

Web alert

Internet conferences

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The internet is increasingly being used to support scientific conferences. Many chemical and biological conferences are advertised on the Web and there are a number of web sites that have freely accessible extensive lists of conferences — for example, ChemSoc, ChemWeb and *Chemistry & Industry*.

Some groups running series of meetings have gone a step beyond a simple listing. If you are interested in attending a Gordon Research Conference, Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB) or Cold Spring Harbor meeting, visit their web sites. It is possible to register for the conference of your choice online, as well as to submit your poster abstract electronically. As conference details are finalized, the programme can also be accessed.

A more recent and seemingly inevitable development has been the advent of the 'virtual conference'. Some very large

conferences have internet sites that allow delegates to see summaries of the sessions they missed. Other conferences are entirely internet based, supported by sophisticated web programming and have many of the facilities expected at a meeting — posters and abstracts, contact details for the presenters, and, in some cases, speakers whose talks are followed by discussions in specially designated 'chat rooms'. Many of these conferences have been faithful to the small details of meetings, even down to a bar where people can meet and an exhibition hall where advertisers can flog their wares.

The Royal Society of Chemistry runs electronic conferences on different areas of chemistry (see the ECHET98 web site) that alternate with real conferences. Molecular Diversity Preservation International (MDPI) is the main sponsor of the second electronic conference on synthetic organic chemistry (ECSOC-2), which begins September 1 1998. The Institute of Chemical Engineers has organised two excellent internet-based conferences, Environment97 and Safety98. The programming that supports both sites is very impressive — at Environment97 there were live broadcasts from the meeting (users with the RealAudio plug-in on their computers were able to hear the talks), and specially designed

theatres housed the posters and technical papers. Registration at any of these conferences is free — so why not check them out?

In the same way that there are several companies to help you organise 'real' conferences, we are also starting to see companies that offer virtual conference services — MCB University Press and Virtual Environments International (VEI) are just two. VEI has hosted several scientific conferences and provides interactive lectures that consist of a slide show and chat screen simultaneously. The lectures are archived in the VEI library and can be accessed after the event. In addition to providing virtual conference facilities, VEI is currently collaborating with ChemWeb to host a series of real-time audio- and video-supported lectures related to chemistry. The introduction of Java applets into this virtual chemistry auditorium now allows users to 'pass around' an interactive molecular structure and highlight or annotate areas with a 'pen'.

With the emergence of internet magazines, news from conferences can reach the rest of the community faster. *The Alchemist* published daily news from the American Chemical Society meeting in Dallas and will do so again for the meeting in Boston (23–27 August, 1998). ChemConnect also published daily news from the Electronic Commerce for Chemicals conference 24–25 June, 1998.

It is unlikely that the virtual conference will replace the traditional international meeting, mainly because there is no acceptable substitute for direct human contact. At the same time, however, there is plenty of scope for the internet to support and enhance what a delegate brings to and takes away from a conference. For underfunded students and small scientific communities that do not have the resources to organise or attend large conferences, the internet offers unique alternatives and opportunities.

Web sites and URLs

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| ChemSoc | http://www.chemsoc.org/gateway/gateway.htm |
| ChemWeb conference diary | http://chemweb.com/meetings/meetings.shtml |
| <i>Chemistry & Industry</i> | http://chemistry.mond.org/ |
| Gordon Research Conferences | http://www.grc.uri.edu/ |
| FASEB | http://www.faseb.org/meetings |
| Cold Spring Harbor meetings and courses | http://nucleus.cshl.org/meetings/ |
| ECHET | http://www.chi.ic.ac.uk/etoc/echet98/ |
| ECSOC-2 | http://www.mdpi.org/ecsoc-2.htm |
| Environment97 | http://www.environment97.org |
| Safety98 | http://www.safety98.org |
| MCB University Press | http://www.mcb.co.uk/services/conferen |
| Virtual Environments International | http://www.vei.co.uk/ |
| <i>The Alchemist</i> | http://www.vei.co.uk/slideshows/vc/bath.html |
| ChemConnect | http://chemweb.com/alchem/home.html |
| | http://www.chemconnect.com/ |