

COMPUTER LABORATORY

KNUT BOEHMER

When I wrote last year's report, it had become clear that COVID-19 would affect work at the OI for a while, but I doubt anyone had anticipated this would be the case for more than a year. While the opportunity to support staff and faculty working from their "home bases" shaped up to be a welcome daily challenge, it also meant finding new ways to connect with people who had technical issues—in some cases, even the inability to connect to the internet. This new, decentralized work structure was also a driving force behind digital workflow overhauls. At the same time, there were new, major, global digital threats that arose, severe exploits that were uncovered and needed remediation, and finally, of course, the small day-to-day tasks that still needed attention. All in all, 2020–21 was an unprecedented, mostly digital year for the information technology (IT) department, and for most of the computer-centric work of staff and faculty it will have ripple effects for years to come.

Zoom

While the first half of 2020 saw the first rollout and experiences of getting to know Zoom, the program became a staple in everyone's workday over the last year. Hardly a day went by without several video meetings. But several larger changes to functions and features in Zoom still made it a challenging task to stay on top of everything. New, useful tools were rolled out, and the positions or symbols of some items changed, all of which information had to be communicated in personal briefings and documentation.

Event Coordination, Support, and Recordings

With nearly all OI programming going fully online, most larger events have become an all-hands-on-deck situation, which I have gladly contributed to. Over the last year, we had an unprecedented variety of events—to name a few, besides the many regular live lectures, we broadcasted recorded lectures, online book clubs, interactive learning and crafting events for children, a few live behind-the-scenes tours (with the *visitors* being shown around from their homes), and, unfortunately, also a few remembrance ceremonies for people close to the OI that had passed during the year. Each one of these virtual events came with its own set of rules, risks, and challenges, depending on audience size, interactivity, and many more factors. Happily, we have a great team that has grown to a solid unit composed of people who are constantly helping each other out, so that 99 percent of all our events went off without a hitch. Additionally, the fully digital events allowed recordings to be made, so that in most cases would-be participants who could not make it to a given event in person did not miss out on our interesting topics, thereby further boosting our growth on social media.

Ancient Armenia Conference

On April 9, 2021, Alain Bresson and Elizabeth Fagan hosted the online conference Ancient Armenia: Center and Peripheries. With all hosts and speakers in North America and Europe, as well as all guests being located all around the globe, this event was the first fully online-only conference that I had to plan and execute from a technical standpoint. The symposium, having a total of fifteen

speakers and eight talks across three panels and around two hundred viewers over the course of the day, proceeded without any problems, and a subsequently edited recording was produced and later given to the organizers.

CrowdStrike

2020 saw an unprecedented rise in the number of cyber-attacks, increased spread of scams and ransomware, and so forth. With the University's contract with Symantec running out in November of 2020, IT Services (ITS) found a new service provider in the cyber-security technology company CrowdStrike. The major challenge here was to roll it out in a situation where most of the computers in use for the OI never came to campus (and to date still have not returned), thus leading to a series of remote calls and long-distance installations made a bit more complex than initially anticipated by the diversity of the off-campus home networks.

As of the time of writing this report, about half the OI's faculty and staff machines have been supplied with the new security software. We project completion of this project by November if the current return to campus (September) is realized.

Code42

The second big software rollout for the OI was Code42, formerly CrashPlan, which is a cloud-based backup program added as a new offer by ITS to all faculty and staff of the University of Chicago in the last year. Code42 features a minimally distracting interface and ensures that all data is automatically being backed up to a safe cloud location once set up. I began to roll it out in May 2020, and it is being used by about 40 percent of OI computers so far. The expected full completion date to cover all computers with valuable data is November 2021. This program has already proven invaluable for several cases of accidentally deleted data by recovering lost days or even weeks of work for both faculty and staff.

Breasted Hall Upgrade

With events returning to Breasted Hall later in 2021, the shift in how events will be held going forward meant that the technical expectations also slightly shifted. Having been conceptualized as a room that can stream events only outward, Breasted Hall's original setup did not include any options to allow the room to be used for two-way video conferencing. Working with college admissions and the ITS audiovisual (AV) team, I mapped out the necessary changes to the already installed systems. Going forward, not only will the changes make it possible to use the room for hybrid events by essentially turning it into one of campus's largest webcams, but they will also expand on presentation possibilities by adding a second, audience-facing camera, as well as improving camera quality. The upgrades are expected to be installed in September 2021 and will help cement Breasted Hall as one of the most attractive conference spaces on campus once physical events return.

Going Forward

As of the writing of this report, the University is planning to resume in-person activities in early September 2021. For staff, a transitional period of six months is planned: most meetings and events will be held in a hybrid model that allows remote workers to participate from home. This plan comes with its own set of challenges from an IT perspective, as most meeting rooms in the OI are not (yet) equipped with webcams, screens, and microphones necessary for these types of meetings. Also, with everyone returning regularly multiple times per week, I expect a small wave of problems arising for devices that have been largely dormant for a year and a half.

A second major task will consist in completing the rollout of the new backup and security solutions for people who have not yet returned to campus even occasionally. This work is necessary to ensure that we are safe from cyberthreats and prepared in case of potential, unexpected data loss.

Finally, I look forward to tackling the new challenges and tasks that will undoubtedly come up in the next year and to striving to ensure that everyone has the best digital work environment possible.
