VENUE or VIRTUAL

Will Covid change how we hold history speaker programs?

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GSL Survey Results!

As I write this, there is hopefulness in the air that we are moving toward a post-Covid future. A more cautious reading, however, is we are still in something of a race between reaching heard immunity through vaccination and the potential for the emergence of more virulent variants. Cases here in New Jersey have reportedly doubled in a post-July Fourth spike in Delta Variant infections. Lacking access to vaccines, some countries are even facing renewed shutdowns. Whether post-Covid is indeed around the corner or further off, there is no doubt adapting to the challenges posed to so many aspects of our lives has caused questioning of pre-Covid norms. Is it always necessary to go into the office to be productive, for example, should street closures for outdoor dining become permanent, or how is it many who were revealed as truly "essential workers" are also some of the poorest paid. The phrase "the new normal" got tossed around a lot as people struggled to adapt to a scary and uncertain reality. While we yearn to return to some aspects of the "old normal"—spending time with family and friends, going out to dinner, not having to wear masks, etc.—there have also been questions about how we might use this moment for change.

I would never, of course, equate my plight with those suffering from infection or dealing with the loss of loved ones. Nevertheless, it did cost me in terms of potential income from book sales. But what else could we do?

The history community, of course, was not immune to the attending upheavals. Aside from the human costs of infected friends and colleagues, historical societies stopped having meetings and programs, museums large and small shut their doors to visitors, and libraries to researchers. Whether an amateur volunteer or a career professional, the act of "doing history" often ground to a halt. Institutions also faced financial hardships as they could no longer perform their basic missions, let alone provide revenue-generating services, and public resources were necessarily shunted to Covid-response measures.

Personally, the timing was particularly unfortunate. March 31, 2020 would be the 150th anniversary of Thomas Mundy Peterson becoming the nation's first African American to cast a vote under the Fifteenth Amendment. He cast his ballot in a Perth Amboy, New Jersey, city charter referendum and the community still annually celebrates "Thomas Mundy Peterson Day." So that year's events would be an obviously propitious time for me to announce the release of my latest book, "To Cast a Freedman's Vote: Thomas Mundy Peterson at the Intersection of Suffrage, Citizenship, and Civil Rights"! Yet, as I coordinated with event organizers, news reports of a fast-spreading and deadly virus quickly made it clear there would be no such programs. I would never, of course, equate my plight with those suffering from infection or dealing with the loss of loved ones. Nevertheless, it did cost me in terms of potential income from book sales. But what else could we do?

The answer was actually in front of us all along. Virtual meetings over the internet were part of the business landscape for some time. Most desktop, laptop, and tablet computers already had decent quality cameras and microphones and online access had long ago become ubiquitous. The best-known platform, Zoom, had been around since 2012. If they could do nothing else, history groups could use this existing technology to still host speakers for audiences now "sheltering in place." Nevertheless, at first, there was a scramble to get up to speed. Even for the already tech-savvy, there was a learning curve. While they were not completely unknown, virtual programs hadn't "been a thing" for much of the NJ history community before. There was simply too much of a visceral social

charm in physically going to an event, chatting in person with friends, and interacting with speakers in the flesh. Huddling around a computer screen with tinny sound at the whim of a Wi-Fi connection seemed a poor substitute indeed. Yet, under the circumstances, it was also better than nothing—it was a virtual lifeline that could keep history communities connected and active.

A year or so later, most of us have probably attended virtual history events, and most of the speakers I know have given enough virtual programs that the prospect is no longer as daunting. Not surprisingly, after some initial uncertainties, most agree there are things they like better about virtual but also a lot they miss about in-person. As someone who has been in all aspects of events—coordinator, speaker, and attendee—it got me thinking. Is how we hold our NJ history events one of those pre-Covid norms that will or should change?

Is how we hold our NJ history events one of those pre-Covid norms that will or should change?

To find out, I put together a simple survey with a couple basic questions to gage how members of the GSL community feel about things. Admittedly, the resulting sample size is rather small—23 presenters, 14 program coordinators, and 14 attendees responded. Nevertheless, some patterns emerged that I think are a good place to start exploring the subject. I am aware some organizations have been conducting their own polls and it would be interesting to compare their results.

Before Covid, on average, how many in-person history programs did you give/hold/attend per year? By comparison, how many virtual programs did you give/hold/attend in 2020?

Coordinators	Presenters	Attendees
Decrease = 4	Decrease = 10	Decrease = 2
No Change = 7	No Change = 12	No Change = 4
Increase = 3	Increase = 1	Increase = 8

I binned multiple choice answers by groups of 5 up to 25+. The goal was to see if there were any differences in the numbers of events being offered between the pre-Covid, primarily in-person type and Covid-period, primarily virtual. We will get into the details in a bit, but the raw data looked like this:

Overall, institutions managed to maintain or even increase their program schedules, presenters were evenly split between doing the

same number of programs or fewer, and attendees increased the number of programs they participated in.

On average, which format attracted larger audiences?

Coordinators	Presenters
Virtual = 9	Virtual = 8
In-Person = 4	In-Person = 8
No Change = 1	No Change = 5
Not Sure = 0	Not Sure = 2

There is a difference in how coordinators and presenters saw things. The majority of organizers reported seeing larger audiences for virtual, while presenters were evenly split between virtual and in-person. The different perceptions might be due to their respective focuses. The coordinators will have harder numbers from pre-registration records, for example, and public institutions such as libraries rely on attendance statistics to justify their program funding. By contrast, the presenter may or may not see the number of attendees displayed, but is obviously distracted by giving the talk. The numbers can also vary over the course of a program, with a drop near the end when the speaker may have a better opportunity to check. This probably accounts for the two "Not Sure" answers.

If you sell books at your programs, on average, which had better sales? If you like the speaker and they have a book to sell, which format are you more likely to follow up and buy one?

Presenters	Attendees
I Don't Have a Books to Sell = 13	Virtual = 1
In-Person = 9	In-Person = 3
Virtual = 0	Same = 7
Same = 0	Not Sure = 3
Not Sure = 1	

This is another area where two groups involved are seeing things differently. While a majority of presenter respondents did not have books to sell, those who do had the same experience I had—in-person events are better for selling books. However, this contradicted the self-perception attendees seem to have of being economically ecumenical in their book-buying tendencies regardless of event format.

My theory has been that at an in-person event, if someone enjoyed the speaker, there is a strong "impulse by" instinct.

As coordinators naturally keep close tabs on audience size, speakers with books to sell will have harder numbers pertaining to their sales. As a speaker myself, I can say presentations have been the most effective means of selling books. I saw a clear decrease in sales once I went to all virtual talks.

My theory has been that at an in-person event, if someone enjoyed the speaker, there is a stronger "impulse buy" instinct—the books are right there for immediate gratification. We know we probably will forget to hunt it down online later. Plus we can have the author sign it for us. While all this is still possible with a virtual event, it lacks the intimacy of complimenting the speaker to their face, supporting them by buying their book, flattering them by asking for an autograph, and looking them in the eye as you shake their hand. It makes us feel good because we made them feel good by expressing our appreciation for their efforts. That dynamic is what's missing, even when you type "Great talk! Thank you!" in an online comments window.

"Book sales during virtual events never happen."

The whole wind-down transition at the end of the event is different. Aside from speaker interactions at in-person, there is chatting with other attendees, maybe refreshments. The energy drops and it's time to drive home. With a virtual event, you click on "leave" and you are already home. There is less of a transition process and it is very easy to forget any in-the-moment impulse you had to find the book online.

As with attendance for coordinators, however, presenters who rely on book sales for income will keep harder numbers. People may want to think of themselves as equally open, but good intention doesn't always translate into sales. One presenter commented "Book sales during virtual events never happen. Most of the talks I gave last year I set up my own program to do. The majority of paid programs simply canceled rather than develop a virtual program. I lost 90% of my usual revenue."

What did you like most about virtual programs?

This was an open question, where respondents could share their opinions and experiences in detail. As might be expected, one of the primary thing people liked about virtual events was the lack of a commute. This was particularly attractive for older or visually

impaired people who don't feel comfortable driving, especially at night. It also removes the threat of bad weather from the decision-making equation for all involved—as long as the power and internet connection hold out, the show can go on even in storms or blizzards.

Presenters

"Takes less time because do not have to travel."
"No travel expenses."
"Not driving!"
"Not having to travel!!"
"I did not have to travel and it was more comfortable physically."
"No travel involved. Instead of having to leave my historic site for 3-4 hours for an hour program (including travel, set up, etc.), I only had to log in to virtual platform ten minutes early and was done as soon as program was done."
"Not having to drive several hours."
"I'm not much of a traveler—usually need to get a limo for in person talks—so Zoom is great for me."

Attendees

"Being old, I did not have to worry about driving at night, as my eyesight isn't what it used to be."
"The ease of availability, the fact I didn't have to drive any place."
"The lack of extra time in traveling to and from not to mention the weather. Also no extra expense for staying overnight if necessary. No boundaries because of location."
"No travel required."
"Saved travel time—some of the groups I belong to are a 3 to 4 hour round trip."
"Didn't involve driving."
"No travel necessary on days when I didn't really feel like it."
"Ability to attend programs that were at further locations—places I might not want to take the time to drive to."

That last point is another advantage of virtual programs that is related to the lack of travel—the only geographical limits for potential programs, speakers, and attendees are maybe time zones and quality of the local internet connection.

"Being old, I did not have to worry about driving at night, as my eyesight isn't what it used to be."

"I will continue to attend events virtually that I never would have travelled to before - this is all events, not just historical presentations."

Coordinators

"Larger audience; potentially more diverse audience—no babysitter needed; no after dark driving."

"More choice of speakers who lived out if state but could present to our audience. Costs were cheaper for speakers, from fee to putting them up in hotels or buying them a dinner before the talk."

"That members from out of the area can participate."

"Out of area participation."

"Availability of presenters from all over the country."

"I liked the reach we had into other countries and new audiences—and the ability to affordably hire speakers from Europe and other continents!"

Presenters

"Able to attend a worldwide audience with virtual talks, not just local residents."

"Provides access to programs that would otherwise be out of reach."

"Can reach people in remote geographic locations, and include people who can't leave home due to age, disability, or travel restrictions."

"The ability to go to programs offered by venues across the country distance was no object."

"People from around the world could attend. A much broader audience."

Attendees

"I will continue to attend events virtually that I never would have travelled to before—this is all events, not just historical presentations."

"Could attend programs being held far away."

"I was able to attend New Jersey presentations from my retirement home in New Hampshire."

"I could join programs from all over the country. Not just NJ. I learned about things I probably would not have attended in person. I no longer drive as far at night and I enjoy the variety offered from faraway places."

"For in-person outreach programs, I have a limited geography. With virtual, I was able to present for a library in Bergen County just as

easily as the Pinelands Commission in southern Jersey. One virtual program had viewers from the Pacific northwest in attendance, something that could never happen with in-person outreach programs."

Beyond these two common threads, there were also these other things people liked about virtual programs.

Coordinators

"Increased attendance and email addresses."
"Convenience."
"Much greater attendance."
"Presenters who worked hard to stay connected to the audiences."
"Succinct, lack of driving to and from, less time consuming."
"Being able to handle everything from the comfort of home."
"It was easier with respect to cost and time to get to venue."

Presenters

"Audience can see my slides better, larger audiences."
"It was more comfortable physically."
"The audience was, to some extent, a different one because, like me, they needn't drive anywhere to listen. Sometimes people from quite far away logged in."

Attendees

"Being able to see the speaker's presentation directly on my lap top."
"The fact I could still ask questions, the speaker seems, in most cases, more prepared and at ease."
"Moderators [were] very helpful; able to see fellow attendees and interact."
"Could often view the program again after posting; was easier to fit into [my] schedule."
"Convenience."
"Ease of doing it at home and still attending."

What did you like least about virtual programs?

Naturally, it wasn't all love shown for virtual programs. The common complaint across the board was the one most obvious. As wonderful as this technology is for temporarily mitigating the restrictions imposed out of necessity in a crisis, virtual can never be

"Could often view the program again after posting, was easier to fit into [my] schedule."

a real substitute for the quality of human interaction that makes in-person programs an *event*.

Presentations are communal, involving subtle give and take dynamics between the speaker and their audience. A good speaker learns to "read" their audience. If someone seems bored or tired, for instance, I will make eye contact with them as if I am engaging personally with them alone to bring them back into things. If I make a joke I can look around the audience to share a laugh—or become self-effacing to mitigate one that fell flat. In my talk about the 1951 Woodbridge train wreck, I relate some sad and poignant stories. More than once I caught the moistening eye of an attendee and knew I had reached them. I'm not bragging that I do this—most speakers learn from experience how to use the interactions with their audience to keep their attention, bring home a point, or just entertain them. Indeed, it is part of what makes doing talks personally fulfilling.

None of that, however, is really possible with a virtual program. Depending on the platform, maybe you can see thumbnails of a few attendees who leave their cameras on, but you can't make direct eye contact. And, since people are at home, it's easy to be distracted by someone leaving to get a snack. In most cases, I turn those off and just have my camera visible so I can make sure I am in frame and help guess at how I am doing.

If a program is being hosted by a history society, it is often held in conjunction with business meetings and followed by socializing and refreshments. Depending on the group, monthly meetings may be the only chance some get to see each other in person, shake hands, or get a hug. Events organized by institutions such a public libraries attract varied audiences from the community who might not otherwise have the chance to meet others who share their interests. None of this is part of the virtual experience.

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<u>Coordinators</u>

"Lack of personal interaction."

"Less engaged audience, less interacting, no related sales."

"Audience eating, drinking or falling asleep on camera or noises from their background or not muting."

"Solitude."

"Less personal interaction."

"Missed the interaction of in-person events."
"That they were virtual! The personal interaction makes a huge difference in the total experience."

Presenters

"Not able to make eye contact with audience. For some talks, not able to bring and exhibit original items to display at the events."
"No real interaction."
"Lack of face-to-face time with audience members."
"No real person interaction."
"Not hearing or seeing my audience. Do my jokes work? Have I just puzzled some members of the audience? Lots of things a speaker gauges from the stage."
"Not being able to see the audience reaction and if the tech was working correct."
"The one-on-one interaction following the presentation is not as personal."
"Separation from the audience."
"I don't like talking to a computer. I miss actually seeing people, the handshakes, the hugs."
"Watching a program on a screen is like watching TV, in my opinion. It's not the same as live interaction."
"The inability to have eye contact or much interaction with my audience."
"Impossible to judge audience reaction/interest while speaking. No opportunity to travel to interesting sites and venues or hang out with participants afterwards."
"Lack of in-person interaction; no back and forth and audience participation and stimulation."

Attendees

"I miss the atmosphere of an in-person presentation, and the chance to meet the speaker afterwards."
"Minimal interaction with other attendees and the presenter."
"Lack of interaction."
"No real interaction with the speaker or other attendees."
"Lack of personability."

"The technical challenges of virtual, especially some who can't figure out computer challenges and blame the organization."

"I'm always nervous about not being anle to connect - but all hoss have been good about that and we always did a dry run."

As amazing as the technology is in theory, it can also be amazingly frustrating to figure out and, in practice, doesn't always work. Tech issues and even lack of "virtual event etiquette" was another common complaint identified among the things people liked least about virtual. In some cases, it was a matter of a learning curve and it got better thanks to patient coordinators. But bad experiences left others nervous of technical difficulties beyond their control.

Coordinators

"Some speakers do not like presenting over a computer, especially older presenters. Some prerecord their presentation. The technical challenges of virtual, especially some who can't figure out computer challenges and blame the organization. Audience eating, drinking or falling asleep on camera or noises from their background or not muting."

"Mastering the Zoom platform and format—but once we learned best practices, it was very smooth."

"One person with tech problems/inexperience can ruin a Zoom meeting for many. And there's always more than one person in the group with such problems."

"Sometimes technical difficulties."

"Technical issues."

"Novelty wore off quickly. Audience members not muting themselves."

"Managing the technology can be tricky. We needed to upgrade audio, video to present quality programs and quickly learning all these techniques—and of course limiting access to the actual museum to view exhibitions coordinating with the programs was a great limiter."

"Older folks having issues signing on and getting upset while starting event and allowing people into presentation."

Presenters

"Disturbances from open mics and the occasional connectivity issue where moderator starts freezing."

"It is best to have a second person handling the logistics. It is distracting trying to handle glitches or technical aspects while speaking."

"Once I got help from the tech people (my only computer skill is typing) I really enjoyed the various formats by the different groups I spoke to—the feedback features (oral and on the Zoom site) were fine."
"I'm always nervous about not being able to connect—but all hosts have been good about that and we always did a dry run."
"I have a better understanding of tech issues and now know how to used different services."

Attendees
"From my end, technical stuff since I don't have computer skills. But moderators always assisted me, whether as an attendee or as a presenter."
"Unstable internet connections, people not muting themselves."
"Technical glitches; length of programs—often platform used had time limits (often wanted longer program!)."
"It is best to have a second person handling the logistics. It is distracting trying to handle glitches or technical aspects while speaking."

"One concern is that recorded talks may reduce the opportunity to give the same talk again in the future."

Despite such drawbacks, program coordinators and attendees had an overall higher opinion of virtual programs compared with presenters. I suppose it is not that hard to understand why. For coordinators and attendees, the virtual option mitigates some of the hassles inherent to in-person events. Organizers are able draw from a far wider pool of presenters without added travel expenses on top of stipends, making their jobs easier. There is no need to reserve a venue or worry about making the call on cancellations due to bad or (even worse) "iffy" weather conditions. Attendees can choose from a wider number of events without concern for distance. As much as they may miss the social aspects, the idea is also rather seductive of curling up on your couch in comfortable cloths with a snack and not needing to drive anywhere—especially for older folks, people with mobility or vision issues, or anyone after a long work day. Convenience is mighty appealing.

While it is true speakers also benefit from the lack of travel or being dependent on the weather, the reasons they bother creating and presenting programs in the first place is more specific. Those of

us who write books count on talks for part of how we make a living. Certainly the commute can be annoying, but the same can be said for many jobs. What good is the convenience if it comes at the cost of your ability to earn your income? But selling a product isn't the only reason we do it—after all, there are far more profitable professions! Many speakers give their talks simply because they enjoy it—they enjoy educating people and sharing their interests and passions with others. They can, of course, technically still do that with virtual presentations. The lack of personal interactions with the audience, however, can make it that much harder, and a lot less fun. Virtual presentations are just not as conducive to the main reasons many speakers do what they do.

Some institutions video recorded their programs before Covid (with permission from the speaker), but it does not seem to have been a common practice. Virtual presentations, by their very nature, are far easier to record (albeit still needing the speaker's permission). This is another aspect of virtual offering both pros and cons. One presenter commented how "In some cases, recorded talks have potential to expand the audience over time." A recorded talk posted to an organization's website, their Facebook page, or on YouTube means it is out there for others to discover even years later. But, if a given talk is already widely available for free, does that diminish the opportunity for a speaker to "sell" it to other venues? The same speaker also added "One concern is that recorded talks may reduce the opportunity to give the same talk again in the future. For some talks, I am now permitting the recording to be available for a month after the event to address this potential issue."

A couple presenters were completely sour on doing any virtual programs. When answering what they liked about doing virtual programs, one speaker replied simply, "I didn't do any." Yet another responded "Nothing. I disliked them immensely," adding that in future they would be "refusing to do them." "I don't like talking to a computer," said someone else, "I don't like virtual. I like seeing and talking to people, shaking hands." Reflecting the pernicious problem with virtually selling books, another concluded "I am also a presenter and other than lost book sale opportunities have no interest in placing myself before a computer and talking." Another concluded, "I

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only hope we can go back to in person as long as I am doing this."

Not all speakers were as down on doing virtual. "I would like to continue only virtually, except if it is a larger venue," said one, adding the only downside for them was they "tended to be less aware of time and sometimes ran over." Nevertheless, there seems to be the potential for pushback against any dominant trends towards virtual programs by coordinators.

The introduction of all virtual programs has been, of course, a response out of necessity. It was a temporary expedient to overcome a crisis. The question then becomes, once we do reach a post-Covid state, how much of this temporary expedient becomes permanent norms? In order to get some sense of which way the winds are blowing, I asked two multiple choice questions of both coordinators and attendees.

When things reopen, will you.../If you had it your way, after things reopen, would you prefer...

The possible answers included offer both in-person and virtual, go back to in-person only, go to virtual only, or not sure.

Coordinators

In-Person Only = 4
Virtual Only = 0
Both = 8
Not Sure = 2

There was no interest in completely replacing in-person events with virtual—no doubt to the relief of many presenters! Some will return to in-person only, but the trend leans towards some sort of combination between the two so attendees at least have an option.

Attendees

In-Person Only = 1
Virtual Only = 0
Both = 13
Not Sure = 0

The idea of offering both certainly seems to align with the opinions of the responding attendees—a compromise between the two paradigms.

"Going into the future, I can see offering on site, in-person outreach, and virtual programs for my historic site."

Looking to the future, the main takeaway is post-Covid programs will likely involve in-person / virtual hybrid approaches. What that will look like, however, is a question that raises a whole different set of issues."

Another open question I posed to everyone was...

Is there anything you will be doing differently as a consequence of your experiences with virtual programs?

Coordinators

"We are purposefully expanding hybrid (in-person and virtual) content and learning strategies into our mission."

"Learning the Zoom quirks of meetings vs webinars may change how some things are held going forward."

"Virtual only when necessary. But to make live events [with] in-person also available virtually."

"Many things—we will try to incorporate virtual into our on-site programming in future since we don't want to lose an interested and engaged audience that may not be able to be with us onsite - not just for distance/location but for age/disability/infirmity, etc."

Attendees

"What surprised me is the variety I could attend, since taking the time to attend speakers, I never researched more on line. Now I look to the library's upcoming events to learn new things. I was surprised at the variety of programs that is offered."

"Will be attending more virtual programs when possible."

"No, except that I think virtual programs need to be low in cost. In person expense's should be more due to the ambiance, opportunity to be physically in a historic space, and may be have special take-home opportunities (like books, etc.)."

"I will appreciate the live programs more than previously. Sometimes you don't realize what you have until it's gone..."

"Going into the future, I can see offering on site, in-person outreach, and virtual programs for my historic site."

Conclusions

The GSL survey was a small sampling, limited to New Jersey, and I would be interested in hearing what any other polls have shown. Nevertheless, there were some fairly specific trend lines. Program coordinators and attendees miss some aspect of in-person events, but seem more open to including a virtual option. The question for the longer term is whether attendees will demonstrate a clear

preference for one or the other. Will the convenience factor ultimately trump the social factor? Or will we miss the social engagements enough to abandon the convenience of staying home and watching online?

Presenters, however, are less enthusiastic because of how virtual programs diminish the primary reasons they do them, both financially and for enjoyment. This seems to suggest the potential for resistance to any post-Covid virtual program trends. However, if coordinators are offering both in-person and virtual, a speaker would still have the option of in-person engagements. Nevertheless, it seems important either way that program coordinators and authors giving programs overcome the vexing issue of book sales.

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Looking to the future, the main takeaway is post-Covid programs will likely involve in-person/virtual hybrid approaches. What that will look like, however, is a question that raises a whole different set of issues. To date, few organizations have reopened for in-person programs to have begun experimenting with both formats. However, a few larger regional and national history and preservation groups have, and while the idea makes sense in theory, the practice is revealing some potentially cumbersome aspects. In a hybrid model, organizers who were used to the workload and typical problems associated with traditional in-person events now have to add on top of all that those issues associated with coordinating virtual programs. Will paid staff be expected to take on the extra work without added compensation? Will volunteers want to?

Much seems to depend on the scale of the event, the resources of the hosting group, and the circumstances of the venue. A small local group hosting a single speaker at a regular donated venue and able to depend on free volunteer labor is one thing. It is something altogether different for a group organizing a conference with multiple speakers and breakout sessions booked at a hotel conference center with paid professional AV and catering services. Incorporating virtual components naturally add layers of complexity and expense onto an already complex and expensive event.

Whatever the future holds, the first steps must be to get out from under the shadows of Covid. So I will conclude with the blunt comment of one of the speakers: "Get vaccinated!!!"