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Academia in the Post-Pandemic World: Leapfrogging into the Unknown – Tales from Organizing EGOS 2020

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Over the past months, we have been witnessing nothing less than a radical rupture in the globally shared "institutional fabric": 'discontinuities in the taken-for-granted features of global society that have developed over the past decades' (Hwang and Höllerer, 2020, p. 294). And academia is no exception. While deeply institutionalized practices of academic life have not been radically altered for the most part, many of us have formed the view that the COVID-19 pandemic and the cascading effects of the corresponding global crisis are likely to lead to the end of academic life 'as we know it'. And still, we have little idea as to exactly how such changing practices will pan out in the long-run, how profound the changes might be, and how long-lasting their effects. Our commentary offers a number of provocations. A key metaphor we wish to develop is 'cultural leapfrogging': a situation 'in which a next-generation institutional infrastructure is imagined and created more or less de novo rather than merely imitating, adapting, or translating an institutional design observed elsewhere' (Gehman and Höllerer, 2019, p. 233). With the technological aspects of leapfrogging all too familiar to those of us who have spent considerable time moving our lives online, the social aspects of such a shift have attracted less attention. Cultural leapfrogging, happening in often contested instances, is not without risk: the moment you 'leap', regularly with limited time for reflection, you are catapulted into uncharted territory – with little idea as to where exactly you will land.

In this commentary, we wish to share anecdotes and insights on such a cultural leapfrogging experience drawn from organizing the 2020 EGOS Colloquium online: the first author as the then-President of the European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS) and the second author in his role as Chair of the 2020 Local Organizing Committee. Overall, we intend to tell a cautionary tale, covering a number of issues

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such as community building, collegiality, critique and constructive feedback, cross-fertilization of ideas, socialization of newcomers, and networking among scholars. The current COVID-19 crisis has afforded a number of opportunities, but it has also led to more troublesome consequences – some of which, we argue, are potentially irreversible.

Preparing to Leap: Questions and Anxieties

The 2020 EGOS Colloquium was conceptualized as a sustainable conference – with the idea of minimizing the carbon footprint of an international conference of this size and format. Soon after the global COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020, it became clear that there was no way the conference could run as envisaged on the campus of the University of Hamburg, Germany. When we decided, on 17 March 2020, to organize the Colloquium as a virtual conference, we knew that we wanted to do this instead of cancelling it altogether – but in all honesty we had little idea what the journey would entail. After all, we were among the first major associations and scholarly communities to make a move on this scale, involving a full conference with thousands of participants from across the globe.

We were unsure how it would work out technology-wise: by early 2020, not many had experience with Zoom-based teaching, and there were no ready-made online conferencing platforms available either. So that was one 'unknown' for us – and finances were another. But there was a much greater concern: how could we possibly move 60+ EGOS sub-themes (i.e., conference streams) and 1,800 paper presentations into the virtual sphere; successfully run opening, keynote, and award ceremonies; host social events and networking receptions; and, in general, maintain the academic spirit of a lively conference? How could we hold the community together as one, across continents and time zones? We were worried whether our sub-theme convenors and participants would be prepared to follow us in this endeavour, or if instead we would receive a large number of cancellations and end up with a fragmented conference. With the backing of the EGOS leadership, we concluded that we had little to lose. Hoping that the community would come along and be somewhat forgiving of all kinds of potential glitches and hiccups, we felt that this prospect was still better than simply pulling the plug.

Take-Off: The 'Wow!'-Moment

The success of EGOS 2020 came as a surprise. We were amazed that almost all sub-themes ran as planned, with only a few cancellations from submitting authors, and a huge crowd cheering (virtually) that EGOS was brave enough to continue with the conference. With the support of many helping hands, we managed to get a full program together, much as we had planned it under 'normal' circumstances. Convenors worked closely with us to create innovative solutions for the sub-themes, adapted to challenges, and made sure the conference turned out to be a rewarding experience for almost all involved. In the end, we had no less than 2,100 participants over 5 days of conferencing, 470 live sessions, pre-conference workshops, sub-plenary sessions, a keynote (even with a live debate), and a worthy (pre-recorded) opening and award ceremony. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive and by far exceeded our expectations.

With this, and with technology working perfectly, many of our worries vanished. We had leapt, we were airborne – but where would we land? Witnessing a number of wonderful developments and positive outcomes, not all of them anticipated, it was overall a truly extraordinary experience. At the same time, though, we have observed a few more troublesome implications that we feel need to be reflected on. Cultural leapfrogging might come at a price, and there is a concern that we might be about to lose important aspects of academic life that we have grown quite fond of.

Community or Platform? Tribalization in Academia

'Being lonely together': this emotional expression, to be heard in one form or another over the entire 2020 conference season, also captured some of our own feelings. Indeed, it was somewhat awkward sitting alone in front of our laptops in a deserted office wing at the original Colloquium venue at the University of Hamburg (Daniel), or in the middle of the night in a small beach-side apartment in quasi-locked down Sydney (Markus), whilst the EGOS Colloquium was getting into full swing. It was the impression of an impoverished experience that we shared with many of our peers. In contrast to previous years, we, as the organizers, were not able to float between rooms and sessions to get a feel of how the event was being received. We vividly remember a frantic call between the two of us immediately after the opening ceremony: EGOS 2020 is obviously on – but what is actually going on? Is everything working for all the sub-themes? Are people showing up? How is the spirit among participants? In fact, we had to rely heavily on social media to get direct feedback on, and from, the conference. We were checking for issues as well as for positive and uplifting comments on Twitter, and we monitored trending posts like addicts. It was, however, only a partial remedy for how odd we felt.

As we later learned from various individual comments, such feeling of isolation was shared by others – albeit to varying degrees: some sub-themes experienced quite engaged and creative exchanges that left attendees pleasantly surprised by how well the online format actually worked. In particular, sub-themes in which a substantial number of participants already knew each other from previous instances, or where convenors truly went the extra mile, recorded a high level of interaction, and as a result created a very positive impression. Participants in sub-themes with less 'social glue' or creativity, as well as newcomers to EGOS, had a more mixed overall experience. What was striking, however, was that activities beyond the sub-theme level, those geared towards all Colloquium attendees (i.e., keynote, sub-plenaries, or various socials), did not generate similar levels of enthusiasm. All of a sudden, we were not one big community dividing into sub-theme sessions whenever scheduled, but a number of disconnected tribes, each with its own emerging internal norms of engagement and very little engagement across the tribes.

Such tribalization leaves us pondering a pivotal question: what holds a scholarly community together in an increasingly virtual academic world? The EGOS community has been built on a distinct 'EGOS spirit', which emphasizes the development of a shared scholarly agenda over several days within one particular sub-theme and connects participants to the local academic setting. An exclusively virtual setting comes with the considerable risk of being reduced to an anonymous 'service-providing platform' whose role is limited to ensuring technical functionality for the gathering of multiple tribes. But it does

not stop there. We will also have to deal with raised expectations in terms of the professionalism of the very service at offer: 'we pay, so what do we get for it?'. Even though we charged only a symbolic conference fee, we still had to debate the benefits of EGOS membership with some participants. Such perceptions and expectations will impact future 'business models' for online and hybrid conferencing.

In addition, these issues should be a reminder to all of us why we have committed ourselves to scholarly societies and associations in the first place. What is the ultimate benefit for the individual scholar moving forward? We have learned that running mini-conferences of like-minded scholars works quite well online – sometimes even better than face-to-face. And if such smaller-scale meetings are in fact easier to organize, and at almost zero cost, is there still any value-add in being part of a larger association that ties together these various sub-communities? One might start wondering whether the 50–70 tribes (in our case, the EGOS sub-themes) indeed any longer need and/or value the 'umbrella' of the overall conference/association.

Overall, we note that identity and strong 'sense of belonging' have likely become even more double-edged swords in the virtual academic environment. And it is in this sense that cultural leapfrogging equally reveals a double-edged character. The 'new normal' demands creative solutions on the part of scholarly associations and event organizers for all forms of conferencing – face-to-face, online, and hybrid – while also retaining a distinct spirit and set of values within and across an academic community.

Zooming In and Out: Transactionality versus Collegiality

From the anonymized log files of the Zoom-based conference platform we learned that – quite literally – 'Zoom-ing' in and out of virtual rooms was common practice over the 5 days of the conference. We admit that even we occasionally switched between parallel sub-plenaries, in fear of missing out on something important, or aiming to get a 'best of', and consequently were lacking adequate attention span and loyalty to the presenters. However, an important aspect of the EGOS spirit is that it is built around the firm notion of collegiality, which entails a commitment to a specific sub-theme's program over the entire Colloquium.

As a matter of fact, there are significantly lower transaction costs and fewer social controls in place during a virtual conference. Entry and exit barriers are fairly low; anonymity is arguably higher; and switching channels is easy and more accepted than physically changing rooms while sessions are running. We certainly noticed the increased tendency of participants to focus on delivering their own presentation and receiving feedback – and then, too often leave the room for more exciting options. Peer control seems rather difficult online for conference sizes above a certain threshold; and new social norms still need to emerge. Moving online certainly has fostered a more 'transactional' understanding of academic exchange, which seems aligned with the notion of conferences resembling platforms rather than the gathering of a community. Culturally, this may have important consequences for community spirit, collegiality, and scholarly engagement. These characteristics might become less important, less visible, and hence less practiced.

Against this background, how can we contribute to preserving the unique spirit and values of collegiality even for those who become socialized in the 'new normal'? It

seems critical to hold on to some important rules of engagement – and practice them accordingly. We tend to the view that more senior scholars, in particular, have a huge responsibility to foster this academic culture and act as role models when attending and convening conferences, no matter the format.

Fuelling the Star Cult: Everyone Follow the Twitter Queen![1]

The instrumental importance of social media, and Twitter in particular, for the 2020 Colloquium – and also for our own wellbeing – caught us, we willingly admit, by surprise. Being very late to the party ourselves, Daniel started using Twitter last year to showcase his academic institute, and Markus, a long-time self-declared sceptic of social media, re-activated his dormant LinkedIn account just in time for EGOS 2020, and even signed up for Twitter on the very first day of the conference to be able to follow what was going on. Social media emerged as the principal arena in which impressions about the conference were exchanged. Posts ranged from praise of how well a particular session was run and organized, to how great a specific presentation was, to links to one's own work that related to the ideas discussed. Featured imagery included Zoom screenshots, memes, or the location from which people were following the conference. Overall, we were thrilled about the overwhelmingly positive tone of comments and by the high number of people active on social media.

But being active on Twitter was not just vanity: if we did not post, others would do so – and maybe not in the way we would like essential information to be spread in the context of the conference. Which brings us to an important issue: who speaks on behalf of a virtual event in which we are all participating, but only from afar? How do we talk about the event? How do we avoid voices on social media becoming tribal at times? And, more generally, who has legitimacy to speak on behalf of any constituency within a community such as EGOS? This all goes hand in hand with an irreversible trend in academia to use social media like Twitter or ResearchGate in order to be seen, to enhance the visibility of one's work, and to develop one's own 'brand' (Mehrpouya and Willmott, 2018). There are some notable consequences for academic exchange that we observed during EGOS 2020. With a few exceptions, on social media there was collective praise – and hardly any critique. The scholarly discourse during the conference became dominated by a handful of social media savvy scholars, seniors and juniors alike, who garnered a large amount of attention. While some might still regard this as an opportunity for 'democratizing' and overthrowing the traditional status hierarchy within academia, we are more sceptical: s/he who has more followers who echo a posted message, dominates.

What also comes with this is a tendency towards a new star cult. For sure, academic 'fandom' has always been around; but when public appraisal, 'likes', and 'retweets' from a large number of 'following' peers become the ultimate goal, this displays a new quality. And it leads to the emergence of some quite novel practices, such as the constant public cherishing of the 'amazing' work of leading scholars, or junior scholars extensively referring to seniors to praise them for their words of wisdom in order to get their attention. Sometimes, while reading through the Twitter feeds, the two of us were amused by the conveyed vibe of an '*in vivo* workshop' of how to play this new game. Might we have unknowingly paved the way for a new dynamic and a questionable set of novel

'competencies'? Is it all about being, and remaining, visible? About visibility through 'likes' and 'applause', not critique and intellectual engagement? About being active online all the time – and for s/he who pauses, to lose the game? We believe that, as a scholarly community, we ought to find alternative ways of engaging and having an 'impact' – and such discussion on impact most likely goes way beyond the theme of our commentary here. As a scholarly community, we probably need to protect, and further develop, safe spaces especially for PhD students and early career scholars.

Just Being Kind to Each Other – Or the Crowding Out of Critique?

Another puzzling observation was the changed tone of feedback during online paper sessions. The majority of discussions revolved around praising the paper being presented, giving tips for improvement here and there, and recommendations for additional literature or areas one could focus on. Profound critique, significant challenge, or more substantial arguments were astonishingly lacking in the debates – and all the more so on social media.

All this might be partly in line with a more global trend towards the North American 'sandwich-style' of giving scholarly feedback at conferences. However, the EGOS community until not long ago proudly claimed to uphold a spirit of true critique and reflection rather than predominantly praise. But there is slightly more to it. We observed that especially in online fora, colleagues tend to shy away from critique for probably good reasons: the danger that critique gets misunderstood is high, and one has little chance of putting things into context (for instance, during the coffee break after the session). Lacking face-to-face interaction and unable to see the emotional response of the person critiqued, it often proves difficult to find the right tone. Finally, online fora are often recorded, and/or the comments made in the chat potentially saved and stored for eternity – and we know all too well what recording does to social interactions.

In consequence, we call for innovative rules of engagement that are fundamental in fostering reflection and critique, that work across different conferencing formats, and that cater in particular to online meetings. Potential measures may include, but are by no means limited to: reinforcing the role of senior discussants as *advocati diaboli,* to raise critical voices to both uncover flaws and unleash constructive critique; avoiding the recording of sessions, and discouraging participants from doing so; readjusting presentation formats to enable feedback and debate rather than spending time on extensively presenting work; session facilitators/moderators emphasizing the fundamental role of critique for the advancement of our field and reserving sufficient time for this while ensuring that it remains constructive, is correctly understood, and not personal.

Improved Work-Life Balance or Online All the Time?

One of our biggest concerns was how we could run the Colloquium across different time zones and be as inclusive as possible to our worldwide community. As a result, some sessions were allowed to start at 06:00 in the morning, while others closed around 23:00 at night. As it turned out, we were indeed able to accommodate scholars across the globe over the entire week of EGOS 2020 – although we acknowledge that this format had significant unintended consequences.

From our experience, we wish to caution those who think that virtual conferencing will improve work-life balance for everyone. We admit that at first glance it might seem too good not to be true: less conference travel makes sense ecologically, saving time and cost. Plus, being close to family during a conference enables us to more easily take care of the many responsibilities in our private lives. But it has a flip side too: blurred boundaries between the professional and private sphere, less focus on the academic agenda (remember the 'luxury' of a few days per year to fully immerse ourselves in intellectual endeavours), less inspiration from being exposed to the 'magic' that unfolds during an academic conference.

Moreover, and paradoxically, significant timing issues arise. As all of us who have ever taught a global MBA course or engaged in a research collaboration across continents will know, organizing across very different time zones poses a considerable challenge, and 'Zoom-fatigue' is omnipresent. Early morning calls and after-midnight Zoom sessions have become a routine feature in our diaries over the past months (at least for those not located in Europe or on the US east coast). In such a way, 'Euro-centric' takes on a new dimension.

Finally, let's not forget one thing: for many (especially junior) scholars who lack either, or both, geographical proximity and adequate funding, events such as EGOS have been a fixture in the academic year, and often the only opportunity to stay in close touch with their scholarly community, collaborators, peers, and – yes – also with academic friends. We guess that many of you who have embraced academia as a distinct 'scholarly lifestyle' will agree that in 2020 quite a lot went missing – again, despite all the positives. This is not to legitimize academic tourism and other non-sustainable practices – but it requires careful consideration in regard to which conferences can be attended online, and which should be held face-to-face.

Concluding Remarks: Leapfrogging But Where To?

We started this essay with the notion of cultural leapfrogging that has catapulted us into uncharted territory – and the puzzle of where exactly academia might end up in the post-pandemic world. Presenting anecdotal evidence from organizing EGOS 2020, we engaged with topics such as the need to foster a scholarly culture in an academic world where technology accelerates the tribalization of like-minded scholars; how to maintain collegiality and reciprocity when entry and exit barriers are low; how to successfully socialize newcomers into our community; and how to handle the manifold issues that come with new norms of engagement in social media that are more concerned with a currency of visibility than with critical reflection and controversy.

Ultimately, how does all this impact our life as scholars? In future, academia might be even less a 'calling' and traditional 'scholarly lifestyle' but more transactional in nature, with technology increasingly enabling people to decouple from their academic 'home' departments, domains, and communities. And we are already witnessing a more homogenous, post-pandemic global academic system emerging under our nose – one with an even clearer economic rationale: low transaction costs, stripped-down service provisioning, and budget-driven restructuring.

On the positive, and against the backdrop of an increasing proliferation of small-scale workshops, summer schools, and professional development workshops dispersed around the globe, the collective leap-frogging exercise during the COVID-19 pandemic has also taught us that some of these formats work well online. They can be organized relatively easily and can be run by enthusiastic academics, hence becoming much more inclusive – literally just a mouse-click away. An option could be to retain some selected conferences in face-to-face formats to continue fostering community-building, cross-fertilization of ideas, socialization of newcomers, and networking among scholars, amongst other things. At the same time, we need to further develop the institutional infrastructure and create innovative rules of engagement for online and hybrid formats that allow us to maintain the very spirit of collegiality, reflection, and critique that has been pivotal in the development of our scholarly societies. Taken together, this might pave a way forward in an academic world where we continue to practice scholarly values while embracing the merits of new technologies in rendering our conference practices more sustainable and inclusive.

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NOTE

[1] Obviously, we here allude to the imagery of the 'queen bee'. We shall note, however, that there are an equal number of, if not more, 'Twitter Kings' out there.

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