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Urquhart, Cathy , Niederman, Fred  and Bailey, Arlene  (2024) Editorial: What is the Future of AIS Conferences in Our Community? Communications of the Association for Information Systems, 54. pp. 937-948. ISSN 1529-3181

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.17705/1CAIS.05435>

**Publisher:** Association for Information Systems

**Version:** Published Version

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6-14-2024

## Editorial: What is the Future of AIS Conferences in Our Community?

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### Recommended Citation

Urquhart, C., Niederman, F., & Bailey, A. (2024). Editorial: What is the Future of AIS Conferences in Our Community?. *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*, 54, 937-948. <https://doi.org/10.17705/1CAIS.05435>

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## Editorial: What is the Future of AIS Conferences in Our Community?

### Cover Page Footnote

This manuscript underwent editorial review. It was received 5/10/2024 and was with the authors for one month for zero revisions.



## Editorial: What is the Future of AIS Conferences in Our Community?

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### Abstract:

The future of AIS conferences, thrown into sharp relief by virtual innovations during the pandemic and the subsequent return to face-to-face conferences, is debated in this special issue. This editorial introduces the seven papers contained in the special issue and provides the context for the debate on the future of conferences in the AIS Community as well as pinpointing key contributions made by the papers in the special issue. The editors debate three questions: Are conferences still a viable means of academic exchange and community for the future? Given that both virtual and face-to-face options have opportunities and constraints, what can we do to have the best of both options? What consequences, intended and unintended, do new conference formats have for social inclusion and sustainability? We examine different types of hybrid formats and features and also consider the vexed question of how pricing may impact inclusion. We conclude with a call to consider that, for social inclusion, we have an obligation to make participation as rich as possible - some options should not offer a diminished experience. As outlined in this editorial and special issue, the challenges of making participation as rich as possible are manifold - but in doing so, we help both our community and the planet.

**Keywords:** Hybrid Conferences, Social Inclusion, IS Community, Sustainability.

This manuscript underwent editorial review. It was received 5/10/2024 and was with the authors for one month for zero revisions.

## 1 Introduction

This call for contributions to CAIS originated with debates and discussions about the role of AIS conferences over the years, and the subsequent sharp relief that this debate was thrown into by the recent pandemic. At that point, conversations about the viability of online versus face-to-face, and hybrid options were intensified even further, as exemplified by our first paper from Carte et al. (2024) assessing options open to the community at this point, given the lessons learned from the pandemic. One key issue is how to leverage what we have learned about virtual conferences and their contributions to the AIS community.

Globally, within associations, the academic community, and across the conference industry at many levels, there have been ongoing discussions on the best approaches for conference organization and participation in the post-pandemic era. Key areas for the future development of conferences are being discussed, taking into consideration the opportunities and implications of technologies, and socio-economic and environmental factors (Rogers & Wynn-Moylan, 2022). These factors have an impact on the conference planning and implementation processes in relation to decisions on financing, logistics, and privacy and data protection considerations (Bajpai et al., 2022). International associations continue to discuss the role of conferences in sustainability and their contribution to community and society (AMI, 2024; Scharkow & Trepte, 2024). The discussion on the future of conferences connects with discussions of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and the ability to facilitate the participation of all stakeholders. This continues to be part of the discourse for the AIS community (Marabelli et al., 2023).

Our conferences are one of the major vehicles for building our academic community, leading to questions about how as a community we organize ourselves, and serve the world. Conferences serve several purposes for our community in addition to knowledge production (Zhang & Niederman, 2017). When we talk about building communities, this raises the question of who is in that community, and how to include the community, and so the shape of future conferences is critical.

As editors, we hoped for, and expected, a variety of takes and contributions. We were particularly interested, for instance, in contributions that explored diversity, equity, and inclusion, in the context of the overarching question of sustainability. Contributions on the Metaverse and peer review systems were welcome because they are all building blocks for the future of conferences. We also appreciated the hard-won wisdom of conference organizers which was evident in several contributions.

We are pleased to share seven papers within this CAIS debate special issue.

In the opening paper of this debate, Carte, Garfield, Nelson, Pouloudi, Subramanian, Paul, and Rodriguez Abitia (2024) argue that the future of AIS conferences is hybrid. They build on recommendations from task forces of the AIS (Carte et al., 2022) and the ACM, and review literature and experiences of lessons learned during the pandemic and the best practices of conference hybridization. Carte et al. (2024) propose light, medium, and heavy hybrid models for conferences and a risk analysis related to attendance and revenues as well as the overall experience of attendees.

Mettler (2024) responds to the debate, exploring the purposes of conferences, changes during and post-pandemic, and the impact of conferences on the environment, as well as on human resources, particularly through volunteers. He presents additional options that focus on enhancing equality and diversity in conference participation for all IS scholars. Suggestions include multi-hub conferences, assessing the cost and benefits of conferences, and promoting the exchange of ideas.

Ahuja (2024) discusses the implications of the different formats for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). She makes a number of compelling observations about the state of play for ICIS 2020, 2021, and 2022 in terms of how many participants from each of the three AIS Regions (the Americas, Europe, Africa and the Middle East, and Asia/Pacific) attended. She observes that the highest attendance from Region 3 occurred in 2020, when the conference was completely virtual, and that geographic proximity also increases face-to-face attendance. She carefully analyzes the advantages and disadvantages of hybrid conferences through a DEI lens, and makes additional suggestions, beyond hybrid options, for increasing DEI in our conferences.

Given the environmental implications of the decisions on the future of conferences, Watson (2024) fires a broadside at the community when he applies an eco-socio-technical lens to AIS conferences. Are our conference practices sustainable? He suggests approaches to lessen the considerable carbon footprint of

our conferences, such as reducing the time spent together, combining our major conferences with regional conferences, and having the default choice for meals as vegetarian (people could still request the meat option if so desired). He also makes some interesting observations about the primary social functions of our conferences and how we could achieve the same aims with a lighter impact on the earth.

Tate, Zwanenberg, and Clarke (2024) discuss insights from 30 years of ACIS conferences and respond to the debate. The changes that have occurred prior to and post-pandemic are discussed in conjunction with other issues influencing conferences such as climate change, technological change, and changes in the tertiary sector. A review of the debate and the AIS Taskforce report help to inform the proposals made.

As IS academics, we need to be mindful of future technologies that can transform the conference experience. In pursuit of the goal of immersion and presence in the proposed hybrid options, Cuellar (2024) suggests that the future of conferences is in the Metaverse. Existing and future technologies are discussed, and examples are outlined of proposed solutions. The paper argues that the AIS should lead in the development and usage of these technologies which can support the conference experience.

However conferences are organized, the challenge of providing good quality peer review remains important. Carvalho, Anderson, and Zavolokina (2024) explore some of the current challenges in managing the review process for conferences in the IS community and posit some solutions. The issues explored include addressing potential conflicts of interest from authors who are invited to review in the same track in which they have submitted and enhancing review quality. The solutions discuss applications of quid pro quo rules, incentives, and blockchain-based tokens.

The three editors have had lively discussions on what we think are key aspects of this debate. It can be summarized in three main questions:

**Why bother with conferences? Are conferences still a viable means of academic exchange and community for the future?**

**How do we get the best of both conference formats? Given that both virtual and face-to-face options have opportunities and constraints, what can we do to have the best of both options?**

**What are the consequences of these new formats? What consequences, intended and unintended, do new conference formats have for social inclusion and sustainability, especially in developing contexts?**

We discuss these in the following sections, highlighting some viewpoints expressed by authors in this special issue, and making recommendations arising from the debate.

## 2 Why bother with conferences?

*Are conferences still a viable means of academic exchange and community for the future?*

In a future where artificial intelligence (AI) can either contribute hugely to human creativity or have some highly negative consequences for academic work, what might be the point of conferences? For academics, conferences give community identity and an opportunity for creativity in the processes of knowledge creation.

Assuming we reach this stage of development in AI, we might speculate about whether there would continue to be any point at all to conferences. At present, there are some serious work-related purposes for conferences including, but not limited to, the exchange of knowledge and career positioning. If AI at some point in time can initiate, conduct, and distribute the results of scientific investigation better than humans can, does there remain any point in doing it (perhaps aside from hedonic recreation) (Johnson et al., 2021)?

Keeping these long-term possibilities in mind suggests nearer-term organizational questions facing AIS. In particular: (1) what services are valued by members keeping in mind that different individuals perhaps represented by group segments will value different services? (2) what are better ways to provide these services? (3) what are the right pricing models to generate revenue to cover costs? And (4), are there meaningful ways to provide services to non-members, for example, libraries, that may generate additional revenue? As is pointed out by Tate et al., there may be a need for AIS to consider conferences beyond a revenue-focused model.

In the opening lines of the opening debate paper, Carte et al. (2024) state “Academic conferences provide a needed opportunity for members of the academic community to come together, share ideas, solicit feedback, connect with colleagues, recruit, and establish a community identity (Leimester et al., 2021).”

Mettler (2024) takes issue with this definition by saying that mingling together in one large room is perhaps not enough to help new people join the community. He also wonders if the huge amount of effort expended in peer review and organization, and carbon footprint, could be better utilized. Again, we can say that the very notion of a conference is subject to serious challenge from some quarters, at least in its current form. We envision that however conferences are defined or organized, conference models should seek to facilitate the participation and inclusion of interested persons with support for diversity and equity.

### 3 How do we get the best of both formats, face-to-face and virtual?

*Can virtual and face-to-face options ever be equivalent, and what can we do to have the best of both options?*

Table 1 shows us that when considering hybrid conference formats, the relationship between physical and virtual attendees needs to be considered. Otherwise, there may in fact be two parallel conferences, a virtual one and a face-to-face one. Looking at the communication possible between in person attendees and virtual attendees is one way of leveling the playing field between different types of participation, which leads us to Carte et al.’s (2024) central premise - that the future of conferences is hybrid.

**Table 1. Segments of Conference Attendance**

Conference Participant	Other Conference Participants	
	In Person Attendee	Remote Attendee
In person attendance	All in a room together	Communication between remote attendees and those in the room
Remote attendance	Communication between those in the room and remote attendees (e.g. via padlets and screens)	Virtual platform (e.g. Zoom breakout rooms)

Carte et al. (2024) put forward several options in their paper. The paper discusses motivations for attending conferences virtually or face-to-face, then presents an overview of some of the options for consideration in organizing hybrid conferences. These options include ‘light hybrid’ (limited access to conference activities through a virtual mode) ‘medium hybrid’ (more virtual access to conference offerings) and ‘heavy hybrid’ (with an attendant risk of cannibalization of in-person offerings). In some cases, in-person attendees may also wish to have access to the virtual options. Ahuja (2024) reflects on these options and discusses additional ideas including blended options. Included in these considerations, authors of papers in this debate issue also explore local and regional conferences and hubs, and AIS and non-AIS conferences.

We provide a summary below in Table 2 for readers, to give an idea of the sheer range of options suggested in these papers.

**Table 2. Considerations for Conference Formats**

Considerations For Remote	Considerations for Hybrid	Considerations for Face-to-face	Considerations for All Conference Formats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A virtual Region 4 (Ahuja, 2024)</li> <li>• Build an immersive experience via Metaverse (Cuellar, 2024)</li> <li>• Multimodal opportunities (Tate et al., 2024)</li> <li>• Look at ways in which it is not the same as face-to-face (Tate et al., 2024)</li> <li>• Digitization and synthesis of conference papers and resulting knowledge (Watson, 2024)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Light, medium, or heavy hybrid options (Carte et al., 2024)</li> <li>• Blended or alternating options (Ahuja, 2024)</li> <li>• Peer review considerations (Carvalho et al., 2024)</li> <li>• Build an immersive experience (Cuellar, 2024)</li> <li>• Equal participation and interaction opportunities (Mettler, 2024)</li> <li>• Seen as 'new normal post-pandemic' (Tate et al., 2024)</li> <li>• Potentially disruptive multiple material settings (Tate et al., 2024)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Environmental issues (Mettler, 2024; Watson, 2024)</li> <li>• Does not guarantee inclusion (Mettler, 2024)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversity, equity and inclusion</li> <li>• Funding models and responsibilities</li> <li>• Joint conference offerings</li> <li>• Support for participation - registration fees, travel and visas</li> <li>• Space and support for networking</li> <li>• Opportunities for feedback and publication</li> <li>• Recognize contributions of service and volunteer roles, including organizing and reviewing</li> <li>• Unbundling and extended conference options</li> <li>• Moving to ICIS proceedings as a premier knowledge-sharing outlet</li> </ul>

As can be seen from the table above, there is no shortage of thought-provoking suggestions as to how the AIS community might revamp and reconfigure its conferences to include virtual options, and hopefully include more people in our community, while having the added bonus of reducing our carbon footprint.

Some common ideas include; co-locating ICIS, as it goes through its cycle of being hosted in Region 1, 2, or 3, with the respective key regional conference (Watson, 2024). So, for instance, ICIS would be colocated with PACIS every time it occurred in Region 3, with ECIS when it occurred in Region 2, and with AMCIS when it occurred in Region 1. The advantages are obvious, in terms of one trip for university administrators to fund and also a reduced carbon impact, but disadvantages might include a shortening of the regional conference and a loss of identity for that conference, but only for one year. People also like to have several opportunities to submit to conferences during the year. This idea would also commit our community to the same dates each year, regardless of semester arrangements across various universities. This could arguably be unifying. Ahuja (2024) also suggests the creation of a virtual Region 4, open to members from all over the world. AIS conferences would then be held in virtual Region 4 every fourth year. The virtual Region 4 could also be used to experiment with new technologies to create more engaging experiences for conference attendees. The downside of this model is that those who are unable to travel can only attend a conference every fourth year, but one would hope that virtual and hybrid options would be available in other years.

We could also consider the growing role of local conferences. Yolande Chan (2023, personal communication) makes the following observations. First, the complementary positioning of international (ICIS) and regional (AMCIS, ECIS, PACIS) conferences is well established, albeit evolving (as evidenced above where people take those conferences as the basis for future models). Chan reminds us that where we face significant opportunities to leverage AIS and to grow is through engaging and establishing an AIS presence and visibility at *local* IS conferences. She points out that we know little about these conferences which are spread over continents and countries, some being entirely virtual. Chan suggests that a new AIS officer could usefully be appointed to survey our community, create an inventory of IS conferences around the globe (their communities, histories, leaders, languages, time zones, impacts, etc.), and engage with a subset of these local conferences. The AIS will need to carefully consider how to do so, especially when conferences have clear affiliations with other computing associations, and operate in different languages. Chan says that the ideal would be if the international, regional, and local conferences all



provided affordable virtual engagement options so that the AIS membership could grow and AIS members could become more global and more engaged in other regions and localities. She suggests that, given that these local conferences might be focused on teaching, practitioner problems, or even thinly disguised consulting forums, AIS would have to ensure that the quality is kept high and selective. Chan says the reward of doing this work on local conferences means having a truly global presence, that is when AIS is known by IS professors, students, consultants, and practitioners from all over the world. When we see regional and local AIS engagement around the world, we will know that we have engaged successfully.

Obviously, it is not the job of this editorial to exhaustively analyze all the suggestions offered above - we would urge you to read these interesting papers in the special issue. Indeed, we hope that these ideas serve as a catalyst for additional thinking and innovative ideas. That said, we hope to draw out some key implications of at least some of the suggestions and think through some of the intended and unintended consequences, especially when it comes to DEI considerations and sustainability.

There are also specific challenges to the AIS in these papers, specifically the need to consider conferences beyond a narrow remit of risk for organizers and the association and the need for the AIS to further work on a welcoming and inclusive approach to conference organization and participation. This is key given the range of stakeholders involved in the success of conferences. Hybrid conference formats facilitate diversity and equity in the participation of conference organizers and chairs, reflecting the best approaches to support inclusion. Also, there is the suggestion that the AIS could lead on a common technical infrastructure for conferences, including the facility for immersive experiences.

Let us return to our key question - can virtual and face-to-face options ever be equivalent, and what can we do to have the best of both options? The preceding paragraphs show a real appetite in the special issue for new formats and new combinations in order to test these possibilities, tracking those that deserve replication and refinement, and setting aside those that don't seem to work as well. We can also consider what has been learned from our experiences so far.

First, what is the value of conferences to people who attend face-to-face? Arguably, some of the greatest value people gain is from informal networking at conference social occasions. At the same time, people with family obligations or disabilities may not always be able to participate in those occasions, even if they are physically present at the conference. Still, others may be using the conference as a convenient location for an interesting family or personal trip. It isn't necessarily required that all participants receive value from every source, as long as they have the opportunity to do so, and they receive enough value from at least one. More conventionally, people may really value feedback on their ideas in conference sessions. One thing we have learned from the pandemic experience is that Zoom sessions are useful for the pure accumulation of feedback, providing written feedback that could be saved and collated for the benefit of the presenter. Even without a virtual audience, running a program like Zoom would allow for the automated creation of a transcript that could be supplied to the presenter for later examination.

Second, hybrid alternatives present the challenge of integrating those present with those at a distance in a meaningful way that maximizes the contribution and participation of both. One disadvantage of hybrid is that the motivations of those participating remotely may be very different from those who wish to participate face-to-face, so the audiences for the conference may not be the same. Then again, given the choice, individuals may be able to match their preferred mode with their individual needs and preferences. Motivations include the need to balance family life, the wish to avoid travel, the sheer difficulty of getting visas for some participants, and perhaps the attraction that it is possible to multitask while attending. In all formats, participation and focus can vary as a result of the demands and motivations.

On the other hand, it may be much easier to switch from one conference track to another if attending virtually. Benefits for virtual attendees include all of the positive values of digitization such as recording or pre-recording sessions (where policies allow this) and extend access to those whose universities cannot or choose not to subsidize physical conference attendance. For those who have tight travel budgets and time constraints, it might conceivably make more conferences available to that person. However, this could lead to the richest universities with large programs absorbing a greater percentage of presentation slots, pushing out smaller programs. Still, another consideration is whether there need to be constrained numbers of presentation slots at all, such that any quality paper might be accepted with no artificial acceptance or rejection rate.

Third, we need to consider that, for hybrid and virtual conferences, there are significant design choices that affect the quality of experience for physical and remote attendees. For instance, the worst of all possible worlds is the sadly frequent practice of a meeting in a room where virtual attendees dial in using

Zoom or Teams, where face-to-face is privileged and it is easy to ignore those virtual attendees. This version of hybrid allows administrators and organizers to claim (verbally or not) that the hybrid form doesn't work and should be discontinued. Perhaps a more honest appraisal of hybrid options would be that it requires more planning and execution in order to more fully engage remote participants than we have done consistently in the past.

If we take a design choice where Zoom or Teams become the central tactic, it requires a facilitator(s) to keep track of people in the room who want to participate, and arguably this facilitation can be quite effective. Sometimes this means more cameras, the ability to shift focus from one camera to another, and designated areas for speaking (say a podium with camera and microphone). At least two cameras are helpful when speakers are facing the in-person audience. If there is one camera on the speaker the view of the audience is lost to those remotely participating, if the camera is on the audience it may be difficult to follow the speaker. Perhaps, in future versions of Zoom (and other teleconferencing software), there will be more choices for sharing screens and sizing and orienting the videos of other participants. Perhaps there will also be more choices for recording selected portions of the meeting and editing versions of the recordings afterward. The recorded captions are marvelous for transcribing, translation, and research purposes, though the word selection, spelling, editing, and formatting of the produced transcript could all be improved. Monitoring the evolution of these technologies, and what they afford, can enable conference organizers to continually add features and affordances that close the gap between in person and remote participants.

Remote, purely virtual conferences also have some challenges. There are some information assimilation limits such that as groups get larger, the facilitator(s) is forced to focus more and more on fewer active participants, and the value of the larger group becomes watered down. To some extent, this can be ameliorated by extensive use of comments and recording them for subsequent distribution but still can be a source of frustration. During the pandemic, fully online conferences used a wide range of break out group scenarios, each of which had its pros and cons. It also hearkened back to limited participation by having to choose single smaller groups, where technology could allow, for example, access to multiple groups and an ability to quickly and easily shuttle between them. On the other hand, break out rooms do allow virtual attendees to establish relationships with other attendees. In a sense in the physical conference, each session is a sort of breakout room, however, digital conferences offer the potential for additional layers and, perhaps in the future, for participants to configure their own ad hoc groupings.

One practical limitation rarely mentioned for virtual options, but always encountered in practice, is the physical reality of time zones. For instance, a person from Atlanta in the US (Region 1) virtually attending ICIS 2023 in Hyderabad (Region 3) would have found that they would have to be up overnight to attend the day sessions. It is probably necessary for people to become much more familiar with different time zones in our regions. Some clever scheduling can allow overlap between regions - see the example schedule in Table 3. Additionally, recorded face-to-face presentations could be followed by asynchronous comments and discussion much like what is commonly done using course management systems like Canvas and Blackboard.

**Table 3. Sample Virtual Conference Schedule Showing Potential Time Overlaps Between Regions 1, 2, and 3**

UTC (equivalent to GMT) Coordinated Universal Time (London, Dublin, Lisbon)	EDT/EST Eastern Daylight Time/Eastern Standard Time (New York, Atlanta, Florida)	PHST Philippine Standard Time (China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia)	
Region 2	Region 1	Region 3	
11.00 -11.10	07.00	19.00	Opening Welcome
11.10-11.40	07.10	19.10	Tribute
11.40-12.25	07.40	19.40	Keynote
12.30-13.15	08.30	20.30	Session 1
13.15-13.30	09.15	21.15	Coffee break
13.30-14.15	09.30	21.30	Session 2
14.15-15.00	10.15	22.15	Lunch/Breakfast break
15.00-15.45	11.00	23.00	Session 3
15.50-16.35	11.50	23.50	Session 4
16.40-17.00	12.40	00.40	Coffee break
17.00-17.45	13.00	01.00	Session 5

#### 4 What are the consequences of new conference formats?

*What consequences, intended and unintended, do new conference formats have for social inclusion and sustainability, especially in developing contexts?*

Having thoroughly examined the nature of the hybrid conference formats, we can now turn our attention to the consequences of adopting those formats. The proposals contained in this special issue have both intended and unintended consequences for our academic community. A move to a hybrid format for our conferences means that we are potentially creating two separate audiences who have a different and possibly unequal experience, depending on the level of hybridization. It is not possible to argue, at this point in the development of hybrid options, that a virtual experience is equivalent to a face-to-face one. Of course, they are not – it is a case of looking at the tradeoffs that exist and considering how to make sure that we add value to the virtual experience using existing technology. All that said, the experience of the pandemic resulted in AIS achieving an extra layer of inclusion in the community. For members of our community who would have the added logistics of acquiring visas for particular locations, suddenly visa applications and delays were no longer a problem, and the number of conferences that could be attended was expanded. It is the view of this editorial team that virtual options are vital for maintaining and expanding our academic community and that these options are very positive for social inclusion.

There is also the vexed question of the pricing of face-to-face versus virtual conference attendance options. For ICIS 2023, the virtual option was approximately 50% of the full registration and offered live streaming of panels, keynote speeches, awards ceremony, and some paper sessions. At the same time, all papers were required to be presented in person, which arguably would skew attendance to in-person attendance, given that in many university systems an accepted paper is required before travel funding is granted for a conference. It is also difficult to predict whether 50% of the registration fee is seen as reasonable for administrators - only time will tell. A good quality virtual offering, may, arguably, be fairly costly, but then again, the cost of registration might always be prohibitive for countries that have a lower UN human development index. Depending on the number of participants among whom costs can be spread, it is very likely not to be as expensive as physical travel. That said, (1) varied access packages at different price points might be offered, though, again, this might reinforce a sort of class system; and, (2) additional scholarships might be arranged for those wanting/needing the services of face-to-face participation and are able/willing to contribute to such by submitting papers, reviewing, participating in auxiliary events but without sufficient institutional financial support. There are further concerns. If virtual attendance is priced more cheaply than physical attendance, then it may be that we create two classes of attendees, where administrators at hard-pressed universities will only fund virtual attendance.

Arguably, in contexts where university budgets are routinely restricted, this could actually result in a layer of inclusion that had not been there before. Even if priced similarly, it could be that people will opt for

virtual attendance because of the time saved in travel. Given that the AIS funding model is currently reliant on conferences, the consequences would have to be carefully modeled.

There might also be compelling reasons, from a carbon footprint perspective, to go virtual, and many universities are already looking much more carefully at the reduction of air travel as part of their sustainability policies. The AIS community, after all, is a global community who are as subject to political and social changes as any other community. Watson (2024) gives us some very good suggestions for AIS policy with regard to conferences where the carbon footprint might be reduced by combining ICIS with the appropriate regional conference in each region. We also have to anticipate external changes. It might well be that in the face of increasingly dire climate events, that some countries legislate to introduce flight budgets for individuals and this has a follow-on effect on university policies for travel. Even for those who prefer physical meetings, an increased presence of entirely virtual ones may present opportunities for some who would otherwise be left out. The relevant question is how to continually improve the delivery of fully online meetings, sessions, workshops, and full conferences (as well as selecting the themes and materials for each) so that eventually whether or not they match the values of in person conferences, they provide increasingly greater levels of value.

Please note that this discussion presumes the continued desirability of organizing an association like AIS around conferences. This discussion largely assumes the continuance of one global and three regional conferences, however, this is not necessarily the only possible model. ACM, for example, has dozens of special interest groups that plan and manage their own conferences within a broad set of overall constraints. Perhaps a shift toward a larger number of local or affiliated conferences organized in smaller geographic units would provide for face-to-face benefits (with arguably lower carbon footprint costs) while an array of special interest group topical conferences or sessions at nominal prices and/or covered by a broad subscription would also be worth considering. It is clear that any society, AIS specifically, has a heterogeneous diverse population of existing and potential members who attend conferences and join as members for a wide variety of reasons (Zhang & Niederman, 2017). In the spirit of requisite variety in systems thinking, an equivalent variety of services may be necessary for attracting a critical mass of scholars for whom the benefits of joining outweigh the costs.

At the end of the day, conferences are part of an array of products and services offered by associations largely governed by traditions that can be reconsidered in traditional systems analysis terms (shifting from the “as is” to varied imaginative “to be” alternatives) or in a sort of “Blue Ocean” way breaking down the elemental offerings and reconsidering ways to package them to provide maximum opportunities to serve the community. Considering all of these possibilities is outside the scope of this editorial and this special issue, but may be worth considering especially for an organization such as AIS which has focused on a content area that has markedly changed the world and promises to continue to do so where we might serve as a disruptive as well as an incremental catalyst.

We see the next few years as critical in terms of how this debate will unfold. Already in Europe, flying is discouraged by funders for climate reasons, and this may have a real effect on physical conference attendance. It may be that a rush back to face-to-face will exacerbate existing inequalities in our community that virtual options to some extent were corrected over the pandemic. Hybrid options would facilitate increased support for hosting conferences in emerging economies, those with smaller geographic locations, or with less-resourced budgets for hosting. Carte et al. (2024) highlight the importance of increasing impact in the host city, hosting conferences in the Global South, as well as initiatives to support global participation. Increased participation of development contexts in hosting, organizing, and attending will also benefit the community in planning inclusive conference models. We agree with Carte et al. (2024) that the AIS should encourage continued experimentation with formats ranging from variations in face-to-face, to virtual, and all combinations thereof. Such experimentation should be considered by bidders in applications to host conferences. Recognition of the organizing efforts for hybrid should be highlighted, along with the need for early decisions on the format to facilitate participants’ decisions and plans. It is incumbent to document the execution of such formats both the anticipated and unanticipated effects. Once documented, the distribution of evaluation from many stakeholder perspectives regarding each of the potential outcomes including generating value, financial viability, and social inclusion should be carefully observed. Where successful experiments are observed, additional refinement and presentation of such formats should be encouraged. We see AIS taking a leadership role, given the extensive knowledge of socio-technical systems in pioneering new and successful conference formats. It is notable that a number of papers in the special issue challenge the existing AIS model of conferences and we

would urge people not to shy away from the idea that substantial reform to that model may be needed in the future.

The critical role of conferences in supporting the financial viability of the AIS cannot be overstated. Therefore changes to format need to be very carefully considered. Membership is a source of revenue, conferences a significant source of value, and finding the right combination requires very careful consideration. If virtual attendance increases, it may be that the value of membership in its own right may have to increase as well, and different benefits are offered to members. The relative costs of membership versus virtual attendance, especially for resource-constrained and developing contexts is also a consideration. More radically, we could consider decoupling membership from conferences. This would have the effect of shifting emphasis to member services rather than conferences, arguably resulting in a more cohesive and inclusive community all year round, rather than one focused on particular gathering points that not everyone can access.

We leave you with this final thought. We know that virtual options have expanded our community and given opportunities to colleagues all over the world to join our academic community - this was the lesson of the pandemic. We would suggest that, for social inclusion, we have an obligation to make participation as rich as possible through available options - some options should not offer a diminished experience. As outlined above, the challenges of making participation as rich as possible are manifold - but in doing so, we help both our community and the planet.



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