UKSS Newsletter Issue 5

Summer/Autumn 2021

It is fatuous to say that the past year has been difficult. It has been a testing time for us all. There is little point in even attempting to describe the hardships and sorrows that have been experienced; there are too many. But it would be inhuman not to acknowledge this fact even in a systems newsletter. The UKSS management board would like to extend our sympathies to all those who have suffered hardships and losses over this time and wish all a speedy return to equanimity.

As always, the Management Committee would like to hear feedback from you, our membership: **ukssnewsletter@gmail.com**

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MEMBERSHIP NEWS & EVENTS

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The UKSS International Conference 2021

This year we decided that we would hold a Virtual Conference. As you know we, along with most other societies, postponed the 2020 conference. We were reluctant to do the same this year so pressed ahead with a 'virtual Zoom based event. Although most are experienced Zoom users holding an international conference was a new venture and one we approached with trepidation. The main load fell upon the Conference chair Gary Evans who put everything together. The event would 'replicate' the normal event with Plenaries and breakout rooms. A brave undertaking. Gary recounts his experiences below.

From my point of view, as UKSS President I was impressed by the way the management team pulled together to make the conference work. I can only applaud the team work once again and thank my colleagues for their efforts.

We had our moments of course with last minute difficulties emerging which required some quick-thinking responses but in the end it worked. It worked well. We even managed to time papers from different time zones into the programme. The overall response from presenters and delegates was positive and a clear enthusiasm not just for Systems but a 'thirst' for the UKSS to offer more than just the annual conference. We have taken this on board and are in the process of organizing events in response to that enthusiasm.

Prof. Frank Stowell

Humberto R. Maturana (September 14, 1928 – May 6, 2021)

It is with great regret we learnt of the death of Humberto Maturana. Humberto made a significant contribution to the Systems community. His pioneering work with Francisco Varella laid the foundations for many important research projects. The notion of autopoiesis has had a lasting impact upon the way that we view the world. On a personal note I remember Humberto accepting an invitation as keynote speaker to the UKSS conference at the University of Oxford and where he graciously accepted the award of the Societies gold medal for outstanding contributions to the discipline. Despite a long-distance flight and a busy time at the conference he still found time to give a workshop for the Open University Systems group whilst in the UK. He was tireless and gracious. He will truly be missed but his work will continue to inspire many Systems researchers and practitioners.

There is no doubt that our Scientists and technicians, ably assisted by clever entrepreneurship, have given us the means of escape. But the pathway is still rocky and there are many potential missteps that may cause us to stumble along the way, but we are emerging from this tunnel. It would be noteworthy if we, the systems community, were able to offer something that helped alleviate or contributed to understanding what we have experienced. Doubtless there will be many papers and articles written from hindsight that will be published, but there are few, very few, Systems based papers that were published during the pandemic and subsequently. This might prompt the critics or Systems naysayers to ask 'What is the point of Systems?'. I am pleased to say that I am neither critic nor naysayer, on the contrary even more convinced by the need for Systems thinking and practice.

The pandemic has hastened what was already happening. For example, in the UK there has been an on-going change in the way we shop. The pandemic has supercharged this change. As it has to the way we teach, the way we provide medical care and many things that we had taken for granted for decades have undergone seismic changes. Things are changing at an uncontrolled rate and there is little or nothing individuals can do to stop it. The way that we interact with them has changed and it is unlikely we will return to the way that we related to them before. It is a revolution in the true sense of the word. The question we should ponder is 'What is this system that is developing?'. Have we any control or is it something that will emerge with us having little say in its outcome.
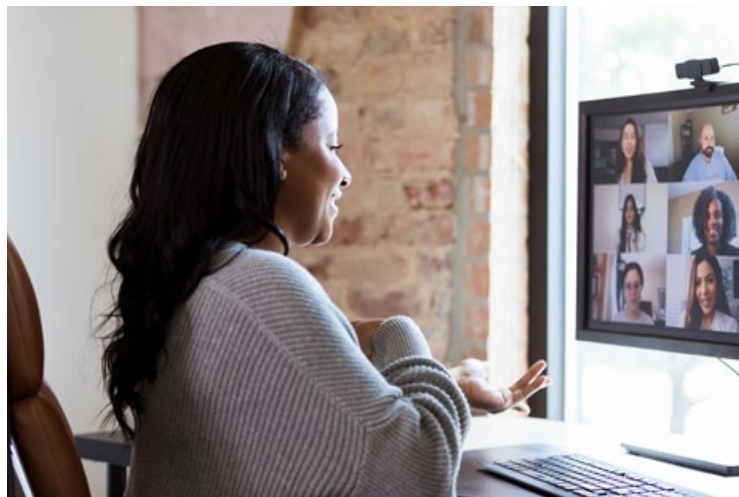
There is little doubt that our scientists and technicians have found a way to 'tame' the pandemic, but do we really understand what it is and what is at its root cause? There are competing forces in our new world from politics to science. Politicians cast suspicions on China as the locus of the virus epidemiologists warn that this pandemic is just one of the many health hazards that face our growing overpopulated world. Scientists acknowledge that the impressive array of vaccines at our disposal are the result of earlier research and innovative ways of modifying them to address the current strain of virus. Much as they do for influenza each year- thankfully. But is this our future, stumbling from one pandemic to another?

In an age where 'instantaneousness' seems to underpin our everyday lives and the way we live it I believe that it is important that we develop our ability to analyse and dissect what we see, read and hear. It is by accepting our limitations, our limited horizons, that we can reduce the impact of preconceived ideas and perhaps avoid making the same mistakes again. Thinking holistically has rarely been more important. Husserl distinguishes between our world of lived-in experience and the world of science that supposes a world as existing, waiting to be explored and modelled. This is not to deny the world is 'real''…. the real world indeed exists, but in respect of essence is relative to transcendental subjectivity…' (Husserl 2012, p.xliii). Science, of which technology is its standard bearer, presupposes the thesis of the natural world-perspective, investigations being in this framework, and is bound up with the ontology of the real. In other words, ideas are explored from the same basic premise from which they started. If we are to understand that changes in our world, of which the pandemic is one outcome, then we need intellectual and practical tools that will help us in this endeavour. Systems offers one such possibility.

For those that know me you will know that I have been involved in Systems for many years and been lucky enough to meet many of the pioneers of modern systems thinking and practice. Sadly, many of these Systems 'Greats' are passing on. Unfortunately, in addition to the dearth of new Systems thinking, the development of ideas that were the touchstone of many exciting systems research projects has reduced to a trickle. The antidote to this bleak interpretation was the unexpected, and clear enthusiasm shown by the conference delegates during the day and specially at the end plenary session. They showed a willingness to increase their thinking across the spectrum of systems ideas. In truth there is much for them to explore from 'Hard' through to 'Soft' Systems; from Bertalanffy to Checkland , what they can make of these ideas they can help us to make sense of what is happening now.

The result of this enthusiasm and in acknowledgement of many suggestions we are presently putting together some ideas that will enable this resurgence of interest. For all its problems Zoom provides the UKSS with a new way of reaching our growing number of supporters. Please watch this space.

Frank Stowell President UKSS

Reflections on a Zoom-based Conference

When the Management Committee decided to deliver the conference using the Zoom Video Communications software, we perceived a co-hosting challenge or two on the day, and we were not disappointed. However, it proved to be an enjoyable event, and we all took something from the keynote and the breakout room presentations.

I have been using Zoom since 2017, and most of the problems during the conference are not uncommon to my experiences to date. When you use Zoom daily, you learn you need a wire signal supply of 17-18 megabytes, this is to the router, and 1.5 GBs of data download capability. I find a super-hub to be best with boosters in the main rooms of the location I work from during the day. Turning the hub off to clear data is good practice, and having all applications switched off when using Zoom reduces the likelihood of applications competing for broadband width a necessity. If not, it makes the broadband unstable and dropout in connectivity highly likely. I also request the audience to switch off their camera to help with broadband width and use Zoom's chat functions. Zoom is our new digital working culture and probably here to stay.

I must confess to being pro Zoom and use it extensively during my working day and for Systems research. Connecting and presenting to people in various locations is a USP feature of Zoom, even when a global audience. Each day between 6-6.30 pm, I connect with my e-commerce classmates from various countries and on Wednesdays and Thursdays from 10 pm to midnight. We benefit from excellent engagement, informative sessions and have become accustomed to Zoom's time lags. Each session can be recorded and available for those who could not attend a session is another unique feature of Zoom.

So, I believe Zoom is a different way for our Society to connect and engage with Members and reach a far wider audience than traditional communication forms. I would probably argue it is almost the expectation of professionals and certainly so with younger Generation Z who are communications savvy. Conference in its traditional format still serves a purpose, particularly for networking, an embedded part of the Society's culture. However, the Society's Systems forums and monthly Q&A sessions seem ideal for virtual delivery via Zoom. There is a practicality to all this, too, and that is cost. Venue hire, food and beverage, keynote expenses can make it expensive to run such events. Then our costs, such as time off work, reorganising family commitments, travel to and from the venue, and an overcrowded public transport system. Our Society needs to consider a more blended learning approach to engage with Members and the global Systems community.

From a Systems research perspective, I find Zoom incredibly useful, along with other digital methods. I use Zoom to engage system actors in workshop sessions, usually face-to-face, and then Padlet https://www.padlet.com/ to build up the systems themes surfacing from the workshops. System actors can then work with the codes in Padlet to add and validate them. The system models that flow from the Padlet boards I share using either Pechakucha https://www.pechakucha.com/ or Prezie https://www.prezie.com. In addition, with the trust and confidence of the system's actors, I use WhatsApp to keep the community spirit sound and allow actors informal headspace to express views. A real benefit of these methods is how they enable you to access and work with system actors who are incredibly busy and would generally find it impossible to attend a half-day workshop. Instead, they can contribute when their diary permits, plus the methods are available 24/7.

Undoubtedly, digital methods have revolutionised how I conduct Systems research and uplifted my research productivity.

Gary Evans, UKSS Conference Organiser

Conference on Zoom: challenge or opportunity - Petia Sice

Reflections from the field

The 21st International UKSS conference was held on Zoom on 21st June 2021. We were concerned as a conference online format could pose challenges: would the technology work? Would we fully engage and communicate effectively? Would people remain online for a full day?

As it turned out we did have some technology glitches and would rather perhaps meet face to face to get to know each other, but we did, however, still enjoy the experience. Believe it or not, enthusiasm and follow up from the conference is still happening.

Did we have an extraordinary opportunity? I would say yes. Being online together allowed us to connect with people from all corners of the world. We enjoyed the experience and the face2face interaction online was real, time went by quickly and we felt rewarded in being together, talking together, sharing perspectives, and seeking synergies for working together.

The conference opened a space of trust and enthusiasm. The technology helped and perhaps we in fact had an extraordinary opportunity to connect - and the willingness to connect. Let us embrace the challenge and joy to pursue this opportunity.

Reflections on UKSS conference (21st June 2021 -via Zoom) from some delegates

Pavla Kramarova

The conference was an interesting experience and I was delighted to be part of it as a new member of UKSS and to be given the opportunity to present my research project there. Presentations and Q&A's were insightful and worthwhile to participate in and listen to, from the Keynote Speaker's talk to both Systems Thinking and Systems Practice streams. The event emphasised the fact that the UKSS connects enthusiastic and like-minded researchers who are interested in looking at problematic situations holistically using Systems ideas across various research fields. It was a great opportunity to see what kind of research is taking place internationally, since many members and attendees were spread across the world. Therefore, the opportunity to attend the event online was welcome and enabled networking and engagement amongst attendees, despite the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions put upon travel and face-to-face meetings.

What I found particularly interesting was how the entire UKSS applies Systems Thinking across many disciplines that are usually kept in silos and one must go to a specific conference based on an area of research interest. This may be, inadvertently, quite limiting in terms of feedback received or networking at these events, due to audience unfamiliarity with Systems ideas or methods you are using. The UKSS conference offers benefits, especially if Systems Thinking is not a mainstream or familiar approach in your particular field, at the moment. Here, the diversity and mix of topics is embraced and focused on Systems Thinking and its practical application to various projects. In my opinion, this makes the conference quite unique in the approach and crossing such boundaries. Thanks to this, it was possible to share research ideas and use of different methods suited to the investigated situation of interest at the event. However, it also showed (me in particular) how much there is to be explored about different methods, their combinations, or different ways of application of Systems Thinking to human problematical situations.

Overall, as a new member of the UKSS I would like to see a communication channel or medium open to share and connect with other researchers who apply Systems ideas within and outside UKSS, and have a better transparency in the areas of interest of other members. From my point of view, this would improve the feedback even more for presenters at the UKSS conference and increase its attendance by spreading the word to a larger audience as well. A blended approach (combination of face-to-face and online event) might be a good way to aspire to in the future of UKSS conferences in order to accommodate international delegates and attendees and to enrich and keep our conversations flowing about Systems Thinking and Systems Practice in the years to come.

Shavindrie Cooray

This June, I attended the UKSS Conference after many years and was inspired by the presentations. The diverse ways in which presenters applied soft systems thinking reaffirmed my commitment to it. Given the interesting work that was highlighted, I find that it is a pity that there are so few soft systems thinking papers published in top-ranked journals.

In July this year, the world's leading systems researchers will gather virtually for the 38th International Systems Dynamics Conference. This conference is organized by the Systems Dynamics Society that encourages the development and use of systems thinking and systems dynamics modelling around the world. Of the approximately 400 papers on the program, 9 appear to have the words "systems thinking" in the title. It is not clear whether these papers refer to soft systems thinking. "Soft systems thinking" does not appear in any title.

The challenge that members of the UKSS face as arguably the biggest group of soft systems thinking researchers is to raise the profile of soft systems so that it can take its rightful place among other systems methods in top-ranked publications and at conferences such as the International Systems Dynamics Conference. I believe that if we are to accomplish this goal the focus should be on facilitating online networking among interested parties from both academia and the industry.

Some suggestions would be:

- Creating a searchable member directory on the website.

- Having webinars and online workshops to bring academics together and to connect with practitioners

    from the industry.

- Maintaining lively discussion boards on the UKSS website and social media.

- Creating special interest groups that meet regularly online to explore relevant topics.

- Having a list of introductory online resources to introduce newcomers to soft systems thinking.

Notes from UKSS [Virtual] Annual General Meeting

President address. This last year has been challenging for all societies as we moved into a new era of virtual conferences. It is an odd feeling to be speaking to a computer monitor and not to the delegation in person. But hopefully next year.

The state of the society – needless to say, no real change since our last conference. As the board is Virtual' there have been few expenses and there are sufficient funds for a physical conference in 2022

Membership is static as you would expect - Membership remains steady at 160 people on the database.
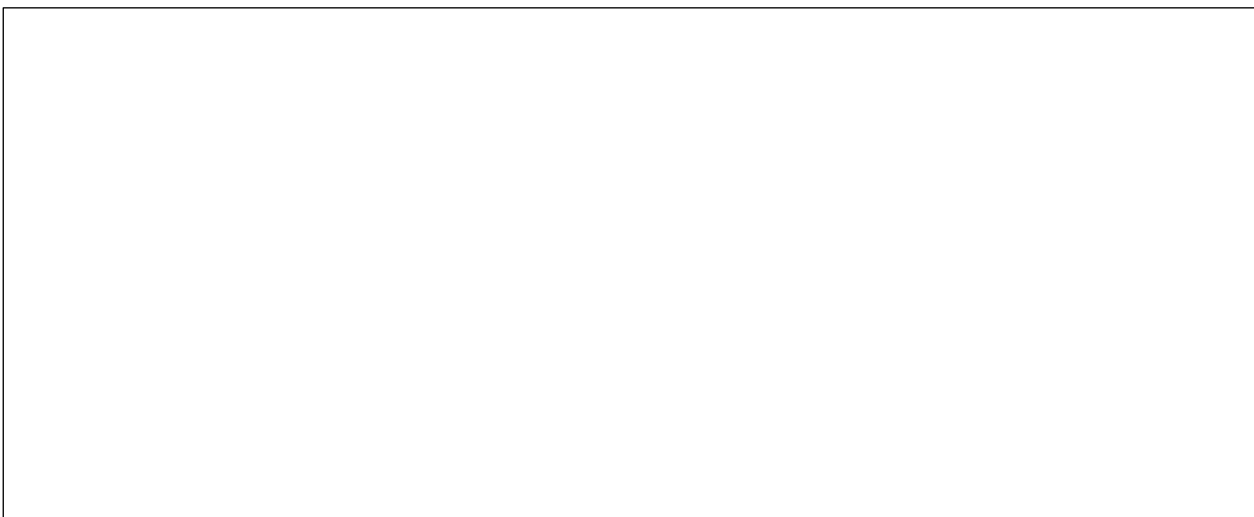
Newsletter - we aim to produce 2 newsletters per year. In the last one you may have seen a summary of the exercise we carried out on the society. For this we used AIM. The outcome did not yield too many surprises for your team, as you can imagine, as we have been trying to manage the society over the past difficult two years. The most important challenge we have is the recruitment of a membership/marketing secretary. We need someone who is a Systems person, knows how to manage the data base and how to market the society – some task. Vital so if anyone feels they can take it on let me know.

Systemist – this is published twice per year. All papers are double blind refereed then those we publish are put onto the UKSS webpage. The papers are open access and the copyright remains with the authors. A soft and hard copy is lodged with the British Library. Any author that would like a hard copies can be purchased, but remember that the soft copies are available on the web page. The next Systemist publication will be the refereed full papers from this conference. For those wishing to extend the ideas you presented today please submit a full paper by the end of July.

Items from the Agenda

Agenda Item	Discussion
1	Welcome and apologies – Professor Stowell, President of the UK Systems Society, welcomed members to the 21st UKSS International Conference. He thanked members for attending the AGM and the UKSS Management Committee, especially the Conference Chair, Gary Evans. Prof. Stowell also thanked the conference keynote speaker, Dr Nigel Williams, University of Portsmouth.
2	Minutes of the previous AGM – Professor Stowell outlined the agenda and briefly covered the Minutes of the 2019 AGM. However, it had been a period of uncertainly and little change because of COVID.
3	Matters arising – no matters were arising.
4	President's address – Professor Stowell highlighted this last year has been challenging for all societies as we moved into a new era of virtual conferences. It is an odd feeling to be speaking to a computer monitor and not to the delegation in person. But hopefully, next year conference in the traditional format will resume.
5	Society's finances – Professor Stowell reported that the Society's situation shows little change since 2020. The Management Committee meetings have continued to be virtual and there have been few expenses. There are sufficient funds for a physical conference in 2022. FS confirmed the Society has a bank balance of £7,960.00 and trading for 2019-20 reports a surplus of £685.54, income of £1,762.74 and expenses of £1,077.20. The Balance Sheet reports a total assets less liabilities figure of £7,511.59 and up on the previous year's figure of £6,826.05. There were no questions from Members about the Society's finances.
6	Membership – Prof. Stowell indicated the membership is static as expected and remains steady at 160 people on the database. All that register for the conference receive 6-months of free membership, with a view of them taking up membership after the 6-months. Otherwise, the basic membership remains £20 per annum, This provides discount at the next conference plus online access to the UKSS journal Systemist and the Society's newsletter. There were no questions from the Members on this agenda item.
7	Newsletter – Prof. Stowell confirmed the Society aims to produce two newsletters per year. In the last newsletter there is a summary of the exercise the management committee undertook on the society using AIM. Although the outcome did not yield too many surprises it did highlight key roles that should be filled as a matter of urgency. The most critical challenge is the recruitment of a membership and marketing secretary. Members were invited to apply for one or both of these roles. The credentials for each is that the individual should be conversant with Systems, and know how to manage the membership database. The marketing secretary should also be a systems person, know about the history of the UKSS and be capable of marketing the society to the community. If a member or affiliate feels they can take it on, please let us know.
8	Systemist – Prof. Stowell, Editor in Chief, confirmed The Systemist is published twice per year. All papers are double-blind refereed, then those published are put onto the UKSS webpage. The articles are presently open access with the copyright remaining with the authors. A soft and hard copy is lodged with the British Library. Authors can request a hard copy which can be purchased at cost. Please

	note that the soft copies are available to download from the Society's webpage. The next Systemist publication will be the refereed full papers from this conference. For those wishing to extend the ideas you presented today, please submit a longer article by the end of July.
9	Conference – GE confirmed the booking of Lancaster University for the 22nd UKSS International Conference on Monday 20th June 2022 [NB the management committee has subsequently recommended the conference be extended to a 2 day event in 2022] The Committee is planning for a blended conference but predominantly face to face. Accommodation is available on Campus at highly competitive rates for those wishing to stay overnight. The Committee is in the process of organising a keynote speaker and conference theme, and the flyer will be published in December 2021 and calling notice for abstracts in January 2022.
10	External relations – Petia Sice. Petia stressed the importance of engaging with practitioners, practice without theory is blind and theory without practice is sterile. She argued that Systems Thinking and Systems Practice are important ways of 'addressing' problem situations. The need for holistic conversation has never been critical for our society. She emphasised plus the need to engage with new and younger researchers, such as those to be found at the University of Northumbria. PS also argued REF and impact case studies could provide an opportunity to showcase Systems research. To foster more relationships, PS highlighted two new initiatives. First, a Systems Q&A session could be considered say one per month to engage younger researchers and practitioners. These will be advertised via the society's webpage and newsletter. Second, virtual forums addressing Systems Thinking and Systems Practice. The forums we will host using the Zoom Video Communications software to attract the broadest cross-section of the Systems community in the most inexpensive and environmentally friendly way.
11	Constitution – nothing to report at this AGM.
13	AOB. No AOB, Prof. Stowell thanked the Members for attending the AGM and wished them good Systems Thinking!
14	Board meeting closed at 12.30-noon.

CALL FOR PAPERS

The Systemist is a peer-reviewed, open access journal published annually on-line under a Creative Commons licence (CC-BY). There are no publication fees. Hard copies of the journal are available by payment on request. Accepted articles are eligible for advance publication.

Submissions are invited of original articles, which may be full research papers, case studies from practice, substantial reviews of relevant literature, opinion and discussion pieces or other types of submission by agreement.

Topics could include, but are not limited to:

➢ problem structuring methods
➢ modelling approaches
➢ soft systems analysis
➢ second order cybernetics
➢ critical systemic thinking
➢ work systems
➢ systemic approaches to management of projects
➢ environmental and social sustainability
➢ systemic governance of technologies
➢ socio-technical principles and practices.

Please submit via the Journal home page at www.systemist.org.uk