

Zoom became *Saturday Night Live*'s breakout star in historic all digital, remote episode



“Live from Zoom, it’s *Saturday Night Live*” isn’t a phrase people ever assumed NBC’s quintessential late night show would ever open with, but then again, most people likely weren’t using Zoom as daily vernacular a month ago.

The breakout star of *Saturday Night Live*’s unprecedented remote episode was the video conferencing tool tens of millions of people are using while working from home. It wasn’t just a casual throwaway line in a sketch during *Saturday Night Live*’s (SNL) most recent episode. It wasn’t just a venue where the show was filmed, standing in as a digital replacement for Studio 8H at 30 Rock in New York City. Zoom became a cast member in its own right as the SNL team worked remotely to put together a 90-minute show for Saturday night. There was a dedicated Zoom sketch, constant jokes that ended with Zoom punchlines, and an impressive Weekend Update

segment all done using the productivity software.

Like everyone else stuck working from home, the cast of *Saturday Night Live* were also left to figure out a way to remain productive in an extremely abnormal time. For *Saturday Night Live*, that means there aren't any sophisticated props, costumes, or audio and visual effects to carry gags. It's a group of people sitting in front of their webcams, trying to think of witty one-liners. Zoom provides the barebones of what regular people need to continue working remotely, but as a venue for the show, it stripped down a form of entertainment reliant on a number of external factors into nothing but sheer drive from comedians to *make something*.

The big question is did it work? Not always, but *Saturday Night Live* rarely produces a show with nothing but outstanding sketches. As guest host Tom Hanks, who recently recovered from the coronavirus, said in his opening monologue, "It's *SNL* – there will be some good stuff, maybe one or two stinkers." Or to steal a traditional showbiz phrase, the show must go on. Ensuring that show goes on is much easier with a multi-billion dollar conglomerate behind it (*SNL* airs on NBC, which is a division of NBCUniversal, owned by Comcast) even without the props, cameras and sets its budget usually provides.

(NBCUniversal is also an investor in Vox Media, The Verge's parent company)

That was obvious in the sketches that made it to air. If Zoom was the stage, the format was more in line with what people might expect out of a YouTube upload or viral video on Twitter. Last night's *SNL* more closely resembled TikTok than the live show fans are used to, but with even more limitations. There wasn't any physical comedy to drive home jokes – no spit takes, exaggerated falling, or weird body contortions. Outside of a couple sketches, there weren't even major collaborations among the comedians – a staple of *Saturday Night Live*– and the element that makes it a variety

sketch show.

[embedded content]

Instead, comedians filmed from their bedrooms and basements. Kate McKinnon included her cat. Pete Davidson filmed on his street in suburban Staten Island, in front of a house he shares with his mom. They used makeshift green screen backgrounds on Zoom for any kind of visual gag. Technology effectively replaced physical props, becoming just as much a creative crutch, a safety blanket in the form of Zoom audio issues and Twitch livestream set ups, as it was a means for distribution.

That means certain sketches fell flat. Although *Saturday Night Live* has moved toward incorporating more digital sketches throughout the years, those are still based around multiple people appearing together. Since that was impossible for last night's episode, ideas that might have worked well if there was more than one person in a video, didn't have the same magic. Pete Davidson rapping about Drake's new song in his basement is one example.

Other ideas managed to pull it off by leaning into the format. Heidi Gardner's popular Weekend Update character, a Bailey, finally got to record an entire episode of her movie review show on YouTube. Mikey Day became a Twitch streamer who sucks at *Call of Duty* in another sketch. Aidy Bryant used different Zoom backgrounds to guide viewers on a meditation journey. Beck Bennett and Kyle Mooney (alongside special guest Fred Armisen) used a FaceTime call to turn a conversation into a song. It's in these instances where *SNL* zoomed in on the absurdity of our lives right now that jokes really landed, pun not intended.

Last night's episode was one of the show's most heartfelt, even if all-digital, remote episodes are not its future. *Saturday Night Live* couldn't have accomplished what it did

last night without the technology that allowed the team to collaborate, record, and edit from home, or without enough recognizable instances of daily tech use in our lives for *SNL* to riff on. The things that *SNL* managed to poke fun at – Instagram, Twitch, YouTube, FaceTime, Zoom – only work because tens of millions of people use them daily. *SNL* found its moment of normalcy in satirizing the technology that brings us together right now – an attempt to redefine normal reflected in our own lives around the world.

<https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/12/21218052/saturday-night-live-remote-digital-episode-zoom-tom-hanks-kate-mckinnon-aidy-bryant>