

ZOOMING INTO THE FUTURE?

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Ashby Village technology volunteer

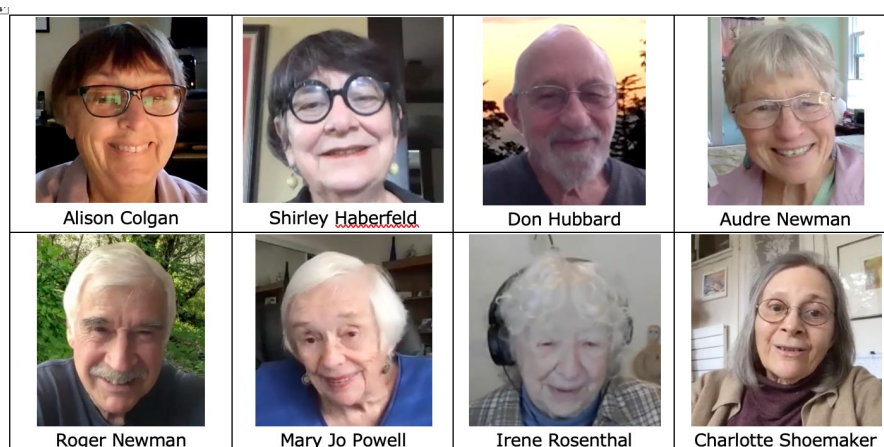
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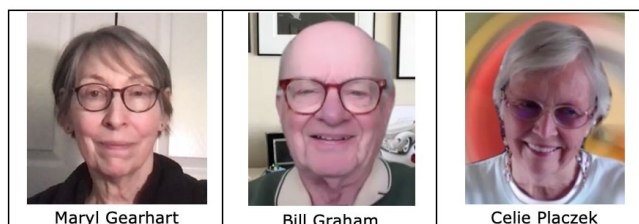
Zoom, Zoom, Zoom! Every week many of us log into Zoom for meetings, events, classes, or catch-ups with family. The Village has been on Zoom since last April - what has the experience been like for Village members?

As a technology volunteer, I wanted some insight into members' Zoom experiences to get a better understanding about how volunteers can help. I invited eight Village members to share perspectives on Zoom and on the future of Zoom in the Village. Two technology volunteers, Bill Graham and Celie Placzek, joined some of the interviews.

The members we interviewed offered views on Zoom for different activities (committee meetings, large events, small social gatherings) and for different roles (facilitator or participant). This article isn't a complete summary of our rich conversations, nor are the views expressed representative of the Village membership. Please consider this article as an invitation to more conversations about Zoom in the Village future!



A gallery view of Village members interviewed



A gallery view of the technology volunteer co-interviewers

Zooming now

Everyone is grateful for the Village's wise decision to adopt Zoom. Alison Colgan commented, "what's good about Zoom is that it exists right now!" and, indeed, without Zoom, we'd be even more isolated. Mary Jo Powell complimented the ways that the Village has "done a great job to keep us together" through Zoom and the "Daily Dose of Dopamine" emails that provide links to online events and resources.

What's Zooming in the Village?

Many Village groups and meetings are continuing over Zoom – just take a look at the busy [Village calendar!](#) Committees are convening, and many interest and neighborhood groups are gathering. The larger events – in the Arts & Culture, Science & Ideas, and Embracing Change series - are even attracting bigger audiences. Audre and Roger Newman are delighted that more people are attending Science & Ideas.

Zoom has even opened up new opportunities – more attendance, expanded audience, introduction to new websites. As Shirley Haberfeld commented, big Village events can host speakers from anywhere, and people from anywhere can attend. The Documentary Film Group now gathers monthly over Zoom to discuss a particular film which each member has viewed independently, and Alison commented that she's pleased to learn about free movies available through the Kanopy public library app. Shirley and Celie used Zoom to create a memorable intergenerational workshop on iPhone photography with their granddaughters.

For our intergenerational Zoom workshop, I picked photo apps our granddaughters might enjoy and then we looked at the images - like the chicken that flew up in the air, wonderful!
Celie Placzek

Because getting together via Zoom is logistically easier than in-person – no driving and parking - some groups are meeting more frequently. We can attend when we want and however we want. As Don Hubbard commented, at a large event we can tune in without dressing up, or turning on cameras or microphones – just sit back, have a snack, and enjoy. Shirley is "showing

up more than I have in the past,” and Roger feels that Zoom has “enriched my life because it’s easy to sign up and attend.”

So the Village is zooming away, but the transformation has not been without frustration and loss. Technology challenges, for example, can be incredibly irritating. When Charlotte Shoemaker uses Zoom, at random and sometimes frequent intervals “the participants freeze, Zoom reverts to its home screen, a circle goes round and round on my screen, and the other participants see my name in the square,” but a minute later it automatically returns her to the group. Bill Graham tried mightily to help, and he commended Charlotte for her resilience, “You just plug all along anyway!” We need patience and good humor, and coping may be easier with a continuing group of people who know one another. Roger remarked that people who know one another “are more tolerant of Zoom glitches and not making judgments if people stumble around with the technology.”

Patience is also required when the participants differ in their skills with Zoom. We all know the Zoom meeting routine: Meetings start with 5 or 10 minutes of Zoom support, and, even then, meetings are often interrupted with more Zoom instruction (‘how can I change the view?’ ‘how do I mute myself?’ ‘I don’t see the chat!’).

And there is loss. Some kinds of Village events have paused or been substantially revised. It’s close to impossible to hike, play a board game, or knit over Zoom. Most attempts at shared meals have been abandoned because of the awkwardness of eating in plain view.

Zoom is more accessible

Once people master the basics of Zoom, they may find it easier and less

Zoom is a boon for me because I don't have to drive, park, and struggle through doors with my walker.
Mary Jo Powell

time-consuming to join a Zoom event than travel to an event or meeting. Mobility, for example, is a key issue for Mary Jo Powell, and she commented that

“Zoom is a boon for me... I don’t have to drive, park, and struggle through doors with my walker.”

Hearing is the key issue for Bill; with Zoom, “I can hear 100%, and my reaction is, ‘This is the way the real world lives, and I kinda like that!’”

I can hear 100%, and my reaction is, ‘This is the way the real world lives, and I kinda like that!’
Bill Graham

Alison mentioned a friend who is “in heaven because now she has access to all sorts of things she couldn’t hear in the past.”

Recordings provide greater access as well. It’s much easier to record a Zoom event than a live event, and AV staff have been so helpful by posting recordings on the Village’s Youtube channel soon after each event. As Alison

commented, “it’s terrific because now we have a stockpile of things to view at our leisure.”

Learning how to participate in a Zoom event

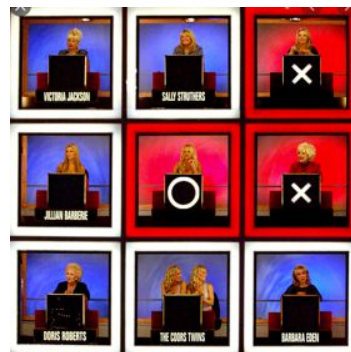
Events and gatherings are different over Zoom, and we’ve all had to *learn how to Zoom*. As Don commented, some differences aren’t necessarily “a positive or a negative, they’re just different.” For example, “we had to learn politeness – not interrupting,” and Don appreciates that, in some groups, the

In some groups, we don’t talk personally so we’ve had to make a point to. It’s the formality of our little boxes, and each box has its turn.
Irene Rosenthal

facilitator asks participants to raise hands before speaking, or asks quiet participants if there’s anything they’d like to add. In some of Irene Rosenthal’s groups, “we make an effort to take turns and hear from everyone on important issues.”

At meetings – like committee or council meetings – most people feel they are accomplishing on Zoom at least as much as before. People have learned how to share documents via Share Screen and how to use Chat to record questions and notes.

But, let’s face it (literally!), Zoom is like the old TV game show Hollywood Squares, with everyone looking straight ahead at the screen. It can be uncomfortable - and sometimes humorous - viewing everyone in rows of squares across your screen. We notice new things about people’s appearances; we peek into everyone’s home or their clever Zoom background; we look at ourselves, not fun if you haven’t had a haircut in months! Granted, when meetings are around a table, it’s difficult to gauge everyone’s reactions. But with Zoom, as Don commented, “there’s a publicness to the conversation – you’re looking directly into each person’s face, including your own.” Perhaps for this reason, we may feel less comfortable participating. Shirley, for example, feels less comfortable participating in large groups on Zoom than she does in large in-person groups.



And while it’s useful to have the option to join a Zoom meeting by phone, problems arise. The participants on video may forget about the phone participants, and the phone participants may be lost because they can’t see who’s speaking or view shared documents.

Learning how to host a Zoom event

Hosting a Zoom event requires practice, and presenters and hosts may underestimate how much practice! It's no surprise that people shared stories of their hosting misadventures.

At one of the Science & Ideas events, for example, Audre Newman forgot to turn on Record, and "I felt so bad because the presenter really wanted the recording!" On another occasion, Celie Placzek tried to monitor the Chat for Audre during an event, but Audre's Chat setting made the comments visible only to Audre (whoops). A technology workshop on streaming began with a lengthy Zoom tutorial that delayed the workshop far too long.

Hosts are learning how to run a Zoom event successfully. Roger, a retired college professor, realized he needed to pre-plan discussion questions for Science & Ideas. Compared with in-person college teaching, "with Zoom we don't have as much opportunity for interaction;" it's not easy to go back and forth between slides and the participants, because "the more people you have, the harder it is to see everyone" in Gallery View. He hopes that more practice with the Raise Hands function will help him engage his audience.

It can be difficult to manage both Zoom and the event itself. Audre and Roger would like someone to handle Zoom and provide brief Zoom tutorials – for example, on "how to ask a question, how to raise hand." And they'd appreciate someone monitoring the Chat so the presenter can pause periodically to address questions and comments without reading through the entire chat.

What's missing from Zoom meetings?

We're all missing opportunities for informal socializing, and the formality of Zoom events can interfere with personal conversations and connections. As Irene put it, "you raise your hand, and it's all about business."

Alison misses contact with people and informal "chats about what's going on in their lives." Irene misses "chitchat as people stroll in," and Don misses "the personal touch and the chance to catch up." Charlotte is hoping for "more conversations and connections among members, and that's much better in real life," but, over Zoom, "I don't have eye contact and other clues." Mary Jo appreciates that the social hour has continued, but with Zoom it has to be one person talking at a time, and she misses "walking around, sitting down in

Documentary Film discussions are better because I distribute questions ahead of time, but it's less cozy because we don't see the film together - there's something very sweet about watching a film together.

Irene Rosenthal

different groups.” Alison really appreciates the efforts to create Zoom versions of parties and happy hours, but these Zoom versions “can be awkward and not that much fun.” Audre mentioned that, in a getting-to-know-you group, people took turns “to tell about a specific aspect of their lives, and that felt stiff because I want to respond as people are talking,” so she’s hoping they “get more fluid.”

One-to-one Zoom conversations can be more successful than group conversations, though not necessarily. Charlotte often prefers to talk one-to-one on the phone because, “I feel like I’m with the person – we’re together verbally, and it’s like I’m with the person even if I can’t see them.”

Village members are creating workarounds so Zoom gatherings provide more personal interactions. It’s generally an intentional decision. In some of Don’s groups, for example, “we’re doing more of that [personal sharing] because we’re aware we’re missing that.” Some interest groups weren’t pre-planned before the pandemic, but, with Zoom, the participants find they need to do more planning and structuring.

Zooming into the future?

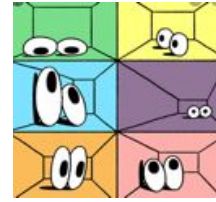
Is there a future for Zoom after sheltering? Can Zoom continue to enhance the mission of the Village? Everyone I interviewed sees a future for Zoom, and Shirley’s comments captured the views well: She’s “excited that Zoom has become part of our existence” and feels that Zoom has some promise to help people “feel more connection and open up more communication.” But there were qualifications to the endorsements.

Yes to Zoom in the future, but not all the time

It goes without saying that we can’t wait for the day Zoom isn’t necessary. Everyone misses in-person gatherings, classes, and events. Everyone misses gatherings over meals – potlucks, restaurant outings, happy hours, picnics. Everyone misses activities together like handwork and hiking. We need, and some of us prefer, in-person conversations that, as Charlotte commented, “feel better in real life.”

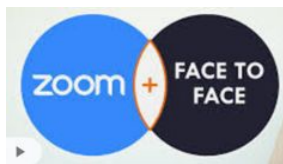
For some kinds of events and some members, Zoom is either not an option or an option of last resort. People expressed concern about members who aren’t participating because they don’t have the equipment or the skills. People are also concerned about couples where one partner needs more Zoom help than the other; for those couples, as Irene commented, “Zoom may be more arduous than getting the partner to an in-person event.”

Even among the most enthusiastic Zoomers, there's waxing and waning of interest. Zoom fatigue is real. Irene has "gotten exhausted – there's too much, it's overwhelming, and I'm too busy as it is." For Mary Jo, "there's just a lot going on" with Village events, family Zooms, online courses and lectures.



The need for hybrid models

Everyone I interviewed believes Zoom will enhance the Village post-pandemic. Zoom events are more accessible for people with mobility or hearing impairments, and Zoom events are more convenient for people who live far from the Village office. What will be needed are hybrid models that combine Zoom and in-person.



Meetings might *alternate* Zoom and in-person events, especially for smaller recurring meetings. Mary Jo hopes for a "dual thing, so I can sometimes go to meetings held at the Village via Zoom without dealing with the mobility issue," and so she can more easily do more than one thing in a day.

Meetings could *combine* both in-person and Zoom – as Don put it, "marry the advantages of Zoom and the advantages of in-person," especially for larger events. But how? Would a presentation be recorded both via Zoom and a video camera? Would a social event integrate Zoom with a computer station? The Village will need to pilot different hybrid strategies and do some careful thinking about which events are suitable for a hybrid.

What are your views?

A core theme in the interviews was the importance of member input. The Village needs to hear from you! Village members need to share their feedback about Zoom with the Village at large and also with the neighborhood and interest groups they regularly attend. As Shirley commented, "the question should be put out to the membership, and everyone should have input."

The Village welcomes your views about Zoom at info@ashbyvillage.org or (510) 204-9200. And if you'd like assistance with Zoom, contact the office to request a technology volunteer!