PROXIMITY AND POLITICAL SCIENCE: HOW DISTANCE WAS OVERCOME (PARTIALLY) BY COVID-19

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A key enemy of understanding is isolation. Distance makes it more difficult to craft scholarly insights, to obtain feedback, and to share ideas with other scholars. Because of this, tight-knit communities have long demonstrated advantages in research and learning. In the current globalized world, distance remains a problem for scholars of the Asia–Pacific region. In contrast to Europe and the Americas—regions characterized by continents—the Pacific is an ocean with a diverse set of nations, most of which exist separated from one another, on the rim. This physical geography complicates attempts to study and to communicate insights about regional affairs. Arguably, our understanding of the region is hampered by one of its most important attributes: the physical separation of its component nations.

Cyberspace overcomes distance. Its most useful attribute is the ability to transmit ideas and images across space, linking individuals and groups—especially in situations in which geographic separation is a significant impediment. Although they are a distant second-best to actually being in person, virtual meetings through cyberspace for some time have been an alternative or complement to conferences and talks at remote locations. They are most attractive where the physical movement of people is most difficult, such as in the Asia–Pacific region.

The Pacific International Politics Conference Online Seminar Series (PIPCOSS) is an online workshop designed to encompass the intellectual interests of international relations (IR) scholars based in or engaging with the Asia–Pacific region. The series emerged in part from the annual meetings of the Pacific International Politics Conference (PIPC), which were suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic. PIPCOSS's audience consists mainly of PhD-holding academics, researchers, and political science students, including not only previous PIPC participants but also newcomers. Seminars last about an hour, with a short presentation from the author and formal comments from two discussants, followed by a general Q&A session. Authors are expected to circulate a draft paper to the discussants one week before the presentation. Since June 2020, we have held 38 meetings (as of the end of March 2022). The affiliated institutions of the presenters are located in Australia (four), Canada (one), China (two), Germany (one), Hong Kong (seven), India (one), Japan (four), Singapore (one), South Korea (one), Switzerland (one), Taiwan (one), the United Kingdom (one), and the United States (13). The size of the audience varies between 10 and 35 people, depending on the date and time of the sessions. Thursday and Friday sessions tend to draw a larger audience.

Community building is one of the critical tasks for online workshops. We circulate information on upcoming talks, which includes the title of the presentation and author information, to the PIPC listserv and other country-based and IR listservs, about a week before and on the day of the presentation. We also encourage past participants to introduce PIPCOSS to colleagues and serve as discussants to stay connected and build a community. Ironically, the average number of participants was higher during the peak of the pandemic. As vaccinations mitigated the pandemic, institutions have begun in-person teaching, which imposes more time constraints on potential participants and discussants. Once in-person teaching is restored everywhere, we will increase our efforts to expand the community by reaching out to scholars in countries that have not been included yet (e.g., Southeast Asian countries). If there is a greater demand to set a regular meeting day and time, we will consider doing so as well. In addition, we want to hold an online mixer to receive feedback from previous and potential participants about community building.

The PIPCOSS steering committee, which is composed of six members diverse in terms of age, gender, and location, diligently addresses issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The committee works to create an environment in which people from different backgrounds feel comfortable participating. PIPCOSS reduces the barriers for participants from underrepresented groups in that workshop organizers are doing the legwork of networking for the presenter, who may not have the resources to reach out to higher-profile scholars or scholars in another country. PIPCOSS also gives priority to graduate students, who have had fewer opportunities to present their research due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, PIPCOSS sessions usually are held during Asian working hours while also being accessible for those joining from Europe and North America. This addresses issues of equity and inclusion for scholars who otherwise would find it difficult to participate due to their geographic location. Cross-border travel within the Asia–Pacific region is costly because it usually is by air. Therefore, PIPCOSS enables intraregional inclusion by providing an easily accessible and friendly platform to exchange ideas for scholars in distant locations across the region.

As vaccination rates increase and the pandemic gradually comes under control, it is important to consider how the community of Asia–Pacific IR scholars can continue to benefit from our online presence and the creative adaptations it has made to date. Although there can be no replacement for in-person meetings, PIPCOSS and similar online seminar series have distinct advantages, three of which are cost, convenience, and reduced carbon footprint.

Whereas many universities faced serious financial difficulties—or at least cost constraints—during the pandemic, web-based meetings provided a low- or no-cost alternative to international travel. Even as our institutions recover financially in the coming years, the perennial challenge of managing what for many is the scarcest resource (i.e., time) will remain. Web-based research meetings are highly efficient in terms of time. We do not need to leave our desks to attend, different time zones usually can be accommodated, chat functions allow a parallel Q&A session that can be downloaded and saved after the meeting, and sessions can be recorded easily for viewing by those who cannot attend in real time.

Many political scientists also are greatly concerned about climate change. Online meetings have proven to be a viable tool that has the potential to significantly reduce our collective carbon footprint. Those of us who travel frequently in the Asia–Pacific region typically cover vast distances by air each year. For instance, a roundtrip Los Angeles to Seoul flight produces about 885 kg of carbon, according to the United Nation's International Civil Aviation Organization web calculator.[1] Given the vastness of the

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Asia–Pacific region, even regional air travel produces a significant amount of carbon. A roundtrip flight from Singapore to Taipei produces about 411 kg for each economy passenger; from Sydney to Tokyo, it is about 764 kg. These emissions from one roundtrip economy flight have increased to 19% of the total annual emissions from a typical US passenger automobile, according to data from the US Environmental Protection Agency.[2]

We are excited to continue PIPCOSS in the post-pandemic era because we believe it provides intellectual enrichment fostered by a diverse community, along with several practical benefits. PIPCOSS will serve as a forum for young scholars who settle in the Asia–Pacific region after finishing their degrees abroad—including the United States and Europe—to continue their scientific IR research while living in Asia. PIPCOSS also will serve as a forum for those who are unable to attend annual in-person meetings due to travel costs and family obligations, especially for young scholars who struggle to balance parenting with producing good research output. Even during the pandemic, many young scholars were willing to present their work and receive feedback at PIPCOSS, which indicates a greater need for an online platform such as PIPCOSS.

PIPCOSS has proven to be a viable additional mode of interaction for IR and international political economy scholars based in and/or studying the Asia–Pacific region. A key lesson from our experience is that having a diverse and relatively large group of committed organizers is an important factor for the success of an online workshop. The diverse and inclusive structure of the PIPCOSS steering committee allows us to tap various networks to promote upcoming talks and recruit excellent presenters working on a wide range of topics. It also makes it possible to share the workload across committee members, which is important for the sustainability of an online workshop. In a post-pandemic world, PIPCOSS will complement the annual PIPC in-person meeting. Given that travel distances between the Pacific and Europe/North America are among the greatest globally, PIPCOSS can increase cross-continental participation while reducing costs and climate impact. We are grateful to all those who have participated in the meetings, contributing to their success, and we warmly welcome newcomers. ■

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NOTES

1. See www.icao.int/environmental-protection/Carbonoffset (accessed October 24, 2021).
2. See www.epa.gov/greenvehicles/greenhouse-gas-emissions-typical-passenger-vehicle (accessed October 24, 2021).

CROSS-WORKSHOP REFLECTIONS

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In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic affected academic life in various ways. Among other concerns, the pandemic changed the way that research seminars were conducted. I helped to transition two preexisting seminars from in-person to virtual formats and also co-organized a virtual seminar that was created in response to the pandemic. As the restrictions associated with COVID-19 ease and in-person seminars return (at least partially), it is important to assess what we, as a community of scholars, learned from our experience of moving seminars online. More important, we have an imperative to ensure that the lessons that virtual seminars have taught us are not lost.

My viewpoint is informed by three experiences. First, I organized the internal brown-bag seminar at the University of Rochester department of political science in the spring of 2020. Second, Sergio Montero and I organized the Wallis Institute of Political Economy outside-speaker seminar series in 2020. Third, with Alexandra Cirone, Ryan Hubert, Andrew Little, and Anne Meng, I co-organized the Virtual Formal Theory Workshop in 2021. This workshop was created in response to the pandemic as a way to maintain a sense of community among scholars interested in formal political theory.

Organizing virtual seminars at the height of the pandemic was not easy, and these seminars—the Rochester internal brown bag, the Wallis seminar series, and the Virtual Formal Theory Workshop—were far from perfectly executed (on my part). I have learned several lessons that inform how I think about seminar organizing—in particular, from the contrast between traditional in-person seminars to fully virtual seminars. I share these lessons in the spirit of contributing to a discipline-wide discussion about how best to utilize virtual tools going forward, which I believe will be useful for transitioning back to in-person activities.

In my view, organizing a seminar entails two ethical responsibilities that should guide which parts of virtual seminars we retain when in-person seminars resume. First, seminar organizers have an obligation to the audience—whether they are departmental colleagues or members of a research community (e.g., formal theorists, methodologists, and comparativists). Second, organizers should carefully consider which scholars are invited to seminars. Presentations are opportunities for scholars to improve their work and gain visibility. Because there is no substitute for a seminar presentation, organizers are ethically obligated to ensure that seminars—through the scholars they elevate and the opportunities they offer to departments and research communities—constitute a positive force in shaping the discipline.

For seminars that traditionally were held in person but were forced online by COVID-19, it is important that they resume as we transition out of the pandemic. Seminars that traditionally were held in person have a rigid format and admittedly were difficult to adapt to the pandemic. A major misperception early on was the idea that we simply should host a seminar—but on Zoom! I learned quickly that the interactive dialogue in which audience members ask questions and speakers respond generally did not translate well to virtual formats. However, the interactive seminar format is

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