

Dr. Bhavani's Diary (Working from Home during COVID-19) – Part 1

March 13, 2020 - April 24, 2020 (6 weeks)



On March 12 during lunchtime we were informed in a message from the senior administration at the University of Texas at Dallas that we will be having an extended Spring Break starting March 13 evening until March 30th morning after which all classes would be online until the end of the semester. My immediate reaction was relief as the chances of me getting COVID-19 would be a lot less. Then that evening my students started emailing me expressing their concerns taking the exam on March 13. I assured them that the exam would be a take home exam. However, on March 13 I did go to the university to meet with my undergraduate student who was doing some research with me. I recommended her to read some papers and then went home. That weekend I was re-writing the exam as it was now a take home exam and I believe I sent the new exam to the students on March 15. I also graded some assignments that weekend. I had to go to the University on Monday March 16 as I had left my diary at work. Ever since I watched Bridget Jones Diary in 2001, I have my own diary with full of notes about work and some personal stuff that had to get done. It's now 19 yrs. since I have kept a diary. I get them from CVS pharmacy and they come in different colors and patters. Of course, some patterns are duplicates and I try not to use the same pattern for the diary one after the other. That is, I mix them up. So enough of my diaries, let's get back to my schedule. Please note that I will mainly focus on my work life and less on my personal life to protect the privacy of my family.

March 17 (Tuesday) I get my home office organized and then gave the opening keynote address and panel via Zoom at Cyber-W: Women in Cyber Security Research Workshop on March 18. I was so happy to do this and got very motivated. The next almost two weeks was spent on serving on three PhD committee meetings and also writing some papers for three conferences organized by IEEE. But all the while my main concern was the major international conference I was chairing for IEEE (IEEE Data Engineering) in Dallas April 20-24. We discussed with IEEE and the steering committees and decided to postpone it hoping that COVID-19 would be gone by summer 2020. But now we get to the end of March and there was no end in sight for COVID and some other conferences were going online and so on April 1 we decided to have the virtual conference via Zoom for the same dates (a joint decision by IEEE, the steering committee, technical committee and organizing committee). I will get back to the conference shortly.

In the meantime, I was also supposed to co-chair an ACM conference ACM CODASPY in New Orleans March 16-19. But on March 8 the organizing committee decided to postpone it to October. I preferred a virtual conference but most of the others preferred a face to face conf. At that time October seemed far away and we thought COVID would be gone by summer. So, I was still happy that we could have a face to face conf and I could deliver my banquet address on AI for Good. But now it looks like the conf would likely be virtual.

So now I finish the articles and send them to the publishers, also worked with our outstanding editor in our department who was writing an article about me which she published on March 30. This is the day that school started for Spring semester. Students completed their exams and I had given them a revised agenda and gave them time to finish some assignments. My next class was on April 10. That gave me some time to select the papers for them to read and we posted them on E-learning, the platform we use for teaching. So now that I had a good handle on the teaching and completed the papers for 3 conferences (IEEE IPDPS, IEEE Big Data Security and Privacy and IEEE IRI), I also committed to submitting a paper for IEEE ISI in the Fall. I was quite pleased with the progress and also read some research papers on machine learning and security. During this time, I also completed a project report. But the major IEEE ICDE conf was looming at the back of my mind.

Then our small team, myself, our project coordinator and the three research PC Chairs worked really hard for the conference meeting almost every day and working with IEEE setting up the Zoom streams and working with the authors. We decided to give a reduced registration to authors and have it free for others. So, we got 2000 registrations. It was a huge challenge as to how we could pull it off. We were not ready for the conference to start on April 20 but decided to give it our best shot.

In the meantime, I continued to teach my classes and plan for the summer class (social media analytics and security focusing on COVID-19) and also my Fall class on Secure Data Science. Also, I wanted to host the Stanford University's WiDS (Women in Data Science) Dallas event as an ambassador at ICDE. Once I knew that the main part of the conference was going to be OK by April 9, I started planning for the WiDS Dallas event and invited some of the top female researchers in data science including the professor from Stanford who is the founder of WiDS to give the talk. This event was going to be on April 24. All this while I continued to work with my students, grade the assignments, give them feedback and plan for Exam #2 and their programming projects.

While all this is going on at work, I also had to coordinate the activities with my family. My husband whose base is in Boston and travels back and forth between Dallas and Boston arrived in Dallas Feb 15. I had attended AAAI in NYC and gotten back Feb 13. So, his plan was to spend 3 weeks in Dallas. After spending several years at MIT, he is now an entrepreneur developing a ceramic rotary engine and some of his work is in Dallas. Unfortunately, he could not get back to Boston due to COVID. And we felt it was better for both of us to stay together. Our son and his family are in New York City and I dread every day how they are. So far are all OK and hope we stay that way. We even had some family events on Zoom and they were great. Thanks, goodness, for technology. I had three things to worry about. Safety of my family, my work at the university and the major conference.

So now we have arrived at the week of April 20. The Day 1 of the conference on April 20, we started off with a short meeting between the key members of the organizing team (our daily recap) and then a day of workshops which went without any glitch (except some

very minor ones). I was anxious about April 21 – Day 2 of the conference and Day 1 of the main conference. We started with our opening remarks and then the keynote followed by tutorials, paper sessions and a second keynote. April 22 was also a success and in addition to the keynote, tutorials and paper session we also had our gold (Alibaba) and platinum (UT Dallas) sponsor presentations. This was followed by April 23 starting with the gold (Qatar Computing Research Institute) sponsor presentation, keynote, tutorials paper sessions. We finished the conference early afternoon. Then we started working frantically so that everything was in order for the WiDS Dallas event – getting the logos, linking Zoom to YouTube and some other planning and everything went well without any glitch on April 24. IEEE helped us a lot.

My major advice now, do not plan a large virtual conference in 20 days. We had no choice. As I mentioned earlier, we thought COVID would be over by the summer and so had planned to postpone it to Fall. But by March 30 we realized that COVID was not going away anytime soon. It may even take a year or more to get back to near normal. So that's when we decided on April 1 to go virtual. Having gone through the experience I believe that we need at least 3 months to organize a large virtual conference,

What were the challenges during this trying time? I kept myself busy and felt on top of the world most of the time, there were also very anxious times with COVID-19, I could not go to the Gym and went too often to the kitchen to eat and eat. This was the case for 4 weeks. Then at the end of it I decided I have to take care of my health and be fit so that I don't die if I get COVID. So, I started using my exercise bike at home and also ate more healthy food. Also, even though the conference was online, I wanted to dress up every day like I would have had I attended the conference in person. So, I selected 5 outfits one for each day (blue, pink, red, orange and burgundy). Only thing was that I did not have any hair color and so had to use mascara to touch up the gray. However, I am now thinking of leaving it gray while I am home to see whether it is fully gray. I have been coloring my hair since I turned 40. My oldest sister said my hair was embarrassing and practically dragged me and colored it for me when I visited her in August 1995. As they say once you start coloring it is not easy to give up.

So today is April 24 evening – exactly 6 weeks since I started the diary. Much has happened these six weeks. Lot of trials and tribulations but at the same time some joy and hope. I also learnt a lot using Zoom, WebEx, Teams, and more, even though I may have contributed to some of these technologies through my earlier research in collaborative and multimedia data management. One thing is for certain; without technology the world economy would have completely collapsed with COVID-19. Therefore, we have to work harder to develop even better technologies not only to keep the economy going, but also combat COVID-19. I will continue with Dr. Bhavani's Diary Part 2 starting tonight April 24 and see where it takes me over the next few weeks. In the meantime, I wish all my family, friends, colleagues, students and everyone else the best of health and happiness.