Imperial College London

How do I engage through digital media?

Ideas and guidance on engaging online audiences in meaningful two-way dialogue with your work

Engaging online offers many possibilities – new formats, creative approaches and the opportunity to reach global audiences. Whether you are looking to interact with the public online instead of or alongside face-to-face activities, digital platforms enable exciting ways to meet your engagement aims.

1 | Why online engagement?

There are times when online or remote engagement is the only way to engage the public with research (such as during a global pandemic). But even in more normal times, online engagement can play a valuable role in reaching wider audiences and could be the best option for your aims.

Convenience
For both organisers and participants, online events and activities can be more convenient compared to face-to-face engagement. Provided your target audience have access to a smart device, they can tune in from anywhere – at work on their lunch break, on the bus on their commute or from the comfort of their own home. For those with work or care commitments, removing the need to travel to an event or activity saves both valuable time and money.

Accessibility
Online events may be more easily adapted for accessibility. For example, most programmes used for live online events enable closed captions so that audiences with hearing difficulties can read what's being said. Online events are also more accessible to those less comfortable in busy spaces. This might include individuals with social phobia or mental health conditions such as PTSD. Engaging digitally offers a great way to create highly inclusive environments.

Simple and cheap to run
Online engagement activities are often simpler and cheaper to run compared to their face-to-face counterparts. There is no need to find a venue or arrange catering for example. You can easily create fantastic online engagement with zero budget!

Global potential
With around 60% of the global population having access to the internet, your online engagement activity has the potential to reach people from all corners of the globe.

A note on digital access

According to Digital Access for All, nearly two million children, young people and their families don't have adequate access to a device and/or connectivity at home in the UK. The proportion of households with home internet access decreases with household income. In 2020, just 51% of households earning £6,000 - £10,000 per annum had home internet access, rising to 99% for households earning £40,000+. Also, for many low-income households, the only internet access is through a smartphone rather than a laptop, computer or tablet.

What does this mean for your online engagement activity?

It doesn't mean don't do it! It means you will need to consider how your target audiences are going to access your activity. Perhaps there are charities or community groups you can partner with who can support you. Make sure you consider the device your target group is mostly likely to be using and design the experience with that in mind.

2 | Digital platforms

When it comes to choosing a platform for your digital engagement activity, there are plenty of options to choose from and, depending on your aims and target audience, some will be better suited to your activity than others. The key to success is to consider what your aims and outcomes are before you pick a platform. And if you're adapting an existing face-to-face activity you might need to come right back to your aims and

redesign it for an online format – it doesn't always work to just run the same thing over a digital platform!

Here's an overview of some of the main platforms available to you with a description, list of key features, audience demography and some examples of how it's been used for public engagement.

Platform	Features	Description	Audiences	Engagement examples
Twitter A social media platform for sharing short character-limited content that can be liked, retweeted or commented on by users. Hashtags can be used to increase the reach of content.	Posts	Tweets are limited to 280 characters with ability to add videos, gifs and images. The 'lifetime' of a tweet is very limited.	Generally professional adults aged 21-40 with higher earnings and levels of education than the general population. 16.7 mil UK users.	Polls can be used to gather public opinion perhaps ahead of a panel event. Imperial's poet in residence used Twitter to crowdsource words from the public inspired by Imperial research.
	Threads	Series of linked tweets to tell a longer story.		
	Poll	Allows users to vote in response to a question.		
	Twitter Live	Live video where users can ask questions live.		
Facebook The Goliath of social media platforms with a plethora of functions enabling people to connect.	Pages	An organisation's page can be 'Liked' by users enabling their content, such as posts and photos, to feature on 'Likers' feeds.	2.5 billion monthly active users globally with a gradually ageing demography in Europe and the US. Good for reaching ages 25-45. 40 mil UK users and used daily by 44% of the whole UK population.	For the Great Exhibition Road Festival we hosted a family quiz with the Natural History Museum that was live streamed to Facebook.
	Groups	Groups are digital spaces where people with a shared interest can come together to share ideas and information.		
	Facebook Live	Live video where users can ask questions in real-time.		

Platform	Features	Description	Audiences	Engagement examples
Instagram Owned by Facebook since 2012, this is a predominantly visual social media platform that enables users to edit and share photos and videos.	Posts	Images or videos that users can 'like', comment on, save or share. Unlike all other platforms, links cannot be included in posts.	Yound adults (mosly female) predominantly ages 18-34. 24 million UK users.	The Francis Crick Institute used Instagram stories to gather questions from the public to ask researchers who responded via an Instgram Live.
	Stories	Instagram's response to SnapChat's (now depleting) popularity, 'Stories' are images or videos that are available to view for 24 hours (unless saved as a 'Highlight'). Various functions available as part of Stories inc. Polls or Q&As.		
	Instagram live	Live video where users can comment or ask questions in real-time.		
	Reels	Instagram's response to TikTok's popularity. Reels are short videos that can be created with handy tools to create interesting visual effects.		
	IGTV	Any videos longer than 1 min appear on Instagram TV (IGTV).		
Reddit A predominantly text-based platform with threads of conversation and forums where people can find, share and ask about interest-specific content. Content visibility is more user-led rather than algorithm-led and content can be seen by anyone even if they're not 'following' you. Reddit is one of the most popular websites in the world.	Subreddit	Subreddits are interest-specific digital communities or forums often with their own codes-of-conduct detailing the types of content that should and shouldn't be shared there. Each subreddit is managed by volunteer moderators.	Reddit's audience skews young (ages 18 - 35) and male with most users from the US (50% of all traffic), followed by the UK and Canada (both 9% of traffic). It has around 450 mil monthly active users worldwide.	We have hosted a number of AMAs with Imperial researchers including one on our COVID-19 vaccine and this one on nutrition and the gut microbiome.
	AMAs	Usually lasting a few hours, an 'Ask Me Anything' (AMA) is a live online text-based event where 'speakers' post information about their area of expertise and invite Reddit users to ask them anything. The Reddit community then 'Upvotes' or 'Downvotes' comments and questions therefore showing which questions are most important to that community.		
YouTube A video-sharing platform where anyone can create a channel and upload videos. Users can like and comment on videos and subscribe to channels.	Videos	Videos to inform, inspire or entertain can be uploaded.	Popular amongst ages 18-50 based on data collected by the PEW Research Center. 78% of males in the US say they use YouTube vs 68% of females.	Many of our Imperial Lates Online events are streamed to YouTube. These include panel events, quizzes and Q&As.
	Livestream	Footage or events can be livestreamed to YouTube such as panel discussions, theatre performances, talks and more.		

Platform	Features	Description	Audiences	Engagement examples
TikTok The fourth most popular app in the world (and the only one in the top five not currently owned by Facebook). It allows users to share short videos often accompanied by music.	Short videos	Videos can be about anything but much of TikTok's rapid growth in popularity is due to 'challenges' which can be range from performing a dance, making your mum smile or getting creative with a new TikTok feature (see #RainDropChallenge). Videos can also be live.	TikTok has been downloaded 1.7 billion times and has 3.7 million active users in the UK. 41% of users are aged 16-24.	Anna Blakney who worked on Imperial's COVID-19 vaccine candidate took to TikTok to share information about vaccines and engage audiences in the comments to address vaccine hesitancy.
LinkedIn Professional networking social media platform often used for networking and for advertising/ finding job opportunities.	Posts	Posts can be created with text, images and videos that users can then like and comment on.	Most popular with 25–55-year-old professionals. 57% of users are male and on average all users earn more than the general population and have high levels of education. Imperial's account skews heavily towards alumni.	Key researchers involved in the COVID response reflect on their work to tackle the disease.
	Groups	Create groups with professionals in the same industry or with similar interests.		
I'm a Scientist A purpose-built safe online space for school-aged audiences to ask scientists questions.	Chat Q&As	Online events take place three times a year allowing scientists and school children to chat. Users can ask the scientists anything and then vote for their favourite scientist who wins a £500 cash prize.	UK-based school-aged children	Find out more on their website.
Zooniverse An online citizen science web portal.	Projects	A citizen science web portal where researchers can post micro-volunteering opportunities for anyone to take part in real science experiments - often in the form of data-gathering or analysis.	2.2 million registered volunteers	Check out their live projects and have a go at contributing to some research.
Zoom A video communications platform for online meetings or webinars.	Meetings	Individuals can join a meeting where they can chat with others. Meeting duration is limited to 40 mins in the free edition and a maximum of 100 participants.	Great for close-knit events such as workshops where you want to create a strong community feel with fewer people.	We ran a family quiz with local families in and around White City.
	Live events	Only listed speakers may speak or have their cameras on. Audiences up 50,000 may ask questions in the chat.	Great for closed events or webinars.	Some of our Imperial Lates Online quizzes have been hosted as Zoom events.
VOICE A platform that enables the public to contribute to health research.	Projects	VOICE is a platform that supports researchers to conduct meaningful patient and public involvement. You can post and create online opportunities for the public to be involved in your research.	Individuals who have expressed an interest in supporting medical and healthcare research.	Find out more on their website.

This list is by no means exhaustive. You may wish to consider other social media channels such as WhatsApp and Snapchat or platforms which are popular in the far east such as WeChat and Weibo. There are also many other video meeting platforms including Microsoft Teams, Skype and BlueJeans – find out which your audience uses already!

Additionally, the social media landscape is constantly changing so it may be worth doing more research before deciding which platform and features are best for your engagement activity.

If you have a more specific audience in mind, you might want to try more tailored platforms. Mumsnet, for example, could be a good option if you are looking to engage parents and carers or Knowledge Hub is widely used by the public sector for knowledge exchange.

What tools can be used to add interactivity?

Interactivity is built into most of the platforms listed above but there are a whole host of other online tools at your disposal to drive dialogue and interactivity. Some popular options include:

- Mentimeter - live polls, quizzes, word clouds, Q&As and more
- Slido - allows for Q&As, polling and word cloud generation
- Padlet - collaborative mood board
- Group Map - collaborative brainstorming tool
- AWW App - An online whiteboard
- Miro –collaborative white board and group brainstorming

Tools like this can be great for use in smaller-sized events, workshops or dialogue sessions - especially as the data can be viewed not only by the organiser, but by all in real time. They can also be useful for evaluation though some tools are easier to export data than others. The key is to try them out to find which is best suited to your aims.

3 | Producing an online event

How you produce your event will depend on your aims, target audiences and your content. Do you want to be able to see your audience? Are you happy for anyone to stumble across your event or is it 'invite only' for more specific groups such as the local community?

As with most things, practice makes perfect. So before launching into a live online event, we always recommend doing a few tests including a full a dry run with all your speakers and ideally a test audience. This might be friends or family, colleagues or a small selection of your target audience. As well as getting valuable feedback and ideas to improve, a dry run enables you to fine tune the flow of your activity or event and iron out any technical hiccups with speakers' cameras, mics or slides. On the day, we also recommend joining the event 30 mins – 1 hour before you are due to go live to check tech again and do one last quick run through of the content.

There are plenty of tools out there that enable slick online event production with relative ease. The Public Engagement team have found StreamYard to be the best option for producing our online events. The platform allows you to stream your event to a multitude of social media platforms (including Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube) and enables flexibility with how you can arrange the speakers on screen, the option to share screens and video content, and the ability to brand the event with your logo, brand colours and backgrounds. You can also display audience comments on screen and create custom banners to put up during the event to increase engagement with your audience. You cannot see the audience when producing a StreamYard event, you can only engage with them through the live chat function, which makes it suitable for broadcast events with large audiences. If you would like to see and speak directly to a small audience Zoom might be a better platform to use.

Marketing - As with all engagement activities, telling your target audience about it is key! Check out our planning resource for top tips on doing this.

Roles - During a live streamed event, there are generally several key roles to consider. You might have one person for each role or you might be sharing the responsibilities. Either way it's good to consider who will undertake the following roles:

Production team
- **Content producer** – Responsible for creating the narrative, angle and format of the event, sourcing speakers or collaborators, possibly drafting schedules such as key questions to cover in a panel
- **Technical producer** - Responsible for what the audience sees (e.g. slides, presenters or audience questions) and when, based on the agreed event content
- **Moderator** – Moderates and replies to some comments and questions from the audience and posts key information in the chat
- **Observer** – Watches the livestream as an audience member and flags any issues to the producer such as sound or visual quality

Presenting team
- **Host/facilitator** - Responsible for leading a discussion or activity, working with the content producer on a rough schedule or script
- **Speakers** – these might be guests, researchers or artists you have invited to help deliver the event

Download our template production matrix for online events to help with your planning!

Presentation tips – Speaking live on camera to an online audience is a little different to speaking in person. There are a few extra things to consider as well as the basics. These include:

- Your attire – Camera lenses work differently to our eyes! Certain patterns and colours are best avoided when it comes to your clothing. Extreme colours like black, white and hot red can make it hard for the camera to balance exposure. Tight, small polka dots, stripes, plaid, or any type of crazy pattern can create the moiré effect – lines on screen will look like they're moving, and it can make viewers feel dizzy.

- Camera angle – Your viewers don't want to be looking up your nose. Grab some books and boxes and pop your laptop on top to bring it in line with your face. We recommend keeping approximately ¼ of the screen above your head clear and aim to take up about 2/5 of the screen in the middle.

- Lighting – Aim to illuminate your face. What time of day is your event? This will impact where best to sit if using natural light! Do you have a lamp you can pop in front of you? Play around with different set-ups ahead of the event to see what works best.

- Your background – Do what you can to minimise background distractions. Position your camera where your family/housemates/cat are least likely to walk past and (depending on your audience!) maybe find a new temporary home for that life drawing on the wall. For certain events, you could also consider going the extra mile and decorating your background to suit the theme.

- Sound – There's often no need to invest in a fancy microphone for your engagement activity but if you have different options, try these out in your tests to see which sounds best. Changes to your surroundings can also make a big difference to audio quality. If your room is echoey, hang some clothes or blankets around as these will absorb noise (out of camera view though!) and to minimise noise from outdoors, we recommend keeping your windows shut during the event.

Contingency planning – As with anything, things don't always go according to plan. You might lose internet. Your computer might freeze. Your dog might use your laptop as a chew toy just as the event's about to start. With a backup plan in place though, situations like this don't have to ruin your engagement activity. We recommend having a backup producer as well as a backup host as part of your contingency plan.

Safeguarding – Be careful to consider the ethics and privacy issues in relation to the platform you are using. Some platforms retain data and use it for activities such as advertising. It's important to be mindful of these issues and be wary of signing community partners and students up to platforms that might use their data in unethical ways.

When working with children online, there are risks you need to be aware of. Children may be exposed to upsetting or inappropriate content online, particularly if the platform you're using doesn't have robust privacy and security settings or if you're not checking comments. Children may also post personal information that may put themselves at risk. Consider who else is on the platform, have policies in place so that your moderator knows exactly what posts need to be removed immediately and remind your audiences to be mindful of sharing personal or identifiable information.

4 | Evaluation and analytics

Our evaluation resource has great tips for evaluating public engagement activities but there's a little more to it when it comes to analysing digital engagement. The key thing is to decide what it is you want to know before diving into the metrics and data available. This can be a little overwhelming on some platforms!

To get you started, here are some of the key metrics to consider:

- Impressions – Number of times your content has been seen
- Reach – Number of individuals who have seen your content
- Engagement – Number of interactions with your content (including likes, comments and clicks)
- Views (video) - Definitions vary between platforms. For Facebook and Instagram, a view is counted if anyone watches a video for 3 seconds or more while on YouTube a view is only counted is a video is watched for 30 seconds or more.
- Average viewer duration – The average amount of time viewers spent watching your video (not provided on all platforms).
- Many platforms also automatically capture audience demographics including age, gender and location.

Engaging online enables you to relatively easily collect data that can help you assess how much people have engaged with your activity. The engagement data you will have access to will depend on the platform you use. This is something to consider when carrying out your tests and dry runs.

Another consideration for any evaluation is qualitative data:

- Look out for storytelling – Assess the comments and questions. Individuals sharing personal stories is a strong indication that the audience feel they are in a safe space. Include it in your write up!
- Question quality - As well as the number of questions and comments, consider the quality of them. E.g. "What made you want to study neutrinos?" vs "WHY ARE YOU LYING ABOUT COVID?!!!!?"
- Short evaluation activity - Take a quick temperature check during your event. Mentimeter is a great option for this.
- Survey – Invite participants to share their experience of the event/activity through a feedback form. Keep it short and have a mix of open and multi-choice questions.

Further reading - Let us know of others!

- Social media demographics
- Digital access for all
- Children and online safety
- Creating accessible content online