



# Virtual events

How to thrive in the new normal



**FIPP**  
Connecting  
Global Media

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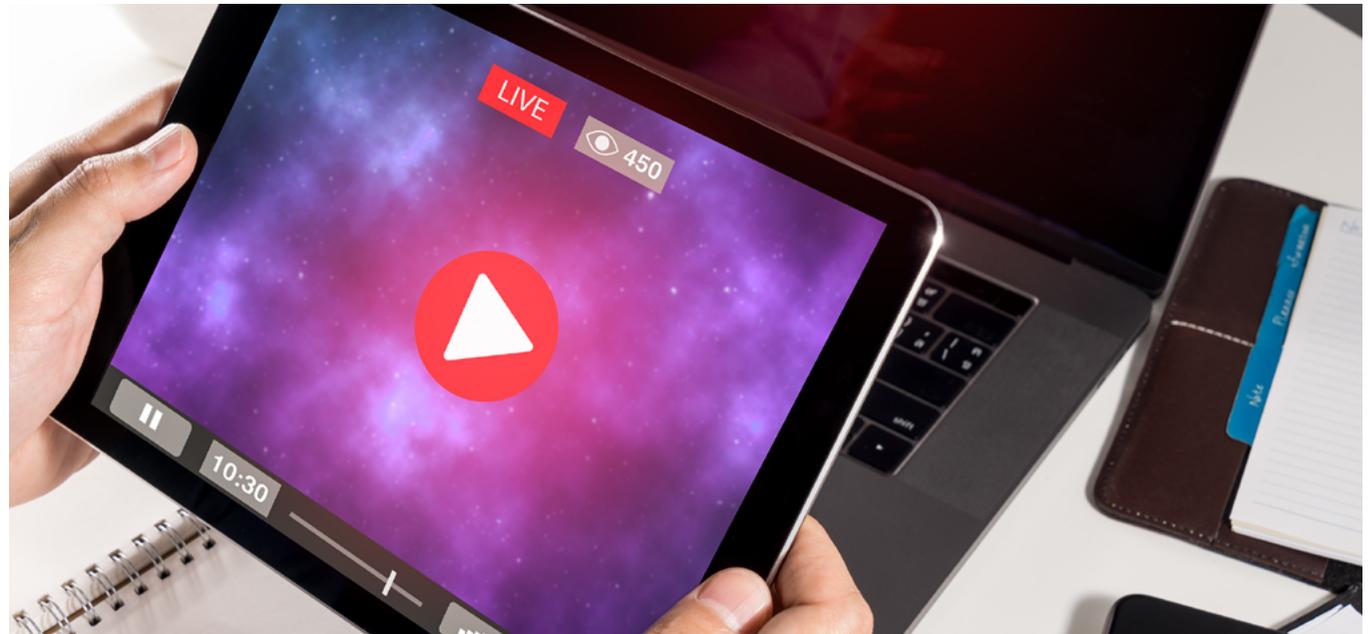
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# 01 The show must go online

In October 2019, we [published a report](#), **“Events in Magazine Media: How to Convert Them Into a Revenue Source”**. It concerns all the ways in which magazine media can – and should – embrace live events as part of their overall strategies for the future. For FIPP members and the wider industry, events represent a clear opportunity for attracting new advertisers, increasing engagement with existing readers and subscribers, and establishing a reliable revenue source. From South Africa to Latin America, Hong Kong to the USA, the behind-the-scenes innovators we spoke to were positive and excited about the



events space. All of them saw events as essential to the future growth and earning potential of their brand.

Then along came COVID-19. The pandemic and the responses to it have left our world unrecognisable in many ways. Live events – a trillion dollar industry<sup>1</sup> – were one of the first casualties of lockdown and social distancing measures, and they'll likely be the last to return. Businesses and individuals alike have rapidly integrated videoconferencing software into their daily lives. Remote-working, once the preserve of freelancers and a small percentage of flexible workers, has become the norm – and looks set to stay that way for the time being.

## The pandemic pivot

So where does this leave events? In short, [with another huge opportunity](#). At FIPP, we know the value of a large, in-person event – for networking, novelty, and gathering new ideas. Nonetheless, we've been encouraged by the numerous online get-togethers that have proliferated in their place – making space for innovation and connection in a valuable, albeit different way. Publishers have shown resilience and innovation in the face of this rapidly shifting environment: the once-zestless videoconference has been reinvigorated, showing itself to be a playful, dynamic format.

Most importantly, and perhaps surprisingly, consumer behaviour is promising and people are feeling buoyant. "Positivity" is the top thing people want to see from media companies. Media consumption remains high: 87 per cent have maintained or

increased their use of social media; 73 per cent have maintained or increased their use of print media, and 88 per cent have maintained or increased their time with online media websites, according to Condé Nast Britain's new report, "Looking Beyond Lockdown – Changing Consumer Behaviour in Response to Covid-19", which surveyed more than 2,500 Condé Nast Britain consumers.

With this in mind, we've designed this new report to resolve many of the questions industry professionals might have about making the most of the new circumstances – as social distancing measures continue, as air travel decreases, and as we move into a future that might look a lot different to the past. Even under difficult conditions, opportunities can and do emerge for publishers navigating the new "virtual world". Whether you're hosting a short webinar or a full-scale virtual conference, we hope you find this report useful.

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<sup>1</sup> [pcma.org](http://pcma.org)

## Experience economy, attention economy?

In our [previous report](#), we emphasised how millennials' quest for meaningful experiences in "the experience economy" trumped their desire to buy material products. This was – and still is – good news for events. In the new era formed by the pandemic, these experiences are increasingly taking a virtual shape. However, capturing people's attention without the natural buzz created by a live audience isn't easy.

Getting people to sign up is one thing, Adam Preset, a senior research director at Gartner, whose clients often ask for help putting these types of events together, told CNET<sup>2</sup>: "Are there lots of organisations that have been able to get viewers to attend webcasts? Yes. Do they feel like they get the same attention and engagement that

they would in person? It's mixed."

If human attention is an "intrinsically scarce commodity", as business strategist Michael H. Goldhaber first formulated<sup>3</sup> it in the 1990s, then it pays to remember that there is only so much time a person can reasonably be expected to focus. This is especially true for something taking place online: most people are surrounded by distractions, switching tabs is all it takes to alleviate boredom, and concentrating on a screen takes a lot more mental energy than listening to someone in person.

This is why the phrase "Zoom fatigue" has entered the cultural lexicon. Zoom calls and other types of online interaction "wear on the psyche in complicated ways", reads a recent article<sup>4</sup> by Julia Sklar for National Geographic. "The brain becomes

overwhelmed by unfamiliar excess stimuli while being hyper-focused on searching for non-verbal cues that it can't find."

These considerations should be built into online event planning to ensure that attendees are not fatigued. We'll go into this in detail in [Section 03 - How to plan an online event on page 13](#).

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<sup>2</sup> cnet.com

<sup>3</sup> firstmonday.org

<sup>4</sup> nationalgeographic.com



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## 02

# Types of virtual events

How can you capture and maintain people's attention? Publishers have been experimenting – with plenty of success. It's good to remember that online events have received a makeover that was totally unimaginable before 2020 – we are on totally different territory now.

It's obviously wrong to imagine that online events are in any way comparable to in-person ones, but while not all events will readily lend themselves to Google Meet, Newrow, or Skype, there are some that can work really well.

It helps to begin with some definitions – so what exactly does an online event look like? There are many answers to this question, and new formats are emerging all the time – but here are some of the most popular.



## Webinars

WEBINARS remain one of the most popular options for publishers. Here at FIPP, we began hosting [free webinars](#) within weeks of the lockdown measures coming into force in the UK, and over 1,000 attendees have tuned in each time to listen and contribute to various topics.

From the unexpected pitfalls of

remote publishing to rethinking content distribution during COVID-19, listeners from India to North America [have accessed FIPP expertise in a way they could not have before.](#)

Another example is the Economist Group's World Ocean Initiative, which aims to “foster a global conversation on the

greatest challenges facing the seas”, and which is hosting a series of virtual events with high-profile speakers over the coming months. Over 700 people attended the first Insight Hour webinar, and physical events are scheduled for further down the line.

Despite the economic uncertainty caused by the pandemic, consumers still want high quality output from their favourite media brands – and are more open to trying new brands.

“The most effective and inspiring media brands are capturing both the pull of escapism and the compulsion to stay constantly and reliably informed,” concludes Condé Nast Britain's new report<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> [fipp.com/news](https://www.fipp.com/news)



IR Magazine’s virtual event ‘IR in the time of Covid-19’

## Conferences

How do you replicate the conferences that have been a staple of both B2B and B2C media for decades? Publishers have experimented with conferences, but specially adapted to Zoom or similar software. By the end of March 2020 a host of publishers – including The Atlantic, Axios, and The Wall Street Journal – had already rapidly modified their physical conferences<sup>2</sup> for the digital sphere.

<sup>2</sup> adweek.com

Rather than live-streaming a traditional panel, speakers can instead be encouraged to deliver shorter presentations and encourage engagement via chat functions, with breakout room features used to divide participants by various interests into different sessions.

Many scientific conferences have been run in this way, and brands such as Internet Age Media (IAM) – whose Barcelona-bound event was instead run on Zoom for 350 paying attendees – have shifted to digital with impressive speed and nimbleness. IR Magazine ran its free, full-day global virtual event in a similar way, making the recording available for on-demand streaming afterwards and providing handy follow-up resource libraries for attendees.

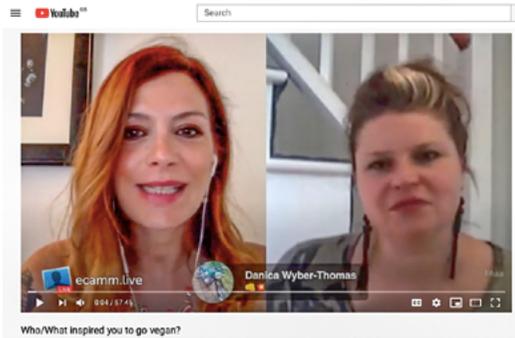
## Social media meets

Another option is a meeting on social media, like the recent one on Instagram Live from Cherry Bombe. The female-focused food brand had anticipated 700 paying attendees at its in-person Jubilee event in New York, but instead used Instagram Live to put on Jubilee 2.0 – an entirely online event which reached 180,300 Instagram accounts<sup>3</sup>. Participants were encouraged to “bounce around” the



Cherry Bombe’s Jubilee 2.0 Instagram Live series

<sup>3</sup> adage.com



**Ethica Magazine's YouTube Live session on what inspired some readers to go vegan.**

different speakers across the 9-hour day, who delivered cookery demo's and talks (later posted as Stories) via their own Instagram channels.

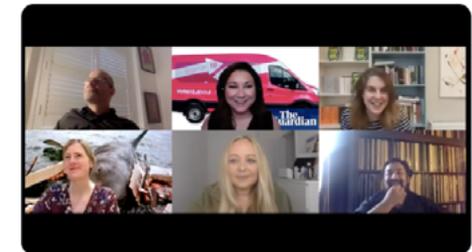
Tuning in to social media channels remains a tried-and-tested way to bridge links with readers, and this method has been revamped during lockdown. UK lifestyle and vegan magazine Ethica hosts interactive sessions via YouTube Live, asking readers to engage with questions such as "who/what inspired you to go vegan?", followed by a discussion.

What's more, as TechCrunch reports<sup>4</sup>, Facebook is challenging Twitter's status as the default "second screen" with the launch of Venue in May 2020, an app billed as a digital companion for live events. Live broadcasts allow opportunities to bring potentially millions of users together simultaneously, but rather than Twitter's democratic approach to commenting, Venue allows only high-profile analysts such as journalists, current or former athletes, or influencers to curate the conversation. This may offer some media companies another way of generating interaction with readers.

## Podcasts

Another format worth exploring, and one which media brands already excel at, is live podcast recordings. Podcasts have

<sup>4</sup> techcrunch.com



**The Bunker Podcast Zoom sessions.**

the advantage of being relatively easy to stage, and the low-production value is part of the appeal. As Amy Martin, Eventbrite's Content Marketing Manager for the UK and Ireland, wrote<sup>5</sup>: "When it comes to a live podcast event, all you need is a couple of comfy chairs, a coffee table, and some microphones."

The same is almost true when delivered

<sup>5</sup> eventbrite.co.uk



Nat Geo's Consider This podcast.

virtually – and British podcasts such as Remainiacs and sister podcast The Bunker have embraced the format, with regular real-time Zoom sessions exclusively for Patreon backers. The creators have referred to a surge of new subscribers under lockdown. Gal-dem Magazine has also offered recordings of its live-from-lockdown discussions with guests, such as a recent episode

recorded remotely from the Words Weekend festival.

Another example is The Spectator, which collaborated with over-50s network Circle Square to record an episode of its Books Podcast as part of an online event. Meanwhile National Geographic has launched a 12-part podcast series called 'Consider This' in the run-up to the Emmy Awards, featuring contenders from Nat Geo's own portfolio, including Jeff Goldblum and Bear Grylls.

A major plus of podcasts is content recycling: they can be recorded and released to followers further down the line. Live videos, such as those hosted on Instagram Live, can be easily converted into a podcast using software like Anchor.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> medium.com

## Social get-togethers

Fusing a live podcast recording with a social gathering vibe, The Irish Times Women's Podcast has been hosting "Big Nights In" with listeners during lockdown. The series began in January in a Dublin cultural centre, but moved to Zoom after lockdown. Guests have included musician Lisa Hannigan and author Marian Keyes. Over 800 Irish Times subscribers have tuned in so far.<sup>7</sup>

## Fun challenges

A good outlet knows its audience extremely well. It also knows what kinds of events will usually get a good reception. This becomes somewhat skewed when everything takes place online – but events can still function as successful brand extensions.

<sup>7</sup> adworld.ie

Magazines with a physically active audience are finding success with creative ways of exercising while social distancing remains in place. One example is Cycling Weekly's sister company, UKCE, which hosts sportives across the UK. These haven't stopped during the pandemic. Instead, readers are taking part, for example, in various #StayinandRide challenges. They record their progress on a regular cycle ride outside or on an indoor bike, using a designated fitness companion app. For a small fee, participants can receive a certificate and medal.

## Virtual reality (VR)

Some events have gone meta, building their theme into the format – such as the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) Conference on Virtual Reality and 3D User Interfaces, originally scheduled to be held in Atlanta, Georgia,



USA and instead hosted by Mozilla Hubs in March 2020. Organisers made extensive use of VR in this all-digital offering, with simulated stages, award ceremonies, and avatars for the more than 2,000 participants<sup>8</sup>.

VR headsets are hardly household items, coming with a hefty price tag. But if you are appealing to a niche audience that is likely to access one, there's the additional advantage of reduced distractions – it's difficult to play on another device when you're immersed in a VR headset.

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<sup>8</sup> qz.com

Like any event, some preparation is essential – but it needn't begin several months in advance, as with many in-person events. Here are some of the main things you should consider as you prepare.

### Free or paid-for?

One of the first things to consider is whether you will charge for your event. Many publishers have made their initial virtual event offerings free to attend in the first few months of the pandemic, treating them as an experiment. As time goes by, what people are willing to pay for will become clearer.



“A bit of friction in the registration process is good, as it ensures the right people show up,” Xiaoyin Qu, the co-founder of a new virtual conference start-up called Run the World, told Wired<sup>1</sup>. And the audience is potentially limitless: “We can sell infinite tickets to a global audience. That is pretty powerful. Revolutionary, even,” Orson Francescone, managing director of FT Live, told the Drum<sup>2</sup>.

Part of the problem with charging for online occasions is that people are

<sup>1</sup> wired.com  
<sup>2</sup> thedrum.com

used to getting things for free on the internet. A blog post for INXPO, a video platform and virtual events solutions company, recommends<sup>3</sup> that hosts think about two key things – attendance and sponsorship – and try to weigh them up against each other. “We’ve seen customers doing different blends of each side of the equation,” it says. “Free attendance but heavy sponsorship, paid attendance and light sponsorship, paid attendance and heavy sponsorship, etc.”

Tortoise Media – the British crowd-funded start-up that pioneered “slow news” – has circumvented the question somewhat by focusing on getting new subscribers and establishing a pathway for future interactions. As Tortoise’s co-founder **Katie Vanneck-Smith** told



**Katie Vanneck-Smith,**  
Tortoise co-founder

FIPP: “You have to be a member to attend a Tortoise ThinkIn – so if you see a guest you want to meet, or a conversation you want to be part of – you need to join up to attend. You can start with a 30-day free trial.”

With a business model built around paid membership, they’re treating attendees as potential new members. “ThinkIns are also the key to engagement and therefore retention,” Katie added. “We are seeing our current new members come to 3+ ThinkIns on average in their first month. We have anything from 200 to 2000+ attending – the maximum capacity in our [physical] newsroom was around 120 (if everyone squeezed in...)”

Nonetheless, virtual events cannot replace physical ones, because being able to connect in person is such an important feature of membership.

“ThinkIns are at the heart of what we do at Tortoise,” Katie added. “They are now digital first – but we will return to hosting ThinkIns in person as well – when the rules allow. As a membership organisation, meeting up in person is part of what makes membership special.”

Other things to mull over are the costs of setting up the event (eg. speaker fees, studio lighting, technology), demand for your content (is this an event that people are independently excited about, or have they been told to attend by their employer?), and whether revenue or engagement is more important to your brand at this moment (of course, ideally you want both!).

## Research platforms

One thing that experienced online event organisers know is that the platform really matters. While Zoom’s intuitive simplicity and the familiarity of Microsoft Teams and Google Meet make them

<sup>3</sup> [blog.inxpo.com](http://blog.inxpo.com)

popular options, other platforms offer different services. SwapCard is an app and desktop site designed specifically to facilitate online networking; Cisco's Webex has a user-friendly look and feel; and vMix is popular for its green room function.

Internet security should be actively considered, too. Zoom, for instance, has been troubled by security breaches, while Webex's end-to-end encryption option must be manually enabled by call administrators. Microsoft's Skype, meanwhile, recently launched a new feature called Meet Now that allows any user to initiate or join a group video call without creating an account. But since anyone with the link can access a meeting (and the links don't expire), there are security issues there, too.

None of this is prohibitive – it all



Edie Lush, executive editor, Hub Culture

depends on the type of event you are hosting, and how much security matters to your users. Book clubs likely won't have the same privacy requirements as, say, a conference on internet safety for children.

The most important thing is that everyone involved knows how to navigate the technology and deal with any issues that arise. That's really the mark of a good event, says **Edie Lush**, podcast host, communications trainer, and Executive Editor at innovation-led social networking service Hub Culture, who MCs dozens of events per year. "All the usual rules about good speakers apply – they need to be saying something that's different and interesting and arrests the audience," Edie told FIPP. "But they also need an ability to navigate the digital platform, and some people just aren't good at it or think it doesn't matter. The ones

who take the time to figure it out with speakers in advance – those are the best online conferences."

### Online networking capabilities

For many people, going to a conference is about networking much more than it is about listening to speakers. So, can Zoom breakout rooms really replace the serendipity of face-to-face networking? Unlikely. It's probably the biggest plus of physical events, as even the very best video-conferencing technology cannot capture the energy of a full room of excited people.

Nevertheless, there is still value to be gleaned. As mentioned above, apps like SwapCard have been designed specifically to imitate event matchmaking, in this case by algorithmically analysing the profiles of attendees and exhibitors and then suggesting the most relevant people to "meet". Other handy features include

a business card scanner, real-time analytics, and the possibility for sponsors and exhibitors to record interactions and sync data with their CRM system.

Deal Room is a similar platform, specialising in online networking and offering a fast setup (create an event in less than 10 minutes) and features like one-on-one meetings, multi-speaker streaming, online round tables, and visibility for sponsors and exhibitors. Attendees can add information under “Offer” and “Seek”, similar to how an “Ask me about ...” lanyard works in person.

And there are perks to online networking. Edie Lush says that because during the pandemic people have been more open and willing to take part in online events, she has connected with a lot of people that she otherwise wouldn't have. “I've been more brazen with my requests on



Communications consultant Andy Bounds

LinkedIn, for example,” she says.

In the same way, while it won't be accessible for everyone, technology such as VR can help to facilitate networking. It levels the playing field between star speakers and regular attendees – when everyone is using an avatar, speakers are more approachable and less intimidating.

### How to keep people engaged

What can you do to make your speech more three dimensional? Award-winning communications consultant **Andy Bounds** had some tips [at a recent webinar hosted by FIPP](#).

“When delivering a presentation, you want people to be excited, energised, and happy they attended,” he said. Adding energy and humour where appropriate is one way of doing this, and Andy also recommends signposting:

“you want people to recall the information you're giving them, so remind them regularly why they are here, what you are going to show them, and what they will get out of it by the end.”

As Anne Quito writes for Quartz<sup>4</sup>, the German language has the perfect term for this situation: *sitzfleisch*. To have *sitzfleisch* (“sitting flesh”) means the skill of having enough mental and physical stamina to endure sitting still without getting fidgety. At a time when many of us are spending lengthy periods of time at home, *sitzfleisch* comes at a premium, and capturing someone's attention enough to get them to tune in, listen, and engage is the real challenge.

Andy Bounds prescribes direct eye contact, even if that can feel a little strange. “Eye contact means people have to look at their camera, so their

<sup>4</sup> qz.com

audience feels they're being looked at in the eye," he told FIPP. "You'll know this from watching TV. The presenter always seems to be looking at you."

Eddie Lush agrees. "You are trying to create live broadcast television," she told FIPP. "Think about live TV and all the things that can go wrong – the feed fails; the person's audio is wrong; there's some crazy background noise; they can't hear you. That is what we are expecting people managing these online events to cope with. But the good news is we can all learn these skills – we'll all become live TV directors."

In Zoom meetings for instance, both Eddie and Andy agree: many presenters make the mistake of looking at their audience on their computer screen, instead of at their camera at the top of the laptop. "But this means that, to their audience, they're looking below their eye line", which is ineffective, says Andy.

## Plan for awkward moments

Whether it's technological glitches or audio lag, there are always going to be awkward moments. And with online events, you won't have the usual tools at your disposal to smooth them out, so there's plenty to worry about: what if the software gets overwhelmed? How will you deal with a frozen screen or audio sputter? What if the platform you've chosen for connecting simply isn't up to the task? And what if children or loud noises keep interrupting the flow?

As with many issues, it's the way you deal with them that your audience will remember. Make sure to have a plan for every fail that can reasonably be expected, and practise appropriate responses in advance. Most audiences will be understanding of the occasional wrinkle, but people's patience will wear thin, and they will expect higher quality if they are paying.

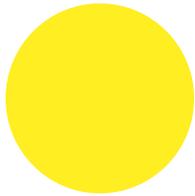
"The cardinal rule is have a plan A, a plan B, and a plan C," says Eddie Lush. "And tell everyone what the plan is."

## Visuals

Will there be a consistent background for every guest? Will you even have a background? Will the names of sponsors be in full view? What should you and guests wear?

"In the evolution of good video conferencing behaviour, what I'm seeing is that the most professional people are moving to a blank wall behind them," says Eddie Lush. "No bookshelf, nothing. Or really bright lights in front of them, and a black background." She also recommends that speakers always stand up: "It increases attentiveness and can make you feel better equipped to handle difficult situations if they arise."

When hosting webinars, says FIPP CEO James Hewes, "you want a professional



“The cardinal rule is have a plan A, a plan B, and a plan C for when things go wrong”

Edie Lush, Hub Culture

look and feel, which means that seeing your home office in the background is a no-no. We experimented with green screens and virtual backgrounds but on home set-ups the quality is poor, and the experience is unreliable.”

### How long it will be?

As mentioned before, screen time should be strictly monitored. Online presentations should be snappy and to the point. Andy Bounds recommends 20 or 40 minute speaking slots, which are more digestible (and less predictable) than a full hour or 30 minutes. “If it can be shorter, do it!” he says. “Natural rapport-building can’t occur in the same way, and it’s OK to accept that.”

“I don’t know anyone who would want to sit through speaker after speaker



Cobus Heyl, chief content officer and marketing manager, FIPP

for hours on end,” says FIPP’s chief content officer **Cobus Heyl**. “In the way consumption of most news happens at the atomic level (unit of content), we believe similar principles will apply here.” Break content into consumable “chunks”, he adds, and give people plenty of chances to take coffee breaks, use the bathroom – and stretch their legs.

For longer events, like Bloomberg Live’s first-ever multi-day virtual live event in June 2020, the pressure is less intense on audience members to participate in everything. This ability to drop in and out of sessions may go some way towards mimicking the physical feel of a multi-room conference centre with lots of interesting talks going on.

### Measure success

Signing up with an email address is not the same as paying USD \$1,500 for a ticket, booking flights and hotels, and taking time off work. The format has changed, so the metrics should too. How will you measure if your event has been a success? How much of a role will post-event content play? And how will you keep the relationship going with attendees afterwards?

“Key data to look out for are the number of registered delegates versus those actually attending; how long they stayed on; how much attention they were paying; and transcripts of questions asked and chat,” says James Hewes. You can also send out different URLs for your event as a way of tracking where your audience is coming from.

## Planning ahead

- **Have a script**

When real-life, face-to-face interactions and body language cues are off, the value of the spoken word is under the spotlight. Having a script is a must, says FIPP's James Hewes. "Pauses and hesitation are even more apparent on video than they are in real life, so make sure your script helps you navigate your way through the event." Zoom has a "practice" function, he adds, so make sure you make use of that.

- **Plan how it will end**

What's the best way to end a presentation? Consider whether you'll opt for a straightforward goodbye from the host or presenter, an invitation to participants to click on hand-clapping emojis, verbal responses (if it's an intimate event), typing thank you's... or an applause track from YouTube, which is what the organisers of IAM Weekend – originally scheduled to be in Barcelona and later switched to Zoom – opted for.

End a presentation by outlining actionable points and your own corresponding reactions, says Andy Bounds: "If you as an audience do this, then I am going to do *that*." One example might be eschewing the vague "get in touch with any questions" for "feel free to email me with a question about y, and I will then reply with x."

- **Translations**

Part of making an event more global is offering live translations, but with interpreters potentially on opposite sides of the globe with different internet speeds, it can get tangled very quickly. Glitches are common, and frustration can follow suit.

"Nobody has quite cracked the translation side of online conferences," says Edie Lush. She instead suggests dividing breakout rooms by language, so that speakers of different languages can connect directly without interpreters.

- **Follow-ups**

Follow-up emails are a great way to remind your audience of what they learned, to share links to topics discussed, and to invite them to your next event.

Be open about re-sharing presentations post-event, since people cannot be expected to make notes all day and you want to keep presentation slides free of words and clutter. "Offer to send a full script after," says Andy Bounds.

There's an added role for sponsors, too. In a nice touch, Kerry Diamond, co-founder and editorial director of Cherry Bombe, emailed participants a goodie bag after the day-long food-focused conference which unfolded across 9 hours on Instagram Live. The goodie bag contained discount coupons and vouchers from the event's sponsors – a memorable way to tie up the day and connect audiences with sponsors.



## WEBINAR TIPS FROM FIPP CEO JAMES HEWES

FIPP has always made use of webinars to communicate with our members. But unprecedented times called for a swift upskilling. Here's what we learned – the hard way

### ▶▶ It's a talk show, not a lecture!

Ditch the lengthy slide decks and use slides sparingly, as a prompt. Your audience will lose focus otherwise. Focus on the conversation and get to the point.

### ▶▶ Keep it small

In addition to the host, don't have more than two guests in a conversation at any one time. Webinars eat up time more quickly than physical events and your audience will get lost trying to pay attention to too many speakers.

### ▶▶ Tech matters

There's no right or wrong platform, but make sure it's one that you trust and is user-friendly, and corresponds to your business objectives. For example, different platforms allow different levels of customisation and branding (Zoom is quite poor at this). Also think about how the platform communicates with delegates before and after an event. We get around 10 per cent of our attendees on each webinar through links provided in post-event emails for the previous webinar. And if you want to share your webinars after they're over, be sure they are being automatically recorded.

### ▶▶ Use the chat function

One of the best things about webinars as opposed to in-person events is the ease with which people will ask questions. Make sure you keep your eye on incoming queries and integrate Q&As into your presentation as a way of getting the conversation flowing.

### ▶▶ Use analytics to learn about your audience

If you have a strong marketing / CRM focus, then you'll want to look at the extent to which your chosen platform supports custom URLs to allow source tracking (FIPP creates 10-15 different URLs for each webinar, to allow us to understand where the audience come from) and integrates with your CRM platform. In post-event analytics, look out for data such as the number of registered delegates versus those actually attending; how long they stayed on; how much attention they were paying; and transcripts of questions asked and chat. Post-event, consider splitting webinar recordings into shareable clips that you can then use on social media to drive more traffic and awareness.

### ▶▶ Prepare, prepare, prepare

This is essential. Once the event is underway, it's too late to fix glitches. So have a script and practice it. Hold a call with your guests beforehand and talk through how the event will unfold. Test that slide-sharing works. Agree how questions will be fielded – and what to do if something goes wrong.

### ▶▶ Have good sound and lighting

Will need a sound-proofed room or additional lighting? Generally, extra lighting works wonders and looks more professional. Are your webcam and microphone good enough? A lapel mic is a good investment. One good tip (from TV people) is to try to put everything in the same place each time so that it always looks the same – I have some pieces of tape on the floor to indicate where it all goes.

### ▶▶ Backdrop and visual elements

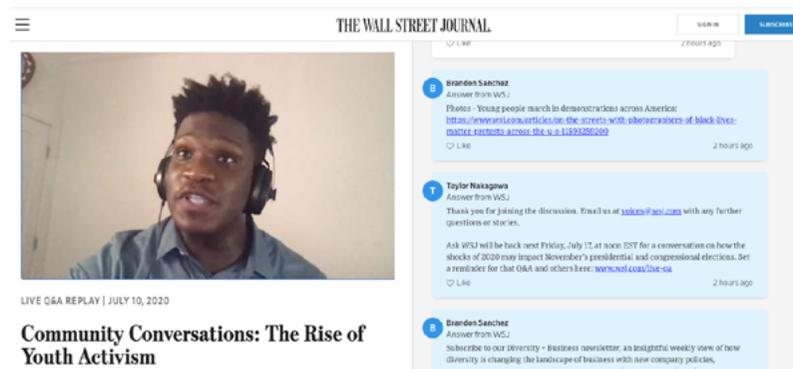
Get a vinyl backdrop made. These are not expensive (about GBP £40-50) and look professional. I also bought a backdrop stand to hang it from, which cost another GBP £50. At FIPP, we also use custom backdrops for sponsored sessions.

## 04

# What are the gains?

During the pandemic, many online events have been pulled together on the fly. Yet even if imperfect, the online events space has many advantages which are becoming clearer as time goes by.

Of course, media brands have made use of video-conferencing and online tools for years now, but they've been fast-tracked to the top of the priority list as a result of COVID-19. With a bit of planning and preparation, they can be slick operations. Here are some of the main opportunities afforded by virtual events.



WSJ's online live

## The 'in it together' effect

In our [previous report](#), we emphasised “the experience economy” and how, within this new landscape where demand for meaningful interaction is soaring,

the best physical events tended to offer attendees an exclusive experience: something they'd want to talk about with friends, share online, or go to again. That sense of community has been both the most longed-for *and* the most difficult thing to replicate during the pandemic. Meeting new people and conversing with like-minded strangers was also one of the major selling points of large, in-person conferences.

Nonetheless, there are ways of creating that digital handshake. Online events have offered, and continue to offer, a way for isolated people to connect. The

feeling of being “in this together” can be harnessed by virtual events, representing an opportunity to make people feel closer during anxious times. The fact that a large proportion of the world population was (and still is) “stuck” at home has meant that there’s an obvious commonality to each attendee’s present situation – a starting point to build upon.

One good example is The Wall Street Journal’s online live Q&As, which aim to stimulate community conversations on topics such as policing during a pandemic or race at work.

Another example comes from TED. The 36-year-old non-profit, famous for its curated series of seamless presentations delivered to auditoriums full of inspired attendees, has swivelled to virtual gatherings in recent months. Identifying a demand for its intelligent content, across March and April TED live streamed a daily conversation

**TED Connect:  
Community and Hope  
live-streamed series**



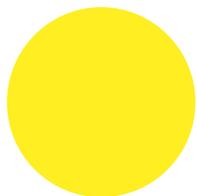
series via Facebook Live with high-profile speakers like Bill Gates and Priya Parker under the banner “TED Connects: Community and Hope”.

“TED is about the sharing of ideas – and the building of a kind of community,” Chris Anderson, Head of TED, said in a recent podcast<sup>1</sup>. “Both of those things you can actually do in a world when no one can move out of their homes,

courtesy of the internet.” After initially worrying that TED’s business model – built around lively physical conferences – was in jeopardy, he then saw a large nook that TED could fill. The pandemic became an opportunity to embrace connections and create community of a different kind.

Similarly, the team behind Tortoise Media recognised a service they could

<sup>1</sup> soundcloud.com



“Numbers at the digital ThinkIns have far exceed anything we could have hosted in our newsroom.”

Katie Vanneck-Smith, Tortoise co-founder

continue to provide during the pandemic. ThinkIns – Tortoise’s daily news conference opened up for members and invited guests – are normally held in person, but they switched to online within 48 hours. “So a week before Boris Johnson asked the UK to stay home, save lives and protect the NHS we were already running our daily ThinkIns via Zoom,” the brand’s co-founder Katie Vanneck-Smith told FIPP. “We know how important they are to our members and our journalism – it was inconceivable to us that they would stop.”

While not strictly *events*, they are proving a very popular way for people to engage with the brand: “When everyone was thrown into lockdown, digital ThinkIns and our daily email Sensemaker have given people a

chance to have their views heard and provided clear, thoughtful analysis of the unfolding events,” Katie added. “We have seen numbers at the digital ThinkIns far exceed anything we could have hosted in our newsroom.” Tortoise have also been running special conferences, such as a day-long seminar on Artificial Intelligence that attracted over 2,000 delegates.

### **Increase reach and attract new audiences**

As well as generating a sense of community, online events offer an exciting chance to democratise the events space. Visas can be expensive and difficult to obtain if you don’t have the “right” passport, and costly travel is off-limits for many people. Online events also lessen accessibility concerns for

both organisers and attendees. Those with underlying health conditions, disabilities, or family commitments may welcome the chance to gain access to expertise, experiences, and information that they otherwise couldn’t.

The advantage of online functions over physical ones in this regard is crystal clear, says Edie Lush. “I predict that when real-life events return, they will endeavour to have an online side to them if they possibly can – if they’ve managed to get to that global audience,” Edie told FIPP.

Recognising the inequalities that the pandemic would expose, Katie Vanneck-Smith of Tortoise told FIPP about the brand’s approach to meeting the needs of its audiences – old and new.

Compared to physical events, “the [virtual] rooms are more inclusive, global and can scale,” she said. “They have allowed people who wouldn’t have normally been able to make it to one of our ThinkIns to be part of it. We have also been able to convene really interesting speakers who are more available. It has removed geographic barriers and also made them more accessible to an increasingly diverse group of people – especially attracting a younger, engaged audience.”

She added: “We also realised that this pandemic was not going to be the great leveller – it was going to compound the inequalities we see in society. So we have aimed to make our journalism reflect as many voices as possible. We have a wide and diverse membership base and we have brought in what we called the Unheard Voices – people whose experiences are typically ignored – and Letters

from Lockdown written by members.”

There’s another advantage to events with global reach, in that organisers can integrate attendees’ different time zones into their planning to maximise accessibility and attendance. For example, sessions held in the British Standard Time’s (BST) morning will be slanted towards a live audience made up of much of Asia and EMEA. On the other hand, sessions in the BST afternoon will be slanted towards a live audience made of EMEA, and much of North and South America. Networking by topic and breaking up discussions into chunks can be easier online, too, using platforms’ particular features to divide content more manageably.

Of course, these kinds of arguments have been made before, but that was before COVID-19 changed everything. With high-speed internet now a reality in many parts of the world, a global swing

to online events could really benefit those for whom international travel, or even leaving home, is an impossibility.

### Lower cost

Some of the downsides to virtual events – explored at the end of this report – are offset by the enormous reduction in cost. Finding a venue, taking care of speakers, and making sure everyone has enough to eat and drink is no longer necessary. Many logistical difficulties can be sidestepped. All you really need are good guests and a professional set-up. (Unless the sight of a high-profile speaker in their pyjamas is part of the appeal, of course.)

“You want to give the best impression to your audience,” wrote [James Hewes](#), FIPP CEO. “This is what we learned from two months of hosting webinars. And, given you can source a professional-looking set-up for under GBP £500 / USD \$600, there’s no excuse for not delivering a high-quality experience. It’s

likely we're going to be doing this for a long while, so you might as well get set up accordingly!"

## Monetisation and subscription-boosting

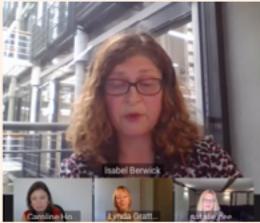
You can turn to online events as an alternative revenue stream, taking advantage of broader global reach and renewed interest in digital offerings to drive membership packages and sign up new readers. As Digiday reports<sup>2</sup>, TechCrunch has tied Extra Crunch Live – its series of investor Q&As – to paid membership and seen huge growth. Meanwhile, NYTLive has reaped success with virtual events, with significant proportions of the more than 250,000 attendees from 110 different countries not being New York Times subscribers. Jessica Flood, managing director at NYTLive, said: "We are engaging that group in a variety of ways, including

<sup>2</sup> [digiday.com](https://www.digiday.com)

Financial Times' FT Digital Dialogues



Watch the on-demand video of **Future-Proofing Investment Portfolios: A New ESG Framework for a New World** [here](#)



Watch the on-demand video of **Opportunity in Adversity: Mastering the Art of Self-Renewal** [here](#)



Watch the on-demand video of **Business Books in Times of Uncertainty** [here](#)

a new suite of subscriber-only virtual events launching in the coming weeks."

Financial publishers like Bloomberg and The Financial Times have had their finger on the pulse for a while, understanding paying subscribers to be the most engaged customers who read more articles both before and after an event. With its more than 150 physical events on pause for now, FTLive is still offering on-demand video versions while still drawing 5,500 attendees<sup>3</sup> to a four-day FT Digital Dialogues digital event in April 2020. FT Global Boardroom, a fully live, global digital event, had 100 remote speakers and 52,000 delegates.

As with physical events, sponsorship is another huge opportunity for publishers. "The value proposition for participants and sponsors of a virtual event is different from a physical event, but it

<sup>3</sup> [digiday.com](https://www.digiday.com)

is not of lower value,” says FIPP’s chief content officer, Cobus Heyl. “Physical events have their obvious merits, but virtual events have theirs too.”

### Act as a consultant

As Adweek reports<sup>4</sup>, there’s also an opportunity for publishers to leverage their knowledge and act as consultants to organisations wanting to put on their own virtual events. For example, publisher Government Executive Media Group (GEMG), established set up GovExec Virtuoso to beef up its consultancy capabilities and has its sights set on the public sector. The idea is to advise on and facilitate events, including bolt-on services like audience polling, interactive sessions, and round tables.

“The reality is live events are forever changed. We’re not going to see people convening in hotel ballrooms anytime

<sup>4</sup> .adweek.com

soon. That networking component won’t come back,” Tim Hartman, CEO of GEMG, told Adweek. “We’re rethinking the entire experience as digital.”

### Data collection and content creation

Physical events might be on pause, but the (albeit different) KPIs of virtual events are still revealing. The distinct advantage is that the data is instantly available to refine quality and offer feedback on the go. Having the choice to watch something live or on-demand is also a huge bonus for many people.

The generation of such content is one of the key benefits of running events, whether on- or offline. Reports, videos, podcasts, and even screen shots can all be shared downstream, increasing audience reach even further. As Jonathan Moore, SVP of Events at Bonnier, said in our 2019 report: “The passion our audiences have for the content is a key

driver for us in developing an events strategy that aligns with the content our editorial teams are producing.”

### More active audience

One of the biggest takeaways here at FIPP has been the increased engagement of our audiences. “Unlike in physical events, where asking questions can be painful, online audiences are more than willing to submit questions via the webinar platform,” said FIPP CEO James Hewes. “During one recent webinar, we had more than 30 in a single hour.”

James advises using audience questions as you go to help smooth out wrinkles in the virtual experience, rather than saving them up for a specific Q&A at the end. “Keep an eye out for questions that are relevant to whatever bit of the conversation you’re on and throw these in. The audience will feel more like they’re part of the event and it will make the whole thing flow more naturally.”

## 05

# A hybrid future

As we have seen, many publishers have dived head first into the online events space, while others have been more cautious or limited by financial constraints. Yet as magazines come back to life after the long shock of COVID-19, events in all their forms seem more important than ever to publishers' business models.

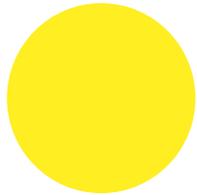
The scope for online events is, in theory, endless, and the playing field appears wide open for the foreseeable future. "We're witnessing a change that's going to last for a couple years at least," said Technalysis Research analyst Bob



O'Donnell on CNET<sup>1</sup>: "Everything is being questioned at this point."

Something we consistently heard when researching for this report was the notion of hybrid offerings. If necessity is the mother of invention, the lockdown has certainly been a source of experimentation – and media brands will be keen to keep hold of the new audiences and global reach they have acquired during the past couple of months.

<sup>1</sup> cnet.com



“When real-life events return, they will endeavour to have an online side to them if they can”

Edie Lush, Hub Culture

After all, if online events have been a success, why stop now? Even as the strictest lockdown conditions ease and physical events begin to return, online events are now an established part of the ecosystem.

Orson Francescone, managing director of FT Live, revealed his optimism<sup>2</sup> about the ability of the media industry to get better at selling online events. “The best salespeople will rapidly evolve their conversations with clients from ‘this is a second-best alternative to make-do in these uncertain times’ to ‘you want this digital solution a lot more than you thought you wanted that physical event, and let me show you why,’” he said.

In the past, online events may not have

reached their promised zenith because there were never any significant barriers to getting together in person. Yet with travel restrictions and a worldwide economic squeeze forecast for the near future, virtual gatherings are often, for now, the only option. The pandemic has intensified our relationships with our devices – no one is seriously keeping a check on their screen time any more – and this means more people hungry for high quality online offerings. Aided by AI, improved noise-cancelling technology is in the works<sup>3</sup>, and, fuelled by demand, we are likely to see more online event innovations come along as firms scramble to provide services for a captive (or cautious) workforce, establish themselves as a go-to, and reap the financial rewards.

What’s more, this is likely to happen again. Second waves of COVID-19 are predicted, and the risk of another global influenza pandemic remains high on the World Health Organization’s list of top 10 threats to global health<sup>4</sup>. Concerns about the climate and people working from home en masse might be enough to change course and make this change more permanent. Companies are beefing up their offerings in anticipation of social distancing becoming a norm. So while “Zoom fatigue” is real and the constant slew of online events may well leave people hankering after the real thing, renewed interest and the raising of the overall standard of online events should ensure they remain a reliable and lucrative option for publishers in times to come. ■

<sup>2</sup> [thedrum.com](https://www.thedrum.com)

<sup>3</sup> [nrc.nl/nieuws](https://nrc.nl/nieuws)

<sup>4</sup> [who.int/news-room](https://www.who.int/news-room)



**FIPP**  
Connecting  
Global Media

## ● What we do

**FIPP – Connecting Global Media** represents content-rich companies or individuals involved in the creation, publishing or sharing of quality content to audiences of interest. FIPP exists to help its members develop better strategies and build better businesses by identifying and communicating emerging trends, sharing knowledge, and improving skills, worldwide.

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