How to choose the format that suits your online event best?

When choosing the format of your event, it’s challenging to find one-fits-all as you would want to balance your goal, content, accessibility options, safety and technology choice. Will it be a real-time synchronous or asynchronous event, or perhaps a mix of two? Do you want your participants to fully engage and interact on the spot, or do you want to give out a resource and schedule a time for sharing and learning? What are the limitations or challenges of the format that you might need to adjust as to meet the different needs of your participants?

In deciding your online event’s format take into consideration the following elements:

- benefits and challenges relevant for your event in terms of
  - synchronous communication and format
  - asynchronous communication and format
  - combination of the two
- your goal and type of engagement relevant for your event
- duration of the event
- time zone(s) and time availability of your participants
- your participants’ needs (accessibility, challenges and safety risks)

Formats based on goals and participants’ response and engagement

Some formats provide more opportunities for engagement and interaction, such as: online trainings and workshops, collaborative sessions, (live) chat, live streaming events with Q&A session, conferences, online meetings. They are mostly synchronous with all participants in the shared space and entail “immediate response” and real time participation both from you and your participants. Though they have many benefits, such as addressing questions and issues immediately, enhancing the connection and interaction between participants, etc., they also bring many challenges. These formats rely on access to uninterrupted internet connectivity, technology, availability of all participants during the event, and also pose time zone and safety issues that need to be addressed and taken into account.

There are formats that also have the element of “immediate response” for dynamic engagement and participation, but the response is scheduled and required only after the content is shared. One of the examples of this format is a webcast where a pre-recorded content is shared on a platform while designated time for knowledge exchange and learning is set up. Another example is a prerecorded conference that is streamed and then followed by a live Q&A. In these cases, the material is prepared in advance (prerecorded) and then live streamed or shared for direct participation in real time. Choosing these formats provides you with a possibility to schedule the

time for feedback, engagement and mutual learning.

Some of these formats can also be completely asynchronous and have an element of “adjusted response”. Some examples are: collaborative writing sessions, workshops, discussion boards, webcasts, etc. In these events, everyone works towards their goal, but not necessarily at the same time and shared pace. This means that the person decides when, for how long and in what way they want to participate based on their sense of safety, needs, availability and situational capacities. People take their own time and pace for processing information, which supports different participation models and diverse needs.

One of the challenges for asynchronous events is that the material preparation, documentation and shared instructions need to be thorough as to support self-paced participation, clarity in communication and avoid confusion. Schedules also have to be revisited, shared agreements on due dates made, and potential homework assigned within the group. On the other hand, while working on preparatory documentation, you can make the documentation more accessible and focus on translation, readability, adjust images, and make beautiful and creative visual and audio content. As they lack real time exchange, it might be challenging to sustain a community spirit and a feeling of togetherness, but this can be compensated with additional spaces for games, exchange of artworks, poetry, etc.

[Possible illustration] When thinking about your goals and diverse possibilities that suggest the appropriate format for the event, here are some examples of possible formats:

- To do capacity or skill building with your participants, or a storytelling session, a workshop would be the most appropriate format.
- To exchange knowledge with attendants about a specific subject with the contribution of subject matter experts, you could select a webinar or a conference.
- To engage your participants, encourage real time interaction, and explore a certain issue or a topic, a plenary session or live Question and Answer session on a streaming platform would be a best fit.
- To reach a decision in a horizontal manner among many members, you could choose to organise a virtual assembly.
- To collectively inform the course of an organisation and connect with peers you can opt for online staff meetings.
- To have some fun / leisure time and bond with your community you could organise an online party with music, drinks and “corridor discussions”.
- To provide support and check-in on folks you could hold collective care and group support sessions.

We suggest going back to your participants, risk assessment and survey results and align your decisions. In addition to this, it’s helpful to draft a script with your content, speakers, etc. and see how that will fit into the format chosen. The most important thing to keep in mind are the different needs of the participants, how to meet them and format limitations. The format you select will also define the technologies you will use, as well as the kind of planning and adjustments that you will have to use from this point on.

APC examples of practice on different formats

The shift from an in-person meeting to an online workshop in response to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an experimental exploration of creative and feminist space-making grounded in collective care. Up to date, this is still a learning process for us where we are combining many elements and building different structures with an intention to dedicate maximum attention and resources to our events. However, we would like to share some examples of our online events and convenings of different formats:

- Storytelling from remote workshop
- APC member convening Closer than Ever
- Take Back the Tech 2020
- APC Staff meetings

One of APC's first experimental spaces was our **Storytelling from remote workshop** held online in August 2020 for 16-18 participants. For this five day long workshop (with two optional days two weeks after) we combined tools for synchronous and asynchronous activities: BigBlueButton for our meetings, Mattermost for instant and asynchronous communication, Telegram as back-up, Etherpads for text writing and editing (eg. on Riseup.net) and wiki pages as repositories instead of folders. For more content around methodology and a complete list of tools used during our workshop, check our Storytelling from remote module and section Recommended resources, tools and further reading.

APC member convening Closer than Ever was a five-day long multi-lingual online convening with about 200 participants organized in October 2020, which also marked the 30th anniversary of APC. The programme spanned across all time zones, starting at 3:30 UTC and ending at 22:00 UTC. Each day was dedicated to a theme where we had 12 plenaries (90 and 120 minutes) in two major time zones, intended for everyone to participate. Each day we had two main plenaries with translation, interpretation and captioning. Along with the plenaries, we had:

- 25 hosted events of 30 and 60 minutes;
- 9 Digital Booths of 60 minutes each in English, Spanish and French held in permanent rooms with APC staff. The boots served as info point to orientate members into the space and happenings, digital participation grants and other questions/needs;
- 12 sessions of 2 hours each for the APC 30 year timeline for our stories;
- Care events as ongoing, open rooms;
- A bar, a park and a beach as informal spaces to relax and organise pop-ups on topics chosen by participants, as well as a Square and a Market Place to promote and share pop-ups;
- 2 parties.

The convening ran in two main spaces, one structured and the other flexible with five types of possible event formats (60 to 90 minutes) organized by the community. We also prepared a Host/Propose an event template for participants to fill in with necessary information so we could support them, along with relevant repository links for materials and a list of tools. Here are the possible formats that were featured:

- **Interactive one-hour long workshops**for 15 – 30 people using simple participatory exercises designed to inspire and facilitate participants' engagement, such as spectrograms or small group discussions.
- **Story-circles** for reflective and transformative conversations for 5-15 people with a theme or a question (for example, "my online body"). Story circles are first-person, confidential, safe spaces for interpersonal reflections and exchange.
- **Annotate sessions**for 5-7 people to ask and collect feedback on a specific research, study or plan where the host makes available the documents and prepares a set of three to five questions they would like to receive feedback or collect insights on. Annotate sessions can be writing sprints and use the Pomodoro Technique for real-time writing and annotation, or they can take the form of a discussion documented through note taking and recording.
- **Fast-forward sessions** are creative sessions where participants receive one or multiple scenarios and are invited to imagine new possible actions, advocacy strategies, etc. They can work for a small group of 10 as well as a larger group of 30 to 40. Participants can write their possible future in a group or individually and this can be done using text,images, or creative art materials.
- **Share your format** option where participants are invited to use their own event format that facilitates engagement and participation.

Following our member convening, in December 2020 we organized **Take back the Tech 2020** as a three-day long online convening for 50 persons with a more fluid structure. Our aim was to explore creative ways of holding space online in ways that are inclusive and forefront of self and collective care. We designed a series of facilitated and self-paced asynchronous jam sessions, real-time sessions of care and playfulness, and live multi-lingual plenaries.

- We combined synchronous and asynchronous sessions: plenaries, self and collective care sessions and DJ live boards.
- Plenaries and specific real time events of self and collective care were set in BigBlueButton and organized in two time blocks: 9:30 UTC to 13:00 UTC and 14:30 UTC to 18 UTC, with interpretation provided.
- Asynchronous events were collaborative spaces featuring DJ live boards on WeKan with curated resources, tools and learnings in English, French, Spanish and Arabic by 5 different DJs, as well as all participants.
- We also set up a Mattermost channel TBTT Garden which featured all information related to events, including the DJs playlists.
- This convening was login-based, meaning that schedule, maps and ReadMe documents were set up as Wiki pages.

Since COVID-19 outbreak we have started experimenting during **APC online staff meetings** on formats that help connecting with one another, enhance participation and facilitate learning. APC Staff meetings are three-day long meetings held quarterly for up to 50 APC staff members. Our meetings represent dedicated time to come together as team, share information, learn from one another and have a space to develop and deepen the way we work, influence and create changes. We have a staff meeting wiki (fashioned after the APC convening wiki), a separate staff meeting Mattermost space to keep conversations in one place and a folder in Share2 for all documentation.

Formats used are:

- plenary and group discussion sessions
- hanging out, storytelling and music sessions
- self-reflection through journaling sessions

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