

Tipsheet for Accessibility and Equity in Online Engagement during COVID-19



Online tools and platforms can help increase accessibility to public engagement initiatives for those facing barriers related to geographic distance, physical mobility or scheduling conflicts. However, it is important to remain mindful of barriers that can impede people from learning about, accessing or participating safely and meaningfully in a digital engagement process.

The following table outlines potential barriers related specifically to online engagement, and particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, with questions to consider and strategies that can help address these barriers. For broader accessibility and equity considerations that may still impact online engagement, see p. 57-73 the SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue’s 2020 guide [Beyond Inclusion: Equity in Public Engagement](#).

Barriers	Questions to ask	Potential strategies
<p>Digital Accessibility</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do some groups of people lack digital devices (phones, computers) at home, or might they be sharing them with other members of their household? • Do some groups of people lack a stable internet connection at home? • Do some groups of people lack the digital literacy to navigate the engagement platform? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer offline avenues for outreach and participation (mail-outs, telephone conference connections, telephone surveys, text messages or radio phone-in shows) • Give preference to low-bandwidth, mobile-friendly, text-based engagement platforms • Consider loaning or sponsoring equipment, mobile data cards or WiFi hubs • Use platforms that are familiar to the key audiences, and/or that are easy to navigate (e.g. social media, or platforms that don’t require downloads) • Send a “how-to” guide beforehand, and schedule time for testing and orientation
<p>Language and Communication</p>	<p>Are your methods for outreach and engagement accessible for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • people with lower levels of literacy? • people who are Deaf/deaf/hard of hearing? • people who are blind/low vision? • people with speech impairments? • people who are not fluent in the dominant language? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combine multiple modes of communication, such as text, audio, video and/or graphics • Provide real-time translation in relevant languages, ASL interpretation, and/or live captioning • Use large, accessible font • Add captions to images and videos • Ensure that digital materials are accessible by screen readers • Use plain language, with limited jargon • Do not speak quickly, and make space for participants to reflect and respond at a comfortable pace



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<p>Date and Time</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How might work, caregiving, household chores or other responsibilities impact people's availability? Could this impact some groups of people (e.g. women) more than others? • Is the engagement accessible for community members still working essential jobs outside of home during the COVID-19 pandemic? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer asynchronous channels for participation (e.g. discussion forums) • Respect start and end times • When videoconferencing, acknowledge the likelihood of interruptions from family or pets! • Offer breaks in longer sessions
<p>Safety and Security</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do some participating communities commonly face harassment in online spaces? • Has the COVID-19 pandemic increased discrimination or conflicts between groups that could manifest in the engagement? • What micro-aggressions may human or automated moderators not easily detect? • Is there an increased risk of hacking or disruptions given the topic of the engagement? • Do some participants fear that their income, safety, or other aspects of their personal and professional life might be affected if they participate? • Is the engagement addressing potentially sensitive topics that could re-traumatize participants or trigger strong emotional reactions? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly communicate guidelines for respectful participation • Develop a moderation strategy for online discussions (criteria for responding, deleting or ignoring behaviour; preferences between automated or manual moderation; and a schedule for moderating discussions given the risk level) • Consider the need to host separate engagements for groups at risk of harassment • Provide staff training (e.g. regarding historical context, anti-racism, conflict de-escalation, etc.) • For higher-risk contexts, design engagements that are invitation-only, with a low public profile, and password-protected access • Consider whether anonymity would increase participant safety or embolden online harassers; avoid anonymity in cases of greater participant interaction • Provide links to mental health supports, or invite support workers (e.g. counselors, Elders) into the engagement to connect directly with participants



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<p>Privacy and Data Security</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who owns or can access the data collected through the engagement platform? How long will it be stored, where and how? • Might video-sharing intrude on some participant's privacy when connecting from home? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate engagement platforms' privacy policies in plain language, and ask about concerns • Give preference to platforms with secure, domestic servers, end-to-end encryption and password-protected access • Inform participants about plans to record audio, video or chat data in live meetings • Establish policies and procedures for secure data handling and storage, communicating these to participants • Do not attribute participant names to ideas in notes; anonymize data sets • Invite participants to connect without video, or share tips on creating a virtual background
<p>Financial Accessibility</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If participants receive financial compensation in the form of cash payments, will this impact their ability to receive income assistance with earning restrictions (e.g. Canada Emergency Response Benefit, disability assistance, unemployment insurance)? • Is the form of financial compensation accessible for participants? (e.g. cheques and e-transfers may be inaccessible for individuals who lack a bank account, email address, or are unable to access their bank in person or online) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If offering financial compensation, discuss the most appropriate and meaningful form of payment with community members and partners

