# CO-LAB-ORATION AND COVID-19

## How Think Tanks Can Act as Innovation Incubators and Community Connectors

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COVID-19 ushered in a new reality for all of us. An ironic reality that socially distanced us while also unifying us in addressing shared challenges – especially in the realm of planning and designing for spaces where humans gather and interact.

In 2019, Naomi and Lauren, coauthors of this article, worked together on a project at the Smithsonian on an exhibition drawn from the science and health collections. During this project, they studied how human-centered-design techniques could be integrated within traditional exhibit development frameworks. As Lauren transitioned from her role as Senior Project Manager at the Smithsonian into her position at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) as Exhibits and Artifacts Program Manager, and Naomi's work in strategic planning with Storycraft Lab shifted toward brand marketing experiences, they stayed in touch as friends and colleagues, both always interested in expanding their community of practice.

In this article, we share details of an effort called the FuturesForum – and the teamwork, quick reinvention, and changing nature of collaboration we helped uncover that led to new ways of working for NASA and its Visitor Center Consortium, the museums and visitor centers across the country

that share NASA stories. Please consider this article a toolkit for your organization – it can be scaled and modified and, we hope, will provide kernels of information to help your team operate differently in a changing world.

## The FuturesForum

In the early days of the pandemic, Naomi reached out to colleagues around the country, including Lauren, to bring them together as thought leaders. They came together from museums, government agencies, and private industry to connect and collaborate in the form of an informal, online forum. The goal was to consider how narrative experiences, from museum exhibitions to business events, would be impacted by the pandemic. The diverse group included planners and strategists at Microsoft, Google, Hubb (a virtual event planning platform), Intel (a technology company), Amazon, PCMA (Professional Convention Management Association), the Smithsonian Institution, museum design firm Gallagher & Associates, and Georgetown University's Ethics Lab. While we were all specialists in our respective fields – whose paths did not frequently cross in a pre-COVID world – we were together solving for the same problem: how do we design engaging experiences in a post-COVID world?

These conversations began informally but quickly gelled into weekly sessions where members convened by Zoom as a roundtable to collaboratively and collectively discuss how we might respond to the challenges we all faced. Naomi named this group the "FuturesForum" – and the "Future" we had to address was immediate. The goal of convening and learning from each other was to answer these questions: How do we adapt

## How do we adapt our industries? Learn new skills? Reach our audiences? Engage our content?

our industries? Learn new skills? Reach our audiences? Engage our content? Not all of the players in the FuturesForum produce exhibitions in a traditional museum setting. However, all involved are storytellers and many develop and produce exhibits that are featured at trade shows and conferences, and shared thoughts in these sessions on how COVID-19 might impact both museums as well as large gatherings of people. What connected us all was the human experience of space and message.

As Mark Dominguez, Strategic Planner at Intel explains, this challenge actually presented us with the time to realize a significant opportunity – to learn from one another, to share best practices and to prepare to meet new realties:

> As it became apparent that COVID-19 was going to change the landscape of our industries, many people were stunned still by this previously unimaginable scenario. This challenge presented us with the time to realize a significant opportunity: to learn from one another, to share best practices, to prepare to meet new realities. The biggest opportunity of this time was to re-forge relationships, to re-imagine what engagement looked like, and to explore new ways of collaborating with an unprecedented degree of partnership and teamwork. This was a time for investment into self, industry and community.

**Season Two Syllabus**
*Hybrid Explorations*

**Episode 1:** **Open Forum** – Reflection Session. What do you need to know about Hybrid? Intention Setting and Needs assessment.
July 6

**Episode 2:** **Let's Get Phygital** – Fishbowl format: 3 topics. 5 min presentations/intro followed by 12 min discussion.
July 20

**Episode 3:** **Architecting for Inclusivity** – What does inclusive mean to you? How are you planning to design for inclusivity?
Aug 3

**Episode 4:** **Hybrid: Shared Experiences** – (2) Fireside Chats (15 min chat w/15 mins Q&A) on Shared Journeys and Shared Communications
Aug 10

**Episode 5:** **Spark Session** – The panel shares Interesting Innovations and Cool Tech for engagement generated in the midst of Covid-19
Aug 17

**Episode 6:** **What Is Shareworthy?** Best Practices in planning shareable content - During and Post-event.
Aug 24    Round Table Moderated discussion.

**Episode 7:** **Connecting Hybrid Communities** Idea Jam Concepts for engagement, co-creation and interaction.
Aug 31    Facilitation/Moderation in Mural by Storycraft LAB

**Episode 8:** **Create your Adventure:** Storytelling in hybrid spaces. Trends for Exhibiting. Look at Microsites. Digital Museum Exhibits.
Sep 14    Experience Mapping workshop facilitated by Storycraft LAB.

**Episode 9:** **Back to the Future** – Open Forum
Sep 21    Where are we now? What have we learned? Where do we want to learn more?

REFLECT & INSPIRE

STRATEGIC PLANNING

IDEATION DESIGN

hubb + storycraft LAB

**Fig. 1.**

The FuturesForum season-two "syllabus" showing the variety of topics and session formats.

What we discovered is that by embracing this opportunity, we could find new ways of collaborating.

## Connecting Communities

In the weeks that followed the rapid shutdown of pre-pandemic life, FuturesForum became a venue for sharing best practices and challenges and for brainstorming ideas and approaches that drew on the power of collaborative group think. In truth, the think-tank approach served more than a professional need; at the start of our adjustment to COVID-19, we were all dealing with personal circumstances that were unprecedented. We all had a deep need for human connection, to understand how others were processing and dealing with the situation. That access to others helped to deliver a context that helped us understand and with it some degree of normalcy, albeit a new normal. The shared personal challenges and new use of virtual tools to talk to others (in their homes, no less) uncovered and super-charged something else: empathy.

In the world of experience marketing (immersive campaigns that engage viewers with product and brand messaging), empathy is the first stage in the any innovative design-thinking process. Empathizing is primarily an audience-focused activity. We seek to understand the needs and perspectives of our audiences and ask questions that enable us to build profiles and personae that in turn help us to identify the drivers and barriers of behaviors. What moves them to action? What connects them most powerfully to a message? What propels them up the ladder of engagement? This process of dialogue leads to insights, uncovering opportunities

for impactful, resonant engagement. Whether that be with an intent of marketing or educating, it helps us to better deliver our messages. The circumstances around the COVID-19 crisis inspired us to widen the lens of empathy to include our teams, our colleagues, ourselves. We asked questions of one another – what do "WE" need to move forward? How and where are WE stuck? What inspires US to action? We applied the tools and techniques of audience engagement to encourage collective progress and help us overcome our internal inertia. In leveraging the virtual tools at our disposal, we reenergized communities that had existed within our networks before, but now became accessible and active in a new way.

## Forum Formats

As the FuturesForum met, a group of six people grew to 10, and then 16 – and it became apparent that the group needed structures for organizing the various discussions. Naomi and Storycraft Lab created a syllabus for an initial eight-week series that would investigate the challenges and opportunities that a shift to virtual engagement presented (figs. 1 & 2). We began with assessing future norms – beginning by acknowledging engagement theories from purely physical in-person experiences that were no longer applicable, *and* identifying what we needed to know moving forward. From there, the group

**Fig. 2.**

An example FuturesForum "roundtable" format that helped to structure and guide the group discussion.

**Season Two Syllabus**
*Hybrid Explorations*

**EPISODE 3 (AUG 3):**
**ARCHITECTING INCLUSIVITY**
*What does inclusive mean to you? How are you planning to design for inclusivity? How do you measure success for inclusive/accessible programs? How do we accommodate and connect all styles, abilities, comfort levels?*

**Good**Questions
Participants are encouraged to ask positive questions that identify shared challenges, uncover unknowns, consider opportunities and develop ideas collaboratively.

**AGENDA:**

Question 1:     What does Inclusivity mean to you, given your unique perspective on the Events industry?
                *To all participants – 60 second responses – 12 mins*

Question 2:     How do you consider the terms Inclusion and Accessibility as they relate to one another?
                *To Kena Jones, Strategic Marketing Manager, Salesforce; Follow up conversation / question from group - 10 mins*

Question 3:     How has virtual enabled and extended inclusion?
                *To Susie Kandzor, Director of Hacking, Microsoft Garage; Follow up conversation / question from group - 10 mins*

Questions 4-11:  From TBD; To TBD – *5 mins per (time permitting)*

CONFIRMED: Allie Magyar (Hubb), Denise Cintron (Intel), Usha Chaziyat (Intel), Monte Rehling (Intel), Justin Boone (Opus), Neal Thomas (AWS), Kim Gishler (CEMA), Sarah Bondar (The Charles Group), Susie Kandzor (Microsoft), Kena Jones (Salesforce), Jeremy Baxter-Jenkins (Silver Fox), Megan Henshall (Google)

hubb + storycraft LAB

generating great content & monetizing content

We used to worry - How do we keep attendees engaged so they don't pay attention to the second/third screen?

**Now we say: Bring out your screens!**

Sharing the development phases as a way to explain WHAT the event is

How does strategy change? Hitting the "reset" button.

**Bring everyone to a place of comfort, to the be bold and make decisions**

**JULIE LYNCH**

You're budgeting differently; everyone thinks it's less money but it's not

Remote Hug! Connecting with people you haven't "touched" before

Make sure all voices are being heard... can be daunting, but also positive!

scenario planning - be supportive of possibilities but also pragmatic - voices of reality

I'm having fun. We just have to make sure everyone is understood and taken care of

**It's OKAY to test things out!**

**KIM GISHLER**

How are new technologies are going to be used to create new experiences?

AR/VR/Mixed Reality. People need to understand the tech.

**3RD Screen**

Experience events together

**Unpacking the Tech Knowledge**

Creativity in how we use tech

How is VR being incorporated right now?

**GARY GONZALEZ**

ex. digitalizing music festivals, concerts

**Advertising as clickable pathways**

Event owners are leading with fear... of the unknown; afraid to say I dont know exactly how this will work

**Observing virtual events as case studies, being event curators**

considering key audiences; figuring out what's right for them

how to make events more engaging? requires building buy-in from stakeholders

**SARA SMITH**

check out Microsoft Build 2020

**In gaming... How is ROI measured?**

**ALLIE MAGYAR**

**Creating an inclusive environment**

**LEARN. EDUCATE. GROW**

My Biggest learning: invest ergy into building akeholder buy-in earlier on in the ocess, make them part of the journey

**Interacting is still extremely important**

Our communities are more global, connected than ever before

**How do we unite people?**

an environment that allows different people to connect & do their best work

Organizational approach to learning

**SARAH BONDAR**

**JUSTIN BOONE**

Ask our attendees: What do they need? begin with emotion and the tech will follow

**MAHOGANEY JONES**

**How do we meet people where they are?**

How do we ensure that Hybrid is NOT an afterthought

Emotional Agenda

Widen your apperture

**Curiosity is this wonderful emotional driver to play with.**

Hybrid is a Sweet Spot that has been underutilzed

How can we mirror both audiences?

**Embrace FUN**

I see a different mindset with my association clients who seem to embrace the possibilities more...

Clients are either on board or are fighting the virtual elements but it is a reality we have to help them with.

I'm focused on the Emotional side... so much of us are focused on tech-side because of our fear of the unknown

**POWER TOOLS: Play. Discovery. Creativity**

We have to look at this lens of emotional drivers when thinking about experiences

**It's okay to break the internet**

Co-creation as component of experience; build something

Curating boxes & swag bags to be reflective of event--

Being comfortable with beta

ow do we educate and reassure corporate clients hat virtual events

Think about

What do you need to know about Hybrid?
What have you learned from the past 3 months and how might this shape Hybrid events?
What's the biggest question you have about Hybrid events?

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## Designing for Audience

"Research shows us that Personalized journeys allow discovery and exploration within the learning experience.

By providing an inclusive variety of pathways tailored to learning and social preferences, we ask customers to participate in creating their own customized learning journey.

This participatory approach increases excitement, engagement and efficacy in the experiences we deliver."

– Usha Chazhiyat, Intel

considered data and measurement, gamification, spatial experience, user journeys, educational engagement – all design parameters in the planning and development of exhibits and experiences that cut across industry verticals.

During the eight weeks, we analyzed the trends we saw emerging in the marketplace as brands, museums, and cultural organizations used virtual methods to engage their audiences. Together we reflected on how we had adapted in our own work, and shared insights and inspiration from our respective industries. Each week's discussion was highly curated to create conversations between regular contributors and guest visitors, using tailored questions and a variety of discussion formats. We also created a podcast, as well as soundbites, a "discussion map" (fig. 3) – a visual notetaking canvas in MURAL – and shareable "notable quotables" (fig. 4): graphics that helped to highlight and broadcast the session's thought leadership.
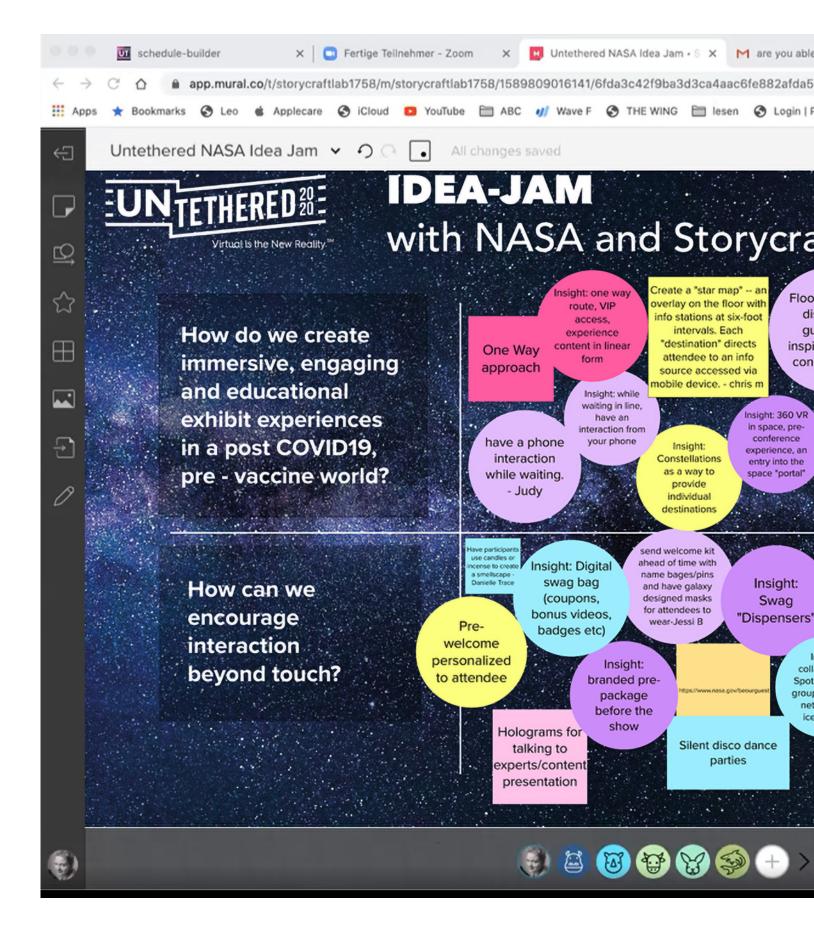
## Actioning Insights

At the end of our initial eight-week series, the FuturesForum culminated with a three day-long "Untethered Conference," intended to give the group a sense of forward momentum and purpose. Hubb created the conference to connect and support the event industry during this time of profound change. "Untethered," hosted by Hubb, was an unabashed attempt to "break the internet" – which meant providing fun, engaging, irreverent, and uplifting content that invited attendees to take part in a virtual experience and test the limits of the technology. We wanted to prove to an industry bereft at the loss of live-face-to-face interaction that "Virtual Events Don't Have
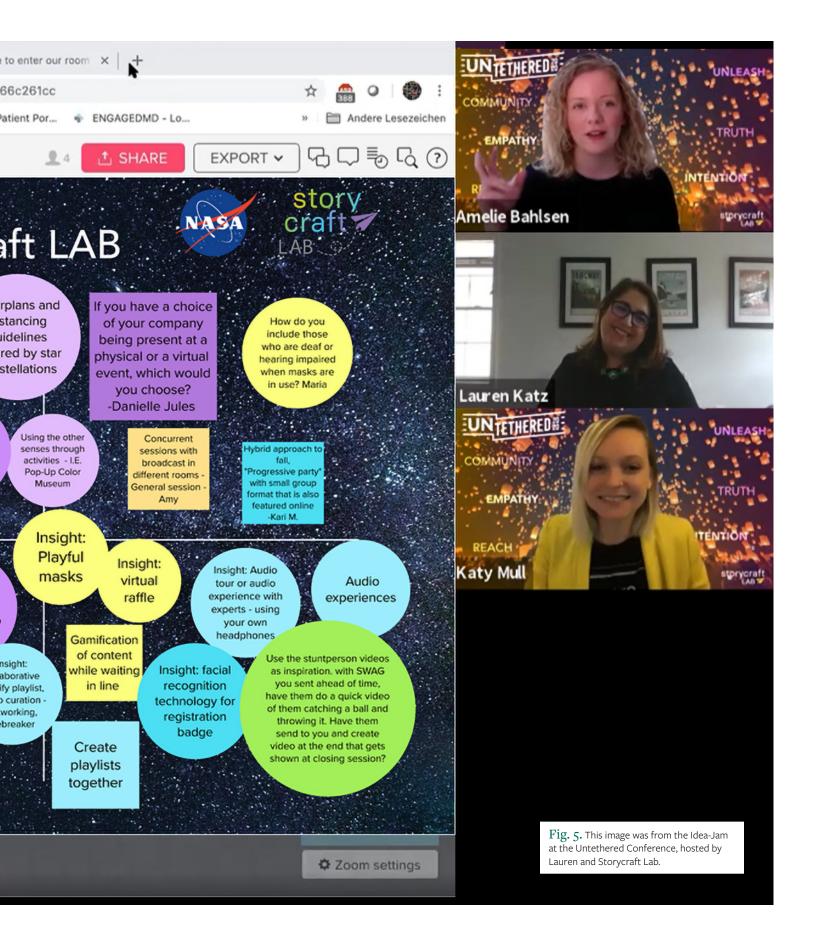
to Suck" and connect a community with a positive message.[1] And it was an experience, apparently, that the audience truly needed – over 5,000 strategic planners and designers attended the conference, which was free (but with a recommended donation to benefit the Meetings Industry Fund). Allie Magyar, CEO of Hubb and creator of the Untethered Conference had this to say:

> I saw an industry, and its people, who I have so much passion for – confounded by fear of the unknown future. Planners are solvers – it's our superpower. Untethered was created to remind our industry of the power of our shared strength. We...can accomplish more as a group than individually. In that way Untethered became a platform for an empowered community – one that felt enabled to contribute to future models in a positive, meaningful and valuable way.

It was here that FuturesForum participants shared their learnings and conversations and tested the ideas with a much broader audience. Key insights and excerpts from the FuturesForum discussion were shared in a synopsis presentation, members of the FuturesForum were matched with conference attendees for "fireside chats,"  and NASA, through Lauren, partnered with Naomi's firm – Storycraft Lab – to host an "Idea-Jam" (fig. 5, p.64): an ideation session that asked the industry to brainstorm concepts for addressing how exhibition stories might be told and experiences designed for a post-COVID, pre-vaccine world.

The Untethered Conference's openness to pushing boundaries created an environment that allowed for experimentation without

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Untethered NASA Idea Jam ⌄ ↺ ◌ ▪    All changes saved

# UNTETHERED 2020
Virtual is the New Reality.℠

# IDEA-JAM
## with NASA and Storycra

**How do we create immersive, engaging and educational exhibit experiences in a post COVID19, pre - vaccine world?**

**How can we encourage interaction beyond touch?**

One Way approach

Insight: one way route, VIP access, experience content in linear form

Create a "star map" -- an overlay on the floor with info stations at six-foot intervals. Each "destination" directs attendee to an info source accessed via mobile device. - chris m

Floo dis gu inspi con

Insight: while waiting in line, have an interaction from your phone

have a phone interaction while waiting. - Judy

Insight: Constellations as a way to provide individual destinations

Insight: 360 VR in space, pre-conference experience, an entry into the space "portal"

Have participants use candles or incense to create a smellscape - Danielle Trace

Insight: Digital swag bag (coupons, bonus videos, badges etc)

send welcome kit ahead of time with name bages/pins and have galaxy designed masks for attendees to wear-Jessi B

Insight: Swag "Dispensers"

Pre-welcome personalized to attendee

Insight: branded pre-package before the show

I coll Spot group net ice

https://www.nasa.gov/beourguest

Holograms for talking to experts/content presentation

Silent disco dance parties

**Fig. 5.** This image was from the Idea-Jam at the Untethered Conference, hosted by Lauren and Storycraft Lab.

fear of failure. This safe space allowed us to learn and to define more opportunities for applications of ideas and concepts to our own practices. We believe this think-tank phase is crucial. After the FutureForum's roundtables, it provided us with the means to capture and communicate all we have learned and, more importantly, by asking the participants in the forums to then lead broader conversations within the community, we were able to activate our learning, broaden participation, *and* further the leadership development of forum members.

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Consider creating your own FuturesForum to bring together diverse voices with different areas of professional expertise to consider tricky questions, discover new insights, test innovative ideas, and finally, study and celebrate their application – *together*.

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For us, the conference helped us consider practical issues in our own work. When NASA moved all staff at its Washington, DC headquarters to telework status in mid-March 2020, we were not quite certain of the future. How long would we be working remotely, what would happen to planned events, how would this impact our work? In addition to museum exhibitions, NASA engages various communities around the world with short- and long-term exhibitions about their work. These exhibitions are for

academic and space policy conferences, students of all ages, and the general public.

NASA had begun to consider how to modify a highly interactive exhibition to allow for social distancing, so we used the Idea-Jam, presented by Naomi and Lauren at Untethered, to brainstorm pertinent issues (not necessarily solutions). What are the items that need to be considered during social distancing? For example, how do you shift from touchable interactives? How do you have experts explain complicated topics from six feet away? How do you share outreach material when you can't touch?

After the Idea-Jam, we presented at an internal session at NASA about the future of events and exhibitions to encourage robust conversation between internal and external thinkers about our recent exploration into the world of virtual events and exhibits. *How do we create high quality experiences and what platforms are available?* For us, we saw the value of the think tank in allowing broader groups to participate in a problem-solving discussion, and it helped us reframe both our understanding of the challenges we perceived as well as our understanding of audience needs and desires.

We envision this as part one of the discussion; a follow-up in early 2021 will consider both sharing information and resources and hearing from our colleagues on what they have learned in their work. As we write this in late 2020, we can further reflect that even with a vaccine, some of these issues will still be at play. How do we have in-person experiences with masks, social distancing and minimal touchable interactives?  How does that change storytelling? What does a hybrid world look

like where some people will be together, and some might join from remote locations? We know that in the brand marketing realm, the virtual channel has created greater inclusion and accessibility for audiences, and this is a positive development that many brands do not want to cede in the future. We know too that museums will grapple with these same issues for exhibitions and programs.

## Summary

The nature of change is that it forces us to encounter the uncomfortable, deviate from well-honed processes, and innovate new approaches. This learning curve can be both tiring but illuminating, a tough but invigorating journey. The message we would like to share through this article is that change, and the growth that comes with it, does not have to be a solo journey. The strength we find from one another in working through adversity is golden. Embrace this uncomfortable encounter, take the time to ask yourself what you need to succeed and then, ask the same question of your colleagues and your audiences.

- Build a group of intrepid explorers to journey with you and commit to learning from one another along the way. Find time for fun and create safe spaces for testing and failure.

- Apply empathy to your teams and to your audiences – now is the time to revisit the personas that drive your strategy and ask again what your audience needs and how your engagement can meet that new need.

- Consider creating your own FuturesForum to bring together diverse voices with different areas

of professional expertise to consider tricky questions, discover new insights, test innovative ideas, and finally, study and celebrate their application – *together*.

- Build relationships that you might not normally have or take the time to invest in existing relationships. Ask your colleagues what they've learned in this time and how you could be inspired by their work or even reproduce it in your own organization.

We know that by this time next year things will look different. We hope that they will be better, but we know that we are heading into a new normal. We believe that work will look different with some organizations, offering employees full to part-time telework. We think museum visitation will also look different with timed tickets and virtual programs. Experiences for conferences and tradeshows will likewise continue to change. Packing people into a shared space for maximum visitation will no longer be how we measure success. Instead, we'll need to assess our strategic success by understanding how we have included, inspired, and impacted our audiences *meaningfully*. Creative collaboration and connecting new communities will be how we, as storytellers, expand and engage our audiences to great effect. ∎

1    This title is from a Hubb webinar presentation, "Virtual Events Don't Have to Suck," available at: https://info.hubb.me/virtual-events-dont-have-to-suck.