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The Urban Book Series

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# The 'New Normal' in Planning, Governance and Participation

Transforming Urban Governance in a  
Post-pandemic World

 Springer

# Chapter 18

## **Videoconferencing: Miracle Tool or Policy Trap in the Governance of Smart and Sustainable Mobility?**



**Nacima Baron**

**Abstract** During 2020, the French government imposed three lockdowns. As national regulations for smart and sustainable mobility had to be implemented very rapidly, public managers converted a significant proportion of face-to-face meetings with local authorities into virtual meetings. For this study, 34 direct and 65 remote meetings were observed, and the 15 public managers leading these sessions were interviewed. After establishing a generic script of collaborative practices and identifying the modifications made in the conversion to a videoconference format, the chapter proposes an analysis that addresses how public managers assess the benefits and limitations of videoconferencing. The main findings are that content and interactions change considerably in videoconference meetings compared with real-world meetings. And, that informational tasks are easy to deliver, but collaboration between local politicians and technocrats is much harder to achieve. Nevertheless, and somewhat paradoxically, there is strong support for videoconferencing among public managers. Consequently, as videoconferencing tends to be seen as the new normal in planning, this chapter explores the way public managers balance the positive affordances of videoconferencing (productivity, accountability, and better working conditions) with the more negative impacts of remote meetings in terms of collaborative governance.

**Keywords** Collaborative practice · Digital media enactment · Affordance theory · Public management · Smart and sustainable mobility

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## 18.1 Introduction

Since the COVID crisis, videoconferencing has become a pervasive tool in governance and public management. Erasing physical distance, Webinars—according to the public discourse of the Web-conferencing systems (WCSs) industry—provide lively forums where information sharing, open discussion, creative thinking, and collaborative problem solving are smoothly, transparently, and immediately available (Zoom Annual Report 2021). However, information and communication technology (ICT) scholars with an institutionalist perspective have for long argued that digital devices must be adapted to be adopted. In other words, ICT's characteristics and functionalities must be adjusted to the skills and purposes of users, and their benefits and limitations emerge from experience in use. In short, media technologies are enacted by public managers, and this process may transform institutions and organizations as well as the scope and content of collaborative policy.

This chapter does not directly address the (good or bad) consequences of citizens' adaptation to videoconference meetings, and this aspect has already been quite intensively explored (Ball et al. 2020; Karl et al. 2021). Instead, it situates the research gap in understanding how the emitter side (here a state agency) manages the disruption occasioned by a sudden shift to videoconference-led collaborative policy. There are two research questions here: (1). How do public managers adapt collaborative practices in the shift from physical contiguity to digital connection? and (2). How do public managers justify these adaptations?

The empirical survey relates to the implementation of low-carbon regulation in France. After the yellow jacket protests (2018–2019), the *Loi d'Orientation des Mobilités* (framework law on mobilities) were passed in December 2019, and a thousand rural intermunicipal authorities were asked to adopt and ratify local powers to manage mobility. This formal act would enable them to set up local transport authorities and to operate smart and sustainable mobility services. The moment at which public managers had to convince rural mayors exactly coincided with the pandemic crisis and the usual “tour de France” of state representants migrated to the virtual sphere.

After a theoretical overview of the digital enactment of state collaborative practices, this chapter presents the survey and describes and discusses its results. Although communication practices were degraded in videoconference meetings, WCS is strongly supported by public managers. The author discusses possible interpretations of this paradox and uncovers some of the dilemmas that videoconferencing may cause in the conduct of collaborative policies.

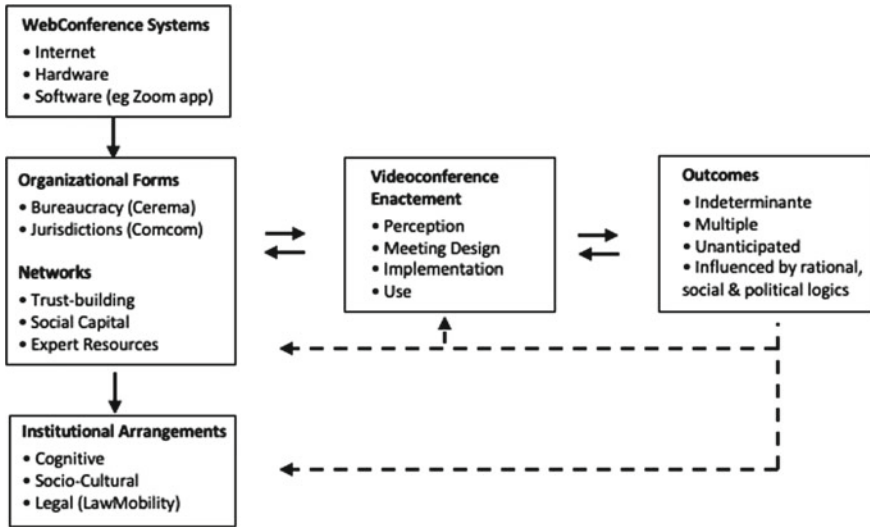
## 18.2 Theory and Method

### 18.2.1 *Collaborative Practices and Videoconference Enactment*

The term “smart and sustainable mobility transition” refers to the shift from individual car use to walking, cycling, public transport, ride sharing, and digital mobility services. Marsden and Reardon (2017) argue that this transition needs governance because the powers to regulate mobility are spread across institutional levels. France is well known to be a highly centralized state (Cole 2006; Drake et al. 2021). After the 2018 yellow jacket protests, the government adopted the *Loi d’Orientation des Mobilités* (République Française 2019)—framework law on mobilities—with the intention of transferring the capacity to implement smart and sustainable solutions from central administrations to rural local authorities—notwithstanding the role of French regional councils to plan transport major infrastructure. Regions would stay the main level of transport policy and rural municipal groupings their instrument outside of metropolitan zones. The task given to public managers at Cerema (a public agency in charge of public expertise and public policy dissemination charged with the evaluation and dissemination of public policy) was to encourage around 1000 inter-municipal authorities throughout the country to formally adopt powers that would allow them to develop smart and sustainable mobility projects and respond to the needs of the car-dependent portion of the population. This collaborative process began in September 2019, and the intermunicipal authorities had until 1st July to vote in order to obtain national funds.

This policy process can be conceptualized through the notions of collaborative governance. Davis (2018) defines the capacity of state governance in the mobility transition as the establishment of coordination and collaboration between multi-scalar actors (2018). Collaboration in transport policy mainly requires the building of a relationship of trust between central and local government (Lah 2019), and, according to Paulsson et al. (2018), entails the shift from a vertical relationship to network-based governance. As argued by Pettersson and Hrelja (2020), the alignment of visions and interests can only be attained if (1) a good quality dialog is established, (2) sufficient finance and knowledge resources are provided, (3) a clear policy mandate is given, and (4) good practical conditions for collaboration are met.

When the COVID-19 crisis began, Cerema managers converted the meetings to videoconference sessions. ICT scholars are aware that there is interaction between technology, organizational, and institutional processes, and that videoconferencing affects the discourses and behaviors of organizers and participants (Hacker et al. 2020). As a result, the conditions of enactment of media technology alter the conditions of implementation of collaborative policy. The technology enactment



**Fig. 18.1** Videoconference enactment framework (Author’s own elaboration adapted from Fountain 2001)

framework (Fountain 2001) can easily be applied to videoconferencing, where it is characterized by the following steps:

- (1) Videoconferencing is appropriated by public managers in their day-to-day practices and in the perceptions of these practices, which are influenced by rational, social, psychological, and political logic.
- (2) Gradually, videoconference practices become technically stabilized and institutionalized through the emergence of new collaborative patterns.
- (3) This appropriation drives new arrangements and finally affects the way policies which are negotiated and implemented (see Fig. 18.1).

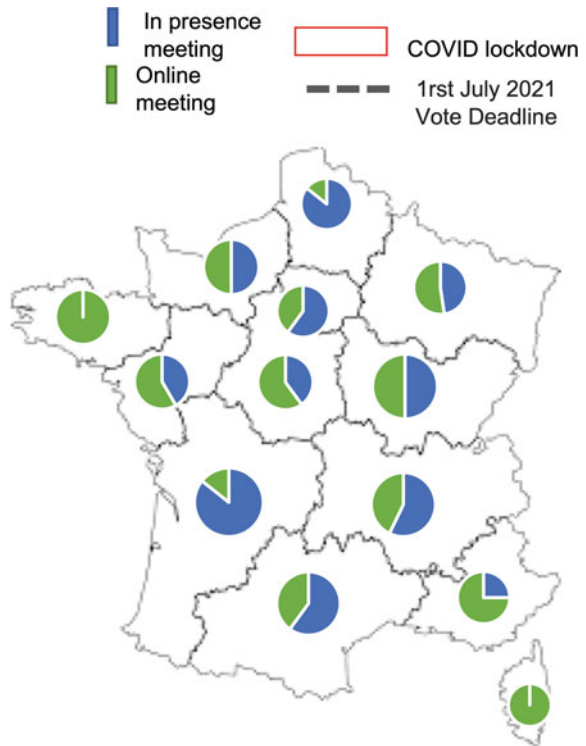
Like any media, videoconferencing is characterized by a set of affordances (Gibson 1977) that enable, limit, and structure communication practices without predetermining them (Volkoff and Strong 2017; Waizenegger et al. 2020). The enactment of videoconferencing by public managers activates affordances that are both positive and negative (Hacker et al. 2020). In our study, therefore, we try to identify these affordances in the practices and discourses of public managers in France.

### 18.2.2 Methods

The study spans the period from September 2019 to July 2020. Figure 18.2 shows the succession of real and virtual meetings in each of France’s 14 regions. In all, 29 physical meetings and 65 virtual meetings were held, attended by a total of 697

participants. I had the opportunity to follow each of them, real and virtual, as a mute participant. Afterward, 15 semi-structured interviews (each lasting between 45 and 90 min) were conducted with the 14 Cerema managers (plus their national coordinator). In the interview grid, these managers were asked to explain the script of a “normal” meeting (tasks, practices, objectives, and what kind of reactions were expected from rural mayors and staff) and then to describe a meeting under the “new normal” conditions. The 14 public managers were then asked if communication potentials were enhanced or degraded by videoconferencing, and why and how they evaluated the positives and negatives of videoconference-led collaborative governance. (See Fig. 18.2).

**Fig. 18.2** Real-life and virtual meetings balance in French regions (September 2019 to July 2020)



## 18.3 Results

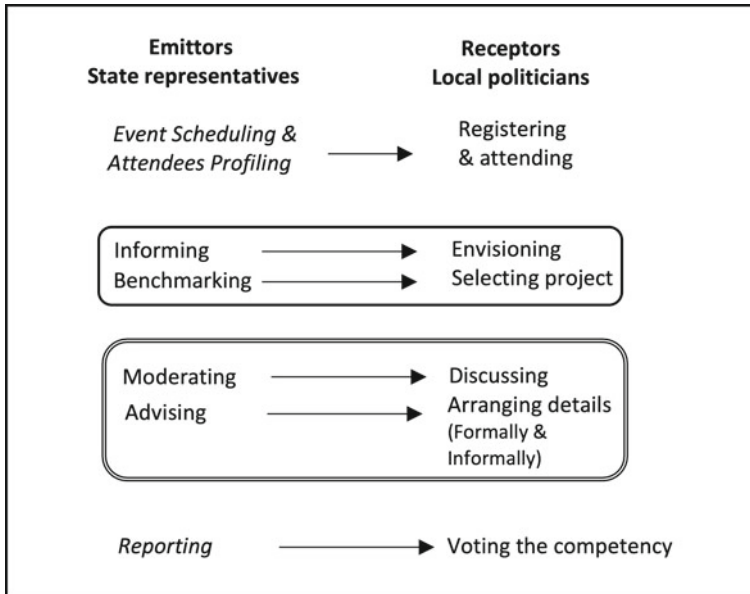
### 18.3.1 *Before-and-after Comparison of Collaborative Practices*

The results of my observation of the meetings and of the interviews with the public managers converge toward the idea that, prior to distant meetings, public managers had no clear vision about the necessity to adapt their communication practices with local representatives. They did this adaptation quite spontaneously, when understanding the difficulty of achieving their goals. I draw a pattern of the following normal and then new normal meeting script in order to stimulate their explanations and justifications concerning this adaptation.

Figure 18.3 represents a presential script of collaborative policy management. This scenario is stable and familiar. Task one consists of pre-meeting targeting, i.e., profiling a list of people permitted to attend (mainly mayors and prominent local notables whose decisions could convince other village representatives). Then, the session—held in any available official building—begins with a welcoming coffee (15 to 30 min), followed by an official speech from the senior state representative (the Prefect or any of his representants, such as the Sous-Préfet). Then Cerema's employees moderate a working session divided into two main parts. The first part is informative and consists of two steps: exposition of the law main articles using a PowerPoint document, then mayors who have already taken on the mobility prerogatives are invited to explain to their homologs the good reasons for doing so. The aim of the benchmarking session is to mitigate uncertainty and skepticism and to provide evidence of the feasibility of the mobility transition in car-dependent rural areas. The second main part is devoted to an open conversation. Public managers and local politicians discuss to what extent the low-carbon mobility measures could fit their local needs (considering the geographic and demographic context) and go into the details of procedural or financial aspects. For Rye et al. (2018), policy transfer sometimes requires the bypassing of formal hierarchies and the mixing of formal and more informal registers. Our case study reflects this. Mayors are eager to talk individually to Cerema experts with a certain discretion, away from the plenary gathering. Very often, conversations take place at the preliminary coffee, during the break, or even in the car park before leaving. In wine regions (Burgundy, Loire Valley, etc.), and if the meeting is held in a town hall, the ritual is that the welcoming mayor offers a drink to all participants and informal conversations go on in small groups. After the meeting, public manager's report back to their line managers on the proceedings and sometimes ask experts colleagues to clarify specific points (e.g., legal issues) that have been raised, on which they need further insight in order to keep open the dialog with mayors and obtain the implementation of the law.

Figure 18.4 shows the adaptive practices enacted by public managers in video meetings. Core points are listed below:





**Fig. 18.3** Real-life meeting collaborative script

- There are a few changes to pre- and post-meeting tasks (targeting and reporting) at the intra-organization and intra-institution level;
- The welcome script is greatly altered. The initial social interactions (polite greetings, informal talks on weather or health, on transport difficulties to arrive to the meeting point, etc.) are replaced by blind technical interactions. Videoconferences more often start with “*Can you hear me?*” than with “*Hello nice to see you dear... at the coffee arrival and then Ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted...*” because of the lack of bandwidth in rural areas, and significant numbers of participants must turn off their cameras to follow the session.
- Meeting duration is considerably reduced (maximum 45 min to 1.5 h), and the schedule is adapted (8 a.m. to 10 a.m.) as public managers state that rural mayors have difficulties to attend long internet sessions and quit them.
- The meetings main steps change. The first part, dedicated to informational content, is considerably extended (often filling the entire meeting), and the second deliberative part almost disappears.
- The illustrative peer-to-peer (mayor to mayor) presentation is replaced by input from the Cerema experts.
- Individual talks to adapt and adjust the application of the law to each rural community do not take place on the same day but occur some days later in the form of individual consultative videoconference sessions at the request of mayors.
- Obviously, there are no convivial rituals and no common debrief around a drink.

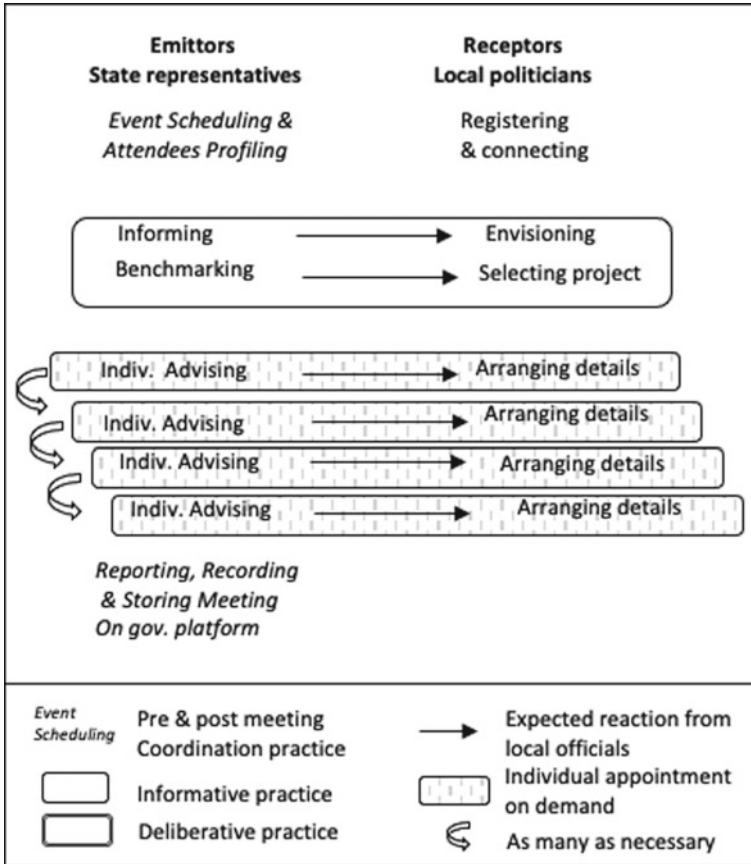


Fig. 18.4 Virtual meeting script

In a nutshell, the Cerema managers considerably alter their collaborative practices. Remote meetings are shortened and fragmented, the content is less diverse, the communicative elements are delivered, but open debate and collective discussion are limited, informal communication absent.

### 18.3.2 Public Managers’ Positive and Negative Perceptions of Videoconference

Beyond technical frustrations over the quality of Internet connections and although (or perhaps because) they have made important efforts to adapt to the shift from presence to distant practices, Cerema managers are strong adherents to videoconference solutions. The justifications are that videoconferencing gives the public manager

access to a miracle triangle of relationality, productivity, and work-life balance. Relationality refers to the coordination advantages afforded by videoconferencing. Zoom has been quickly and easily adopted in the internal communication between Cerema employees. They enjoyed agile pre- and post-meeting organization, and they consider that it has made the staff more cohesive (especially toward State administration for which they report the territorial adoption of the law). Productivity is considered from two perspectives. At individual level, public managers are relieved of the necessity for time-consuming travel. They live close to regional capitals and used to travel to the cities and villages where the physical sessions were held. The videoconference turn makes their day-to-day lives much easier. They are less alone in front of rural mayors, as Cerema experts can attend more easily the virtual session and answer immediately to technical, juridical, and any kind of detailed question the rural mayors may have. As the videoconferences are recorded, this produces a bank of questions and responses that can be shared between front line civil servants.

The convergent conclusion of the survey is that the positive affordances counterbalance the negative, even if there is a consensus that videoconferencing is much more effective for the transmission of information than for collaborative practices such as debate and argument, open discussion, and decision-making.

### ***18.3.3 The Paradox of Bad Outcomes yet Adherence to Media Technologies***

The finding is somewhat paradoxical: Public managers have enacted videoconferencing and made significant adaptations to their collaborative practices to overcome the limitations of the medium, yet strongly support the use of videoconferencing as the “new normal” in governance practices. The empirical case identifies three dilemmas around the use of videoconferencing in collaborative governance. Videoconferencing delivers immediate benefits to the leading institution in a remote collaborative policy and the employees of that institution: It gives an impression of resilience and continuity of public service. Individually, in the depths of the pandemic, public managers develop “technologies of the self” in the Foucauldian sense of the term: They embrace remote communication, acquire new technical skills, adapt their attitude, and, most importantly, believe that they are still delivering because they maintain contact with the recipients of policy. This is the reassurance effect of videoconferencing: The public managers are proud to belong to a resilient and reliable public administration because the sessions are held anyway, so they believe that the law will be adopted by local stakeholders regardless. The videoconference adaptation is a demonstration of public service proactiveness in challenging times. Moreover, videoconferencing reinforces professional cohesion and affiliation since it conveys the impression of Cerema as an agile and efficient state agency.

Tying these findings in with the literature of transport policy, one can say that these positive affordances apply much more to coordination than to collaboration tasks.

This finding is further elucidated when reconnected with the scholarly framework of media enactment. Videoconferencing, like other Internet tool previously adopted by civil service departments, is more effective in reinforcing the role of the organizational and the institutional setting than in connecting with external stakeholders (Gil-Garcia et al. 2018). ICT scholars argue that the more institution-centered and vertical an administration is, the more rose tinted is its perception of technological media. In our case study, the positive affordances are linked to a vision of the centrality of the public manager in the collaborative process. Cerema's managers, individually and collectively, adhere to videoconferencing because this technology reinforces the leading role of the state agency in the process. If videoconferencing conveys an impression of effective consultation and policy delivery, this raises two final questions. To what extent will the perception of the advantages of videoconferencing (the gains in coordination policy, in staff cohesion, hundreds of kilometers avoided, etc.) make the civil servant blind to the difficulties of rural mayor's experience in enacting videoconferences and to the subsequent degradation of the policy process? And what are the consequences, now and in future, of such a dialog between the state and local stakeholders in the domain of smart and sustainable policies? The response to the first question lies in the suddenness of the technical shift during the COVID crisis and in the prior failure to educate public managers about the communicational limitations of videoconferencing and responses in participatory design capacities (Morelli et al. 2021). Cerema managers were conscious of one of the problems of mayors: the so-called "zoom fatigue" (Wiederhold 2020). In response, they shortened the duration of meetings, but this did not fully resolve a problem that is twofold. Zoom fatigue arises partly from the incapacity to track communicational clues such as body language and facial expression, especially if the video is turned off (Standaert et al. 2021). And on the recipient side, it also arises from information overload (Mroz et al. 2018). Our interviews with Cerema's managers reveal that videoconferencing threatens the global policy process in two ways. First, the use of videoconference solutions deprives public managers of physical experience of the territory and therefore direct engagement with the implementation of sustainable and smart mobility policy. In real-life meetings, mayors would introduce Cerema regional managers to ongoing projects (e.g., such as the construction of a bicycle lane, and the associated practical difficulties). In this on site experience, Cerema managers gained a much better understanding of the local context of policy demands, an aspect of their professional expertise that is lost with videoconferencing.

The second aspect is that of disengagement by local stakeholders. Cerema's managers acknowledge that videoconferencing disrupts the social and psychological cultures of collaborative policymaking. Videoconferencing lacks informal "breathing spaces." Videoconferencing does not offer the informal and confidential discussion; space mayors were previously able to open with state representatives, in which they could bargain their political fidelity against promises of infrastructural investment. Yet conferring a sense of commonality is the basis of a public service design approach (Trischler and Westman Trischler 2021). They replaced it by more information transfer (then the vicious circle and the loss of participants). The sense of commonality and conviviality, the trust building capacity that is so important for the

adoption of a new rule in the rural part of France was impossible to save through videoconference as it is a social production, enacted in the interstices of formal communication.

## 18.4 Conclusion

This chapter has explored how public managers enacted videoconferencing for collaborative meetings run during the COVID crisis to inform rural mayors about a new mobility law and convince them to initiate smart and sustainable projects. It is well known in scholarly work on information and communication technology that the use of technology changes in the aftermath of extreme events. COVID-19 pandemic emergency has been such an event. Videoconferencing was not new, but the health crisis forced its rapid adoption at a time when the state was keen to avoid another yellow jacket protest and to make mayors walk the talk in terms of the implementation of mobility policy (Mattissek and Sturm 2017). The results of the qualitative survey demonstrate that Webinars differ in their content and scripts from real-world meetings. Collaborative processes are much harder to deliver than information and benchmarking. Nonetheless, public managers speak a “tech-friendly” language and primarily enact videoconferencing as a mean to reinforce their organization and institution. While priority is given to coordination over collaborative policy making, few of them address the risks that videoconferencing poses to their expertise and to the very challenges of their activity, that is, rebuilding trust between state and local governments and implementing a decentralized sustainable mobility policy in low density regions (Hacker et al. 2019).

In this case, videoconferencing seems to have had agency over the policy process. It is often stated as a truism that Web conference systems annihilate geographical distance. Nonetheless, on 2nd July 2020, the map of intermunicipal rural governments that had embraced new mobility competencies shows a visible north south divide most southern local authorities situated beyond a radius of 400 km from Paris rejected to implement the Loi d’Orientation des Mobilités, whereas many municipalities located in the northern part of France adopted it. Although many other political and institutional criteria must be considered in explaining this split, the result still says something about the silent resistance of local governments to a digitally mediated mode of state presence in remote and under-resourced territories.

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