Engaging the public online

Warwick Institute of Engagement has now supported a number of online engagement events and have put together the following list of tips and suggestions based on our experience so far. We’ve also put together a list of the potential tools you could consider using.

General advice

- Have an initial meeting for devising and planning the event, try to make sure everyone involved is present, so they are aware of all aspects of being ‘live’ online/the order of the evening/expectations of contribution.

- Do a risk assessment. Even though you aren’t seeing anyone in person it’s still useful to do a risk assessment. Potential things to consider:
  - If your event could be accessed by those under 18, and especially if it’s targeted at them, you need to consider online safeguarding practice (e.g., ensuring private chat between attendees is disabled and ensuring no personal details are shared in the chat)
  - How would you deal with difficult/inappropriate questions/comments?
  - Are your speakers all happy publicly broadcasting their full names, from their homes etc? Blurred backgrounds can be a useful option for maintaining privacy.
  - How would you deal with interruptions (e.g., Zoom bombers)
  - What’s the back-up plan for poor connection, drop out of speakers etc.

- Consider the content on any slides you are presenting – are they clear, images good quality, do you have permission to use the content, don’t use too many words. Remember some people may be watching on a phone and therefore can’t read small print or graphs etc. Some platforms may have presenters on screen as well as slides so reducing the size further.

- Have a practice run-through in advance with all your speakers so everyone knows how the running order works, check the timings of different sections and how to use your chosen tech platform.

- Have someone who isn’t presenting responsible for managing the chat/comments, a waiting room (if you’re using one) and the ‘behind the scenes’ tech (e.g., sharing slides etc.).

- If you’re using tools to make the sessions more interactive (e.g., sending your participants to a Padlet wall to leave comments) then allow time to explain how these work (if you aren’t confident the group already know), and for your participants to get to them etc.

- Remember not everyone (contributor and audience) is comfortable or experienced with live online public facing events, so be clear with instructions, don’t use jargon.

- Create a written document briefly outlining the event to be shared with everyone in the event team.

- Try to ensure, if you are participating on screen, to be as well-lit as possible (e.g., don’t sit in front of a daylight window sit facing towards it) use room lights if you can. Halo lights are a great investment if you are going to appear online a lot.
• Check your background is not too distracting and you’re not sharing anything that would give away private details about yourself/ your location.

• Check your camera is clean (wipe with dry cloth)

• Check your microphone is working and the other contributors can hear you well.

• Turn off mobile phones and devices or at least use airplane mode to avoid any interference.

• Remember even if you are not speaking or it is not a section you’re directly involved in, you may still be on screen and to the audience - e.g., as part of a panel event the ‘behind the scenes’ tech operator may have all four presenters still up on screen even if only one is speaking.

Event Format
• An hour is usually long enough – if you’re going longer than this be sure to break it up.

• A series of events is a nice way to cover more information – e.g., we ran one event with an opening launch talk, released a series of online static content (e.g., photos, podcasts etc.) over the week, and invited participants back for a closing event.

• Panels need to be manageable. Having too many speakers makes it very hard to manage conversation – 4 and a chair is probably the maximum.

• Remember to include a ‘welcome’ to open the event explaining the format they can expect.

• Remind viewers/listeners of how they can contribute to the discussion e.g through chat

• Remind viewers to share their attendance and experience/content on social media etc. If appropriate – e.g is there a hashtag for the event for twitter.

• Ensure the Chair or lead for the event is aware of time throughout so they can move it along if running over time - usually the one looking after the ‘behind the scenes’ has time to do this.

• Remember to close with time to thank all the contributors and say whether the event may be available at a later date and highlight any future events.

Platforms to use
Consider how you want the event to run and what tool best facilitates that.

• If we are broadcasting events and only inviting the audience to engage via the comments, we use Streamyard to broadcast to YouTube. You can also use this to broadcast to Facebook Live and various other platforms.

• For events where we want more interaction/ conversation with the audience we recommend using Zoom.

• Microsoft Teams works the least well and should be avoided for public events.

For advice on accessing Zoom for use in public events please get in touch with us.
Evaluation

There are a few ways to evaluate an online event. Planning this before the event will ensure you can measure the success effectively.

If you have an invited or registered list for your audience, you can follow up with a request for feedback of the event.

- Choose questions that you will find useful to have answers to
- Don’t make it too time consuming

You could collect feedback received during the live/online event.

- Collate the online chat into a format that can inform you of how engaging the event was
- Consider the quality of questions asked in the online chat to check understanding or where your viewers are coming from.
- You could ask people where they are from and to add it into the chat during the event
- The ‘thank you’ comments at the end can be revealing too, if they say why they enjoyed (or not) the event.

Also request feedback from your participants about how the event went for them – all useful learning for future events.