

# Organizing a free mixed-format online conference

Report on the Digital Truth-Making Conference  
(October 2020, dgv / HU Berlin)

Report by: Antonia Sladek. Conference Organizers: Christoph Bareither, Dennis Eckhardt, Alexander Harder, Julia Molin, Antonia Sladek, Vanessa Zallot.

## Content

I. Introduction.....	1
II. Pre-recorded Video Presentations & Live Discussions.....	2
III. Digital Tools.....	4
IV. Interaction.....	6
V. Planning for Online Participation.....	7
V. Funding and Workload.....	8
VI. Further Resources on Online Conferences.....	9

## I. Introduction

The conference “Digital Truth-Making: Ethnographic Perspectives on Practices, Infrastructures and Affordances of Truth-Making in Digital Societies”<sup>1</sup> was hosted by the Institute for European Ethnology at the Humboldt University of Berlin. Funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), the conference took part all-online and free of charge between October 1 and October 9, 2020. Post-registration for access to the recorded video presentations will be open till September 2021. You can find information on topics and contents on the [conference website](#); the following report will merely address conceptual and organizational questions: How was the online conference designed, realized, and what did participants like or dislike about it? Which tools and formats can be recommended for organizers of virtual conferences?

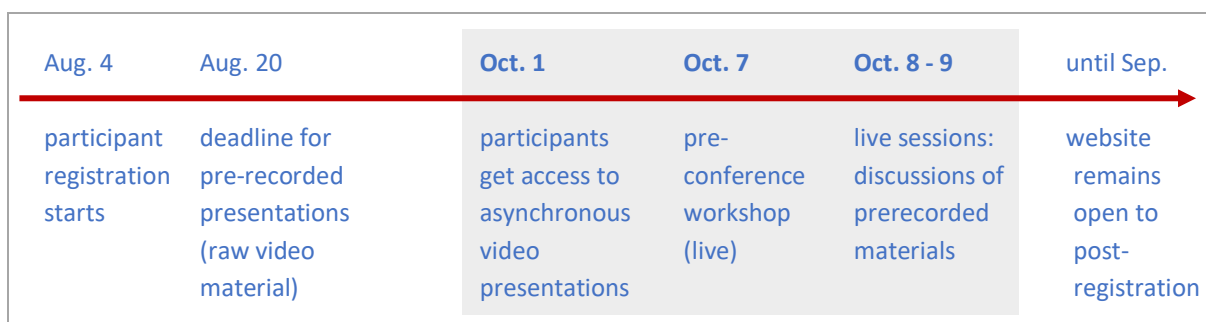


Fig. 1. Conference timeline.

<sup>1</sup> 7th conference of the Section “Digitization in Everyday Life” of the German Association of Cultural Anthropology and Folklore Studies (dgv).

Like so many other conferences in 2020, the conference “Digital Truth-Making” (DTM) had to be turned from an offline into an online format in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this paper we outline the conference concept, namely mixed a-/synchronous panels, and we evaluate the digital tools we used based on our participant survey. On the one hand, the DTM succeeded in stimulating a high level of research-based discussions and experimented with a promising socializing tool. On the other hand, time management and networking remain critical issues that need careful attention in the future.

About half of the live attendees at the DTM conference participated in our feedback survey, as well as two who only watched asynchronous videos. Of the 47 respondents, about one third were presenters or moderators. PhD students and postdoc researchers (30% each) constituted the majority of the sample. Most of the respondents (72%) stated that they would have attended the DTM physically, if there was no pandemic. For the 12 persons who could not have come in person, travel cost was selected the most important obstacle (7), followed by the loss of time in relation to work (5) and family (4), and even visa difficulties (2). This means, that to a certain extent the online format made the conference more accessible for international scholars, scholars with higher workloads and scholars with families.

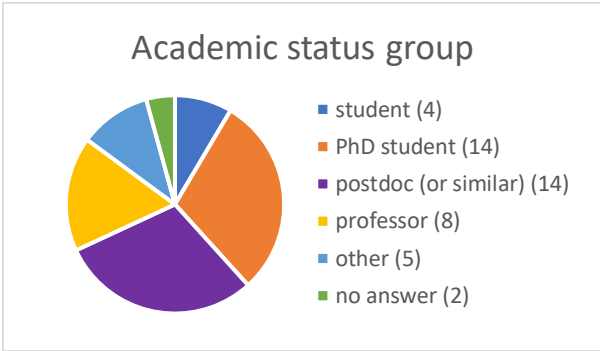


Fig. 2. Total number: 47.

## II. Pre-recorded Video Presentations & Live Discussions

To address issues like time difference, unstable internet connections, and the need for a flexible time management, we asked all speakers to pre-record their presentations, and we professionally edited their video material. A week before the live conference, the videos went online: Participants could dive into the variety of topics on their own terms, leaving comments and questions that helped in preparing and moderating the live sessions on October 8-9.

Apart from two keynotes, three workshops, and some poster presentations, our five panel-blocks provided the base for the live program. These blocks consisted of three parts. 1) A

30 min	Flexible Time Slot: take a break / (re)watch a presentation / socialize
40 min	Breakout Discussion: Join 1 of 4 speakers for an in-depth discussion
50 min	Fishbowl-Discussion with all panelists

Fig. 3. Structure of live panel sessions based on pre-recorded presentations.

**flexible time slot**, during which attendees could (re)watch a presentation, take short breaks or use our tools for socializing. 2) A **breakout discussion** for an in-depth discussion of one of the pre-recorded presentations with the speaker in attendance. 3) A joint panel discussion (or “**Fishbowl-Discussion**”) for carving out

connections between all presentations and bringing the presenters in conversation with one another and with the attendees.

The majority of the surveyed participants stated that they prefer the mix of asynchronous videos and live sessions over a conference that is exclusively live (76%). Most claimed that the conference concept and schedule were easy to understand (74%).

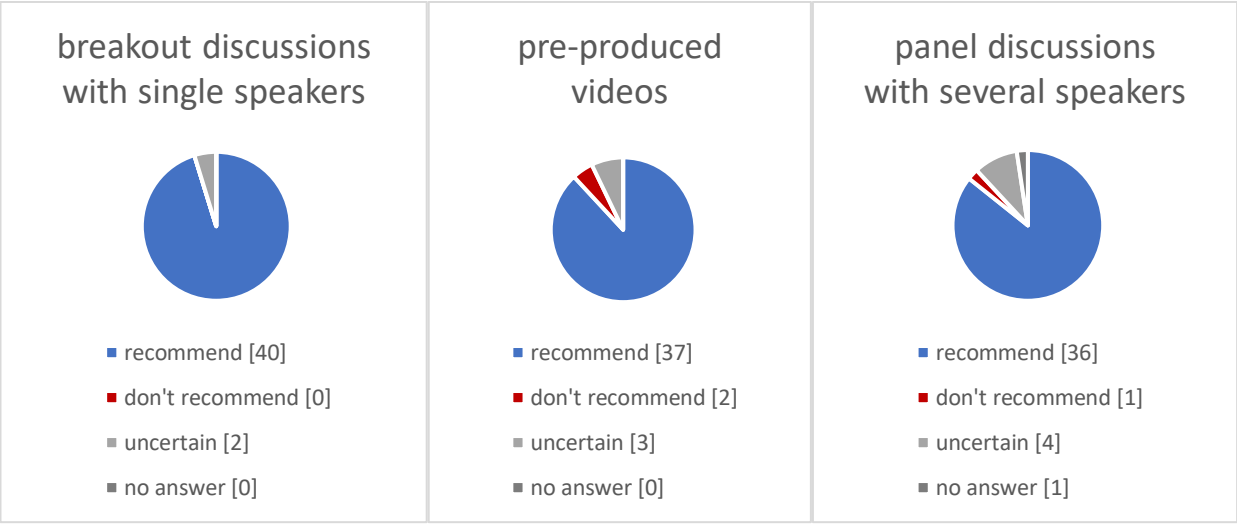


Fig. 4. Total number: 42, question: Would you recommend those tools/formats for further online conferences?

88% of the respondents would recommend pre-recorded video presentations for further conferences. Several comments valued the time flexibility, as well as a deeper understanding enabled by stopping and repeating. One participant highlighted the fact that the video format saved time for discussion and exchange during live sessions. Some suggested to extend the one-week time frame for watching pre-recorded videos before the conference. Another one considered that – if one wanted to watch all the videos – DTM was more time consuming than other conferences. Especially for speakers, [producing the recordings](#) took a lot of time.

Time restrictions also played a role for the live sessions, due to time difference, work, and family. Only 37% claimed to have attended each session they wanted to. A respondent suggested to spread out the live sessions on 4 instead of 2 days, which could ease the situation. Also, the importance of breaks was emphasised, an issue we addressed though the flexible time slots and one-hour lunch breaks. 67% of respondents think that they took enough breaks.

Only 59% observed a vivid interaction during live sessions in general. However, the 40-minute breakout discussions with the speakers about their presentations were described as engaging and productive. An overwhelming majority (95%) recommends this format for further use. Likewise, the 4-hour pre-conference workshop with generously timed breakout sessions was perceived as an opportunity to connect with other scholars. Similarly, another comment suggested integrating even more time slots for small group discussions on broader topics to enforce those connections.

The survey results were not as clear regarding the joint panel discussions, which were perceived as less interactive than breakout sessions. Nonetheless, our survey suggest that the

dynamic of these larger group events can create a different kind of community experience than interactions in small groups.

### III. Digital Tools: Building on Humboldt University’s Digital Infrastructures and on Open Source Tools

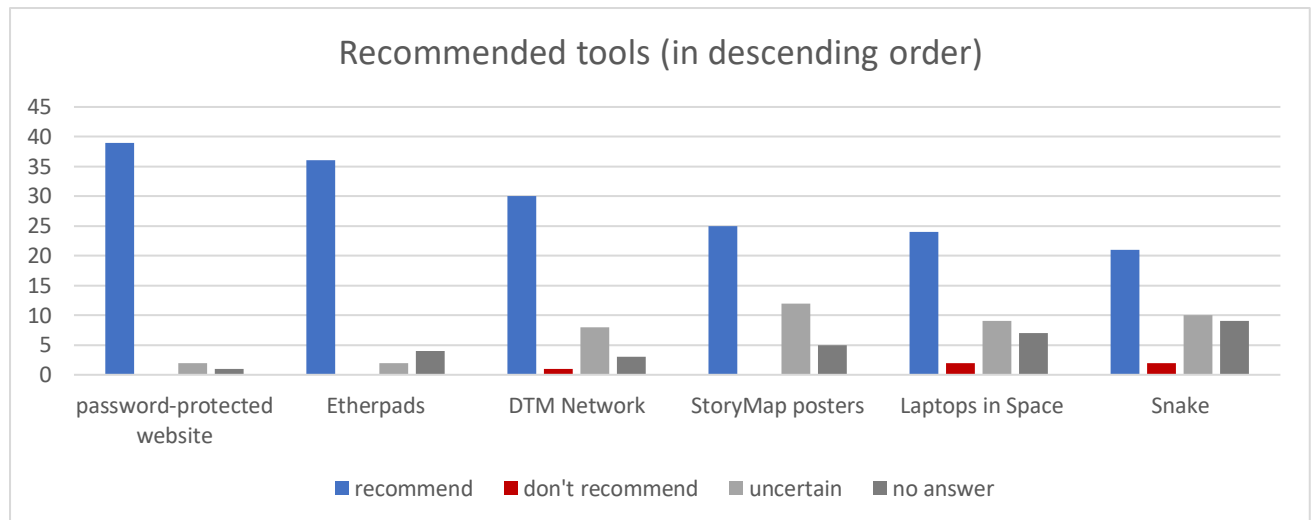


Fig. 5. Total number: 42, question: Would you recommend those tools/formats for further online conferences?

By what means can such a mixed-format approach be realised? As we are based at the Humboldt University of Berlin (HU), we preferred to use services hosted on our university’s servers to maintain as much control as possible over data security. First of all, we obtained a university-hosted webspace for a WordPress website. Parts of the website were password-protected, so that only registered participants could access it. Here, we embedded the video-presentations that were hosted in the repository of HU. For most respondents, the website and videos were stable, only 2 mentioned serious problems with streaming the videos. In this case, downloading the videos proved an alternative, but it also required us to ask participants to respect copyright restrictions and refrain from sharing passwords and direct links.

Each presentation had its own subpage with an embedded video and a so-called Etherpad. Etherpad is an Open Source Tool for simultaneous collaborative writing, which is hosted by HU. These [pads were pre-structured](#) to encourage comments, questions, and literature recommendations, which attendees could leave for the presenters and for the breakout discussion. The Etherpads remained relatively unused until 3 or 2 days before the live conference. However, they were highly valued in the participant survey: 86% recommend them for further conferences, and several comments described them as a helpful way to share thoughts, enhancing interaction in the live breakout discussions.

As WordPress is highly customizable, we could seamlessly integrate not only videos and Etherpads, but also further Open Source tools, namely a networking site, and a little game called “Snake”.<sup>2</sup> Some welcomed Snake as a funny ‘icebreaker’, and about 20 persons participated in sharing personal high scores. A more central part of the conference was the

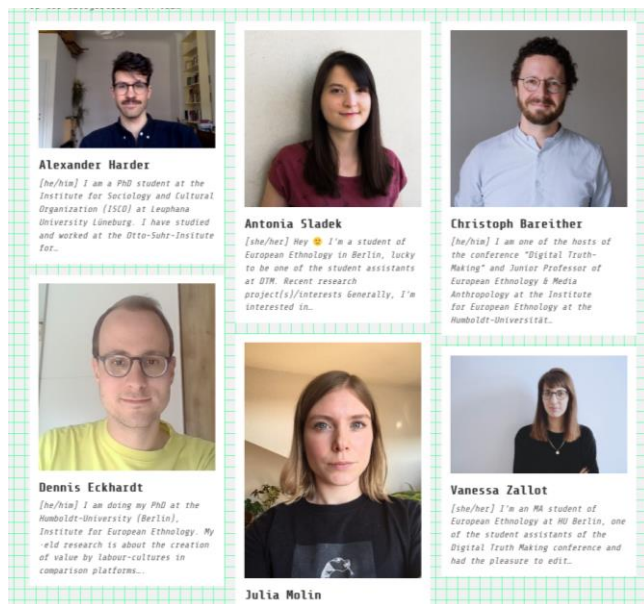


Fig. 6. The conference team at the DTM networking site.

DTM Network which we designed as a virtual box of business cards, based on the WordPress template “SLOT” by [Alan Levine](#) which we found used [in another conference](#).<sup>3</sup> Participants can get to know each other, search for names, tags, or discover profiles randomly. Contrary to Social Media, no one is excluded because one does not need a profile on a commercial platform. Because the DTM Network didn’t include a chat function, we asked the participants to leave their email addresses. A more sophisticated alternative could be the Open Source social intranet “[HumHub](#)”, which might

be worth considering for conferences that take part on a regular basis. For a small singular event like DTM, the SPLIT was a good compromise.

Having introduced the asynchronous services of the DTM conference,<sup>4</sup> we now turn to the synchronous interaction tools: the software Zoom, which we used for panel discussions and breakout sessions, and the experimental tool “Laptops In Space”, which we used for socialising events. We opted for Zoom because, during the time of the conference, it was the only stable video conferencing option available at our institution for the large number of participants we welcomed at the DTM; however, Zoom comes with many strings attached, most notably the questionable handling of user data, which is why we tested viable Open Source options such as Jitsi and BigBlueButton. While these were not running stable enough on our university’s servers by the time of our conference, we are looking forward to using such tools in the future and encourage scholars from other institutions to consider this option as well.

<sup>2</sup> To embed Snake on a WordPress website install the following plugin: <https://wpsocket.com/plugin/snake/>. Active it in your Plugins menu, then embed it on a page or post by adding [snake] in the Code Editor Mode.

<sup>3</sup> A SPLIT is a WordPress site, where anyone can easily create a post with photo, text, and tags. We [followed the instructions](#), customized the layout, [adjusted the collector-template](#), and added a password-protection.

<sup>4</sup> Additionally to the mentioned tools, we also used email lists for communicating with participants, the file sharing platform of HU where speakers sent us their videos and slides. A last one, the Open Source tool KnightLab StoryMap was used for digital posters, but it was unintuitive for poster presenters.

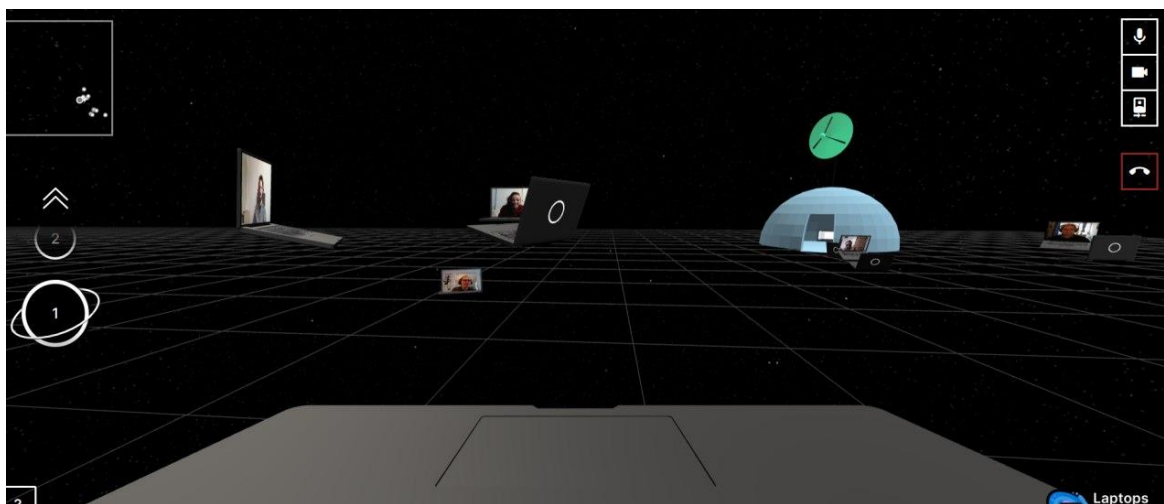


Fig. 7. Participants chat in “Laptops in Space” in the morning of the second conference day.

Laptops in Space is a tool still in its experimental state, combining videoconferencing with a virtual environment: Participants can move around as “flying laptops”, and chat in small groups. The closer you get to other participants, the louder you hear them (a useful mechanism that could be further improved). When approaching from the front, you can see their faces. Quite a few respondents mentioned Laptops in Space as a personal highlight, as a funny experience allowing for informal encounters. However, a relatively strong computer, a headset, and a stable internet connection are necessary, so that the software was not accessible for all participants equally. According to the developers [neesh GbR](#), the tool will be further developed and made accessible as Open Source software.

#### IV. Interaction

On the one hand, we are very content with the high level of interaction between speakers and participants, at least among those who attended live sessions: 93% said to have contributed questions and/or comments. Etherpads and Zoom sessions were most frequently used for this purpose (each by 55% of the respondents), followed by Laptops in Space (22%). Those who used Etherpads were more likely to comment or ask questions during the Zoom sessions.

On the other hand, we had hoped for more social exchange. At least, the survey paints a disillusioning picture: Only about a quarter of the 39 participants who answered this question, seemed to be satisfied with the amount of networking, socializing, and informal conversations respectively. If one only considers participants who spent at least one day on the conference, the satisfaction is a bit higher.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, 6 out of the 9 persons who affirmed that they had enough socializing and fun, mentioned “Laptops in Space” when they described their personal highlights. So, reaching for a higher participation in such tools could help, as well as

---

<sup>5</sup> One third claimed to have had enough socializing and exchange of experiences, and 40% had enough networking.

integrating networking and socializing into the program, instead of limiting social interaction to the breaks in between the scholarly exchange.

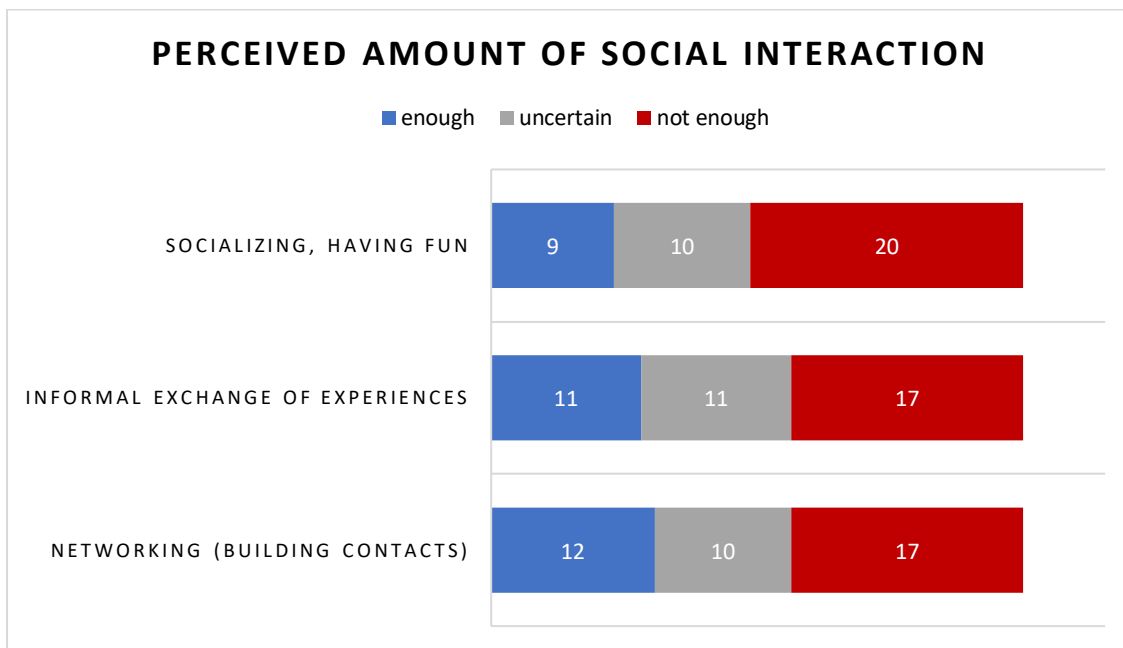


Fig. 8. Total number: 39, question: Did you have enough social interaction with other attendees?

## V. Planning for Online Participation

The participant management was one of the main uncertainties during the planning process: We knew from other online conferences that **the number of registered participants differs highly from the average number of attendees** in the live sessions. Firstly, the free registration might be not as binding, and secondly, most attendees could not participate over several days because of other obligations at work or at home. Unexpectedly, whereas most of the attendees watched seven or less video presentations, two thirds of them attended more than 6 hours of the live program (see fig. 9). This suggests that the asynchronous mix of video presentations and live sessions enabled attendees to select only those videos that they are strongly interested in, which at the same time inspired many to participate actively in the live discussions for several hours.

Our goal was to reach between 50-100 participants in each live panel session to ensure a suitable group size in breakout discussions with the panellists. So, what would be an **appropriate limit for registrations**? We closed the process after 200 registrations (including speakers and moderators) but accepted further 21 registrations via email. In fact, the level of attendance at the live sessions was much lower than we expected it to be.<sup>6</sup> From the 220 registered participants, we estimate that around two thirds have accessed the website and watched some of the conference videos (although we did not track these for data protection reasons). Slightly more than one third of these registered participants have engaged in the live

<sup>6</sup> The live panel sessions almost always had 36 participants (including speakers and moderators), and the largest session was the opening keynote with 61 attendees. 72 persons created a profile in our networking site.



discussions at least once. For conferences following similar formats, we therefore suggest to accept a significantly higher number of conference registrations (especially when the conference is free of charge) in comparison to the ideal number of live participants.

We were also concerned about an equal distribution of attendees during breakout sessions with speakers. Therefore, we asked participants to register by writing their names in participant lists on Etherpad. Although most of them registered rather short dated, it turned out to be a useful strategy.

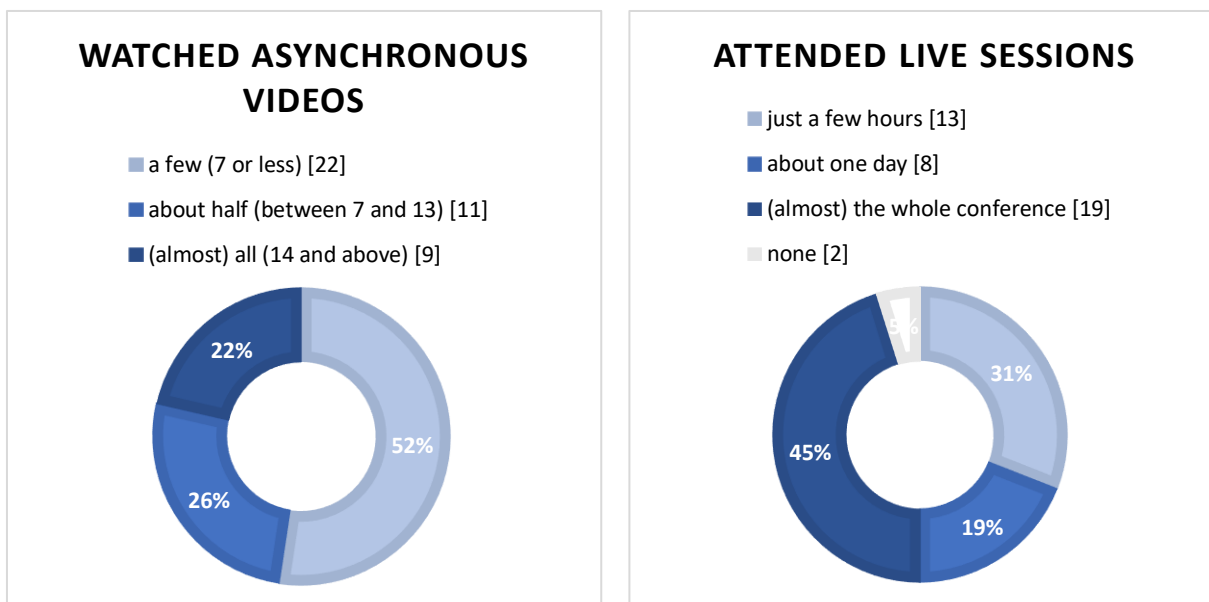


Fig. 9. Total number: 45, question: How many video presentations did you watch? / How much of the live program did you attend?

## V. Funding and Workload

Overall the conference evaluation demonstrates that the asynchronous conference design was successful. We hope that this report can, thus, inspire other conference organizers to explore similar strategies – and to help in developing sustainable funding strategies for digital conference formats. While our conference was extremely low-cost in terms of technology, because it could build upon existing video conferencing structures at our host institution and additional Open Source software, the ambitious conference design still required a much higher work amount on the side of the organisers in comparison to regular ‘offline’ conference formats. Creating a well-designed website, professionally editing all conference video presentations, ensuring a seamless integration of Open Source tools and managing a complex time schedule requires many work hours by an experienced team.

We therefore appreciate that the German Research Foundation agreed to a rededication of our conference funding, enabling us to hire three experienced MA students (with a total estimated workload of around 1500 hours) to support the conference organisation. This funding was indeed crucial for the success of the conference design we outlined in this report, and we hope that other conference teams can profit from our positive experience.



## VI. Further Resources on Online Conferences

We hope that we managed to provoke some helpful thoughts and questions for organizers of virtual and hybrid conferences. Feel free to contact us via [ethnodtm@hu-berlin.de](mailto:ethnodtm@hu-berlin.de). You might as well consider the following resources:

For a 24-hour system, that equally covers all time zones:

Mayanthi L. Fernando et al (2020): The Distribute 2020 Playbook.  
<https://distribute.utoronto.ca/playbook/>.

For poster sessions in Social Media and a hybrid multi-hub-system:

Orad Reshef et al. (2020): How to organize an online conference.  
[https://www.nature.com/articles/s41578-020-0194-0.epdf?shared\\_access\\_token=mB0I3JTCL3bvf7hNmJf4NRgN0jAjWel9jnR3ZoTv0NZ73OmF5lccJxTwZIBAEM\\_pCK89Sd3SRKgVw4xNMs8zLDyojyxZeiPU64MIDNOvliOPYhCL3RrOyBsuxkKSUjm2clq\\_3AFwzHA05h49XWg%3D%3D](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41578-020-0194-0.epdf?shared_access_token=mB0I3JTCL3bvf7hNmJf4NRgN0jAjWel9jnR3ZoTv0NZ73OmF5lccJxTwZIBAEM_pCK89Sd3SRKgVw4xNMs8zLDyojyxZeiPU64MIDNOvliOPYhCL3RrOyBsuxkKSUjm2clq_3AFwzHA05h49XWg%3D%3D).

For a socially engaging virtual network meeting:

K. J. Winkler et al. (03/20/2020): Suddenly find yourself needing to take that meeting online? <https://www.aaas.org/programs/center-public-engagement-science-and-technology/reflections/suddenly-find-yourself-needing>.

For an in-depth analysis on how speakers can successfully interact with online participants:

L. F. Castro (2019): Social presence in an online professional conference. *TechTrends*, 63 (4), pp. 408-419.  
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11528-019-00382-6> [based on her [dissertation](#)].

For a laughter:

J. Bohannon (2008): Slaying monsters for science. *Science*, 320 (5883), pp. 1592-1592.  
<https://science.sciencemag.org/content/320/5883/1592.3.full>.

For reducing academic air travel:

P. Wilde et al. (ongoing): Flying Less in Academia: A Resource Guide.  
[https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vSLG573KG2YrLhpT8SBgTKNvrEUBtTCN\\_NBVtdEl8jqHK\\_vY6MhonM4DeiEoMoh18CdyfNdxCfp6gp/pub](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vSLG573KG2YrLhpT8SBgTKNvrEUBtTCN_NBVtdEl8jqHK_vY6MhonM4DeiEoMoh18CdyfNdxCfp6gp/pub).