

PER for Social Distancing

What is in this guide?

With restrictions in movement and social meetings now in place across the world, opportunities for face to face public engagement look likely to be limited for a long time to come. In response, many existing public engagement projects have looked to move online and lots of new initiatives have sprung up to make up for events that have been postponed. This guide highlights some inspirational examples and important considerations for engagement projects under restricted conditions.

Where should I start?

Why, who, what? – Before embarking on any engagement project, you must have a clear idea of the intended outcome. Once you have your aim (ideally in the form of a [SMART objective](#)), you should ask [who is my key target audience](#)? When using methods other than in-person events, it is even more important that you have a clear idea of who the content is for because this will determine how best to successfully target that audience. A clear understanding of who you want to engage will also have a strong influence on what method you use because not all methods work for all audiences. For example, if you are seeking to engage local A-level students then an Instagram campaign with a clear Birmingham link might work well, but if you would like to engage older adults you might need to think about something that people could find out about or engage with when out at the supermarket. It's also really important to remember that not all audiences have access to digital technologies or online content, especially when multiple people are in the home and competing for access to limited internet or devices.

What can I do?

The good news is that there are still dozens of options available to you and there are brilliant new examples of novel approaches to engagement popping up every day so it's a great time to be inspired by new methods of engagement.

Options you could consider are:

- Social Media projects e.g. Facebook, Instagram
- Online written projects e.g. blogs, live Q&A or 'pub' quizzes, online polls
- Video projects e.g. vlogs on Wordpress or YouTube, short shareable videos
- Visual content e.g. infographics, websites
- Audio content e.g. podcasts, songs / music

And don't forget offline options:

- Worksheets or activity sheets e.g. that can be picked up from shops or downloaded (so are accessible for those with some, limited internet access)
- Printed materials, e.g. newsletters, zines, colouring books
- Experiments, crafts, 'makes' or demos to do at home



Some examples and sources of inspiration



Slack is a discussion platform that works well for activities with a clearly defined audience. PER Team's [Breakfast Brainstorm](#) monthly drop-in take place on their and there is also support from others involved in engagement at [#scicommchat](#)

The [National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement](#) (NCCPE) have lots of resources and support to help with all aspects of engagement projects so do explore their website fully. Since social restrictions have been in place the NCCPE have crowdsourced content for a new [guide to creating and running online events](#).



I'm a Scientist...Get Me Out of Here! (IAS) Is a long-running online Q&A and chat platform for school children to interact with researchers. Since school closures IAS has launched [I'm a Scientist...Stay at Home](#) to allow those being schooled at home to take part. IAS are experts in issues of [safeguarding](#) and offer lots of guidance on working with young people.

Blogging is a popular medium for researchers and some blogs have become extremely popular. Easy to use platforms include [Wordpress](#) and [Medium](#). However, in order for a blog to be engagement, rather than dissemination, you must create two-way dialogue between your content and audience. Examples of blogs that have created a lot of interest and dialogue online are [IFLScience](#) and [Little Bites of Science](#).



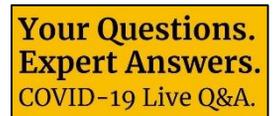
[Bang the Table](#) is an Australian-based online consultation company that focus on engaging local communities with democracy. They have lots of resources to support online projects like their [Digital First Community Engagement](#) guide.

Apps and games are increasingly popular formats for engagement, but using them effectively can take a lot of work and skill. There is plenty of [good guidance](#) on these methods and some great example such as [LaserLabs](#), a spin-out from the UoB Gravitational Waves research group.



Podcasts are also increasingly used for engagement, though careful thought needs to be given to recording technique, editing, content and evaluation. Good examples include [Skeptics Guide to the Universe](#) or [Watercooler Neuroscience](#), and [Entocast](#) both of which were developed by PhD students at Birmingham.

Question and Answer sessions can connect members of the public to research and provide audiences with control over content. Examples include [Ask Me Anything](#) on [Reddit](#), online (or printed) [surveys](#) and polls, live Q&As such as those being run by [London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine](#), who use a combination of video conferencing, Twitter and YouTube channels, though it can be difficult to manage content in multiple places at once.



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More examples and sources of inspiration



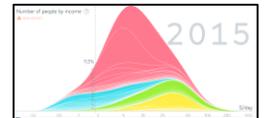
Hackathons, where participants work together to solve a shared challenge, often, though not exclusively based around the use of coding of technology, can also be used for engagement. One recent example is being run by EU Commission to address approximately [20 imminent coronavirus challenges](#).

You should also consider formats that are successful in face to face that could be moved online such as [University of the 3rd Age](#), [Café Scientifique](#) or [Skeptics in the Pub](#). It might worth contacting existing local groups if you are interested in investigating this option. There is also guidance on running events online from [Think with Google](#).



There are also lots of initiatives springing up to enable families to get involved in hands-on demos and experiments at home, either through live webcasts or online worksheets. Examples include [Glasgow Science Centre](#), [#sciencefromhome](#) on Twitter and [CREST Awards resources](#).

Infographics and visuals can be really powerful for engagement. Great examples of how to use these include [Gapminder](#) (checkout their tools and their videos), and [Of All the People](#) by Stan's Café. There are also lots of [handy free tools](#) available.



Social media platforms are sometimes thought of as being perfect for engagement projects as so many people use them. However, there are also lots of potential pitfalls. For example, [not all audiences are represented on all platforms](#). Twitter tends to attract more professional users, but Facebook can be used effectively to engage with families e.g. the [Parenting Science Gang](#) and [Nappy Science](#).

If something more creative or artistic is your thing there are also lots of good options. You could create musical or spoken word content to be shared or circulated in various ways. Examples include [Science Is For Me](#), [funny science songs](#), [classical music](#) like [Sounds of the Stars](#), research inspired [comedy](#) and [stand up](#), and [lots of science poetry](#).



Other performance arts based projects are also moving online. Take a look at this eclectic [repository of performances](#) that will now be web-based for inspiration or this [guidance from NESTA](#) on ways to create two-way audiences engagement experiences through theatre.

Citizen science projects, where members of the public make observations or collect data directly that either contributes to new research or sets context for existing research or allows people to recreate research questions or findings for themselves can be really effective engagement tools if they can be done online, in the home or whilst making essential trips. Examples can be found on [Zooniverse](#) and the [Natural History Museum](#).



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Other things to think about

Is it two way?

It's not just about deciding what to do and why. Public engagement is defined as being a two-way process so you need to demonstrate that you are also learning something from the public. You should also consider how collaborative or participatory your engagement could be, as we know that people understand more and are more likely to do something if they have been involved.



Dissemination is telling



Engagement is two way

How will people know?

Once you define your intended audience you should think about how you might reach them and how you could motivate people to take part. Consider how you could find and communicate with relevant existing groups (e.g. sports clubs or book clubs), what relevant communities of interest there might be (e.g. allotment owners forums or home schooling advice groups), whether you could find an audience through their shared location (e.g. Birmingham or Selly Oak groups) and whether you could use groups or people you know to help spread the word (e.g. colleagues, project P.I.s links, departmental communications leads or social and family connections). Then think about what the benefits of taking part might be and what you might need to communicate or support that. Can you make taking part useful, entertaining, fun or exciting in some way?

How does it work in practice?

What do you need to bring your plan to life? Do you need printed materials? A piece of software? Materials? Are there any barriers to people taking part that you need to consider like a convenient time of day or a stamped envelope to return information? Try to run through every detail of how your activity will work and ideally ask someone to help you (e.g. other course participants on Slack).

Data, privacy, safeguarding, accessibility and ethics

Try to identify any potential issues and if in doubt ask for help. If you are collecting information is it non-identifiable? Do you need to ask for consent? What happens if someone with additional accessibility needs want to take part? What adaptations could you make? Don't ask for any information you don't need and think about any potential sensitivities that taking part might raise. What if someone is personally affected by the research content or makes a disclosure? What additional support or information might they need?

Did it work?

Finally, you need to think about evaluation. How will you test whether your activity meets your aims and whether your participants have taken anything from the experience? Just counting heads or tickets is not enough, but evaluation also doesn't need to be hard. It could be as simple as a voting task or collecting comment cards.

