

Honorable Board of Supervisors:

My name is Sarah Reith, and I am a reporter with kzyx, Mendocino County Public Broadcasting. I want to address the lack of meaningful participation in the local democratic process as we all attempt to stay safe from the novel coronavirus.

As we emerge from the shelter in place orders that have saved thousands of lives, we have regained certain freedoms: the freedom to go shopping, to go to the gym, to attend church and demonstrations, and now, to drink and socialize at a bar until midnight. This last was surprising, in light of Dr. Doohan's very convincing argument, just a few days before issuing the order, that people who have been drinking for several hours are unlikely to observe social distancing protocols.

What we don't have is the freedom to attend local government meetings in person and contribute to the decisions that matter to us. We can only participate in the democratic process if we have good internet and cell phone service, well-maintained equipment to make use of that infrastructure, and the skills to operate the expensive equipment.

We have the right to attend political protests, but a world-changing movement, which will happen regardless of a line item in a health order, is not the venue to state an opinion about something like the use of rangeland to grow cannabis, or a particular budgetary decision.

"Allowing" a juggernaut like the Black Lives Matter movement to take place does not indicate any real level of respect for our First Amendment rights. And now that we have demonstrated our cultural priorities by allowing drinking establishments to stay open until midnight, we need to accept the risk involved in reopening the democratic process, as well.

In a related issue, the Friday press conferences are inadequate. The press is often not brought into the zoom meetings until the moment when it is our turn to ask questions. That's confusing, because we are watching it on Facebook or Youtube, which has a considerable delay.

Technology is not adequate to the task of conducting a real, live, respectful interaction with the press.

In short, democracy by zoom is not democracy. The pandemic is going to last a long time, and we need to come up with a way to hold meetings and press conferences in person. People in many other sectors of society, including yoga studios and art classes, have figured out how to conduct their proceedings on location, while offering a distanced option for those who do not feel safe enough to participate in person. If I can take a yoga class in a studio, and then hang out at a bar until midnight, I need to be able to exercise my right to participate in civic affairs like a voting-age adult. Maybe the capacity of the chambers should be kept to a minimum, and if there's overflow, people who want to speak can wait their turn in the hallway or in conference room C, where they can practice social distancing and watch the proceeding in real time until they are called on. Speakers could wear masks and disinfect the microphone with a Clorox wipe when they finish their comments. We know how to do this safely by now.

But democracy has always involved a certain amount of risk. Surely it's at least as valuable as going to a bar.

Sarah Reith