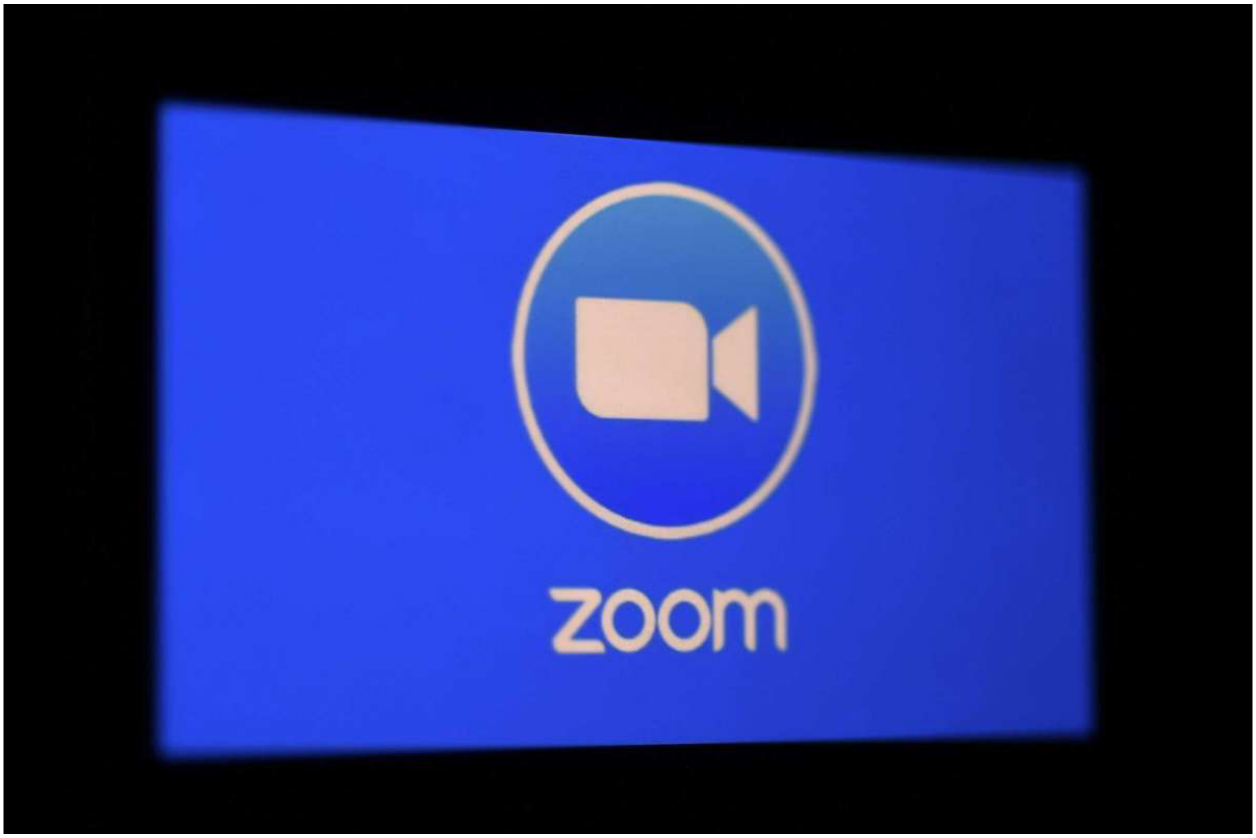
Zoom-bombing retroactively raises questions about online etiquette

Jo Kroeke **April 2, 2020 Updated: April 2, 2020 5:30 p.m. CT POST**



In Massachusetts, two high school teachers had their Zoom classrooms reportedly hijacked while they were teaching kids.

One individual, who was not visible on-screen, yelled profanity and then shouted the teacher's home address, according to the FBI. Students and the teacher could see the other hijacker, who displayed swastika tattoos.

These interferences, whether by people who had been invited to participate or by hackers, have also hit closer to home.

New Canaan town officials have twice seen their meetings take an obscene turn. During a budget presentation March 26, loud music interrupted and a reference to male genitalia appeared across the screen, in the line that identifies the speaker. The problem resurfaced during the annual public hearing on the budget Tuesday. Council members tried to mute those coming in, but not before racial epithets, obscenities and pornographic images made it into the video conference.

Only a few days earlier, an unknown individual interrupted a Middletown Public Schools community forum by repeating the "n-word" multiple times, while two officials — both of whom are African American — presented the district's e-learning plan.

And Wednesday night's budget public hearing in Cromwell was similarly derailed by racial epithets, racially-charged video and pornography.

Reports of these disruptions, called Zoom-bombs, have increased as schools and offices take their classrooms and conference rooms online. Experts say users who do not know all the features of these apps or do not set up explicit codes of conduct ahead of a call are vulnerable to these disruptions.

"We are deeply upset to hear about the incidents involving this type of attack," a Zoom spokesperson said in a statement. "We strongly condemn such behavior and we encourage users to report any incidents of this kind directly to support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/requests/new so we can take appropriate action."

In response to these safety and security concerns, Greenwich Public Schools, where elementary schoolers have iPads and middle- and high-schoolers have Chromebooks, took its time to launch videoconferencing, Superintendent Toni Jones said.

"We work with teenagers, so it's about making sure they're in a good learning spot, that they're dressed for school — a lot of these are safety and security issues for teachers," Jones said in a virtual Board of Education meeting March 26. "People don't think about that when they use (these platforms) in their adult lives."

The school district set up a code of conduct with help from the Greenwich Education Association, the local teacher's union, so teachers and students are safe, she told board members.

"The key is making sure that teachers have an understanding of how to utilize any platform, especially one which is going live on the internet, before we use a platform with children," she said in an email Monday.

In a letter to parents Friday, after hearing their requests for videoconferencing, Jones said Greenwich Public Schools uses Google Meets and Zoom, but it prefers staff use Google Classroom, as it is approved by the CT Data Privacy standards.

“We are only cautiously optimistic with Zoom and its ability to meet the standard of expectations for K-12 in terms of safety and security settings,” Jones said in a follow-up email Wednesday evening. “Currently, it has not met the CT privacy expectations, while Google Classroom is an approved K-12 educational platform. When using these platforms, we must also be sure that we are not in violation of student rights, by having a student or family record a session.”

Chris Hadnagy, the founder of Innocent Lives Foundation, a national nonprofit that works with law enforcement agencies to bring online predators to justice, commended the district for waiting until rules for conduct were codified.

“A lot of people are reacting, they are not being proactive,” he said. “Smart companies and districts are saying, ‘How can we learn from mistakes and do something before that happens?’”

Hadnagy, whose areas of interest include online manipulation, stalking and cyber crime, said that Zoom has tools for shutting this behavior down, and this phenomenon can be solved with a little training.

Unwanted visitors can find their way into a meeting by “brute forcing” the 9-digit code, by trying random numbers until one combination works. Or, they can find publicly posted links and codes in shared online calendars, he said.

One easy fix for private meetings is to send passwords through texts and secured messaging. For public meetings, such as those in New Canaan and Middletown, however, the call can be set up so that when people join, their cameras and microphones are automatically turned off, and only a moderator can turn them on.

That, Hadnagy said, can keep users safe from “a loser coming on and showing porn.”

Hadnagy suggested the meeting leader nominate a moderator, who controls who can speak and when.

When Wilton Public School administrators realized the closures would last longer than originally thought, they started preparing teachers to use Zoom safely. This week, videoconferencing officially started in the district with teachers in older grades using Zoom for instruction and teachers of kindergarteners, first and second-graders using it for morning meetings, when they check-in, read aloud and let kids talk about their day.

“Really, kids at that age need reassurance,” Superintendent Kevin Smith said. “When it’s so uncertain, and so scary, seeing your teacher’s face can go a long way.”

In preparation for the launch, last week families and teachers received guidelines, protocols and norms on conferencing from the district.

“There is no perfect tool, and (the apps) are just tools,” said Fran Kompar, the director of digital learning. “The kinds of things that have to be in place are beyond tools, such as acceptable-use policies. Those policies are more important than ever.”

Hadnagy agrees.

Outside attacks are serious, he said, but the more common problem comes from within: Users who do not observe web-conferencing etiquette, and wear work-inappropriate clothing, accidentally broadcast family members in their underwear, or use the bathroom.

“As long as you have people and technology you’re going to have these kinds of problems,” he said.

He recommended teachers be strict with guidelines, so kids know they will be banned and not invited to the next call if they break the rules.

“Otherwise, students will come in and say, ‘I didn’t know this would be bad,’” Hadnagy said. “Right now, there are no consequences. People ... think it’s funny. But when there are consequences, people pay attention more.”

The Whitby School in Greenwich started training teachers in videoconferencing platforms in early March. Once Zoom-bombing news broke, the school included more guidance for securing virtual classrooms, Director of Innovation Tim Schwartz said.

“It’s an ongoing effort and there is learning for all of us,” he said in an email. “We’re grateful that we haven’t had to deal with Zoom-bombing yet.”

With the measures in place, students, even the youngest ones, are actively participating in videoconferencing sessions while balancing time off-screen, Schwartz said.