

‘Good sound is the new black’ - Agnieszka Walter-Drop



A journey into hybrid meetings, remote interpretation and new ways to organise events with the DG LINC Director-General

Many of us in Parliament have the habit of tuning into the Strasbourg plenary on a Monday at 5pm, or following a big EP committee vote. Switching the language we use is as simple as ever - it's only a click away - but the way meetings are organised and interpreted has in fact changed radically since the start of the pandemic. Agnieszka Walter-Drop ran through these changes with us and explained why sound quality is so important...

Dzie dobry Agnieszka! 20 months into the pandemic, how is DG LINC doing?

While this has been a very difficult period both professionally and personally, DG LINC as a whole has risen to the challenge. This has been an opportunity for us, for a number of reasons.

First of all, we were called to find solutions so that Parliament could continue its legislative work and reach out to citizens, by establishing remote meetings. We were central to that. Second, we have a sense of mission: we know how much our work is important, indispensable and valued. This was an exceptional 'booster', to use a word *dans l'air du temps*, since we were called to perform wonders.

We introduced hybrid meetings, mixing physical and online settings, where Members could engage in a debate or a negotiation, in a multilingual format. What is notable is the size of this challenge, since Parliament works in 24 languages. We managed to build this up from scratch, to get to the level of performance we know today - with quite an incredible 500 000 remote participants in over 5 500 meetings since the beginning of the pandemic.

How deeply did the crisis affect conference interpretation?

Today, we provide 80% of the capacity we had in January and February 2020, which were busy months, up from the 20% that we were able to offer as the pandemic struck. It happened in a demanding context, both logistically and technically, but also in terms of managing people's expectations, fears, and demands. We now work differently, and we have fast-tracked new ways of working, which we are still exploring to match the needs of the Institution.

All this was possible because the teams were ready to step up and go further than ever before: this has involved everyone, in particular the interpreters but also the technicians, remote conference support specialists, ushers and the planning, resource and logistics teams behind the scenes. It all came to fruition thanks to the cooperation with the political groups, DGs IPOL and EXPO as meeting organisers, as well as DGs COMM, PRES, ITEC and INLO.

How did Interactio come about?

The hybrid meeting platform looks quite different today from when we started. Actually, we were exploring solutions that would have allowed for the organisation of multilingual meetings with remote participation and remote interpretation already before the pandemic. The crisis broke out just as we were testing a number of comparable platforms, so we were, in a sense, ready.

The big plus is that after we were able to fine-tune the platform for remote participation, we have been able to use it during the pandemic to facilitate remote interpretation as well.

How is distant interpretation organised?

It takes multiple forms. Booths in meeting rooms can be combined with mobile booths in internal interpretation hubs in Brussels and Strasbourg and with our four external hubs in London, Vienna, Ljubljana and Riga - where interpreters can do their job with the support of a technician. We have even developed the possibility to provide interpretation from the home office, to the tune of 8% of the non-plenary meetings we have covered so far. A good recent example is the Giscard d'Estaing ceremony on 2 December last, when interpretation was provided from several distant sources. There's a lot of organisational and logistical work that goes into managing teams in various locations, something we are learning and improving almost on a daily basis.

How about meeting organisation, which has also changed a lot in recent times?

A big novelty we recently introduced is the registration and participation management tool EP Events: with it, event organisers can streamline the registration process and share the information with other services such as security, accreditation, ushers... The tool provides a complete overview of the conference, and encompasses the creation of badges, the distribution of documents, the booking of breakout rooms if needed. It was used for last year's EYE event and we expect to use it regularly for all physical events happening at the EP.

We are also developing the Events Memory tool: once ready, organisers and participants can access documents, presentations, photos of a particular event they attended *after* it has taken place. And finally we have just presented the Sustainable Events Checklist to the Quaestors: a pre-event questionnaire to raise awareness among organisers about their choices for keeping their event sustainable, and for the institution to measure the environmental impact of events hosted by the EP. It is now available for all meetings.

I'd also add that we use a 'data protection by design' approach for all events, so that all the tools I have described are compliant with the legislation.

Having said all this, we already know that the meetings of the future will be both physical and hybrid, mixing *in situ* and remote participation, and that's what we are working on.

How did the interpreters cope during the pandemic?

I want to pay tribute to their flexibility, to their readiness and their commitment to embrace the radically different ways to provide interpretation. Interpreters - and conference technicians, multilingual remote meeting teams and ushers - were among those who were always coming to work on Parliament premises since the start of the pandemic.

A big challenge we have been facing since the early days of remote participation has been sound quality. It deteriorated quite a lot. We constantly try to make speakers aware of the impact of poor sound on communication, on the image of the EP itself as well as on our interpreters' ability to provide the service. Good sound is a vital element in looking after the auditory health and wellbeing of our interpreters and all meeting participants; we all have to do our best to eliminate substandard sound from EP hybrid meetings. Interpreters need good sound to perform their complex task - if it's not of sufficient quality, then sometimes they have no choice but to stop interpreting...

This led us to improve the remote participation tool, especially its sound quality. But the key element remains the speaker: we have been equipping Members with EP interpreter-certified microphones and - in cooperation with the Commission - also the Commissioners. Our teams offer coaching to speakers and give tips on how to best connect, also enshrined in two Quaestors notices. This effort is underpinned in our motto: **#GoodSoundIsTheNewBlack**; we hope everyone joining a meeting will take this to heart. At the end of the day, good sound determines whether you get your message across and has a direct impact on how Parliament and its Members are perceived.

Finally, I'd like to add that everything we developed is the result of constant and comprehensive dialogue with interpreters: we have regular and frequent meetings on their working arrangements, on remote meetings, technical aspects and are working on shaping the future together..



Turning to tomorrow: what's in the pipeline for LINC?

Like all other Parliament services, we too need to look at what is going to remain from this pandemic era and what can be kept as a plus, to be developed further. For LINC, there's no return to the context we knew before Covid: though we expect the Parliament to remain a physical workplace with *in situ* meetings and face-to-face interactions, the future will be hybrid as well, for both participants and the service we provide them with. This process is to be optimised and made leaner, with new, powerful IT tools and, in any case, with good sound. This is going to be especially important as we get closer to the next elections, with more and more meetings and events to take place in hybrid fashion.

Le mot de la fin

The last two years have been an incredible period, very uplifting, yet challenging. The Parliament as an institution and as a key actor in European policy-making has proven indispensable for getting us through these difficult times. This has created a new energy in DG LINC also for the future. We are central in the political work of the House, even though we are 'just' a logistical support service. We will manage the challenges of the transformation we are in only if we stand together, taking into account the needs and expectations of our clients, partners and staff. And for this to happen, good sound has to become "the new black".

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