ICA 2020 Conference and Coronavirus provisions

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The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was first identified in the Chinese city of Wuhan on 31 December 2019, and there have since been about 50,000 cases identified as of 15 February 2020. The vast majority of cases have been in China, particularly in Hubei province. At the same time, cases have been identified in 24 other countries. There had been 1,381 deaths from the acute respiratory disease as of 15 February, or about 2.7 per cent of those who have contracted the virus.

As the nature of transmission of the virus remains uncertain, one consequence of the Coronavirus outbreak has been the implementation of travel restrictions in several countries. In Australia, a travel ban on arrivals from China was implemented on 1 February, and on 15 February this was extended by one week. This has had major ramifications on sectors such as education and travel, and has also meant that few flights are now operating between Australia and China (this is likely to remain the case even after the travel ban is lifted).

The ICA Executive Committee has been monitoring the situation closely, as the 70th Annual ICA Conference will be held on the Gold Coast from 21-25 May. The health and safety of our members and attendees are of the utmost concern: both those coming from mainland China and those coming from other parts of the world. We have been following travel advisories from the Australian Government, as well as updates from the World Health Organization and Australia’s Department of Health. We have also been in consultation with Destination Gold Coast, who are responsible for tourism and events in the Gold Coast region.

While outcomes can never be certain with such a unique global public health issue, transmission rates appear to be stabilizing, and the mortality rate from the virus does not appear to be higher than that for influenza more generally. It is also vitally important to support our ICA members in China and the Asia-Pacific region, and the Gold Coast conference will provide a great opportunity to showcase the great dynamism and scope of scholarly work in the communication field in the Asia-Pacific.

We therefore encourage all of those intending to come to the Gold Coast for the conference to register as planned (by 27 February in order to get the priority housing link), and to make travel and accommodation plans to be in Australia in May. Were travel bans to remain in place beyond March, we will contact all of those who have registered to look into alternative arrangements for presentation, including possible presentation by video link. Currently, our registration numbers continue to grow and are at the same basic level they usually are at this point in the registration
calendar. Attendees from other parts of the world can rest assured that they will not be taking health risks in coming to Australia, as the government is erring on the side of extreme caution.

It must be emphasized that a tele-presentation option, if implemented, would only apply to conference delegates from countries banned from entry by the Australian government due to health concerns. There has been discussion of video presentations operating more generally, particularly in light of the climate impact of air travel. We understand these concerns and there is an ongoing discussion going on within ICA about this; it will be the subject of several sessions at the Gold Coast conference as we think towards the future of conferences in the Academy generally. There are numerous implications of such a shift, including costs, event logistics, the purpose of conferences – which are about listening as much as presenting, and about the opportunity to meet other scholars in person – and network capacity.

Therefore, as with the Muslim ban in the United States during the San Diego conference, the option to present via teleconference—if it becomes necessary—would be an exception only for those who are banned by the Australian government from traveling into Australia. ICA is not in a position to make medical decisions in a vacuum, and our policy will be guided by the practical necessity of what is allowed by the Australian government which is, in turn, advised by the World Health Organization as the situation evolves.

In this difficult time, we also extend our solidarity to our ICA friends in China. The emergence of Coronavirus has presented an enormous challenge to Chinese people, and we respect your strength and perseverance in the face of adversity. We look forward to the global dialogue we will have as communication scholars at the Gold Coast in May and for many years to come.

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