

STATE OF PLAY

# The new experimental landscape of virtual conferences

Member exclusive by Anne Quito for The virtual conference reboot

Spring is a particularly busy time for professional conferences. TED, Google I/O, IBM Think, and Milan's Salone di Mobile are just some of the major annual gatherings scheduled for this time of year. Under normal circumstances, many of us would be polishing pitches, confirming travel logistics, and packing business cards for professional gatherings.

A global pandemic has vexed all plans. Many events foiled by Covid-19 are included on a dedicated Wikipedia page which reads as a memorial to the best-laid plans of 2020. This disruption is more than a logistical nuisance—it equates to billions of dollars in losses. The decline in business air travel alone represents an estimated \$809 billion hit to the US economy.

While many organizers opted to cancel or postpone events, many more plunged into the world of virtual conferencing. They're realizing that hosting a good virtual conference isn't simply a matter of transposing stage content and broadcasting it on the internet.

This is fueling a burgeoning industry. Online speaking gurus are offering tips on matters like ideal Zoom backgrounds, video teleconferencing software, optimal camera angles, or how to convey authenticity online. Startups are pitching alternative online meeting platforms, virtual reality, and volumetric video (aka holograms) to bring meetings to life. Graphic designers are advertising PowerPoint slide assistance and e-templates for academic posters. There are even magicians who specialize in performing illusions for virtual conferences. They're called—what else?—Alakazoom!

And perceptive organizers are also looking to neuroscience for clues on how to better engage audiences on the other side of laptop screens.

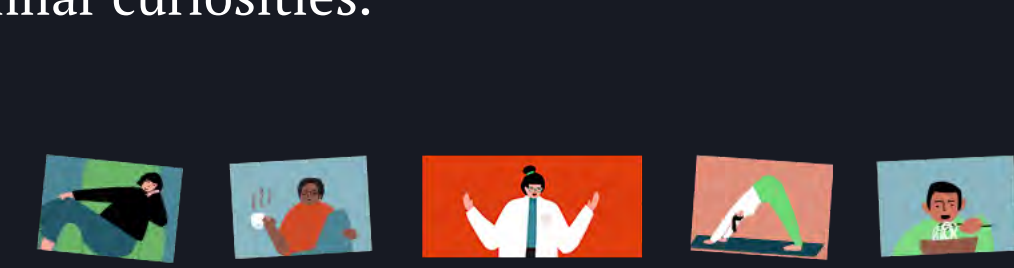


Denmark's Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen attends a video call meeting with E.U. heads of state.

REUTERS/RETAU SCHAPPE/USLOTTIE SHARPE

Largely stale formats until now, virtual conferences are being reimagined as a kind of experimental theater for exchange and networking amid this global health crisis. The medium, as we're learning, has its own persnickety tech and rules of etiquette. We're testing, we're fumbling, we're learning as we go. And, perhaps for the first time, people are rethinking the standard meeting format in ways that were previously unimaginable.

But is this enough? Our field guide asks if super-produced virtual conferences can ever replace shaking somebody's hand, sharing a drink at the cocktail hour, or even flocking to a breakout session with people of similar curiosities.



## Intermission: How about some magic?

Alakazoom, a new startup by celebrated magicians Ryan Oakes and Doug McKenzie offers an astonishing answer to whether we can conjure the magic of human connection in remote gatherings.

Using online elements like email, emojis, and text messaging, Oakes and McKenzie have created an act called "Digital Deception" for virtual events. They've performed for companies like Google, IBM, Procter & Gamble, PWC, UNICEF, and even a family sheltered-in-place on a yacht. "Clients have hired us to entertain their clients because, you know, virtual cocktail hours can only go so far when everybody's staring at each other," says Oakes, the youngest winner of the Society of American Magician's National Magic Competition.



Doug McKenzie and Ryan Oakes

COURTESY OF ALAKAZOOM

The idea for an online show coalesced as soon as they began hearing of show cancellations because of the pandemic. "We registered the domain name, we built the website and ran to the camera store before everything got sold out," explains McKenzie, a Scottish sleight of hand master who once stole former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani's watch in plain sight of his guards.



Magic in your hands

"When we first thought of it, we assumed we'd be doing our shows [sitting] together virtually. And then a week later I was like, we're going to need two of everything," says Oakes, who is self-quarantining in Brooklyn, a few blocks away from McKenzie.

Can a magician penetrate your laptop screen and know what's on your mind? Alakazoom comes close to making you believe that fantasy. During our interview, Oakes and McKenzie wowed me with a bit they conjured using my smartphone. They even changed the weather forecast for my zip code before my eyes.

"We've designed it so things are happening with you at home. It's not necessarily watching us do some sleight of hand on video on YouTube, which there are plenty of," explains McKenzie. He says that not being in the same room with participants helps their act. "I think it's more impressive than if I can read your mind in person, because I'm not there to look at you and pick up your subtle body language cues and all the other things that go into mind reading."

Oakes and McKenzie have been studying about how to facilitate memorable human connection online, especially during a time when social distancing seems to have shrunken our universe. "We're trying to replicate the shared experiences and memories of a group in a live format," says Oakes.

It boils down to small details like switching to the gallery grid view so participants see reactions, or having sound effects, visual gags, and "groaner dad jokes," as they might do in a live performance. It's also about minding basic production values—lighting, audio, camera angle—to make sure that the experience flows as seamlessly as possible, despite unreliable wifi connections. Alakazoom also found the secret of preventing participants from multi-tasking. "That's because we've hypnotized you," jokes McKenzie.

Magicians keep an audience of any size mesmerized with clear, snappy prompts, interactive tasks, and a satisfying payoff—a formula meeting organizers can learn from. "We're still figuring it out but we're going to see a lot of innovation in virtual meetings over the next few months," predicts McKenzie. "Hopefully, we're helping push that."

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