

An Offer that Can't Be Refused

The reverse-zoom project aims to supplement 'live in-person' conferences with inclusive sessions dedicated to conversation. Presentations and full papers (not required) are encouraged but not required, made available to participants before the zoom event. What could be wrong with this idea?



The Lacanian-Freudian structure of the Other through the impossible predicament of the 'forced choice' was made publicly accessible with the film, *The Godfather*, whose central character Vito Corleone (played by Marlon Brando) popularized the expression 'Make him an offer he can't refuse'. The forced choice is not really a choice, but a circulation between two unacceptable and mutually defined pseudo-options. In academia, this is the imposture embedded in the standard rejection notice, 'Although we received many more excellent proposals than we expected ...'. Rejections in fact are the basis of accrediting the accepted proposals, the few against the many who, in essence, have sacrificed their work on behalf of an agenda that is traditionally encoded and concealed.

or sources of its arguments, or (3) are over-worked. In many cases, conference CFPs are coded so that proposals will not be completely anonymous. Keywords offer clues to what organizers 'really mean to support', and reviewers work according to a template that is not made public.

Yet, one says after reading the above statement, there still remains an element of aggression in the 'forced choice' aspect of this option, in the intention to restore scholarly conferences to their original ideal aim, free discussion of ideas among any who are interested and 'have something to say'. It has been widely recognized that the conference model has evolved to the point of restricting this aim to the point where free discussion is made virtually impossible by restrictions that were once imposed by the space and time limitations of venues and schedules that now, thanks to the technologies of the Internet, no longer need exist.¹

There are two modalities for anyone proposing a free-discussion zoom event as a supplement to an existing conference/symposium designed to invite participants, most of whom will be rejected to advantage those who will be selected. This in itself is imposture, thanks to the use of rejection ratios to 'certify' participants who have undergone blind review by anonymous reviewers whose credentials are not known or knowable.² In the rare case that reviewers' comments are given, many rejected applicants have detected that reviewers have (1) not read the proposal fully, (2) do not understand the basis

¹ In real time and real space, the standard conference prospect of having to endure boring talks and inept graphics is sufficient incentive to accept an 'at least minimal' review process. Experience, however, does not suggest that this process reduces, even minimally, the likelihood of boring, bad papers. The obligation to watch full presentations is not necessarily helped by time restrictions. Running sessions simultaneously acknowledges the boredom factor, while consecutive in-line presentations run the risk of exhausting even the most patient audiences.

² The anonymity of reviewers and their credentials disadvantages areas of expertise that reviewers do not have or actively opposed. In the case of ideological rejection, there is no redress. Reviewers are generally unrewarded for their efforts and, hence, hard to find. Some reviews try to balance off arbitrary judgements with a jury system. Many rejected proposers will have experienced radically opposed opinions expressed in comments; but the standard experience is that negative reviews come with terse comments if any at all.

There are, however, conference opportunities offered sincerely, even though they apply the restrictive review process using the alibi of ‘a necessary evil’. This forces the well-meaning organizer into the imposture of congratulating those refused with the required polite lie, that ‘while there were many excellent proposals ...’. Refusing the option of zoom discussion and internet posting means that the organizers have consciously decided not to allow these ‘many excellent proposals’ to present their positions, but that they do not wish to take responsibility for this decision. This may be justified because sponsoring such discussions takes time and

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effort. This proposal aims to relieve or remove that difficulty, while offering extended control over the supplemental zoom to the organizers of the original in-person conference.

The management of an in-person conference is already burdensome, and accommodating all those interested in participating is an unacceptable added task. In fact, the responsibility of this is not

the organizers’ but rather the rejected applicants’. *If it is actually true* that there were ‘many excellent proposals’, there will be no privileged information to withhold, and all applicants who submit timely proposals should exercise the right to self-organize. This convivial interpretation of the conference *invitation* is based on the principle that an invitation should be inclusive whenever and wherever that is possible and practical, with any technical barrier or expense added falling to those who would benefit from free discussion.

Can This Idea Be Made non-Aggressive?

Despite the ethical arguments for inclusion, any supplement of an event authored and organized in the standard in-person way seems to challenge ownership of the idea. In fact, a zoom event with free discussion, by offering what the in-person conference cannot offer, threatens the main conference by offering freely what it intentionally designs to be in short supply. The aggressiveness of limiting discussion is sublimated in the standard conference design. Participants who have invested time and money in attending will be denied free discussion of their ideas with what was once presented as a practical limitations but today, with the advantages of the internet, is manifestly untrue.

Yet, this option still presents itself as an aggressive act, despite the original aggression embedded within the ‘standard operating procedure’. How do organizers of shadow zoom discussions present their optional events as a goodwill gesture?

First, it is essential that the supplement is in fact a goodwill gesture. This is grounded in the original organizers’ thoughtful articulation of a truly interesting issue or topic. This sometimes actually happens because there are many under-examined issues in any field that benefit from novel re-presentation. They are designed to arouse broad interest across a range of traditions and paradigms. The ideal is for each conference to be a section cut across diverse points of view, with the conference itself designed to accommodate this diversity with equal attention to all aspects of controversy. *Even if restrictiveness is imposed in a dissimulated way* — i. e. if organizers know of its suppressive effects, have the means to avoid these effects, but still decide in favor of restrictiveness — this implicit aggression should not be opposed by a counter-aggression. The standard conference should not be undermined, *even when organizers have neglected the ease of inclusion*. Instead of ‘undermining’ (the aggressive counter-measure), the motive of reverse-zooming should remain

focused on its product: *What can be learned by the free discussion in non-restricted sessions? What can be shared, and how, that will benefit both groups?*

The forced choice is not necessarily the structure of the offer that can be refused, without consequences, at any level. The first option is *not to make the offer in the first place* — without concealing the event, to hold a ‘shadow zoom’ in the place of an actual conference event. The second option is to offer, to in-person conference organizers, an unrestricted role, with no stigma attached to refusals on any grounds (lack of time, dislike of the idea, desire to maintain the integrity of the original event). The offer intends to benefit those who must, according to the original conference’s restrictions, be rejected, as well as to those who, though accepted, must abide by limitations (15-minute limits on presentations, word-limits on works to be published, etc.). The conviviality of this zoom project must be genuine and transparent. The free speech it purports to promote must be built into its structure at all points, meaning that nothing other than scholarship be its standard.

Protocols?

If the aim of reverse-zoom conferencers is aggressive, that is, if they intend to subvert the themes or events of an actual in-person conference, this can be justified as a corrective measure, redressing the imposture whereby the in-person conference has distorted, restricted, or defaced some original idea. In this case, nothing is owed to the in-person conference or its organizers, although the reverse-zoom should be offered in good faith, filtering out any personal animosity.

Where the reverse-zoom intends goodwill and is motivated by the desire to help and promote the intentions of the in-person conference organizers, every precaution should be taken to avoid interference. Although primary concern is for reverse-zoom participants and the quality of the session(s), the original idea and efforts of the original organizers should be acknowledged, even if they decline to participate. The aim must truly be to assist in the *scholarly pursuit of the ideas that are shared by all*, with credit given to any who have constructed useful frames that bring the topic into new focus.



‘If you and I agree, then one of us is unnecessary’

— variation on a theme from Baudelaire³

³ ‘C’est par le malentendu universel que tout le monde s’accorde. Car si, par malheur, on se comprenait, on ne pourrait jamais s’accorder’. (It is by universal misunderstanding that we agree with each other. If, by some misfortune, we understood each other, we would never agree). Source: <https://quotepark.com/quotes/1768316-charles-baudelaire-pit-is-by-universal-misunderstanding-that-we-agre/>) *Journaux intimes* (1864–1867; published 1887), *Mon cœur mis à nu* (1864). Source: <https://quotepark.com/quotes/1768316-charles-baudelaire-pit-is-by-universal-misunderstanding-that-we-agre/>