Stop recording live events: A case against the recording frenzy affecting academia

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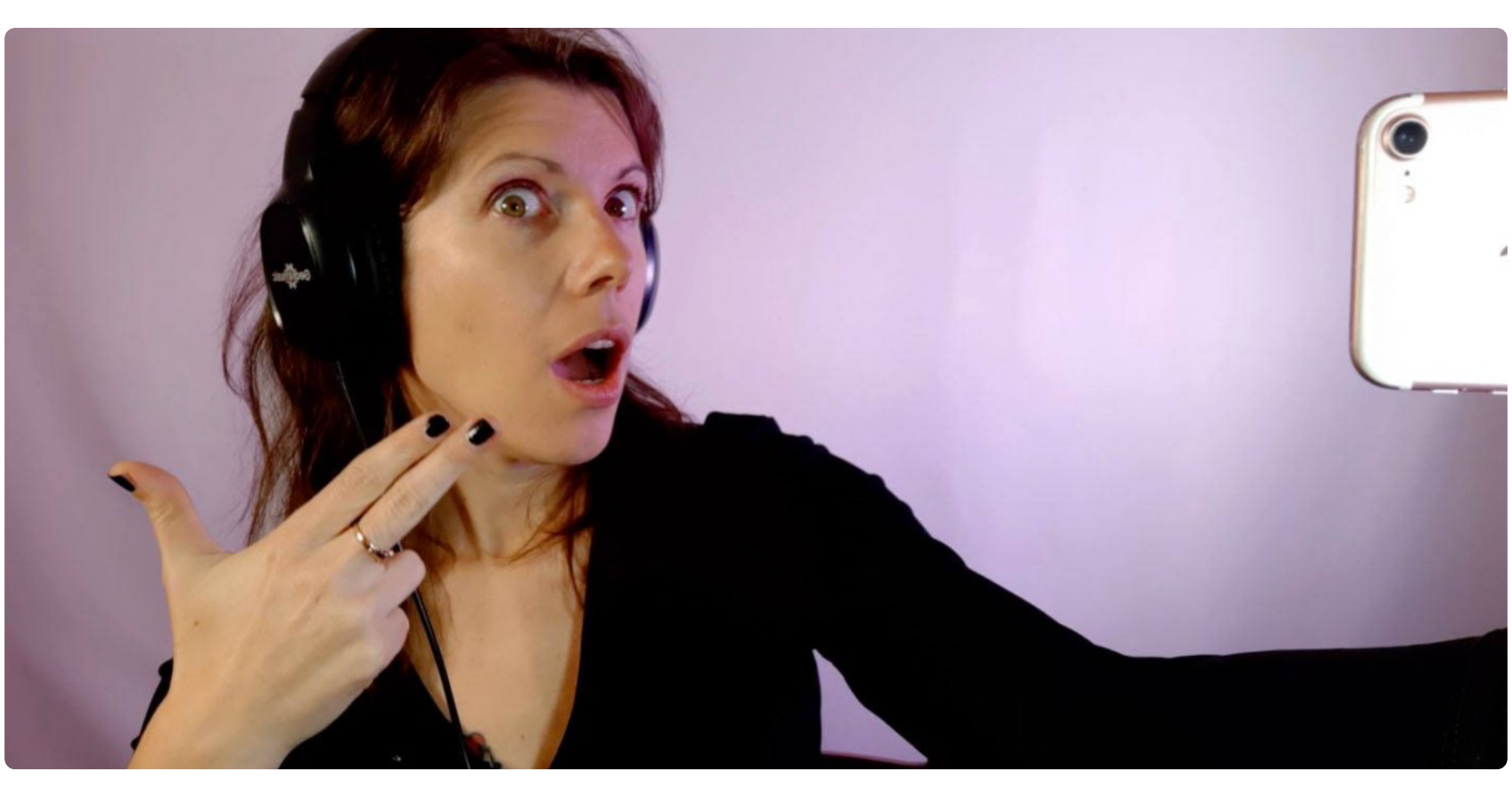

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I would like to provide an opportunity for dialogue and reflection on an issue that in my view reveals a poor understanding of how the tools for digital communication work.

I am often invited to speak at live events. It doesn't matter if it's in person or online, the technology to record talks/presentations/etc. and share them online is there, and oh boy we use it. It's recording frenzy, wheee...

As a technology expert and professional content producer, I take issue with how this whole recording business is normally handled. In this article, I unpack some of the main critical points and patiently wait for the reactions to hit me back. Let's go.

Summary of the points unpacked below:

1. The importance of context
2. Respecting people's right to be informed they are going to be recorded
3. Live streaming vs. content on demand: two different objects
4. Expressing one's opinions safely for the sake of an engaging discussion
5. Recording for a reason or because "we can"
6. The audience deserves curated content
7. The financial issue
8. The content is an asset: who benefits from it?

Context

Speaking live for a specific audience IS NOT being posted online forever.

It's so self evident I am not even sure how to explain this. Keyword: CONTEXT. Speaking to *this* group of people *here and now* is different than having one's words available to *anyone anytime* in the future. Basic concepts like SPACE and TIME.

I have tons of content online, so don't think I am a prude freak who lives in hiding. I just want to be in control of what I put online, because I am aware that my words and anybody's words for that matter may mean something else in a different place and in a different time. It's naive to disregard that this may be the case. It means you have not fully comprehended the *magnitude* of "online" and "forever".

Corollary: a professional speaker wants to know who their audience is. The message is not always delivered in the same way, it is targeted to the specific audience. Actually, a professional speaker will want to know more about your whole event, and even who is scheduled to speak before and after them, and where in the program if it's a conference.

When you publish something online, you lose control of who your audience is, but paradoxically "the internet" has become its own type of audience. So, it's fine if you tell me that my talk is meant for online publication. BUT if you invite me to speak at an event on that day at that time, and then post the recording online thinking these two delivery methods are *interchangeable*, then YOU don't know who your audience is, and that's no way to organise an event.

Maybe you think that your little event will not attract many viewers anyway. In fact, I have tons of content online but my views are in the triple digits. I am available *to the world*, but I have not been seen *by the entire world.* Fair enough, but POTENTIALLY the world can see me, so as an event organiser you cannot expose me to this eventuality without my consent. Which brings me to the next point.

Informing people they are being recorded

Every time I am invited to speak at a conference or event, I have the habit of asking whether the event will be recorded. More often than not the answer is yes. I always get offended by the fact that the organisation didn't think it was relevant information to include in the first place. If anything, it seems polite to me. Basic courtesy.

But to keep it professional: the invitation should contain all the parameters that will help me, a professional speaker, prepare for the event. If we agree on the previous point (i.e., live IS NOT recorded), failing to mention the recording is just unprofessional.

Moreover, if we want to go the legal route, what about **privacy laws** and (re)using people's images and words without their explicit consent? Why do so many event organisers take this so lightly? Even I, as an independent podcaster, have to be mindful about that, and make sure I let my guests know what I am going to do with their content, from editing to future exploitation. I do so out of respect and because I am legally required to. I am proud to say that this has built a trust relationship between me and my guests, who have been happy to work with me over and over again.

If you want to overlook the privacy aspect because just walking down the street or browsing Facebook *we are being watched anyway*, let's move to the next point: the type of content you are asking your speaker to produce.

A different type of content

Speaking live IS NOT producing content.

The live talk "happens", it's between the speakers and the audience, it's a shared moment between the participants *there and then*. Content is persistent, available on demand, it is an ASSET and it usually aims to meet higher standards than a live talk. Just to make this point clear once and for all: it's not that if I am not being recorded I will show up unprepared and say whatever. I always show up prepared and deliver all I have because I love sharing my knowledge and possibly hearing back from the audience. But if I know that my talk will be memorialised and published online forever, I will want to be impeccable and - see next point.

Live is safe, public and recorded is not

As simple as that. When we are having a conversation within the confines of a room, virtual or real, it's just you and me, the speaker and the attendees, and we can create a space where we feel safe to have a *real conversation*, where new or sensitive ideas will be pitched, personal opinions will be offered to the group feedback, and all those good things.

I speak from personal experience, but certainly this doesn't only apply to me. I often speak about sensitive topics. Here's a fair list: mental health in academia, what's wrong with the peer review system or with the evaluation system of scientific projects, the training of young researchers, developing one's publishing style, how to deal with rejections, making a professional transition from academia to the private sector. If I am going to share my thoughts on these topics frankly, I am going to expose myself. And I am willing to do it, but only with the group of people that I agreed to talk to on that day. Actually, I am so hungry for real discussions that I will *seek* opportunities for debating my and others' ideas. But this can NOT be done if you're being recorded and then put online forever.

Never mind *my* opinions, which nonetheless I tend to protect just as I protect my freedom to express them without retaliation, but *as a speaker* and therefore often leader of the discussion that follows my talk, I have the *responsibility* to protect the opinions and the freedom to express them without retaliation of the participants.

Yes, when an event involves more speakers, you've guessed it, I am the trouble-maker. Because nobody else asks about the recordings, or doesn't seem to have all these rational apparatus behind their reasons in favour or against the recording. I come down hard and I am perceived as paranoid or, way worse, as ashamed of my inability to deliver a good speech. One day, a speaker involved in the same events I was said they were "fine" with the recording, because they were not afraid to "express their opinions in front of anyone." I sincerely found that disingenuous. If you are not afraid to speak your true mind in front of anyone, you either have very uninteresting ideas or you're a fool.

To recap: a free, real, interesting discussion is only possible within the boundaries of the *here and now*.

Why do we even record so much

As a technology expert and professional content producer, I have the impression that we record all these events just because WE CAN. Dear event organiser, why do you need to record this or every event? What is the strategy behind that. Is there a marketing plan, an archiving ambition?

Reasons to motivate an otherwise purposeless recording are easy to provide: for example, that the people who couldn't make it will be able to watch later. Meh. This argument never convinced me. First, are you setting up a whole recording system for the few individuals that had something better to do that day? Why should the others show up in the first place. Just produce content and publish it online, why set a date and time for the live thing. Second, you are not identifying these individuals, you are simply dumping the content online for *anyone* in the future. From which follows the next point.

The audience deserves curated content

When someone says they are going to record an event and make it available on their YouTube channel for the benefit of some unidentified and unquantified audience, what they are really saying is: we are going to DUMP the content online.

Even the best live event is somewhat messy: test test at the beginning, can you all hear me, yes, do you see the slides, let me introduce the speaker, we will wait five more minutes for the last participants to join. I don't want to hear that when I watch content online. If what was said during the event is so interesting that you want me to benefit from it, *give me that and spare me the noise.*

Content curation seems a mystery to most content producers within institutions and non-profit associations. Here's an idea, thank me later: content curation goes from cleaning the content so that at least it has a sensible beginning and end, despite being *unedited* in its duration; to listening to, analysing and selecting the content so that you could - imagine that! - publish focused excerpts of that unmissable thing that was said, produce *more* social media posts or even focused YouTube clips, and *truly* squeeze out the max of that content, benefit your community of followers, and increase your traffic/views/stats. Just a thought!

Please, stop the dump of unedited two-to-three hours events.

The financial issue

Let's address the elephant in the room for a moment.

There is a bad and only partially justified habit in academia for which invitations to speak always come with the understanding that there will be no financial compensation. That is fine, although it might be *classy* on the part of the organisers to differentiate between types of speakers. For some, public speaking is part of their duties and therefore intended as included in their salary. Young academics between jobs, young professionals, etc. do not fall in this category. Neither do professional speakers *by definition*, and it's still ok to invite them without a budget as long as the deal is clear. In my experience, it is never clear. I always have to ask, which makes me feel cheap, and the answer is always no.

Working for free is not what bothers me, because I love what I do so much that I will happily accept speaking engagements if the context meets my interests. What bothers me is the *carelessness* with which event organisers contact professional speakers/researchers/etc. and ask them to provide free labour just like that. Like, of course you work for free.

In what other professional sector is this normal, accepted, tolerated? As I said, this habit is *partially* justified in academia, what I'm saying is that it's not *always* ok to ask for free labor. And that event organisers should make an effort to stop taking free labor for granted and consider treating their speakers with the respect any professional deserves.

Now, coming to the live vs. recorded issue. We have clarified that a live talk is not a YouTube video, that one is *live* and the other one is *persistent,* that they are two different objects (ontologically) and two different *products*. Based on this important distinction, when I accept your invitation to speak live for fifteen minutes, I am not accepting to produce a podcast/video/etc. that is a *persistent object* that you will share on your platform. The **cost** of these services is different, and I *hope* I don't have to make a case for the fact that professional services deserve recognition, if not compensation.

When you invite me to speak at your live event for fifteen minutes, this is the service I agree to provide. Be clear about it, so I can make my decision based on what you are asking me. I don't call a plumber to fix my shower and then say, oh I thought it was intended that by coming to my house to fix the shower you were also going to check the pipes in the kitchen. Yes, he can do both and maybe he's happy to help you, but it's two different things.

Besides, keep in mind that when I accept to speak for fifteen minutes, the time I will invest is at least one hour, because I will attend to the whole event. Plus the time to prepare my talk, which ranges between one and two hours. Just in case you're tempted to minimise the "fifteen minutes" of my time you're asking to take.

Who benefits from the asset?

Content is an ASSET.

Persistent content that is available on YouTube, a blog or some other social media platform, ADDS VALUE to your digital presence. When the live talk is published online, it becomes something that benefits you *across time*.

When you invite me to speak at a live event, my service should be limited to that event. It always fascinates me to see that many people consider content production as included in that service.

If my talk is good (and we assume it is, otherwise you would not have invited me) or if I am a big name (which thank god I am not), other people in the future will want to access my content. Where will they find it? On your YouTube channel, which means my content is going to increase your traffic, number of views, etc. and possibly increase the reputation of your channel, if the content is deemed valuable by enough users. This is what I mean by *added value*.

Whether the channel is monetised or not doesn't matter. It would just make things worse.

I am not saying this is the end of the world, and that's why I left this point last. I am not on a crusade to prevent other people to get a few hundred more views on their channel. Good for them. I am just pointing out that this illusory interchangeability of digital objects is technically content appropriation *when not adequately compensated*, and an abuse of professional services.

Conclusion

In this article, I tried to list some of the reasons why I mostly oppose the recording frenzy of live events in academia, while I would be much in favour of quality content production.

You can say it all boils down to this:

- **Digital literacy:** understand the difference between digital objects
- **Know what you want**: ask for the right professional services
- **Be ethical and polite:** respect people's privacy and professional experience.

One last word which maybe helps us meet in the middle: if you can't help recording the event, at least let me review the final version before you post it online, and let me give my consent *then.*

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The reasons why I mostly oppose the recording frenzy of live events in academia, while I would be much in favour of quality content production. Mic drop.

Jamie Angus • 2nd 25m
Prof at University of Salford
Federica, Much of what you say resonates.
One of the hardest changes for me when covid came was realizing that I needed a completely different set of skills to produce my talks.
I also realised, that I need a crowd/audience to "Riff" off to do my best presentations.
Also IMHO to do a good online presentation requires far more work to prepare and get right.
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Federica Bressan (She/Her) • You 12m
Science communicator & Author
It's a performance! Therefore, it's a production.
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Federica Bressan
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