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The Future of Conferences Is Unconferences: Exploring a Decentralized Network of Regional Meetups

This forum is dedicated to exploring the notion of meaningfulness in design processes, taking the perspectives of community groups, nongovernmental organizations, and those who are marginalized in society as starting points. Authors will reflect conceptually and methodologically on practical engagements. — **Rosanna Bellini and Angelika Strohmayer, Editors**

The Future of Conferences Is Unconferences
Exploring a Decentralized Network of Regional Meetups

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Academic conferences allow researchers to showcase their work and network with peers. However, such events also have substantial limitations, such as one-sided communication, high costs, environmental impact, and time away from other obligations [1]. The Covid-19 pandemic forced conferences to move online, lowering costs, increasing access, and showing that networking is possible without everyone traveling to a physical venue. Now there is an opportunity to create a new model that incorporates the best elements of both in-person and virtual conferences. We propose an alternative: locally grouped *unconferences* [2]. Unconferences are gatherings that combat the hierarchical structure of standard conference design by minimizing formal speeches and emphasizing informal connections through participant-driven content.

To identify whether this model is compatible with academic research, we, a group of researchers in the northeastern U.S., organized the first unconference-style Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) event for local researchers. The event was free to attend and first come, first served for registration, with the host institution providing facilities and some refreshments. Attendees expressed positive feelings about the event and were interested in attending similar ones in the future. The informal and interactive format allowed for more dynamic and meaningful interactions, providing a valuable experience for attendees.

We aim to identify the vital ingredients that help to make our unconferences a success and identify areas to consider for the future of academic conferences. Through our local meetup, we explore different design dimensions of academic conferencing. Upon reflection, while the event was a success and received positive feedback, it provoked questions around how to regenerate its success in different regions and even improve the experience for participants. Here, we discuss the future directions of local-conference organizations.

First and foremost, we champion more such local gatherings. As more HCI publishing moves to journal models (e.g., *PACM*) with a large international conference attached to them, we believe intimate and small gatherings are more valuable for participants, allowing for in-depth discussions and ample networking opportunities. Smaller, low-key gatherings can simulate the benefits of academic conferences. We encourage local researchers to shift toward organizing such meetups.

As more of these gatherings emerge, we need a space where community members can share experiences so that others can learn the tacit knowledge of organizing such events. So we created a portal (cafe.hci.social) where organizers can post their events to share their experiences and provide valuable information for future organizers. Similar to community-driven knowledge repositories such as those that track HCI position opportunities (e.g., [3]), this portal thrives on community participation. By sharing attributes of interest such as the number of participants, conference organizers make it easy for future organizers to find events with similar configurations.

While official conferences require higher costs and preparation, local meetups are cheaper (it took us only two weeks to organize and hold the gathering). As a community, we can take advantage of this fact and use local meetups to follow up and experiment with original designs of events we missed in official conferences.

One concern of the model we propose vis-à-vis traditional international conferences is that large conferences provide opportunities for gathering people outside of one's region or country. To mitigate this, individual chapters can apply for SIGCHI funding to sponsor senior scholars to travel to regional conferences that they might not otherwise attend. Individual chapters could even piggyback on the traditional practice that many universities have of inviting

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Insights

→ A localized unconference model for academic conferences can serve as a viable alternative to mitigate the inherent drawbacks of conventional conferences.

→ A key to success of such regional meetups is lower friction of organizing.

→ Such regional meetups should focus more on interactions between researchers than the dissemination of knowledge.

colloquiums or seminar speakers from other institutions, with the added benefit that the speaker could also stay to participate in the regional event.

We also call for more research efforts on conference organization. These could include research into the most effective methods for selecting and organizing presentations and the best ways to foster networking and collaboration among attendees. By investing in these areas, we can ensure that conferences are a valuable and effective platform for connecting researchers, disseminating knowledge, and advancing research. Historically, we have settled on conferences where we have presentations of 15 minutes or longer per talk and time for socialization. While this format is effective at disseminating researchers' work [4], we believe conference design can be overhauled and customized based on resources and attendees' needs.

One direction is supporting organizers in finding the best format for conferences to achieve their goals. For example, there are universally positive sentiments regarding the socialization aspect of our event, but not so much for identifying opportunities for collaboration or learning about others' work. Several platforms [5,6] in community building offer templates that event organizers can use. When applied to conference organizing, these platforms can take inputs from organizers and attendees regarding their priorities in the meetups. If other organizers seek to optimize their events for research collaboration, the platform can recommend a template with programs that involve more paper discussion or presentation.

Next, we break down the key elements of the conference schedule of the CSCW Northeast gathering and discuss the vital components of the event: socialization, dissemination, and event organization.

Socialization and discussions. The program started with a reception that included welcoming messages from us, the organizers. As we sought to promote networking in the event, we then had a 15-minute icebreaker: a Rock, Paper, Scissors battle [7].

World Cafe (https://involve.org.uk/resources/methods/world-cafe) is a form of topic-based discussion,

promoting organic and friendly conversations among scholars. There were two sessions of World Cafe, one in the morning and another in the afternoon, each with community-sourced topics lasting 45 minutes. Participants proposed topics weeks in advance of the event, and organizers solicited group leaders (mostly faculty members) from the attendees who each came up with a topic of discussion. Non-leaders signed up for sessions the day before the event or the day of. "The Promise and Perils of AI-Mediated Communication," "Centralization vs. Decentralization," and "Can You Publish Design Research and Why Not?" were just a few of the sessions.

Participants found that social events were a major aspect of the meetup, which facilitated their engagement. They were largely satisfied with the unstructured social events, including coffee breaks and lunch. Participants found that the small size of the event contributed

to the quality of socialization, with most responding that future events should be kept to a similar number of participants. Regarding socializing activities, they found programs such as World Cafe to be effective. Participants thought everyone had a chance to talk and that there was enough structure to facilitate discussion. In particular, they found it to be an improvement over traditional conference structures, which are less helpful in scaffolding introductions prior to informal socializing. While these segments scored highly for participant engagement, they were less effective in identifying collaboration opportunities. Attendees also identified potential downsides of the World Cafe format, including that the quality of the discussion is highly variable and relies heavily on facilitators.

Structuring the event on a volunteer basis was seen by many attendees as a benefit, providing opportunities for anyone to moderate discussions,

including more-junior researchers. Even the location of the event—Cornell Tech—was selected on a volunteer basis. Faculty from other institutions reported an interest in hosting future events, but it could potentially have ramifications for hosting institutions, as less well-financed institutions might be less able to host.

Dissemination. The event included three 45-minute panel sessions, each featuring four panelists who presented their CSCW 2022 publications. Panelists were selected based on topic coherence and diversity of perspectives, including seniority, institution, demographics, and comfort level with public speaking. Chairs for each panel were chosen for their interest in asking questions and familiarity with the papers. The three-panel topics were computer-coordinated cooperation, navigating and integrating digital content, and data's social complexities. Panelists were given two minutes to present their findings without slides. The audience asked questions, and panel chairs sometimes offered follow-up questions.

Panel sessions were the only sessions focused on formally sharing research projects. These also received largely positive reviews from participants, with a few points for improvement. While participants found the sessions to be engaging and interesting overall, several participants pointed out a shortcoming regarding the selection of panelists. In addition to the smaller gathering size, finding and grouping relevant papers may prove more difficult (though organizers' choices may also play a role), and participants may all engage with the same set of panels, which may or may not be optimally aligned with their interests.

Organizing. We were motivated by the CSCW 2022 conference moving online due to Covid-19 and visa restrictions. We focused on creating opportunities for group discussion and intimate networking, restricting participation to small populations. We used participant-driven unconferencing principles and communication tools like Google Groups, Google Docs, and Slack. The event was advertised on social media and internal university mailing lists, and participation was limited to the first 70 respondents, over half of

whom were Ph.D. students.

In the survey conducted after the meetup, there was unanimous satisfaction and interest in attending future similar events. Participants indicated varying levels of interest in organizing future events: All the faculty members reported interest in organizing, whereas graduate students had mixed responses. Most participants reported a preference for such events to last one day, with a minority preferring a shorter (e.g., half-day) event.

The size and location of the event were important factors regarding participants' experience. On the whole, attendees thought the size of the event was just right, allowing them to meet many new people throughout the day without being overwhelmed or needing to separate into multiple rooms (thereby defeating the purpose of the single-track event). However, limiting the size did mean some people who wanted to attend could not. Notably, the event was held in New York City, which most participants found to be an easy destination and an appropriate midpoint for institutions in the region. Participants expressed a willingness to travel to other locations

as well, with the caveat that it should be a location amenable to non-overnight travel. Although our case is limited to the U.S., geographic accessibility, such as transportation modes, should be considered for local networks.

Most respondents reported that regional events should occur between quarterly and biannually, allowing individuals to attend a subset of events (unlike annual formal conferences, where most researchers must attend every event). This frequency would allow the regional meetup to complement annual conferences by providing more regular contact with other researchers.

Regarding timing, this event coincided with a day of the main CSCW conference, which was held virtually for a two-week duration. Because the in-person regional meetup was preferable to the official virtual conference, some missed a coauthor's presentation that day. In the future, however, such events should be timed to complement rather than cannibalize the official conference.

A major goal of the event was to make conferences more accessible and enjoyable to a broader group of attendees, specifically by making them less financially burdensome for those with fewer resources and less intimidating for junior scholars. Graduate students reported finding the gathering an easier setting for meeting other scholars. However, all institutions represented at the event were at R1 research institutions. More-proactive

Unconferences are gatherings that combat the hierarchical structure of standard conference design.

recruitment extending to academic institutions out of the group would be beneficial to make the event more inclusive. Such recruitment would be critical for ensuring that future events do not become an insiders' club or a gathering among friends.

Concluding thoughts. Virtual conferences over the past two years have been invaluable and maintained the continuity and resiliency of academic conferences. However, they are less desirable than physical conferences in some ways. We argue that the decentralized regional meetup can be an alternative to bridge this gap. In this article, we documented experiences of organizing and attending such a regional meetup. The result suggests that organizing was inexpensive and attendants made meaningful connections. We hope that more such regional meetups are organized in the future, helping scholars learn and grow.

The small size of the group left me feeling like we had really bonded as a community—even though many (most?) attendees were people I had not met before. — Anonymous attendee

ENDNOTES

1. Vardi, M.Y. ACM for the public good. *Commun. ACM 66*, 5 (May 2023), 5; https://doi.org/10.1145/3589609
2. Greenhill, K. and Wiebrands, C. The unconference: A new model for better professional communication. *Proc. of LIANZA Conference 2008: Poropitia Outside the Box.*
3. CS/HCI PhD Opportunity Tracker (2023); http://www.andrewkuz.net/hci-opportunities-2023.html
4. Sanderson, K. Do scientific meetings matter? Turning up for talks brings surprise benefits. *Nature.* May 22, 2023; https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-023-01604-x
5. https://involve.org.uk
6. https://projectinclude.org
7. This activity is where two people play Rock, Paper, Scissors and the winner then challenges winners from other pairs, allowing pairs to snowball into larger teams and gradually bringing attendees into contact with one another.

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