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## Are we Concentrating on the Right Issues? A Response to the AIS Taskforce's Plan for the Future of IS Conferences

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### Cover Page Footnote

This manuscript underwent editorial review. It was received 3/21/2023 and was with the authors for twelve months for two revisions. Cathy Urquhart served as Associate Editor.



## Are we Concentrating on the Right Issues? A Response to the AIS Taskforce's Plan for the Future of IS Conferences

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### Abstract:

This short article aims to challenge some fundamental assumptions we hold about conferences and how we organize ourselves as an academic community. It puts forward the environmental impact of extensive traveling and the strain and squandering on the volunteer-based academic system, exacerbated by the growing number of paper reviews to be handled every year and the growing tendency that attending conferences becomes a secondary matter for scholarly exchange and learning. Since there are no alternatives to scientific conferencing in the foreseeable future, the article's attention shifts towards the question of who has access to this scientific exchange. This discourse responds to the AIS taskforce's future plan for IS conferences, discussing some limitations of hybrid models in tackling inequality and diversity issues. The article concludes with the presentation of some obvious, and in some cases radical propositions, for changing the way scientific conferences encompassing a "hybrid" experience could be organized differently.

**Keywords:** Diversity, Emissions, Hybrid, Multi-Hub, Scientific Conferences, Social Inclusion, Volunteerism and Reviewing.

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## 1 Introduction

Scientific conferences have long been hailed as a crucial platform for researchers to disseminate and update knowledge, as well as to establish long-lasting collaborations that drive a discipline forward (Sarabipour et al., 2021). Stemming from a time when researchers only had access to peers' work if it was available in their local university library, one can certainly understand this widespread opinion that conferences are essential for a stimulating exchange of knowledge as well as to get access to the newest findings.

Even the COVID-19 pandemic has changed little in this belief. While the involuntary shift from face-to-face conferencing to fully virtual conferencing now prompts discussions about how these meetings should be hosted (the focus of Carte et al., 2023), it has done little to challenge the fundamental assumption that conferences are essential for facilitating the exchange of ideas and staying abreast of the latest findings. On the positive, the forced changes have prompted contemplation regarding the delicate yet resilient nature of things. Simultaneously, they have sparked thoughts about how the post-pandemic reality can be enhanced by building upon the positive experiences gained during this period. However, in only a brief period following the pandemic, it is apparent that a significant number of the implemented changes are being reversed to restore the pre-pandemic status quo (Falk & Hagsten, 2023). For example, ICIS – the flagship conference of the IS community – has reverted to its traditional format of being conducted exclusively as an in-person event in 2022, with no alternative options available. After initial reluctance, ICIS 2023 offered some limited hybrid options. What will happen in the future is likely to be contingent upon the actions and decisions of the local organizers.

As we move forward, it is worth reflecting more deeply on the *raison d'être* of scientific conferences. In this article, my primary focus will be on discussing some of the negative aspects of conferences. These include the detrimental effects on the planet resulting from extensive travel activities. Additionally, I'll address the burden to an academic system, largely reliant on volunteerism, facing its limits as the quantity of papers to be reviewed increases along with the proliferation of workshops, conferences, and pre- and post-conference ancillary meetings (see Section 2).

Given that scientific conferences will not go away in the foreseeable future (for many, the benefits seem to outweigh the drawbacks), I will subsequently address the issue of access to this form of scientific exchange. Particularly, and as a response to the AIS taskforce's plan for the future of IS conferences, I will concentrate on the question of whether changing to or additionally offering a "hybrid" option will be enough to level the playing field and ensure that everyone has equal access and opportunity to participate (see Section 3).

Since criticizing is far easier than working out solutions, I will then present some obvious, and in some cases radical propositions for the future of IS conferences (see Section 4). One of such is the concept of "multi-hub" conferences, which are conferences simultaneously held at multiple, spatially distributed conference locations (hence, reducing the need for long-distance traveling) and which make an informed use of streaming technologies to facilitate social interactions between conference attendees across the hubs as well as those who only participate virtually (Lowell et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly shown us that much is possible with new technologies, provided the will to change is there. However, the resolution of the IS community's inequality and diversity issues cannot be a technical response only, which is why I see the propositions made in this article mainly as starting points or links to ongoing discussions and other proposals regarding how to make our community more inclusive (e.g., Chau et al., 2022; Marabelli et al., 2023). It is certainly not the ultimate response to all our existing issues.

## 2 Are the Costs and Benefits of Scientific Conferences Still in Balance?

Each year, conferences tie up a huge number of resources: countless articles need to be written, reviewed, and finally presented. Following the AIS annual report of 2021, the total submissions for AMCIS, ECIS, ICIS, and PACIS combined was 3004 papers for the said reporting period (one can do the math of how many reviews and editorial reports were written). With the number of submissions increasing each year (due in part to the growth of the IS community), conference organizers and reviewers are being pushed to their limits (Chua et al., 2018). It is only through the tireless efforts of countless volunteers (to whom I am bound to great gratitude) that these events can even take place.

What motivates these volunteers to commit? Is it simply a sense of duty to the academic community, or is there something more at play? While some may be motivated by self-interest (e.g., to gain recognition, to mention a service activity in performance reviews, to get their own papers published, or to improve their CV for funding applications), I assume that the prevailing motivation is a desire to be a good colleague and a good reviewer by helping authors of conference papers in their further journey to journal publication. Volunteering is grounded on a tacit agreement: in exchange for reviewers' comments (and feedback received during the conference), authors are in debt to refine and improve their work so as to contribute to the long-term advancement of the discipline. That is ultimately what conferences are all about. But is this really the case?

Contrary to the common belief, it may be that the exchange of ideas and improvement of preliminary work is increasingly becoming a secondary matter. There are various reasons for this. On one hand, it is important to note that achieving acceptance for a premier IS conference typically requires a significant investment of time and effort, as the work must already be highly matured and polished. This may come at the expense of other important activities and less time (or inclination) for situating the work "on the ground" (Trauth, 2017, p.12). Often, a conference paper is written just with the intention to "get accepted." This reduces the likelihood of controversial or unusual work being presented, making conferences less of a place for engaging in discussions but rather a place where to repeat already established ideas. On the other hand, the assumption that researchers attend conferences only for "talking research" or "getting inspired" needs to be revisited. Since conferences are increasingly used for ranking or self-promotion purposes (it has become standard practice to share at least one photo of conference attendance on LinkedIn or Twitter/X), there is a real danger that conferences are degenerating toward an end goal in themselves, where the focus is not on advancing one's research, but on publishing for moving up on rankings, self-marketing, or making the university pay for a jaunt. In many sessions, even at larger conferences, there is often a low turnout, with only the authors and session chairs in an otherwise empty room.

This would not be a tragedy, however, if we look at not only the obvious costs of organizing a conference and reviewing papers but also consider the hidden costs, namely the substantial carbon footprint that conferences generate (Leochico et al., 2021). I do not want to be a killjoy, but it is quite legitimate to ask whether it makes sense for thousands of people to travel hundreds of miles for a 20-minute presentation (or even less) in front of a half-empty audience or without the intention to take the paper to the next level. Is the assumption that conferences disseminate and improve knowledge still a permissible argument for the high CO2 emissions we generate with it?

The potential benefits of socializing and having fun at conferences may be raised as a counterargument, but it is important to note that colleagues often attend conferences for only a brief period of time (especially ICIS which always takes place shortly before Christmas), leaving little opportunity for extensive social interaction. It is also worth considering that although there are numerous networking events organized, they are not equally useful or accessible for everyone (Windeler et al., 2020). Being physically present at a conference, hence, does not guarantee inclusion as many exclusive events for members or by invitation only are becoming increasingly common. This can be particularly challenging for young researchers who lack a strong network or affiliation with a renowned institution, making it difficult for them to develop meaningful connections within their professional community through conference participation. It takes a lot more than a big room and a few drinks to feel a part of the community.

Therefore, adopting a "hybrid" approach to conferences – if properly done – may offer a promising solution to address a range of issues, such as reducing carbon emissions and improving accessibility for new members of our community. I express my appreciation for the efforts of the AIS taskforce in this regard. However, it is important to not approach this decision solely from a business standpoint, as the implications extend beyond financial considerations. Other factors that should be taken into account include environmental sustainability, equal opportunity, and the scientific added value or gain in knowledge with such a conference experience. A comprehensive and multifaceted approach to evaluating the feasibility and potential benefits of hybrid conferences is required.

### 3 Will Going "Hybrid" Solve our Inequality and Diversity Issues?

There is increasing evidence that moving scientific conferences online may have positive effects. Raby and Madden (2021) highlight the potential to resolve several barriers to in-person conferences, such as geographical distance, costs, and time constraints, which have especially inhibited researchers (mainly

women) with parental and other responsibilities to participate. Doshi et al. (2014) also see it as a means for increasing the inclusion of persons with disability as it allows them to participate in conferences that otherwise are difficult to access for them. Particularly, the cost argument seems compelling as, even in comparatively wealthy countries, the travel budgets are facing considerable strain. The concerns of the AIS taskforce that a hybridization may cannibalize conventional meetings are thus justified, especially since the added value of in-person participation (which because of the above reasons we are seeing increasingly dwindle) must be set against ever higher costs for airfares, accommodation, ground transportation, higher registration fees, and not least the CO2 emissions saved!

I understand the focus of the AIS taskforce is on finding the "right" price so that hybrid and in-person conferences can be financially sustainable. However, from my point of view, it is important that the same mistake is not repeated with membership fees or article processing charges where often country-specific discounts are made for the sake of simplicity. Of course, the prevalence of financial hardship is more common among researchers in the Global South, but it is not only a problem there. In this regard, Marabelli et al. (2023) make a good observation that a person's spending capacity may not always be adequately mirrored by the Human Development Index (HDI) of a country, which is also used by the AIS for setting membership fees. If hybridization should, indeed, reduce inequality and enhance knowledge exchange and participation, we need to pay special attention to those of us who, due to their precarious employment conditions (often graduate students and untenured faculty) may not afford a participation "out-of-their-own pocket". We, therefore, need to reflect on other ways of determining a price that is not only affordable to wealthy participants from select schools and universities but also to colleagues, students, and (not to forget) IS professionals who are operating in less favorable conditions.

If fees are waived or significantly lowered for certain participants, caution must be exercised to avoid free-rider or cross-subsidization effects that are potentially harmful to the collective (e.g., registering for the conference with secondary affiliation, or making attendance prohibitive for many so that few can participate). In addition, it is important to ensure that there is not a two-tier community, where on-site participants receive a "premium package" while online participants are left with a diminished experience. Merely providing synchronous online access to paper sessions and keynotes or asynchronous online access to presentation videos via the AIS eLibrary, while a step in the right direction, is insufficient. To ensure that both on-site and online participants have an equitable and valuable experience, it may be necessary to explore new and innovative ways to facilitate interaction, networking, and engagement.

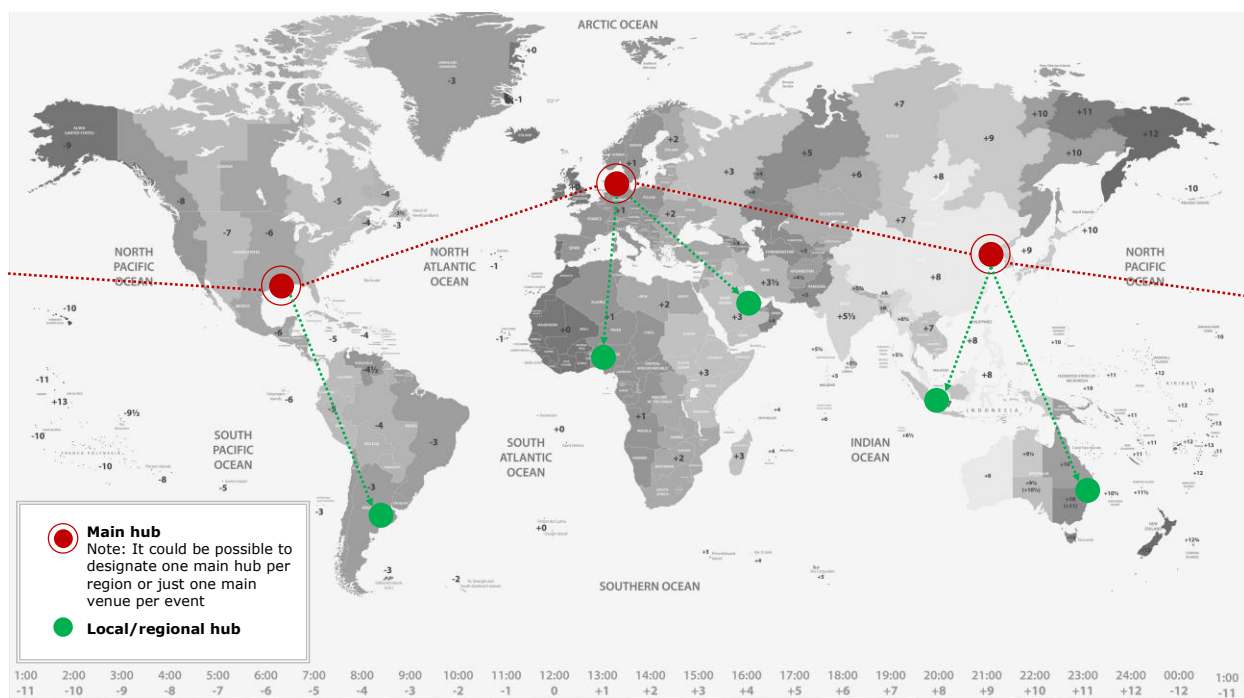
When going "hybrid", we, therefore, must think beyond accessibility and equally reflect on participation as it is vital for career prospects (Funk et al., 2012). Participation is not achieved if we simply put those who cannot afford (or are unable to join) on-site conferences into one (now virtual) room and replace coffee breaks with unmoderated breakout rooms. To ensure that all conference participants can benefit fully from the event, it is essential to provide thoughtful and engaging networking opportunities, even for those who cannot attend in person. A proper hybrid offering thus needs also to include online activities, such as academic job talks, matchmaking and mentorship programs, and collaboration opportunities. It is also important to facilitate meaningful interaction among participants, including well-designed icebreakers to encourage conversations among new attendees and those who are unfamiliar with each other and the community. Furthermore, it is crucial to provide online attendees with the means to interact with speakers and other on-site participants, such as through Q&A sessions and discussion forums. Giving online attendees the opportunity to actively contribute to the conference organization and play a significant role in its success can enhance their sense of engagement, ownership, and belonging to the community. All this considered, I am aware that this will not be an easy task for future conference organizers. My subsequent propositions may further complicate the organization of future IS conferences but will hopefully have a positive impact on solving some of the outlined problems, as I will explain next.

## 4 A Radical Proposition for the Future of IS Conferences

As previously indicated, I do not want to end this article without a constructive proposition aimed at mitigating the highlighted issues, or at the very least, that help address a subset of the mentioned challenges. Naturally, there are numerous aspects that warrant alteration and attention. From my perspective, the ensuing four points appear to constitute pivotal mechanisms for inducing substantive and positive change.

### 4.1 Replacing Large-scale Gatherings by Multi-hub Conferences

In IS, the conferences are (logistically and physically) organized based on the three geographic regions that the AIS uses for categorizing its members. The three regional conferences AMCIS (region 1 – Americas), ECIS (region 2 – Europe, Africa, Middle East), and PACIS (region 3 – Asia, Pacific) are held between June and August and are organized by regional chapters in terms of topical and scheduling decisions. The biggest IS conference, ICIS, rotates among the three regions and typically takes place in December. Accordingly, at least for participation in the latter, a long-distance flight must often be expected. It also requires the presence of a suitable infrastructure capable of accommodating a substantial number of attendees at the designated conference venue. As a result, hosting such an event is contingent upon the availability of comprehensive facilities, which predominantly align with global urban centers possessing extensive international air travel connections. Locations of a smaller scale or those situated in remote places are precluded from consideration, primarily due to their inadequate infrastructure and challenging transportation logistics. It is important to note, however, that notwithstanding these constraints, research of considerable global importance frequently emanates from these places (without mentioning specific universities or research centers). This said, participating in ICIS, whether as an attendee or in the role of an organizer, poses significant challenges for certain IS scholars.



**Figure 1. Possible Implementation of a Multi-Hub Conference Format**

One prospective approach to mitigate certain challenges involves a paradigm shift toward the arrangement of "multi-hub" conferences (see Figure 1). A multi-hub conference is a format that involves several global locations, where attendees can meet virtually or in-person at several hubs located across the globe (Parncutt et al., 2021). The talks and presentations given at each hub are shared with all other hubs, either in real-time (e.g., live streaming of keynote speeches and panels), allowing for live questions from audiences at other hubs, or as recorded videos (e.g., downloadable from the AIS eLibrary). Social interactions among the different hubs occur during virtual socializing sessions, which also include face-to-face interaction. During the conference, participants can repeatedly choose between parallel real and virtual presentations. Additionally, some participants may choose to attend the conference purely virtually, without traveling to any of the hubs. It thus offers a unique opportunity for colleagues from different parts of the world (especially those working at the aforementioned smaller or remote research centers) to establish, promote, organize, or institutionalize their academic discipline locally, which is not possible with virtual or hybrid conferences unless the organizers are globally distributed and actively promote the participation and visibility of researchers in different regions (Parncutt et al., 2021).

To ensure accessibility worldwide, Levitis et al. (2021) suggest organizing three time zone hubs and repeating the conference's main content (e.g., research presentations) at suitable times for each hub. Scheduling a maximum of four hours a day, this arrangement should allow the content to be available during typical working hours across various regions. To streamline the process and minimize technical issues, presenters are encouraged to pre-record their talks. This also allows for scheduled playback across all hubs, facilitating speaker-participant interactions. For Q&A sessions, Levitis et al. (2021) propose having presenters nominate a representative, such as a collaborator, from each hub to participate in the session.

From a practical standpoint, ICIS would be predestined to be organized as a multi-hub conference given its global orientation. Alongside a principal venue (designated as the primary or main hub), the concurrent establishment of one or more local hubs in distinct regions of the AIS could be envisaged. Adopting such a multi-hub format could bring several benefits, particularly for researchers with limited financial resources, given that it could allow them to participate in conferences with minimal travel costs while still feeling connected to the community as if they were meeting in person. Additionally, this approach could have positive environmental impacts, as it would reduce the need for long-distance travel and instead promote ground-based or short-distance travel options, which are generally more sustainable (Coroama et al., 2012). An additional (unintended) benefit of this approach is that it provides greater flexibility for those who wish to travel to attend conferences, given that travel lovers would have the option to choose from multiple conference locations, which could lead to more varied and diverse experiences and additional opportunities for networking and collaboration across different AIS regions and communities.

## 4.2 Making Conferences a Marketplace of Ideas Again

While the previous proposition may potentially curtail the necessity for extensive long-distance travel, organizing and implementing multi-hub conferences still entails a considerable allocation of resources. This is why it is imperative to ensure that (especially in-person) conference participation remains substantively rewarding, not solely on an individual level, but also for the advancement of the broader scientific undertaking. Hence, I hold the perspective that a paradigm shift towards reinstating conferences as vibrant arenas for the exchange of groundbreaking, innovative, unorthodox, or controversial ideas is of paramount significance, as opposed to their role merely as platforms for publication, self-marketing, and the reiteration of pre-existing material, often driven by the allure of subsidized travel opportunities (by the employing university or funding agency).

Facilitating this transition necessitates an elevation in the engagement and stimulation of the content presented and discussed within conference settings. This objective is intrinsically intertwined with the criteria employed for the evaluation and selection of articles to be presented. Presently, there exists a subliminal accord to assess the quality of a submitted article based on dimensions such as the relevance of the research inquiry, methodological rigor, theoretical contribution, and overall quality of writing. To encourage more discussion and debate, we could add a new category called "potential for discussion," which is already used in other disciplines for judging and selecting conference papers. Alongside the existing criteria, this newly introduced element would assess the likelihood of an article eliciting compelling and productive discussions amongst conference participants, with the aim of subsequently fostering an increased incentive to engage in the conference sessions.

A measure aimed at further enhancing the originality of the presented content and, potentially, expanding diversity among conference attendees involves a departure from the prevalent practice of submitting comprehensive manuscripts. Instead, an alternative approach would involve opting for condensed submissions in the form of extended abstracts. This would significantly reduce the burden of peer review all at once. Also, it would benefit those scholars who experience language problems. The widely accepted premise that scholarly recognition necessitates a certain degree of proficiency in the English language is well established (Meneghini & Packer, 2007). While it does facilitate effective communication and fosters a common ground, it concurrently engenders a significant disadvantage for non-native English speakers. Language encompasses more than the mere transmission of factual information; it embodies a distinct worldview and an entire cultural baggage (Alves & Pozzebon, 2013). Transposing the intricate nuances of original ideas into disparate semantic, syntactic, and occasionally cultural contexts poses a severe challenge. Often, concepts and notions infused with cultural connotations struggle to integrate into the international scientific discourse (Davison & Díaz Andrade, 2018) or suffer a loss of nuance and significance during translation between languages.



Especially for scholars without the financial means for language editing or the opportunity to pursue careers abroad, the prevailing evaluation system, which predominantly assesses logical argumentation and clarity of expression (while comparatively putting lesser emphasis on originality, added value, and broader impact), poses a substantial hindrance. Notably, conferences such as ICIS, characterized by an acceptance rate of 25 to 30 percent (Urquhart et al., 2017), often present an insurmountable hurdle. There is a discernible risk that valuable insights and findings for the IS field may be overlooked (Meneghini & Packer, 2007). My point here is not to make our premier conferences less selective. Rather, I want to call for a reconsideration of the criteria underpinning the assessment and selection of papers for conference presentation, pivoting away from an undue emphasis on stylistic writing quality and towards an evaluation based on factors such as impact, controversy, or the eagerness to engage in discourse with the authors. This deliberation can certainly be undertaken using shorter textual forms, such as the proposed extended abstracts.

### 4.3 Reducing the Burden on the Academic System

Introducing multi-hub conferences is not exactly a measure aimed at alleviating the pressures on the academic system, at least not if added on top of existing structures and commitments. On the contrary, organizing and orchestrating a compelling multi-hub event necessitates substantial resources. This is why I would further advocate the optimization of the prevailing conference schedule as an additional course of action.

Therefore, and in contrast to the proposal presented by Marabelli et al. (2023) who advocate multiplying the number of conferences in the form of small, theme-oriented gatherings so as to enhance the prospects for face-to-face interactions and cooperative ventures (particularly for researchers situated in the Global South), my stance leans towards reducing the overall number of larger, community-spanning IS conferences (e.g., AMCIS, ECIS, ICIS, and PACIS) in favor of one, maximum two, multi-hub conferences per year distributed across locations in all three AIS regions. As is customary, this could be one in June, and another in December.

While I acknowledge the commendable intentions of Marabelli et al. (2023) in their pursuit to amplify opportunities for scholars and students from historically marginalized regions and groups to receive valuable feedback and mentorship from established mentors, I also recognize that realizing such an initiative would demand an expanded cohort of volunteer reviewers. This requirement, in addition to the already rising submission numbers of existing IS conferences (and ancillary meetings) of varying scale, will further increase the burden on the academic system. Moreover, it is unlikely that the entirety of this responsibility and work could be shouldered exclusively by "senior scholars from wealthy countries whose attendance is sponsored by the AIS" (p.13). Also, the identification and selection of such senior scholars raises pertinent questions, such as how to ensure a diversity of individuals is chosen for this role, thereby mitigating the perpetuation of a select group (or "usual suspects") consistently receiving this honor. Furthermore, the potential expansion of local conferences in the Global South might inadvertently be construed as a form of "cultural imperialism" or "development aid" which could inadvertently marginalize the research presented therein, even if it holds substantial value for the broader IS community.

In light of these considerations, I, therefore, posit an opposing approach which involves a general reduction of the number of gatherings and conferences, respectively the establishment of one or two multi-hub conferences (with local hubs that could be located in smaller, remote places around the globe) per year. This strategy, when coupled with a more stringent limitation on the number of submissions per author – potentially reducing the maximum limit from 5 to 2 papers per person and conference – would alleviate the cumulative strain on the academic system. Moreover, aligning this approach with the earlier proposition to accord much greater significance to the assessment of originality, potential for meaningful discussions, and broader impact, alongside the adoption of briefer textual formats, could potentially engender a more equitable and engaging environment. Such measures may extend a more favorable opportunity for scholars grappling with language-related challenges or conducting unconventional research to achieve visibility and access the international stage, thereby fostering greater inclusivity and averting the propensity to remain insular or be labeled as "deserving" or "in need to be developed".

The time liberated for the entire IS community through the relinquishment of reviewer responsibilities could be redeployed by asking scholars to take a more active role in the pre-conference preparations or involvement during the event itself, such as for example the moderation of virtual and in-person engagement and networking sessions, the augmentation of virtual mentorship initiatives targeting young

or marginalized scholars, or the facilitation of online and on-site dialogues with individuals who encounter challenges in social interactions (Hardin & Brooks, 2021).

Of course, my proposal has downsides. I do not conceal the reality that the endeavor required for annually organizing one or two multi-hub conferences in contrast to exclusively in-person or fully virtual gatherings is considerable. I also acknowledge Marabelli's et al. (2023) critique that events of that size tend to occur in affluent, internationally significant urban centers due to the necessary infrastructure (especially bandwidth to connect a substantial number of remote participants). Nevertheless, these concerns can be addressed by an increased engagement of the AIS in both the planning and implementation of such a multi-hub setting. To alleviate the burden of the local organizers, the AIS could assume a central leadership role by taking more responsibility for both the underlying infrastructure (i.e., the software and hardware like cameras, microphones, and loudspeakers for running such an event) and the harmonization of collaborative endeavors across the main hub and all affiliated local hubs (i.e., overall financial and organizational planning, marketing, and broadcasting of the event). This can be further supplemented by the establishment and dissemination of its proficiencies and capabilities pertaining to contemporary technical conference infrastructure and should notably also encompass intricate aspects like streaming and recording arrangements, as well as subsequent processing procedures under consideration of local data privacy expectations.

I understand that the present mission focus of the AIS does not explicitly include the provision of technical support for conferences. Nonetheless, developing a proficiency in this domain would not only accentuate the inherent value that the association imparts but also play a role in strengthening its existing spectrum of engagement in facilitating scholarly discourse. This facet might not be readily apparent to all scholars, both those with an AIS membership and beyond. This brings me to my last proposition.

#### 4.4 Prioritizing the Accessibility and Participation of all IS Scholars

The AIS taskforce's plan for the future of IS conferences is inherently oriented from the vantage point of the association and its members. In consequence, the document accentuates the requisites, prospects, and challenges pertinent to them. While this perspective is logical, it is crucial not to disregard the substantial number of IS scholars who remain non-members, either due to the perceived absence of necessity or the financial constraints associated with membership fees.

Regarding the latter, the AIS has recently instituted commendable measures aimed at fostering inclusivity, notably exemplified by initiatives like the Eph McLean AIS Membership Scholarship Program and the AIS & Bocconi Ph.D. Student Travel Grants. These undertakings are designed to afford doctoral students and faculty members undergoing financial hardships the opportunity to affiliate with the AIS and receive sponsorship for taking part in some of its key events. Nevertheless, as ICIS transitions away from a hybrid format and returns to becoming a fully in-person conference again, laudable endeavors such as the AIS Virtual Registration Grant Program, which previously waived a portion of the conference fees (applicable to ICIS and AMCIS) for scholars from medium and low HDI countries, have been rescinded. Consequently, a notable reallocation of resources is imperative to fortify other scholarship initiatives, thus counterbalancing the elimination of this avenue and accommodating the resultant shortfall.

It is also advisable to contemplate whether a mandatory membership condition remains an essential prerequisite for attendance at AIS (and affiliated) conferences. The AIS' ambition to engender strong ties with new members is well understood; however, it cannot be overlooked that this approach might inadvertently exclude individuals who lack the financial means for membership and who might not benefit from or be entitled to receive scholarships or other support mechanisms. This potential exclusion particularly affects the often unnoticed "middle class" of scholars (i.e., those located in comparatively wealthy countries, but still operating in precarious conditions; also see Section 3).

More generally, the deliberations concerning critical matters, such as the way we will organize, facilitate, and moderate our scientific exchanges in the future, should adopt a standpoint less biased towards "insiders" (or members), but take a more comprehensive worldview that encompasses the needs of the entire IS community. As we know from economic theory (e.g., Lindbeck & Snower, 1989), prioritizing the desires of "insiders" frequently results in detriment to the conditions of the "outsiders" (for instance, due to resource constraints). Consequently, I assert that the AIS taskforce's plan for the future of IS conferences necessitates a more balanced approach, one that places greater emphasis on augmenting the accessibility and engagement of both, AIS members and non-members, for example, by offering a

"membership on trial" option, or, as mentioned, waiving the membership obligation for joining the conference.

With regard to participation, potential objections rooted in practical and logistical challenges posed by time zone differences may be raised. In addition, there could be a plausible concern that scholars may relinquish the possibility of forging connections extending from the AIS region they are located in. In my defense, it is imperative to underscore that the prospect of participating in conferences outside one's AIS region today is reserved for certain scholars only (i.e., those with the necessary financial means or receiving active support). On the other hand, the multi-hub conference format offers the possibility to attend the very same conference within a geographic region proximate to one's domicile (thus reducing travel expenses), or (but this might not be the principal intent, given the overarching objective is to minimize extensive traveling) it permits the selection of not just one but multiple conference venues situated all over the globe.

Evidently, the conference experience will not be homogenous across all the hubs. For instance, attending a keynote address in person at the main venue versus engaging with its streamed or recorded version is not the same. The participation experience, thus, whether being present at the main or localized hubs or only virtually, will inherently always differ. It is also contingent upon several other factors: the number of local participants, the local premises, the allocation of presentation slots within the hub's ambit, and the time zone difference with the nearest main hub. Nevertheless, I assume that scholars are motivated to travel to the nearest hub and have meaningful exchanges, either in-person or online, instead of not having them at all, respectively facing only downloadable content. As said, promoting diversity in conference participation is not only determined by giving people access to the event but also giving colleagues from various parts of the world, different career stages, diverse gender identities, and lesser-known institutions a possibility to take an active part, either in presenting and discussing their research or in being part of organizing hub-related activities.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

This short article undertakes a reflective discussion of the intrinsic objectives of scientific conferences, challenging conventional assumptions and notably accentuating their adverse aspects. It underscores the ecological ramifications of extensive travel, the burdens imposed on the volunteer-centric academic structure, and the fact that not everyone has the same possibility to access and participate in this form of scientific knowledge exchange. In light of the absence of foreseeable alternatives to scientific conferencing, the narrative transitions to an examination of "hybrid" conferences, which is an essential element in the AIS taskforce's plan for the future of IS conferences. It delves into certain constraints inherent in hybrid models' capacity to address issues of inequality and diversity. The article culminates by presenting several propositions (summarized in Table 1).

**Table 1. Propositions for the Future**

What?	How?	Why?
Changing the established cycle and the way AIS conferences are organized by shifting to a multi-hub conference format.	Curtailing the number of large in-person gatherings and instead conduct a limited number of multi-hub conferences dispersed across all three AIS regions.	Multi-hub conferences reduce the need for long-distance travel and allow researchers with limited financial resources to participate while still feeling connected to the community as if they were meeting in person.
Making conferences a marketplace of ideas again.	Getting to point faster by shorter textual forms and judging conference submissions not only based on methodological rigor, and the quality of writing but also on their potential to spark interesting discussions.	Despite the abundance of scholarly gatherings, intellectual exchange and debate at conferences have diminished, with participation in paper sessions being infrequent.

<p>Reducing the overall burden of excessive review requests on the IS community.</p>	<p>Reducing the overall number of larger, community-spanning conferences to one or two multi-hub conferences per year and limiting the number of submissions per person to max. 2 papers per conference. Moreover, it is advisable to abstain from submitting full papers and instead restrict submissions to extended abstracts.</p>	<p>The quantity of articles submitted to conferences is consistently rising; however, their scientific merit is not always commensurate, resulting in reviewer demotivation and overexertion. Specifically, the increasing volume of paper reviews consumes a considerable amount of collective energy, while the impact of those submissions remains modest at best.</p>
<p>Prioritizing the accessibility and participation of all IS scholars.</p>	<p>Moving away from reflecting solely within the purview of an "insider" standpoint and integrating scholars from underrepresented parts of the world, different career stages, diverse gender identities, and lesser-known institutions to take part in the organization of multi-hub events and providing thoughtful and engaging networking opportunities for virtual attendees.</p>	<p>We do not solve our diversity issues by simply offering a new "hybrid" channel to conferences. On the contrary, there is the risk that we create a two-tier community, where on-site participants receive a "premium package" while online participants are left with a diminished experience.</p>

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