
COMMENT AND REPLY

Live streaming at international academic conferences: Cooling down the digital optimism

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Comment on Parncutt and Seither-Preisler (2019). Live streaming at international academic conferences: Ethical considerations. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1525/elementa.393>.

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Introduction

The recently published paper “Live streaming at international academic conferences: Ethical considerations” by Richard Parncutt and Annemarie Seither-Preisler (2019) tackles the fascinating topic of the environmental impact of academic conferences, in particular the carbon footprint caused by the participants’ travel to and from the conference location. According to the authors, a viable alternative to this type of event is live streaming. The authors cite numerous statistical data and present their speculative, ethical argument, to conclude that “the present article will have succeeded if it motivates further progress” in hindering anthropogenic global warming (AGW). While sympathizing with every convincing argument in favor of emissions reduction related to academia, in this commentary, we raise five concerns regarding this particular line of argumentation. The overarching reservation is grounded in the fact that the authors extrapolate their experience in the Global North to the entire academic community.

Essentializing races

The key problem with the proposition from Parncutt and Seither-Preislers is that they treat academics as one broad, homogenous social category, and they duplicate this problem in the case of race. Their narrative of privileged academics is another example of a “grand erasure” of experience and social process characteristic to the Global South (Connell 2006: 261). While Parncutt and Seither-Preislers are aware which *anthropoi* contributed to AGW and suffer from it (“AGW may be considered racist in the sense that the main perpetrators are or were white and the main victims are or will be non-white”), they seem to essentialize the race (Chao, Hong, and Chiu 2013). The general category of “white,” in the global context does not

seem to be especially useful in ethical considerations on a global scale. Numerous studies have proved that race and ethnicity are social constructs and subject to social labeling, boundary work, and symbolic violence (see: Plüss 2013). For instance, in her study on Ukrainian academic migrants to Germany, Anna Amelina (2013: 141) demonstrated that a “complex interplay of ethnicity-, class- and gender-related categorizations pushes mobile scientists to define themselves as an exploited elite.” This occurred despite the obvious “whiteness” of Ukrainian migrants.

A Universal academic privilege?

Second, the bold declaration that “academic privilege facilitates climate action” (p. 1) also seems far too simplistic. Similar to the previous argument, Parncutt and Seither-Preisler too easily move from the differences in the carbon footprint produced in the “industrialized” and less developed countries to general conclusions about an unspecified category of “most academics,” or “academics” in general. To what extent can we speak of one “global academic community”? The most obvious difference between global metropolises located in the Northern hemisphere and peripheries is old-fashioned geographical distance forcing scholars in the Global South to “participate at a distance” (Connell et al. 2018). It is rather clear that the center of the world’s research – due to financial expenditures – is in the US, Western Europe, and some Eastern Asian countries (Marginson 2008), while the other parts of the world constitute peripheries of global knowledge production (Rodriguez Medina 2014). Thus, showing up physically only at “regional conferences,” which is suggested by the authors (p. 1), makes sense only for scholars in specific, highly populated areas, such as those from which Parncutt and Seither-Preisler conveniently travel by train across some European countries. The rest of the world, including the vast majority of the US, devoid of decent public transportation, would be doomed to stay at home. This arbitrary choice of locations indicated by Parncutt and Seither-Preisler, on which they build their argument, is accompanied by an equally arbitrary

selection of topics which can justify physical travel (why would environmental protection be significantly more critical than cancer research?).

We do not even have to introduce the “Global South” argument, because the same problem occurs in the case of numerous precarious workers in the Global North (Thorkelson 2016; Birdsell Bauer 2017). For instance, a recent study reported that 30 percent of American adjunct faculty earn less than \$25,000 a year, which places them at or below poverty levels (Flaherty 2020).¹ All these incompatibilities between the situation of high-flying academics (Burawoy 2000) and precarious academics make every judgment regarding the general “academic privilege” exaggerated. Although Parncutt and Seither-Preisler discuss the specific situation of young scholars who are “under subtle pressure” to attend conferences to “present research at international conferences and meeting influential colleagues personally” (p. 5), they appear to assume that all young scholars have the financial resources to do so. Again, important social categories have been essentialized.

A simple economic reason or the cultural conundrum?

The next puzzling element in Parncutt and Seither-Preislers’ argument is their unwavering faith that electronic conferences can “include academic colleagues who would not otherwise have participated for financial reasons,” and “increase the number of submissions and the cultural, geographic, and economic, diversity of participants,” (p. 5). This claim can be rebutted both on the basis of the extant academic literature on academic imperialism and on the basis of conference participation.

First, the problem is that the economic difficulties in covering the cost of attendance constitute merely the tip of an iceberg. The reasons why academics from unprivileged parts of the world do not attend the international conferences mainly involve cultural barriers. The exclusion from the global communities of practice is a result of:

- (1) unequal power relations resulting in a lack of reputation and recognition of the institutions located in the Global South. The divide of Global North vs. Global South can be referred also as to the clash between “centers” and “peripheries”, or metropolises and non-metropolises (Wallerstein 2009; Rodriguez Medina 2014). In the academia, as the landscape of it is varied and dynamically changing, it is no an easy task to clearly classify various countries as either centers or peripheries. However, there are geopolitical superpowers such as the US, along with the UK, Germany, Switzerland, which are without a doubt academic centers.
- (2) the lack of interest of metropolitan institutions in the knowledge from non-metropolitan institutions, often theorized as “asymmetrical translation” (Rodriguez Medina 2014), or “the claim of universality,” “reading from the center,” “gestures of exclusion,” and “grand erasure” (Connell 2006; Connell et al. 2018). The former benefit from their privileged position and export the outcomes of their

research. The papers, patents, and solutions grab global attention and are sold, under the expensive licenses, to the peripheries. The latter, in turn, are doomed to be recipients of those “products” as their own research is not seen as innovative and competitive. In some cases, peripheries are just “laboratories” for Northern researchers, where the fieldwork is done, because the political and social reality of a periphery can be inspiring (Blagojević 2009: 76; Connell et al. 2018; Ergin and Alkan 2019).

The simplest exemplification of these theoretical terms are scholars who cannot connect their scholarship with current debates dominating international (i.e., mainly US- or UK-based) journals, or the ones who would have participated in the international debates providing they had been able to adequately express their ideas in proper English – as they can already do in, e.g., Arabic, Chinese, Russian, or Spanish. Online conferences will not change much in this regard.

Biased presuppositions, instead of unbiased observation

What further deeply troubles us is the figure of “a hypothetical qualitative study,” which raises both sociological and philosophical concerns. If the authors had grounded theory approach in mind (Glaser and Strauss 1967) – as most of the qualitative researchers do (Sbaraini et al. 2011) – the very proposition of “a hypothetical qualitative study” is internally contradictory. The simple reason for that is that the whole sense of in-depth studies, as opposed to surveys and quantitative methods in general, is to get rid of any presuppositions to describe the subjects’ narrative and point of view (Apitzsch, Inowlocki and Kontos 2008). The authors, by the way, seem aware of this rationale behind qualitative inquiry as they demonstrate that qualitative criticism contradicted the generic findings of the survey they cite (p. 2), but unfortunately, they do not draw any conclusions from this clash.

Of course Parncutt and Seither-Preisler could say that they relied on the *abductive* version of grounded theory inspired by Charles Pearce (Charmaz 2006, Swedberg 2014) that requires initial ideas. Unfortunately, also in this case, they did not meet even the basic condition of qualitative reasoning: they did not test the results of their “social guessing.” Instead, we got bare presuppositions, which grounded theory tries to avoid. Even if we go one step further towards the humanities, to so-called experimental philosophy, it is still clear that we need to start with empirical data for further theoretical and normative investigation (Knobe, Nichols 2008).

Enlightenment’s optimism cooled down by COVID-19

Finally, Parncutt and Seither-Preisler believe that electronic communication will “improve the conference experience for individual participants.” Unfortunately, this optimistic claim seems questionable. Studies from all over the world have pointed out that even traditional

on-the-spot conferences are not always effective places of knowledge exchange because as the days pass, fewer and fewer participants attend the sessions, and the number of interactions is limited (Hoyer and Naess 2010). Moreover, Parncutt and Seither-Preisler neglect the argument that for many attendees, the primary reason for participating is networking (Rowe 2018). Although they provided one example of young scholars forced to participate in such international congresses (p. 5), they do not consider how this will impact the planned transition to online communication. In the electronic settings, a fruitful debate would be much more difficult, even if “virtual cocktail parties” are now technically possible (Rogers, Masoodian and Apperley 2018).

Their claim can also be contested in the light of the COVID-19 outbreak’s impact on academic conferences, which demonstrated that the academic world is not entirely ready for the digital shift. We focus on an example of one particular international event, in the same way as Parncutt and Seither-Preisler did in their paper (p. 2). Both of us recently intended to participate in the Comparative and International Education Society Annual Conference. This year it was going to be held in March 2020 in Miami. Initially, the event was planned as a hybrid on-site and off-site conference. Luckily, the organizing committee unanimously voted to cancel the on-site portion of the conference in advance and arranged it basically as Parncutt and Seither-Preisler propose – as an online event. This example is meaningful because even in case of a conference for the relatively narrow category of education scholars, it was impossible to avoid “internet trolls”, which disrupted our Zoom sessions. This is an offshoot of the broader problem of “ZOOM-bombing,” or the posting of pornographic and racist content by third parties (Duffy 2020). Another big issue is that the privacy of electronically interconnected scholars can easily be breached. Third, from the organizers’ point of view, it is crucial that there is no simple way to limit participation to those who paid conference fees. These difficulties do not prove that a successful online conference is impossible, but the recent problems they have posed for international conferences should at least cool down the optimism expressed by Parncutt and Seither-Preisler. Although COVID-19 seems to be a strong test of whether live streaming conferences is a viable option, there is still a catch. Even if, as some sources suggest (Gottlieb et al. 2020; Price 2020), the academic community warmly welcomes online conferencing when the biosecurity measures and travel restrictions are in place, it will be interesting to observe what would happen in 2–3 years. Only if the restrictions are lifted and number of online conferences does not decrease dramatically, the digital optimists will be entitled to break out the champagne.

Conclusions

The current debate on the AGW is vulnerable to similar threats as those which occurred a few decades ago in the critique of wilderness preservation (Guha 1989). Inadvertently, it claims universal applicability of the proposed solutions, overlooking substantial differences between

societies as well as within societies. Every attempt to reform the way academics participate in conferences has to look for the balance between the urgent need to mitigate the harmful impact of international flights, expectations to allow truly global cooperation, and decrease inequalities. One day indeed, internet streaming may be able effectively to address some of these problems but by no means is it a Holy Grail solution for all future conferences. Furthermore, we should take into account that some of these problems are more severe for the inhabitants of certain regions. An unequal world requires in-depth studies focused on differences and different scenarios, instead of taking a shortcut to work out one, golden solution.

Note

¹ Ironically, the same salary in Senegal, the Philippines, or even Poland, would be considered a competitive salary.

Competing interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Author contributions

Both authors contributed equally to the writing of the manuscript.

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