

To Zoom or not to Zoom?

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One of the many significant changes that has occurred in life since the pandemic is our reliance on Zoom. During the lockdown, Zoom seemed like the only way to have in-person interactions. I had Zoom meetings for work, my kids did Zoom meetings for school, and there were even attempts at Zoom parties. It really became an indispensable tool for communication. However, now that we are back to in-person meetings and conferences, we still often have the option for Zoom participation. I think this option is a good thing for the most part, but it can have unintended consequences as well.

For the positive aspect of keeping Zoom in our lives, I want to remind everyone of what it was like to have to rush to a meeting, 5 or 10 minutes late, entering in an embarrassing sweat and then trying to assimilate without too much disruption. Instead, during the Zoom era, it was much easier to be on time to meetings since all you had to do was log in by the start time. Also, coming in late was almost never even noticed since you could come in muted with camera off. We also all seemed to have a lot more patience and tolerance for how the details of life could interrupt the best laid plans.

Well, that era has certainly passed and a pandemic fatigue has set in. It seems like everyone has lost the compassionate understanding for what others are going through that seemed so present during the pandemic. As an example, think about how traveling on a plane has become a test of patience as airline logistics put us all through the ringer and fellow passengers seem ready to snap. On a recent flight, I saw multiple instances of one passenger verbally accosting another when they thought their behavior was inconsiderate.

The moving on from pandemic-era policies is also true of our Zoom encounters. Many meetings are now offered in a hybrid format with some coming to the meeting in person and others Zooming in remotely. This is where the unintended consequences come in. Hybrid Zoom meetings break up the attendees into two classes, those at the meeting and those elsewhere. Those at the meeting may be masked (or not) but the meeting flow is about the same. Except, there is now the interactions with disembodied video faces and remote voices or lack thereof (You're on Mute!). Some remote attendees may just be participating to get credit for attending and may not offer more than a few words of commentary. Others may seek to overcompensate, offering long monologues on the issues at hand. For the remote attendees, the Zoom option may seem like a blessing, enabling them to participate yet avoid the logistical difficulty of physically attending (like getting dressed appropriately but not just from the waist up). In some sense, it is good to have the increased participation enabled by the Zoom option, but on the other hand, the quality of the interaction is definitely strained. Whether 'tis nobler to include the remote attendees or require participants to attend in person – ay, there's the rub.

The one area where I think the Zoom holdover is not helping us is remote talks for seminars and conferences. The idea of an invited talk or seminar is based on someone sharing their ideas with a like-minded group. However, an essential component of the visit is missing when this is conducted by Zoom. Instead of networking discussions that are so easy to have in person, the Zoom approach makes this difficult to accomplish, if not removed entirely. Perhaps this is a skill I need to evolve, but I'm not sure I've seen anyone master it yet. At a recent presentation, I was intrigued by imaging results shown by the author. I was able to ask a question of the author, but since it was by Zoom, the interaction took on a much more formal tone. In the pre-Zoom days, I certainly would have approached the author after the session and we may have had a good

conversation that sparked ideas on both sides. However, with the presenter coming in by Zoom, they immediately disappeared after the talk, making it much harder for me to follow up.

The two class problem of Zoom vs. in-person also has an impact on the attendee demographics at seminars and conferences. I have found that a sort of age discrimination has set in. Many older folks are more reluctant to travel now to avoid exposure. Instead, I have seen two classes of speakers at conference sessions. The younger folks are there to present their work as they try to develop their research presentation skills while the older folks stay home and send in their invited talks by virtual video. This is an unfortunate schism that is developing with the unintended consequence of diminishing the excitement of attending a conference in person. If invited speakers just give video talks coupled with the younger researchers missing the feedback from senior members of the field, the experience is lacking for all.

I think I'm guilty of working both sides of this Zoom dilemma. I certainly see the benefit of reducing superfluous travel when a brief Zoom appearance will suffice. One area where this has proven to be effective is for grant study sections. I think the change to Zoom will be permanent there, as this business can be done nearly as effectively with a remote meeting. On the other hand, I've offered Zoom video presentations of our work recently in lieu of cross country trips. This was definitely a choice of expediency for me. In the past, there would be no other option and I would have jumped on the plane and attended in person. Yet, when I do attend a conference in person these days, I am somewhat resentful when others only appear by Zoom. I guess this fits in with our feelings of pandemic fatigue, resulting in less sympathy for the challenges others may be going through. As we navigate toward the post-pandemic Zoom hybrid era, I will aim to be an in-person participant when I can and remember what caused me to choose the virtual option at other times, particularly to be more understanding when I see others choose it.