

Some Options for Video Conferencing in the Coronavirus Age A Real Tool Against Social Isolation

Bill Blair 29 March 2020

With the current COVID19 crisis there is a potential for significant social isolation, especially in the U3A Canberra family given its demographic.

Increasingly, digital technologies are emerging to permit virtual gatherings from your own home to replace the physical gatherings that U3A was able to support in the past. Systems such as *Skype*, *Facetime*, *WhatsApp* and more are supporting electronic connections. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses (e.g. the need to be registered with a service, the need to have specific computing hardware).

Members of U3A and other like-minded organisations have been experimenting with a number of these platforms. Three have been specifically examined for their utility for U3A to permit dispersed lectures or discussion groups.

The three packages examined are an emerging industry front-runner called *Zoom*, an open source alternative called *Jitsi* and a Google-based platform called *Hangouts Meet*. They all share a common theme of video (and/or audio) meeting over the Internet. I could summarise their distinctive differences as:

ZOOM. Arguably this is the package that has most excited people. Meetings have to be setup by a person (called a 'host') who has a Zoom account but participants don't need to. There is a small amount of software that has to be downloaded if you are using a desktop computer, or a small app for Apple or Android devices. The host can register for a free, basic account but in this case meetings are limited to 40 minutes at a time. Some courses will prefer this platform as all kinds of devices (computer or mobile) can share their computer/device screen to other participants in addition to the 'normal' share of the vision from your computer/phone camera.

JITSI. This is a very cute and simple package. Desktop computers need to use the Chrome browser (not Firefox or Microsoft Edge). A small free app is required for Apple or Android mobile devices. No-one needs to register with jitsi, it is free and there are no time limits. There are some issues with sharing the screen from mobile devices, but for simple video conferencing this may be the top choice.

GOOGLE HANGOUTS MEET. This was the last package to be explored (only very recently). It was examined as it is the video conference package tied up with the Google Suite that U3A will be adopting for the organisation's corporate email system. It is free and has no time limits on the meetings, however, the meetings have to be arranged by someone with a U3A G Suite account. I haven't written up a "Beginner's Guide" until such time as the suite is fully deployed to U3A Canberra and the issue of accounts is resolved. Desktop machines simply use their Internet browser, Apple and Android devices have to download a small, free app.

NOTE: Beginner's guides to participating in Zoom and Jitsi meetings can be downloaded after logging into the U3A Members Home page at <https://www.u3acanberra.org.au>, then clicking on the links in the Members' News item, *Video Conferencing in the Coronavirus Age*.