

Conference rage: How did something as truly awful as panel discussions become the default format?

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The relatively low impact of many academic conferences suggests it may be time for a rethink, argues [Duncan Green](#). 'Manels' (male only panels) are an outrage, but why not go for complete abolition, rather than mere gender balance? With people reading out papers, terrible powerpoints crammed with too many words, or illegible graphics, it is time for innovation in format. We need to get better at shaping the format to fit the the precise purpose of the conference.



With the occasional exception (see previous [post on Piketty](#)), my mood in conferences usually swings between boredom, despair and rage. The turgid/self-aggrandizing keynotes and coma-inducing panels, followed by people (usually men) asking 'questions' that are really comments, usually not on topic. The chairs who abdicate responsibility and let all the speakers over-run, so that the only genuinely productive bit of the day (networking at coffee breaks and lunch) gets squeezed. I end up dozing off, or furiously scribbling abuse in my notebook as a form of therapy, and hoping my neighbours can't see what I'm writing. I probably look a bit unhinged.....

This matters both because of the lost opportunity that badly run conferences represent, and because they cost money and time. I guess if it was easy to fix, people would have done so already, but the format is tired and unproductive – how can we shake it up?



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Conferences frequently discuss evidence and results. So where are the evidence and results for the efficacy of conferences? Given the resources being ploughed into research on development (DFID alone spends about [£350m a year](#)), surely it would be a worthwhile investment (if it hasn't already been done) to sponsor a research programme that runs multiple parallel experiments with different event formats, and compares the results in terms of participant

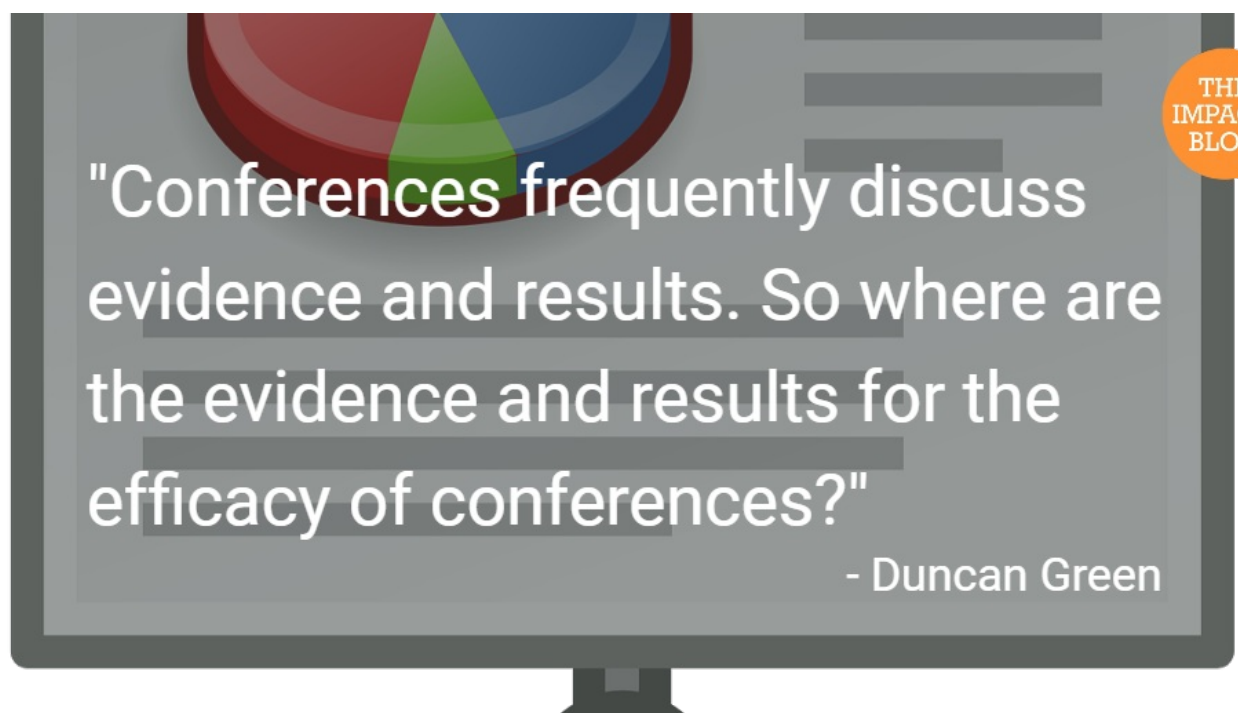
feedback, how much people retain a month after the event etc? At the very least, can they find or commission a systematic review on what the existing evidence says?

Feedback systems could really help: A public eBay-type ratings system to rank speakers/conferences would provide nice examples of good practice for people to draw on (and bad practice to avoid). Or why not go realtime and encourage instant audience feedback? OK, maybe Occupy-style thumbs up from the audience if they like the speaker, thumbs down if they don't would be a bit in-your-face for academe, but why not introduce a twitterwall to encourage the audience to interact with the speaker (perhaps with moderation to stop people testing the limits, as my LSE students did to Owen Barder last term)?

How did something as truly awful as panel discussions become the default format? People reading out papers; terrible powerpoints crammed with too many words, or illegible graphics. Please, can we try other formats, like [speed dating](#) (eg 10 people pitch their work for 2 minutes each, then each goes to a table and the audience hooks up (intellectually, I mean) with the ones they were interested in); [world cafes](#); simulation games; joint tasks (eg come up with an infographic that explains X). Anything, really. Yes 'manels' (male only panels – take the pledge [here](#)) are an outrage, but why not go for complete abolition, rather than mere gender balance?

We need to get better at shaping the format to fit the the precise purpose of the conference. If it's building networks, making new links etc, then you need to maximise the interaction time – speed-dating, lots of coffee breaks etc. If it's to jointly progress thinking on a particular issue, then use a workshop methodology, like the excellent [USAID/IDS seminar](#) I attended a few months ago (whose results I'm still using). If it's to pick apart and improve methods and findings, then it has to be at first draft stage, and with the right combination of academics and practitioners in the room. But if the best you can manage is 'disseminating new research' of 'information sharing', alarm bells should probably ring.

Resource it: Organizing good conferences requires expertise and time. It's not something an overburdened academic should be doing at 1am, after the kids are in bed, and the emails are done. Weirdly, friends tell me that there is often no budget for conferences. But doing them on the cheap is a false economy, if all the people who end up the room wish they were dead/get nothing out of it. So research funders should demand a sensible conference budget in any proposal, and outside particular research projects, academic institutions should fund conferences seriously as places where networking can incubate new ideas and refine old ones.



And why should academics be organizing them anyway? Isn't there a case for outsourcing more of them to good conference organizers who 'get' the special challenges of academic (rather than, say, corporate) events? With my How Change Happens hat on, the obvious question is, why haven't things changed already? Using the handy 3i rule of thumb, is it ideas, institutions or interests that are keeping things this way?

Ideas: maybe people genuinely think this format is the best possible, or just lack imagination – how do we undermine that view and get recognition of alternatives?

Institutions: is part of the reason for the leaden, top-down formats that organizers want to control the agenda, pump out their own material etc? Does everyone need to be on a platform, with at least 20 minutes to talk about themselves or their interests? If so, very hard to get away from panelism.

Interests: Academics have to write papers for career advancement and to feed the [REF](#) beast. But does that really mean they have to present and discuss them in such a mind-numbing way?

Finally, allow me one *unconstructive* suggestion: can we please as standard have a clock above the platform that not only records the time, (for the benefit of the chair), but the cumulative cost of the day, based on a rough estimate of the hourly salaries of those in the room (we could base it on this [meeting cost calculator](#))? Perhaps the IT wallahs could also come up with a way of monitoring the number of people who are not actually in the room in any useful sense, because they are on email/twitter/Facebook/doing their online shopping?

And in case you think I'm picking unfairly on academics, corporate, NGO and thinktank conferences are all usually awful, in their different ways ([thanks Tolstoy](#)). Rant over, reactions please, including top tips for how to organize good conferences on negligible time/money. See some previous cathartic post-conference posts on [epistemic communities](#) and an even more [prolonged purgatory](#) in Delhi.

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