

The Reverse-Zoom Idea

SUMMARY. By using informal unstructured zoom sessions with small study groups, “study materials” (YouTube video podcasts and position papers) can be circulated in advance of more formal meetings with invited critics and, later, full on-line conferences. Simply by initiating informal discussions and making individual research positions available beforehand encounters with audiences, limitations of in-person meetings are overcome. Public, accessible materials are archived, zoom sessions can focus on conversations and debates, and scholarship can again focus on interaction, critique, and dialog.



Figure 1. “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.” Peter Steiner, *The New Yorker*, July 5, 1993. In the case of zoom conferences, this has changed, but zoomers can still opt to wear dog costumes or use dog puppets. The advantage of anonymity, while limited, can be transferred to the flattening of the usual hierarchies that dominate conference organization. Through the reverse-zoom idea, discourse comes first. Participants use conviviality rather than competitiveness. Materials can diversify, lengthen, and challenge. Most of all, they can reach a broader and more relevant public, canine or human.

The limitations of in-person conferences are well known. Topics are set in advance, by organizers who invite participants who will, working on their own, submit proposals for approval, be assigned to sessions, and constrained along with all in the audience to sit through sequential presentations scheduled, as it happens too often, at the same time as other sessions that are equally or more attractive. The length of the paper as well as its content and style are constrained. Computers with PowerPoint “slides” must be hooked up, often with difficulty. Session chairs frequently allow presenters to go over their allotted time, reducing the time for questions and discussion often to zero. The conference organizers demand fees; lodging is costly; travel is both difficult and expensive. Without institutional support, participation is out of reach for many academics, and for non-academics, the prospect of self-funding may not be an option. Possibly, papers are published, but “proceedings” lie on the lowest rung of the evidentiary ladder for promotion and tenure. To add charge to conference participation, blind reviews add status, but reviewers are hard to find and often unreliable. Advanced work is often reviewed by the less-advanced, who often over-state or over-impose

their credentials. Those no longer needing credit for promotion or tenure, often senior or independent scholars, find themselves answerable to reviewers with little knowledge of their work or the “stakes at hand.”

Those who have personally paid, or have had their institutions fund, their attendance are convened to hear what are usually a highly paid and expensed keynote speakers, whose seniority or publications have placed them in the cadre of those whose multiple requests have compelled them to use one presentation multiple times. The highly paid celebrity confers status on the conference but has not been required to produce any original product. There are often in the audience those who have heard the same presentation multiple times, although the themes of the different occasions have called for more original work.

What, then, is desirable about in-person conferences, apart from the dubious extra lines on the *resumé*? Almost everything outside of official sessions is, for the convivial, a chance to engage with an unpredictable public. Mixing, conversing, taking field-trips, drinking, and dancing are the standard surplus enjoyments of the academic life. Despite the pretenses of the topics to be relevant, despite the imposture of keynote speakers, and despite the restrictions and imperfect credentialing of scholarship, conference participants almost always say that they enjoyed the event. The costs and pains endured are, like those of childbirth, are magically forgotten. Only memories of pleasure survive.

These positive memories are what the zoom conference confronts. Lacking all of those elements that have saved the otherwise dreadful in-person event from disaster, the zoom conference tries in vain to copy every detail of the in-person “real thing.” Sessions are set up to run simultaneously, often with the same theme, duplicating the irony that a speaker in one session would prefer, at the same time, to be a listener in another. Like the real-life version, presentations are kept to a time-limit; and, like real-life sessions, chairs often allow some presenters to exceed the limits, forfeiting discussion time or cutting the last speakers short. But, because the zoom sessions are centrally organized, there are no hallways to take discussions out to; no bars where conversations continue over drinks; no restaurants for extended enjoyments. The zoom conference has, in copying the in-person model, had to do without what made the in-person model tolerable but, worse, imposed new sanctions despite the internet resources that might have offered new and different freedoms.

In some on-line conferences, the tradition of a keynote speaker is retained, along with fees and publicity. Although a keynote speaker’s talk can easily be recorded and presented, a speaker’s sudden failure to appear is endured; the participants who funded it are not compensated for the loss or inconvenience. The investment in keynote speaker status magically lives on, anachronistic in the age of internet tendency to equalization.

This is perhaps a too-harsh critique considering the labors imposed by the pandemic on those who, having planned an in-person event, were suddenly forced to adopt to on-line substitutions. Legal matters were not fully known; technical issues confronted those who before had minimal expertise. Participants already accepted were demanding some return for their

fee–investments. Plans already in place could not be easily or fully jettisoned. Organizers were, to use a cliché, between rocks and hard places.

Yet, there has not been a productive consensus view of what might not only compensate for the loss of the in–person conference but also take advantage of resources that only the Internet might provide. While the old model has produced grievances, no new model has appeared. What would a new model be like? This proposal returns to the original ideal of scholarship as, inherently, shared. It places what is logical to scholarship at the front of a process that draws the principle of sharing through four stages, from informal to formal. “Publication,” the need for permanent proof of the interactive value of the conference, becomes the *temporal event’s* extension into enduring preservation of the *archive*. The limited accessibility of the conference event is extended to the unlimited access to its products, minus the social interactions. Events and archives come naturally to the zoom meeting. Both are a matter of connectivity and skills of producing and accessing. Although personal contact is, for the time being, limited by masks, shields, and screens, what happens on either side of these barriers can, on behalf of scholarly conviviality, take the form of the cinematic “fourth wall,” a passage-way as well as a window or filter.

The Basic Design

The First Session(s): Brainstorming. The zoom conference converts a collaborative instrument through the device of the “reverse zoom”: an inversion of the usual conference procedure of challenging would–be presenters with topics/questions. Reverse–zoom means that topics emerge from discussions of shared interests, with different results from different small groups, informally brainstorming in as many sessions as they desire, to the point where each member has some picture of their own interests in relation to the group’s interactions.

The Second Session: Critical Review. Taking a break from the small–group zooms, participants prepare separate positions. These are presented in a slightly more formal kind of zoom. The group has invited one, two, or three “outside critics” to hear each group member present their individual ideas and also for the group to summarize the results of its preliminary informal sessions. These presentations can be little more than summaries, or the session may involve elaborations that respect the guests’ tolerance and free time. Notes from this second session are used to guide each group member’s development of a **formal, recorded presentation**.

The Third Session: Public Archiving. With YouTube accounts, members publish their presentations as video podcasts. The minimalist version is nothing more than the presenter reading a paper or talking from notes, recording the results to .m4v format during a “solo zoom session.” The file is then uploaded to YouTube and the link shared with other members and the visiting critics.

The product of the second session is an archive of presentations, which can be improved, enlarged, or replaced at any time. The group is now in the position of proposing their work as a SESSION of an upcoming symposium, conference, or seminar, along with other groups working in the same general area. *Note that organizers of the conference have specified little more than a date and a general framework. Not until positions have been critiqued and developed by the small-group zoom interactions have any specific topics become known.* The conference theme transforms, from being “nothing much” to “something.” The value of that something will be unknown until the conference itself happens as an event.

The Fourth Session: The Actual Zoom Conference. Each informal group becomes a session in the collective zoom conference, whose themes are now specifically defined after emerging from local discussions and reviews, and whose conference materials are already publicly available, thanks to publication on YouTube. The conference organizers job is to schedule the sessions — as consecutively as possible, to maximize every attendee’s chance of participating in the sessions that personally interest them — and publicize the schedule to attract a wider audience. Note that few who attend in-person conferences are not also presenters. There is nothing like an “audience” present merely to take in the presentations. It is assumed that those whose proposals have been rejected will not attend. The reverse-zoom conference, in contrast, encourages a wide audience, first by making all presentations freely available through YouTube, but second by creating sessions that are devoted to debate, discussion, questions-and-responses, and extended conversations.

Presenters in each session should not present full versions of their papers. They introduce themselves by summarizing their work and its conclusions, using only a few visual supports. If the discussion requires it, they have their original files on hand and can screen-share selections. The aim is to reserve at least 80% of each session for live interaction. This is an advantage of the Internet that, when in post-pandemic times face-to-face conferences may safely return, can and should be retained.

After each formal session, “coffee-room sessions” can be set up to allow participants looking for more conversation to arrive and leave at will, to join in a common conversation or to depart and set up extra-mural discussions on their own. These “chat rooms” are the transportation hubs, spinning off groups as they form.

The advantages of the reverse-zoom symposium is, first, that it is more of a *sym*-posium than a *confer*-ance. The advantages of collectivity can be realized in a setting that does not privilege, and can barely recognize or respect, hierarchical orders of organizers, reviewers, presenters, and expert key-noters. The zoom conference itself reduces expenses of its in-person counterpart. No plane tickets, hotel rooms, restaurant meals, or conference fees. No conference facilities. No receptions. No heavy program books. Investment can be made, instead, in the technical support personnel, the software utilities, the web sites. Expenses vanish, and almost

all of the original value re-appears. What cannot appear is compensated by modes of sharing that did not or could not happen in face-to-face events.

Technical Minimums

The production value of archived materials and live sessions can be high, but this is not necessary. It depends on the skills of the participants. Many who have been attending conferences for decades still have not mastered PowerPoint beyond the ability of switching from “light table” to “presentation” modes. Images are usually static, and presenters still “read from their slides,” repeating audibly what the audience can read for themselves. The reverse-zoom proposal does not assume that such presenters will improve their products, but it attempts to reduce the pain felt by the audience, by moving presentations from live sessions to accessible-beforehand public archives.

Reverse-zooming requires each participant to own or have access to a laptop computer equipped with a camera and microphone. Quality improves if an external microphone can be used to suppress/limit ambient noise, or if an external camera can improve image quality.

Minimally, a participant of the reverse-zoom conference will have to master two fairly easy tasks: (1) opening an account on YouTube, which involves no payments and minimal personal data; and (2) opening a Zoom account, allowing the user to record a minimalist presentation, in a solitary recorded zoom session. Zoom saves the file as an .m4v, either on the user’s computer or in the Cloud. This file, in turn, can be uploaded to the YouTube account and made public. The link to this video podcast can then be shared with, first, members of the original zoom group and its invited critics; and, second, with conference organizers who list the link in the conference program.

There are other skills involved. Good lighting and sound recording are not easy to master, but there are many guides. Both PowerPoint (PC and Apple) and Keynote (Apple) allow voice-over recordings to be inserted into “slides,” and both have the option of saving slide files as video recordings, making it possible to skip the step of the solitary zoom session. But, even if the unskilled presenter insists on a minimum product (video showing him/herself reading a paper or talking from notes, *sans* images), the reverse-zoom advantage is that no one will have to watch the result involuntarily. The YouTube archive will give the audience the chance to preview, and market forces will prevail. Often, the minimalist presentation has maximum intellectual value because the ideas themselves come across, without the assistance of fancy graphics. This will be as evident from the archived podcasts as from the in-person session. The only difference will be in the lack of the pleasant surprise, that the boring-looking talk is not so boring after all.

Some skills are required to take advantage of zoom sessions. Many experienced users still are not aware of how to use virtual backgrounds, how to activate or de-activate microphones,

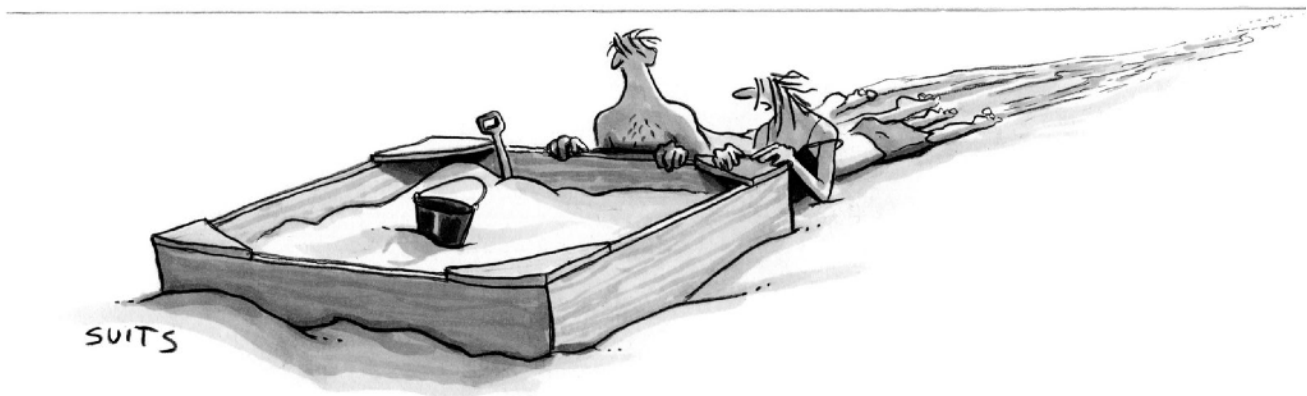


Figure 2. "Let's take our fun where we find it." Julia Suits, *The New Yorker* June 8, 2020. Reverse-zooming is not perfect, but it does have some critical advantages over in-person conferencing, not the least of which follows the dictum that "getting there is half the fun."

how to test cameras and microphones, how to use the Chat utility, how to switch between different screen views, or how to share screens and, hence, "show a show." At some point in the four-step reverse-zoom process, colleagues or conference organizers can assist. They can point to on-line instructional resources, offer critiques, and distribute "rules of the game."

Questions? Suggestions? Comments? You may want to organize your own reverse-zoom conference. This is an idea, not a copyrighted platform. If you do use it, however, please share the positive and negative results with others. One of them is listed below.

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