Is Video Conferencing The Right Tool for Project Communication in COVID-19 Times?

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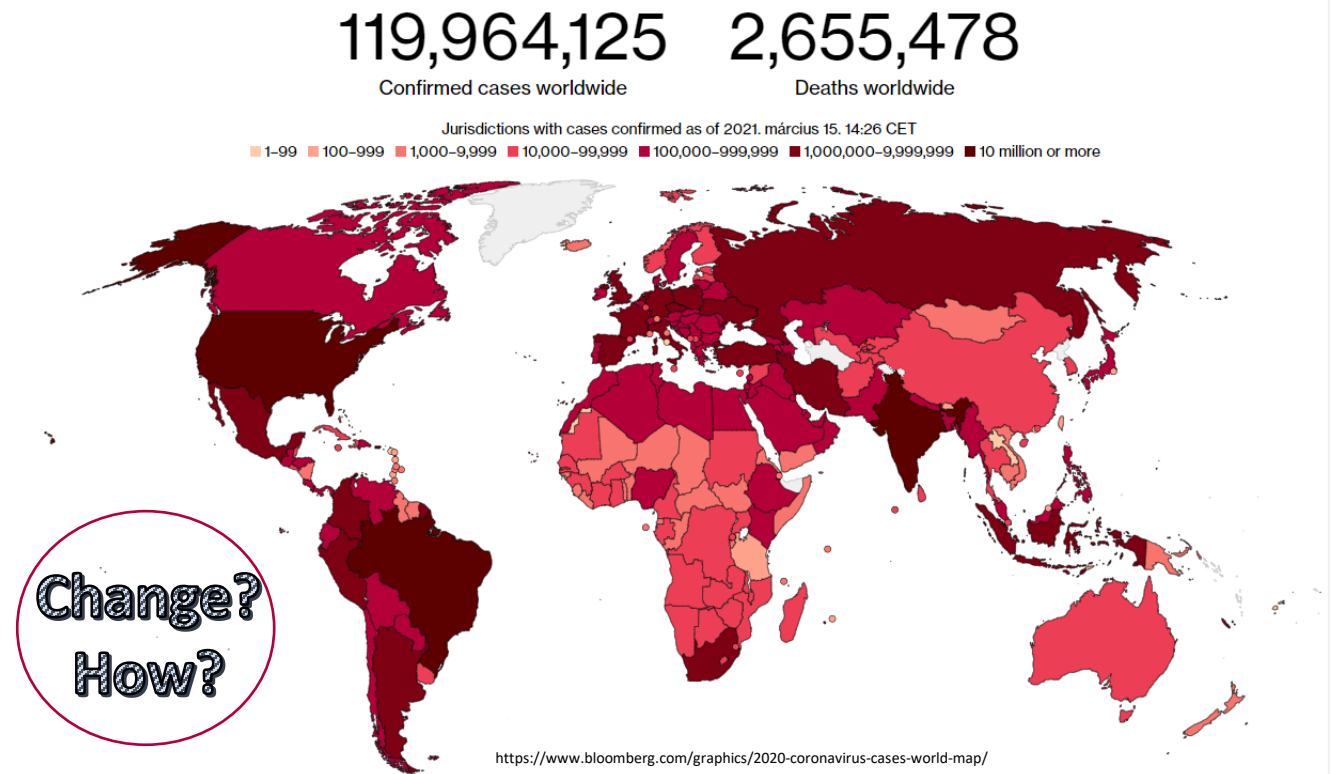
Introduction

- Coronavirus disease 2019 (**COVID-19**) was identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019.

- The disease has since **spread worldwide**, leading to an ongoing pandemic.

- The appearance of the **virus** and related **lockdowns** have **significantly changed our lives.**

  - **New reality** in which the most natural form of human communication – face-to-face communication – was no longer adequate.

  - The elimination of the possibility of face-to-face communication is a change for on-site project teams.

119,964,125
Confirmed cases worldwide

2,655,478
Deaths worldwide

Jurisdictions with cases confirmed as of 2021. március 15. 14:26 CET

1–99 | 100–999 | 1,000–9,999 | 10,000–99,999 | 100,000–999,999 | 1,000,000–9,999,999 | 10 million or more

Change? How?

https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2020-coronavirus-cases-world-map/

ALMA MATER EUROPAEA
ECM

Research idea

The **research idea** is to examine whether

the **use of video conferencing** as a communication medium –

is **a choice in project communication** to replace face-to-face communication,

and if so, **is it the appropriate choice** –

based on project manager's personal judgment.
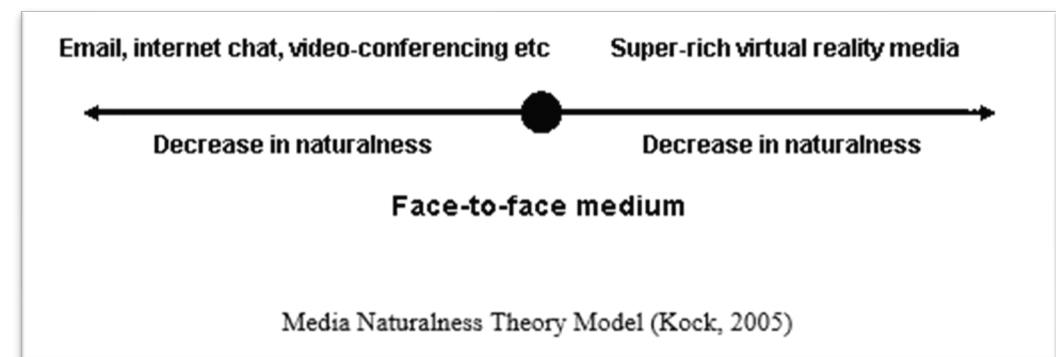
Theoretical background

- **Media Richness Theory (MRT)**

Figure1: Media Richness Theory Model (Daft & Lengel, 1986)
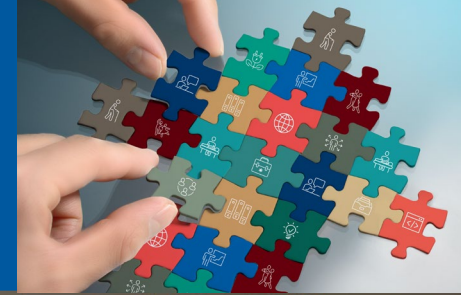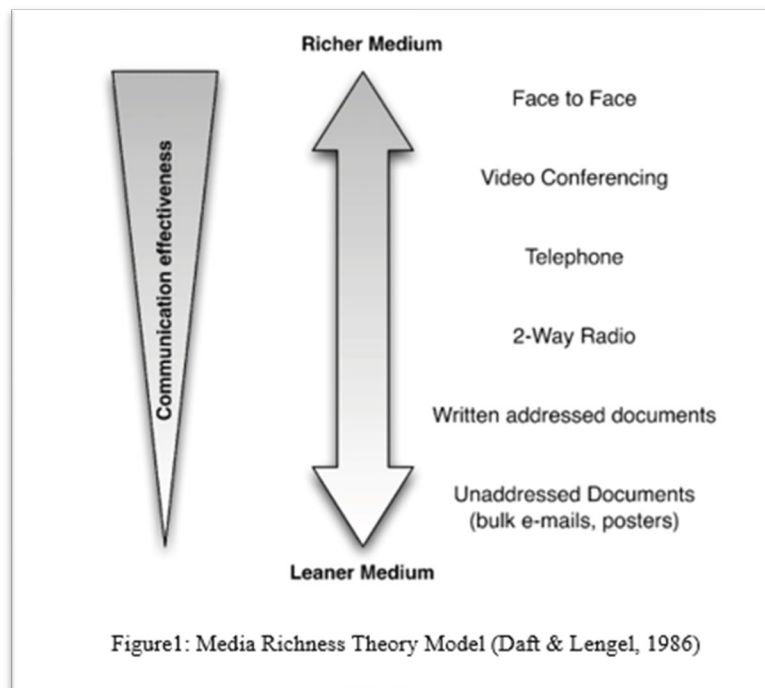
„**Richer communication media** are generally more **effective than leaner**, less rich **media**"

(Daft & Lengel, 1986)

- **Media Naturalness Theory**

Media Naturalness Theory Model (Kock, 2005)

„**Natural communication** requires:

- **High degree of co-location**,
- **High degree of synchronicity**,
- The ability to convey and observe **facial expressions**,
- The ability to convey and observe **body language**
- The ability to convey and listen to **speech.**

The naturalness of the communication medium is based on the extent to which it is able to incorporate these five elements, the quality of the outcome of related tasks depends on this." (Kock, 2005)
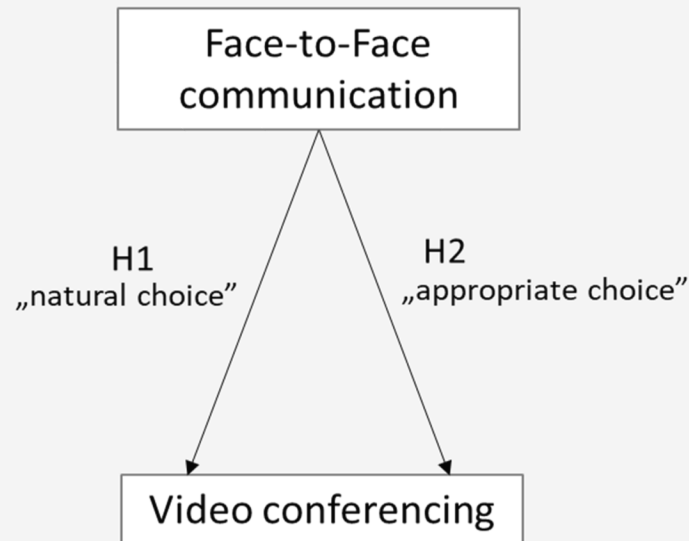
Hypothesis

H1:

if the technical possibilities are available and face-to-face communication should be avoided in case of communication with more than three participants, the natural choice of the project managers is the use of video conferencing

- Face-to-Face communication should be avoided
- Technical possibilities are available
- On-site project team before covid-19

Face-to-Face communication

H1 „natural choice"   H2 „appropriate choice"

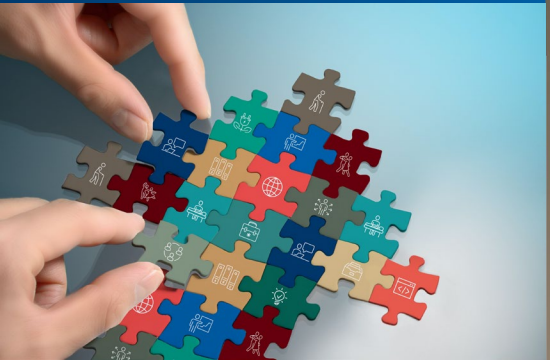Video conferencing

Hypothesis overview (own editing)

H2:

project managers consider the videoconferencing instead of face-to-face communication as an appropriate choice of their own, i.e. they have a positive experience regarding the communication

Method

- Semi-structured interviews
  - along pre-defined questionnaire
  - follow-up questions
  - within 30 minutes after project communication was completed
- Participants
  - 10 Project managers
  - Working on ICT projects (IT system implementations)
  - More than 4 year experience, advanced technological background
  - Large corporate clients (300+ Employees)

1.	What media did the project use before COVID-19?
2.	What part of the project communication was face-to-face communication?
3.	How have two-person face-to-face meetings been replaced?
4.	How were the three- to five-person meetings replaced?
5.	How were more than five face-to-face meetings replaced?
6.	In case of video conferencing, has the amount of work required to moderate communication changed?
7.	What was your personal experience with video conferencing?
8.	How did you feel during video conferencing?
9.	Did you feel different about smaller and larger video conferences?
10.	Did you change your practice based on the experience of the first period? Has your choice of tools changed in different project communication situations?

Table1: Pre-defined questions for semi-structured interviews (own editing)

Results

First week

- meetings - with more than three people- were conducted by video conferencing equipment
  - „clear choice, natural, OK, familiar, good, effective"
  - „supportive tools"
  - „we see each other as if we were talking in person"
  - „fun – solved the anxious mood"
- Communication requiring the participation of two people was handled by phone or e-mail by 70% of the project managers

After 2 weeks

- project managers changed their previous practices
  - „exhausting, tiring, I couldn't work like that forever, stressful"

Respondent	Reason for change	Way of change
1. respondent	As there was no need to physically change seats, the number of meetings increased. Instead of the previous time spent changing places and talking in the corridors, we also held meetings. I could not stand the sitting in one place, I started walking, which I was better able to solve with an audio conference. So, I started eliminating video conferences.	Audio conferencing instead of video conferencing
2. respondent	I felt more tired after a video conference conversation than after a phone conversation.	Phone calls and Audio conferencing instead of video conferencing
3. respondent	I did not like to see myself, so I turned off the camera. And that caused everyone to turn it off after me.	Static photo instead of active camera

Results

Respondent	Reason for change	Way of change
4. respondent	Due to internet problems, the camera could not be maintained, so we had conversations without a camera.	Static photo instead of active camera
5. respondent	I feel more tiring talking to the camera than face-to-face meetings	More written communication
6. respondent	I do not like to be watched.	Static photo instead of active camera
7. respondent	I became tense to see a lot of people, with different backgrounds, moving back and forth, up close, from a distance, with different image quality	Static photo instead of active camera
8. respondent	It is annoying when the sound and picture slip from each other.	Static photo instead of active camera
9. respondent	It was more difficult to maintain eye contact with participants than in face-to-face communication. The one I wasn't talking to was often relegated to the background, starting to pay attention elsewhere. I felt stress because of that.	Turned off camera
10. respondent	After the initial successful conference meetings, I felt that people were getting more and more tired, everyone was listening, people needed to be called. Who, by the way, behave completely differently in personal discussions.	Smaller group video conferences with turned off camera

Conclusion

- Project managers **naturally used video conferencing tools for meetings** involving more than three people in the first two to three weeks after the possibility of face-to-face discussions ceased.

- They felt good in the situation, they described it positively.

- After a few weeks, **video conferencing was changed to less "rich and natural media"** (Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), Media Naturalness Theory Model (Kock, 2005) than face-to-face communication (mostly audio conferencing) arguing that video conferencing causes fatigue, stress, and makes it more difficult to moderate participants because they themselves are more tired, more resigned, "keeping their distance from the meeting," although they are physically there in front of the camera.

- Based our findings, it seems that – because of these influencing factors - **video conferencing is not the most appropriate substitute for face-to-face communication in all project communication situations.**

Further research

Research on wilder sample

- Involvement of additional project managers and the widening of the sampling

Expanding the assessment of the impact of communication medium change

- Examine the effect of changes in project communication on project team members

Examining teams with smaller technological backgrounds

- Include projects in the study that take place in a customer environment that is less familiar with and uses the technology. Where technological capabilities and / or participant readiness do not allow for the immediate deployment of "rich media" (Daft and Lengel, 1986).

Investigation of causes and circumstances

- Examine what are the human factors, technical conditions, situational differences that have a negative impact on this communication medium.

Link to virtual project team communication research

- Involvement of teams that acted as virtual teams even before the pandemic.