

An Expanded Engagement Toolbox:
Lessons from Qualitative Interviews about the COVID-19 Pandemic and Community Engagement

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Abstract

Pre-Pandemic, Pandemic, and Post-Pandemic Engagement:
A Qualitative Look at the Changes to Engagement Cause by the COVID-19 Pandemic and its Impacts on
the Future of Engagement

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The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted many facets of life, and community engagement is no different. This study explores what engagement looked like before the pandemic and during the pandemic, as well as what barriers the pandemic caused for engagement. These topics are explored through qualitative interviews with ten different engagement practitioners in the Puget Sound region. The future of engagement after the COVID-19 pandemic is discussed, as well as advantages and disadvantages of in-person and remote engagement. Finally, some best practices for remote engagement are presented.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically impacted many facets of daily life. Restrictions on meeting in-person have caused events to be cancelled or moved online. This has applied across many different industries and fields. Prior to the pandemic, community engagement typically occurred in person. These activities included open houses, setting up a table in a park, and community events. The COVID-19 pandemic caused those in charge of participation efforts to quickly re-think how to gain public feedback. Most community engagement and public participation is now conducted virtually, through video calls, webinars, or websites.

There is a plethora of literature regarding public participation. Much of the literature, such as Arnstein's "A Ladder of Citizen Participation", focuses on the redistribution of power and a movement towards citizen control. Some focus on how we should undertake community engagement, like Milton Herd's comprehensive *A Planner's Guide to Meeting Facilitation* and Van Maasakkers and Oh's discussion on the physical location of meetings.¹ Although more municipalities have started to move to engagement via the internet using web conferencing software or open house web platforms, there is little discussion in the literature about online engagement. Because of this lack of research, it is difficult to know how the switch to online engagement precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the public participation processes.

The purpose of this research is to guide community engagement practitioners as they aim to gather effective remote feedback from community members. It explores how the pandemic changed engagement and recommendations for a post-pandemic world. These recommendations are rooted in the real world lived experiences of engagement professionals.

¹Mattijs Van Maasakkers and Jeelson Oh. "Where Should We Have the Meeting?" *Journal of the American Planning Association* 86, no. 2 (2020): 196-207.

Research Questions

In this thesis, I examine the impacts the COVID-19 pandemic had on community engagement. It aims to answer five questions:

1. What did engagement look like prior to the pandemic?
2. What did engagement look like during the pandemic?
3. What barriers to performing effective engagement arose during the pandemic?
4. What will engagement look like after the pandemic?
5. What are lessons learned and best practices discovered during the pandemic?

Literature Review

Despite this online shift, there is little information in the literature on online engagement. Current resources discussing the impacts of COVID-19, “Zoom fatigue,” public participation, digital engagement, and equity and advocacy in the planning realm will be reviewed. This literature serves as background to the research questions stated above.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically impacted all facets of life, and the urban planning world is no exception. Shauna Brail discusses the impacts of the pandemic on cities, focusing on four key areas.² These key areas are mobility, housing and food security, local business, and public realm. She proposes strategies for rebuilding that can occur within the pandemic. These strategies include opening up streets to cyclists and pedestrians, repurposing public outdoor space, and building partnerships between governments and NGOs. Hurtado argues that planners need to consider the impacts of the pandemic on cities, communities, their residence, and the planning profession as a whole.³ The pandemic has changed planners' immediate work situation, but the industry needs to start to consider what it means for the future, even if it means asking questions that cannot yet be answered. Planners should start to consider different scenarios for the future and look for solutions to the problems that have and will arise. These solutions should be in three categories: short-term, medium-term, and long-term.

As we look to the future post-pandemic, Ann Forsyth argues we need to focus on scenario planning and options for the future, not only focusing on how to deal with another pandemic.⁴ She argues

² Shauna Brail, *Coronavirus and Engaging Cities: Towards Community Recovery* (Carlton, Australia: Bang the Table, Pty Ltd, 2020).

³ Petra Hurtado, "COVID-19, Communities, and the Planning Profession," *American Planning Association Knowledge Center Blog, American Planning Association*, April 8, 2020, <https://planning.org/blog/9198765/covid-19-communities-and-the-planning-profession/>

⁴ Ann Forsyth, "Speaking to the Future," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 86, no. 3 (2020).

that the planning profession needs to have a more of a focus on the future, and on a broad range of topics. She also points to learning from other countries and what strategies they employ.

Zoom Fatigue

When the pandemic began, many different things shifted online. Many people were working from home and using web conferencing software like Zoom to talk to coworkers. Because people were not allowed to meet in person, it was also used for interacting with friends and family. Zoom was also a tool utilized by many organizations for remote engagement. This shift from rarely using web conferencing software to using it for many hours a day resulted in a feeling nicknamed “Zoom fatigue”.

In his editorial “Zoom Fatigue, Hyperfocus, and Entropy of Thought,” Steve Cranford notes that there are many benefits to doing things online. He notes that attending scientific conferences has become much more accessible, both with monetary costs and time spent. The new remote model has also changed his work life. His days are now “saturated with online meetings” that have sucked out “much of the humanity and office camaraderie.”⁵

Changes have also been noticed at the academic level. “Avoid Zoom Fatigue, Be Present and Learn” explores why students are struggling with remote classes and potential solutions to this issue. The authors note that 80% of the 350 college students they polled “indicated it was harder to focus their attention and stay present while taking classes online.”⁶ There were several reasons given by the authors for this difficulty to focus, including internet challenges, lack of normal non-verbal cues like body movement, and multitasking. The authors provided recommendations to limit “Zoom Fatigue”, including adjusting your camera and lighting so you are visible to others, sitting upright, and limiting distractions and multitasking.

⁵ Steve Cranford, “Zoom Fatigue, Hyperfocus, and Entropy of Thought,” *Matter* 3, no. 3 (2020), 588.

⁶ Peper et. al, “Avoid Zoom Fatigue, Be Present and Learn,” *Neuroregulation*, 8, no. 1 (2021), 47.

Public Participation

“A Ladder of Citizen Participation” by Sherry Arnstein is a seminal work in the realm of public participation. In this article originally from 1969, the author contends that everyone is for public participation in theory, but that this support disappears when it is extended to have-not groups.⁷ However, she says that citizenship participation is including have-not individuals and groups in the political and economic process. She presents a typology of citizen participation that takes the form of a ladder with eight rungs. Through this ladder, the author advocates for redistribution of power.

Tritter and McCallum examine the efficacy of Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation through a case study of participation in health care models in five different countries.⁸ This evaluation leads to a critique of the model based on several factors. The authors argue that public participation is complex, as are the people involved. As such, Arnstein's assertion that citizen power is the best and highest form of participation is flawed. In particular, they note that different people may desire different levels of participation, that such an assertion "ignores the existence of different relevant forms of knowledge and expertise," and that prescribing one best alternative limits the flexibility of participation processes.

Hou provides a historical look at how public participation in the urban design field has evolved and the current challenges, opportunities, and trends.⁹ To begin, he provides a brief overview of some common participation methods, such as visioning exercises and advocacy. He outlines current challenges, including bureaucratization and mistrust between participants. He concludes by outlining current trends, including a more holistic view of participation and increased community member empowerment.

⁷ Sherry R. Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 85, no. 1 (2019).

⁸ Jonathan Quetzal Tritter and Alison McCallum, "The Snakes and Ladders of User Involvement: Moving beyond Arnstein," *Health Policy* 76, no. 2 (2006).

⁹ Jeffrey Hou, "Citizen Design: Participation and Beyond," In *Companion to Urban Design*, ed. by Tridib Banerjee and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris (London: Routledge, 2011).

Building on the legacy of Arnstein, landscape architects Juarez and Brown acknowledge that public participation in design processes has become an accepted part of the field.¹⁰ They aim to answer "who should participate, which methods should be employed, what type of knowledge should be produced, and how that knowledge [will] be integrated into the process."¹¹ They argue for answers to these questions that empower the public involved, rather than extracting information from them.

Although Juarez and Brown say public participation is an accepted standard in the design field, Cornwall contends that it has become a political process more than a technique.¹² She states that this can be resolved by providing 'clarity through specificity'. Engagement programs should explicitly say who is participating, what they are participating in, and for whose benefit. This provides "a way of distinguishing feel-good talk of 'participation' that has little substance to it in practice, from forms of genuine delegated control that enable people to exercise a meaningful part in making the decisions that affect their lives."¹³

There are a multitude of articles, reports, and publications that discuss how to have the effective participation that Cornwall advocates for. Bryson, Quick, Slotterback, and Crosby aim to provide direction for practitioners to help them design better participation processes.¹⁴ This advice comes from a systematic review of existing research on the subject utilizing a process based on the evidence-based practice movement. This process resulted in a three-part 12-step design process, with the main parts being "Assess and design for context and purpose," "Enlist resources and manage the participation," and "Evaluate and redesign continuously." These three parts are designed to be iterative, with the practitioner continuously engaging in this cycle. In the American Planning Association's *A Planner's Guide to*

¹⁰ Jeffrey A. Juarez and Kyle D. Brown, "Extracting or Empowering?: A Critique of Participatory Methods for Marginalized Populations," *Landscape Journal* 27, no. 2 (2008).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹² Andrea Cornwall, "Unpacking 'Participation': Models, Meanings and Practices," *Community Development Journal* 43, no. 3 (2008).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 281.

¹⁴ John M. Bryson, Kathryn S. Quick, Carissa Schively Slotterback, and Barbara C. Crosby, "Designing Public Participation Processes," *Public Administration Review* 73, no. 1 (2013).

Meeting Facilitation, Herd explores multiple aspects of public meetings in the planning realm.¹⁵ This guide aims to instruct planners on how to hold collaborative, productive public meetings. It starts with a discussion on the value of public participation in the planning process. Much of the book explores specific aspects of the public meeting and provides help on how to conduct a productive, successful meeting. Herd concludes by addressing challenges one may experience during public meetings. The book concludes with a reinforcement of the importance of the planner as facilitator.

Some resources place emphasis on different aspects of engagement. In their *Public Involvement Guide*, the Portland Bureau of Transportation emphasizes how to perform effective, equitable engagement.¹⁶ The guide stresses including community partners throughout the planning and execution of public involvement processes. The authors also highlight the importance of considering who your audience is and the unique conditions, struggles, and needs they may have- including the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, the guide centers on the needs and expertise of the community. Sarah Holder's interview with Warren Logan, a transportation planner in the Bay Area, places weight on the role of listening and power structures in planning.¹⁷ Logan emphasizes the need to meet people where they are and listen to their concerns, compared to a traditional public meeting where people have to come to City Hall and only a few people can speak. The article explores other ways to engage directly with people, such as through Twitter or personal conversations during a morning commute.

Several case studies provide practical ways to implement equitable and effective public engagement strategies. Christiansen presents a case study examining the strategy of community engagement undertaken during an "urban street transformation initiative" in Saint Paul, Minnesota.¹⁸ This

¹⁵ Milton Herd, *PAS Report 595: A Planner's Guide to Meeting Facilitation* (Chicago: American Planning Association, 2019).

¹⁶ Portland Bureau of Transportation, *PBOT Public Involvement Guide* (Portland, OR, 2020).

¹⁷ Sarah Holder. "A City Planner Makes a Case for Rethinking Public Consultation." *Bloomberg CityLab*, August 15, 2019. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-08-15/warren-logan-wants-the-bay-area-to-plan-with-him>

¹⁸ Lars D. Christiansen, "The Timing and Aesthetics of Public Engagement," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 35, no. 4 (2015).

particular case was chosen for the author's analysis due to "reportedly unprecedented levels of residential involvement that included populations typically absent in the City's public meetings, open houses, and hearings."¹⁹ This success was due to the engagement activities starting prior to involvement by the City, as the community organizers had a much different viewpoint than city officials. In particular, the author notes that the aesthetics and feel of an engagement event are important. Hou and Kinoshita examine the impact of using informal participation mechanisms in planning through two case studies.²⁰ This study grew from limitations existing in many institutionalized and legislated participation efforts, with a main concern that it marginalizes individuals and communities. The authors found that informal interactions between community groups and individuals allowed people to overcome barriers and build trust and encouraged spontaneous and creative solutions.

Digital Engagement

As mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced many government meetings to move online. Crandall explores options for digital meetings and engagement in a blog post for the Municipal Research and Services Center.²¹ She notes that some degree of remote meetings will likely continue in the future. The author discusses some of the issues with online meetings, including the requirement for reliable internet access. She emphasizes the need to provide people with multiple options for participating, including call in options, public comment via voicemail, and combining online engagement with non-digital forms of engagement, like surveys.

As mentioned in Crandall's post, the pandemic has necessitated a transition to digital engagement. Michael Podgers argues that planners need to focus on keeping their engagement efforts

¹⁹ Ibid., 456.

²⁰ Jeffrey Hou and Isami Kinoshita, "Bridging Community Differences through Informal Processes," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 26, no. 3 (2007).

²¹ Laura Crandall, "Engaging in a Pixelated Public Square," *MSRC Blog, Municipal Research and Services Center*, April 20, 2020, <http://mrsc.org/Home/Stay-Informed/MRSC-Insight/April-2020-1/Engaging-in-a-Pixelated-Public-Square.aspx>

equitable and accessible and provides seven recommendations to help ensure this.²² He suggests that digital engagement efforts should be easily accessible by a smartphone, as they are widespread and may be someone's only internet connection. The author recommends crowdsourcing solutions to new issues that occur and provides the example of asking the community for suggestions on providing live translations during events. Another recommendation is to see digital engagement as a new opportunity for connection, as in-person events can be difficult for some members of the population to attend.

Because of this shift online, it is important to consider how best to implement effective, equitable public engagement using the internet. Butteriss provides best practices on performing deliberative dialogue online.²³ The author argues that online processes should mirror in-person interactions. The dialogue should include a range of viewpoints, and participants should be "empowered to influence the process."²⁴ The author notes that many online engagement processes are not deliberative enough: "They have a launch date, and a close date... you cannot simply launch a website and hope."²⁵ The author explores different considerations when performing online engagement, such as the software used, how to recruit participants, and effectively facilitating dialogue.

Abdullah, Karpowitz, and Raphael's interview with Steven Clift of E-Democracy.org explores online forums as an equitable conversation space and the challenges the medium presents.²⁶ Clift notes that the adage "If you build it, they will come" does not hold true for online forums. Without targeted outreach, these websites attract "the most wired, most highly educated" homeowners.²⁷ Instead, Clift

²² Michael Podgers, "7 Emerging Tips for Equitable Digital Engagement," *Planning*, June 2020.

²³ Crispin Butteriss, *Making Deliberative Dialogue Work Online* (Carlton, Australia: Bang the Table, Pty Ltd, 2020).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁶ Carolyne Abdullah, Christopher F. Karpowitz, and Chad Raphael, "Equity and Inclusion in Online Community Forums: An Interview with Steven Clift," *Journal of Deliberative Democracy* 12, no. 2 (2016). <http://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.263>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

argues that targeted inclusive outreach with a focus on equity must accompany the creation of online forums. This is paired with an evaluation of the forum to ensure the goal of equity is being met.

Although remote engagement presents new possibilities, with new online platforms and asynchronous options, Cherewka discusses the inequities present in both access to the internet and "digital literacy" and how these two items have become more critical throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁸ This article focuses primarily on the digital divide between the US population as a whole and immigrant populations. Although the scope of the issue is difficult to ascertain, existing research points to the presence of such a gap. This gap can negatively impact a person's life in a variety of ways. The article specifically discusses the impacts on employment, education, and health care.

Equity

As many of the articles above noted, digital engagement may have negative impacts on equity. This is a critical topic for planners. Garcia, Garfinkel-Castro, and Pfeiffer discuss racial inequity in the US and how planners can address it in a report for the American Planning Association.²⁹ They argue that, through several tools mentioned in the book, planners can combat racism, segregation, and discrimination. The book examines the causes of segregated communities and how to engage with diverse communities.

Finio, Lung-Amam, Knaap, Dawkins, and Wong explore the usage of opportunity mapping in planning and how it can contribute to equitable outcomes.³⁰ They explore how these maps are created, by whom, and for what purposes. By examining their usage in five major cities, the authors argue that

²⁸ Alexis Cherewka, "The Digital Divide Hits U.S. Immigrant Households Disproportionately during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Migration Information Source*, September 3, 2020, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/digital-divide-hits-us-immigrant-households-during-covid-19>

²⁹ Ivis Garcia, Andrea Garfinkel-Castro, and Deirdre Pfeiffer, *PAS Report 593: Planning With Diverse Communities* (Chicago: American Planning Association, 2019).

³⁰ Nicholas Finio, Willow Lung-Amam, Gerrit-Jan Knaap, Casey Dawkins, and Brittany Wong, "Equity, Opportunity, Community Engagement, and the Regional Planning Process: Data and Mapping in Five U.S. Metropolitan Areas," *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, (July 2020): . <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X20945385>.

opportunity maps can be a useful tool to display demographic information. These maps can in turn be used to fight for increased equity in planning and the distribution of municipal government resources.

In *Reinventing Cities: Equity Planners Tell Their Stories*, Krumholz and Clavel discuss the topic of equity planning and explore it further through interviews with practitioners.³¹ Through these interviews, they provide some generalizations of how to successfully perform equity planning. Overall, the authors aim to encourage other planners to explore the practice of equity planning in their city and critically think about how it can be successful and provide real change for marginalized populations. One of the interviews discusses the creation of Portland's central city plan in the 1980s. Margaret Strachan, through her role as city commissioner, spearheaded the new central city plan. Her focus was engaging neighborhood and neighborhood groups in a variety of methods. This process provided more power to neighborhood groups, which has continued after the plan's completion.

Zapata and Bates also explore the topic of equity planning.³² The authors introduce their backgrounds in equity planning and the history of the practice that began in Cleveland in the 1970s with Krumholz. Equity planning aims to confront the disparities present in our society through policies and practices. It is now present in a variety of fields. However, there is much work to do, as the authors point out that the United States is experiencing the largest racial wealth gap in decades.

Although there is a strong push towards more equitable planning, Beauvais and Baechtiger argue that equality and equity are values that are often at odds.³³ Because of this, organizations must decide which of these two values they will elevate when creating deliberative discussion processes. The authors note that although self-selection may be perceived as most legitimate and is best for achieving equality,

³¹ Norman Krumholz and Pierre Clavel, *Reinventing Cities: Equity Planners Tell Their Stories* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

³² Marisa A. Zapata and Lisa K. Bates, "Equity Planning Revisited," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 35, no. 3 (2015).

³³ Edana Beauvais and Andre Baechtiger, "Taking the Goals of Deliberation Seriously: A Differentiated View on Equality and Equity in Deliberative Designs and Processes," *Journal of Public Deliberation* 12, no. 2 (2016), DOI: <http://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.254>

"self-selection often produces more homogenous groups that reflect ... social inequalities."³⁴ They argue that engagement processes should be designed to meet specific goals, for example, either equity or equality.

Planners must constantly be working towards a more equitable future. In his 1965 article, "Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning," Davidoff explores the idea of the planner as an advocate in a pluralist system.³⁵ He saw these two connected thoughts as a way to address inequities in the distribution of wealth and resources- an issue that society still struggles with today, 55 years later. Pluralism in planning would allow and encourage other agencies and community groups to create their own plans for the city. These alternatives would be created and presented by those who feel strongly about the ideas, instead of a professional planner merely providing alternative solutions that he or she has no interest in. The public would also be able to see alternative solutions, instead of following what the planning agency presented because it is the only option. In such a system, planners would act as advocates on behalf of their agency or community group. A planner would become "an advocate for what he deems proper."³⁶

In *Planning in the Face of Power*, Forester explores the power and relationships present in the planning practice.³⁷ Like Davidoff, he thinks planners should advocate for certain goals. He argues that planning is inherently political, and planners must learn to navigate these power structures to accomplish their goals. Throughout the book, the author explores "what planners, when they are so inclined, might do to foster more genuinely democratic politics in their communities."³⁸In the final section of the book,

³⁴ Ibid., 4.

³⁵ Paul Davidoff, "Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning," in *The City Reader, 5th ed.*, ed. by Richard Legates and Frederic Stout, (London: Routledge, 2011).

³⁶ Ibid., 438.

³⁷ John Forester, *Planning in the Face of Power* (Berkeley: University Press, 1989).

³⁸ Ibid., 9.

Forester presents a framework to enable planners to be effective agents for change in the inherently political realm in which they operate.

Conclusion

The review of existing literature on the impacts of COVID-19, “Zoom fatigue,” public participation, digital engagement, and equity and advocacy in the planning realm serves as a backdrop for the proposed study. The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically changed community engagement processes, and the equity impacts of these changes must be examined. As Butteriss notes, “The practice of online public engagement, and particularly online deliberative dialogue, is still very much in its infancy.”³⁹ If we are to continue to practice remote engagement, we must research these impacts.

17. ³⁹ Crispin Butteriss, *Making Deliberative Dialogue Work Online* (Carlton, Australia: Bang the Table, Pty Ltd, 2020),

Methods

This study utilized open-ended qualitative interviews. The interviews were guided by the five research questions as well as a prepared list of questions. Some of these questions were:

- What is your role in your organization?
- What did community engagement look like before the pandemic?
- How were events advertised?
- What barriers did people face to participating?
- What type of engagement have you done during the pandemic?
- What do you think are some best practices for remote engagement?
- Has there been discussions in your organization around racial equity and remote engagement?
- What do you anticipate engagement will look like after the pandemic?

This list is not exhaustive. Because these interviews were open-ended, they did not follow a set script. Clarifying questions were asked when needed. Questions were asked to some participants and not others based on their experiences and the organization they work for.

Rationale for Method Selection

Qualitative open-ended interviews are particularly well-suited to the chosen topic for many reasons. Interviews allow for “developing detailed descriptions.”⁴⁰ This study sought to provide an in-depth look into how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted community engagement and what lessons were learned through this. The participants provided these detailed descriptions to further the knowledge of this process. Weiss also notes that qualitative interview are well-suited to studies that seek to describe a process.⁴¹ Interviews allowed the participants to describe their personal process when it comes to putting

⁴⁰ Robert S. Weiss, *Learning from Strangers* (Riverside: Free Press, 1995), 9.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

on engagement events or activities. This rich description helped elucidate the process of changes to engagement that occurred because of the pandemic and how these changes impacted the efficacy of engagement.

Another benefit of interviews is they place value on the participant's whole story and lived experience. Other methods, such as surveys, often take only "bits and pieces" of this story.⁴² As Weiss elaborates, "[W]e can establish an understanding with the respondents that it is their full story we want and not simply answers to standardized questions."⁴³ Utilizing open-ended instead of fixed questioning allows for more exploration of their story and responsiveness to the answers provided by the participants. The goal of this study is not statistical analysis, but to understand the participants' stories and lived experience, and to have a depth of understanding.

Finally, interviews were chosen because they allow the researcher to learn about events that have already taken place. Gerson and Damaske note that "many of a person's most important experiences occur at times and places that are beyond an investigator's reach, including events that took place in the past and activities that are too private to allow others to observe."⁴⁴ Part of understanding how COVID-19 changed engagement was understanding events that had taken place in the past that I was unable to observe. It also involved many processes, discussions, and decisions that took place within the interviewees' organizations that likely would have been too private for me to observe.

Participants

Participants for this study fall into three different groups: employees of local governments, consultants, and employees of community-based organizations. Betty, Matt, Elizabeth, and Kathryn work

⁴² Ibid, 2.

⁴³ Ibid., 3.

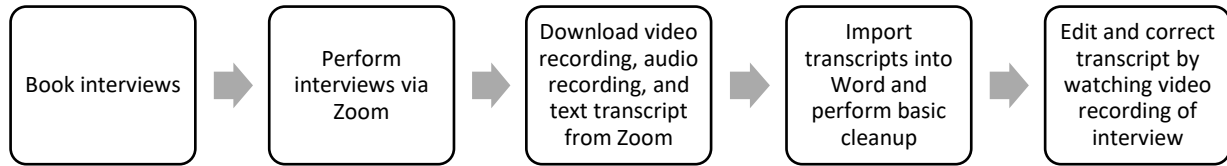
⁴⁴ Kathleen Gerson and Sarah Damaske, *The Science and Art of Interviewing* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 7.

government organizations. Benjamin and Thomas work for urban planning and architecture consulting companies. Julia, Megan, Luke, and James work for community-based organizations. The participants acted as a “panel of knowledgeable informants” who could guide me through the engagement processes.⁴⁵ Participants were initially recruited through purposive sampling. Four of the participants were personal connections. Three of the participants were recommended by personal connections. The final three participants were recruited through snowball sampling. Luke and James work at the same organization and were interviewed together. Betty and Elizabeth work in different departments of the same local government and were interviewed separately. All ten participants work in the Puget Sound region. Their names have been changed and details that could identify them removed to protect their anonymity.

Procedure and Data Collection

Potential interviewees were contacted via email. After they had confirmed their interest in participating in the project, we scheduled a time for the interview, and I emailed them a consent form (see Appendix A). This consent form provided more information about the study, including some example interview questions and why the study was being undertaken. Interviews were conducted between March 2 and April 14, 2021. The COVID-19 pandemic did lead to some complications for data collection, as performing in-person interviews would have been very difficult. Instead, all interviews were performed via Zoom, with one participant calling in with their phone instead of using computer audio. Interviews lasted for approximately half an hour to one hour. The audio and video for each interview was recorded utilizing Zoom. Zoom’s built-in audio transcription feature was also used.

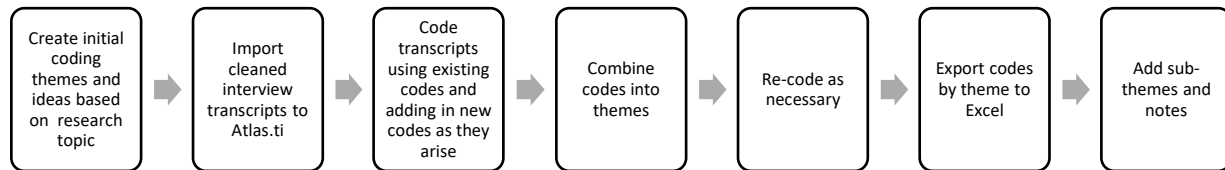
⁴⁵ Weiss, *Learning from Strangers*, 17.



Data collection procedure

Data Analysis

Interview data was analyzed by coding themes and ideas existing within the interview transcripts. Coding was performed using the software Atlas.ti. Atlas.ti is a qualitative data analysis and research software. The thematic content analysis involved looking for common themes in the interviews that could answer the research questions and provide insight to engagement practitioners. Some codes were deductive based on the research questions, such as “pre-pandemic engagement” or “pandemic engagement.” Many of the codes were inductive, such as “collaboration with other organizations.” The list of codes and their frequencies can be found in Appendix B.



Data analysis procedure

Because this was a qualitative open-ended interview study, the analysis relied “less on counting and correlating and more on interpretation, summary, and integration.”⁴⁶ Seven main themes were identified during this process of watching, cleaning transcripts, reading, and coding: Pre-pandemic engagement, engagement during the pandemic, in-person engagement, remote engagement, best practices for remote engagement, the future of engagement, and racial equity. After the coding was complete, quotations were exported to Excel for further analysis based on these seven key themes. Each set of quotations was reread to determine sub-themes and third-level themes within the major themes. Quotes

⁴⁶ Ibid, 3.

were then grouped together based on these sub-themes, and are presented together in the Results section, along with analysis and observations.

Considerations

Generalizability

A common concern with qualitative studies, and particularly those done without random sampling, is their generalizability. These concerns can be ameliorated, in part, by the consideration of respondent's own assessment of generalizability. As Weiss describes, respondents likely know about the experiences of their friends and family and know if their experiences are similar.⁴⁷ Another counter to these concerns is that if the interviews achieve theoretical saturation, they will capture most of the information there is to know about a topic.⁴⁸ Finally, Weiss also mentions the Theory of Independent Qualifiers. This theory argues that if the findings are plausible and supported by the data, there is no reason to assume the conclusions are not generalizable.⁴⁹ Krumholz and Clavel noted in their collection of interviews on equity that, although other planners will not be in the exact same situation as the stories shared, they still suggest "issues and possibilities, traps and opportunities to look out for and take seriously."⁵⁰ Although the interviews still cannot be considered statistically valid, "they offer a key ingredient that surveys cannot: sufficient depth and breadth to discover the factors, mechanisms, and processes that create broader trends."⁵¹

⁴⁷ Ibid, 26.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 28.

⁵⁰ Norman Krumholz and Pierre Clavel, *Reinventing Cities: Equity Planners Tell Their Stories* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 225-26.

⁵¹ Gerson and Damaske, *The Science and Art of*, 16.

Personal Bias

Another consideration for the study is my personal bias. As Yin notes, “A person should be *unbiased by preconceived notions*, including those derived from theory. Thus, a person should be sensitive and responsive to contradictory evidence.”⁵² I have personal biases due to my race, gender, and personal experiences. I also have biases that come from my reading of theory. For example, I thought that inequitable internet access would be a disadvantage of online engagement. However, this was not a major theme brought up by the participants.

⁵² Robert K Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, 6th ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2018), 57.

Results

Engagement Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the engagement undertaken by the interviewees was in person. Some remote engagement was also utilized.

In-person Engagement

In-person engagement prior to the pandemic took many forms. Half of the those interviewed discussed performing open houses as an engagement technique. Typically, these events were at a community building, such as city hall, a library, or school, and lasted two to three hours. Mailers would sometimes be sent to notify residents of the event. They often had boards set up with information and staff available for residents to talk to. Elizabeth described the common setup for open houses she did: “People come to a community space and there were boards around and people could come and take in information on their own time and there was staff there to answer questions and engage community members and people could leave comments on Post-its and also do dot voting and then there was some more in depth discussion as well,” This reflects the descriptions provided by the other interviewees.

Another commonly used method was booting or tabling. For this style of engagement, the interviewees would set up at a community space or event to meet people. Matt would set up a table in parks or at community events and provide trail maps and give away branded items. Elizabeth would set up a table outside grocery stores or at community events to speak with residents and ask them to fill out surveys on a particular issue or project.

The interviewees also discussed organizing events within a target community. Julia held several ‘picnic in the park’ events. Her organization provided food for those who came and had informal conversations with them about the project. Megan’s organization had two larger events during the year where they had activities, including kayaking and Zumba, and provided food. They would share information about their organization, what they do, and how people could get involved. Matt’s

organization had a variety of events for community members to attend, ranging from movies or concerts in a park to mountain bike races.

Some other in-person engagement activities included having focus groups, performing interviews, going door-to-door to residences and businesses, and government meetings such as city council or commission meetings.

Remote Engagement

In addition to in-person events and activities, half of those interviewed did some form of remote engagement prior to the pandemic. Four of the interviewees used some form of online survey. Betty would send mailers related to a specific project to impacted residents with details of the work and the URL for the survey. Benjamin used online maps to engage. Elizabeth's organization purchased an online open house platform prior to the pandemic, although she said that, at the time, there was not a lot of interest in using it.

Engagement During the COVID-19 Pandemic

All of the interviewees noted that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their usual engagement practices. This involved a transition, to some degree, to remote engagement, although engagement during the pandemic did consist of both in-person and online events. The transition to remote practices was more pronounced for the four participants who worked for governments and the two consultants who primarily work with governments than it was for the four people who worked for community-based organizations. This distinction occurred because most governmental bodies in the Puget Sound region did not allow their staff to continue to participate or organize in-person events. However, those who worked for the CBOs were more flexible in the methods they used.

As with in-person engagement, online engagement can take many forms. All ten interviewees reported using some form of video conferencing program, with nine of the interviewees specifically mentioning the platform Zoom. Four of the participants discussed using some form of online open house.

Four of the participants reported using the online survey platform SurveyMonkey. Other types of remote engagement or tools utilized included creating videos on a specific topic, interactive maps like Esri's StoryMap, and interactive polling like MentiMeter.

COVID-19 Pandemic and Emergency Communication

Four of the interviewees commented that the pandemic forced them to switch from their usual engagement focus to providing information related to the pandemic. This transition meant that they no longer had time to perform engagement. Matt stated that this was the biggest immediate impact on his ability to connect with the community, and that pandemic-related communication took tremendous resources away from his traditional engagement activities. He said, "We basically had to drop our established communications with the community, and we had to shift into how to create signs, social media, and other campaigns specifically about COVID." Part of this shift occurred because the people he usually interacted with in his engagement activities were now asking the same questions. He elaborated by saying that "the pandemic resulted in our very diverse constituencies having very similar or the same questions."

Betty noted this same trend for herself and her coworkers. She said, "We were just so focused on answering all the COVID questions and concerns, nobody was doing engagement, other than [using our web platform], saying 'Tell us your COVID story'." Luke also shared similar experiences. His organization focuses primarily on environmental outreach but shifted to providing resources related to the pandemic, grant opportunities for business owners, and rental and bill paying assistance for their community.

Although the pandemic took resources away from the traditional methods of engagement, there were also some positives that emerged from this new focus on emergency communication. Matt noted that the pandemic "forced us to create really efficient and very up to date" information, including daily updates. He felt that providing this up-to-date information to his constituents built trust with these groups.

He said it also “drove folks to be more active on our websites and on our social media.” They have continued to see higher levels of engagement on their website and social media than before the pandemic. Luke connected with a popular YouTuber he knew and had the YouTuber create content around the pandemic as another way to share information. He said he felt like he did not know what to do because of the barriers presented by the pandemic but was still able to find innovative ways to provide necessary information to his community.

Transition to Remote Engagement

Betty and Kathryn both discussed struggles with transitioning to Zoom. Betty commented that, before the pandemic, she was only familiar with using Skype. She turned to one of her coworkers who was more familiar with Zoom to teach her how to use it. Kathryn said that, when the pandemic began, no one in her organization really knew how to use Zoom. Although there was a learning curve, the situation has improved. However, Benjamin did not notice difficulties with Zoom, stating that “luckily people are comfortable enough with using Zoom on a personal level, or can even just call in to certain phone lines such that it hasn’t seen as much of a hiccup as it probably would have if this had happened even 10 years ago, when the idea of using Skype for video calls was still relatively new.” All the interviewees noted that, despite the increased internet literacy mentioned by Benjamin, there were still challenges to using online tools to engage the community.

Barriers to Effective Engagement During the Pandemic

One focus of the interviews was what barriers people faced in participating, or difficulties that arose for the practitioners in trying to undertake remote engagement. A common theme throughout the interviews was how much more challenging it was to build relationships and establish trust with the community when using online methods. The interviewees describe several different reasons why meeting with new groups was so difficult. For Elizabeth, the greatest struggle was trying to connect with people who had not engaged with the city previously. Because they did not have any contact information for

these individuals, they could not invite them to online engagement events. She commented that, prior to the pandemic, “some of the best ways for me to meet new people would have been tabling at a library or grocery store or going to a farmers market or going to one of the many community block parties that happened throughout the year. And I couldn’t do any of that. That created barriers to reaching people.” She continued, saying “I think the biggest thing for in-person is just that opportunity to go and meet people who aren't normally participating in something- who aren't going to find out about your project because they're not on the email list or they don't already understand how the city works. I think that's the part that's really been hard in this pandemic- is to find people who don't participate.”

Betty even noted that she had difficulties making relationships with other organizations. She tried to connect with ten different community-based organizations for a project, but only received a response from three of them. She postulated that this low response rate was due to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. “I remember calling, I remember emailing. I just think they were so overwhelmed. And they were closed. So I think people not being in the physical office, not having a live person to answer the phone, that was definitely a challenge for me to be able to find somebody to talk to.”

However, Luke was able to make new relationships with organizations through virtual events:

Because we’ve been attending a lot of summits virtually, that has really opened my eyes up to organizations somewhere further away that I had not heard of, and then being able to connect with each other offline...I feel like virtually, we get to know more people sometimes, because if there’s a summit- not everybody can attend. But the virtual summit has opened a lot of potential for me- like other organizations I had not heard of, to be able to connect... We want to build that relationship and build connections to further existing programs.

Although Betty found it difficult to connect with new organizations, the prevalence of online events allowed Luke to make connections that would not have been established without the online transition caused by the pandemic.

Matt noted that online engagement went well if it was for a project that started prior to the pandemic. He felt that the rapport they had established with the community led to successful meetings that had “really good attendance.” Conversely, he noted that “having meetings with new audiences is still

very tough right now.” He found that this barrier could be overcome by having “someone who is vouching for you and will help bring you in to that community.”

Another common issue that was also discussed in the literature was “Zoom fatigue”. Interviewees felt this contributed to both the number of people willing to engage as well as the quality of the engagement. Benjamin noted that “a lot of online meetings can feel a bit tedious and when you lose people’s attention, they’re going to go off and do something else on their computer.” Julia reported this online meeting fatigue in her own life as she tried to remain connected with community groups by attending their remote events, describing it as “exhausting”. Thomas felt that “Zoom fatigue” was impacting the turnout for online events.

A third barrier that participants brought up was technical difficulties or a lack of internet literacy. Thomas felt that, in order to have broad public usage, any technology utilized in engagement had to be very easy to use. This conclusion was supported by experiences he had towards the beginning of the pandemic with online mapping. The tools he tried to use did not work well, as he found that the “technological hurdle was just too high for people.” Betty and Elizabeth were both particularly concerned that using online tools could make it harder for older people to participate. Elizabeth felt that this limited her ability to try new or innovate tools, like interactive online whiteboard spaces. She said “there’s almost too many bells and whistles... I just need one or two things for people to do.” Luke noted that, although there may be more technological barriers for older people, “younger folks will teach back to their elders and parents.”

Solutions to Barriers

The interviewees have also found ways to overcome some of these barriers. They provided several examples of ways to overcome the struggle of building relationships and engaging with new groups of people. Three of the respondents leaned on existing relationships to either fill the gap in engagement or connect with new groups of people. Luke and James leaned heavily on their existing

relationships with other community-based organizations to spread information. They found that, by leveraging these existing connections, they could reach a much larger audience than they could have on their own. As Luke noted, “Without connecting with other organizations and everyone working together, the information will be disconnected and the number of people we reach out to will be limited.” Julia also utilized this strategy. She said she specifically emailed community members she already knew who would be able to pass on information about their engagement efforts and the specific projects they were working on. She also noted that this had the beneficial secondary effect of allowing her to stay connected with people she already knew, especially during a time when they could no longer meet. “A couple of us have been working in the neighborhoods for many years, so we had professional relationships with community leaders and community groups established. It was at a time when we weren’t seeing those people on a regular basis, so it was nice to have something to email about in particular.”

The interviewees suggested several different ways to overcome the technical difficulties and lack of internet literacy that may exist when trying to engage in an online space. Three of the interviewees explicitly mentioned that all online engagement should be designed with mobile phones in mind, because that may be the only way many people access the internet. Benjamin noted that if you are going to be having a series of meetings, it is prudent to

make sure that, at that first meeting, you allocate plenty of time for technological difficulties, because inevitably there's someone on the call that will not have their microphone configured right or there'll be an echo, or whatever. If it's one in an ongoing series of committee meetings, for example, it can be essential to make sure you have enough time at the beginning, just to debug anything, and you have an overflow of time after the meeting, if you need to make up time.

Because this may take up a significant amount of the proposed meeting’s time, it may not be an appropriate strategy for one off meetings.

Luke took this idea of teaching participants how to use the technology before the meeting even further. One of the events he runs is a training course for landscapers. Previously, it was held in person, but transitioned to be on Zoom due to the pandemic. However, many of the participants were unfamiliar

with the platform. Luke would meet with the participants outdoors and physically distanced prior to the meeting to teach them how to use Zoom. He would show them how to download Zoom on either their phone or laptop, and then taught them the functions they would need for the training. This was especially critical for his community, as the trainings have in-language breakout rooms. Without his help, “they wouldn’t be able to have that in-language training or be able to ask questions.” He would also do a remote dry run with them the day before the training to resolve any outstanding issues. Although this required a substantial time investment, it was essential for the training event to go well and meet his community member’s needs.

Exceptions to the Remote Engagement Trend

Two exceptions to the movement to remote engagement were discussed by interviewees. Four of the participants shared examples where their engagement efforts were not impacted at all by the pandemic. In all these instances, the engagement practitioners were already using remote engagement, so there was no transition required. Benjamin had already moved to performing interviews over the phone, Skype, or another platform. Thomas frequently used the polling platform SurveyMonkey before the pandemic and has continued to use it during the pandemic.

All the interviewees from community-based organizations, as well as one of the government employees, noted that they still have some in-person engagement. This happened because the activities could not transition online. Almost all the in-person activities that could not become remote were programs undertaken by the CBOs to provide support for the communities they engage with. This included food and grocery deliveries, community cleanup events, passing out informational flyers, and filling out grant paperwork. These activities all help to build and maintain relationships with the community. Luke said, “I feel like during the pandemic, a lot of the work is either over the phone or on Zoom. But it’s still important to do that direct outreach part because there are things that we can’t do, like seeing the issues that the business owner have, and the only way we can help is really in person, especially with paperwork [for grant applications].”

The Future of Public Engagement

As more of the population becomes vaccinated against COVID-19 and new cases of the virus decrease, one can assume in-person gatherings will be permitted again. This leads to the question of what community engagement will look like in a post-pandemic era. This is further complicated because both in-person and remote engagement have advantages and disadvantages which were discussed by the interviewees.

Advantages of In-person Engagement

1. Person-to-person interaction

In-person engagement excels in providing person-to-person interaction. The interviewees felt that it was more personal and casual. Julia described an informal afternoon in the park by saying, “It was more of a personal feel and more casual come as you are, and there were treats for the kids and the kids were just running around playing and the adults could talk, and then the kids were also welcome to come up and offer their ideas and opinions.” Luke also noted that you get the chance to interact with children and other family members. “When we go door to door, it’s more personal. We’ll be able to see the family members and the kids.” Megan noted that “the most important thing about this is that you get to meet people and you know how tall they are. It’s these little things. You can see how they interact, their mannerisms, how they are as a person and you can get to know them.” This is contrasted with online engagement, where seeing a person’s face on video is the most personal it can be.

2. Easier to build relationships

This person-to-person interaction that occurs also makes it easier to build relationships. Luke found that meeting in-person allowed him to connect with business owners and help them with needs they may have, which in turned helped build the relationship. “When we come for one thing, but the business owner needs help with another thing- so we’re teaching them about waste, but then because we’re in the

same language community, they would always ask ‘Can you take a look at my bill? Can you help me call someone?’ because of the language barrier. I feel like that’s an important part of building relationships.”

3. Shows more investment in the community

When engagement is done in-person, it often involves meeting the community where they are. This requires more time or resources than remote engagement, but Benjamin felt that the payoff can be worth it. “It can be valuable as part of public engagement to demonstrate you’re interested in the community, that you’re seeing what’s going on, that you’re taking the time to meet with people face-to-face.”

4. Provides visibility for the organization’s work

Along with showing more investment in the community, engaging in-person can provide more visibility for the work an organization does. Megan noted that they were often out in the community “doing restoration events, cleaning up... having things happen at the community center. I mean it was just like popping all of the time.” This led to “a lot of visibility because folks are just out and about in community.” Matt also did a lot of events out in the community where people already were. “It was a lot of boothing in parks and at community events, it was lots of ribbon cuttings and groundbreakings. It was a lot of organizing community five K’s, mountain bike races, doing a lot of out in the field. We’d go out there with our tent and our swag. We have a lot of trail maps and things like that we tried to be very visible to give away our materials and to remind folks of what [our organization] does.”

5. Ability to be hands-on

In-person engagement can include hands-on activities. Luke’s organization partnered with the water utility company “to take the community out to learn about the Cedar River, where our water comes from. Then the community knows and understands the value of the water that they’re using and being connected to the environment that way.” These hands-on opportunities provide other ways of learning

that may be more impactful than watching a video, attending a community meeting, or other forms of remote engagement.

6. Some engagement activities cannot be done remotely

As discussed in *Exceptions to the Remote Engagement Trend* above, some engagement activities cannot be done remotely. Luke had to help businesses with grant paperwork that could only be done in person. Megan's organization also had events that could not be done remotely, like a neighborhood cleanup. Julia's organization provided food delivery for people in the community.

7. Community members can show their support or concern for an issue by being present

When an event is in-person, community members can come to the event to show their support. Megan commented that there is a "power in being present." She described this power by talking about a hearing on EPA changes to the clean water standards. She said, "Everyone together went into the building for a show of presence and standing in solidarity with an issue, not necessarily just to speak. And so when you are, then, testifying remotely, you have no idea how many people are there, or if they're all wearing, you know, blue to represent how they feel."

Disadvantages of In-Person Engagement

1. High opportunity cost to participate

The disadvantage of in-person engagement that was mentioned the most was the high opportunity cost for people to participate. An in-person event requires the participant to spend time and resources to travel to the destination. They also need to be available at the specific time of the meeting. If they have children, they may need to find childcare. Matt described this by saying, "A lot of the barriers to folks wanting to come to our events and things like that were time commitments, we didn't have childcare, they weren't always in the most public transit friendly places." Benjamin had a very similar comment. "In-person evening meetings may not be convenient for folks that have kids, especially if it doesn't seem like

there's childcare being provided. It could also be inconvenient over larger geographic areas if you have a lot of people who want to participate, but are located, you know, an hour's drive away from where a certain event's being held.”

2. It can be difficult to engage with new audiences

Some of the interviewees noted that it can be hard to engage with new audiences. Betty commented that in-person events have “the same suspects. It was the same people. So, the challenge is bringing in the new voices.”

3. People's needs may not be accommodated

People may have certain accommodations that would need to be made for them to participate. Benjamin said that it may be hard for certain people to engage in-person. “So folks that have mobility limitations, for example. Folks that are hearing impaired. And even in some cases, folks that are visually impaired. There are some public engagement events where it's very hard for folks to engage, because in many cases, public engagement events aren't necessarily designed with their needed accommodations in mind.”

4. Requires a physical space

Another disadvantage with in-person engagement is that it requires a physical space. Elizabeth commented that, “It can be challenging, I think, to find community space in [our municipality]. You know, we have our community centers, but they are in high demand so sometimes, we're just not able to find space when we want it.”

Advantages of Remote Engagement

1. Engage with the material at your own pace

One of the main advantages of remote engagement is that people can often engage with the material at their own pace, on their own time. Meetings can be recorded for community members to

watch later. Online open houses can be open for several weeks instead of several hours. Kathryn said that she appreciated “the ability just to pop in and look at the things and read them at my leisure and go back if I want to and see it again.” Benjamin found that online tools like open houses and maps were very useful in this regard. “People are able to manipulate this information themselves. They're able to look through and concentrate on the things that they want. They're able to take an online map, for example, and look at their house and figure out ‘What would this plan mean for me in my neighborhood?’”

2. Lower cost and less resources required to put on than an in-person event

Online engagement can often cost less money and require less of the organizer’s time. Benjamin said that online engagement “may be something that a lot of communities take, as well, for budgetary concerns that instead of renting out space and paying for the cost of printing up a lot of boards- having presentations online, being able to record it for later. Those can probably be seen as as more more effective.” Matt found that a lot of his time was freed up, which lead to better engagement. “What we found is it cuts down a lot of the logistic resources that are required when you go into traditional event planning like space and setting up the room. And so, instead, you can spend more time on getting content that is actually going to be more appealing to the audience.”

3. Can be easier to accommodate people’s needs

It can be easier to make certain accommodations for people when using remote engagement. Benjamin said that remote engagement can be beneficial because there is “the ability to engage from at home without the need to worry whether there's stairs or whether the facilities can be accessible, I mean that can be pretty important” Matt said online engagement can be more accessible because you can have closed captioning on meetings and use translation services. Kathryn agreed, saying her municipality had implemented the ability to translate their web content on-demand.

4. Easy to provide materials in response to questions

Matt found a major advantage of remote engagement was it allowed him to respond instantaneously to people's questions and provide them with resources. "You can be much more responsive, because you can have materials ready to be able to answer questions- you can send maps right away, rather than being in a meeting where you're like 'Hey can you send me an email about that.' You can get right back to people and it's great."

5. Potentially broader audience

As with Betty's comment that in-person engagement often has the same people, Matt found an advantage of online engagement was that "it allows you to get more diverse input because usually you would just hear from the same frequent flyers at the meetings, but now you're getting a broader set of answers."

6. More tools available

The transition to remote engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic brought new tools into the realm of engagement. Thomas utilized the polling feature on Zoom to get instant feedback from participants. He said, "We'll use the built-in polling features and Zoom. We could use that with a visual preference survey. Or, could be findings from an existing conditions report- Does this finding sound right to you or is there something we missed? We can ask those questions get a quick read with the polling features on Zoom." Elizabeth was exploring other options for engaging, such as "online whiteboard tools where you could put sticky notes and upload pictures."

7. Low opportunity cost to participate

Remote engagement requires less time and resources to participate- something Thomas referred to as a 'low opportunity cost.' He said, "People could call, join, didn't have to pay attention the entire time, but it wasn't like they had to spend their whole evening driving somewhere and then sitting

around... So there's definitely opportunities for that to happen, where it's a low very opportunity costs for someone to join the event..." Many of the other interviewees echoed these comments. Kathryn said, "I think, for a lot of people, 'I don't have to worry about childcare. I don't have to worry about transportation. It's just a lot easier for me to show up from my living room than to have to go to a place.'"

8. Can provide a level of emotional safety

Because participants are not in the same physical space, remote engagement can provide a sense of what Elizabeth referred to as 'emotional safety'. She said that remote engagement can be beneficial as it avoids "that sort of negative emotion, the idea of 'I don't want to go to a meeting where people are just going to be screaming or yelling'. If you're curious about an issue, there's maybe a little bit more emotional safety coming to something that's online. You don't have to be with angry people, or maybe if you hold a different viewpoint than the majority people- again it just might feel more safe if you could do that from your home."

Disadvantages of Remote Engagement

1. Difficult to build relationships and have person-to-person interaction

It can be difficult to build relationships through remote engagement and to gain the community's trust. There is often a lack of person-to-person interaction. Matt said that "I think the biggest challenge to doing all the virtual stuff is developing trust with the public. There's nothing better than being in person with someone, looking at a map, or looking at a potential playground area and listening. And just having that person realize you're truly listening to them, you're respecting their voice. Doing that online is very tough." Benjamin found that it was difficult to have that personal interaction with participants that you could in person. "You can't engage everyone with the same level of attention that you could in person."

2. No hands-on component

Although there are many different tools that can be used for remote engagement, it is not possible to provide a hands-on component. For this reason, Luke felt that in-person engagement has its advantages. “I feel like it works best when we still have in-person training [for spill kits]. Because then you're showing them where their storm drains are, showing them how to use it hands on. Whereas with a video- although it's beneficial where they can always watch them any time, I feel like for a business, someone being there, showing them how to do it is better than watching a video.”

3. Participants typically need internet access and technological literacy

Almost all forms of remote engagement require internet access and the technological know-how to participate. Benjamin said this can be a “major disadvantage... in a lot of communities who have people that aren't necessarily as technologically literate or don't have access to good enough internet.” When Luke’s organization shifted to using Zoom for a training event, they had to take extra time to show the participants how to use the platform. “In order for this training to happen, we have to show them how to use Zoom. And it's not simply sending them a Zoom download link and something like that.”

4. May not have the same perceived validity as in-person engagement

Benjamin brought up the point that remote engagement may not have the same perceived validity as in-person engagement. He said, “If your facilitation of an engagement event would seem to be more valid if it were, considering what a lot of local folks would see as normal, having a roundtable meeting in person- that that would have more validity than sitting behind a computer screen and looking at people turn their cameras on and off.” However, this issue of perceived validity may improve if remote engagement becomes more normal.

Engagement Post-Pandemic

All ten of the interviewees expected that a mix of in-person and remote engagement will become the norm. They felt that remote engagement would continue because of the advantages discussed above. However, in-person engagement will return, especially because it can overcome the disadvantages of remote engagement, leading to a hybrid model. The communities practitioners engage with are diverse, and there is no 'one size fits all' approach. They presented several different pictures of what the future of engagement will be after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first main idea of how hybrid engagement will look is having events that mirror each other, where the same information is presented in-person and online. This option is beneficial because it can accommodate people's different needs and provides you with the advantages of both models. Elizabeth commented that she will continue to use remote engagement once she can have in-person events because of the convenience factor for participants. She said, "I don't have to worry about childcare. I don't have to worry about transportation. It's just a lot easier for me to show up from my living room than to have to go to a place." Luke would follow this model as well because he wants to make sure people have the option to choose which they prefer- in-person or remote. Kathryn thinks they will have in-person and remote events that mirror each other, partly because that is what the residents of her municipality will now expect. However, she noted that this will likely require more staff resources. Thomas agreed with this, saying "It does almost sound like twice as much work, because then you have to prepare materials that you can't reuse so easily."

The second idea was to have a mix between in-person and online events. With this model of hybrid engagement, some of the events would be only in-person, whereas others would be only online. This option alleviates Kathryn and Thomas's concerns about the increased resources required to run two sets of engagement activities. Betty thought that this could look like the first event being in-person and the second being online. Matt also promoted the idea of meeting in-person first, and then moving to remote because of the convenience. He said, "I really love the idea of having kickoff meetings. For

instance, on a certain project- if you're working with 40 community members, a kickoff meeting in person. You show 'Hey, we're here to listen.'" This first in-person meeting can be used to establish rapport and build relationships, while the later remote meetings could be easier for people to attend.

When trying to decide how to perform engagement post-pandemic, the practitioners stressed that it was critical to consider the community's needs. James described this by saying,

There is not just one solution that will fit everybody. So for all of our programs, we want to understand what method works best, so that's why for businesses, we're in person, whereas for other projects that might be a mix of online and in person. But you know, even pre pandemic, this is not like something that's come out during the pandemic, this is like pre pandemic. It's always been about this relationship building, it's about listening to people, going where they are, whether that be for technical access or for language access, or for geographical access. You know, that's all been a thing pre pandemic and it's been incredibly critical, as Luke mentioned, during the pandemic and I'm sure that will be even just as critical going forward after the pandemic.

Best Practices for Remote Engagement

Because engagement will likely move to a hybrid model, it is important to consider best practices for remote engagement. Recommendations for in-person engagement have been discussed at length in the existing literature. However, because remote engagement is a relatively new phenomenon, there is a paucity of writing on the topic. As part of the interviews, the participants discussed their thoughts on how to have effective remote engagement. These techniques were tactics the practitioners were already utilizing, as well as lessons they learned while performing remote engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. Provide non-digital ways for people to engage

There are many benefits of remote engagement. However, there are disadvantages as well, as discussed above. To ameliorate concerns of internet access and technological literacy amongst participants, the interviewees also often shared information in non-digital ways. James explained the importance of providing a non-digital way for community members to participate. He said, "When that's the only avenue for providing input, then that becomes really easy to alienate communities that don't have

access to that, because the technological barrier or just because the language barrier. So that's why, when we do webinars... it's accompanied with in-person meetings or accompanied with other materials so that we're still in contact, before and after the webinars.” For one of her projects during the pandemic, Julia had postcards delivered to people in the community with four different languages. She said, “People can submit the postcards with their suggestions and then we entered that information into the web portal.”

Luke used text messages and phone calls to connect to some of his community members, as well as mail. He said that “when we need to share a document or anything, either we mail it out to them or like [use] a phone number that we can text. We would text that information beforehand, and then we can ask them a couple of questions- are you understanding this information... [They] receive that information through the text first and then you can do a follow up call to walk through the information with them.”

2. Plan with phones in mind

“The biggest thing that you can do for equity in public engagement is just making sure that materials can be accessed in a in a user-friendly way on a phone... Everybody has a phone, not everybody uses computers on a regular basis.” This quote from Benjamin illustrates how imperative it is for any remote engagement to be accessible on a smart phone. Julia and Matt also discussed the importance of this. Matt said that it is key to create graphics that work “in a very mobile phone friendly format.”

3. Allow multiple responses from the same IP address

Both Julia and Benjamin stressed the benefits of allowing multiple responses from the same IP address. Julia said this was critical because “people might share the same cell phone to participate. And so to really be conscientious about that when looking at the IP addresses. Like if we got four votes from one IP, that doesn't necessarily mean it's for one person trying to stack the votes, that it could be shared device. So thinking about that a little differently.”

4. Encourage the use of video for online meetings

Several points throughout this paper have discussed the struggle of creating personal connections and developing trust with your participants over remote engagement. When using a web conferencing platform, this can be mitigated by all the presenters having their video on. Matt said that “all the speakers need to have their video on,” and that this helps the participants know that you are “truly listening to them and value their opinion. Thomas found that having video on in breakout rooms can help facilitate discussion. He said this helps people “pretend like they're in the same space,” and it “seems like it's worked well” when he has used this practice in his remote meetings.

5. Utilize breakout rooms

Several interviewees recommended breaking out into smaller groups when using web conferencing software. Benjamin commented that “there are certain limitations with the platform where in large groups...it's very, very hard for people to feel like they are having their voices heard.” To alleviate this concern, Benjamin recommended breaking people into smaller groups. This provides more opportunities for discussion. Megan, Luke, and Elizabeth all recommended using breakout rooms to allow for in-language discussion.

6. Have shorter meetings

As discussed in the literature, spending a long amount of time online can lead to “Zoom fatigue”. Benjamin commented that “it seems like having shorter meetings is something that's necessary because online meetings have a way of wearing people out. People are sitting in one place for a long period of time, it's not like when you're meeting folks in a room. You don't necessarily have as much contact so a lot of online meetings can feel a bit tedious and when you lose people's attention they're going to go off and do something else in their computer.” Although this may not be as necessary post-pandemic when less people are working from home, it is still important to consider, as remote meetings do not have the same stimulation as in-person meetings.

7. Compensate people for their time

Several of the interviewees described how their in-person events would have food, gift cards, or other ways to compensate participants for their time. This practice can also be carried over to remote engagement. Julia said that in person, they would normally pay for food and have dinner together at their events. For online events, she said that they provided gift cards for lunch delivery for the participants. She also saw organizations “offering raffle items for participation. So you could get a gift card for a neighborhood shop or a restaurant or something like that.” This has the added benefit of supporting local businesses and restaurants in the community you are working in. Megan suggested sending a goodie bag to participants, which “lets them know you care about them.”

8. Leverage existing relationships

When doing remote engagement, it can be difficult to connect with new groups of people. It is important to leverage your existing relationships and connect with their networks, as discussed previously. For one of his main projects, Matt was trying to connect with minority groups during the pandemic. To do this, he partnered with a non-profit group that already works within those communities and has done virtual engagement. He said,

They have trust and rapport with those [communities] so what we're trying to do is see if they would be willing to sponsor us and basically cohost and vouch for us and introduce us and help introduce us into that virtual world... we want to make sure if we actually do a virtual event focused on these communities that we're working with the partners who will help us develop materials that actually resonate with those communities. If you have existing relations, you can use that to then develop that virtual content.

He also discussed how the time saved by not needing to set up an in-person event can be used to meet with community leaders prior to an engagement event. These meetings can be used to make sure the content is tailored to the target audience.

9. Use plain language

A benefit of remote engagement is that participants can view and interact with the information on their own time. However, it is important to consider this when creating your content. Unlike an in-person open house, there will be no subject matter experts available to discuss and explain concepts to the community. Because of this, it is critical to utilize plain language. Matt initially noticed this when providing emergency information related to COVID-19 to his community. He said, “Basically COVID presented this thing which was you couldn't hide behind a website or products that weren't clear, because you were getting so many questions. You would get inundated with ‘Hey, this is a bad product, you need to fix it.’” He said he will take this lesson with him post-pandemic, and that they won't “quickly whip up a sign or fact sheet and call it good”, because “the public wants to actually be able to understand and digest material.” Megan commented that the number one priority when communicating with the public is to have information that makes sense, is clear, to the point, and tells people how it is going to impact them.

10. Keep online information up to date

Another lesson learned from the pandemic is how important it is to the community that you provide up to date information. Elizabeth said she felt that their online open house platform will be more successful as there is more activity on it and new information for people to see and engage with. She said, “I think about the websites that I go to visit, and I go because I want to see what's new on there. If I went there and it never changed, I would probably stop going there. I've already seen this, I don't need to go back here .” Matt felt that having up to date information also improved engagement. “I think people are more willing to engage those sites if they can say this communication product is more fresh- which requires more resources, but we know we're getting better engagement.” Another item he mentioned to improve your web content is simply having the date when the page was last updated clearly shown.

11. Utilize graphics and visuals

Utilizing graphics and visuals instead of text can provide a more engaging experience for participants. Matt said that many of his organization’s meetings have shifted away from using slideshows to providing more visuals. For example, when talking to a community about a new park space, he said that, in the future, instead of having a slideshow, “we’re going to have a few PowerPoint slides then we’re going to go to Google Earth and our drone footage and we’re just going to walk around the space- and photos are worth their weight in gold.” Megan also recommended using photos and creating a dialogue with your participants instead of having a presentation, especially when sharing with the community. When creating surveys, it is also helpful to include more graphics. Kathryn found her organization had improved success and response rate on surveys that contained a lot of pictures. She said they did three different visual preference surveys during the pandemic and one before it that all had very high response rates compared to surveys they had done previously with less or no pictures.

Racial Equity and Engagement

The interviews also explored the topic of racial equity and engagement. This exploration follows a renewed focus on racial equity in the United States. High profile extrajudicial killings of unarmed Black community members have brought past injustices to Black and Brown people in the U.S. to the forefront of many people’s minds, as well as the systemic racism still present in many of our social and governmental systems. These inequities are especially important in community engagement, as practitioners should strive to hear from all voices, but particularly those that have been previously ignored or prevented from participating. Many municipalities have acknowledged the importance of racial equity and adopted organization-wide policies the focus on this. Portland Bureau of Transportation notes that “as an organization, we are committed to equity in all our public engagement efforts.”⁵³ The City of Seattle started their Race and Social Justice Initiative in 2005. This initiative explicitly mentions “conduct[ing]

⁵³ Portland Bureau of Transportation, *PBOT Public Involvement Guide* (Portland, OR, 2020), 3.

racially equitable community engagement,” as well as valuing the wisdom of impacted communities and learning from them.⁵⁴

Engagement can help to better understand the situation and needs of a community. Hearing the perspective of people within historically underrepresented communities can help “foster the kind of understanding that might be expressed as ‘Had I been in that situation, I’d have acted that way too.’”⁵⁵ This concept is especially important in urban planning, as the majority of urban planners are white.⁵⁶ Many of the best practices mentioned above have the potential to improve racial equity. For example, Benjamin mentioned that making sure your engagement activities are smart phone-friendly is the best thing one can do to improve equity. The interviewees also discussed two main ways they aim to improve racial equity within their engagement activities: Providing access in languages other than English and using engagement methods that the community prefers. These suggestions can apply to both in-person and remote engagement.

Providing Access in Languages Other than English

Providing access to engagement activities in languages other than English was the most frequently mentioned way that the interviewees currently aim to improve equity in their engagement. This was implemented in a variety of ways. A low-cost way to provide in-language access done by several of the participants was to translate online and printed materials, or to limit the use of text and utilize more graphics and images to convey meaning. For example, Matt’s organization created a media campaign and signs at the beginning of the pandemic about staying safe while using their outdoor public spaces. “It had

⁵⁴ City of Seattle, Race and Social Justice Initiative 2019 – 2021 Strategy (Seattle, WA, 2019), 4, 1.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Kendra L. Smith. “More and Better: Increasing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Planning,” *PAS Memo, American Planning Association*, May/June 2019, 4. This report includes information from APA’s 2018 Salary Survey in which 79% of respondents indicated they were white.

to be signs that work in very diverse communities,” so their communication was “based in a series of images with very little words.”

Several of the participants mentioned having translators available at in-person and online events. Betty had two Mandarin interpreters for an in-person open house she did before the pandemic. Many of the staff at Megan’s organization are bilingual, so they can speak with members of their community in their first language instead of English. Luke believes that having someone for people to speak to in their first language is very important. He said, “I feel like not just having the material in language but really have someone be able to share that information out. And that's how you get people to know about certain things. Just having it on a website, just having it on a certain place, it's kind of dead.”

This in-language access can be enhanced further by providing events that are entirely in a language other than English. Kathryn’s municipality was undergoing an extensive land use code update process and put on some sessions entirely in Korean. She said, “We, the non-Korean speaking planners, we didn't know what was being said. It would be translated to us later or on the side.” Elizabeth also had events that were completely in a language other than English. These events were facilitated by members of the different communities who had been hired by her organization as cultural outreach assistants to help connect and build relationships. These outreach assistants would facilitate the event, and Elizabeth would attend only to answer questions as needed.

Use Engagement Methods that the Community Prefers

The interviewees stressed that, when aiming to perform racial equitable engagement, it is critical to engage with the community in the way they prefer. This is at the heart of engagement- understanding that the community members have knowledge and life experience that those performing engagement do not. When Elizabeth and her cultural outreach assistants meet with people, she lets the assistants guide the activities and events. For example, some of the presentations were in English.

For some people, they're fine with seeing a presentation in English, or they want to [have it in English] because they want to practice their English, but when it comes to giving feedback or asking a question, they want to do it in their own language because they have a bigger vocabulary, they feel they're more comfortable expressing themselves, they're self-conscious about their English... We've had people come where we do the whole presentation in English. My cultural outreach assistants we're like 'Yeah no no it's totally fine.' They're telling me it's okay. But we would do a breakout room that was facilitated in a different language so people could listen to the presentation in English, but have the conversation about the content in their primary language.

Matt's organization would ask the communities what the best platform is to reach them. For example, some groups tended to use Facebook more, whereas others preferred Nextdoor. Benjamin also commented on this, saying that there is no one particular platform that is the best when it comes to racial equity. He said, "It's very context dependent, it's very dependent on the individual type of community."

Lack of a Formal Policy

Although the interviewees acknowledge the importance of racial equity in engagement and their personal praxis, none of their organizations had a formal policy in place regarding racial equity and engagement. Julia noted that it is part of her personal practice, but her organization has not discussed the topic. However, she said there is "an understanding that our friends and neighbors need to be represented, and friends and neighbors in these neighborhoods are not always at the table, and we need to get them at the table, and we need their voices as part of it." Thomas noted his firm had a staff committee focusing on equity, but, as consultants, much of their direction on equity and engagement comes from their clients. He said that this ranges from "telling us we're not doing enough, to telling us that we're doing too much."

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had extensive impacts on almost all facets of life, and public engagement is no different. Those interviewed provided an in-depth look into these changes and the struggles they have faced.

Limitations

This study utilized qualitative interviews. Because of this, there are several limitations. This study cannot provide any statistically valid quantitative information, nor can it be generalized to the population as a whole. Although I can say that four of the people who were interviewed used online surveys before the pandemic, I cannot say that 40% of people who do engagement used online surveys before the pandemic. Another limitation of this study was that it was performed over Zoom. There were times that I could not understand what the interviewee was saying, even after rewatching the recording multiple times. Although nine of the ten participants were interviewed via video chat, the majority of non-verbal communication was obscured. This could have limited my understanding of an interviewee's meaning.

The reliance on people's subjectivity is another limitation. As the researcher and author, all of the interviews and results are viewed through my lens. This is impacted by any biases I may have, such as my personal technological literacy and experience performing remote engagement. The interviews themselves could have been detrimentally impacted by me. This was my first experience utilizing open-ended interviews as a research method. As the interviews progressed, I became more comfortable and familiar with the method and spent more time listening to the interviewees instead of talking. In fact, Weiss recommends that the interviewer should not, "at any point introduce his [or her] own experiences, not even to note, by saying something like 'Yeah, I know what you mean,' that he [or she] had had experiences similar to the respondent's."⁵⁷ I am certainly guilty of including my own observations or experiences into the interview. The interviewees themselves are also a limitation. Although I have no

⁵⁷ Weiss, *Learning from Strangers*, 10.

reason to doubt anything they said, they are also people with their own biases that impact how they view the world. Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault take this farther by asserting that “one cannot take people’s stories at face value.”⁵⁸

Finally, the most significant limitation in my opinion was the inability to do any in-person research. I think it would have been extremely beneficial to my understanding of public engagement to visit an open house with Elizabeth, a picnic in the park with Julia, or a boothing event with Matt. Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault “recommend that researchers spend time with the people they interview in their everyday settings as they go about their day-to-day lives.” If I had more time, I would have also liked to attend remote events put on by the interviewees to add another layer of understanding beyond their accounts of the activities.

Areas of Future Study

One of the major topics of this research is what engagement will look like after the COVID-19 pandemic has subsided and we are safe to gather in-person again. A future area of study would be to see how engagement actually changes after the pandemic. How well does this future engagement align with the expectations of the interviewees? In particular, it would be interesting to interview the same ten individuals.

A large-scale survey of remote engagement practices would also be an interesting area for future study. This could explore what percentage of engagement practitioners use remote engagement and/or in-person engagement, common methods of engagement (web conferencing, online open house, mailers, etc.), ranking barriers to remote engagement, and utilization of the best practices mentioned in this report. This could provide statistically valid results that would complement, or potentially refute, the qualitative data provided here.

⁵⁸ Steven J. Taylor, Robert Bogdan, and Marjorie DeVault, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Guidebook and Resource* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 106.

Final Thoughts

Although the pandemic has been going on for over a year, there is still a lack of research on remote engagement techniques. I hope the information provided within this report will be useful to engagement practitioners through the end of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

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Appendix A

Consent Form

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this thesis research! The following provides some information about the study, what to expect during the interview, and how your data will be used. If you have any questions, please let me (Gillian Hagstrom) know. If you consent, please sign or type your name on the bottom of the page where indicated and return it to ghags@uw.edu prior to your interview.

Information About This Study

This study is being conducted for a thesis in the Master of Urban Planning program at the University of Washington. The purpose of this study is to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted community engagement processes. This research aims to guide community engagement practitioners as they seek remote feedback from community members, and to provide advice on which changes that occurred due to the pandemic should be carried forward post-pandemic, and which should be abandoned. This study also aims to explore how racial equity has been impacted by these new forms of engagement.

Study Procedures

This study utilizes open-ended qualitative interviews. The interview will be guided by a set of questions related to the topic, but the overall goal is to explore your perspectives and experiences. Some questions that may be asked include:

- What types of community engagement was undertaken prior to the pandemic? During the pandemic?
- What barriers did community members face to participating? How have these barriers changed?
- In your experience, what do community members think about online engagement? What is better and what is worse?
- How has the pandemic impacted efforts to make engagement more racially equitable?
- How has the makeup of who participates in engagement events changed?

Interviews will take place over Zoom. Interviews are anticipated to take between thirty minutes and one hour. **The session will be recorded and transcribed after the fact.** Your personal information (name, job title, employer) will not be used in the thesis. The information provided during the interview will not be used for any purposes other than the completion of this thesis. A copy of the thesis will be provided to you upon completion via email.

If you agree to be part of this research, please type your name in the box below.

By typing my name below, I volunteer to take part in this research and consent to the interview being recorded.

Appendix B

Interview Codes and Frequency

Code	Frequency
Accessibility of the engagement event	1
Barriers to engagement	39
Best practices	41
Building relationships	14
Collaboration with other organizations	8
Communication strategies	11
Communication tools	22
Community input	1
Community needs	11
Compensating people for their time	5
Connecting with the local community	3
Demographics	4
Different forms of engagement for different communities	6
Emergency communication	6
Finding ways to make engagement work during the pandemic	6
Hybrid engagement	14
Impacts of COVID	19
Importance of relationships	16
Importance of up to date information	2
Innovative engagement	7
In-person	48
Internet and technology literacy	16
Language access/ engagement in other languages	13
Lessons learned during COVID	6
Letting people know how their feedback impacted decisions	1
Marketing of engagement	11
Meeting people where they're at	10
Negative	4
No changes because of COVID	5
Pandemic engagement	48
Perceived validity of online engagement	2
Pre-pandemic engagement	46
Pre-pandemic engagement easier than during the pandemic	1
Racial equity	17
Remote/Online	64
Remote/online engagement - advantages	24
Remote/online engagement - disadvantages	16
Remote/online engagement - working well	1
Resources required for engagement	13
Solutions to in-person engagement barriers	1
Solutions to remote engagement barriers	11
Staff/practitioner reluctance to adopt remote engagement	2
Supporting the local community	4
The future of engagement	20
Transactional communication	4
Troubleshooting/teaching online engagement tools	1
Trust	2
Unprepared for remote engagement	1
Working with existing stakeholders	1
Zoom	7

Appendix C

Advantages and Disadvantages of Remote and In-Person Engagement One-Page Handout

This one-page handout summarizes the advantages and disadvantages of remote and in-person engagement presented within this paper. The advantages and disadvantages are based on the information provided by the interviewees. It can be used as a reference when considering what type of engagement event to undertake.



Advantages and Disadvantages of Remote and In-Person Community Engagement

Adapted from "An Expanded Engagement Toolbox: Lessons from Qualitative Interviews about the COVID-19 Pandemic and Community Engagement," a thesis by Gillian Hagstrom

Advantages of In-Person Engagement

1. **Person-to-person interaction.** In-person engagement excels in providing person-to-person interaction that can be more personal and casual.
2. **Easier to build relationships** compared to remote engagement.
3. **Shows more investment in the community** by meeting them where they are.
4. **Provides visibility for the organization's work.** People in the community can see your organization at work and learn about what it does.
5. **Ability to be hands-on.** Hands-on opportunities can provide other ways of learning that may be more impactful.
6. **Some engagement activities can't be done remotely**, like community cleanups or food delivery.
7. **Community members can show their support or concern for an issue by being present**, which is difficult to do when using remote engagement. Think of a community meeting filled with people who are there to support a cause.

Disadvantages of In-Person Engagement

1. **High opportunity cost to participate.** Interested parties have to travel to be available at a certain time, travel to the location, and may have other barriers like needing childcare or a place that is wheelchair accessible.
2. **It can be difficult to engage with new audiences.** In-person meetings often have the same groups of people who attend.
3. **People's needs may not be accommodated.** This could include mobility limitations, resources for people who have a visual or hearing impairment, or other requirements.
4. **Requires a physical space**, which may be difficult to find depending on the type of event and the time it is taking place.



Advantages of Remote Engagement

- 1. Engage with the material at your own pace.** Meetings can be recorded for future viewing, online open houses can be open for several weeks, and people can take as much time as they want to review the information.
- 2. Lower cost and less resources required to put on than an in-person event.** You don't need to pay to rent a space, print out materials, and spend time setting up the space.
- 3. Can be easier to accommodate people's needs.** For example, you can turn on closed captioning and use translation services.
- 4. Easy to provide materials in response to questions.** You can provide a link or documents in the chat of an online meeting.
- 5. Potentially broader audience.**
- 6. More tools available.** For example, many web conferencing platforms have built in polling tools, or you can use an online whiteboard tool.
- 7. Low opportunity cost to participate.** It's easy for people to join a meeting for part of the time. People don't have to worry about traveling to an event.
- 8. Can provide a level of emotional safety,** especially for contentious issues or issues where some people may have dissenting opinions.

Disadvantages of Remote Engagement

- 1. Difficult to build relationships and have person-to-person interaction.** This can also impact the level of trust from the participants.
- 2. No hands-on component.**
- 3. Participants typically need internet access and technological literacy.** For example, people need internet access and know-how to join a meeting on a web conferencing platform.
- 4. May not have the same perceived validity as in-person engagement.** For many communities, engagement has always been done in-person. Because of this, remote engagement may seem like a less valid way to interact with the community and get feedback.

Appendix D

Recommendations One-Page Handout

This one-page handout summarizes the recommendations presented within this paper. The recommendations are based on the information provided by the interviewees. They are based on both the Best Practices for Remote Engagement section and the Racial Equity and Engagement section of the paper. It can be used as a reference when considering how to perform remote engagement.



Recommendations for Post-Pandemic Community Engagement

Adapted from “An Expanded Engagement Toolbox: Lessons from Qualitative Interviews about the COVID-19 Pandemic and Community Engagement,” a thesis by Gillian Hagstrom

- 1. Provide ways to engage that don't rely on an internet connection** to alleviate concerns of internet access and technological literacy. This could include mailings, text messages, and phone calls.
- 2. Plan engagement with mobile phones in mind.** People may not have easy access to a computer, but most people have access to an internet-connected mobile phone.
- 3. Encourage the use of video for online meetings** to help facilitate discussion and let participants know you are there and listening.
- 4. Utilize breakout rooms** to provide more opportunities for discussions. They can also be used to provide in-language options.
- 5. Have shorter meetings** when online instead of in-person. Participants may have a harder time staying focus during long online meetings.
- 6. Leverage existing relationships** to make new connections.
- 7. Use plain language** so the public can easily understand the material.
- 8. Keep online information up to date**, including adding the “last updated” date to webpages.
- 9. Utilize graphics and visuals** to provide a more engaging experience.
- 10. Provide access in languages other than English**, which can range from translating materials and having them available to organizing events that are fully in another language.
- 11. Use engagement methods that your community prefers**, such as a particular social media platform, or in-person versus remote engagement. Check in with a community leader or other organization who frequently works with your target audience.
- 12. Engagement isn't a 'one size fits all' approach.** Tailor your engagement based on your audience and what type of feedback or input you're looking for.