
TUG 2021 conference organization reflections and recommendations

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Introduction

TUG 2021 showed improvement in several areas including more automation in the production of the web site, better security and handling of sessions on the Zoom platform, and broadening of subject and language coverage of the workshops.

This document summarizes the reflections by (some of) the organizing committee members. People referred to by name include: Jennifer Claudio, Tom Hejda, Norbert Preining, Arthur Rosendahl, Paulo Ney de Souza, Alan Wetmore.

1 Major points of agreement

- Dual in-person and online conference: an online-component committee should be separate from the local organizing committee.

Paulo's specific recommendation are to build a kit with a projector(s), camera, lapel mics, mixer table, for use in the conference room and project to the online audience on a side-wall of the conference hall, and integrate them into the conversation.

Jennifer prefers a slightly different arrangement, where we could have a pair of people designated to moderate through a Zoom account used to broadcast and relay questions from outsiders who log in, and that would be the single point of entrance into the conference participation.

Tom favors a solution where the entire organization of the e-meeting part is left up to the local committee and that they should be free to organize in any way they choose.

- Chairing of the sessions was well done. Speaker introductions were well-conducted and chairpersons were good at asking at least one question or providing a comment for each talk. Having at least two chairpersons was helpful.
- The mixture of interviews, pre-recorded presentations, and live presentations worked well and should be preserved for future conferences.

2 Suggestions for improvement

2.1 Conference organization

To help orient the attendees to the conference environment and to set the tone that it is not just a string of webinars, but rather a collaborative experience, we should ensure having short opening and closing sessions that are marked on the schedule.

2.2 Speaker organization

The following idea was suggested by Paulo: The inclusion of a submission form would enable speakers to submit their titles, abstracts, photos, slides, videos, and supporting documents in one central hub, rather than having a person manually request each component. These would then be automatically deposited. This information could then be used to build a page for each speaker, listing his or her talk(s), affiliations, contributions to CTAN, GitHub, etc. This point was also raised by Tom.

Arthur strongly disagrees and believes it should all be handled by email, due to the small size of the conference.

Alan proposes the idea that a single point-of-contact could respond to initial submissions with other committee members backing up missed responses. Based on this year's volume of submissions, he has volunteered to send initial acknowledgements and would welcome reminders if he misses any. Besides this, Alan suggests that each submission could be tracked by date and a member for initial receipt, acknowledgment, etc.

Alan also suggests that, starting at the end of the submission window, a weekly update email to all would-be presenters would eliminate individual replies to panicking presenters worried about the dwindling time remaining.

Other suggestions relevant to speaker organization include:

- Make sure we use the reminder-to-speakers program built by Norbert and Paulo (TUG 2020).
- Include a briefing session for speakers to review Zoom tools for speakers (Jennifer volunteers to do this). Tom's original point raised here might also refer to providing audience members with an orientation regarding how to raise their e-hand or to request to speak or ask a question.
- Make audiovisual checks standard procedure prior to full conference days.
- Train chairpersons or have a separate "IT team" for troubleshooting issues within the platform.

2.3 Communication of information

Participants need to feel secure in terms of confirmation and followup before the conference. Suggestions to accomplish this:

- Make several minor (local) improvements for the registration form, attendees list, what's on, etc.
- Integrate the schedule and the rest of the website, as well as the what's-on page, so we have a single point of entrance to the conference.

- Create a submission page for prospective speakers, so they can upload their material and follow up on the process of approval and scheduling.
- Automate the generation of the new page from the metadata file.
- Make sure information in emails is well presented and well structured. Many people complained about not having the Zoom password. Perhaps it could be the first item in the email. The message was also almost certainly marked as spam for some recipients.
- List the conference in `researchseminars.org`.
- Produce Calendar files for Google, Outlook, iCal and Yahoo.
- Announce it through other T_EX user groups around the world.
- Active social media presence of the conference on Facebook and Twitter.
- Prepare a production calendar with detailed deadlines for each task of conference organizing.

2.4 Compliance with privacy policies

The general recommendation is that TUG should come up with a conference *Privacy Policy* and *Terms of Service*, and that participants of the conference should have to agree to it at the time of registration. The strongest of these policies comes from the European side and protects three set of rights: the right to know what will be done with your personal information, the right to refuse its use, and the right to have the information removed upon request within a reasonable time frame. Among the proposed items is to make the publication of name/affiliation optional on the attendees list.

2.5 Conferencing platforms

The following things should be considered for future online presence, of which details here are described relative to the Zoom platform. Other platforms and social interactions are discussed in a later section.

- We should switch to using the Adelaide Zoom via the API. An example is that the Brazilian Math Congress was able to open 16 rooms and did this well. The advantages are as follows:
 1. No sharing of the Adelaide password.
 2. Open concurrent rooms for Workshops at the same level.
 3. Can automate the room opening and hand-out to the chairs.
- We should ensure that transcripts are available, by enabling the option within Zoom. However, automated transcripts are of poor quality with our T_EXnical material.

- We should take precautions to avoid overly long YouTube sessions. Specifically, closing the feed after each block of sessions should help mitigate the potential for losing the YouTube records. (YouTube does not preserve a session lasting more than 12 hours.)

2.6 Post-production

Automate post-production. Norbert has automated the post-production of the videos as much as it can possibly be done. We should build the scripts that upload the videos to YT. There are many scripts already—it is a question of adapting them to use our metadata and our channel settings.

3 Communication media and social interaction options

Social interaction on the Zoom platform, especially in the webinar form, is not inherently easy. Attendees may not feel comfortable communicating or holding conversation through the main stage platform (Zoom), or may benefit from informal small group follow-up conversations. As a result, additional platforms Zulip and GatherTown were used as out-of-Zoom options in 2020 in order to allow more natural interactions between attendees. Zulip provided the platform at no cost to TUG.

3.1 TUG 2021

Zulip allowed continued free use to TUG, however had a low rate of new signups in 2021. Concerns about it included that it was hard to follow strings of conversations and announcements and it was not well organized. An advantage of it is that it allows conversation and connections to persist beyond the conference.

GatherTown was not offered in 2021 due to its change in pricing plan and restrictions to access.

Topia was found as an alternative to allow social encounters, but had criticism regarding ease of use and its style or features. To help facilitate virtual social gathering, setting times in the schedule designated as coffee or social breaks, rather than just a general break, may make this platform more fruitful. An earlier introductory or orientation session to Topia might also remedy the issue of people looking for each other, not finding each other, and consequently exiting. A future proposed alternative to Topia may be Wonder since it has a more straightforward interface without extra cuteness.

Slack and Discord have been suggested as alternative clients for the conference. Slack is growing in popularity for businesses and organizations as a self-contained communication medium; however, it

comes with a heavy annual price tag in order to have full access to it. Discord is similar to Slack in terms of functionality for chat, voice, and video, and it is free. Discord, however, is widely used within the gamer culture and does not have as strong an identity in the professional world.

4 Survey of attendees

A short anonymous and optional feedback survey was administered from 10 Aug until 14 Aug to all participants. Forty-nine responses were collected. Most responses expressed positive feelings toward the conference.

Regarding future conference participation, 41/49 indicated that the respondent would likely recommend participation in future TUG conferences to friends or colleagues, regardless of whether the conference was held online, and only one indicated that they would not recommend it. Similarly, 42/49 would recommend online participation in the future. Of note is that while seven people provided an intermediate response for TUG conferences in general, only four did so for prospective TUG online, and three total responded negatively toward this.

Praise earned by TUG 2021 online included:

- Accessibility without travel
- Breadth of topics
- Representation of updated work
- Organization and delivery
- Prompt availability of recordings
- Length of talks was just right

An aspect in which we will need to consider improvements is that nearly 69 percent of participants were unable to view or attend all of the sessions that they wanted. Self-reported reasoning for this was mainly attributed to the time zones during which talks were offered and the quantity of personal free time (including household commitments).

Desired quantity of interaction was spread across the board, with almost equal numbers of responses for too much, too little, and just right. Written feedback was also divided, with several other suggested platforms named. In this section, several comments also stated general dissatisfaction with the talks, or that their expectations for some talks were not met.

In the free-response section, several pieces of constructive feedback were provided, summarized into these categories:

- Incorporate digital attendance, even if the conference is in person.
- Create a url for each talk, such as by using GitHub.

- Increased workshops for non-English speakers.
- Improve speaker presentations (audio issues, content delivery).
- Make TUG more attractive.
- Earlier call for proposals.
- Avoid issues/conflict during the AGM.
- Use free or non-proprietary software as a platform.
- Clarify the use of the social platforms early on.
- Manage both YouTube and Zoom participant commentaries.

5 Proposed course of action

- Discuss strong points of disagreement.
- Create guidelines or handbook for online component of TUG.

5.1 Shorter talks, longer breaks

Paulo: this would remove the scattered breaks; if a speaker slightly overshoots the time, it would still be fine. Longer breaks would allow for more discussion time, for better or worse. The current setup felt very discontinuous to me.

Jennifer: The Zoom environment doesn't naturally promote a lot of discussion even when the time to discuss is offered. One solution that has been proposed a few times is the use of breakout rooms, but this is very unnatural and results in extensive work by the hosts since it cannot be assumed that all attendees would know how to enter a breakout room or that they would have an up-to-date version of Zoom which allows it.

Also, a person who thought they were interested in a potential discussion might end up in a room where others are talking more one-on-one since not every speaker is trained in inclusive talking management, and consequently end up "stuck" in an irrelevant discussion that is not convenient to leave and without being able to easily communicate with the host once in the breakout.

5.2 A closing thought

At the price of one evening session, we could allow people from Asia/Pacific to participate live. For instance, 8pm Rochester (New York) is 8am Malaysia, 9am Japan and 10am Australia East coast, all quite bearable.

◇ Paulo Ney de Souza and Jennifer Claudio
<https://tug.org/tug2021>