

## RIFS-Blogpost

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[Dachzeile]

# The Future of Online Participation: What Can We Learn From the Pandemic?

Building on both observation and the findings of various studies, [a new RIFS Discussion Paper](#) examines the use of online communication tools during the coronavirus pandemic and draws several conclusions for the future of online participation. Overall, this grand experiment in the use of online communication tools very clearly demonstrated their limits, and a number of lessons can be learned from this for the future.

## 1 Lockdown communication and digital discontent

The pandemic put us all in what was an historically unique situation. Isolated from the outside world, we were repeatedly compelled to shift much of our communication into the digital space. Zoom and other video conferencing tools proliferated rapidly, following in the footsteps of tools like Skype, which, while often used to communicate with contacts abroad, did not experience the same breakthrough success. A period of trial and error followed – which tools work well? When do connections get dropped? What is the best way to use the camera and headset? After an optimistic start, disillusionment soon set in. It turned out that video-conferencing can be a grind: not only do the voices sound metallic, sitting on a chair for hours, staring dead-straight at the screen, eventually leads to headaches, stiff shoulders and sore eyes (now known as 'Zoom fatigue'). Yearning to meet with colleagues over a relaxing cup of coffee, most of us could only take comfort in a short walk down the hallway to the kitchen... day in, day out.

## 2 The advantages of online communication seem so obvious

Yet it had all sounded so tempting: No more would we be forced to navigate dangerous urban or rural traffic to get to work. If you don't want to see or hear your colleagues, you can hide them at the touch of a button. And if you don't want to be present yourself, you can choose not to be seen and/or heard by pleading 'technical problems'. And then there's the environmental benefits: With all the emissions that we would save and the stress that we could avoid – video-conferencing promised something akin to perfect working conditions coupled with a salve for the eco-conscious among us. As the Pirate Party and other social movements have stressed for close to twenty years now (*liquid democracy*), digital communication can also benefit public participation in political processes. Digital solutions enable citizens to participate even when they don't have time to attend public meetings in person. Online participation can also benefit people with disabilities, where face-to-face events are difficult to reach or not barrier-free, or if certain requirements for active participation are not met. Digital solutions also enable users to respond more directly, more diverse, and even after the fact (*liquid feedback*). But if the benefits of online participation are so overwhelming, why have calls for the development of *liquid democracy* faded? And while the prevalence of online meetings has grown

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by 30% compared to pre-2020, why have experiments with online communication during the pandemic not led to more profound change in online participation? Why haven't town hall meetings, for example, simply shifted online?

### **3 The truth about online communication: "Warm" vs. "cold" settings**

Soon after the first hard lockdowns were imposed, we began to realize just how beautiful it is to experience other people with all our senses. Despite all their efforts to replicate this – from 3D glasses to haptic feedback gloves – the tech industry has only succeeded in ensuring that demand for video games remains as high as it ever was. Our experiences with online communication during the pandemic showed that tools like Zoom fail to satisfy our desire for "social" rewards. Virtual soirées have proved a dismal failure; conversation doesn't flow the way it would in person and wine tends to taste rather flat when you're sitting alone at your computer. The digital space is a cold place. New audio and video options have added some warmth, but it's still impossible to get an authentic sense of others.

Taken together, what all this means is that if online communication has certain advantages, but face-to-face exchange remains the medium of choice, then only a combination of the two ("the best of both worlds") will enable us to overcome the online/offline dilemma. This reflects the current reality in which we move fluidly between online and offline spaces. Thanks to smartphones, the boundaries between these spaces have become blurred and face-to-face meetings are now increasingly supplemented using digital solutions.

### **4 Hybrid public participation: online and/or offline?**

What lessons can we take from these experiences for future online citizen participation? One possible option would be a hybrid practice in which citizens' assemblies, for example, convene online, while events such as project site visits take place in the real world. Previous experimental approaches and [research projects like ENVIKO \(RIFS\)](#) have shown that digital spaces and tools can be tailored for use in creative and innovative public participation processes. Surveys on citizen participation in the energy transition show that the vast majority of citizens view online solutions as a useful complement to real-world formats and would prefer that events be held in person, where they can get a personal impression of project developers and local government officials involved in planning processes, for example. On the other hand, more technical aspects are often better addressed in online formats. Although interactive online formats are on the rise, including hybrid formats that use video-telephony to connect remote users with in-person events, a broader shift towards online solutions has not occurred. If anything, the pandemic has increased people's interest in experiencing a town hall meeting, site visit or planning workshop at first-hand.

### **5 The future of online participation: Dare to experiment!**

Overall, organisers of public participation processes are not harnessing the full potential of digital technologies. And this is justifiable to a degree – as the saying goes, just because you can doesn't mean you should. And yet it is only by experimenting with innovative technologies and solutions that we can identify their advantages, even if this does entail risks. [The research project AR4Wind](#), for example, used an augmented reality solution to enable citizens to view and experience the impact of a proposed wind farm at development sites using their smartphone camera. Local residents were able to gain a much better impression of the project than they would have through photographic visualizations or drawings. The [ENVIKO](#) project is currently studying how citizens could contribute to energy transition planning processes by offering feedback on visualizations of this kind. This would help to build much-needed connections between project communication efforts, public consultation and feedback, and debate in online and offline communication spaces. We are likely to see some exciting developments in online/offline participation in the years ahead.

Read more about participation in the post-Covid era here:

- Radtke, J. (2023): E-Participation in Post-Pandemic-Times: A Silver Bullet for Democracy in the Twenty-First Century? - RIFS Discussion Paper, July 2023. <https://doi.org/10.48481/rifs.2023.022>
- [Website des Projektes ENVIKO](#)