

Report of scientific meeting
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Prospects of online scientific meetings

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The 22nd Annual Meeting of Society of Evolutionary Studies, Japan (SESJ) was held online on September 6-9th, 2020. The meeting was originally planned to be held in Okinawa as a regular on-site format. But, due to the rapid spread of COVID-19 around March ~ May 2020 in Japan, the SESJ board of directors gave up the on-site meeting and, instead, decided to host the annual meeting as an online format. We charged no fee for participation. We confined participation to our society members except for invited speakers and the press. The organization of an online science meeting was our first experience and was a challenge.

In this online meeting, the regular oral and poster presentations by society members were united and replaced with a new web-based format using LINC Biz: posting up to five self-explanatory poster pieces, each to be expanded by clicking it. We allowed posting together supplementary materials, such as movies, photos, or sounds (meant to be, e.g., animal vocalizations) to bolster the presentation. Questions, comments, and answers were entered as a text and posted there. The time constraint has been a matter of concern for regular poster presentation and discussion. This novel system appeared to promote visiting and discussion and, in a sense, to be a better format for poster presentation. Poster evaluation and award announcements were also carried out in this system during the meeting period.

This meeting, on the other hand, maintained regular programs using Zoom or other online systems that are member-proposed symposia including invited non-member speakers, international plenary talks, a summer school program for members, society awards ceremonies, and an award lecture. Council and member assemblies were also held online separately from the meeting dates. This flexibility was also a merit of online format. However, because of time shortage for preparation and arrangements, we gave up including a public symposium for general citizens and high-school poster presentations.

The total number of participants was comparable to that of regular meetings of this society in the past despite no high-school programs and exclusion of non-members. In fact, participation of regular members and students outnumbered those to meetings in recent years. The number of new membership applications also greatly increased for non-members to participate to this meeting. Although the free-of-charge registration would be a factor, the feasibility and flexibility of participation without traveling would have motivated, especially, young researchers with need of childcare. According to feedbacks, while on-site face-to-face meeting is desired by many participants, they also find possibilities of the new meeting format with online not only in feasibility of participation but also in fulfillment of scientific content and richer opportunity of discussion. In fact, amount of comments and questions posted for the chat space to LINC Biz posters and Zoom oral presentations apparently surpassed those in regular meetings.

We have been forced to get used to the various online systems in one year. Systems also made a rapid progress and improvement to meet our demands in only one year. I am sure we can manage online meetings better for the next meetings with incorporating outreach and other programs missed this time. Even after this pandemic is calmed down and on-site meeting is enabled, some components of online formats would be incorporated to the on-site meetings. By going through a management of this meeting and participation to other online scientific meetings, I find bright prospects for online scientific meetings.

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