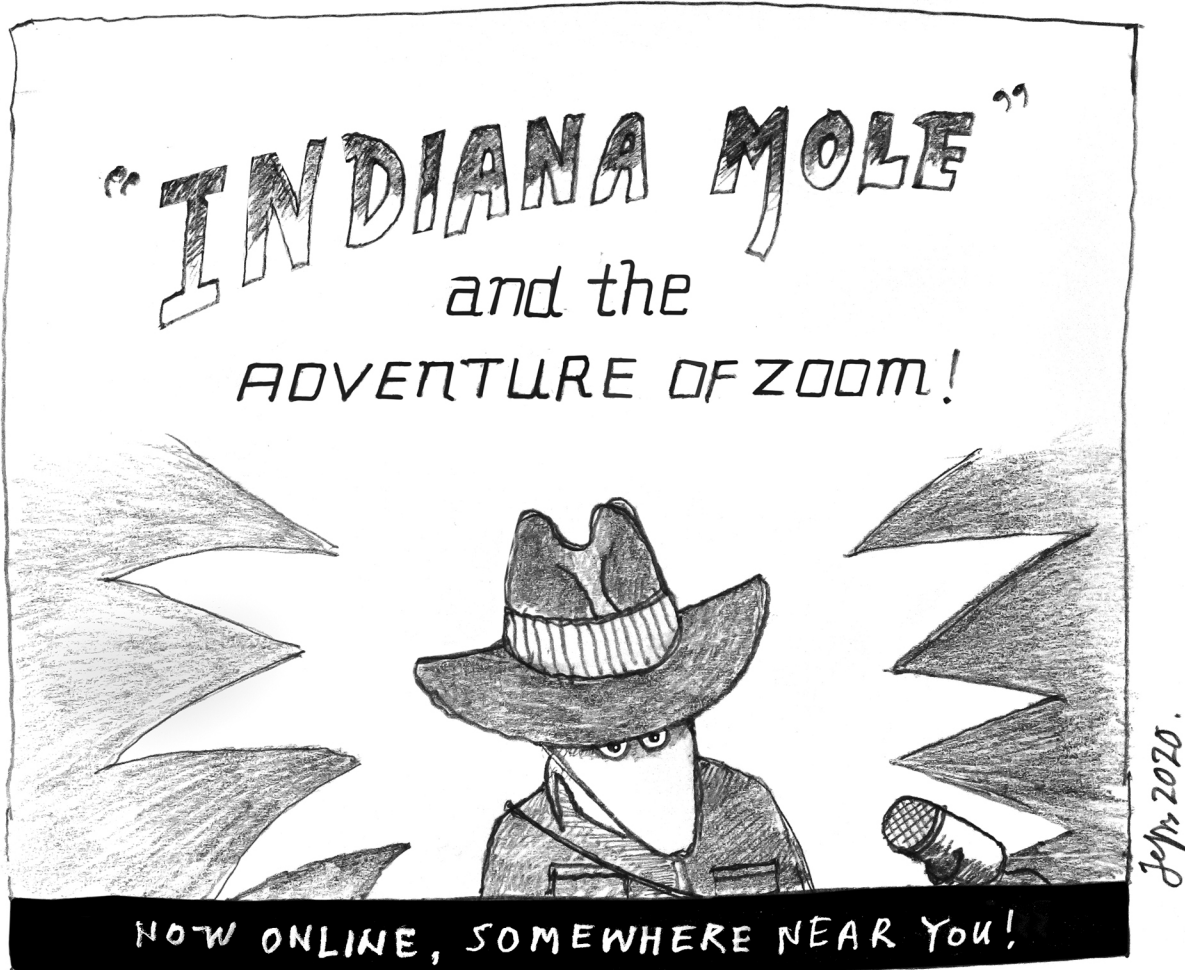


STICKY WICKET

Corona XI – zooming out

Mole

Original artwork by Pete Jeffs - www.peterjeffsart.com

Well, that was a bust. I just labored through my umpteenth online, video seminar, this one on “The Effects of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds.” Okay, it wasn’t the title (that was a rather good play, but not about irradiating flowers), but I didn’t pay enough attention to be able to tell you what it actually was. As usual, we were meant to stare at slides (not slides, but you know) while the speaker mumbled his way through the presentation for days and days (actually, I suspect that it was about 50 min, but it felt like a long weekend), following which the host asked for questions, and we fumbled through those until the time ran out. I was doing something else, of course. There was an entertaining dynamic when the speaker’s dog started barking, apparently at a squirrel, and we had to pause the presentation to give the dog a toy to play with, and for the rest of the time we could hear them periodically playing ‘fetch.’ Now that I think about it, I think this was my favorite video seminar in weeks.

In these challenging times, it does seem rather trivial to complain about how boring online seminars really are. (I guess we are

supposed to call them ‘Webinars’ but that makes me think about protein bars made of duck feet, and I get nauseous, while at the same time getting paradoxically hungry. It’s a virtual thing). But we do seem to feel that we have a responsibility to try to maintain scientific norms. I’m not talking about discussing and sharing data on the TP (the Terrible Pandemic, for those who are not paying attention); that is genuinely important, and I’m scheduled to do that tomorrow. No, I’m talking about the regular seminars that cannot happen in person, and since it is relatively easy to get someone to take an hour or so to present their research (rather than having to get on a plane, taxi to a hotel, meet all day with folks who may or may not want to meet, drink too much coffee and eat too many meals, and then take another day going home), we have a lot of online seminars. At our place, we’re planning to do a lot *more* of these – maybe your place is thinking about this, too. They’re easy!

But here’s the thing: They are also so *boring*. And I’ve been thinking about why this is, and perhaps what we can do about it.

Here's the thing: there is a big difference between seeing something live and seeing it *broadcast* live. The problem is well known in the theater world. If we go to see a great play, we are happy to sit where we can see the stage, and find ourselves immersed in the goings on until it ends. Show the same play from the perspective of someone sitting in the audience, even from the perspective of a very good seat, and it becomes, at best, barely watchable. But move the play to diverse locations, with carefully planned camera shots, expert editing, and usually some reworking of the script, and it can become a very good movie. We have been trained to expect a certain level of sophistication in what we view in a broadcast setting. But this is not something available to the vast majority of us when we prepare to give an online seminar. I don't know about you, but I don't have the time, money, or interest in enlisting the expertise to transform my talk (which might be very good in real life – at least I hope so) into something I would want to see on screen. So what can we do?

Let's start from first principles. What is the point of a seminar? Most would say, "the exchange of information among peers," but we know that what makes a great seminar (as opposed to just an okay one) is that the speaker takes us on an adventure, an exploration of new ideas and concepts. We come out invigorated when we didn't just get 'more info,' but rather have our heads spinning with possibilities. A great seminar gets us thinking, and not only about the results.

But this principle applies to all seminars, not just online ones. And, as far as I can remember from long ago when we actually had these in person, the "grand adventure" talks are pretty rare. But, if the speaker was engaging and the concepts were made clear to my little insectivore brain, I enjoyed it (and always learned something). But I realize (when I think back to those distant days of live seminars) that I *always* took notes at real seminars. It helped me focus and integrate the information, and besides, I could always re-read them and remind myself of what I had learned. But I *never* take notes while listening to online seminars. Maybe it's on me.

But I have a strong suspicion that this is not the problem (or at least, not the whole problem). Recently, at our weekly lab meeting, one of the molets presented his research project in the form of a proper seminar (it's good practice), and despite the data being rather great, his command of the information excellent, and the organization of the slides into a coherent and interesting story, the presentation completely fell apart. He became confused and muddled, apologized repeatedly, and eventually gave up three-quarters of the way through. I realized what had happened: he was speaking without audience feedback, not only interspersed questions and comments, but also the all-important feedback that comes from seeing our interest and comprehension on our faces. He was speaking in an isolation chamber. With a lot of encouragement (not only from me but also the others who were 'there') and a lot of good advice, he recovered, and it was fine. But I think it is this: the way we normally present seminars just doesn't work as well as a virtual presentation.

And now that I think about it, those online talks that I've heard from speakers who I know are wonderful in person have been good (better than okay), but would have been spectacular in real life. I think we need to re-think the online seminar. If you are organizing one of these, or perhaps planning to do one, maybe we can come up with an idea to make it as good as it can be? I have a few ideas (hey, it's Mole here!) and they are not mutually exclusive. So, here we go, 'Mole's guide to a more successful virtual seminar.'

The chalk talk

There is a thing called a chalk talk, which harkens back to the days when chalk, a white substance in the shape of a thin

cylinder, was used to write on a black surface, or 'blackboard' during a lecture, but was more usually found as dust on a presenter's clothed leg. Chalk talks are mostly used today when one is being considered for a job. I have watched a lot of these, and more recently, they have been virtual. And the funny thing is, they have been really good (okay, most have been really good). There was something about the speaker standing up in front of a writing surface, describing and illustrating ideas, that seemed to work in this virtual format. And while the 'interested face feedback' was not there, interactions with the audience were many. I know, you'll argue that this isn't possible with audiences of a hundred or more viewers, but actually, all it takes is a moderator who watches for questions and interrupts the speaker. And these interruptions did seem to serve the same purpose of focus and engagement. I think I would love to hear a chalk talk-style presentation from a speaker whose only goal was to convey new ideas and observations. Yes, we will lose the slides with the 'real data' but I think we can work around that, which is the next idea.

The two-body talk

Part of the problem with online seminars, as I've suggested, is that we don't see the speaker, but only hear a disembodied voice. So, let's get rid of that problem: we have to have the ability to see two things at once (you know, 'two bodies'). There's a way. What if, before a seminar, we receive the entire talk as a download? We can print it out, or if we have two monitors (I know, many of us don't) we can have that up on a screen. The speaker remains 'on camera' and has the ability to view all (or very many) of us at the same time that we view them. (Yes, this assumes bandwidth, but a good moderator can control things to ensure that there are at least a few of us 'there'). The speaker will have to ensure that we are all on the same page, slowing things down, but that is not necessarily a bad thing – fewer 'slides' in a presentation, if chosen well, can greatly improve a talk. And we will have to be sufficiently engaged to follow along, which might improve our own focus. Besides, if we have a printout, we might be encouraged to sometimes write something down.

The debate

Not to be confused with the two-body talk, the debate invites two speakers. Here's the idea: two researchers, working in the same field, are invited to each present a short story, say of ten minutes. They share these in advance (with each other), and prepare five minute responses to what the other presented (these do not have to be pro/con adversarial positions, but of course they can be). Next, a host poses prepared questions for the two, who each have short times to respond, while a moderator collects questions from the audience and selects from among them. I imagine something like this could be lively, and might even have the 'feel' of a meeting exchange.

The interview

Essentially 'the debate-lite' for those who do not want to rope in (I mean, invite) two people at once. Very short talk, followed by questions that have been prepared in advance (probably most productively in collaboration with the speaker). The interviewee can respond with additional slides, on screen conversation with the interviewer, or both. Here's the thing, it is all about the questions; if you ask, "Where did you do your training?" or "Can you give us another example?" I'm going to spend the time playing games on my phone.

The 3-5 slide limit discussion

This is a format I have seen work very well at some small high-level real-life meetings. The idea is that the speaker chooses a topic for discussion, and introduces it, having the option to show a small number of slides. Ideally, these do not contain data, but instead illustrate concepts that are important for the discussion by all of the participants. There are some problems with this, though. First, some speakers simply cannot do this, and essentially give data-driven talks (ignoring the slide limit, or sneaking in many ‘pop-ups’ on each slide) with the usual questions from the audience (“What was the pH of the medium in the experiment on slide 27?”). Secondly, the participants have to be experts in the general area, or otherwise the discussion can degenerate (“I never heard of these ‘mitochondria,’ are they cells?”). Third, I don’t know if the pauses,

foul ups (“You’re still on mute,” “Can you see my slide?” “Call in participant JB227, please mute yourself, we can hear you typing emails.”) and general difficulty of the online format will make this unworkable. Finally, there are some discussions that are just more interesting than others. There are ways around all of these, with some good planning, and this approach can be interactive and interesting.

There are undoubtedly other approaches that are more interesting than what we are currently seeing. Maybe you have experienced them, thought about some, or just are thinking about them now. Let’s meet up and talk about it! I’ll bring the slides and share my screen for the presentation. Okay, I’m *kidding*.

Until next time, stay safe (masks can be *cool!*), stay healthy, and above all, stay negative.