

Do you miss the conference circuit? I surely don't

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The first scientific meeting I attended was a big international conference hosted by my home university during the second year of my PhD. In a pinstripe suit, I trekked from my cubicle in biology to a large gathering hall and stood beside my poster, ready for the world of molecular biology to discover my ingenuity. The next 2 h were a blur of nervousness and inexperience, but I do recall that my mother, an antique dealer by trade, stopped by to lend her support. Sharp as a whip but sans high-school diploma, she proceeded to work the crowd, making her way from one poster to the next. I thought the gig was up when she spent 10 min with a renowned curmudgeon, learning the finer details of Southern blots. But when he asked her for a business card, I knew it was all okay. Unfortunately, I did not inherit my mother's gift of the gab. I departed the session that evening with no new acquaintances or collaborators and the sad realization that the conference game is more complicated and cliquish than I initially thought. Little did I know that the coming years would take me on a whirlwind of international conference travel.

In the past two decades, I have visited more cities and countries than I care to count. What's been gained from all this hustle and bustle, apart from generating a carbon footprint the size of a small town? Of course, I have had the privilege of seeing beautiful and interesting places, some more so than others. My CV now bears the stamps of a moderately successful scientist: invited talk here, keynote lecture there, etc. I can navigate airport security with the best of them, my belt and shoelaces undone before even entering the terminal. And, to my mother's surprise, I've learnt how to make small talk over coffee and cookies.

Yet, I can count on one hand the number of new alliances formed from these travels. Despite my best efforts, only one prospective student has ever reached out after a meeting. Most of my networking has come from simply emailing researchers and asking if they would like to collaborate. And my graduate students tend to come from the undergraduate courses that I teach. In fact, I would argue that incessant traveling has had various negative effects on my professional and personal lives.

A jet-set, economy-class lifestyle is exhausting. You know the narrative: 5 am alarms, taxis, buses, multi-leg flights, layovers, delays, cancellations, lineups and lineups for the lineups, and don't even think about trying to write that manuscript en route. The reward? A poor-night's sleep in a strange bed and 2–5 days of sitting in a dark, stuffy lecture hall. Add in jetlag, caffeine, sugar- and salt-rich processed foods, a lack of exercise, and you have the perfect recipe for an unproductive, unhealthy, and unhappy scientist. Then, there's the alcohol. As many have pointed out before me, excessive drinking is contributing to a plethora of problems at academic meetings, the least of which are a bad hangover and a lackluster presentation.

In recent years, I've tried to counteract some of these destructive tendencies by packing running shoes, choosing healthy snacks (when available), limiting my alcohol consumption, and taking regular walks throughout the day, even if it means missing a talk or symposium. I'm also now much more selective about which and how many meetings I attend, choosing quality and convenience over quantity and popularity. But sometimes I'm still left wondering whether I would have been better served by

just staying home and reading the literature. Indeed, the growing popularity of preprint servers, like bioRxiv, means that you no longer have to travel halfway across the globe to see unpublished results, not to mention that much of the data presented at meetings are already published.

While scientists are globetrotting, back at home life carries on in their absence, which can add any number of additional stresses. Partners single-handedly look after children, pets, and household duties, often becoming overtired and resentful. Colleagues fill in for missed lectures, overdue deadlines, and postponed meetings. Students' questions go unanswered, laboratory work goes awry, and an array of trivial administrative tasks pile-up. When the prodigal professor does return home, there are so many fires to put out, relationships to patch up, and sleep to catch up on, that those manuscript revisions, which were supposed to be finished before you left for the meeting, get pushed back another week. And the cycle continues with the next trip.

I realize that this slightly cynical view of conference travel is not necessarily shared by the majority of academics. Many of my close colleagues consider traveling to be one of the major perks of academic life. Like rugged, weathered backpackers, they embrace their peripatetic existence, bragging about the countless hours spent in-transit, that stomach bug from a meeting in Budapest, the amazing pizza just past security in Copenhagen, and the soaring frequent-flier miles. They'll proclaim that their longest friendships, greatest collaborations, and best students are the products of networking at meetings. Even some of my lecture-stream coworkers find research conferences to be

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an excellent reservoir for new teaching material. And I'll be the first to admit that now and then lightning does strike, like watching that perfect talk, which hammers home just how wonderful and ah-inspiring science can be. If only there was a little more lightning and a little less fog at meetings.

Whether you love or hate traveling, COVID-19 has all of us stuck at home with nowhere to go. In addition to ending most 2020 (and likely 2021) in-person scientific events, the current global pandemic will arguably have a lasting effect on conferences and conference travel for years to come. One of the key catalysts for this change is a four-letter word that rhymes with boom—and what an impact it has had. Zoom has quickly become a panacea for at-home academic work, be it a one-on-one chat with a graduate student, a departmental seminar or a thesis defense. As of August 2020, I have already participated in two international biology conferences hosted through Zoom, with two more on the near horizon. In addition to being free, safe, and environmentally friendly, these online meetings allowed me to take-in talks from prominent figures in my field from the comfort (and chaos) of my own home. Overall, I gained as much from these electronic meetings as I have from similarly sized conventional ones.

With a Zoom conference, there's no jetlag, redeye flights or noisy hotels, and I'm guaranteed good coffee, nice wine, and nutritious food. In between sessions, I can easily help with household chores or go out for a walk, run or bike. And if I'm not enjoying one of the talks, I hit mute and move on to other tasks. But, admittedly, the two Zoom conferences I attended did not provide the same level of excitement, comradery, and fruitful chitchat that I've experienced at other conferences. Keep in mind as well that I was not a speaker at either of these events. I sense that giving a talk through a laptop camera in a backroom home office lacks the exhilaration and energy of a real stage. But maybe this sense of disconnectedness will improve as we get more comfortable and creative with using online tools.

Compared to traditional brick and mortar meetings, online conferences are easier, faster, and cheaper to organize, requiring much less preparation and logistical planning. Consequently, Zoom might bring in a new era of conference abundance. This could be particularly helpful for the development of small, highly focused meetings, which in the past have been cost-prohibitive because of the low participant numbers. Zoom is also providing graduate students and early career scientists an outlet to present their work at

crucial stages of their research development. Most importantly, it has democratized conferences, allowing researchers with limited travel budgets, for instance, to attend meetings. However, I've recently noticed a rise in online predatory conferences. Almost daily I receive emails from disreputable companies or organizations inviting me to participate in their upcoming events, most of which have substantial registration fees.

More than 6 months ago, I got on a plane and headed toward Monterey, California, for the 2020 American Society of Naturalists (ASN) meeting. Had I known that this was going to be my last academic trip for months, or potentially years, I might have savored a little more of that sunset into the Pacific Ocean at Asilomar State Beach or that 4-h wait in US immigration at Pearson International. But, truthfully, I'm not itching to get back out on the conference circuit, and I bet that many of you are feeling the same way. So, let's make the best of bad situation by staying home and enjoying a good old-fashioned Zoom meeting. If you are lucky, you may even find my ugly mug smiling at you through a square box on your laptop.

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