



## **COVID-19 and our decision on the 70<sup>th</sup> Annual ICA Conference in Australia**

Friday, 6 March 2020

It is with great disappointment and a heavy heart that we announce that the 70<sup>th</sup> 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.



**International  
Communication  
Association**

Global Headquarters  
1500 21st Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20036 USA  
(01) 202.955.1444  
[www.icahdq.org/](http://www.icahdq.org/)

**Below 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)

Tuesday, 10 March 2020 - **The Frequently Asked Questions list at the end of this document has been updated, please [click here](#).**