Out of the Ivory Tower, into the Digital World? Democratising Scholarly Exchange

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Abstract

The year 2020 has witnessed an unprecedented expansion of scholarly events online. Yet, in the scramble to adapt to difficult circumstances, little reflection has been given to the ways in which these new digital landscapes can reshape our approach to public history more permanently. This article draws upon the authors' experiences as organisers of the 2020 AskHistorians Digital Conference (AHDC). As one of the first pandemic-era conferences to be 'born digital', The 2020 AHDC leveraged its online format to challenge the exclusionary nature of traditional academic conferences. By reducing barriers to both participation and access, the event blended scholarly exchange with public engagement on a remarkable scale, reaching a global audience of tens of thousands. In sharing the lessons learned from this undertaking, we argue that digital conferences are not a temporary expediency; rather, they present a revolutionary opportunity not only to reshape the ways in which scholarly conversations take place, but also to reduce artificial divides between academic and public histories.

I

During the spring and summer months of 2020, as innumerable conferences, workshops and symposia were cancelled, postponed or translated into digital formats, the nature of scholarly exchange underwent an unprecedented and rapid transformation. Forced by Covid-19 to avoid large, public gatherings, historians had little choice but to adapt to new methods of academic exchange.

That the pandemic has led to profound changes in the ways that conversations about historical research are held is indisputable. What is less clear is what this change means for the nature of the conversations themselves – not just *how* we talk to one another, but also the identities of those who participate, the composition of the intended audience and

the subjects that are discussed. The initial wave of frantic efforts to hold stopgap events online during the early months of the pandemic made it difficult to prioritise such considerations. Yet, just as the conversations surrounding online teaching shifted over the summer of 2020 from one of immediate expediency to a qualitative discussion of approaches, goals and best practices in online delivery, we hold that it is time also to think deeply about the shift from traditional, in-person models of research exchange to digital platforms. Rather than seeing online events as an unfortunate, makeshift alternative, we argue that this moment offers an opportunity to reimagine what academic conferences can hope to achieve.

This piece draws on the authors' experiences as members of the organising committee of the AskHistorians Digital Conference (AHDC), which took place in September 2020. Founded in 2011 and located on the Reddit social media platform, AskHistorians is one of the largest, if not *the* largest, ongoing digital public history projects in the world. The premise of AskHistorians is simple: anyone can use the text-based forum (known on the platform as a 'subreddit') to ask a public question about the past and hope to receive an expert and in-depth written response from the community of historians who use the platform.[1] Thanks to its famously strict moderation policies, it has become known across Reddit and beyond as a source of reliable and high-quality historical information and analysis.[2] AskHistorians now has approximately 1.3 million subscribers and receives 2 million unique visitors each month – more visitors than any single public heritage site or institution in the United Kingdom.[3]

In April 2020, the administrators of the project decided to host its first scholarly event: the AHDC.[4] This decision was precipitated by the sudden shifts in the landscape caused by the pandemic itself, as well as the perceived need for new ways for scholars to connect with one another. It was, therefore, one of the first history conferences to be 'born digital' – that is, planned from the onset to be an online event, which allowed for considerable flexibility and freedom in terms of structure and approach. As a result, this event was conceptualised differently from the kinds of history conferences regularly hosted by universities and other scholarly organisations. Given the underlying premise of the AskHistorians project, namely the assumption that high-quality historical scholarship does, in fact, have a public, it followed that any conference it hosted should

[1] For an overview of the project's wider aims and nature, see 'About AskHistorians', <https://www.askhistorians.com/about> [accessed 21 Feb. 2021].
[2] Sarah A. Gilbert, ''I run the world's largest historical outreach project and it's on a cesspool of a website.' Moderating a public scholarship site on Reddit: a case study of r/AskHistorians', *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4 (2020), pp. 1–27.
[3] For comparison, the British Museum's busiest single month since 2012 (July 2015) saw it receive 765,877 visitors. 'Museums and galleries monthly visits', Department for Culture, Media, and Sport, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/museums-and-galleries-monthly-visits> [accessed 21 Feb. 2021].
[4] Details, including the full programme, are available at <https://www.askhistorians.com/2020-digital-conference>.

be public in nature. The model that emerged can be thought of as an 'open-access' conference, for which barriers to participation, in terms of both invited speakers and the wider public, were kept to the absolute minimum. Not only was participation free, almost all conference content was pre-recorded and made available through digital platforms such as YouTube and Reddit. These have allowed for ongoing free access to the conference's content, with only a small number of live events requiring prior registration due to limits placed upon participant numbers.[5] Our aim in adopting this model was to both give speakers an opportunity to reach an audience much larger than would be possible at an in-person event, and to ensure that these conversations would be enriched and transformed by the inclusion of minoritised voices.

In discussing our experiences of hosting this event, this article examines the intent and outcomes of this approach from the perspective of the AHDC both as a scholarly conference and as a digital public history initiative. While the potential for digital conferences to address lingering academic inequalities has been noted since before the pandemic, online scholarly events also hold the potential to help break down what we regard as artificial and often unnecessary barriers between public and scholarly histories.[6] Drawing on our experiences, we argue that digital history conferences can and *should* be seen both as opportunities to address structural inequalities within academia and as potential venues for the practice of public history.

II

The AskHistorians project is intentionally disruptive towards academic hierarchies. Hosted on a platform where anonymity is standard, it is neither possible nor desirable for traditional academic systems that judge participants by their credentials – degrees, job titles or institutional affiliations – to underpin day-to-day interactions on AskHistorians. Rather, users are recognised for their ability to create content in line with the community's expectations of in-depth and comprehensive answers that reflect current scholarship. Consequently, AskHistorians has become a space in which the creation of public history is the preserve of scholars usually found towards the bottom of academic hierarchies such as postgraduate, or even undergraduate, students, or those whom academia has tended to exclude altogether. As a result, the voices shaping historical

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[5] While conference speakers still retain ownership of their intellectual property, they are bound by the terms governing content rights and usage set out by Reddit and YouTube in their individual user agreements. Effectively, this means that speakers' papers are governed by a CC-BY licence while their answers to attendee questions are governed by a non-exclusive free, non-attribution licence with Reddit. For further information, see: 'Reddit User Agreement', *Reddit*, 15 Sept. 2020, <https://www.redditinc.com/policies/user-agreement-october-15-2020>; 'Terms of Service', *YouTube*, 17 March 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/static?gl=CA&template=terms>.

[6] For discussion, see Maria José Sa, Carlos Miguel Ferreira and Sandro Serpa, 'Virtual and face-to-face academic conferences: comparison and potentials', *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 9/2 (2019), pp. 35–47.

conversations on AskHistorians tend to be very different from those given opportunities on more traditional public history platforms of the news media, historical documentaries or trade publishing, which favour well-established and credentialed figures.

This levelling effect, embraced by AskHistorians users and its administrators as a part of the democratising nature of the project, has profound implications for the use of this space as a venue for scholarly exchanges. Baked into the assumptions of the AHDC organisers was the notion that this event could and should have the potential to challenge hierarchies that are particularly pronounced when it comes to in-person academic events. Not only are the public excluded, whether implicitly or by design as discussed below, but conferences are also sites where academic inequalities are often felt especially keenly. Most obviously, the funds required to attend such events are unevenly distributed, resulting in the benefits of conference attendance accruing to scholars with the required institutional or personal resources. This issue is further compounded by the uneven geographic distribution of conferences and the prestigious academic institutions that host or sponsor them, which results in highly unequal situations where the scholars with the best access to resources also have the lowest cost of participation, an issue visible on both a regional and global basis. For scholars who are based in, or are from the Global South, the resources and effort required to attend prestigious conferences in the Global North are extreme. Even where those resources exist, obtaining visas for international travel is often a fraught, expensive and highly uncertain process regulated by famously unsympathetic government agencies.[7] Hanging over such issues is also the reality that conference resource consumption, particularly that stemming from international travel, is already unsustainable.[8]

In addition to inequitable distribution of resources, the academic conference itself is often a physical and cultural space in which other forms of structural inequality – race, disability, gender – are heightened. These problems, in our judgement, stem from conference spaces and experiences being largely based on norms established when the academy was still characterised by its lack of diversity. While burgeoning research into the conference experiences of racialised minorities, women, carers and people with disabilities has shown that progress has been made to improve access, support and safety for minoritised individuals, many

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[7] Amelia Hill, 'UNESCO chair blasts "discriminatory" UK visitor visa system', *The Guardian*, 24 June 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/jun/24/unesco-chair-blasts-discriminatory-uk-visitor-visa-sysem> [accessed 21 Feb. 2021]. For a specific case, see Sukaina Ehdeed, 'The impact of visa denial in academia', LSE Middle East Centre Blog, 27 Aug. 2019, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2019/08/27/the-impact-of-visa-denial-in-academia/> [accessed 21 Feb. 2021].

[8] Fabian Wenner, Freke Caset and Bart De Wit, 'Conference locations and sustainability aspirations', *disP – The Planning Review*, 55/1 (2019), pp. 34–51; Ken Hiltner, *Writing a New Environmental Era: Moving Forward to Nature* (Abingdon, 2019), esp. App. 1.

problems remain unresolved.[9] Even the direct and indirect enforcement of such basic norms as who gets to speak and when, and who is listened to, can have profound implications for the participation of neurodivergent scholars, to take just one example.[10]

For the organisers of the AHDC, concern about these issues was reflected in an ongoing process of determining what the conference should look like and how it should be run. Not only did we want to avoid replicating formal academic hierarchies regarding who was able to attend, contribute and present at the conference, we were also keenly interested in the potential for digital events to address structural inequalities that have proven difficult to overcome for in-person events, which are constrained by both cultural inertia and the physical conferencing spaces in which they operate.

The potential for global access is perhaps the single most evident way in which digital conferences can address these issues. Without the need for travel, accommodation, or venue hire, the major costs associated with conferencing for participants and organisers alike were greatly or entirely reduced, and the need for visas eliminated. Some constraints remained, however, including access to reliable and safe internet connections, hardware able to handle videoconferencing, sufficient digital literacy to use the selected platforms, and health issues that may preclude extended screen use. While solving long-standing issues surrounding universal internet access and literacy lay beyond the scope of our undertaking, some of these barriers could be partially mitigated through conference structures. In particular, by meeting with presenters and panels ahead of the conference, organisers were able to identify technical issues ahead of time, and participants with lower digital skill levels were provided with additional support and resources.

This more-level playing field could, in theory, open the door for global participation on a scale that would be impossible for any in-person conference with comparable resources. In practice, however, while the conference was meaningfully diverse along some identifiers – gender, subject matter and career stage – the extent of global participation was less than we had hoped.[11] Just 13 per cent of papers came from historians

[9] For example, see Claire Timperley, Kathryn A. Sutherland, Marc Wilson and Meegan Hall, 'He moana pukepuke: navigating gender and ethnic inequality in early career academics' conference attendance', *Gender and Education*, 32/1 (2020), pp. 11–26; Liz Jackson, 'The smiling philosopher: emotional labor, gender, and harassment in conference spaces', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 51/7 (2019), pp. 693–701; Emily Henderson, 'Sticky care and conference travel: unpacking care as an explanatory factor for gendered academic immobility', *Higher Education* (2020), DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734–020–00550–1; Marisa De Picker, 'Rethinking inclusion and disability activism at academic conferences: strategies proposed by a PhD student with a physical disability', *Disability and Society*, 35/1 (2020), pp. 163–7; Genine Hook*, Sole Parent Students and Higher Education: Gender, Policy and Widening Participation* (London, 2016).
[10] Nick Hodge, 'Unruly bodies at conference', *Disability and Society*, 29/4 (2014), pp. 655–8.
[11] For instance, roughly 25% of invited participants at the AHDC identified as BIPOC/BAME, nearly half identified as women, and 6% of our participants identified as non-binary or genderqueer. For the follow-up conference scheduled for Oct. 2021, we built on this foundation by appointing a dedicated

based outside North America or Europe. While, undoubtedly, we as organisers might have done more to attract a wider array of presenters, particularly by engaging directly with scholarly institutions in the Global South, this failure also reflects persistent structural barriers. Any call for papers is transmitted through the personal and professional networks of the conference organisers and host institution. As we found, limited tools currently exist to reliably extend these networks, and tools that do exist still tend to be nationally or regionally constrained. Global conduits for sharing information about conferences remain underdeveloped, perhaps precisely because sharing information about in-person conferences is often of limited value given the constraints on actual participation across vast distances. As such, while organisers could and did call upon various means to spread the word, those familiar tools reached a familiar audience. A likely outcome of the sudden expansion of digital events due to Covid-19 is that although existing transnational scholarly networks will be tightened and enriched, they may still exclude communities of scholarship for whom integration into these networks was always limited. While post-Covid-19 digital events must therefore grapple with debates similar to those tackled by Digital Humanists in the early 2010s regarding accessibility and the inclusion of disadvantaged public audiences, the steps taken in organising the AHDC provide a launching pad for addressing these challenges.[12]

Indeed, better results were achieved in the areas in which our institutional knowledge, connections and culture were already firmly established. One of the most popular panels, 'Indigenous Histories Disrupting Yours: Sovereignties, History, and Power', featured several Indigenous scholars and activists who spoke not only to the intricacies of Indigenous histories, but also to the complex and contested public uses of these histories in the contemporary world. In highlighting Indigenous viewpoints across varied contexts, the panel was able to speak powerfully to Indigeneity as a category encompassing diverse, yet interconnected, experiences and perspectives from around the world. Such a panel was made possible through the close and long-standing involvement in the AskHistorians project of scholars such as Kyle Pittman, a Nez Perce and Yakama descendant and adjunct faculty at The Evergreen State College. Thus, we were able to better reach historians in this field with our call for papers, and our track record in highlighting Indigenous historical issues on our platform gave the participating scholars some confidence in our willingness to host and support a provocative exchange of ideas.

Similarly, the everyday AskHistorians culture of challenging traditional academic hierarchies led to applications from a range of

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diversity subcommittee, which adopted a range of additional strategies to further enhance participant and subject matter diversity.
[12] For discussion see Jessie Daniels and Polly Thistlethwaite, *Being a Scholar in the Digital Era: Transforming Scholarly Practice for the Public Good* (Bristol, 2016), pp. 13, 30–1.

speakers with strikingly diverse backgrounds.[13] While some speakers hold permanent academic posts, or, in the case of renowned folklorist Ronald James, are retired from such posts, many more were precarious early-career or postgraduate researchers for whom access to a wide, public audience was a new and welcome experience. Still others came from backgrounds that would rarely, if ever, feature at a standard history conference: various panels saw contributions from political analysts, journalists, activists and undergraduate students. Nevertheless, the range of backgrounds and experiences posed significant challenges from an organisational standpoint. While some speakers were immensely experienced, a significant number of participants were presenting their first scholarly paper. Here, our emphasis on meeting with participants ahead of time paid further dividends. While one-on-one meetings enabled participants to receive a detailed briefing and confidentially discuss any concerns, whole-panel meetings allowed rapport to build between panel moderators and co-panellists, smoothing issues of communication and boosting the confidence of speakers who were inexperienced or presenting in a second language. Particularly useful were the efforts of more experienced participants to offer advice and support to their fellow panellists. This work of inclusivity though was not without its costs: a very small minority resented the time commitments these meetings represented, to the extent that one participant withdrew from the conference altogether.

The digital medium offered a means through which basic accessibility could be mainstreamed. Most obviously, of course, was the fact that participants could attend from the comfort of their own homes, reducing the impact of factors such as physical disability and caring commitments upon the practicality of conference attendance. By pre-recording panel presentations and releasing them ahead of a scheduled, forum-based Q&A, we were also able to commit to captioning videos as a standard, with a small team of volunteers from the wider AskHistorians community working to correct automatically generated text. The only exception was the keynote address, for which we did not have the resources to provide live captions or sign translation, though a captioned recording was made available at the end of the conference. This format was appreciated by users not only because, as feedback made clear, some were 'hard of hearing and [captions] make a huge difference', but also because it meant that users could schedule their participation around other commitments.[14]

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[13] Our call attracted a very broad range of responses, from self-identified autodidacts and hobbyist history enthusiasts to established faculty. Each proposal was given due consideration and evaluated according to its fit with the conference's theme and whether the paper would fit into a cohesive conference panel. Many proposals that we were ultimately unable to accept were instead invited onto the AskHistorians podcast, thereby providing these researchers with an alternative digital public history platform.

[14] Comment by u/TheHondoGod, 15 Sept. 2020, <https://www.reddit.com/r/AskHistorians/comments/it5sbf/megathread_day_1_of_the_askhistorians_digital/g5d19pr?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3>. On scheduling, see for example comment by u/Eringrapejuice,

The asynchronous nature of the panels also meant that many of the problematic dynamics of in-person talks such as requiring neurodivergent audience members or participants to sit still and quietly for extended periods were either avoided altogether or could be mitigated through moderation, by, for instance, removing belligerent questions, or indeed any audience contributions that proved to be 'not so much a question as a comment'.[15] Furthermore, with questions and answers submitted in writing on the AskHistorians forum, panellists were generally able to offer more thoughtful, considered answers, freed from the pressure of immediate, off-the-cuff responses. Finally, a virtual conference space reduced the scope for the kind of physical sexual harassment that is all too common at in-person gatherings.[16] However, the potential for verbal or written harassment of the kind that is all too common across contemporary social media platforms remained. While the organising committee was vigilant in watching for such behaviour and in making clear to attendees that support was available, the fact that we know of no such incidents during the conference is not a guarantee that they did not occur. Clear, strong, anti-harassment policies of the kind increasingly embraced by in-person conferences also remain vital in digital conference spaces.

A major reason to reduce barriers to conference attendance is that conferencing has numerous ancillary benefits beyond sharing one's research. A key consideration for the AHDC organisers was therefore to ensure that some of the important benefits of in-person conferencing such as informal networking and socialising were maintained, and that the chosen platform for these events (Remo) proved flexible and accessible for a variety of guests. Remo accommodated users connecting through their choice of video, audio and text-based chat to join discussions based around small, virtual 'tables'. These participation options, moreover, avoided the usual reliance on alcohol that is common at in-person conference networking events, a practice that is itself problematic and often exclusionary.

While Remo itself proved a success, feedback highlighting that 'the organisers picked the perfect platform', our observations indicate that barriers to replicating the in-person experience remain significant.[17] First

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15 Sept. 2020, <https://www.reddit.com/r/AskHistorians/comments/it5sbf/megathread_day_1_of_the_askhistorians_digital/g5dmnyi?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3>.
[15] Reddit's architecture allows for an unlimited number of threaded conversations in response to a given post, which is ideal for a Q&A format, allowing multiple simultaneous exchanges between the audience and one or more panellists. Posting a question or comment was open to anyone with a Reddit account, with threads monitored in real time by forum moderators, who could immediately remove content that breached the rules or spirit of the event, while all users could use an inbuilt report function to flag comments for review. For more on comment/question moderation, see Gilbert, 'Moderating a public scholarship site on Reddit', pp. 1–7, 9–13, 16–18.
[16] Nina M. Flores, 'Harassment at conferences: will #MeToo momentum translate to real change?', *Gender and Education*, 32/1 (2020), pp. 137–44.
[17] Comment by u/Eistean, 16 Sept. 2020, <https://www.reddit.com/r/AskHistorians/comments/itsl2g/megathread_day_2_of_the_askhistorians_digital/g5h2nn1?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3>.

and foremost, digital conferences cannot currently claim a monopoly over attendees' time: while an in-person conference-goer may have little choice but to attend scheduled conference events, a digital participant is likely to have other demands on their time concurrent to the conference. This is compounded by the issue of time zones; it is simply not possible to schedule online social events at a time of day during which all conference attendees are likely to be available. The strategy employed during the AHDC was to stagger and repeat events across the day, which saw some success, but also meant that attendance across events was somewhat fractured. While this strategy might be better optimised in future events, solving this issue will require a shift in academic cultures more broadly: an institution happy to release a historian for several days in order to attend an in-person conference will ultimately have to also allow them time to attend digital events.

III

While democratising conference access for scholars was an important objective, and one for which the digital format offers concrete advantages, the AHDC is hardly alone in such ambitions. Particularly in the fields of public and local history, conference spaces have been meaningfully opened to different forms of scholarship and knowledge production. Yet even for such undertakings, the reimagining of the purpose and scope of conferences has important limits: they are still conceived as spaces in which knowledge is created through interactions between participants, and in which the public themselves are either marginal or entirely absent. What made the AHDC unique was the ambition to blur the line between scholarly conversations and public history. That is, while the direct creation of knowledge was still largely (though hardly exclusively) the preserve of speakers and moderators, the audience for this process was much, much larger.

This ambition, and the rationale behind its attractiveness, is a product of the distinctive nature of the AskHistorians project itself, which is one of many contemporary public history projects seeking to invest both historians and audience with agency in creating historical knowledge.[18] Ordinary AskHistorians users set the terms of conversations themselves: they determine the histories in which they are interested, the approaches they wish to explore and the scope of the answers they want, and in doing so often prompt participating historians to reframe and reconsider their

[18] E.g. Laura King and Gary Rivet, 'Engaging people in making history: impact, public engagement and the world beyond the campus', *History Workshop Journal*, 80/1 (2015), pp. 218–33; see also, Fine Danniau, 'Public history in a digital context: back to the future or back to basics?', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review*, 182/4 (2013), pp. 118–44; Meg Foster, 'Online and plugged in? Public history and historians in the digital age', *Public History Review*, 21 (2014), pp. 1–19; S. Bhattacharya, A. Medcalf and A. Ahmed, 'Humanities, criticality and transparency: global health histories and the foundations of inter-sectoral partnerships for the democratisation of knowledge', *Humanit Soc Sci Commun*, 7/6 (2020), DOI: https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599–020–0491–7.

own knowledge. As a result, AskHistorians has long focused on fostering the particular skill of asking historical questions, with mechanisms to recognise and reward particularly interesting or insightful questions, as well as providing user-orientated resources designed to help people formulate better queries. A key pillar of the community are 'Insightful Inquirers', users who regularly ask questions that break the mould and help historical experts share new knowledge. While this question-orientated user culture played less of a role in the conference, given that panels were selected and recorded ahead of time, it was nonetheless vital to our vision of what the conference might achieve. Not only would the format of the panel Q&As be better as discussed above, but we also had confidence that our users were equipped to take part in a constructive discussion through their questions and comments.

More broadly, AskHistorians seeks to build historical skills by showcasing the historical method itself. By discussing the processes of arriving at answers, and making concepts, methodology and historiography accessible, we aim to provide users not only with reliable, accessible information, but also to develop their own skills over time to think historically. This belief – that an audience stands to learn from the *process* of historical thinking as much as the specific content of an answer – has profound implications for the potential purpose of a historical conference. That is, there can be an inherent worth in showcasing the ways in which historical knowledge is built, so that the wider goals of public history – to build engaged and critical citizens – might be fostered.[19] Yet, to date, even public historians have generally not sought to reimagine the conference space, not just as one in which public history approaches and concepts are discussed, but also as public history in its own right. While wider collaboration is often sought after, this is generally framed as involving a wider range of stakeholders rather than as inviting an interested public to become active participants in shaping the conversation.

The view of conferences as largely closed events rests on an assumption that the kinds of scholarship showcased in such events is too dry, specialised or otherwise esoteric to have a meaningful public audience. Yet, it is far from clear that this assumption is actually true. As a public history forum, AskHistorians is predicated on the idea that well-communicated scholarship does, in fact, have an audience, and that people are interested in in-depth, nuanced and credible writing about history. The millions of users who visit the project each month are a testament to this. Rather than lack of interest, we argue that the issue preventing public participation is accessibility. Without considering any formal requirements for institutional affiliation, attending conferences is still prohibitively expensive to those without institutional support or significant private means, and requires flexibility in the work schedules

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[19] Peter J. Beck, *Presenting History: Past and Present* (London, 2012), p. 32; John Tosh, 'Public history, civic engagement and the historical profession in Britain', *History*, 99/335 (2014), pp. 196–8.

of attendees that very few non-academics can accommodate. Knowledge of how to attend also tends to be circulated only within very specific networks – even should a hypothetical highly flexible and independently wealthy connoisseur of history exist, it is probable that they would never even hear of possible conferences that they might attend. As a result, the potential public audience for any given in-person conference is likely to be very small, and reducing these barriers would be incredibly difficult.

In this calculation, AskHistorians, as a successful digital public history project with a large, established audience, was extremely well placed to test whether tearing down barriers to access could unlock the public history potential of scholarly conferences. While some in-person conferences may have nominally been accessible to the general public in the past, few, if any, have actually thought of the public as a primary audience. Similarly, even large, well-established conferences that went online in 2020, such as the International Medieval Congress, saw their digital audience as primarily comprised of scholars rather than a broader public.[20] Our experiment, to our knowledge, remains unique in terms of scale and ambition, and it required a range of strategies to reduce barriers to participation.

The single most important factor enabling public participation was the avoidance of any attendance fees. While costs for accommodation, catering and so on were greatly reduced, the AHDC did face some significant costs, such as licenses for Zoom and Remo and the production of promotional merchandise. These expenses were wholly covered by the generous support of the AskHistorians community through a crowdfunding campaign launched in June 2020, as well as institutional sponsorship from Fordham University Press and organisational sponsorship from Touché Digital Events. This meant not only that we could avoid charging fees for presenting at or attending the conference, we could also dispense with other forms of gatekeeping. The need to pre-register ahead of time, for instance, was limited solely to events with limited space, such as the live keynote address. The vast bulk of conference content was – and still is – entirely open and free to access, with no requirement even to create a Reddit account.

We also leveraged the digital format in other ways to improve accessibility and engagement. So, for example, in structuring the talks the organisers drew as much on podcasting as traditional conference panels, with presenters invited to prepare ten-minute talks that introduced and contextualised their research for a general audience. This allowed additional time for an extended discussion between moderator and panellists exploring thematic and topical connections, with the goal of producing more conversational, engaging recordings. The 2020 AHDC was themed around 'rupture, chaos, revolution and change', with individual panels formed around topics ranging from the lasting effects of colonialism on Indigenous societies to race and twentieth-century protest

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[20] 'Highlights from Virtual IMC 2020', International Medieval Congress, 7 Aug. 2020, <https://www.imc.leeds.ac.uk/highlights-from-virtual-imc-2020/> [accessed 21 Feb. 2021].

movements. Particular effort was made towards marketing individual panels, with each receiving its own graphical design for promotion, and titled as evocatively as possible while still retaining scholarly credibility. This was often achieved through the use of popular culture references like 'How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Apocalypse' or common idioms such as 'pick your poison'. Furthermore, the conference schedule itself was designed to maximise ease of engagement for casual users. By offering a smaller number of widely spaced panels with clear and distinctive themes, we acknowledged that few attendees would be in a position to dedicate entire days to watching and participating, but rather would be engaging with the conference during more limited periods of free time.

The online format also allowed for addressing more pervasive barriers to participation. As previously discussed, the conference panel format of pre-recorded video posted in advance of the text-based Q&A sessions on the Reddit forum and the staggering of networking and socialising events also aimed to tackle the issue of work schedules and time zones to maximise potential participation. Importantly, the Reddit-based Panel Q&A sessions mirrored text-based Q&A events with professional historians and authors, known as AMAs, or 'Ask-Me-Anything's, a format familiar to the AskHistorians community, with explicit instructions provided for new visitors. This resulted in significant engagement between conference panellists and attendees. A recurring issue, however, was that the topics of individual papers were considerably narrower than our usual AMA events, and this may have prevented some users from being confident in formulating questions. This issue might be ameliorated in future by encouraging speakers to proactively identify broader contexts to which they are happy to speak, as well as providing guidance to attendees on how to frame questions. Likewise, increasing the lead time between the release of the panel recordings and the opening of the panel Q&As may offer attendees more opportunity to formulate their questions before the panellists log on to answer.

The end results of these efforts were naturally uneven; panels varied widely in terms of direct engagement, and the specific audience we reached was naturally shaped by the broader demographics of Reddit's users. The baseline engagement, however, was strikingly high: no panel recording received less than 400 views, and no panel Q&A less than 1,000 visitors. In contrast, the most popular panel Q&A ('Be the Change that Others Don't Want: Asserting and Resisting Racial Hierarchies in Midcentury [sic] North America') was visited 12,400 times and generated over 450,000 sitewide impressions. We estimate total audience size as being between 30,000 and 40,000 people across the three days of the conference, which is, we feel confident in asserting, considerably higher than most in-person scholarly events. This headline figure naturally includes a great many people for whom their encounter with the conference was relatively casual, yet the figure also includes a significant number of highly engaged users, as evidenced by the number of attendees at live events, as well as hundreds

of user-generated questions and comments in panel discussions. While Reddit analytics do not capture precise audience demographics, we do know from user surveys that fewer than 10 per cent of our subscribers either work in a historical field (academia or the wider heritage sector) or are undertaking postgraduate study in a historical discipline. In other words, approximately 90 per cent of the audience would probably never have previously attended a history conference.

It is more difficult to make substantive qualitative claims about concrete outcomes from these exchanges. Evidence from post-conference surveys suggests that both speakers and attendees saw these conversations as beneficial, both in the scheduled panel Q&As as well as in the more informal conversations that took place in the live networking sessions on Remo. Panellist Malcolm Craig, for instance, highlighted the usefulness of the approach for public history purposes:

> I just wanted to say thanks to the entire committee for organising a fantastic public history event. It's really been a model of how to do this kind of thing, and there are some great lessons that I'm going to take away from it. I'd also like to thank all the panellists, panel hosts, and the AskHistorians community for such great papers, hosting, questions, and engagement.[21]

A number of users also highlighted not just the abstract enjoyment of the historical topics discussed, but also the role of such events in the specific context of the pandemic:

> The conference is amazing, I've been missing such events in my field as well as in general. It's not only fascinating information that I love learning, but the therapeutical effect of focusing on something else than covid [sic], election, whatever depressing news, and seeing people who genuinely love their work.[22]

More broadly, we stand by the principle that public history works best not on the basis of a single-direction transfer of knowledge from historian to audience, but as a conversation in which different forms of knowledge are shared.[23] By broadening these conversations to reach a much wider range of participants in terms of both invited presenters and user-led conversations, we helped to combat the existence of scholarly echo chambers, where conversations and exchanges are by their very nature limited to the input of only those who are credentialed, or 'properly' trained, and where hierarchies give precedence to some voices over

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21 Comment by u/DrMalcolmCraig, 18 Sept. 2020, <https://www.reddit.com/r/AskHistorians/comments/iugiah/megathread_its_the_final_day_of_the_askhistorians/g5ojetd?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3>.

22 Comment by u/creepy_caterpillar, 18 Sept. 2020, <https://www.reddit.com/r/AskHistorians/comments/iugiah/megathread_its_the_final_day_of_the_askhistorians/g5owf7f?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3>.

23 For further discussion of approaching public history as a conversation, see Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene and Laura Koloski (eds), *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World* (Philadelphia, 2011).

others, whether that precedence is defined by gender, race, disability, neurotypicality, geographic region or career stage.

We would suggest that historians seeking to organise digital conferences in the future view these conferences not only as opportunities for scholars to share their research with one another, but also as venues for the performance of public history. As argued by Peter Beck, historians have a duty to engage the public with their scholarship and this has never been more important. The year 2020 was an unprecedented time, when members of the public called on historians to make sense of the events unfolding around them. While this has led to an outpouring of public history through new and established channels, we can and should reflect on ways in which these efforts are still somehow distinct from historians' usual conversations with one another.

IV

In response to the disruptions caused by Covid-19, historians were forced to adapt scholarly exchanges during the spring and summer months of 2020. What emerged were many digital events; however, most scholars are likely to return to their in-person formats once it becomes safe. We risk overlooking the potential for reconceptualising the ways in which history conferences are delivered, as opportunities both to democratise the study of history and to bring cutting-edge history research to interested members of the general public. Indeed, as events such as the notorious panel hosted by the Society of Historians of the Early American Republic on 'Andrew Jackson in the Age of Trump' have shown, there is already potential for digital scholarly conversations to spontaneously become public history.[24] Rather than reinforcing institutional barriers to prevent such occurrences, we argue that it is much preferable to embrace the advantages of expanding our conversations.

The AHDC demonstrated that, with the right platform, it is possible to start to reverse the exclusionary logic of the academic conference and to break down many barriers to participation. The distinctiveness of the AskHistorians platform suggests that the success of this conference does not provide a ready-made blueprint for other scholars; that is, the conference succeeded precisely because of years of work in building a platform that could host it. It is not clear that traditional academic institutions, designed to host and deliver in-person events, are well suited for adaptation to digital public history.[25] As a result, the expansion of digital scholarly events may well lead to the disruption of established institutional power dynamics of conference hosting and patronage. Yet

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[24] 'President's Statement on SHEAR 2020', post on H-SHEAR, 18 July 2020, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/950/blog/shear-conference-news/6264991/presidents-statement-shear-2020> [accessed 21 Feb. 2021].

[25] For a cautionary tale, see Andrew Hurley, 'Chasing the frontiers of digital technology: public history meets the digital divide', *The Public Historian*, 38/1 (2014), pp. 69–88.

there is also clear potential for future collaboration between traditional scholarly institutions and established digital public history projects, offering benefits to both parties. As this event has shown, this can result not only in historians reaching much wider audiences, but also in an experience that is enriching and valuable for everyone involved. While not every future scholarly event will be equally suited to a digital platform, these advantages should give us pause before we herald the wholesale return to in-person events.

This ethos was reflected in the line-up of speakers selected for the AHDC. As well as academic historians at all stages of their careers, they included voices that have often been marginalised in scholarly conversations, from students, activists and heritage workers, to ethnic and racial minorities, LGBTIA+ scholars, women and scholars with disabilities. For some of these speakers, the AHDC was their first conference and this illustrates the central argument of this piece: that digital conferences as public history initiatives present an opportunity for speakers whose exclusion from traditional academic conferences has little to do with their ability or knowledge. Instead, their absence reflects the ways in which academic historians often limit the scope of their conversations before they have even begun. Rather than viewing such events as purely a pandemic-era expediency, the discipline should view digital conferences as an opportunity for greater accessibility and democratisation within the field of history.

PEER REVIEW

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