ASSETS 2020 UX PANEL REPORT: "LOCKDOWN EXPERIENCES"

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Abstract

This contribution describes the organization and the outcomes of the User Experience panel at the ASSETS 2020 virtual conference. The panel was the first one in the history of ASSETS to be conducted as a virtual event, which required a number of changes, both in terms of panellist and attendee involvement. Adapting to this new situation required new solutions that we believe can be useful for other future events - be they virtual, physical or hybrid. We believe the experiences reported also provide helpful insights for reflection on future work in the domain of accessible computing.

Introduction

The User Experience (UX) panel is a popular feature of the annual ASSETS conference experience. It seeks to provide a space for users with diverse backgrounds to share their individual experiences of accessing technology. The UX panel in 2020 was entitled: "Lockdown Experiences" and was aimed at exploring and understanding the challenges and opportunities that arose during the COVID-19 lockdown for people with disabilities.

Organizing the UX panel as an online event presented us with some new challenges. In our role as UX panel chairs, we wanted to establish how we could maximise the value of the UX panel in this new format. The shift prompted us to experiment with new forms of panellist and attendee interaction. We were pleasantly surprised to discover a number of opportunities made available to us by the online format. Here are two examples:

- The virtual format permitted the inclusion of speakers from a variety of contexts - the ASSETS 2020 UX panel drew together four speakers from three different countries.

- The UX panel (i.e., the actual live event) was complemented by asynchronous forms of interaction, including short video testimonies from eight speakers (the four who took part in the live event, plus four additional contributors). These videos were posted on Discord (the conference communication platform) and on the Facebook "ASSETS conference" group in the days running up to the session.

The aim of our contribution here is twofold:

1. To report our experience of organizing the UX panel, so that it can hopefully be useful for the chairs of future events. We report how we organized the event and the rationale for the main decisions we took.

2. To report the main panel outcomes, which we hope will be useful for researchers and practitioners in the field of accessible computing and assistive technologies.

We first present information about the eight video testimonies collected in advance of the conference, then report details and outcomes of the UX panel session itself as well as steps we took to ensure it was accessible to panellists. Finally, we conclude with questions for the community to consider – these have come from the four panellists who took part in the live panel session.

Video Testimonies

Through our growing experience of virtual conferences, we have learned the importance of facilitating interaction between attendees, not only during live events but also through asynchronous interaction. The opportunity for asynchronous interaction is particularly useful, for example, for participants in different time zones. The ASSETS 2020 conference used the digital platform Discord as a tool to facilitate interaction between organisers, contributors and attendees during the event. Discord is an online tool enabling registered users to interact across a variety of topics and discussions using purposely created "channels". The ASSETS 2020 Discord setup included one channel specifically dedicated to the UX panel. We used this channel to share short user experience video testimonies in advance of the live UX panel session. We also shared videos to the official ASSETS conference Facebook Group. We found the opportunity to both create and share video testimonies in advance to be beneficial in a number of ways:

- First, during planning for the UX panel, the advanced collection of video testimonies supported us to identify panellists who might later be interested in taking part in the live UX panel session during the conference itself.

- Although we could only accessibly host 3 or 4 people during the hour-long UX panel session of within live conference schedule, the sharing of video testimonies through Discord and Facebook allowed us to share with attendees' experiences from a larger set of people (eight in total).

- The use of video testimonies made it possible to share the experiences of people who might otherwise be unable able to participate in the live event, due to time limitations or access preferences.

- Sharing the videos in the days running up to the session helped us to promote the live UX panel event and supported interaction around user experiences. It fostered discussion and reflection amongst conference attendees in advance of the panel and generated questions that could then be asked during the live event.

- Sharing video testimonies through the Discord channel and Facebook group additionally meant they could be watched asynchronously and repeatedly by conference participants to support reflections about the messages conveyed.

Watch the video testimonies
Here is a link to a playlist showing all eight videos:

https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLBHyrwvAyBLPWm1zEM3jOPXeFqtrPlg26.

(The ability to share this playlist with readers of this article is a further advantage of the asynchronous video presentation method!)

Below is a brief introduction to the eight contributors and the experiences they each describe in their video:

1. Sannah talks about her experience of using technology to communicate during 2020. Sannah is a deaf sign language user.

2. Cristian talks about his experience of travelling during 2020. Cristian is totally blind.

3. Jan talks about her experience of using technology during 2020. Jan has aphasia. Jan's daughter Carly is asking the questions.

4. Matteo talks about his experience of using technology with his daughter during 2020. Matteo's daughter has Down's syndrome.

5. Sarah tweets about her experience of using technology during 2020. Sarah has motor neurone disease/ALS.

6. Roobi talks about her experience of using technology to complete her Master's studies during 2020. Roobi is partially sighted.

7. Inho Seo talks about his experience of living independently during the events of 2020. Inho is a blind undergraduate student at Sogang university in Seoul, South Korea.

8. Rosa talks about her experience as Projects and Services Coordinator at Associazione Nazionale Subvedenti in Italy - a National Association for people with low vision, during the events of 2020.

Gathering video testimonies

In order to source the video testimonies described above, both authors approached a number of groups and individuals via email and twitter to invite them to take part. Most of the videos received came from people we already knew - either directly or indirectly. Others whom we approached 'cold' were, perhaps unsurprisingly, less willing to take part. We were disappointed at this limitation in our representation of individual voices within the testimonies and we would have liked to see the pool of contributors broadened further beyond those known to the UX panel chairs. We propose two suggestions to try and achieve this for future work:

1. To have an open call for user experience video contribution further in advance of the conference - shared widely by the conference organising committee and publicity chairs.

2. To make it clear within this call that there is an economic incentive for video contributions. We were able to offer a small token of recompense for the authors of the video testimonies. However, the funding for compensation was secured only after we received the testimony videos so was not offered within our original request for contributions.

The Live Panel Session

The panel itself took place on Tue 27th Oct 2020 at 2pm EDT and lasted for 1 hour. Four of the video contributors (Inho Seo, Sannah, Jan & Carly and Roobi) joined us (Abi and Sergio) as panellists on Zoom. Inho Seo called in from the middle of the night in South Korea (thank you Inho Seo!), Sannah, Jan & Carly called in from the UK and Roobi joined from Italy. American and British Sign language interpreters provided interpretation and the event was also live captioned.

Format of the UX Panel

The panel session was structured as a series of 10-minute one-to-one question and answer sessions between each panellist and one of the session chairs (Abi or Sergio). Each 10-minute section was prefaced by a replay of the panellist's brief video testimony. These four individual conversations were then followed by a panel style Q&A where questions from the attendees were presented to panellists one at a time by the session chairs. Attendees were invited to pose questions for panellists using the Zoom Q&A feature. Questions already elicited in response to the Discord and Facebook posts had also been collected for discussion during the session.
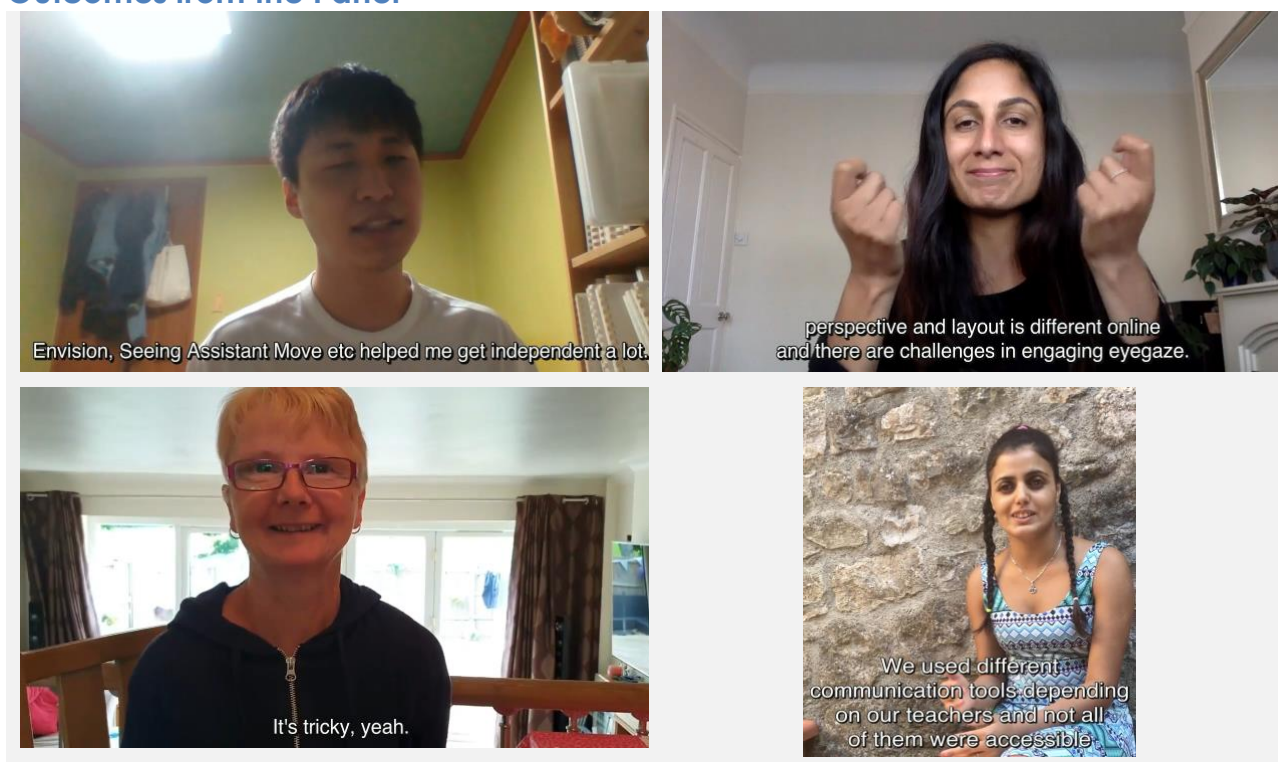
Outcomes from the Panel

Figure 1. Video stills from each of the four contributors who took part in the UX Panel. Clockwise from the top left: Inho Seo, Sannah, Roobi and Jan.

Here are some of the experiences reported by panellists during the session:

Inho Seo:

"Mobility service for the visually impaired and useful applications such as food delivery, E-Commerce, Envision, Seeing Assistant Move etc helped me get independent a lot. It could be possible since those services were accessible enough to use."

Sannah:

"There's a lot of [Deaf] cultural norms that cannot really translate well in online interactions such as tapping, waving or pointing to reference or get someone's attention because everyone's perspective and layout is different online and there are challenges in engaging eye gaze. In terms

of video platforms, my preference is to use Zoom vs. Teams. The video quality on Zoom is far much more enhanced reducing visual constraints and fatigue."

Jan and Carly:

"Carly: [...] at the beginning of lockdown, how did we talk to each other?

Jan: Yeah, very good. Yeah. A phone.

Carly: [we used] just the video, WhatsApp didn't we?

Jan: Yeah,

Carly: Which was good. And I know you've got really confident with it now.

Jan: Yeah,

Carly: Did you feel confident in the beginning?

Jan: It's tricky, yeah.

Carly: What made it easier?

Jan: Uh, you.

Carly: So, having people support you.

Jan: Yeah. Um, friends.

Carly: And practice?

Jan: yeah, yeah, very good

Carly: Practice, practice, practice."

Roobi:

"I just finished last semester in International Cooperation during the lockdown. And it was, it was quite challenging. We used different communication tools depending on our teachers and not all of them were accessible with my screen reader. For example, in Microsoft Teams, I couldn't use the chat to... that we use for raising our hand and taking part in discussions. Also, during exams, it was not that easy, because the exams are already stressful, but I was not sure about showing my ID properly in the camera, and also I had some problems during the presentation so with slides and all this stuff."

After their individual question and answer sections, panellists discussed their ideas in response to questions from attendees, including:

- How assistive technologies could be designed to better support people with aphasia.
- Difficulties in access to travel due to social distancing.
- Challenges of remote working in the Signing work context.
- Effects of lockdown and social distancing on the apps that were helpful before the pandemic.

The session closed with panellists each posing a question of their own to the assembled attendees.

At the end of the session, many attendees left comments on the Zoom chat function to show their appreciation to the panellists and to reflect on what they would be taking away:

"Thank you all for sharing your important insights and experiences to inform future accessibility in tech possibilities."

"Very valuable session--struck by how isolation reduces the help resources that are usually available, and the value of family helpers like Carly, plus creative ways of remotely helping"

Lessons from facilitating the UX panel session

Feedback we received on Discord after the session indicated that the UX panel provided a helpful model of how to interview via Zoom and the process of doing accessible group interviews. Here, we share some of the key steps we took to try and ensure accessibility. We hope these might be useful points for others to consider when delivering panels or conducting group interviews via teleconference:

1. Give panellists/interviewees lots of time to prepare for the session - including agreeing that the scheduled session time in the programme works. This is especially important for panellists attending from a different time zone to you!

2. Send panellists key questions in advance.

3. Give panellists/interviewees a chance to introduce themselves in their own words in advance – for example though a video and / or by asking them a general introduction at the beginning of the session.

4. As a chair, tell panellists/interviewees what to expect from the start of the meeting. i.e. "I will ask you each some questions one to one and then I will ask everyone to come together to talk as a group. "

5. When you come together as a group, actively chair the session to ensure each person has a time to share, respond and hold the floor.

Conclusion and Panellists' Questions

We hope readers have found this report interesting and useful. We would like to close by presenting the questions asked by Inho Seo, Jan and Carly, Roobi and Sannah of UX panel session attendees. We hope these provide some food for thought in future research endeavours.

Inho Seo:

"Can we see more research to improve access to cultural aspects of life to develop shared experiences and relationships? For example, access to games and sports."

Jan and Carly:

"Is there enough information out there about stroke and aphasia? If there was more, would it help you to help develop aphasia accessible technologies?"

Roobi:

"A) Is there a way to keep virtual help apps (like be my eyes) in regular use once the pandemic ends? B) Can you come up with a way to let me know how many people are permitted in a building and whether and when I am permitted to enter?"

Sannah:

"What are you doing and what can you do to ensure Deaf and disabled people are included in technology development from the start?"

Acknowledgments

About the Authors:

Sergio Mascetti is Associate Professor at the Department of Computer Science, Università degli Studi di Milano. His research interests cover the area of mobile data management, with particular focus on assistive technologies. He co-founded and served as Chief Technology Officer for EveryWare Technologies, a university spin-off developing mobile applications, including mobile assistive technologies.

Abi Roper is a Post-doctoral Research Fellow at City, University of London, UK. She is a registered speech and language therapist and works in the fields of both human-computer interaction and speech and language therapy. She is passionate about raising the profile of communication accessibility within both of these fields.