Is your event accessible? | Documentation, technology and access

Accessibility is often an afterthought in online events, when it should actually be a priority and central to the planning process from the beginning. Mobility, access to the internet, electricity, private space and technology altogether remain a barrier for a large number of people, especially women, queer communities, people in rural or (post)conflict areas, people with different needs. Participation and access are always layered: both in physical and online events. They depend on the context, resources and needs of your participants. There is one common note for both physical and online events. Being aware of the path ahead of us, we need to be mindful that participation embodies the privilege and discrimination of our physical lives.

To ensure that you address this consider planning your event by keeping different people with different needs, capacities, resources and levels of access in mind by involving your participants already in the planning and designing stage. Apply the golden three rule and ask your potential participants what would make their participation easy and possible. Below you will find some questions and considerations to take into account at the planning stage and that are also relevant for your survey design. We also recommend going through How to Make a Virtual Conferences Queer-Friendly: A Guide by Queer in AI and Ensuring Virtual Events Are Accessible for All by RespectAbility.

Documentation and accessibility

- Universal best practice is to provide any written, audio and visual materials ahead of time so that people have an idea of what to expect and can plan in advance. Its also good for participants to have the material handy offline, in case something does not work as expected.
- Make sure you use accessible file formats and content (consider readability, color contrast, image description).
- Is the material welcoming, queer-friendly, different needs-friendly and supporting of diverse lived experiences? Think about language, tone, pronouns in your surveys, registration forms, content, privacy, etc.

Participants and access

- Do your participants have access to a private space with internet connection? Do they need to allocate to a friend’s place? Or do they need support for secure connecting? If your participants don’t feel safe in their environment - they will not be able to participate

in your event. Think about human rights activists, LGBTIQ+ persons, violence survivors, people with different lived experiences - and keep in mind that some content shared can compromise the safety of your participants and limit their participation. For example, if one lives with their parents, siblings, or friends or in countries that have oppressive governments/regimes. Consider allocating digital participation grants that might support their participation.
- Do your participants have access to a reliable connection or uninterrupted electricity? Think of your format and adjustments, such as asynchronous type of activity, phone dial in, and consider digital participation grant in your budget.
- Do your participants have access to a personal or shared device? This will determine your budget as you would want to consider per-diems for renting equipment, or local costs of travel to a community centre with access to computers. Also, think about adjusted safety protocols if one is using a shared device to access the event, for example VPN, or reminding them to delete history, cookies and passwords.
- Does your event require participants to use some external materials, conduct analogue activities and do they have the means to do so? For example, if you are organizing an art workshop or drawing related activities, consider including per diems as to make sure your participants have the materials.
- Is participation burdened by caring roles your remote participants need to fulfill at home: do they have a relative they need to attend to? Are they in charge of meals, babysitting? Again, think of digital participation grants (allowance/per diems) so that you can support their participation.
- Will you include captioning, sign language interpretation, image description or other potential accommodations for different needs? Make sure you ask for the materials from your facilitators and speakers in advance, so you can make adjustments.
- Is the language used during the session shared language for all participants? Or will there be multiple languages used? For this you will need translation of the material and during the session.
- Think about adjusting the pace of your session. It will determine the level of focused engagement, overall participation, as well as the speed of translation, interpretation and close-caption delivery.
- How will you enable informal spaces for interaction and networking? Consider games, designated channel for informal communication, etc.

Technology and accessibility

- Is the platform you're using to host your online event compatible with assistive technology like screen readers, captioning, contrast adjustment?
- Are your participants familiar with platforms that will be used for your event? Consider a short manual in accessible format and/or offer assistance.
- Ensure the platform you're using does not have a complex interface.
- Double check the choice of the hosting platform, it's options and limitations. Check if it allows for computer-based and phone-based audio listening/speaking, chat block options, private chat options.
- Suggestion: Have a point person for accessibility before and during the event.

Check in
Honor the dedication, presence and commitment of your participants to access and take part in your event and support the plurality of their lived experiences. Plan to have this reflected in your approach to event duration, breaks and care sessions, registration and documentation design, facilitation during the event, language(s) and accessibility adjustments, protection of your participants' privacy and your commitment to build a safer environment.

Preparatory survey for your participants

Between the initial planning and the actual design of your event, involve and engage your community, your potential participants and ask them what they need as to participate, commit and enjoy during your event. A well composed preparatory survey for your participants is a great practice, as it will give you a closer insight on assumption of participation and expectations. It will also help you make informed decisions on your content, timing, format and tools that you will be using.

You can share your survey separately or as part of your registration form. One benefit of sharing it separately in the planning stage is that it gives you more time to map the challenges of access and prepare a participation plan. Go through the questions and considerations listed above and design your general foundational survey questions. Keep the survey short and include an option for people to leave their contact information in case you want to do a follow up.

Here is a sample of APC's layout structure for a preparatory survey.

- Content
  - What would they like to see happen during the event
  - Anything they do not wish to see taking place
  - Interest in co-facilitating sessions
  - Option to propose a session
  - Other content questions you find relevant
- Safety and accessibility
  - Availability of appropriate space where a participant feels comfortable to have their video camera on
  - Time zone and time availability
  - Language considerations (including language preference for subtitles and interpretation)
  - Other accessibility and safety concerns you find relevant
  - Option for participants to list accessibility and safety concerns they find important
- Device and connection
  - Type (laptop, desktop, tablet, smartphone) (optional):
  - Operating system and version (mac osx, linux/ubuntu, windows, other) (optional)
  - Device brand, model, other specs (ram memory, processor) (optional):

- Type of internet connection and speed (check upload and download speed at https://librespeed.org/) (optional)
- Favorite browser and browsers installed device (optional)
- Possession of equipment for video conferencing (webcam, headphones and microphone)
- Other questions you find relevant

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