COVID-19 and our decision on the 70th Annual ICA Conference in Australia

Friday, 6 March 2020

It is with great disappointment and a heavy heart that we announce that the 70th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, scheduled for 21-25 May, 2020, will not be taking place at the Gold Coast Convention and Exhibition Centre as a physical event. In light of the global coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, the considerable uncertainties and difficulties that many delegates face in coming to Australia, we will instead be convening the ICA conference, with its theme of Open Communication, in May as an entirely virtual conference.

This has been a very difficult decision for the ICA Executive Committee to make. The health and safety of our attendees and their families, colleagues, and students are of the utmost priority to us. There have been deliberations ongoing on the options available since January, when restrictions were first applied to travel from China in light of the initial coronavirus outbreak in Hubei Province. On 17 February, we announced that videoconferencing facilities would be made available to registrants from those countries where travel to Australia was restricted, including China, Iran, parts of Italy and, most recently, South Korea. We were already feeling the loss of just these few countries’ representation in our community. One of the positive aspects of doing a conference in Australia was the convenience for our colleagues in Asia who often travel long distances to see the rest of us, this year we were eager to return the favour.

We then added allowances for virtual presentations for those with potential health risks (respiratory conditions, pregnancy, immune suppression, etc). We estimated that these two groups would account for about 15-20 percent of all delegates, and we had been working through the logistics of a “mixed” conference, involving both in-person and virtual presentations.

The situation continued to deteriorate internationally, however, when during late February and early March, virus outbreaks in Europe and North America have seriously threatened the overall viability of the conference, with many countries banning mass gatherings. There is considerable anxiety about long distance travel and mass gatherings, and we have listened to the voices of our members via email, on phone calls, on social media, and in hallway conversations at our universities.

Taken together, the slump in international travel, the travel bans, the scaling back of flights and visas, and the cancellation of many other conferences and events globally are indicative of the atmosphere worldwide. We had noted that, while overall registrations for the Gold Coast conference were within the lower range of expectations in January, members were – understandably – increasingly adopting a wait-and-see approach so as to avoid the risk of financial penalties.

Most recently and most significantly, a growing number of universities have either placed outright bans on international travel, or have told academic staff that their trips are not covered by the university’s travel insurance, cautioning that if they contract coronavirus while traveling to a conference they would have to deal with the expenses of quarantine, evacuation, and medical treatment themselves. This is happening from North America to Asia, to Europe and New Zealand. This has meant that many of those who still planned to attend no longer find themselves being able to risk the journey.
Of the many scenarios we have worked through, one would have been to hold a much-scaled-down conference on the Gold Coast, with a large number of virtual presentations. The experience for those who did come in person would likely have been poor: sparsely attended events, no social events to speak of, and sessions convened in nearly-empty meeting rooms, dominated by virtual (realtime or not) presentations. Most importantly, we had to account for the risk of COVID-19 being transmitted/contracted at the event itself, or by those travelling to or from the event on any number of connecting international flights from the 80-plus countries ICA members live in. This weighed heavily upon us in our decision-making process. We do not wish to put our attendees’ health at risk, nor to become “part of the problem” globally.

As well, we could have chosen to continue on, but the risk would exist of the Australian government suspending more or even all international travel or banning large gatherings, up to and including the day our conference starts—after the deadline had passed for you to cancel your hotel reservations, or even after some of you had already begun travel. Waiting to make this decision would have put your fates in the hands of an outside entity, rather than our making the difficult decision to do this when some of our attendees’ costs might be recouped.

What we have decided, then, is to host an entirely virtual conference. Other conferences are doing this (even domestic ones in the US that do not have 80+ countries’ worth of participants as we do), and we are hopeful about the possibilities.

We truly regret any inconvenience you may experience as a result of this decision. Again, we did not take this lightly, and it is not the decision that would have been the easiest for us to accomplish, nor the most affordable for the organization. We have chosen to make our lives more difficult in favour of doing what we believe is the right thing.

ICA will incur stiff financial penalties from the convention center and the Star hotel for pulling out of this contract; though the reasons are sound and not limited to ICA. In addition, the virtual conference itself requires a contracted platform and numerous other expenses that are not normally part of our conference expenditures. We must conclude that all of this is worth the expense, given the circumstances.

A few will no doubt see this as an overreaction. Time will tell—as it does with any such crisis situation—whether we will look back and see that we did the right thing or if we should have gone ahead with the physical conference, but the health risks of choosing to conduct the conference in spite of concerns are more dire than the merely financial risks of cancelling, and so we are making, to our view, the responsible choice.

We thank you for being part of the ICA community, and for your ongoing dedication to our mission and to the success of each year’s meeting. It is only because of the strength of this scholarly community that we may rest assured that we will not suffer a loss of commitment or loyalty as a result of such a decision. We remain indebted to those of you who do everything you can each year to come to any part of the world where ICA takes you.
Below this letter is a list of various information points regarding aspects of cancellation practicalities, including hotel, flights, registration fees, and division/IG-level activities.

We send our heartfelt sympathy and best wishes for good health to those among us who are dealing with the effects of this global crisis. Be well.

Sincerely,

Terry, Claes, and Laura

Terry Flew, ICA President (Queensland U of Technology, Brisbane)
Claes de Vreese, ICA President-Elect & 2020 Conference Planner (U of Amsterdam)
Laura Sawyer, ICA Executive Director, Global Headquarters (Washington DC)

WHAT DO I DO NEXT? A PRACTICAL FAQ FOR THE ICA20 VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

The Executive Committee and staff of ICA are working nonstop to ensure we can give you the best conference possible under the circumstances, and the staff are readying the virtual option as we speak. Details of how the virtual conference will proceed will be released shortly, but for the time being, here are a few answers to what are surely the practical questions on your mind:

WHAT HAPPENS TO MY REGISTRATION FEE?
Please do not contact the ICA office asking for a refund, or for answers on virtual conferencing details; as you can imagine, that would result in flooding our emails and phone lines with 1,300 requests, and we only have five staff who are working very hard on getting the virtual conference platform constructed in time. Please note:

- Every registration received thus far will be converted to a virtual registration, allowing access to the online platform where you can upload your presentations and access all pre-recorded and live aspects of the conference when it goes live.
- Every current registration will receive a refund of 25% of the price you paid per your member style and tier, automatically. These will be processed over the next few weeks (we cannot do them all in one day due to the constraints of our payment system). ICA will pay stiff penalties to the venues in Australia for cancellation, in addition to the costs of utilizing the virtual platform; this discount reflects the missing services you would have received (such as morning and afternoon food breaks) while recognizing the value we retain by allowing you to present your work virtually (and interact with the work of your colleagues).
- If you have not yet registered, we will let everyone know when we have changed the fees for the conference to be the new, virtual rates (25% off), and you can register at that time
- Note that those who do not register will not be cleared to use the virtual platform (the company that provides the platform will cross-check registrations with our list). If you do not upload your presentation, it is not considered to have been presented at the 70th Annual ICA conference for the purposes of your CV.
• We will not be refunding membership fees. While the conference member discounted rate is a major benefit of membership, we are still having the conference, merely in a different format.

• The only full refunds we will consider for the conference will be those which are related to accommodation for physical disabilities, such as vision impairment, that make a virtual conference less than ideal.

WHAT HAPPENS TO MY LODGING RESERVATION?
• If you have booked a room at the Star or Sofitel, good news: Experient hasn’t given your actual payment information to the hotel yet (that wasn’t to happen until mid-April). You will not be charged. We will simply purge the reservations at these two properties that were blocked by ICA. The penalties on those missing reservations will be covered by substantial attrition fees ICA will pay.

• If you are at the Star or Sofitel and want to still have a holiday and retain your reservation, we regret that this is not possible as ICA’s contracted, discounted rate is negated by the cancellation of the overall event. You will need to make a new reservation.

• If you booked at one of the apartment properties, you will need to contact them directly, as your contract is with them directly (as we mentioned in several places); we are not an intermediary for your reservation. Showing this letter will likely help you in your negotiation—plus your university’s ban letter will, if you have that—but do know that Experient has informed them in advance that this was a possibility so hopefully they will be lenient.

• If you booked anywhere else for your lodging, obviously those details will be up to you and the lodging venue to determine according to the details you agreed to when booking. ICA cannot assist with those negotiations.

WHAT ABOUT MY FLIGHT?
Many airlines are being lenient about COVID-19 related cancellations and rebooking; experiences vary by airline. If your university has banned your travel, that letter is likely an even better proof for your case in getting your money back than our letter will be. In many cases, universities banning travel have agreed to absorb the costs of cancellation. In other cases, airlines may allow you to simply change your flights to another destination with a later date. If your airline will not let you cancel or change, you may want to just hold onto the reservation in hopes that the airline cancels on you at a later date (in which case you might receive a refund).

WHAT ABOUT GROUND TRANSPORT?
ICA does not have an answer yet regarding whether the transport company will automatically refund all ICA bookings in one motion, or whether individuals must cancel their reservations directly. We will communicate this as soon as we receive an answer from the provider.

PLANNERS & BOARD MEMBERS
Thank you for your patience and the hard work you have put into this year’s conference. We are happy to have the virtual conference as an option for ICA so that your carefully constructed sessions and panels can be salvaged.
• We will let you know how to conduct your business meetings and other unique formats, such as escalator sessions, should you wish to do so virtually, in a later email.

• IF YOUR DIVISION OR INTEREST GROUP WAS PLANNING AN OFFSITE EVENT, don’t forget to cancel your venue rental. If ICA headquarters paid your venue deposit from your div/IG budget, you are responsible for securing a refund. Once the refund is back in ICA’s account, it will be credited back to your division/IG. The headquarters office is not the main contact for your contract and a venue would not cancel without that person’s permission. Therefore, you must do this yourself. If you forget and are charged the full amount, this will negatively affect your division budget.

• The board meeting will have a different format than usual. You will hear from Julie Arnold on that as soon as we have a complete plan in place. Your deadlines for reports and action items for the board meeting REMAIN THE SAME.

• If you were planning a division or interest group reception in the Star or GCCEC and had not signed your own contract (ie you were operating as part of ICA), the penalties we pay on food & beverage revenue will cover your event and you don’t need to do anything.

• If you were planning a reception at Star or GCCEC that was an external satellite event and I had connected you directly with the hotel or convention center staff to arrange for your event, and/or you had signed your own contract, you will need to refer to that contract as to your obligations.

• If you had an event at Sofitel or any other property, you likely have a contract you have signed to which you should refer for cancellation penalties and details.

• If your pre or post conference is ONSITE, and you still want to have it (say, if many of your participants are local), you may still have it but you will need to find a new location as the GCCEC will not be available to you. If your pre or post conference is OFFSITE, you are welcome to still hold it if you have mostly local participants. Either way, you also have the option to cancel altogether or to hold it virtually using the platform. Please let the office know.

HOW WILL THE VIRTUAL CONFERENCE WORK?
• You will need to retain your (discounted) registration in order to log in to upload your own presentation or view others

• The conference will be largely pre-recorded with some live elements and a chat function, making it easy to ask questions of presenters (with more time to do so than in the live conference setting, actually).

• The conference will take place over a week or so, incorporating the same dates as the conference was originally going to happen live plus time on either side to accommodate for time zones. You can watch and comment on presentations at your leisure, according to your own time zone.

• The platform can handle small committee meetings, the exhibit hall, posters, and even pre-conferences and post-conferences, if you wish to use it for that. If you are a preconference or postconference planner, you will receive an email from us about how you want to proceed once we have more information on what that would look like. (If pre or postconferences cancel, ICA can issue refunds for those registration fees at the instruction of the organizers).

• If you were planning to have a committee meeting, we will include instructions for how to do that in a future email.
• You are expected to participate virtually as a presenter if you had committed to presenting your paper at ICA20 physically; this is a commitment each of you made when you submitted your work. With the exception of those who may have vision or other accommodations the virtual conference is, if anything, easier than traveling abroad, so the expectation is that everyone will uphold their commitment to present. In this way, the virtual conference will be a robust experience and you can preserve the ability to list your presentation on your CV as being presented at the 70th Annual ICA conference.

• If you do have an accommodation that makes a virtual conference format difficult for you, please contact Laura Sawyer, Executive Director to discuss so that we can find a way to make it work for you.

We thank all members of our community for their understanding and patience as we attend to all the issues emerging from this unprecedented situation.