Going Digital: From Necessity to Opportunity

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Guests
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Introduction
Creating digital events from scratch can seem like a daunting prospect. EXARC has navigated this process a few times thanks to the difficulties of 2020. The team of behind-the-scenes volunteers and staff sit behind the microphone to share some of their insights about the successes and pitfalls of preparing and hosting digital events. Join host Olalekan Salami as he explores what it has taken to transform EXARC conferences from in-person to digital as well as some of the many benefits of doing so.

Transcript
Olalekan: Hello and welcome to this episode of the EXARC Show! I'm Olalekan Salami and I'll be hosting this special episode where we look at the advantages and disadvantages of digital events, which have been made more necessary than usual over the last year due to the increased travel restrictions of the international coronavirus pandemic. Putting together digital events like conferences and more informal meetings requires the coordination of many people. EXARC has a handful of people who frequently work together as a team, and will share their experiences with you today. Let's meet the team!

Pascale: Hi, I'm Pascale Barnes, I'm the current chair of EXARC and I became chair in 2019. My knowledge of EXARC goes right back to 2012 when I was working for the Ancient Technology Center. I delved into EXARC a little bit more deeply and was really happy to find that it was the sort

of network that I was looking for, lots of different interests, international reach, and just the possibility to participate in conferences and get to know people and network and get ideas, which I think is really valuable when you're a small organization and you feel like you are struggling alone. My role in the digital conferences is to introduce EXARC and to provide a face for the organization.

Roeland: My name is Roeland, I started EXARC 20 years ago with two friends and am currently the Director of EXARC. My role in EXARC is to connect people and make it possible for people to do their thing, I try to enable things. I am mainly working behind the scenes, in the conference office so to say: planning, try to find new team members, making sure the budget is ok (even online events cost money) and that the PR works. When events are actually running, I am almost always present.

Caroline: My name is Caroline Jeffra and I have a PhD in archaeology, but my focus was on experimental archaeology. I started off as a member of EXARC and now I am a member of the board of EXARC. And it was really my interest in experimental archaeology that brought me here. My role with EXARC in terms of digital conferences and events has taken a few different forms. I'm the producer of the EXARC Show podcast. I was one of the organizers for archaeological approaches to the study of the Potter's Wheel. So I have since March really been running EXARC Discord server and I've been behind the scenes working on making events for people to engage with that are entirely digital.

Libbe: My name is Libbe Bjerknæs. I am a Danish archaeologist and I have a bachelor's degree in prehistoric archaeology from Copenhagen University. What brought me to EXARC was that I was looking for something to do And it was looking for volunteers. So I wrote an email and I told the rest of the team that I had lots of time and I would be willing to help out. And just one thing led to another. And here we are. I am the editor for EXARC. For the main part, I record stuff sometimes. And afterwards then I will take all of the audio we have and I will cut it up and make it sound nice. And when everything is as it should be, we can publish the discussions, everything important online as podcast episodes so that people can always go back and listen to it as preparation for the conferences and events. I sometimes also help the speakers with their presentations ahead of time. And during the events, I will also be on record and welcome new people and help troubleshooting if that is necessary.

Josephine: My name is Josephine Bersee and I came to EXARC as a volunteer, initially to work on the events-calendar. I work on transcriptions of the #FinallyFriday chats and the podcasts. It's an ideal opportunity to learn about a topic, because you always have to look up things, check names of people and places and figure out the specialist language that is used. I also work on video-subtitles. Good quality subtitles also add a lot of value, especially in an international environment where there are lots of non-native English speakers - not to mention the challenge of dealing with the accents of native English speakers.

Matilda: My name is Matilda Siebrecht and I am currently a PhD student at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. I was originally introduced to EXARC actually during my undergraduate degree in Aberdeen, where I first became involved in experimental archaeology and I was looking up things and I heard about this amazing society called EXARC, and , now I've been involved a little bit more. because I am trying really hard to make archaeological research more accessible to the general public and this is a goal and a wish that EXARC seems to share, I'm very happy to work with them in this respect and on this podcast for example. So I am currently the host of #FinallyFriday, which is the monthly podcast that EXARC started releasing when the corona virus pandemic hit. a podcast is perfect, because it's not too long, the content can be varied enough to be interesting to a wider audience, but also specific enough within each episode to kind of bring

in the interest of everyone.

Ronja: My name is Ronja Lau, I am from Germany, I live in Berlin and I studied prehistoric archaeology and I'm currently a PhD student at the University and Bodrum. I came to actually over finally Friday a podcast which was about tech archaeology. And I liked it so much that I wanted to participate in the and a volunteer work. And I am now currently managing the Twitter Twitter account of EXARC and tweeting all around our newest informations and happenings and events.

Olalekan: The majority of our team members came to EXARC as volunteers and have continued to give their time and develop their skills to specialise in specific areas. Most of them had very little experience in digital events before the pandemic hit in early 2020. Roeland explains how it all started...

Roeland: in March 2020, instead of cancelling our annual conference, in Berlin, we decided to turn the whole thing online. So the decision to do digital events was made because it was either that or nothing. We had only 14 days to do so, but luckily we had extended our team of volunteers over the previous winter.

Olalekan: Caroline was also involved from an early stage in the digital side of things...

Caroline: we were coming up with strategies to accommodate the fact that we couldn't travel to Berlin. No one could go there for the conference. And so quite suddenly, we had to transform this in-person event to a digital one. And we did so fairly successfully, I think. It used Discord and YouTube and we had actually had more participants than we would have had if the event had gone forward in person.

Olalekan: As the director of EXARC, Roeland has perhaps the widest perspective on how the team has developed and grown...

Roeland: Let's say it was a steep learning curve but thanks to our volunteers, we made it to a good online conferences. We improved greatly since our Berlin conference and I cannot imagine any EXARC Conference in the future without a digital component.

Olalekan: Digital events aren't just important for academics. They are an opportunity for us to open the doors and welcome more people behind the scenes as we share research. Matilda explains why she feels so strongly about accessible communication.

Matilda: As well as being an archaeologist, I'm also a journalist. I am a very strong believer that not just archaeological research but all scientific research, all kind of academic work, shall we say, it's so long it's just been off-limits to everyone outside the academic sphere. Our job is to benefit society in some way, so in order to do that we have to make sure that our work is able to be communicated to society. that was why I decided to become involved, because it is something that is very close to my heart and I thought that this was a fantastic way of trying to achieve some part of my aim in any case.

Olalekan: Ronja feels the same...

Ronja: this was more, more of a public outreach and I like that a lot. So public outreach and involving everyone who's interested in it doesn't matter if they're an archaeologist or not, is an attempt which I always try to follow also in my personal research. And that's why I like to

participate in such things.

Olalekan: The increase in online activity has provided our team with a lot of experience in managing digital events. And digital events have been arranged by many organizations, so we have had many sources of inspiration. Caroline provides some examples...

Caroline: I've seen some platforms that do interesting things that feel very familiar to how I have experienced different conferences, so some of them create this sort of virtual conference center where you can walk from one booth or stand to another. And it's it's a little bit like a video game where you can imagine having your little avatar walking from one place to another. And I've seen others and one in particular where you are able to actually have your little avatar walking through a park or something. And as you get closer to other people's avatars in real time, you start being able to see their faces. A video call is initiated. And so it adds that level of of happenstance meeting that you are missing in these kinds of events. And so that kind of functionality, I think is really promising.

Olalekan: Ronja has some different ideas...

Ronja: The inspiration I got was mostly from my digital science labs, actually, because I was thinking also how can I work on my own public outreach, not only being part of art, but also maybe using some ideas. And I was working the last month on a on a YouTube channel. It's very new. But, you know, as I'm specialized in textile archaeology, I wanted to show people what I'm working on at the moment and what textile archaeology can achieve. And I created this video project, where I was filming, reenactors who created or recreated clothing, weapons, armor, always based, of course, on archaeological finds. There's, of course, a big gap in re-enactment. But I filtered the best so that I can stand behind the scientific research they did, even if they are not archaeologists, for example. And that's a digital project.

Olalekan: The lessons learned through running events have been positive for the people behind the scenes as well. Josephine describes the skills that she's gained...
Josephine: Because digital conferences and events will probably stay with us, even when the corona-crisis is over, I think I've acquired some really useful new skills in a short period.

Josephine: Even though more and more of these tasks are automated, it often still takes a human eye and ear to correct machine-generated language. So working in one of these areas has emerged as an option since I started volunteering for EXARC.

Olalekan: Sometimes the team also learns what not to do. Libbe's experience with digital events hasn't always been so positive...

Libbe: I do see sometimes that these live streaming events will have a big show and will waste a lot of time. We don't come here just for the spectacle of a show. We come here to have a chat and learn stuff and discuss and have a bit of fun as well. But in a good way

Olalekan: Roeland sympathises with issues that other organisations experienced...

Roeland: I have seen large zoom conferences where the audience could use the chat, but the organisers were clearly not prepared for so much feedback – the chat started to have a life of its own which was not positive for the organisers.

Olalekan: There are some broader questions about how one conferencing platform or another influences our experiences, as Caroline explains further from her own experience...

Caroline: in the Potter's Wheel conference, we had some people who were surprised we weren't using the zoom or they were surprised we weren't using YouTube exclusively or this platform or that platform. So I think we're getting to a point where all these different platforms have different assets to them, but people are starting to get locked into one platform or another. And that that is something that I don't like so much. I think from this point onward, it's going to be sort of a balance between being excited about functionality and getting participants excited about that functionality as well. There's a big part of me that knows the hesitation that participants have in adopting; oh can you make a username and download the software and give it these permissions on your computer? There's hesitation. So we have to temper our excitement.

Olalekan: So what did our team agree on? What are the disadvantages of a digital event over meeting in-person?

Ronja: after a conference, you usually talk in private to other colleagues and get to know each other and maybe have a beer or just have some dinner together

Josephine: lacking opportunity for face-to-face contact, for networking and accidental encounters.

Libbe: it is much easier to grab another person at a conference and ask to go have a beer or something and start small talking.

Caroline: the happenstance meetings that you have in moments where you're grabbing coffee.

Pascale: online conferences don't offer that human experience of a face to face chat with somebody maybe you don't know.

Roeland: I prefer in person conferences mainly for the social aspect around the official program. You catch up with friends and colleagues over lunch, you meet new people over a beer and you make plans for new exciting projects over dinner.

Olalekan: Maybe we're all missing socialization a bit more than usual this year. But what do we like about digital events?

Ronja: if we didn't had the opportunity to use a digital version of our conference, nothing would have taken place.

Josephine: it is convenient to have everything online, you save costs and time, and it is good for the environment as there is less travel involved.

Matilda: accessibility is obviously the first thing that springs to mind, because you have so many people in the world who are not able to travel. The ability to then just log in and be in the comfort of your own home is a fantastic advantage it also means that people are much more likely to attend the smaller scale seminars or workshops, or you know a one day thing, a three hour thing, even just a one hour thing, that previously would never have attended, because why are you going to travel all that way just to attend a one-hour workshop. So I think, yeah, making it more accessible and making it a little bit more open to more people and also having more opportunities for smaller scale

things.

Libbe: you don't have to travel far to be at a conference when you do it online. Another advantage of it being online is that now you can suddenly chat with many more people than you would if you had been at a live event. And if you use the text function, you will have a log basically showing every conversation you have had. So you don't have to remember everything by yourself. But you can always look back at the texts you have exchanged. And yeah, you will have a much easier time to reconnect with persons that you have been talking with.

Caroline: the biggest asset of online conferences for me is that you don't have to travel and you don't have to budget for them. So it can be something that's integrated into your normal, your normal workday, in a way. I know that the conference, the archaeological approaches to the Potter's Wheel conference, we had two speakers who would not have been able to join us, even... they would not have been able to join us if it had not been a digital conference. They did not have budget for traveling to Amsterdam, and they also didn't have the time to take leave from their positions. So there's something very important that we've been missing with traditional conferencing in person, which is allowing people to integrate these scholarly activities into their more normal routines.

Olalekan: The team have different ideas about how to combine the advantages of digital and in-person events in the future.
Matilda: organisers of events and organisers of conferences being more flexible and being more open-minded in how much they can share digitally and how much they can share virtually, I think that will be a really nice way for these kind of things to proceed into the future.

Libbe: we could start to record and stream while we are at conferences. So we will still be able to keep this log of everything that has been going on and sharing it with people who don't have the time or the money to travel to a specific place to attend the conference.

Josephine: It might be good to facilitate small-scale break-out groups to re-create a sense of intimacy which inevitably gets lost in an online environment.

Caroline: the way to combine those, of course, I think, is to have greater flexibility in these conferencing platforms. having that flexibility where you can simulate that that moment of grabbing a cup of coffee and chatting with somebody is really important. And the more the more ways that we try to do digital conferencing, the more solutions we'll find. And that's only going to help this process of digitizing conferences.

Olalekan: Of course, the only way to improve our practices is by regularly checking in on what is working and what isn't working. Ronja and Pascale explain why they think EXARC is progressing well...

Ronja: the main part why I like EXARC so much especially this year now, you know, asking the people what's their opinion and how can they change us. This is a big plus. I haven't seen any scientific or non-scientific company or whatever who's asking people what they think.
Pascale: It listens to the audience and comes up with interesting topics for future discussion. it even meets the needs of, say, people who aren't English speakers. You can read the transcript of what's going on.

Olalekan: The EXARC volunteers and staff who work together to bring digital events to life are very clear in saying that their collaboration is what keeps things running smoothly. Trust between

team members makes it possible to get things done and keep improving how digital events run...

Libbe: the different skills and experiences that all these people from all over the world can bring and share with each other is a great resource. And that we are able to provide a platform for all of these people to share their experiences and share their knowledge is truly great.

Josephine: Working behind the scenes you find out how many different skills are required and how many steps need to be taken to create a good digital product. So, managing the process well is really essential. Taking into account the number of volunteers that are involved, working simultaneously on a variety of tasks that follow upon each other, it is quite remarkable how smoothly things run. I think the friendly and open atmosphere, where everyone is prepared to help out everyone else, also plays a role in creating a high quality end-product.

Roeland: We have been able to transfer our open and welcoming atmosphere to our online presence. Participants are very approachable. EXARC is committed to open access, which in our case also means free access.

Matilda: a lot of the other organisations that are taking this online, is that they're still restricting themselves to the organisation themselves. EXARC in general is very good at being more open and allowing non-members to participate in things

Caroline: for us, a platform like Discord where you create a username and you join the server and there are text and audio channels that you can access and converse in, it was a very comfortable fit because you can go away, come back to it and you see familiar usernames. So it's community building.

Olalekan: Having a completely volunteer-based team has a lot of advantages, but Josephine highlights some of the issues that can emerge...

Josephine: EXARC relies on volunteers, which makes it vulnerable to changes. Some activities are very time-consuming, such as for instance the audio-editing. So if such a volunteer leaves, it could be difficult to replace that link in the chain. Overall I would say it's still a learning process and improvements take place all the time. Reflecting on past activities and requesting feedback from both the people involved in making the productions as well as the target audience, might be a useful addition.

Olalekan: One of the best ways to combat this issue is to increase our level of digital interaction even further. Libbe explains her ideas...

Libbe: we need to expand more. having them come back and be active on the Discord server and keep engaging each other and talking and chatting with each other. But Discord is fairly new to a lot of these people, and it has been looked upon as being solely for gamers and such. So trying to tell archaeologists that this is a platform where you can actually have a real discussion may seem a bit odd at the moment. Maybe we can move beyond this stigma and somehow make it seem less threatening and less discouraging to just jump on and start chatting like in any other forum.

Olalekan: Roeland agrees that more promotion of Discord is needed...

Roeland: I see EXARC needs more PR for its online events. The quality of what is presented is good, and we also see many people watching the stuff on YouTube later or listening to the podcasts,

but live interaction is always more valuable. It sometimes feels like organizing a Facebook party and you can't tell how many people will show up. We have the risk for a too large audience: if you are open access all the way, and you only have a limited number of team members to help out, risk is that parts of the online experience will be unmonitored.

Olalekan: Specialising in a digital platform requires a deeper knowledge of the technicalities involved. Caroline expands on some of the difficulties that emerge from using multiple platforms...

Caroline: by going back and forth between Discord and YouTube, we do have a little bit more orientation that we need to provide for people. Zoom and Microsoft teams and other platforms are all video based platforms, whereas we use Discord entirely with audio. People are missing seeing each other face to face and people are surprised when they don't see anything when they signed into the Discord. So that's a little bit of a learning curve for new members. And I'm not sure how we will address that because there's something nice about just having an audio conversation. But it's easy to forget how nice that is, I think.

Olalekan: Pascale takes an optimistic view...
Pascale: the system is quite rigid in terms of having a chat with people. But we do have what we call our pub chat. We have different chat channels. So in that sense, you know, as long as people know where to go and we do help them, I think that we're doing the best that we can with the technology that we have.

Olalekan: The rest of the team also have a positive outlook on the possible futures, especially when considering the increase in accessibility offered by our new experience in digital events...

Ronja: if people are not willing to travel and just say, well what I want to participate in this conference because I think it's very important, then they should have this opportunity. I think this wasn't an opportunity before corona times, which was actually pretty sad. I think it affected me quite much because I somehow lost the fear. I lost the fear of going digital or going into the Internet and showing myself and talking about myself, and this was like a practice of throwing myself into the cold water because I had to there was no other chance.

Matilda: I really really hope that the idea of kind of continuing to have more accessible events and conferences will continue, I really hope that this has taught people the benefits of online platforms and kind of virtual events and so that that can stay a part of the future of archaeology,

Libbe: in the beginning I thought that I would just be an archeologist and go out and dig and find a lot of cool stuff. But I'm starting to think that maybe I can actually work from home at my computer and still contribute to the world of archaeology by making it easier and better and more accessible. So hopefully, combining all of my knowledge and my skill, I can help putting together something that will be more open and more inclusive in the future and not just for archaeologists. I think that we are moving towards a more digital world and that it will be more and more common to have these events streamed and therefore having participation across a much grander scale than we have right now.

Matilda: this has really just shown how international the world is, and how open people can be if they are just given the opportunity to let you do things, so I think, you know, asking to have those other opportunities and asking for that flexibility is no longer considered unreasonable, because we've shown that it can work, which I think is really nice thing.

Olalekan: Another hopeful take-home message for the future of these events is the positive environmental impact of digital platforms...

Caroline: prior to the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic, there was increasing movement within academic, academic circles and professional circles to try and lower our carbon footprints. So from an ecological standpoint, conferencing where you fly out and there's this big this big carbon footprint from travel and from all of the food needs and disposable things, that was something that was being pushed back against. The covid-19 pandemic has, I think, shown us all different ways that we can still engage in these activities without depending on travel. And I think it should become more of the norm so that more people can participate and we can make more ecologically sound decisions about our research and communication activities.

Pascale: If anything, it probably adds to our goals that we at EXARC share, namely providing open access, reducing our carbon footprint and being more sustainable with quality education.

Caroline: the increase in digital conferences and events really for me is a relief because going forward, I'm not going to be in an academic institution. And conferences are expensive to attend. I also feel like I can be more flexible because I can be at home and I can integrate participation in a digital conference in my normal workday, which means that I can be more up to date on things that are changing. And I can also make contributions from my own perspective as time goes by. My plans for the future are widened in scope, despite the fact that I won't be in the comparative comfort, I guess, of of an academic institution where you have the flexibility to participate in these activities.

Olalekan: Digital communication has brought the whole world together, and given voices to those who were either on the outskirts or else excluded completely from in-person events...

Caroline: It's exciting because we have the potential to include people who are much further away. It's exciting because we have the potential to have many more diverse voices in terms of their backgrounds and their careers as well as their ethnicities or nationalities.

Pascale: it's become a very innovative way, really, to stay in touch with everybody across many time zones, over many continents. I still look forward to the time I will be able to do face to face conferences, but we can be really inventive and use it to our best advantage.

Roeland: Although I now travel much less, I expect that when I start making visits abroad again, these will be better planned and more meaningful than in the past. We know better than before that this travel is a luxury. I do believe that this has made the world more of a Global Village than we originally thought.

Olalekan: As we have seen, there are both advantages and disadvantages of digital events and online conferences. An increase in online networking creates a more inclusive and accessible environment for those who may not have the means or opportunities to travel internationally. The decrease in international travel also created the indirect result of less carbon emissions, thus benefiting the environment. Participants and organisers of digital events have also found their experiences beneficial in terms of learning experiences, and they now have many new skills that they would have not had the opportunity to gain otherwise.
However, there are also disadvantages to online conferencing, the main one of which is of course the loss of direct physical contact. Social interactions and networking is a vital part of all events, and the limitations on this imposed by the use of digital platforms is one that all of our team have experienced. But there is hope for the future, and many opportunities to improve digital platforms

to create the same social experience of in-person meetings.

We hope that you have enjoyed this episode, and that - like our team - it has helped you to appreciate what you have learned from this year, and look forward to what the future may hold. If you're interested in learning more about EXARC, you can visit us online at exarc.net where we share upcoming events, peer-reviewed articles from the EXARC Journal, and information on becoming a member. Until next time, thank you for listening and we hope you'll join us again soon!