

21035 It's time for Zoom to look at the bigger picture

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If a week is a long time in politics, then it's an eternity in a pandemic. A month ago nobody – save perhaps employees of globally dispersed corporations – had heard of Zoom, the video-conferencing system. Now it has apparently become a critical part of our national infrastructure as many in the population try to work from home.

This is, of course, great for Zoom Video Communications Inc. Its share price has more than doubled in the same few weeks that most stocks have plummeted. However, becoming top dog in a networked marketplace has its downsides. One of them is that journalists start digging into your past. Another is that you acquire new responsibilities.

History first. Zoom followed rule No 1 in the playbook for internet companies: get big fast. The way to do that is to offer your service free – with the option of charging for superior services. At the moment Zoom offers free video conferencing for up to 100 participants, with a 40-minute time limit. If you want longer meetings, you have to pay for it. As with all such 'free' internet services, Zoom has had its share of anti-social uses – child abuse, porn and privacy violations, for example. To these has now been added a new problem of 'Zoombombing', where occasionally families and groups have had their discussions interrupted by trolls broadcasting pornography, Nazi propaganda etc.

Some other things about it need to be fixed, or at least clarified. The first of these involve Zoom's relationship with Facebook. An investigation revealed that the Zoom iOS app was sending data to Facebook even if the user didn't have a Facebook account. "We were made aware on Wednesday, March 25, 2020," it wrote, "that the Facebook was collecting device information unnecessary for us to provide our services." Ponder that for a moment. The level of carelessness implied by "we were made aware" is staggering. As one analyst observed, Zoom clearly had no idea what data Facebook was collecting. The only inference one can draw is that nobody in the company had actually *read* Facebook's terms and conditions for the Software Development Kit – which say: "We can analyse your app, website, content, and data for any purpose, including commercial."

And the moral of all this? Zoom is providing a service of real value in these desperate times, but it needs to grow up. It's playing in the big league now.

396 words