant we could plan events that suited different time zones and commitments. To achieve this, speakers pre-recorded either traditional twenty-minute papers or five-minute "lightning talks," which were then grouped into panels and hosted on a private delegate website built using Google Sites. Lighting talks were offered to provide a less intimidating way for postgraduates to share early work in progress. The videos were uploaded onto YouTube as "unlisted" so that without the URL, they would not be accessible. Comments and the ability to "dislike" videos were also removed for moderation purposes. These pre-recorded papers were then embedded on our delegate-only website. The use of a restricted, invite-only delegate website prevented the unsolicited distribution of the pre-recorded papers, and each panel was moderated to protect the integrity of any research-in-progress (fig.2). In this way, we respected the work of our speakers and maintained a safe environment where members could communicate in good faith.

We used Google Suite (Google Sites, Accounts, and Groups) as many universities operate on a Google Suite system and because of the integrated nature of each element. We utilised various web template designs to quickly build a website with an intuitive online platform that needed no testing for usability. Google Groups allowed participants to actively engage with the pre-recorded papers before the live Q&A sessions and after the close of the conference. A "single sign-on" using Google Accounts secured the delegate site and the group forum, enabling us to create a private online environment despite our limited resources. It must be noted, however, that the effectiveness of these tools relied on an intermediate understanding of web user experience and delegates having a Google Account.

With the extended two-week programme, we provided the intellectual benefits of face-to-face conferences while taking advantage of digital tools that allowed for more accessible and equitable participation, and a greater level of feedback on work presented. One of the limitations of attending an in-person panel is the time and space allowed for the audience to reflect on the ideas presented. With the addition of Google Group forums that acted like discussion boards on the delegate-only website, we gave postgraduate researchers the chance to pose questions after taking the time to consider the pre-recorded papers. This prompted more in-depth discussions alongside the more basic, clarifying questions. The more rigorous queries prompted speakers to provide referenced and lengthy replies that enabled them to examine new approaches to their work. The live Q&A sessions in the second week served to follow on from the questions posed on these discussion boards, and chairs were actively encouraged to use these forums to initiate roundtable discussions before fielding live questions from the audience. The extended time between the presentation of papers and the live Q&A sessions allowed for a week of learning and engaging, followed by a week of networking and discussing.

(Fig.2) A screengrab from our delegate-only site home page

Impact: International Engagement and Participation

The response to our extended two-week programme was overwhelmingly positive, with delegates viewing it as an advantage of the virtual format. Many saw this as an opportunity to properly reflect on the research presented by speakers during the first week, and formulate more thoughtful questions for the following live Q&A. To complement the release of the pre-recorded papers, we offered socials and workshops in the first week that drew heavily on the zoom "breakout rooms" function. By fully engaging with all that an online format could offer, we developed socials that operated on a "speed friending" model where participants could meet a diverse and international range of delegates for fifteen-minute intervals. In others, we placed participants into groups for fun joint activities facilitated through both Zoom and shared editable Google Documents. The benefit of breakout room socials cannot be understated, with the majority of our delegates reporting that these were integral to later academic engagement in the conference.

Using "Distance 2020" as a prototype of a new online conference model, the impact of such an endeavour can be seen in its overall reach and depth of engagement from delegates. Our conference specific twitter account was vital in reaching delegates worldwide, attracting 426 Twitter followers. By the end of the first week, 153 delegates had registered from 59 different institutions across 13 countries, from Australia, New Zealand, Ukraine, Algeria, Spain, Germany, the United Kingdom, Republic of Ireland, Greece, Sweden, Belgium, Canada, and the USA. The live events drew a total audience of 500 with an attendance of 216 delegates across the 13 live Q&A sessions. A minimum of 74% (113 out of 153) of delegates attended at least one event and/or watched pre-recorded papers, with engagement consistent throughout the whole programme.

As originally anticipated, the majority of delegates were postgraduates: 65% were

PhD students, around 17% were MA students or Honours students, and university staff accounted for 15%. There was a small contingent, 3%, of ECRs and independent scholars. During the conference, YouTube analytics reported a total of 1,158 views across the pre-recorded papers, with the number rising up to 1,197 in the days after live events finished. This suggests that online conferences can continue to contribute to scholarly learning beyond their official end. All who responded to the feedback questionnaire said the conference was "excellent" or "good" with 86.5% rating it as "excellent."[3] Reasons cited included the accessible and scholarly atmosphere, the high level of contributions, the flexible mix of live and pre-recorded papers, the value of meeting scholars from across the world, the role of the comment boards in engendering discussion, and the importance of the various social events. MA students stated that "Distance 2020" provided a supportive and rewarding platform where they could make the first steps into the world of academic conferences. MAs and PhDs were also the group most likely to attend events they had registered for in advance. The online nature of the conference made it easier for disabled delegates and those with caring responsibilities to attend, and these groups reported favourably on the flexibility of the conference and surrounding discussions.

Due to its format, "Distance 2020" facilitated engagement across both weeks. Flexibility played an important role in sustaining delegate participation and, despite the dangers of "zoom fatigue," we kept attendee drop-out rates to a minimum. Delegates watched pre-recorded papers and left comments prior to the Q&A sessions before continuing the discussion via the comment boards and Twitter afterwards. There was less pressure to be seen at every event, and so this asynchronistic approach resulted in 173 posts and 739 comment board views. With this approach, "Distance 2020" became accessible to delegates who otherwise would have been restricted by cost, travel, personal circumstance, or work commitments.

The Eighteenth Century and Distance: Learning from the Past

Fairclough's opening plenary examined the late eighteenth-century revolutionary preoccupation with enacting "action at a distance" and the limitations of technologies in practice. Our present crisis likewise demands that we are ambitious when bridging physical and temporal distance while remaining cognizant of the inherent limitations of digital mediums. With this in mind, the conference asked our speakers and delegates to reflect on the physical, temporal, and affective distance between us and the eighteenth century, as well as the ways in which contemporaries in the past overcame their own divides between locations, ideas and peoples. "Distance 2020" went some way towards answering that demand, and below are our key considerations from the conference for future scholarship in our field that we hope can better facilitate scholarly action at a distance.

As explored by Fairclough and later by Mee in his "Romantic Transports" workshop, the eighteenth century saw a radical redefinition of geographical distance in which global trade and travel literature expanded the understanding of space between countries and cultures. At the same time, new communication and transport technologies attempted to traverse these distances. These contrasting concepts of distance anchored a rich range of papers that demonstrated the way in which intellectual distances within locales were bridged by parochial literary and philosophical societies, and how distances in and between the domestic spaces were traversed by epistolary networks connecting households and communities in times of illness, separation and misfortune. With our attempts to bridge geographical distance in part by "zooming" into each others' homes, these papers provided crucial insights into the contemporary challenges of balancing work, family wellbeing, and individual agency within the domestic sphere.

In addition to the focus on local and domestic distances, our speakers provided provocative and important accounts of racialized distance in political and familial

relationships on an international scale. These ranged from studies of mapping the South Seas onto depictions of eighteenth-century London, representations of South American and Australian landscapes through European aesthetic traditions, and accounts of children with dual heritage travelling between England and India. Together with Deirdre Coleman's powerful closing keynote on white creole women's role in the violence of slavery in the eighteenth-century Caribbean, these papers provided an important insight into the interconnected experiences of distance, transculturation, and colonialism that are still relevant today.

However, just as eighteenth-century revolutionary intellectuals idealised spaces of discussion and debate, we need to be wary of doing the same with our future online environments. The assumption that "digital" translates to more democratic should not be taken for granted. In our virtual communities we can easily disregard the absence of those we don't "see" – those who are excluded by social and economic constraints, those restricted by considerations of health, those whose time does not align with the majority, and those who do not speak up because of implicit hierarchies that can be replicated using digital tools.

While online events seek to connect us at a time when we are most dispersed and disconnected, it is crucial that conferences are built with the intention of flattening hierarchies and accommodating the varied needs of our academic community. This, in part, demands a radical rethinking of institutional support structures. In particular, an online conference has different budgeting considerations which, if not attended to, risk entrenching the labour divisions found in universities. The online conference provides the seductive offer of low overheads: Google Suite offers a free site to host papers and our institutions already have premium subscriptions to Zoom. However, this does not account for the labour-intensive nature of setting up and running a conference like "Distance 2020".

Institutions need to formally recognize and anticipate the costs involved in delivering online events such as the expert labor required when organizing digitally, and the steps taken

to ensure their accessibility. For example, "Distance 2020" was unable to provide quality captioning for pre-recorded papers. Without budgets that address the distinct requirements of online formats, organizers will be increasingly forced to justify costs against a mounting expectation that there should be none. Universities and departments must also conserve individual and institutional resources. This might take the form of a basic conference site template on Google Sites to be recycled, the creation of university approved codes of conduct to be shared with delegates, and specialised IT support that understands the specific requirements needed for a successful online conference. It is also worth thinking creatively about the platforms already in place for teaching and scholarly collaboration and whether they might be adaptable to include the organization of online events.

The successful collaboration between CECS and the ERCC is testament to the strength of an online conference's ability to close metaphorical and literal distances. With "Distance 2020" we created a model for an international postgraduate conference that actively accounted for and recognised the need for more accessibility. The academic landscape will remain volatile for the foreseeable future, and as such both postgraduates and staff must adapt to different modes of networking and engagement. As organisers, we asked our delegates to meditate on how the eighteenth century managed and understood distance. The desire to reach across distances and maintain open communication has once again become a driving force in our scholarly discourse, and it is one that "Distance 2020" attempted to identify within the international postgraduate community. We encourage institutions to seize on the current shift to digital technology during this time of crisis and create environments that do not merely replicate our social interactions within physical landscapes, but reimagine them for the virtual world.

NOTES

[1] The "Distance 2020" organisers would like to express their gratitude to CECS and the ERCC for funding two workshops, and the academic and professional staff from both institutions for their time, knowledge, and guidance.

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[2] Our front-facing website can be accessed here: https://sites.google.com/york.ac.uk/distance2020/home.
[3] Delegates were asked how they rated the conference as a whole and could respond with "Excellent, Good, Fair or Poor".