

## Cultural Relations Collection

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# FameLab, cultural relations and 'going virtual' at the time of a pandemic

Gary W Kerr

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# Foreword

Over the past year we have come to understand more clearly than ever the value of cultural relations and connection generally. If the world is to face and overcome the challenges of the future in a co-operative and collaborative manner, then cultural relations has a vital role to play.

The British Council's responsibility is to create the person-to-person connections that build trust and enable collaboration across national borders. Coming at the same time as a global pandemic, the United Kingdom's new post-EU status means we have a particular responsibility to use all the tools of international engagement wisely. Last year, like everyone else, the British Council faced some very big challenges. We're now in the process of looking closely at ourselves to make sure we're fit for the future.

The pandemic has shown us how much cultural exchange can take place digitally, and the expansion of our digital services, already under way, will only accelerate. In everything that we do, our values and the values that the UK seeks to promote around the world will be paramount.

It is essential to underpin the many and various activities of the British Council with a body of academic thinking about and around the subject of cultural relations. This essay collection is a showcase of both the quality of that thinking and the breadth of activities that come under the heading of 'cultural relations' – everything from astronomy to the everyday encounters of street and marketplace. It's a rich and optimistic field.

For research into the power and purpose of cultural relations, a period of history when normal human encounters and gatherings are banned presents a special interest. Regardless of the range of subject matter, each essay was written in the context (or shadow) of Covid-19, which has reshaped the meaning of encounter. The pandemic has made some things impossible – or at least illegal – while expanding other channels of communication and connection beyond what we believed achievable just a few short months ago.

What remains both possible and inevitable is the need for human beings to create culture in all its forms, and to communicate their feelings and thoughts about it to others. This collection is a brief and welcome contribution to that endless, fascinating and ultimately human process.

**Kate Ewart-Biggs**

Interim Chief Executive, *British Council*

# Preface to the Cultural Relations Collection

Welcome to the new series of essays from the British Council's Research and Policy Insight Team. This collection seeks to deepen understanding of cultural relations by inviting early-career researchers to examine both theory and practice. An important word in our open invitation for submissions was 'afresh,' with the aim to seek new voices to explore what has been the British Council's business – building connections, understanding and trust – for more than 80 years.

*Under one sky.* When first reading this submission from one of this collection's authors, I was struck by the aptness of the title, not just for her own work – a fascinating journey through cultural co-operation through astronomy – but for the situation we find ourselves in today.

Much has been said about whether or not we are, as some commentators claim, all 'in the same boat' when it comes to Covid-19. The statistics in the UK alone about infection and death falling disproportionately on black, Asian and minority ethnic communities suggest otherwise, as do concerns about the long-term impact on young people due to their extended time out of school. On the global stage, WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned in January 2021 of a 'catastrophic moral failure' if equitable access to vaccines is not achieved, with the poorest countries far behind the Global North when it comes to vaccinating their populations.

Yet while we are not all in that boat, we are all under one sky. That means that as well as the moral impetus to ensure vaccines are distributed around the world, there is a practical one – if the virus grows and mutates in countries where they cannot vaccinate populations, while at the same time wealthier countries are opening up borders and economies, we may find ourselves once more facing restrictions to halt that spread. Covid-19 is yet another common challenge that requires collective dialogue and action.

Through building connections, understanding and trust, the British Council's work in cultural relations seeks to create the conditions for dialogue and co-operation, whether it is around tackling a pandemic, addressing climate change or achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

In this collection, our writers explore cultural relations through varied lenses – astronomy, science communication, arts festivals and urban public space – but all address the power of coming together, of interacting and collaborating. In his essay, Will Haynes suggests that cultural relations happen in the spaces immediately around us, in the way city dwellers negotiate the places around them, navigating through difference and challenge as they come. Hannah Dagleish looks to the space above, in outlining the history of 'remarkable' intercultural openness and collaboration between astronomers.

The two remaining essays examine how Covid-19 has accelerated innovation in cultural relations activity. Gary Kerr explores the role of science diplomacy, and how a major international competition in science communication was rapidly forced online by the onset of Covid-19. Co-operation and innovation allowed for the move to digital. Poppy Spowage looks at how African arts festivals have led the way in delivering continued meaningful interactions between artists and audiences, despite the global pandemic. Both essays raise questions about how experiences are made, audiences are nurtured and connections developed and sustained in a virtual world.

At the time of writing, it seems likely that this shift to digital interaction will remain, if not as the new normal, then as a major part of our ways of living and working for some time to come. We will need to negotiate new ways of interacting with our neighbours, locally and globally, and to co-operate on the major challenges ahead. As Poppy Spowage notes in her essay, uncertainty itself is the catalyst for change. It is likely that uncertainty is here to stay. We hope that this collection offers some new insight into how cultural relations can help navigate the way ahead.

**Christine Wilson**

Head of Research

Research and Policy Insight, *British Council*

# Editor's notes

This contribution by Gary Kerr, taking the example of one of the British Council's flagship partnership programmes – FameLab – covers the notion and nature of science diplomacy as cultural relations, situating the programme at the heart of a global community of science communicators who share knowledge and ideas, and through that exchange build cultural connections and understanding. It also covers the challenge faced by the FameLab teams worldwide following Covid-19.

The impact of 'going virtual' has been on the minds of cultural relations practitioners since the start of the pandemic. This essay illustrates a number of the challenges faced by teams delivering FameLab, and how teams rapidly developed plans to ensure the programme could go ahead, and how they have continued to innovate and learn together.

This illustrates what many of us recognise – that lockdown measures have accelerated innovation in digital delivery of programmes. Yet there are new questions about the quality of engagement that can be generated online, and whether the fundamental purpose of the British Council's work in cultural relations – building trust – can happen without meaningful and close human contact.

In his essay, the writer notes that a more culturally and geographically diverse audience could be reached following the pivot to online, and suggests this is a step towards the democratisation of these sorts of events. At a time when science communication is more vital than ever – whether in making people aware of how to stay safe during the pandemic, or in addressing misinformation about vaccines – that is surely positive. And yet the question remains about whether a crucial outcome of good science

communication – enhanced public understanding of and trust in science – can be generated as effectively through this remote medium.

The early theory on intergroup contact by American sociologist Gordon Allport in the 1950s suggested that direct, face-to-face contact was needed to generate the desired outcomes of positive intergroup encounter and a subsequent improvement in intergroup relations. But research in recent years has suggested that computer-mediated communication is as effective, and may even enhance the generation of positive relationships. Reasons include participant ease (joining from their own familiar surroundings), that joining as an individual highlights individuality and decreases identification with other groups, and that video-linked encounters allow for social cues to be read and understood.

This potential to generate positive encounters, leading to increased trust and reduced potential for hostility, could turn out to be a significant benefit of the shift to online delivery of international engagement, particularly if it allows greater numbers and more diverse parties to participate and contribute.

As so often with research, this contribution raises a number of questions that require attention beyond the scope of this essay. While programmes such as FameLab can continue to be delivered online, and may reach a greater and more diverse audience that way, further research is needed to analyse and understand the quality of the engagement, and how it contributes to the goals of science communication and of international cultural relations.

# Introduction

FameLab International is an annual competition in science communication where participants have the opportunity to meet likeminded scientists and researchers from around the world. Through the FameLab programme, participants are able to share the experience of culturally nurturing their passion for communication. The FameLab brand is owned by Cheltenham Science Festival with FameLab being delivered globally by the British Council (British Council, 2021a). FameLab offers professional development training and competition for early-career researchers, having run since 2005 and internationally since 2007 in more than 35 countries, culminating in the international final at the Cheltenham Science Festival each year (British Council, 2021a). To date, more than 10,000 participants have taken part in FameLab events internationally (British Council, 2021a).

FameLab sets out to find and support the world's most talented emerging new science communicators. In the competition, participants have three minutes to win over the judges and the audience with a science talk that excels for the '3C's' of FameLab: content, clarity and charisma (British Council, 2021a). In preparation for FameLab International, participants receive training in the form of a science communication masterclass, delivered by a British Council science communication trainer. The national winner of each participating country travels to Cheltenham Science Festival in June of each year to compete in the international final. Delivering their talk to a live audience at the Cheltenham Science Festival, the international finalists battle it out for first place and for the opportunity to take home a prize and the prestige of being the annual international winner of FameLab International.

When national lockdowns in response to Covid-19 started to take place around February and March 2020, this was the peak time in the FameLab international cycle, with many nations embarking upon their annual science communication masterclasses and preparing to host national finals. In response to the pandemic, many countries had to decide quickly if and how they could adapt to virtual delivery of science communication masterclass training and the national finals.

Indeed, this was all taking place at a time when science communication and public engagement with Covid-19 was at the forefront of news and media coverage, and the science communication community themselves had to consider how and whether they could adapt their science festivals and events virtually. The Covid-19 pandemic emphasised the value of previous research in the academic literature on the importance of effective science communication in making science both accessible and understandable for non-scientific audiences, particularly during times of crisis.

This essay within the British Council's Cultural Relations Collection draws upon FameLab as an example to reflect on cultural interactions, experiences and outcomes inherent in adapting to virtual approaches. The essay is structured into the following areas:

1. the role of science communication and public engagement with science during Covid-19
2. FameLab as a vehicle for science diplomacy and development of cultural relations between nations
3. the impact of the shift to digital cultural relations for the FameLab competition due to Covid-19
4. the practicalities of 'going virtual'.

# The role of science communication and public engagement with science during Covid-19

FameLab International sets out to find and support the world's most talented emerging science communicators and brings together these new science communicators from across the world to develop three-minute scientific talks that excel for their content, clarity and charisma (British Council, 2021a). In doing so, it provides an opportunity for emerging science communicators to broaden their horizons and develop an appreciation for international perspectives, different cultures, experiences and viewpoints on science. Although FameLab is a British innovation owned by Cheltenham Science Festival, the key focus and ambition of FameLab is the international dimension and connection of participants from different countries and cultures, where science communication is central to the cultural connections created and nurtured in the competition.

This section explores the various definitions and roles of science communication and the rationales for science communication events, which provides a basis for deeper exploration of the role of FameLab in cultural relations.

One of the critical roles that science communication plays in society is to improve scientific literacy and education of the general public about science (Society for Science & the Public, 2021). Another major function is to influence the policymaking process (Suhay et al., 2019). These instances may require different types of language, but in both cases, the information being disseminated must be based on facts, and should be as accurate as possible. During Covid-19, a large amount of misinformation has emerged around the pandemic, which may negatively influence the opinions of the general public and policymakers around science and scientists.

This has highlighted the need to revisit the role of science communication in society and the training provided to scientists on how to communicate effectively. Taking this opportunity for critical reflection is important in order to understand how best to equip and empower scientists and science communicators to:

- help improve the reputation of science
- increase levels of scientific literacy among their audiences
- tackle conflicts between science and society, whenever they arise.

Through FameLab International, early career researchers are coached on the skills needed for effective science communication to non-specialist audiences, thus creating a network of FameLab alumni who contribute to better science communication and who can go off and tackle those conflicts between science and society within their own geographic and cultural settings. An example of this comes from Bulgaria where the Sofia Science Festival was set up with the support of FameLab finalists enthused by their experiences of FameLab and the Cheltenham Science Festival, while a new master's programme in Popularising Astronomy at Sofia University was set up by a 2010 FameLab runner-up, Dr Vladimir Bozhilov. The Sofia Science Festival, first held in 2011, will celebrate its ten-year anniversary in 2021 with a blended approach of online and physical events, where a number of British scientists and science communicators are included within the programme (British Council, 2021b).

Numerous definitions of science communication are provided within the literature. Gregory and Miller (1998, p.116)

define science communication as the ‘process of generating new, mutually acceptable knowledge, attitudes and practices... The process of negotiation involves trust that leads to mutual understanding, rather than through statement of facts’. Perhaps a more tangible definition is the description of science communication as ‘the appropriate use of skills, media, activities, and dialogue to produce one or more personal responses’ (Burns et al., 2003, p.190). These personal responses are explained using the vowel analogy ‘AEIOU’ of science communication. These are described as:

- promoting awareness of science (A)
- providing entertainment and enjoyment through science (E)
- sparking and developing an interest in science (I)
- shaping opinions in science (O)
- developing the public’s understanding of science (U) (Burns et al., 2003).

Arguably, fulfilling some or all of the vowels within the ‘AEIOU’ concept of science communication is something that all science communication activities set out to achieve. Indeed, within the context of FameLab, the ‘3C’s’ of content, clarity and charisma are one way of achieving such outcomes.

In the context of FameLab, the participants are of course communicating science to the audience and the judges. However, even the most ardent supporter of FameLab cannot argue that the audience of FameLab International is representative of the ‘general public’ (a problematic term in itself, but further discussion on that is beyond the scope of this essay). Indeed, the audience for FameLab

International are a unique population that have chosen to attend the Cheltenham Science Festival, perhaps demonstrating some level of pre-existing engagement with science.

In 2020, Covid-19 resulted in a shift from FameLab International being a face-to-face event to an online event. This shift to digital for the international semi-finals and final has to some extent removed the geographic and social barriers imposed by the practicalities of the final stages of an international competition taking place in Cheltenham, UK. Data from the 2020 semi-finals shows that in the first semi-final, the audience was made up of people from 62 countries and the second semi-final had 47 countries represented in the audience (British Council, personal communication). Combined, in both semi-finals there were online audiences from 75 individual countries (British Council, personal communication). This represents an incredibly geographically and culturally diverse audience that could not be achieved without a virtual approach, pivoting the event online. In this instance, it can be argued that Covid-19 and the shifting of physical events to online formats has resulted in a step being taken towards the true democratisation of science communication events.

Within the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) sectors, the term science communication can be applied across a range of professional responsibilities, such as outreach, citizen science, widening participation, knowledge exchange, public understanding of science, and public engagement with research. Given this range of avenues through which science communication can be undertaken, there are challenges in determining which are the

priorities for any particular body or individual. In some cases, it may be paramount to focus on engaging audiences with science, to ensure that the public are connected to science work, perhaps to promote a more science-literate society, which is populated by people who can collectively consent to the progress of science or raise questions about such progress. It is important for those working in science communication to understand the terminology in order to accurately reflect what it is they hope to achieve with their endeavours. Indeed, for some professional science communicators, it may be more productive to work with the science industries directly to help them understand how best to communicate with audiences, or to think about their wider social responsibilities.

Despite the critical role of science communication in helping improve scientific literacy among the general public, it is important to highlight that this perceived lack of science literacy is not the reason why there is conflict between science and wider society (Nisbet & Scheufele, 2009). During the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, there have been a series of anti-lockdown protests taking place across the world, with protesters claiming that the lockdown is unnecessary and that the wearing of face masks is scaremongering, with some protesters in the USA proclaiming 'no mask, my body, my choice' (Kang, 2020, p.2). Although some of these protesters may not understand the importance of wearing a face mask to prevent inadvertently infecting others with Covid-19 (Kang, 2020), it does highlight that the attitude of individuals towards science and evidence is shaped not by their knowledge of science, but their own experiences of science, as well as their

culture, geographic location, religion (Davies, 2009) and political ideology. Consequently, empathy is an important tool for scientists when engaging in debates with members of the public who do not have their scientific training or expertise (Janich, 2020).

When engaging with the public, particularly those who have reached a point of view that is at odds with relevant evidence, it is important for scientists to step back and place themselves in the shoes of the other person they are engaging with in order to understand the factors leading to their conclusions (Breyer, 2013). Empathy, after all, is a vital tool in any science communicator's toolbox, particularly when communicating important scientific facts during a pandemic to save lives. In 2020, the winner of FameLab Egypt and international finalist Dr Mahmoud Basheer honed the science communication skills developed during FameLab in his day job as a frontline doctor serving in the Agmay Quarantine Hospital in Alexandria.

FameLab connects the best of the UK with the best of the rest of the world. It achieves this through bringing together the emerging talent in science communication from all competing nations in the form of the competition. In doing so, FameLab allows participants to create an understanding of each other's strengths and of the shared challenges and values shared by participants across the world. This creates a network of FameLab alumni who have this cultural connection in common and builds trust between individuals in the UK and other participating nations, which is an enduring and long-lasting trust, even when official relations between the UK and other nations may be strained.

The international dimension of the FameLab programme has been highlighted by participants as an important aspect of capacity building. For example, FameLab in South Africa is clear that it uses the programme to build capacity among historically under-represented groups (FameLab Stocktake Review, 2019).

The success of FameLab depends upon the British Council's relationships with key partners who are able to exert their influence at a national level, e.g. in ministries of science and education (FameLab Stocktake Review, 2019). Involvement of such partners in participating countries tends to rely on the partner organisations' objectives being aligned with FameLab. For example, a government ministry overseas supporting FameLab in a participating country would expect to see their support for FameLab yielding contributions to achieving national policy goals (FameLab Stocktake Review, 2019). The involvement of partners seeking to use FameLab as a tool to achieve national policy goals leads on to part two of this essay, which explores FameLab's role in cultural relations.

# The British Council, FameLab, science and cultural relations

The British Council is an executive non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office of the UK government. One of the key roles of the British Council is to build connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and other countries through arts and culture, education and the English language (British Council, 2021c).

FameLab International is one avenue for the building of connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and those overseas. Through the science communication masterclasses, FameLab helps participants develop the skills and confidence to compete and communicate their science while making new connections with the UK. In doing so, it helps participants realise their potential and to participate and become a member of a growing network of over 10,000 international FameLab participants.

Collectively, FameLab is a unique series of events comprising regional science communication masterclasses, regional competitions, national semi-finals, national finals, international semi-finals and an international final taking place at the Cheltenham Science Festival. Together, these events are a hybrid of science diplomacy on one hand and cultural relations on the other hand.

Science diplomacy is the use of scientific collaboration between nations to address global challenges and common problems facing humanity and to build of constructive global partnerships (Fedoroff, 2009). Science diplomacy can be categorised into the following three sub-categories:

- **science in diplomacy**, e.g. international negotiations on issues such as climate change and food security
- **diplomacy for science**, e.g. diplomats supporting researchers working internationally in terms of navigating visas, intellectual property, laws of the country in which they operate
- **science for diplomacy**, e.g. using scientific relations to maintain or restore links between countries when political tensions do not permit traditional diplomacy to take place (Ruffini, 2017).

Although FameLab does not naturally fit neatly into any of these three sub-categories of science diplomacy, it does create international networks of scientists and science communicators and therefore sits at the centre of a Venn diagram between science diplomacy and cultural relations. Cultural relations 'is the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding' (Cumplings, 2003, p.1).

At a micro-level, FameLab International is the sharing of knowledge in the form of three-minute science communication talks from participants to the audience. At a meso-level, FameLab is the exchange and promotion of the English language overseas and the promotion of the UK as a place to study, visit and work. At a macro-level, FameLab fulfils the Cummings (2003) definition of cultural relations in the sense that it promotes the exchange of ideas and knowledge, but, vitally, it fosters a global community that share aspects of their culture and develop connections between emerging science communicators. Cultural relations is therefore at the heart of FameLab and it is through the nurturing of cultural relations that nations can charm, persuade and befriend other nations and their citizens (Doeser & Nisbett, 2017). FameLab unmistakably fulfils this role as a key agent in the development of cultural relations between nations, and in particular between the UK and the rest of the world.

Indeed, there are parallels that can be drawn between the cultural capital developed during FameLab with that of the Olympics. The Olympic Games are an international competition bringing together the world's leading athletic talent, just like FameLab is an international competition that brings together the world's most promising emerging science communicators. Excellence, Respect and Friendship are three of the core values of the Olympics and these values are also fostered through FameLab, whereby participants strive

for excellence in the '3C's' of FameLab and develop respect for each other and participants from competing nations. Research has demonstrated that friendship is formed through FameLab, with 86 per cent of FameLab alumni reporting in a study that they remain connected with other alumni on personal social media channels after the international finals (FameLab Stocktake Review, 2019).

Cultural relations is not only fostered through the values of the competition, but through the impacts of the competition. The London 2012 Olympic Games developed cultural outcomes not limited to the sharing of values, but including changes in international perception, collaboration between partners and increased cultural tourism in London (Bourgeois, 2018).

FameLab has also produced forms of cultural relations through organic outcomes including the organic development of Sofia Science Festival in Bulgaria – a science festival that emerged as a result of Bulgaria's involvement with FameLab (FameLab Stocktake Review, 2019). In 2020, Sofia Science Festival reached over 189,000 people (Sofia Science Festival, 2020), highlighting the importance of unplanned organic impacts of global events like FameLab. Another example of legacy drawn from FameLab comes from FameLab Australia whereby the national finalists each year lead a STEM event for children (FameLab Stocktake Review, 2019). Thus, investment in international educational and cultural endeavours cannot be underestimated.

# Covid-19 and the shift to digital cultural relations

The national lockdowns taking place in early 2020 due to Covid-19 meant that many FameLab science communication masterclasses, regional competitions, national semi-finals and finals had to shift from face-to-face to online formats. In June 2020, Cheltenham Science Festival delivered one of the UK's first fully online science festivals, meaning that FameLab international semi-finals and the international final had to take place online. The most important cultural relations impact of this was that national finalists no longer had the chance to travel to the UK to participate in the international semi-finals at Cheltenham Science Festival. This resulted in an important shift from physical to digital cultural relations.

For the 2020 delivery of FameLab, global Covid-19 lockdowns resulted in the FameLab international semi-finals and final being conducted and shared with the audience via the YouTube Live video platform. Live streaming is not something new to FameLab as this has been taking place throughout the competition for a number of years, but key for the 2020 context is that there was no live audience in the international semi-finals and finals, so the entire audience were viewing digitally.

Research has analysed how government agencies and institutions employ digital means to overcome the limitations of traditional cultural relationships between nations (Manor, 2016). For example, many governments provide social media training to diplomats who effectively become a nation's digital gatekeepers (*ibid.*). Indeed, nations predominantly use digital means for nation branding purposes and the development of cultural relations with other nations (Bjola & Holmes, 2015).

Although international relations between nations has always been affected by technology, Covid-19 has highlighted the importance of digital methods in managing and developing relations between nations when traditional forms of cultural relations development cannot take place (Stojanovska-Stefanova & Magdincheva-Shopova, 2020). Indeed, many nations are utilising digital methods to seize the pandemic as an opportunity to actively pursue their international policy objectives through engagement on social media channels such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube (Stojanovska-Stefanova & Magdincheva-Shopova, 2020).

In this sense, the development of digital cultural relations is a form of soft power – a concept linked to cultural diplomacy. Soft power is a country's ability to attract and persuade others, as opposed to hard power, which is the ability to coerce, perhaps through military might or economic sanction (Singh et al., 2017). Soft power encompasses not only the work of government ministries and agencies, but also the work of citizens, non-governmental actors and cultural institutions like the British Council (Singh et al., 2017).

Traditionally, the UK has relied on two key organisations for development of its soft power: the BBC World Service and the British Council (Doerer & Nisbett, 2017). In terms of the UK's soft power assets, these are the nation's values, democracy, economic and political freedom, freedom of speech, innovation, English language, arts and culture, heritage and sport (Singh et al., 2017). In particular, the values of gender equality, diversity, prosperity and opportunity for everyone are seen as key assets of the UK's soft power (*ibid.*). FameLab, delivered globally by the British Council, is therefore a key asset

of the UK's soft power in working with emerging science communicators and audiences globally in order to develop the '3C's' of charisma, clarity and content of science talks. While promoting the English language overseas, FameLab also promotes the values of gender equality, diversity and opportunity for all through the competition. Research has shown that FameLab participants have an enhanced view of the UK and that international organisations that partner with the British Council in the delivery of FameLab report deeper levels of engagement with the UK and improved views of the UK among competing countries (FameLab Stocktake Review, 2019).

The shift from a live audience competition to a virtual competition for FameLab due to Covid-19 means that this sudden emphasis on digital cultural relations must not be underestimated, particularly as FameLab is delivered globally by the British Council: a key jewel in the UK's soft power crown. Exploration of the effectiveness of digital relations between nations is often reduced to social media numbers: numbers of followers,

likes, retweets and so on (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). This is important data for FameLab stakeholders, particularly the British Council, to collect and analyse. In the period from 1 September to 7 December 2020 when the international semi-finals and final were taking place, the British Council notes that they had 296,975 impressions on Facebook and 509,647 impressions on Twitter (British Council, 2021d). While these are important for the British Council's reporting and development of their communications strategy, it is important to note that the extent to which these quantitative values affect the UK's soft power and cultural relations is not clear. The extent to which social media engagement impacts on a nation's soft power and cultural relations has not yet been addressed by researchers, so further mixed-method studies are required to understand the true value of FameLab digital delivery and social media engagement for the development of cultural relations.

# The practicalities of 'going virtual'

2020 has been the year for festivals, events, schools, colleges and workplaces to go virtual and pivot themselves for digital formats. It has been a year of practicing social distancing, facemasks, handwashing and socialising online rather than physically. It has also been a year of global restrictions and staying at home. Covid-19 has created a new environment in which the world has had to adapt. Global responses have led to international travel restrictions, which have had massive impacts on global societies, economies and on cultural relations between nations.

In the early part of 2020, the FameLab Thailand team went ahead with face-to-face heats for the competition. Attendees had to have their temperature checked as they entered the venue by a healthcare professional. They had to complete medical and travel screening before and after taking part in the event. Participants were expected to practise social distancing (a phenomenon that was relatively new to most people at the beginning of 2020) and had to wear face masks at all times. Alcohol hand gels were widely available and staff had to clean equipment such as the microphone after every use. Although all of this was compliant with government advice at the time and provided participants with a sense of security and confidence, it was not without its challenges (British Council Thailand, 2020).

FameLab is a science communication competition, and key to the competition is being able to communicate effectively. The FameLab Thailand team found that the wearing of facemasks limit facial expression, which is a key in being able to judge a competitor's charisma. Ultimately, the FameLab Thailand team found that even when they were complying with government guidelines, it did reduce the overall enthusiasm and vibe of the event. Facemasks made it difficult for voice projection and there were excessive time lags due to equipment having to be cleaned after every participant (British Council Thailand, 2020).

Consequently, FameLab Thailand decided to shift the remainder of their programme online after the first round of live heats. Their experiences and learning on how to effectively deliver their national FameLab programme in an online format was written up and shared as guidelines for running virtual and digital events (British Council Thailand, 2020). The experiences of the FameLab Thailand team have been used by other nations to shift to virtual formats. Of particular interest to national FameLab organisers in other participating countries are the guidelines for preparing for the online competition; assigning staff roles on competition day; developing the sequence of events on competition day; and generating marketing and PR material for a virtual event.

FameLab Australia reported that they were only able to produce the programme digitally due to FameLab Thailand sharing their learning and experiences on how to shift to an online format (FameLab Australia, 2020). FameLab Australia is produced by the Western Australian Museum in partnership with the British Council. The digital delivery of FameLab Australia culminated in the national final being viewed by over 6,000 people with 1,200 voting in the audience choice award (FameLab Australia, 2020). It is unclear whether the increased audience numbers seen in 2020 due to online events reflects better quality engagement with the audience or the extent to which new audiences (e.g. new audiences who are not traditionally engaged with science) are being reached. This in itself poses wider cultural questions about the need for further research on the value of online events and the quality of engagement associated with online events.

The 2020 FameLab Thailand winner was Dr Supree Pinitsoontorn from Khon Kaen University. His talk was based on his research on how to save the environment with carbon nanosponge for oil sorption from polluted water. The 2020 FameLab Australia winner was Cody Frear from the University of Queensland with his talk 'Out with the old, in with the Noo-Noo', which explained his doctoral research on paediatric burns, using the Teletubbies to help make science accessible for non-specialist audiences (FameLab Australia, 2020). Unfortunately, due to Covid-19, Pinitsoontorn, Frear and all the other national winners were unable to travel to the UK to participate in the international stages of the competition, but they were able to participate in the international semi-finals online. The impact on cultural relations of international finalists not being able to travel to UK is unclear, as the impact of Covid-19 on cultural relations is yet to be fully understood and studied by researchers.

# Conclusion

The British Council, founded in 1934, was granted a Royal Charter in 1940 in which its mission was defined as 'promoting a wider knowledge of [the UK] and the English language abroad and developing closer cultural relations between [the UK] and other countries'. When the Royal Charter was updated in 1993 (British Council, 1993), this was amended to read:

*To advance, for the public benefit, any purpose which is exclusively charitable and which shall:*

- a. *promote cultural relationships and the understanding of different cultures between people and peoples of the United Kingdom and other countries;*
- b. *promote a wider knowledge of the United Kingdom;*
- c. *develop a wider knowledge of the English language;*
- d. *encourage cultural, scientific, technological and other educational cooperation between the United Kingdom and other countries; or*
- e. *otherwise promote the advancement of education.*

In this contribution towards the British Council's Cultural Relations Collection, it is argued that FameLab is an important contribution towards the British Council's mission in many of these key areas, particularly around: the promotion of cultural relationships and the understanding of different cultures between the people of

the UK and other countries; promotion of a wider knowledge of the UK; development of the English language; encouragement of scientific, technological and educational co-operation between the UK and overseas; and advancement of STEM education.

In addition, this essay argues that FameLab is therefore a key programme that develops cultural relations and the UK's soft power internationally. Notwithstanding, Covid-19 has posed many global challenges and the swift shift to digital cultural relations has not been without its challenges. FameLab has adapted well to the pandemic in terms of 'going virtual'. At a micro-level and logistics aside, not much has changed. FameLab is still fundamentally an international competition that comprises a series of three-minute talks from participants to an audience.

A key question for FameLab producers is how they will respond to changes at the meso-level. At this level, FameLab provides an opportunity for promotion of the English language overseas and promotion of the UK as a place to study, visit and work. With limited opportunity for participants to visit the UK due to travel restrictions, responding to this may require a 'wait and see' approach to how Covid-19 develops and the success of the vaccination programmes. At a macro-level, and fundamental to the role of the British Council, the necessary FameLab shift to digital cultural relations requires further research and analysis.

The opportunity for people to connect with others from across the world to share cultures and develop friendships is key in the development of cultural relations between nations. Further research is needed to understand how best to continue the development of cultural relations when people are not able to travel internationally or meet face-to-face with people from other nations. This personal connection between participants is key to the success of FameLab and its role in the development of cultural relations. While there is work to be done on understanding how to develop digital cultural relations, it is important to note that great work is being done. It is apt to conclude with a quote from the feedback of a 2020 international finalist:

*The journey of FameLab International is beyond being a competition. It is the people you meet, the science you hear, the skills developed, the experiences lived and the joy of being in the company of people wanting to know more, appreciating the work and creativity put to make complex ideas engaging. It is an experience that will open up a world of new opportunities for you to enjoy.*

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