



## Message from ICA Regarding the #ICA21 Conference

Wednesday, 28 October 2020

After careful discussion and consideration, it is our sad duty to announce that the 71<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, scheduled for 27–31 May, will no longer include Denver as an in-person portion of a hybrid event. In light of COVID-19 and the additional ways that the pandemic “ripple effect” has affected travel budgets, travel restrictions, and in-person events, **we will instead be convening the ICA conference entirely virtually on an entirely new platform** with the conference theme of *Engaging the Essential Work of Care: Communication, Connectedness, and Social Justice*.

### Factors driving this difficult decision

This was a very difficult decision for the ICA Executive Committee to make, particularly because the conference was virtual in 2020. Yet as we planned for a hybrid format, it became increasingly clear that the in-person component of our conference was likely to be severely restricted because of health concerns, travel limitations, and the safety measures required by the hotel conference venue. We tried to imagine an ICA conference with these necessary restrictions:

- a precipitous decrease in the number of accepted panels because of the need to increase breaks from 15 minutes to 30+ minutes for room sanitizing,
- attendees would likely not be able to gather at the hotel restaurants or bars,
- people with accommodations would have difficulty in terms of access due to restrictions in elevator use,
- all elevators would be restricted to two people at a time (can you imagine the lines?)
- many local attractions would be closed or severely limited, making it nearly pointless to even travel somewhere new,
- registration would have included healthcare professionals hired by ICA doing mandatory temperature checks,
- distanced lines to get into the space each morning after a health screening, etc.

These restrictions all but eliminated the positive aspects of conferencing in person. Likewise, because of the pandemic, our members who would be participating virtually would have actually had the quality of their experience *lessened* by the existence of the in-person component – the extra breaks would have meant far more people turned away due to lack of time slots available, as the virtual event would have followed the timetable of the in-person one. Virtual attendees would get only a small slice of the in-person events, as streaming talks and presentations would be restricted to a small number due to exorbitant expenses. It became clear that the 2021 conference as a whole could only survive if we sacrificed the in-person component.



**We want to be clear, however, that we remain committed to a future that includes hybrid conferencing;** we just think hybrid will be more successful when the in-person component isn't curtailed to such a drastic extent, so that both formats can flourish side by side.

### **Time is of the essence**

While we are disappointed, we wanted to make this decision as early as possible in the process: before attendees started booking flights and hotels, before we sent out acceptances, and even, this year, before the deadline to submit has passed. **The submission deadline isn't until 6 November, so if you were ambivalent about a hybrid conference but might be more interested in a fully virtual one, you still have time! Many divisions have options for submissions that do not require a full paper. Please check the CFPs for more info.**

### **What we learned from #ICA20**

One thing is quite certain: this will *not* be 2020's virtual conference. While many of you applauded our efforts in turning around quickly to a virtual conference in 2020, you also highlighted what we already knew: while it was impressive, it wasn't ideal. We were the first association in our field to "call it" for virtual back in March 2020 (which seems like several decades ago now, doesn't it), and so we didn't have much to go on. No "best practices" had yet been established. Since then, we've helped numerous other associations in our field by sharing what we have learned and those conversations have helped us, in turn, refine what we valued about the experience. We gained valuable insights based on our virtual conference last year, and based on the feedback we received from the members (thank you to everyone who filled out the conference survey!), we are determined and optimistic about making this year's virtual conference a rewarding experience for everyone. We also hope that we can work with you as a community to make #ICA21 a success.

### **Vast improvements in the virtual experience for #ICA21**

We are pleased to share that our new platform from Cadmore does a lot of things that last year's platform could not; in fact, of our bullet points of "must haves" for a new platform, after an extensive RFP process and doing tons of demos, we have found a platform that gives us **everything on our wish list**, including:

- Ease of **navigation**- it's not as flashy with little avatars congregating in the lounge, but you won't get lost looking for your paper
- The ability to **receive notifications** when people comment on your video, or reply to a comment you made
- **Compatibility with ScholarOne**, so that your video gets uploaded to EXACTLY where your paper is and **can't be misplaced**
- **Automatic captioning** that will be generated by the system, emailed to presenters for typo corrections, and then synched to the video so that the captions not only appear at the bottom of each video but also appear as a **transcript** on the right side of the screen



- An ***incredible*** search function that allows you to not only search for a person's name or a paper title, but to search for all the presentations that include a certain phrase in the video...and when you click on the results, it takes you to the *exact moment* in the video where the phrase occurs
- The ability to house your videos indefinitely if you so desire, so that **your videos can be cited and listed on your CV**

### **Social events**

We are also working on new and creative ways to add more varied and robust social components to the conference, **with one "hub" area that lists everything going on that day**. And in a couple of months, we will be launching an online community engagement platform, an ICA member-only social platform. We hope that discussions there will help to drive engagement during the meeting and year-round, just as Twitter conversations enriched the #ICA20 conference experience for those who took part in them. We hope that these measures will increase your engagement with the platform and with other humans, something we are all craving! **As with the 2020 conference, we will have an #ICA21 FAQ page up soon to answer your other questions.**

### **Synchronous or asynchronous? That is the question**

While we won't adhere to a schedule grid as if we were in-person, and most sessions will be asynchronous/pre-recorded, we will be more specific about what to look for each day, sending out a daily highlights "schedule" of ICA-wide events to look for.

### **Drastically reduced registration fees**

We are also pleased to announce that we were able to come to agreement with the Hyatt in Denver so that, as we negotiated with the Gold Coast, we will incur no financial penalties and will instead move this Denver conference to June 2025. Because of this negotiation and the fact that we won't have to pay for many of the things we normally pay for at an in-person conference (virtual attendees don't need to be fed!), we are able to offer a steeply discounted registration fee this year for ICA members. Active ICA members will pay only the following fees:

- Tier A: US \$50
- Tier B: US \$25
- Tier C: US \$0

Non-members will pay the same rates as last year, which are significantly higher. **Joining or renewing has never been more worthwhile!** We hope that this member discount will bring numerous new faces to ICA who will remain part of our academic community for years to come. ICA is more than just the annual conference! We've got lots of new member benefits launching this year as well.



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## Pre & post conferences

Finally, we hope to work with local communities that might, pandemic allowing, be able to organize local events around the #ICA21 conference (if you are organizing a preconference or post conference, the headquarters conference staff will be contacting you soon to ask if you wish to do your event virtually, in-person if you're local, or not at all).

## In summary

Going online (again) is not something we do lightly. But the pandemic leaves us with little choice. An early decision will allow our community to plan and engage ahead of time. In the unlikely event that everything resolves and it turns out, in the end, that the conference *could* have taken place in Denver next Spring, we might be critiqued for having taken this decision early. We believe the upsides of an early decision outweigh the uncertainty we would otherwise all be feeling in the next months.

**There are so many decisions we each must make every day during this pandemic—some of them life-altering—that anything we can do to provide more certainty for the community, eliminate another decision “pain point,” and provide some uncertainty reduction for our community is a net positive.** In 2020, we reassured you, “we will meet you where you are.” This holds true today. Life has not gotten easier since May 2020, but we've perhaps gotten a bit more accustomed to this way of being, and maybe we've each worked out some coping mechanisms. **You can still have your child on your lap during your presentation. We will still have an epic showdown of cats (the mascots of Communication and Technology) and dogs (recently adopted unofficial mascots of the not-actually-renamed Division of Games). We will have dance parties and maybe a talent show and, if you're not careful, karaoke.** We know you'd rather be drinking carafe coffee and eating pastries – we would too! We will do our best to make our second virtual conference as fun, as worthwhile, and as rich as it can possibly be.

**In closing, let us thank you in advance for your support of the association and the scholars in our field. Like many of you, we really long for meeting colleagues and friends, discussing new research and gathering socially. We hope and believe we can leverage the fantastic community spirit in ICA to make the conference a success and stand together in these challenging times.**

**Stay safe, stay well. We'll see you soon.**

Laura Sawyer, Executive Director

Mary Beth Oliver, President-Elect, Conference Planner 2021

Claes de Vreese, President