

## CHI 2022 Should Be a Virtual Only Event

### 9 October 2021

We, the undersigned, strongly recommend a virtual only CHI 2022. We are concerned that the format for CHI 2022 will significantly impact inclusion of the full diversity of SIGCHI. We issue this statement to provide insight into how people with different disabilities have responded to the possibility of an all virtual instead of a hybrid event under the current circumstances. We note that COVID is amplifying existing inequities, given that in-person CHI has always been problematic for many people. COVID is just increasing the number of people affected and making that more visible.

### 1. Reasons to Go All Virtual

#### **A. Exacerbating Inequalities**

Access to visas and vaccination; health consequences of getting COVID; and financial costs of an in-person event; are all arenas which exacerbate existing inequalities. These issues are of course intersectional with CHI community members who are members of multiple minorities at additional risk. Further, virtual attendance is more robust to unpredictable changes in the COVID situation and travel / immigration / border issues that may arise.

Regarding access to visas and vaccination, we are concerned with the **global inequity of visa, vaccine and booster access** for Black/Latinx people, people from the Global South, and people with precarious work (including academics on short contracts). At the time of the writing the US border remains closed to citizens from Brazil, China, the European Schengen area (most of the EU), Iran, India, Ireland, and South Africa [5], which represent the bulk of non-North American CHI attendees. Visa and vaccine requirements hinder any travel planning, raise the travel costs due to last minute planning and seem to stay unsolved for CHI2022. Consequently, **a CHI 2022 face-to-face event in New Orleans risks becoming an event for mostly US citizens**, with a few attendees from countries such as Canada, Australia, Korea or Japan to whose borders the US remains open. It is also possible that travelers from outside of the US may be required to quarantine upon arrival, which would add to their financial and time costs and might also make it impossible for them to attend if their quarantine period overlaps the dates of the conference.

Regarding health consequences of getting COVID, those with additional health concerns face more risk if they are exposed to COVID-19. They may be especially cautious given that early data shows vaccine efficacy decreases over time [1] and new disease variants continue to be documented [2] and vaccines have been shown to be

less effective against newer variants [3]. Further, breakthrough cases for the vaccinated continue to be an issue [4], and this conference is occurring in Louisiana, a state which as of October 9<sup>th</sup> the NYT reported having only a 46% full vaccination rate (or 55% for 12 and up). **This risks creating division within CHI of the ‘healthy’ and the ‘unhealthy’ who would have unequal access to the CHI conference.** Amongst the ‘unhealthy’ who would lose access we count those who themselves are disabled and immunocompromised, or have small children, elderly, disabled or immunocompromised people in their households.

The virtual format is also more inclusive of people from low-resourced institutions, including NGOs and independent scholars, and from regions who could not otherwise afford travel and lodging expenses. The exception holds of course for individuals at low-resourced institutions who also lack good wifi access, for whom a significant barrier remains.

### **B. Environmental Sustainability**

A virtual only conference would be more sustainable in that it prevents individuals from the need to travel, as well as reducing the ecological impact of our events on the local communities in which we host them.

### **C. Work Inequities**

The workload for attendees of hybrid events may be larger, increasing the burden of inaccessibility (making both a video and a real-time presentation will cost extra time). Further, we question the ethics of asking volunteers who cannot attend CHI due to COVID to support the work of an in-person conference. We want to avoid service work for a conference that will not be well attended, and recognize that calling for virtual-only earlier saves work.

### **D. Accessibility and Safety of Virtual Only Events**

The virtual format allows people with expressive disabilities to prepare their recorded presentations at their own pace, using whatever assistive technologies they may need. Regarding safety, while we recognize that in some instances the unsafety of the streets is a construct of the patriarchy used to oppress women [8], data shows New Orleans crime index is safer than only 2% of US cities [9]. Thus, virtual participation reduces safety concerns in a city that sells itself in part as an "anything goes" venue. For example, virtual participation reduces certain risks of physical harassment, abuse, and assault as well as the risk of abuses that may take place around alcohol and other decision-impairing substances.

### **Reasons in Favor of Hybrid Event.**

While we favor switching to a virtual only event for CHI 2022 due to the unique circumstances of the pandemic, we wish to highlight a few key arguments in favor of an in-person component which need to be addressed if we are going to ensure equity for all CHI attendees.

### **Networking is More Difficult Virtually**

For students or other people who are new to CHI, people at critical points in their career such as going up for promotion and anyone who is trying to connect to new sub-fields of HCI, networking is a critical step toward their goals. Such networking is extremely difficult to accomplish in virtual events, at least as they have been organized to date.

### **Some Types of Research Benefit from In-Person Presentation and Discussion**

Virtual participation reduces the impact of "critical view" work, and reduces some agendas to look like a pure criticism (rather than a bigger contribution for the community). Poor digital accessibility, combined with a virtual only event without informal in person-social gatherings, would make it hard to fully discuss issues papers raising critical issues in the HCI community. We are concerned about the impact on scholarship and activism if disabled and other minoritized voices are missing in those discussions. While some of these discussions will happen in the sessions itself, much of the critical networking and discussion of controversial issues happens in informal settings at conferences.

### **Some Accessibility Needs are Best Met by In-Person events**

For CHI2021 some disabled attendees reported having sessions scheduled in the middle of the night at which they were presenting. While, for an able-bodied person this might be inconvenient, for a disabled person this can represent a significant threat to one's health, and accommodations for this must be made to ensure disabled participants are not presenting in time slots that will adversely impact their health. The choice to only participate in a daytime, in-person component of CHI 2022 could mitigate this. Further, we are concerned about the ability to book support workers during the full range of times necessary for a virtual conference, such as events scheduled outside 9-5, or social events.

In addition, attendees with mental health issues such as depression were looking forward to a face-to-face conference to support mental health recovery. One of our members wrote, "as an immunocompromised person, I know attending CHI is very dangerous for me, however after nearly two years of isolation I feel compelled to take the risk. Due to my access needs, I wasn't able to participate in the conversation following sessions at CHI21. I feel like not having access to my academic community has significantly worsened my mental health, and as such am making a decision to

attend as my mental health needs outweigh my physical health needs. However, it is vital to me that the conference require vaccination of non-exempt people, and have social distancing.” This concern would be extremely difficult to address in an online only venue.

### **Recommendation: A Virtual-Only Event with Regional In-Person Gatherings**

The decision between virtual, hybrid, and in person is clearly a difficult one, and there is no way to meet all needs with any one of these solutions. However, **after weighing the evidence and the arguments for both, the undersigned nonetheless favor a virtual only event.**

We believe that such an approach is the most equitable and inclusive option. However, acknowledging that a virtual event does not meet all needs, we argue for the following additional changes:

**Regional Meetings with Cross Pollination:** Regional in-person HCI conferences represent reduced COVID risk, and are beneficial to local communities. For instance, British HCI, ICHCI [6] (China), and the NordiCHI [7] (Nordic countries) will go forward in person in 2022. (We have not heard anything definitive regarding AfricaCHI, Interact (Europe), OZCHI (Austria-Asia), or LatinCHI). We note that the US does not have a regional conference, as CHI with its North American roots serves in place of a regional conference. Consequently, we recognize that those with no regional conference, or whose national conferences are online only might lack national in person networking opportunities and look to CHI for this function. Should CHI 2022 shift to a virtual format, a North American regional event should also be planned. Further, **travel scholarships supporting and encouraging cross-pollination across regions** should be provided. This should be designed to encourage some senior, and some junior, members of the community to visit a different regional event each year. This would require financial support for these events to ensure regional events maintained CHI- level standards of accessibility.

**Other Networking Opportunities:** We see a place for even smaller regional meetings during the CHI 2022 period of time. This could be within a single city, country, or region. Another innovation the EC could sponsor is travel grants for students or those up for critical promotion milestones to travel and give talks at other institutions. CrossRoads and Interactions could also write feature articles on scholars on a regular basis to introduce them to the community.

We the undersigned support this statement.

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[2] <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/covid-19/variants-concern>

- [3] <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/nejmoa2108891>
- [4] <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa2109072>
- [5] <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/from-other-countries.html>
- [6] <https://conferenceindex.org/event/international-conference-on-human-computer-interaction-ichci-2022-october-beijing-cn>
- [7] <https://conferences.au.dk/nordichi2022/>
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