NEARLY CARBON NEUTRAL CONFERENCES IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC: A REVIEW ESSAY

Lee Bidgood
(East Tennessee State University)

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, we often gathered as scholars. We talked, ate, drank, chatted, argued, and learned together at annual meetings. En route, we would likely have taken a series of flights from our particular local airport that would gradually surround us with more and more people who do what we do; at a larger regional or international hub, we might find ourselves on a flight filled with colleagues and professional acquaintances all headed for the same conference – finishing up presentations on laptops, catching each other up on the latest disciplinary news and gossip.

Imagining the bustle and energy of these academic meetings – while sitting at the same desk where I have been "teaching online" for the past six months – leaves me nostalgic. I feel disconnected from my professional peers, and from the process of academic discourse. As the date for the Society for Ethnomusicology meeting approaches, I am ambivalent about the online reformulation of this event. I imagine that many of you, like me, are not sure how online versions of conferences will hold up – and if we could possibly take from them something that would inform and revitalise us as teachers, researchers, and writers. Does it seem possible to draw from a virtual conference the spark, inspiration, and energy that an in-person event, full of interactions, unplanned happenstances and human connections used to give us?

As in so many areas of our new pandemic normality, it is likely not healthy to feed our nostalgia for things no longer possible. This essay does look back, but is an attempt to find a way forward. In the years preceding our current COVID situation, other factors were prompting scholars and academics to find new ways to create and maintain professional and personal community through conferences that differ from the "traditional" in-person model.

I present here a review of the "Nearly Carbon Neutral" (NCN) model for academic conferences, in hopes that it might provide us with more ideas and practical advice on how to stay connected with our colleagues, how to connect

our local workplaces and communities with other locales and professional circles, and how to take care of each other in a difficult time.

The Nearly Carbon Neutral model was developed not due to global epidemiological reasons, but for planetary health. The term was coined by organisers of a conference that took place in 2016, an event designed to address issues of climate change from humanities perspectives. Coordinated by the Environmental Humanities Initiative at the University of California Santa Barbara (USA), the project took shape due to the efforts of UCSB professor Ken Hiltner and his colleagues. Hiltner's "white paper" apologia/guide (n.d.) is the main item under review in this essay. This document, widely referred-to by academics seeking distanced and digital alternatives to traditional "fly-in" meetings, is openly available on the UCSB website (https://hiltner.english.ucsb.edu/index.php/ncnc-guide/) and is also discussed in his Routledge volume *Writing a New Environmental Era: Moving Forward to Nature* (2019). The current website version of the document includes an appendix chapter that (due to its relevance in light of the current pandemic) the publisher allowed Hiltner to share, providing open access to discussion of responses to the NCN model, how this model fits with traditional workplace expectations (i.e., do NCN-type conference presentations "count" during hiring or promotion reviews), and other specific concerns.

The NCN approach starts with presenter-submitted videos that can combine video of the speaker and/or a screen recording of a presentation (slides, photos, video, etc). These videos are typically grouped into panels (as at a traditional in-person conference) and shared via a conference website. During the "open" window during which the conference takes place (generally 2–3 weeks), participants can take part in the "Question-and-answer" session for each panel that is conducted in text via an online forum. As the NCN guide states, "[b]ecause comments can be made at any time in any time zone, participants from across the globe can equally take part in the conference" (Hiltner n.d.).

The NCN project was started at UCSB to address concerns about the environmental impact of academic conferences. The Guide states that "[r]oughly one third of UCSB's carbon footprint comes from faculty and staff flying to conferences, talks, and meetings. All this air travel annually releases over 55,000,000 pounds of CO2 or equivalent gasses directly into the upper atmosphere [...] equal to the total annual carbon footprint of a city of 27,500 people in the Philippines" (ibid.). These days, travel decisions are affected by COVID-related concerns, of course, but also by other issues related to health and climate, for example dramatic and extreme weather events such as the winter storm that disrupted the 2018 Modern Language Association convention

in New York City (Quintana 2018). All in all, it might be time to reconsider the relevance and sustainability of our traditions for conferences in the academy.

The NCN model also addresses issues of social justice, making it possible for more people to participate in conference experiences, thus broadening access to the discourse and community of scholars. While the availability of technology infrastructure is not universal, many more people can connect to an online conference than can attend an in-person "fly-in" conference. This structural practicality, as well as the accessibility of the pre-recorded video format (the ability to close-caption videos in more than one language, for example), include more and more kinds of people from more places – making the NCN model one that addresses many current concerns about diversity, equity, and inclusion.

In addition to lowering the threshold of participation for participants, the NCN model provides a model for institutions and groups to hold events that would not otherwise be possible. The low cost of running such an event allows people in marginalised groups, or rural areas, for example, to create events that address their local concerns and priorities. The NCN model also allows for the running of niche conferences that would not be possible using a traditional in-person format. In addition to the eight NCN conferences associated with UCSB focused on environmental justice and environmental humanities, a variety of other institutional units and disciplinary subgroups have used the format, with examples including the "Feral" conference organised by the Massey University Political Ecology Research Centre (NZ) and the Centre for Space, Place, and Society at Wageningen University (NL), as well as events organised by the Environmental Studies Association of Canada and the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment. While many adopters of the format are based in environmental science and environmental studies, organisers outside of these fields are using the format as well, including the Society for Cultural Anthropology and the organisers of the Nearly Carbon Neutral Geometric Topology Conference.

For those of us on the older side of the generational map, it may seem impossible to foster community through online interactions; for younger people whose social sphere is increasingly constructed with online interactions, the NCN model might seem like a familiar format. The move to online instruction, and administration during the COVID pandemic has normalised many aspects of the NCN format, and its online interactions now seem less exotic than they did before 2020. Hiltner's guide ventures to say that the UCSB NCN conferences "generated three times more discussion than takes place at a traditional Q&A [...] while different from a traditional conference, meaningful personal interaction was not only possible, but in certain respects superior" (Hiltner n.d.). The NCN guide

is pragmatic, stating that "it is unlikely that an online conference experience will ever replicate face-to-face interaction [...] However, given the horrific environmental costs and inherently exclusionary nature of traditional conferences, the time has come to radically rethink this cornerstone practice of our profession" (ibid.).

The regional chapter of the Society for Ethnomusicology in which I take part, like many of the organisations and sub-groups in other corners of academia is considering implementing elements of the NCN model in our future annual conferences, seeing the limitations on in-person meetings both as an obstacle and call to action, but also as a possibility to be grasped – we now have the chance to be more inclusive and comprehensive in serving marginalised and underprivileged students, researchers, teachers, and other professionals in our region. I personally hope that more institutions and organisations in the Czech Republic will offer more events online and in open forums, as I would love to participate in them, reconnecting with colleagues who I met during my Fulbright year teaching and researching at the Faculty of Humanities of Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic.

I imagine that many of us find ourselves in the same boat: we are searching for solutions and ideas for how to "do what we do" as researchers, teachers, writers, and activists within the limitations of the pandemic. While our instinct might be to direct our attention inwards in a time of health crisis, social unrest, and economic hardship, the NCN model calls us to – in spite of these significant obstacles – prioritise the maintenance of professional academic community, and the mentoring and incorporation of growing generations of scholars who work in and outside of the academy. Our disciplinary communities are a resource that we should not neglect, especially in a time in which governments and large parts of the public do not always see the value of academic institutions and the trained specialists who inhabit them. The organisational work by Hiltner and his colleagues at UCSB and the expansion of the NCN model by a variety of disciplinary and institutional adopters provide us a set of best practices for and examples of environmentally, socially, and epidemiologically sustainable scholarly meetings.

References

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