

Letter to the Editor

Michael R. Pilla

April 5, 2020

The arrival of COVID-19 has prompted many members of our community to reset and reflect. During this time, I would like to make the urgent request that we learn from this seismic shift and commit to implementing positive changes to our current mode of operation.

As I fall into the Early Career/Graduate Student group, I am particularly mindful of the challenges those of us in this group face and the importance of each decision we make at this fragile point of our career. A budding career, more often than not, benefits from having a mathematical community, access to the current exchange of ideas, and the resources to bring these two together. To be candid, attending conferences is expensive. For those in more demanding circumstances, such as caretaking for others or having limited financial resources, even participating in nearby workshops may prove burdensome. One often sees advice about the importance of attending conferences, networking with others in the field, and participating in the market of perspectives. These indispensable interactions should not be left to the caprice of one's financial standing, geographical location, or as is often expected, the mercy of one's institution or advisor to demonstrate willingness to assist or provide the necessary resources.

Secondly, the negative environmental impact of frequent academic gatherings has gained increasing attention in recent years. The term *Social Trap* refers to a situation in which, based on short-term gains, potentially lethal long-term harm is inflicted. Even if one is aware of the calamity ahead, one must participate in these events or face massive concessions to the trajectory of one's career. There have been efforts by some, seeing which way the wind is blowing, to try their hand at implementing incremental changes. Such efforts have included eco-friendly double conferences ¹ or, with the current state of affairs, virtual meetings ². But these efforts have not gained the necessary traction to address the problem in the long term.

In one fell swoop, virtual meetings offer an opportunity to level the playing field and address the social trap of environmental catastrophe. Local seminars, collegial meetings, and the like, that have continued in this crisis, have done so through the technological miracles of platforms such as Zoom and WebEx.

¹See, e.g., <https://www.perimeterinstitute.ca/conferences/higher-algebra-and-mathematical-physics>

²See the 3rd annual international Applied Category Theory Conference at <http://act2020.mit.edu/> for an example of this.

Circumstances, bleak as they are, have forced our hand. We have been required to adapt to these technologies. Upon exiting this chapter of history, why not perpetuate this adaptation and, as far as is conceivably possible, convert **all** future conferences and gatherings to such virtual formats?

Whether we implement these changes now or in the future, the arc of time will mandate that we update the way we operate.