

# Sonia Livingstone on launching a book in lockdown: “I’m almost to the point of thinking it is better this way”

*Professor Sonia Livingstone has published extensively in her field of Social Psychology. However, when COVID-19 disrupted academic life, she had to rethink the planned book launch for her most recent book, [Parenting for a Digital Future](#). In this Q&A, Professor Livingstone outlines the ways that the pandemic has transformed the process of promoting a book,. She discusses the heightened importance of social media and the opportunities that digital technologies have afforded for reaching new audiences and adapting conventional formats.*

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## **Q. Your most recent book, *Parenting for a Digital Future* was released in September. Can you tell us about launching a book in lockdown?**

At first, it was a bit of a shock because I had not anticipated the book would come out during COVID-19. I had expected to do lectures in person – which would have been an opportunity for a glass of wine afterwards, to talk to people and to share ideas.

But once everyone worked out that life is now online and on Zoom, it became really encouraging and positive as an experience. Easy to arrange. Easy discussion. Ease of participation. All this means greater equality of participation, which is really important. My book is partly addressed to professionals who work with children and families – so, teachers, health professionals, youth workers, NGOs – as well as an academic audience. For students and people who aren’t used to coming into the university, attending was much easier.

The way digital technologies can transcend space and time has been brilliant. It has meant that for events like the LSE book launch, my co-author who is in California was able to come. I could have a respondent from anywhere in the world. And I did – from Denver. Indeed, the best thing for me is that people from all around the world can come to events without requiring flights and travel budgets etc. It became possible to say: here is a book talk, everyone is welcome. Tweet it and they will come.



**Q. What did you find were the biggest challenges?**

People believing that an online event is a real event, that it has the seriousness of the moment of the launch. It's hard to generate that ritual moment: I hereby launch this book!

It was also hard to create the sense of a social and intellectual occasion, for people are part of so many different kinds of online meetings now. I worked out that the way to do it is by building attention on Twitter and by foreshadowing what's coming in [blog posts](#). For this, I relied on having built up a kind of a Twitter and blog community around my work, engaging with people on social media with a kind of human touch. I was conscientious in acknowledging tweets and retweets and thanking people, so by the time it came to the event, I could recognise some of the participants' names and we could have a chat. So when it came to that bizarre moment when you switch off Zoom, and find yourself and you're back in your room, people did feel that they had been part of something.

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Another challenge is that because we're in lockdown people will say: "and how does it relate to COVID?" "Oh", they say, "the work was done *before* COVID" as if it has no relevance anymore. So, I had to work quite hard to make it relevant to COVID.

**Q. You have published over 20 books yourself. How did the experience compare to previous book launches and is there anything that you preferred this time around?**

I'm almost to the point of thinking it is better this way. Previously, I've launched a book at a conference, which is quite good, and at LSE. However, an academic book normally speaks to a fairly niche audience which is distributed around the country or across countries so it's quite hard to get those people there in the same space.

Whereas usually, I'll have my friendly colleagues, but they're not necessarily going to read the book, this time, it feels like I'm launching to people who are directly interested in my particular topic.

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The other thing I really liked is the way virtual events stay online. A book launch in person happens for example, on a Tuesday at 7pm, and then it's over. Now, people can view later, when it suits them. Some of my talks have had far more views later than on the day, so it feels like it's still there.

### **Q. What advice would you give to someone planning on launching their book?**

Don't think of the online as second best.

But be prepared for the process to be very demanding. It does need a lot of social media attention before and after.

*When it came that bizarre moment when you switch off Zoom, leave the meeting and you're back in your room, people did feel that they had been part of an event that was engaging and connecting.*

I've also found there are differences in what makes for an engaging format. Zoom doesn't invite standing at the lectern, talking for 40 minutes and then taking Q&A. I've increasingly moved to conversational styles: staging conversation between me and my co-author, and with the discussants. In general, making it more multi-person and more interactive.

### **Q. In what ways do you think the pandemic has changed academic publishing?**

The pandemic has disrupted the publishing pattern. It's hard for publishers because a lot of their promotion takes place at conferences. On the flip side, I think the authors now know where their audience might be, sometimes better than the publisher does.

The whole process around the published work – both for books and articles – is now much more integrated in a wider social media context. It's no longer just the book. It's also the blog before, the blog after, the piece in The Conversation, the Twitter stream. It's the sense that there is a conversation around the book – it's important to generate that.

*It's the sense that there is a conversation around the book – that's what we're trying to generate.*

I also think there's something about moving online that makes everyone feel more expectant that things will be open access. I see more frustration about paywalls. Perhaps it's just that the pandemic coincided with the open access move. But I think people now expect to be able to click on the link and get what they want.

### **Q. And so, finally, would you do it again?**

I would. There was a day when I gave a book talk in India on one day, a book talk in America the next day and then I came back and I did an event at LSE. Sometimes it was two or three countries on one day. I could never have done a person, however, crazy my life.

So yes, I would. And I will.

*Note: This interview gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, or of the London School of Economics. The interview was conducted by Dr Emily Cousens, Managing Editor of the LSE Impact blog.*

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Read Sonia Livingstone's blog [here](#).

Watch or listen to Sonia's LSE booklaunch [here](#).

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