

Editorial

Conferences are scientific market places

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Green Processing and Synthesis currently benefits a lot from special issues featuring conferences as a whole or sessions within them. Conference organizers and session chairs like to make their event unforgettable by a well-tuned scientific compilation. Authors follow that often liking to say thank you to a wonderful event they were happy to have attended. Yes, conferences are scientific market places. Market places open in the early morning and close during the afternoon.

Conferences are festivals and those have artists. Each organizer tries to bring the best speakers on stage. Commonly organizers make huge and long efforts to get their “stars” contracted and discuss long about what might be the most stunning topic that the audience may never have heard before. Often we find the same speakers going from conference to conference and we see them preparing hard to have every time the same outstanding performance. This spring I saw 10 Nobel Prize winners at a conference opening in China with an audience of about 10,000 listeners ... naturally this was done in the open air. Truly, the organizers are creative in their ambition to be ever better, to go beyond what has been seen before and to give their (paying) audience an unforgettable travel outcome.

After those eminent openings – sometimes in a clarion-call style like Thus Spoke Zarathustra or Beethoven’s 5th Symphony – the conferences continue with their sessions. In miniature format, again a great opening by a keynote speaker is preferred who makes the audience aware of the relevance of a particular research field. Thereafter, one could say “the real conference starts”, with the scientific wonderland waiting for the next conference. A lot of ambitious and often young speakers aim to advertise their own research at its best. They have a hard job. While the “top acts” get a luxurious 45 or 60 minutes and thus can give a speech half marathon, the ordinary speakers have presentations in a 20 minute format; sometimes even less. This is like an 800 m run – too long to be a sprint, yet also too short to be a middle-distance race.

From the first minute, these speakers fight against the end when a nervous session chair gives warning signals or even stands up and making so very clear – whatever the great message to come is – this is the message for the next conference and one has to stop. Now. Truly now. Or even

worse, one of these automated signaling machines turns from green to orange and quickly after to red. Unlike with a stoplight, we cannot cross here anymore. The speakers do their best. Some give us a great performance and a great story in just 15 minutes. They are jewels and the scientific market places should be happy to have those on board. Others have entertainer qualities, showing here and there even clownish qualities. Some speakers are lost in the thousand details of their research and the audience is even more lost. The net result then is that the leitmotif remains unclear, i.e., what the research has delivered and why it is done. Some speakers struggle with English, some with their timing – and end when only half has been presented. It is almost like a soccer game. At the beginning, when entering a session room, you do not know what to expect and anything might (and will) happen – from best opera to popular tunes. From magic moment to boredom.

Very big conferences like to attract thousands of visitors. They have here and there the flair of Times Square or Tiananmen Place at their busiest time ... or the Frankfurter Kreuz (busy A5 meets overbusy A3) at rush hour, the busiest highway junction in Germany. All presentation rooms at such conferences are overcrowded. It is advised to be on time. Otherwise one has to suffer by standing during the lecture, pressing one’s back to the walls. Constantly, the listeners are running from one room to the other. These conferences are nervous and ever dynamic. People come during a presentation, may sit for 3 min on their chair, and leave suddenly. Not really clear what the motivation for coming or going is. Conference books may approach the size of New York’s telephone book. One needs one hour alone to understand what is presented, when and where.

Then comes the agony of choice, since for some half days we like to split ourselves into three persons to attend three very interesting sessions at once. Other half days hardly offer even a few interesting talks; to say it correctly a few interesting for oneself, probably much interesting to many others. One then tends to be ‘explorative’ = to go in talks of topics never or hardly ever heard. One is inspired by a kind of childish openness to all and everything. Yet, this pleasure is pretty soon disturbed quickly; the illusion ends in smoke and reality takes over. I myself as an experimental chemist experienced that many times concerning speeches on modeling or topics of similar ‘intergalactic distances’ to my scientific roots.

All this running, sitting, listening to many (too many) quick speeches, being intersected by coffee pauses (in which the coffee may vanish before half of the pause...), loses its fascination after 2 days of a conferences or so. On the last day of a conference a kind of sadness and exhaustion arises and no one really wants to be a speaker in the last session or truly give the very last presentation. Conference attendees come with their luggage, taxis to the airports come and go. The hectic reaches its climax.

We go back home and like to approach our work which has suffered from our disappearance for a while. Until the next travel and the next conference. Then, the déjà vu begins and therefore each new big conference is almost like a birth and death – starting with toasting champagne

and already then knowing about the emptiness and loneliness on the last day's afternoon.



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