Lip sync conferences

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There is always a frisson of anticipation when heading to a conference. It is an opportunity to renew acquaintances, to share your latest results—or at least those that you think are safe to talk about—and to find out what progress has been made on recent exciting work. Increasingly, however, the reality is that conferences are more like Rock concerts where the main act is clearly lip-syncing their old hits and you end up wondering whether the expense has been worth the experience. It turns out that the oldies but goldies of the circuit were put on the programme because of their earlier “hits”. Three quarter of their presentation is given to well-rehearsed back numbers, and the new material has already been published and is incremental. But the organising committee had to put together the programme more than a year in advance, and some senior speakers tend to get annoyed if they are not given a prime placement; or the committee did not want to stop the tradition that so-and-so has always spoken at this meeting since his great Cell paper in 2000.

Then, there are the rising stars who have advanced the field dramatically and used a daring new approach to address a long-standing problem. Their recent papers combine the clever mining of large data sets with the identification of a new lead or insight, proven to be of relevance by CRISPER knockouts, followed by re-positioning of a drug to show that the disease could be

cured. With so much going on, you eagerly anticipate the next instalment: after all, the work was published more than a year ago and there must be more to come from this prolific laboratory. Perhaps there will be new targets, more proteomic analysis of the factors that bind to the regulatory locus, some clinical follow-up? Sadly, the talk is all-too-frequently a reprise of the original. Which is not a surprise, given that any new information would be back in competitor laboratories before the acknowledgements, and the lead insight would travel around the world before the speaker even got on their flight home. Careers can be stunted by speaking too soon, and the IP may not yet have been sewn up, nor the deal with the company that will exploit it. Keeping silent is the prudent course nowadays, and only when the paper is in press can you shout about your new result—and even then, you worry that the journal will cause problems as you have broken their embargo.

After a talk, a few questions are asked by those at the front of the auditorium, prefaced by the cliché “wonderful talk”, and, as time runs out, the chair suggests that the conversation should continue over the coffee break—which will be curtailed because of an inevitable overrun by the unstoppable lecturer. But the conversation with the speaker does not take place. As an unknown, you cannot easily break through the ring of the friends of the

speaker (all plenaries), who then disappears before the lunch break to attend the next gig.

The exaggerated scenario outlined above is played out too frequently around the world. Perhaps it is time to re-examine the paper-based journal/1950s-based format of a conference? Should we make more use of modern technology? For instance, it might be informative if a speaker gave a 10-minute talk avoiding minutiae, and the audience anonymously tweeted questions for 15 minutes that would be shown on the screen for the speaker to answer. Showing detailed data is not always necessary, as no one is able to analyse it during a talk anyway, but the narrative and the conclusions could be discussed in more depth. Anonymity may help too: many questions that go to the heart of the presentation are often shared with friends during the coffee break, but seldom aired in the auditorium.

With so many conferences to choose from, it might also be timely to establish something like “Trip Advisor”, where attendees can rate and review their conference experience and thereby give helpful feedback to others who plan to attend the next in that series. More importantly, though, organising committees should heed the original purpose of a scientific meeting: a forum for the exchange and discussion of *new* ideas and data to *advance* research, not an opportunity for a “greatest hits” concert in an exotic location.