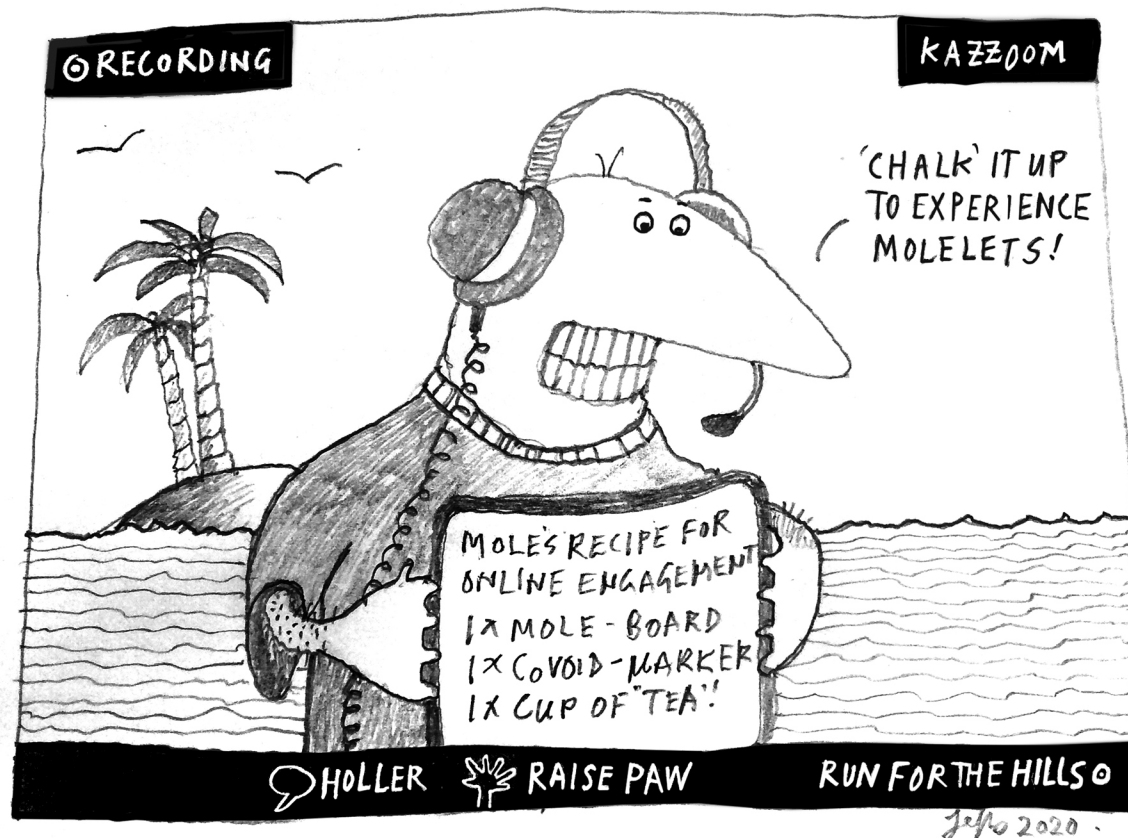


STICKY WICKET

Corona VI – virtual reality

Mole

Original artwork by Pete Jeffs - www.peterjeffsart.com

Woke up, fell out of bed. Dragged a comb across my head. Found my way downstairs and drank a cup and, looking up, I noticed I was late. Another day in the life and, yes, I read the news today (oh, boy). Not very good at all. Like you, I assume, I remain sequestered at home during this Terrible Pandemic. TP. Not to be confused with the rolls of TP that somehow vanish from stores during times of crisis. What is with that? Do people hear worrying news of a shut down and think, "Right, I need to make sure I have food, water and shelter. What else? TP. I need *lots and lots* of TP?" Maybe they figure they can use it in lieu of cash if necessary (actually, come to think of it, they probably can right now). I know, I know, I'm rambling. I'm *distracted*.

But rambling and distraction seem to be the features of this, the CoVOID. Anguish at the mounting death toll and the catastrophic unemployment. Frustration beyond limit at the incremental increases in testing. Elation and then crushing depression over the prospects for a vaccine in the next year. I work from early morning until nightfall, and don't seem to get anything actually done. The lab is stagnant, with our wonderful projects all on hold (so close I can taste their success, arggh!). Is this life for the foreseeable future?

And meanwhile, it is a beautiful, balmy day. A light, cool breeze, blue sky, and *quiet*. I mean, in between all the e-meetings. I do like

getting to pick my background on Kazzzoom; sometimes I'm in the desert, sometimes on a sunlit lake and sometimes in a boisterous crowd at a rock concert. I'm going to try to work on a system to that all the time; pick any background I want in my office and lab. No, I'm not; I'm not that tech savvy.

But it does make me wish we had virtual reality working a little better. Maybe this is something we need right now; a way to interact with each other that actually *feels* like interaction. Without masks. In actual groups. In a nice, crowded restaurant or bar (oh yes, please). Unless this virus just disappears ('Like a miracle.' Except we know it won't), we won't have significant interaction until we have a working vaccine. And let's be real; that isn't going to happen this year. Maybe not until well into next year. As of this writing, there are 95 potential vaccines in development and one in clinical trials (don't get your hopes up). But these are going to take a long time. And then they actually have to be made. And while there is tremendous pressure to bypass the usual precautions on vaccines, there are very good reasons why taking too many shortcuts could be really bad. (Let's not argue about it, it gets people very upset.) So, virtual reality anyone?

It would be so cool. I know I would look terrific; drop some weight (okay, a lot of weight), get rid of the gray, have a dazzling, white smile, oh, and hair! Wavy hair that glistens in the (virtual)

sunlight! Ooh, and get rid of the tiny mole eyes and maybe get a nose job. Of course, nobody would recognize me. Everyone thinks I look like Brad Pitt in 'Once Upon a Time in Hollywood' (Not 'Troy'). But that's okay. We look great. Let's meet on a tropical beach. Or in space.

Okay, we don't have that kind of VR. That will take longer than the vaccine. But all these e-meetings do seem like a sort of alternative reality, where people can be muted (yay!) and I can sit outside during seminars.

But virtual meetings simply are not the same as real meetings. Meetings in e-space are about information exchange, which is fine as far as it goes. But they fall short when it comes to brain-storming, collaborative thinking and, very importantly, informal discussion (absolutely my favorite part of any scientific meeting. Okay, having a drink with friends is pretty great, too. Oh, I miss real meetings). At a deeper level, there are subtle cues that are missing from virtual exchange, for example, eye contact. Have you noticed that, when you speak to someone via video, they are looking at their screens and not at the camera? This matters. Television and film people who speak on camera are trained to look directly into the glass eye of the lens and imagine that they are looking into our eyes. We don't do that. And here's the thing: talking to someone who does not look at your face when they speak triggers an automatic distrust of what they are saying. At least, I think this is true; but the psychologist who told me that didn't look me in the eye when she said it, so I'm not sure.

Companies know this, and some have produced special equipment that reconfigures eye appearance to create the effect of the speaker looking directly at the listener. I tried one of these once but it had some kinks: at times the speaker's eyes looked like pinwheels, which – while sort of cool – did not have the desired effect. And my little laptop doesn't have this feature anyway.

Sound is also an issue. The brief delay between the visual and auditory (lips moving and words coming out) is subtle but we pick up on it. And it affects our interactions. Sure, this can probably be fixed as well but, for some of the meetings I've been in, I just have to close my eyes to listen. Don't get me started on bandwidth problems – it happens all the time to remind us that none of this is real.

One important difference between a good and a bad seminar, in real life, is the deportment of the speaker. A speaker who spends the entire time focused on the slides (they are not really slides any more, you know what I mean. I'm not sure that most of you have ever actually *seen* a slide. These were little plastic things that went into a slide projector, often the wrong way around and, at large meetings, frequently melted during the talk. They were *much* more entertaining than PowerPoint. These are the small things we lose with progress. But I digress. Hey, it's what I do, right? Where was I?). Right, a speaker who spends the entire time focused on the *slides* does not engage us to the same degree as one who speaks to *us*. And now, in virtual space, we just can't tell, since all we see are the slides. It isn't an option, when the speaker must 'share his or her screen.' And, sorry to say, I get bored. Okay, I also get bored in real meetings but good talks really keep me going. It's just so much *harder* in e-space to give a good talk.

But I know a way to fix this, to make our enforced virtual reality a bit more like real reality (there should be a better word for 'real reality,' really). Since entering the CoVOID, I have participated in a few 'chalk talks' (which, of course, don't involve actual chalk; I know, I know, most of you don't know what 'chalk' is). These are exercises wherein the speaker presents ideas and concepts, and hand writes things on a surface (okay, generally a whiteboard) to illustrate them. And you know what? These virtual chalk talks feel WAY more 'real' than do virtual seminars. Not perfect, but better.

So, here's an idea. If you are presenting a virtual talk, consider going retro. Instead of sharing your screen, keep the camera on you, and present your talk on paper that you hold up when you need to illustrate a point or show some data. Sure, it will feel 'clunky' and 'unprofessional.' But you might find that you engage the listeners much more than you would, if you made us stare at your shared screen with your voice in the ether. And if you also *look at your camera* when you talk to us sometimes, that might help too. Hey, it's worth a shot perhaps? We're going to be stuck in virtual reality for the foreseeable future but maybe we can make it a little less, I don't know, virtual?

Hang in there, stay safe and see you next week.