

Are International Symposia Becoming Redundant and Elitist?

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ABSTRACT

In this age of hi-tech, there is no longer a good and valid reason to travel across the globe to attend an international symposium. Excessive costs, waste of precious research funding, and a relatively low benefit: cost ratio should allow those who attend congresses and symposia to reflect and re-think their true reasons for attending such meetings. Surely a face-to-face free live chat about a topic of interest with a peer via Skype or Yahoo Messenger would be the most effective way to resolve any queries related to academic issues. Although online conferencing certainly does not beat the ritzy hotel receptions and glamorous gala dinners, it certainly is a thousand-fold more cost-effective. The true reason, in most cases, why many attendees of a conference travel sometimes thousands of miles to deliver one speech or to put up a single poster is the ability to escape the routine, or the freedom to use laboratory or research funding to do so. The excuse given will almost inevitably be that it is an excellent opportunity to network, but the fact is this is easily possible with an e-mail. The truth of the matter is that the world is now in a state of new awareness and consciousness, and those that lie on either extreme of this social, economic and ethical battle, are in a fierce struggle to implement a new dynamic. I am of the opinion that there is a blind failure in economic responsibilities that is leading to the establishment of a congress elite that uses plastic rationale to justify the waste. One key question is: if you were to pay from your own pocket, would you attend an international meeting?

Keywords: bathos, consciousness, symposia, waste

Abbreviations: ICS, international congresses and/or symposia

WHY HAS THE FUNCTION OF INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIA BECOME DILUTED?

10 or 20 years ago, I would have avidly supported the concept of international congresses and/or symposia (ICS). 10-20 years ago, the internet was not as powerful, or flexible, as it is now. Now, with a little funding, a good internet connection and stable server, a good online conferencing software can be bought, or, for those with more restricted budgets, software such as Skype or Yahoo Messenger are all freely available software that allow real-time text, visual and audio communication with one or a few individuals. Thus, 10-20 years ago, attending an ICS would have been justified due to poor or insufficient communication channels, or methods that were either too slow, or ineffective. Now, even PC-to-PC calls or PC-to-landline calls are either cheap, or free. Online cameras or in-built cameras on computers can be used for easy and convenient teleconferencing. In such a case, the ICS has become vastly redundant. If so, then why does there seem to be an alarmingly large increase in the number of ICS?

>€2000 TO PRESENT ONE POSTER OR SPEECH!

Except for local young scientists who might be fortunate enough to attend an ICS, the great majority of attendees of a symposium are academics with good research funding, possibly most of them being professors since it is this stratum of academia that can safe-guard research funding. Many ICS have a restriction on the number of oral presentations or posters that can be presented. This means that the investment to travel to a distant destination becomes absurdly large relative to what is being produced or presented. And in a meeting where there are 1500 attendees, one poster will inevitably get lost, or attention to it reduced. Examining a more concrete example, let's imagine a Japanese scientist will be attending a 5-day ICS in the EU, and feels proud to be presenting a poster or even an oral presentation. In addition to the amount of time spent preparing the poster

or speech, and in the case on non-native English speakers, additional funding for revising and improving the English, other costs involved would include: a) travel costs, including transit transport fees to get to an international airport, airplane fees, bus, metro or taxi fares, airport and other taxes. Depending on the season, on the class of flight, and on the distance from the international airport, total costs can vary. However, from Kagawa to Osaka International Airport (Kansai), the cheapest round-trip ticket would cost anything between ¥16,000 and ¥25,000, depending on whether the bus, ferry, or *shinkansen* (bullet train) and other trains are used. Depending on the airline and the class, as well as the season, all kinds of fares are available. An off-season low-cost carrier could cost, with no frills flying, no less than ¥80,000 (round-trip per person to a major destination anywhere in the EU). In the peak season, at best, the cost will almost never be less than ¥150,000. b) ICS registration fees, which can range anything from ¥30,000 to ¥90,000. c) Hotel and accommodation. Most ICS take place in top level hotels, with accommodation usually being offered at all levels of prices, from the lowest pension-style motels to 5-star glitzy accommodation. Understandably, the range can be anything from ¥3,500 a night right up to ¥20,000-30,000 a night. d) Meals. Everyone has to eat, and in most ICS there is a wealth of options ranging from all meals inclusive to B&B (bed and breakfast)-type options. Eating out is another option. In all cases, these imply additional costs, and it would be reasonable to target, at the lower end of the scale, ¥2000-4000 a day for food. e) There are always miscellaneous costs involved, either by way of pleasure, gifts, shopping, or others. Let's assume a modest cost of ¥2000 a day for such miscellaneous costs. When added up, I estimate that, even with careful cost planning and assessment, that a trip to the EU from Japan, will cost, at least ¥200,000 (assuming a 7-day trip) which, at a conversion rate of ¥120 = €1, will be equivalent to €2200 (Feb 2013 rate).

In summary, it will cost a minimum of €2000 to present one poster or one oral presentation. And herein, a classic example of bathos (i.e., from the sublime to the ridiculous).

WHO PAYS? WHO CARES?

This is a key question. In most cases, attendees do not pay from their own pockets. I am of the opinion that if most attendees were to have to pay from their own personal finances, then most ICS would be ghost meetings, with a skeleton amount of attendees. This begs the question: who is paying? In the case of business individuals it is almost inevitably the business covering all costs. In the case of academics from universities, private or state, it would be research or project grants. The irony here is that a state-funded university allocates research funding for, as the name suggests, research. However, the rules of the game have been manipulated such that travel related to research is also included in this “research” fund. In other words, tax payers’ money is being used to finance luxurious travel by scientists to attend ICS. I wonder what the tax payers think? In this case, there is the development of an elitist stratum of scientists who use (or abuse) funding for activities that are only marginally related to their research, or that are excessively cost inefficient. Try to consider how much lab equipment or chemicals could be well spent if the €2000 were to be channeled in that direction.

IS IT IMMORAL?

Well, that depends on who’s asking the question. The elitist professor who has “unlimited” funds, and who uses taxpayer research funding for ICS costs might not care, but would only care if they were requested to pay for it by themselves. The conscientious scientist might feel that it is wrong and abusive to use excessive research funds for attending ICS, or might feel that the benefit: cost ratio is far too low to merit the waste of such a large amount of money. In financially challenging times, in a new era in which the elite of society and the less fortunate are clearly diverging more and more, a new state of consciousness needs to set in, and the question that needs to be asked is: where do you stand?

CONCLUSIONS

ICS have several negative aspects: 1) there has been a large increase in the number of ICS, primarily because the business community that is not linked with science sees ICS as big business opportunities; 2) there are many aspects related to ICS that are luxurious and frivolous or unnecessary (hence the excessive costs); 3) ICS and their participants are often elitist and redundant. However, several aspects should be kept in mind: i) despite being in the age of high-tech, high-tech is still not available to everyone, resulting in the punctuated isolationism such as elitist ICS; ii) if in fact a scientist attends an international symposium only because of one reason, i.e., to present one oral or poster presentation, this is truly a large waste both in terms of time and money, begging the question, is that waste justifiable? iii) online conferences, despite being able to resolve many limitations caused by scientists who are unable to attend an ICS because of the lack of funding, it does dehumanize the process of networking.

GLOSSARY

Bathos: An abrupt transition in style from the exalted to the commonplace, producing a ludicrous effect (according to Wikipedia).

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