



What follows is a long overdue update on all that is happening with SSoCIA – call it our first newsletter (suggestions for names welcomed). I realize that 1) it bears an unfortunate resemblance to one of those never-ending Christmas letters and 2) not everyone cares about all the details. So I've grouped the information into sections, allowing everyone to find what they want and ignore what they don't. Here's the TOC:

- I. Info about changes to the listserv to fix the recent problems
- II. Info about the 2020 meeting – we have Simon Conway Morris as one keynoter and are working on Seth Shostak as the second!
- III. Follow-up from the 2018 Meeting – our new name and the results of the participant survey.
- IV. Our leadership structure
- V. Announcements of some SSoCIA-related happenings
- VI. Request for feedback on a few ideas

I. Changes to the listserv

My apologies for the recent slew of emails that stuffed everyone's inboxes! We are still new at this and didn't realize the default setting in the system was to send replies to the *entire list*. This has been changed so replies now only go to the original sender – if you want to email the entire list, you will have to enter the list address yourself. We have also set it up so that by default everyone gets a weekly digest rather than separate emails. This should make little practical difference, since we don't send many messages (and certainly nothing urgent), but if something weird does happen again, you should only have one email to delete.

If you choose to do so, you can always add or remove yourself by going to the listserv page and clicking on the appropriate box on the left:

<https://utlists.utexas.edu/sympa/info/ssocia>.

You can also just email either me (kcs@clemsun.edu) or John Traphagan (jtrap@utexas.edu) and we will do it for you.

II. Info About SSoCIA 2020

Neil Manson is hard at work planning our next meeting. It's tentatively scheduled for March 19-22, though these dates are not yet set in stone. It will definitely be on the campus of the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) in beautiful Oxford, Mississippi and at that time of year the weather should be very nice. Please go ahead and mark your calendars now so you will be able to attend! We should be sending out an official CFP in April, so look for that.

As I said in the teaser above, the eminent evolutionary biologist Simon Conway Morris has agreed to be one of our keynoters! If you haven't already, you have a year to read his [The Runes of Evolution: How the Universe became Self-Aware](#) and [Life's Solution: Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe](#), both of which are extremely interesting! Seth Shostak, former director of SETI research at NASA and now senior astronomer at the SETI Institute, has expressed interest and we are working to make that happen. If you haven't seen him speak before, you are in for a treat!

III. Follow-up to 2018 Meeting

The more perceptive of you will have noticed that I referred to us as SSoCIA, with an extra S. The attendees at the last meeting decided by a slim margin that we should be the *Society* for Social and Conceptual Issues in Astrobiology, so that is now our official name. Carlos Mariscal will tweak the logo soon and we'll revise the image on the webpage. And speaking of webpages, John has now secured us a custom domain and set up a basic page: <https://ssocia.com/> We have big ideas on what we want to do with this eventually (e.g., a searchable database of members and their specialties, an online discussion feature, a clearinghouse for info concerning SSoCIA type events), so please take a moment to check it out and send in any suggestions you have.

If you recall, we did a participant survey after the 2018 meeting to see how we were doing. In short, attendees were generally quite pleased. It seems we succeeded at creating an informal and collegial atmosphere with a diverse set of speakers, which many of us want to see become the hallmark of SSoCIA. It's a good start, but there are a number of things we can and should think about for 2020, so if you have comments or suggestions, please speak up!

Here is the synopsis of the survey results:

- 1) We had a total of 32 responses, which represents about half of the people registered (though a few attendees were not official).
- 2) Overall, how would you rate the conference? Amazing – 16%, very good/above average – 59%, good/average – 10%, not so good/below average – 13%
 - a) Best things about the conference: the main repeated comments were:
 - i) Diversity of interesting speakers/topics (12)
 - ii) Informal discussions/nice community/collegiality (11)
 - iii) Nice venue (3)
 - iv) METI discussion (3)
 - b) Worst things about the conference – these were all over the map, but the repeated ones were:
 - i) Hard to see everything/parallel sessions (5)
 - ii) Paper slots too short (need at least 30 min) (5)
 - iii) Some papers were bad (5)
 - iv) More organized social events (e.g., reception, extracurricular trips) (3)
 - v) Suggestions for improving the next conference – mostly, these were either idiosyncratic or echoed what is mentioned above. However, three people suggested we should organize poster sessions, which might be a good way to expand the number of presenters without exacerbating the problem of parallel sessions.
- i) How likely is it you would attend a conference outside the US? 80% or more likely – 80%, 61-80% likely - 8%, 41-60% likely - 16%, 20-40% likely - 22%, less than 20% likely- 19%

- ii) Primary occupation of participants: 65% academic at traditional institution, 20% independent scholar, 5% government, 3% private industry
- iii) Gender of participants: 75% male, 19% female, 5% other
- iv) Primary discipline of participants: 54% humanities, 22% natural science, 16% social science, 5% engineering
- v) Career stage of participants: 14% student/in training, 19% early career/pre-tenure, 17% each mid-career/tenured/senior, 8% retired

IV. Our Leadership Structure

We needed to start getting organized right after the last meeting, which requires people to actually do things. But we didn't yet have any formal members, so I consulted with the organizing committee and they voted in a slate of acting officers. Our thought was to let these people start the heavy lifting and then put the slate forward to the official membership for ratification at the 2020 meeting. In any event, here is our acting Board:

- Acting President: Kelly Smith
- Acting Secretary: Lucas Mix
- Acting Treasurer: William Alba
- Member at large: John Traphagan
- Member at Large: Sheri Beth Wells-Jensen

There are also several kind souls acting in less official ways to help us get organized, so if you would like to serve, officially or unofficially, please let me know.

IV. Announcements of SSoCIA-Related Happenings

One of the main goals of SSoCIA is to help form an interdisciplinary *community* to help support those interested in these types of issues. One element of this is helping people spread the word about the work they are doing - eventually, we'd like to be able to announce all SSoCIA-related scholarship by our members on the webpage. So feel

free to send me citations and abstracts for any articles you would like members to know about.

Our meetings are clearly inspiring research already. For example, Carlos Mariscal and I are in the final stages of editing a collection of essays for Oxford (tentatively and unimaginatively titled Social and Conceptual Issues in Astrobiology). It began with discussions following the inaugural conference at Clemson in 2016 and contains contributions by a number of SSoCIA folks. And those who were there for the 2018 meeting may remember the heated debates on human colonization of space and METI, *both* of which have now been enshrined in special issues of journals: Ted Peters edited an issue of *Science and Theology* on METI which just came out and contains some excellent articles based on SSoCIA conference presentations, while Keith Abney and I just hit “submit” on the final version of an issue of *Futures* on the colonization debate that includes an unusual interactive piece attempting to recreate the free-wheeling exchange we had in the colonization panel.

We also want to help people find meetings where issues of interest to SSoCIA folks will be presented. No doubt what I provide here is far from complete, so let me know of anything I have overlooked.

- TVIW <https://tviw.us/2019-symposium/>

The Tennessee Valley Interstellar workshop is a smallish but interestingly eclectic group of people with an emphasis on long term interstellar projects. It will be held November 10-15 in Wichita, KS and is being organized by one of our own, Jim Schwartz. Submissions are open until July 30. There will be at least one session there on SSoCIA type issues that Jim and I will be in.

- Nordic Network for Astrobiology <http://www.nordicastrobiology.net/Impacts2019/>

A very friendly, openly interdisciplinary group that meets in awesome places. This one will be in Tallberg, Sweden, June 10-15. Submission deadline is March 31. They usually have at least a session or two on broader issues.

- AbSciCon <https://connect.agu.org/abscicon/home>

This is the main astrobiology science meeting - for Americans at any rate. It will be in Seattle, WA June 24-28. They have not announced the program yet, but I know of several SSoCIA people who have submitted.

- *ISHPSSB* <http://ishpssb2019.tekniskmuseum.no/>

This is the International Society for the History, Philosophy and Social Studies of Biology - a good interdisciplinary group with a focus on biology, as per the name. This will be July 7-12 in Oslo, Norway. The deadline for submission has passed, but there will likely be two full sessions on *SSoCIA* issues and I know of at least one other submission on life concepts, so plan to come if you can.

- Worldcon 2019 <https://dublin2019.com/>

This is a worldwide science fiction convention - lots of people there have an interest in astrobiology and I personally would like to win some of them over to *SSoCIA*. I am in a proposed session on broader issues in astrobiology, but no word yet on whether it has been accepted.

- *SSoCIA 2022* is in the early planning stages and we would like it to be our first international meeting. Pauli Laine is investigating whether we can hold it in Finland, so with luck, we will be able to attend plenaries under a glass dome and gaze at the northern lights – if that's not a good reason to join, I don't know what is!

V. Request for Feedback

We welcome feedback on any issue, from best practices at meetings to how to set up the webpage. But there are a few specific ideas I wanted to run past everyone. First, we are thinking about having an off-year online conference on a special theme, since our regular meetings are only held every other year. Our current thought is to explore a single topic that seems especially timely/popular (like METI was in 2018) with a smaller group of intensely interested folks. Online conferences are challenging, but if we do it right, they could be interesting and might help keep the momentum going between regular meetings. Please send me your brilliant ideas here - either for topics or concerning how best to organize an online event like this.

We are currently thinking through all that's required to make ourselves official. We will have some documents (constitution, bylaws, meeting best practices, etc.) for approval by the membership at the 2020 meeting - we will send all that out at least a month in advance for everyone to consider. We will also be instituting membership dues to make it less harrowing to fund meetings – so far, we have been very successful at keeping

our expenses low, but we haven't yet figured out how to do them for free and we also need at least a small operating budget to tide us over from meeting to meeting. We are currently thinking about something like this:

Regular membership:	\$100
Student membership:	\$25
Conference registration (SSoCIA member):	\$25
Conference registration (non-member):	\$150

This would mean nobody would have to shell out more than \$150 to join and attend (with students paying just \$50) and members would get a small discount on the conference registration (\$25). If you have thoughts about the appropriate level of dues, let me know.

If you made it this far, I thank you for your patient consideration of all things SSoCIA. You can now relax, as there will likely not be much happening until the CFP for 2020 comes out in April.

Cheers,

Kelly

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