

FROM THE PRESIDENT



**By Susan Keith, Rutgers University
2021-22 AEJMC President**

See you soon in Detroit

By the time you read this column, it will have been about two years and seven months since I last saw many of you in person, at the 2019 AEJMC Conference in Toronto. That's one of many reasons I'm looking forward to attending our in-person conference Aug. 3-6 at the Detroit Marriott at the Renaissance Center. I can't wait to see you face to face and hear your ideas about research, teaching, and professional freedom and responsibility.

There have already been a few in-person AEJMC meetings during the pandemic. The leadership ladder gathered with staff at the AEJMC office in Columbia, South Carolina, in June 2021, and

the AEJMC Board met in New Orleans in December. By the time you read this, AEJMC's sibling organization, the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication, will have met in person Feb. 23-25 in Las Vegas, and the 2022 AEJMC Mid-winter Meeting will have taken place in person March 4-5 at the University of Oklahoma. The 47th AEJMC Southeast Colloquium will be coming up March 17-19 with in-person components at the University of Memphis, as well as an online component.

Other academic and professional organizations have also held or are planning in-person conferences. The National Communication Association met in person Nov. 18-21 in Seattle. (I attended, along with Past President Tim Vos, Interim Executive Director Amanda Caldwell, and Assistant Director Felicia Brown.) The International Communication Association recently announced it will go ahead with the Paris component of its May conference.

I know, however, that some of you have questions about our in-person annual conference, which has the theme Focusing on Our Future Together. I'll try here to answer here some of those I've heard most often.

Why is AEJMC planning an in-person conference?

Because, at least at the time I write this, we have no other choice.

Like other scholarly associations, AEJMC must plan conferences years in advance to secure enough hotel rooms, during the two-week range when we hold the conference, for 2,000 or so attendees. The contract for the 2022 conference, in fact, was signed in 2018, long before anyone had heard of COVID-19. Following standard processes for planning large meetings, AEJMC guaranteed the Detroit hotel that conference attendees will, together, spend about \$638,520 on hotel rooms. In return, the hotel gives the association complimentary meeting space and other concessions which financially benefit the association. If we were to cancel our in-person conference and have another virtual meeting, we would be on the hook for paying the hotel most, if not all, of the contract amount.

In 2020, AEJMC was able to get out of a larger contract with the San Francisco Marriott Marquis Hotel because, at the time we canceled, local government had banned indoor gatherings as large as our conference. The association had to pay the hotel \$25,000, but that amount will be applied to the costs of a re-scheduled San Francisco conference in 2025.

By February 2021, when the AEJMC Board decided, based on survey responses from members, that university travel support was too uncertain to allow for an in-person August conference in New Orleans, the situation was different. Most big U.S. hotels had gone nearly a year without substantial conference revenue, and a COVID vaccine was available to some people and seemed likely to become more widely available. As a result, despite extensive negotiations, to get out of a \$553,014 contract with our New Orleans conference hotel, AEJMC had to pay a penalty of \$55,000 – *none* of which is applicable to the costs of a future conference – and agree to hold our conference at the hotel twice in this decade: in 2026 and 2029.

In 2022, vaccines, COVID testing, and COVID treatments are

widely available in some parts of the world; COVID rates are declining in many areas after a spike from the Omicron variant; and there are no government bans on indoor gatherings in Detroit. That good news means, however, that our Detroit hotel has no motivation to allow AEJMC to break its \$638,520 contract. The association's finances are well managed, but they could not absorb a hit of more than half a million dollars.

Why can't the conference be hybrid?

We cannot hold a hybrid conference – one in which all in-person sessions are also live-streamed – because it would cost significantly more than an in-person conference, forcing the association to charge a registration rate of about \$650 per person.

Our regularly contracted wifi, which AEJMC attendees use for email and to tweet about sessions, simply does not provide enough bandwidth to stream, all at once, the 14+ sessions held concurrently at any given time at an AEJMC conference. The association would have to buy extra bandwidth for each of the rooms used for presentations and rent equipment and employ technicians from the hotel's technology vendor, increasing the cost of conference registration far beyond what our members have ever paid.

The AEJMC Board has approved a faculty early-bird registration rate for the Detroit conference of \$275, the same rate attendees would have paid had we met in person in San Francisco in 2020, but significantly more than the \$69 rate we were able to have for a virtual conference. To ask members to pay more than double the in-person rate and nearly ten times the 2021 virtual rate to cover the cost of live-streaming all sessions does not seem financially prudent.

The association has, however, committed to purchasing extra bandwidth for a single room, to live-stream one set of sessions likely to interest all AEJMC members, including the keynote and the cornerstone session (which we used to call a "plenary"). Even if you can't travel to Detroit, you will be able to watch those sessions live.

Can I present via Zoom?

Short answer: No. The Detroit conference is planned as an in-person conference. If your paper or extended abstract is accepted or you are taking part in a panel, you should expect to register, attend and present. The free hotel wifi simply would not be adequate for multiple presenters to Zoom in at once. If, however, you are unable at the last minute to attend the conference, you can always ask a proxy – a co-author, a colleague, a graduate student from your university, someone from the relevant division or interest group, or someone else you know – to present on your behalf. This has long been an AEJMC practice.

Send me your questions

I know that there will be more questions about the Detroit conference as we get closer to August. Both I and the AEJMC central office staff are happy to hear from you. You can reach me at susank@rutgers.edu.



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