

## **The COVID VOICES e. V. platform – share, connect, help and make a difference!**

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### **1. Background**

In November 2020, the COVID VOICES association was officially founded by Lindau Alumnus Stefan Maier. It all started with the idea of combining individual narratives/experience reports of people all over the world, who were and still are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in order to look beyond COVID-19 data and statistics. To simply give people, who were and still are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, a voice. An opportunity for them to be heard, to connect, to help and to get involved in the process of understanding, documenting and mitigating the crisis.

The Sciathon 2020 provided the opportunity to turn the idea into a project with real world impact. [1,2] Since then much has happened: COVID-19 vaccines were developed with dazzling speed, dis- and misinformation related to COVID-19 keep spreading throughout and thereby dividing societies and people are longing to get back to a “new normal”, which nobody can define yet. Meanwhile, there are countless people without a voice and who stand in front of their shattered lives and for whom there is and probably will never be a “new normal” – because of COVID-19, which uncovered the many fault lines across as well as within our 21<sup>st</sup> century societies. It became evident that strengthening the social aspects of our societies is paramount.

COVID VOICES e. V. is by now a registered non-profit association, which is based in Germany. The goal of the association is to document individual COVID-19 experiences of people worldwide who have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic health-wise, economically and/or otherwise and who are willing to share their experiences with the association and with future generations. The interviews and narratives recorded for COVID VOICES e. V. will be combined with COVID-19 data with the following main objectives:

The short term goal is to enable the systematic identification of local, regional, national and international collective problem areas. Further down the road, the use of data mining and machine learning enables the analysis of multidimensional data sets, including social and economic dimensions. The long-term goal of COVID VOICES e. V. is to document and archive these narratives, to ensure an understanding of the impact of the pandemic through individual fates on a global scale for future generations, to bring people together and to help mitigate the COVID-19-related and future crises.

Here, we present a first version of a new tool [3] – the COVID VOICES e. V. platform, which allows people to share their COVID-19 experiences, to connect to other individuals, and thereby to help by getting involved in the process of documenting and mitigating the COVID-19-related crisis and of counteracting the spread of dis- and misinformation related to COVID-19.

Combining individual narratives/experience reports with data and statistics is not limited to the current pandemic. Hence, our approach can serve as a blueprint for other tools addressing different topics or challenges, such as climate change, in the same way. It can be especially useful in counteracting the spread of mis- and disinformation worldwide and it simultaneously allows to address the rational and emotional level of each individual human.

In the following section, the COVID VOICES e. V. platform and its functionalities are introduced in detail.

### **2. The COVID VOICES e. V. platform and its functionality**

The platform consists of the following 8 general sections (cf. Figure 1 (a)): Home, News, About COVID VOICES, COVID-19 experiences, COVID-19 data, Connect, How to contribute? and Contact.

The mostly non-interactive parts of the platform are shown in Figure 1 (a)–(d). These include the news feed (b) and the general information panel (c)–(d). The news feed updates the user on all COVID VOICES e. V. activities, while the general information panel informs the user about the project.

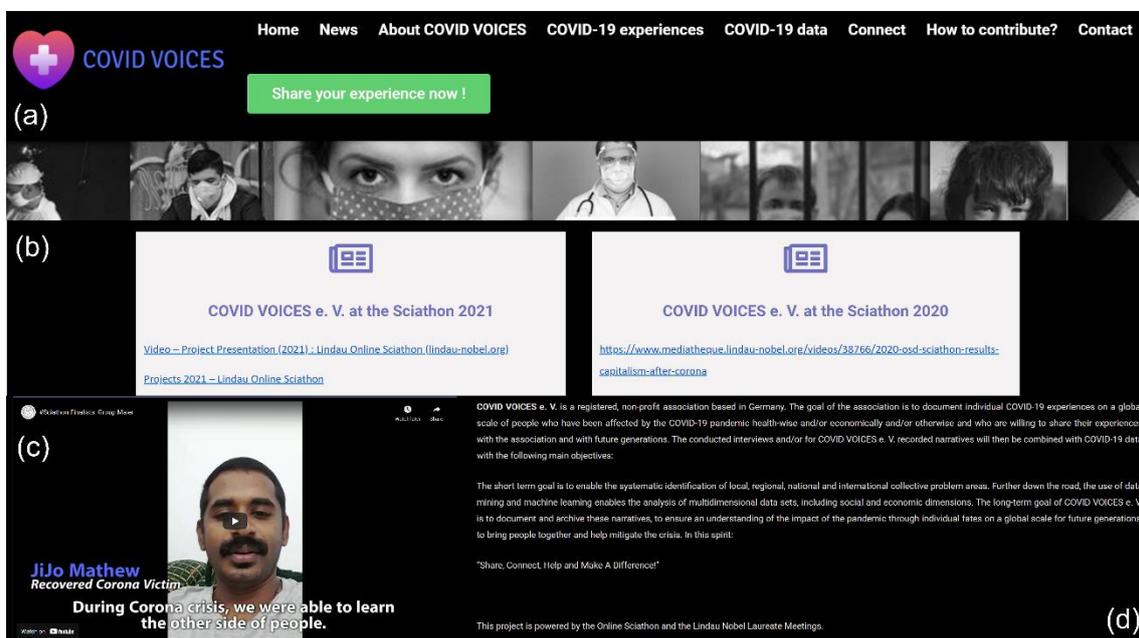


Figure 1 (a) The 8 sections of the platform, (b) the news feed, (c) and (d): general information about COVID VOICES e. V.

The tool allows users to share their individual COVID-19 experiences under the section *COVID-19 experiences* (cf. Figure 3). The user can upload files (e.g. videos, images, texts, audio recordings etc.) while providing his/her name, country, city as well as e-mail address and by giving his consent to our terms and conditions, which are listed at the end of the website. The upload section can also be directly reached by clicking on “Share your experience now!” (cf. Figure 3). If people are not ready to share their experience right away, they can also contact us first. The corresponding contact sections can be seen at the top of Figure 3 and in Figure 2, which contains the COVID VOICES e. V. contact function.

Figure 2 COVID VOICES e. V. contact function

Since some of the shared information can be rather personal and/or sensitive it is important and often required to build trust before the information is being shared and made public. Hence, the additional option of contacting us prior to the upload is required. It is important to note, that the content is not being uploaded automatically. COVID VOICES e. V. will verify the content before uploading it to the website, guaranteeing the veracity and appropriateness of the content and to ensure high quality. The geographic information that the users provide during the uploading process is used for an interactive World Map (see c. Interactive access to COVID-19 experience reports), which links the experience reports to the corresponding geographic location (country and/or city) of the user. This approach allows a geographically resolved analysis of the data and compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation.

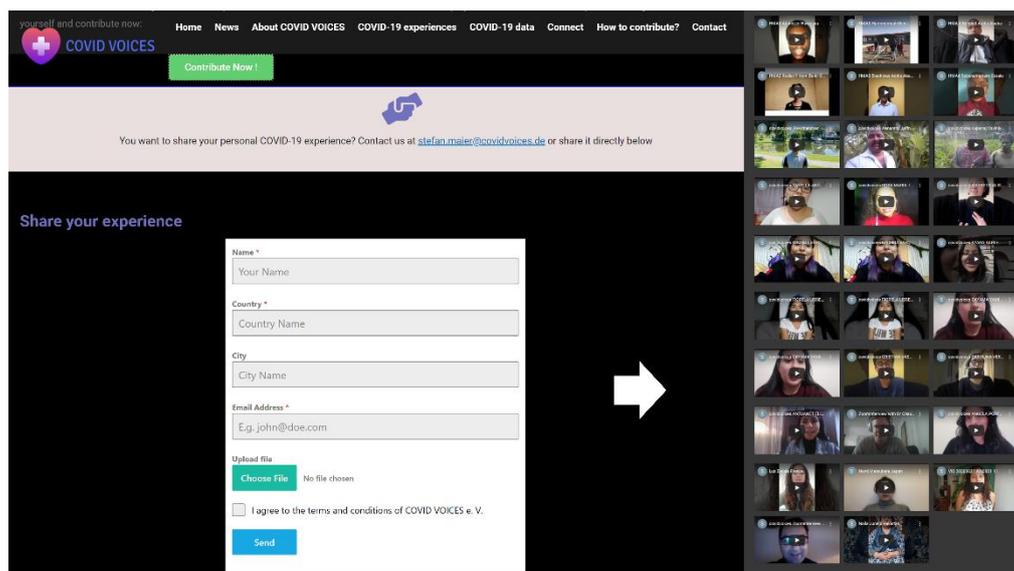


Figure 3 Interactive upload function for people to share their COVID-19 experience and the possibility to contact us. The results are shown on the right. Via the “Contribute Now!” button, the user will be directly directed to the upload function.

The uploaded experience reports can be accessed by the user interactively (cf. Figure 3 on the right-hand side). In addition, the user can interact with a customized COVID VOICES e. V. world map (cf. Figure 4) based on google maps, which contains the geographically resolved data.

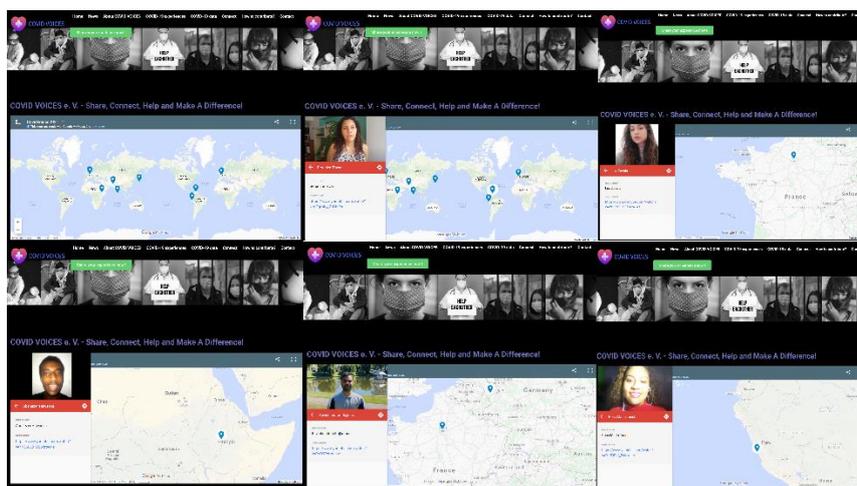


Figure 4 The interactive COVID VOICES e. V. map

Another interactive section (cf. Figure 5) allows the user to directly access COVID-19 data from ourworldindata.org [4], where the data can be viewed interactively and downloaded in various forms (images, csv files, etc.). Our World in Data is a trusted project of the [Global Change Data Lab](#), a non-profit organization based in the United Kingdom and is used by researchers and journalists of trusted institutions all over the world. Our approach of combining trustworthy data with experiences in this way allows the user to directly compare the experience reports with other trusted and constantly updated and reviewed COVID-19 data.

Another interactive section (cf. Figure 6) is the chat room, which allows people to connect to each other. In addition, the website provides the option to contact COVID VOICES e. V. This allows for interactions between users as well as between COVID VOICES e. V. and the users.

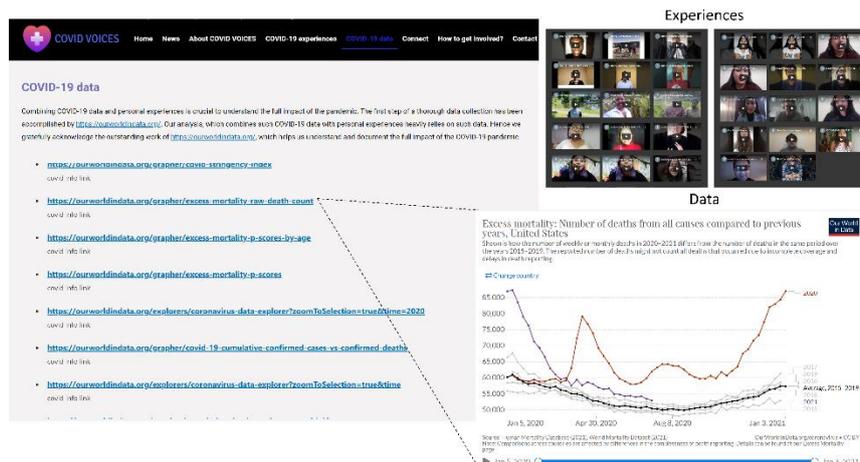


Figure 5 Interactive data section: people can access a variety of COVID-19 data from ourworldindata.org. This allows the user to directly compare experience reports with other data.

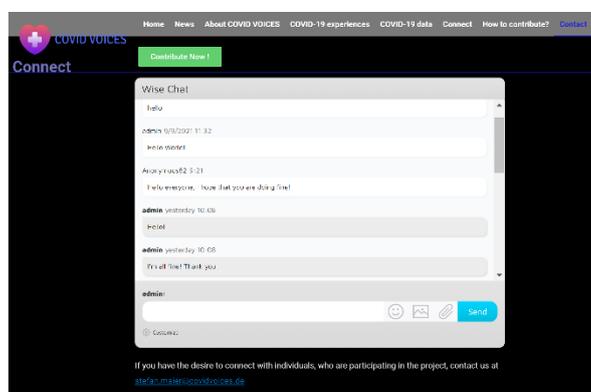


Figure 6 The COVID VOICES e. V. chat room.

**3. Why use the platform...**  
**a. ...as an individual?**

You feel the desire to tell your story of the COVID-19 pandemic, to connect to other individuals with the same desire and possibly similar experiences, to find like-minded people, who are going through the same things as you are during the pandemic (e.g. loss of loved ones, financial hardship, visa problems, loss of the opportunity of education, problems with mis- and disinformation related to COVID-19 causing divided families and lost friendships, insecurities due to a more unsure future because of the pandemic)? You want to connect to these people or us to provide and/or find help and support, to actively work on understanding and mitigating the crisis and help build a better future by counteracting mis- and disinformation or you simply want to be part of a community, where you can be yourself? Try out our platform! *Share, Connect, Help and Make a Difference!*

**b. ...as an NGO or a humanitarian organization in general?**

You want COVID-19 related information, which cannot be found in any chart or statistic? You need experience reports to develop aid strategies or legislation? Contact us or use the platform to advance your work/cause. You need experience reports combined with (scientific) data and/or statistics on a certain topic? Tell us and we can customize our platform for your purposes. Interest in our work has been signaled from various organizations (e.g. Bhumi [5], the world bank [6], plan international [7] and Viamo [8]). Now that our platform is ready, we can intensify these collaborations.

### c. ...as a scientist or a research institution?

You are looking for data for your research project or you want to collaborate with us? Contact us and/or use our platform. Especially in the fields of linguistics and the humanities our platform can be of help to advance your research. Topics such as understanding the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the spread of mis- and disinformation and its impact on societies, etc. can benefit from our platform. COVID VOICES e. V. is already collaborating with the Human Technology Center of the RWTH [9]. We wrote a joint proposal with the title: *“Disruptive Narratives in the Political Landscape of the United States and Germany: A Transdisciplinary Analysis of the Post-Truth Era”* and a first joint publication with the research group of Prof. Alber [10] is in progress.

### d. ...as a school?

Educating children (but also teenagers and adults) on COVID-19 and on how to handle information (including mis- and disinformation) is crucial in times of a crisis so that people are provided with tools to improve their lives. Although education is a human right, the required knowledge is not accessible to everyone. The COVID-19 pandemic strained the educational system in Germany, but also led to increased barriers related to the access to education in other parts of the world. Our platform can help schools with their educational programs and involve students to actively participate in the process of understanding, documenting and mitigating the COVID-19 crisis. COVID VOICES e. V. is for example collaborating with the Haile-Manas Academy in Ethiopia [11]. Students of the Academy sent videos to us (accessible on our platform) and are now collecting further experience reports in their corresponding home town. Further collaboration also with regard to their curriculum is planned.

## 4. Outlook

The Sciathon 2020 allowed the COVID VOICES idea to turn into a project with real world impact. The project turned into an association also supported by the Collective Incubator [12] of the RWTH Aachen and a variety of collaborations are in place. Now, during the Sciathon 2021, we are very happy and grateful that we as a team of four Lindau Alumni, are able to launch the COVID VOICES e. V. platform. The next steps are upscaling and improving the platform, promote the project, to intensify our already existing collaborations and to build new ones. As a recent example, the video campaign of the German government *“Ich hatte Corona”* [13] shows the need, usefulness and importance of individual experience reports. COVID VOICES e. V. goes beyond the German borders and we hope that by combining the collected experiences with data, we can contribute to mitigate the COVID-19 crisis and to a better future, where more people are heard. We also intend to extend our portfolio to other topics in order to be able to customize our platform to the needs of our users, partners and potential future clients.

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[1] <https://www.mediatheque.lindau-nobel.org/videos/38766/2020-osd-sciathon-results-capitalism-after-corona>

[2] <https://www.lindau-nobel.org/future-proofing-the-global-economy-after-covid-19/>

[3] <http://www.covidvoices.de/>

[4] [Our World in Data](#)

[5] [Home - Bhumi](#)

[6] [World Bank Group - International Development, Poverty, & Sustainability](#)

[7] [Advancing children's rights and equality for girls | Plan International \(plan-international.org\)](#)

[8] [A global social enterprise improving lives via mobile - Viamo](#)

[9] [RWTH AACHEN UNIVERSITY HumTec \(Human Technology Center\) - English \(rwth-aachen.de\)](#)

[10] [Jan Alber - RWTH AACHEN UNIVERSITY Aachen Center for Cognitive and Empirical Literary Studies - English \(rwth-aachen.de\)](#)

[11] [Welcome to Haile-Manas Academy \(hmacademy.org\)](#)

[12] [Collective Incubator – Die kollektive Plattform an der RWTH Aachen \(collective-incubator.de\)](#)

[13] [Video-Kampagne "Ich hatte Corona" \(bundesregierung.de\)](#)