

Platform-7 Discussion Festivals

<https://www.platform-7.com>

If I am honest, I am quite surprised that I am writing this piece - I am not technically minded. I try to be, but it is just beyond my grasp. That is why the idea of going “online” was somewhat daunting - as I am sure it was for many of us. However, I must say I have enjoyed it. I love being able to meet with colleagues in New Zealand and China in the (early) morning, and then with colleagues in Canada and Mexico in the afternoon. I love not being tired from all the waiting in airports and train stations. And, for those who know me well, I love having minimal checking procedures as I move room-to-room in the house.

Part of this has been down to joining the “Discussion Festivals” organised by Platform-7 Events. I bumped into the owner of Platform-7, John McKiernan, by accident in the Royal Society of Arts in London as I was grabbing a cup of tea between meetings. We struck up a conversation and by its end we had worked out a way of including John in a research bid - with a novel public engagement idea involving “pop-up” shops as spaces where people could talk about their relationship with their personal health data.

In lockdown, John has created a brilliant online event platform, with software developers in India. The experience is, essentially, a virtual conference venue. Do you remember how in-person conferences worked? Big auditoria with speakers on a stage, and a microphone coming around for questions? Mingling in crowded foyers, grabbing a coffee and new conversation at standing tables before the next session? Poster sessions, hoovering up new ideas from eager presenters? That is the Platform-7 space. Unlike Zoom, you can see the tables in the foyer and easily move between the spaces - virtually wander around. The main hall has a stage and the microphone can come to you for a question or discussion. And it is all curated by John and his staff, so it takes away the worry of whether the slides have uploaded, whether the link will be stable enough, whether everyone is in the right space, whether you have clicked record. You’re back to just worrying about what you’re going to say.

So it is a space that works for events - and we have used the space for some teaching events in the EPH courses with great feedback from the students. We are planning new events - around COVID-19 passporting and insurance, and “onboarding” the new M-GLEPH cohort in August before they register for next year. All good fun.

The most exciting part though is perhaps the simplest. Every Tuesday night, between 2000 and 2200 Maastricht time, there is a “Discussion Festival” in the venue. One of the most difficult things to cope with during the lockdown has been the loss of spontaneous conversations - bumping into people in the University, in a cafe, on a train, and striking up a conversation; getting together with friends and putting the world to rights - and the Discussion Festival has filled something of that

gap. Each week about 50 people gather in the virtual foyer, and wander around tables hosted by people from all sorts of backgrounds. There have been tables about design theory and practice, poetry writing, underground cinema, film making, anarchy and responsibility, French cooking, K-Pop, environmental activism, and a group that improvises live music together. We have even had an evening chatting with George Orwell's son. Something for everyone.

And so, I commend to you the Tuesday evening Discussion Festivals at Platform-7 Events (<https://www.platform-7.com>). Come along if you can. It's lots of fun, and a great "new normal".

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