

# Greening the profession

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**Toby Miller is on a mission to make conferences and conference goers more aware of their environmental impact.**

I have been involved for some years now in several large professional associations of academics, crossing several disciplines. I've chaired book award and public policy committees, and served as divisional chair for bodies such as the Society for Cinema and Media Studies and the International Communication Association. Every now and then, I'm quizzed as to whether I'd stand as president in their annual elections, but I always decline. My politics are too radical to succeed. It's best to have someone less left-wing but still progressive as the candidate of "people like me".

Readers may recall from a previous column that I resigned from the committee that decides which books to publish at the University of California Press in protest at the profligate flying we did in order to meet: nine times a year, 20-odd (and 20 odd) people travelled up and down the state to meet for three hours on jet airliners. I considered this unsustainable.

In concert with those beliefs, I also lobbied the incoming president of one of the associations I'm in to do something about our annual meetings. My reward for successful lobbying? I was asked to chair a taskforce on diminishing the carbon impact of conferences. The membership included almost none of the people I proposed. And when we first met, there were several signs that the hierarchy of the organisation didn't like the angle I was adopting (ie, let's talk seriously about scrapping the conference, and let's engage with the destructive impact of consumer electronics and the information and communication media on the environment, and let's not go for offsets as an easy salve for middle-class consciences). The hegemon of the institution destabilised me by lobbying members of the taskforce, so I resigned as chair, remaining on as a member. The new chair was much better, and just as radical as me, so it all worked out fine from my perspective.

Why does any of this matter? The professional association under discussion has about 2500 people at its annual meeting. The logistics necessitate transporting folks from all over the world by aeroplanes, trains, buses, and cars (mostly, of course, arranged and paid for by participants and their employers). The energy resources expended are massive; they make significant contributions to climate change and pollution. In addition, the sizeable hotels that host these events use large amounts of energy and water, for laundry, heating, cooling, elevators and escalators. Drawing on 2006 numbers, it appears that at an average five-day conference, 2500 registrants will go through 90,000 cans or bottles, 75,000 cups or glasses, 62,500 plates and 87,500 napkins. In addition, few venues offer sustainably grown local foods. Way to go.

To counter such extraordinary wastefulness, a sustainable meetings industry has arisen. Why? Major corporations recognise that unsustainable travel is fast becoming a negative aspect of their public image, so meeting planners are putting pressure from the demand side onto suppliers. What might that mean for those of us who use these annual professional association events as cheap job fairs and places to meet old friends, collaborate, negotiate with publishers, sleep with strangers, and so forth?

Places like EPA Victoria offer excellent tutorials in conducting sustainable events ([www.epa.vic.gov.au/ecologicalfootprint/calculators/event/introduction.asp](http://www.epa.vic.gov.au/ecologicalfootprint/calculators/event/introduction.asp)) that we're drawing on in the

US.

From the work we did on the taskforce, I can recommend that associations only use venues that are certified as environmentally designed buildings and insist that local organisers and hoteliers boast reusable eating and drinking implements (no bottled water), a strong recycling record, and facilities to connect people long-distance via electronic conferencing.

This does not mean that these lumbering yet decadent talkfests will change quickly. The biggest obstacle to reform, at least in big countries, lies in the stark refusal of participants to give up on what may be their only trip away from some fleapit town in a given year, or their one chance to impress potential employers. In small places like Britain, this isn't a problem - everyone takes the train. But in the US and Australia, profligate institutional and personal conduct has overstimulated the aero industry, with the alibi being the size of the country. Years of neglect have left rail stock in an antediluvian state. Canada is slightly more logical - associations within cognate fields regularly meet in the same week in the same city, thereby diminishing travel, and developing synergies.

The task that lies before us is to rethink these meetings, and find ways to enfranchise people who have traditionally been excluded due to cost, such as folks from Pacific islands or far-distant states, as well as convincing regular travellers for whom these meetings are the chance to shed their stardust upon baying audiences that they can greet their publics in a virtual way. Otherwise, what's a heaven for?

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