

Reflecting on Hybrid Events: Learning from a Year of Hybrid Experiences

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a sudden shift to virtual work and events, with the last two years enabling an appropriated and rather simulated togetherness—the *hybrid* mode. As we return to in-person events, it is important to reflect on not only what we learned about technologies and social justice, but about the types of events we desire, and how to re-design them accordingly. This SIG aims to reflect on hybrid events and their execution: scaling them across sectors, communities, and industries; considering trade-offs when choosing technologies; studying best practices and defining measures of “success” for hybrid events; and finally, identifying and

charting the wider social, ethical, and legal implications of hybrid formats. This SIG will consolidate these topics by inviting participants to collaboratively reflect on previous hybrid experiences and what can be learned from them.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Interaction paradigms**; *HCI theory, concepts and models*.

KEYWORDS

hybrid events, remote work, blended experiences, user experience, measurement

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1 INTRODUCTION

The recent COVID-19 pandemic led to a switch to virtual formats on many fronts, and academic conferences were no exception. This generated new possibilities for participation and engagement without the need to travel to a physical site, encouraging a reconsideration of earlier research on distributed teams and organizations. This special interest group (SIG) follows on ACM Special Interest Group on Computer-Human Interaction (SIGCHI) Executive Committee's previous SIG on hybrid formats, held at CHI 2022 [11], and on an open session held in 2020¹. After more than two years of virtual experiences, and more than one year of experimentation with hybrid, there are new expectations about conference accessibility, and new challenges, including accessibility, connectivity, time zone coordination, language, networking, socializing and volunteering, to name a few, that arise as we work towards improving hybrid conferences.

A recent definition of hybrid events in work-related contexts describes a schema where there is a mixture of co-located and non-co-located work or workers – this mix can be across individuals in a team, workforce, or group of people for meetings [16]. Hybrid events inherit this definition for events like trade shows, conferences, seminars, workshops, and similar meetings. The rapid development of technology and changing work arrangements has allowed individuals to embrace hybrid work mode as the norm. Many technology companies adopted forms of permanently remote work over several decades [17], with on-going “tuning” of the sociotechnical aspects of remote work [14] as an arena of labor-management negotiation [10].

More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic forced employees from a wide range of job sectors (e.g., IT and technology, sales, retail, and research) to work remotely [6]. As lockdowns were lifted, companies transitioned (or in some cases simply returned [17]) to “hybrid work” – a process that continues today [1]. Through the unexpected global experiment on hybrid work, employers and workers have rethought their work-life balance, commuting, and health risks [26], with potential gains in social justice through more flexible remote work accommodations [9]. This experience fundamentally questioned if the hybrid event model can become a common practice across different job sectors and opened up opportunities to explore how to make such arrangements consistently possible [27]. Hybrid events generally use device technologies designed for hybrid collaborations – the most common devices in a hybrid setting were generally screen-based (i.e., laptops, PCs, tablets, monitor displays, projection screens, televisions, and tabletops), where users largely remained in sedentary positions [19]. This hardware is connected physically through networks, contextually through software technologies for collaboration [18], and socially through co-evolving work-practices [5]. Across the board, the different stakeholders – employers, employees, the community – are evaluating what it

means to conduct events in a hybrid format, and how to best implement it. This led to an increased interest in hybrid events in the future of work, motivating a slew of research on the subject [19].

This SIG aims to reflect on hybrid events that have been run in the last year or so, to learn from them and rethink what “hybrid events” are, who they cater to, what technology, training and work arrangements are needed to enable it pervasively, how to measure “success” for hybrid events, and how different notions of hybrid across sectors and communities can challenge these outcomes. The SIG's organizers have a wide range of experience in organizing virtual and hybrid conference events as well as research around technology and user experience in remote and hybrid events. This proposal is a joint effort by the CHIWORK collective and the SIGCHI Hybrid Working Group.

2 SIG TOPICS

This SIG aims at bringing researchers together to discuss the following topics related to hybrid events:

Topic 1: What are the current best practices for hybrid events, and how can they scale across domains?

Hybrid events take on different meanings depending on the type, scale, and technology used at the event. In recent years, conference organizers are transitioning from simply having an online option, often asynchronous, to actually planning and implementing the hybrid model [3, 24]. This confers crucial benefits: for example, remote participation can allow people from the Global South and Global North to exchange ideas, can ease financial burdens on early-career scholars, and reduce inequities with visas or other border issues. In addition, remote participation may be temporarily or permanently necessary for some disabled contributors. Nevertheless, the asymmetry between in-person and remote settings remains, pointing toward a need for sociotechnical analyses to complement the technological investigation. Recently, extensive guidelines on hybrid meetings [23] were proposed. The guidelines addressed problems of access to physical resources, serendipity during informal interactions, and lack of new models for workspace design. Comparably, the discussion on hybrid events has just started². CHI22 was one of ACM's first large-scale hybrid events, and a major learning opportunity for the SIGCHI community. What hybrid configurations have events devised since then? This past year has seen multiple hybrid events, run using different tools and workflows, many building upon lessons learned from CHI22. What can we learn from these more recent events? Have the problems been solved? What worked and what didn't work? How can these lessons be systematized in some way?

Topic 2: How can emerging technologies, tools and practices support hybrid event experiences?

A number of technologies have been developed to support hybrid event experiences, and recent discourses have attempted to scrutinize the sociotechnical underpinnings of hybrid reality and the blended experiences they afford [27]. Taken together, these approaches may provide benefits including recreating physical affordances and social cues to strengthen social presence, including multi-sensory (e.g., haptic and olfactory) stimulation to ensure not

¹<https://nehakumar.medium.com/6215365d9a4>

²<https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/the-future-of-hybrid-events>

only an immersive experience but, importantly, that all event participants feel at an equal footing. However, recent events already indicate that technology is only part of the equation: aspects such as event/session flow, rules of interaction, volunteer training and handling the added volunteer burden for hybrid events have already been pointed out as fundamental to a conference's success.

Topic 3: What is a "successful" hybrid event experience, and how to measure it?

A core element for a successful collaboration experience is the notion of presence [21] in general, and social presence (co-presence) [4] in particular, namely the "sense of being with another". This includes different facets of knowing who is in your current hybrid space, how physical and virtual participants are reacting to current situations, and, more generally, an awareness of what these participants' activities are and their availability which may offer ways to connect with them. We borrow lessons from CHIWORK 2022's Annual Meeting and CHI PLAY 2022, two events which combined simple telepresence technology with social protocols to enhance remote participation. A second core element is to establish common ground (e.g., [8]). While there is a history of sociotechnical approaches to creative work among very different teams [2, 7], we need to improve our understanding of both shared work-practices and shared repositories for hybrid meetings. Methods to measure meeting success are also in need of updating [13, 25].

Topic 4: What are the wider implications of hybrid events on access, inclusion, and sustainability efforts, and how does hybridity change the volunteer experience?

We envision this SIG to continue discussions of social implications of new forms of technologies, social interactions, and environments (including mobility practices) that strengthen diversity, inclusion, and equality across sectors, including both technologies [12, 22] and social practices [15]. Moreover, we need to consider how hybrid models perform in relation to increasing expectations and requirements for more environmentally sustainable events (e.g., conferences). Reduced carbon emissions is a much needed outcome for such events that involve less air travel in particular; however, online platforms are not without their own carbon costs [20].

This SIG aims to critically address how hybrid event approaches can fare across a wide range of sectors, and ways to offer equal opportunities to experience "successful" hybrid work modes across communities and individual accessibility needs, without jeopardizing environment sustainability efforts. At the same time, the SIG will also examine how these fundamental changes to how we plan and run conferences impacts the work of our many volunteers, e.g., conference organizers, and student volunteers. Here, we hope to engage in reflection on implications for workload and how demands on individuals are shifting, and we will engage in discussion as to what sustainability looks like in terms of work-life balance for those involved in conference organization. How will these factors influence our measures of success (Topic 3), and what tools do we have to measure such success in the first place (Topic 2)? If not, what best practices and guidelines can we draw upon to make this a reality across geographically-spread communities and individuals who may not have access to the same infrastructure and technology to create the best form of hybrid?

3 SIG GOALS AND OUTCOMES

This SIG aims to be an interdisciplinary forum that brings together researchers, practitioners from academia and industry, and policy-makers to collaboratively reflect about hybrid events. Specifically, we aim to consider how hybrid events are currently being run, and how to scale them across communities, sectors, and industries; to explore novel and emerging technologies and practices to support hybrid events; to define a set of (practical) scalable guidelines and measurement approaches for ensuring "successful" hybrid event experiences; and to collectively discuss the implications of hybrid events, from the standpoint of access, inclusion, and sustainability efforts, to assess their impact across geographies and infrastructures.

To enable active engagement among attendees and evoke a sense of community, we aim to keep the SIG's Slack channel alive after the SIG's conclusion and even open it to other researchers and practitioners who could not attend. Finally, we aspire to continue the discussions about the developed research agendas and SIG themes in the future by organizing bi-weekly conversations with invited speakers (similar to the moderated conversations held on CHIWORK³), which the SIG organizers will facilitate.

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