Google Meet takes on Zoom with AI-powered noise cancellation

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After years of wheel-spinning, Google is frantically trying to compete in the video messaging space, where the coronavirus pandemic has led to an explosion in demand for video conferencing. Meet's latest feature is noise cancellation for video conferencing, which can cut out a lot of the annoying background noises you would normally encounter in video calls.

The feature was originally announced in April, but it is only starting to roll out now and could take another month to hit everyone's account. Serge Lachapelle, G Suite's director of product management, gave an interview to VentureBeat explaining how the new feature works.

"It is important to say that this project stands on the shoulders of giants," Lachapelle told VentureBeat. "Speech recognition and enhancement has been heavily invested in at Google over the years, and much of this work has been reused." Once you have AI that can detect speech, apparently you can also use that tech to detect things that are not speech and remove them from the audio.

"It works well on a door slamming," Lachapelle said. "It works

well on dogs barking; kids fighting, so-so. We're taking a softer approach at first, or sometimes we're not going to cancel everything because we don't want to go overboard and start canceling things out that shouldn't be canceled. Sometimes it's good for you to hear that I'm taking a deep breath, or those more natural noises. So this is going to be a project that's going to go on for many years as we tune it to become better and better and better."

So far Zoom has been the big winner in the pandemic video conferencing wars. The company was ready to go with the leading video conference product at the start of the pandemic and saw a 20x increase in daily active users between December 2019 and April 2020. In addition to Zoom supporting a lot more participants than the competition, Zoom has had a free tier for years, while Microsoft Teams only added free video conferencing last week, and Google Meet only opened up to non-G Suite users in April. Now both companies are scrambling to catch up to Zoom.

Right now, Google is in third place. By the end of April—the company said Meet had 100 million "daily meeting participants," a metric that counts a single person multiple times for each meeting they participate in. Google released this metric a day before Meet became free for everyone, so these were all paying G Suite users. Zoom has three times that many users—the company announced 300 million daily meeting participants in April—and Microsoft is beating Google, too, having hit 200 million daily meeting participants on Microsoft Teams in the same month.

Once the feature hits your account, it will be on by default, but you can turn it off in the settings. For now, the feature is only rolling out to Web users, with iOS and Android coming sometime later.

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