PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT:

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR ARTS AND

HUMANITIES RESEARCHERS

A Working Paper

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ABSTRACT

The current situation surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic provides an unprecedented opportunity to study the impact of digitalisation for humanities research and public engagement. The onset of the pandemic, which closed universities and saw the introduction of a mandatory work-from-home policy, has certainly challenged us to re-think our usual practices and consider new creative ways of working, learning and connecting with each other and with different communities beyond the boundaries of academia. In response to this pressing need, this project evaluates the significance of digital technology as an engagement tool for arts and humanities researchers and analyses the opportunities and challenges that come from delivering public engagement in the online environment. For its analysis, the project focuses on three online public engagement projects conducted by King’s College London (KCL) researchers, including: a) an online conference; b) a series of online workshops; c) a larger digital project that includes several online engagement activities designed to deliver alternative cultural experiences in the time of COVID-19. Different in scale, size and overall objectives, these three case studies offer a varied range of perspectives on technological, institutional, cultural and organisational possibilities and implementation barriers that accompany digital public engagement – including those issues that are specific to KCL and the Arts and Humanities Faculty.

The findings of this study highlight the significance of more strategic incorporation of digital technology to empower meaningful and impactful public engagement with arts and humanities research online. Based on these findings, the report also offers some pragmatic strategic pointers for researchers and institutions to consider, outlining tools, skills and tactics required to effectively design and deliver their digital public engagement work. Indeed, the overarching goal of this study is to inform future action by drawing attention to the wider potential of digital formats and offering practical recommendations that would be of use to the university, academics and community partners well beyond the current crisis.
Chapter 1. Introduction

Over the past years, academic commitment to public engagement has significantly increased in arts and humanities research (TNS-BMRB, 2015; Burchell et al., 2017). In the UK, it is becoming more common for research projects to embrace public engagement with the understanding that it informs research, enhances learning and teaching, and increases impact on society. Researchers are also starting to get increasingly digital with their methods of public engagement. Online technologies have certainly transformed the ways humanities research can be integrated within and beyond academia, offering new tools for scholars to interact with each other, share their research outputs as well as involve the general public in resource creation and skills exchange. Despite these various opportunities, however, there have been few studies of the implications of using digital methods of public engagement for arts and humanities research and there has been limited exploration of the potential of online technology for incorporating citizen input into research projects in this field. This is the gap that this study aims to fill.

Specifically, by analysing King's College London's digital public engagement activities in action, this study aims to achieve two main goals. Firstly, it evaluates the significance of digital technology as an engagement tool for arts and humanities research and stresses the opportunities and challenges that come from delivering public engagement in the virtual environment. Within this discussion the study addresses the following questions: What are the implications of delivering public engagement online? In particular, what are the conceptual and practical implications of online participation rather than face-to-face interactions? How can we utilise technology to communicate arts and humanities research in a more engaging way as well as fostering greater inclusivity, interactivity and collaboration in online realms? What challenges - practical,
As the study addresses these questions, key skills gaps and opportunities for improving future practice are identified. The second goal of this study is thus to inform action and change by offering practical recommendations that will be of use to universities and community partners employing digital methods for their public-facing and socially engaged research activities.

The rationale for conducting this research is twofold. On one hand, the current situation surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic provides an unprecedented opportunity to study the impact of digitalisation for arts and humanities research and associated public engagement. The onset of the pandemic, which closed universities and saw the introduction of a mandatory self-quarantine policy across the globe, has meant dramatic changes in a short period of time to the ways in which academics are designing and delivering their teaching and research work. In fact, many meetings, lectures and events are now taking place via virtual platforms. The challenge for us today is thus to re-think our usual practices and consider new, creative ways of working, learning and connecting with each other and with different communities beyond the boundaries of academia.

At the same time, the need to reach more diverse audiences, global in scale, while thinking creatively about accessibility, diversity, collaboration and participation are drivers that will extend beyond the current crisis. King’s College London’s (KCL) strategic framework of Service (www.kcl.ac.uk/service) provides particular incentives to engage with different voices outside academia. KCL has a long-standing tradition of serving the needs and aspirations of society and being open to new ideas, innovations and individuals. In advancing work around Service, KCL aims to further emphasise its civic purpose and promote the belief that it is the university’s key responsibility to contribute to society through exchanging information, resources, and skills with the public. Within the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, specifically, the Arts and Humanities

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Research Institute (AHRI – www.kcl.ac.uk/ahri) has been at the forefront of developing collaborative research partnerships with diverse non-academic communities as well as promoting new sustainable ways of thinking, doing and disseminating research. Up until recently, however, most of the public engagement initiatives within the university have focused more on face-to-face engagement rather than on using digital technologies as an outlet, despite the many opportunities that online technology provides. The significance of this project lies therefore in drawing attention to the wider potential of digital formats, with implications for the university that will last well beyond the Covid-19 crisis.
Chapter 2. Literature review

2.1 Public engagement and arts and humanities research: key terms and debates

Within academia, the term ‘public engagement’ is generally understood to encapsulate the wide range of perspectives, objectives and activities that address specific social needs and focus on developing mutually supportive relationships between researchers and broader society (Hall, 2010; NCCPE, 2015). In the UK, the term has started to be widely used since the early 2000s; and although official definitions of public engagement have evolved and diversified over time, its main principles remained unchanged and are best captured by the definition provided by the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE):

‘Public engagement describes the myriad of ways in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public. Engagement is by definition a two-way process, involving interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit.’ (NCCPE, 2015).

Beyond its significance for the work of individual researchers, the public engagement agenda has been embraced on the broader institutional level and now constitutes an increasing focus within UK institutional research cultures. As the NCCPE’s founding ethos states, UK funders of research seek to create a culture within UK higher education where public engagement by researchers is formalised and embedded in strategy and practice at all levels (NCCPE, 2018). Added emphasis has been provided by the introduction of an ‘impact’ agenda as part of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (now Research England), whereby public engagement emerged as a subcategory within a broader understanding of ‘impact’ outside of academia (HEFCE, 2011). Furthermore, in addition to funding the NCCPE since 2008, UK funders of research have also funded six universities as Beacons for Public Engagement; Research Councils UK (now UKRI) ran the Public Engagement with Research Catalysts project from 2012 – 2015, the Catalyst Seed Fund scheme from 2015 – 2018 and the Strategic Support to Expedite Embedding of Public Engagement with Research call from 2017 – 2020.
And the Wellcome Trust has funded the strategic development of public engagement within 28 universities. As a result, the official commitment to public engagement has deepened, and public engagement has become an increasingly significant endeavour for most UK universities and for many UK researchers across various disciplines (Burchell et.al., 2017).

When it comes to disciplinary differences, levels of participation in public engagement are understood to be particularly high within the arts, humanities and social sciences (AHSS), often attributed to the fact that the issues of society or public have always been central for researchers in these fields (Hughes et.al, 2011; Burchell, 2015; Burchell, et.al, 2017). In fact, both quantitative and qualitative research across the globe consistently suggests that researchers in the AHSS disciplines carry out more public engagement and communication activity than their colleagues in the STEM disciplines (Vitae-CROS, 2009; Vitae-CROS, 2011; Vitae-CROS, 2013; Burchell, et.al, 2017). In the context of the UK specifically, the CROS surveys reveal levels of participation in AHSS to be between 50% and 60% when compared to 30% and 44% in the STEM disciplines (Vitae-CROS, 2009; 2011; 2013; 2015). Notably, this is despite funding being consistently recognised as a more significant barrier to public engagement for researchers in AHSS disciplines (TNS-BMRB, 2015).

A recent study conducted on behalf of a Consortium of UK Public Research Funders (TNS-BMRB, 2015) has furthermore found that the arts and humanities researchers were not only more likely than STEM researchers to participate and spend time on public engagement, but were also more likely to recognise the more dialogic aspects of public engagement and emphasise the significance of public engagement in terms of learning from the public and contributing to public debates. This finding is also reflected in Burchell et al. (2017), who found a striking difference between AHSS and STEM researchers’ understandings of the objectives of public engagement: AHSS researchers consistently favoured aims associated with a two-way model of public engagement rather than a one-way model of communication. On the basis of their analysis and empirical work, Hughes et al. (2011) have similarly suggested that academics from the arts and humanities tend to engage in more people-based, problem-solving and community-based activities compared to academics from other research fields.
Here it is important to emphasise that within the AHSS research disciplines a number of more critical engagement agendas have emerged in recent years that have reoriented some of the previous efforts associated with the term public engagement. These approaches can be clustered under the umbrella term of socially engaged research – and include community-based participatory research (Israel et al., 2005; Minkler and Wallerstein, 2008; Wilson, E. 2018), action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2011), community research (Hatch. et.al., 1993; Hughes et.al. 2011), and social justice research (Charmaz, 2005; 2011) among others. Although socially engaged work does share many of its principles with public engagement, it implies a higher level of collaborative action or co-enquiry by researchers and social groups and centres around the notion of creating knowledge for the purpose of advancing social action, change and empowerment (Burchell et al, 2017; Tungohan et al. 2019). Instead of seeing academic researchers as the sole producers of knowledge detached from communities of practice, socially engaged research works with communities to advocate for change and “holds itself ethically and politically accountable for its social consequences” (Harding and Norberg, 2005). These forms of research are thus decidedly not neutral. They are typically undertaken within the context of social issues (such as migration, health, race and ethnicity, community development and sustainability) with the aim to critique systems of inequality and promote a “social change agenda” (Whiteford and Strom, 2013, p. 72).

As this brief overview of the literature suggests, there is certainly a clear enthusiasm and commitment among academics in the arts and humanities towards developing new ways to engage with diverse non-academic publics and gain new perspectives on research through mutual learning. In the context of the UK, such enthusiasm can be furthermore seen in the introduction of initiatives such as the Being Human Festival. Established in 2014, and taking place annually at venues across the UK, Being Human offers a national forum for public engagement with humanities research. It focuses on making humanities research accessible and relevant, strengthening community identity, and increasing understanding of the relevance of the humanities to local and international issues (Being Human Evaluation, 2016; 2017). Other successful examples include the AHRC/ESRC Connected Communities programme, which specialised in co-produced research embedded in community engagement, AHRC/Radio 3 New Generation Thinkers initiative, which is supporting a
new wave of public intellectuals in the arts and humanities, and other more grassroots initiatives such as Twitter account *WeTheHums*.

Looking at these various initiatives, we can also observe a growing interest in exploring how digital and communication technologies can be developed to better integrate arts and humanities research within and beyond academia and involve the general public in resource creation and design. Indeed, more creative and digital methods of engagement are starting to gain an increasing attention among academic researchers in this field. The section that follows provides a brief summary of the literature that specifically examines public engagement through digital methods.

### 2.2 Digital Methods of Public Engagement: Previous Research and Practice

The rapidly changing technological environment has certainly transformed both the scope and the nature of public engagement activities (McNutt, 2014; Mollett, et al., 2017). Before the internet, public engagement by academics on a large scale remained restricted to traditional channels of broadcast media, writing books aimed at wider non-academic audiences or giving public lectures, often with limited success. Now various web-based tools and services including social networking sites, blogs, video conference platforms, YouTube and podcasts offer new ways for powerful information sharing, knowledge exchange, collaboration and community engagement (Ross, 2012). It thus has been argued that scholarly communication and engagement in the digital era has been democratised and that traditional barriers between formal and informal scholarly communication are now permeable (Ross, 2012, p.25). Despite the plethora of technologies and devices afforded by the digital environment, currently, there is limited exploration of various methods of digital engagement and their applications within an academic context. So far, much previous research in this area has focused primarily on engagement through social media activities.

This literature suggests various opportunities afforded by implementing social media as tools for public engagement and scholarly communication. First, social media

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3 For example, within Connected Communities several projects such as “Online Orchestra” and “Creative Citizens” explored different ways in which online media can help citizens to generate value for their communities.
has been shown to have direct influence on research dissemination and audience reach (RIN, 2011; NCCPE, 2015). Indeed, the ability to distribute and share academic work more widely, quickly and effectively, to reach new audiences within and outside academia, has been consistently reported as the main incentive for researchers to utilise social media tools (RIN, 2011; Ross, 2012; NCCPE, 2018).

The literature also points to increased possibilities afforded by social media applications for fostering interaction and two-way dialogue with the public (Ross, 2012; NCCPE, 2018). The NCCPE’s (2018) review of social media methods of public engagement suggests that these are particularly effective in a) opening up conversations with varied non-specialist audiences to gather feedback on how they make sense of the research and engagement practices b) facilitating audience-led discussions and debates, which help expose scholars to new ideas and interests (NCCPE, 2018). The review furthermore suggests that social media offers a unique platform to target and tap into specific groups and communities of practice, which may have previously been made more difficult to reach by gatekeepers or paywalls (ibid.). As social media researcher Danah Boyd (2011) argues, the specific characteristics of social media are that they are persistent, replicable, scalable and searchable. Given these features, social media grants academics easier access to wider and more international networks of people who are interested in their work. It also enables them to effectively market projects and events to key target publics as well as build and support communities of interest around their research. In this way, social media has been suggested to have potential of becoming an invaluable component of most citizen science initiatives (NCCPE, 2018).

Building on these ideas, there is also a considerable interest in the extent to which social media and other digital communication technologies can foster more organised forms of collaboration, networking and knowledge building. According to Mollett, et al. (2017), internet-enabled communication and web technologies help promote cross-institutional and cross-departmental research collaboration as they offer more direct and effective ways to share knowledge across dispersed and often interdisciplinary colleagues. Many academics are now using social media informally to increase their own profile, raise awareness of their research, and facilitate opportunities for open exchange and presenting new ideas. This in turn allows academics to access research globally and to participate in deliberations about research practice in real-time,
which suggests digital communication media helps create a culture of openness in scholarship (Tatum and Jankowski, 2010). Within the arts and humanities disciplines in particular, digital humanities researchers were among the earliest adopters of social media tools; microblogging, SlideShare and Scribd were some of the early examples of how scholars in this field have utilised online technologies to share knowledge, disseminate research and facilitate more informal communication (Ross, 2012).

Despite all the potential opportunities that the new technologies offer, their use for public engagement activities in academia also brings some fundamental challenges. The first major difficulty identified in the literature refers to the lack of clear understanding, even among some expert users, as to what the exact benefits of engagement through social media channels are (Ross, 2012). Other challenges suggested by the literature include: concerns about expectations and competencies associated with utilising different social media tools and platforms (Conole and Alevizou, 2010); the view that learning these new tools will be time-consuming (Ross, 2012); apprehensions about the lack of authority and trust in an environment where anyone can post, comment, and it is difficult to determine whether contributions are valid (RIN, 2011); concerns about the unpredictability of social media and the associated difficulties with stimulating and sustaining genuine engagement amongst the overflow of content (NCCPE, 2018). There is also some inherent scepticism about the quality of engagement in online realms as well as the perceived lack of confidence that the appropriate institutional structures are in place to support the development of online activities that really stimulate integrated public involvement and co-creation (RIN, 2011; Ross, 2012).

Such concerns are not unfounded. Up until recently, dissemination-focused interactions with the public remained the primary activities where online technology was utilised within institutional environments (RIN, 2011). This tendency was certainly evident within the previous practices of the Faculty of Arts & Humanities at KCL. Before Covid-19, there was little need, or perhaps, interest for the faculty to fully integrate digital methods within their public engagement strategy beyond traditional dissemination and promotional social media activities – i.e. advertising the events; raising profile of research projects; recruiting participants. The manager for the AHRI, goes on to say:
‘Before, digital engagement would have been very much about using social media to disseminate research. The Faculty does have various social media accounts – Instagram, Twitter and Facebook - and they use those channels for different audiences. So, in our work we usually defaulted to using these (...) We started to do bits and pieces again of quite dissemination-focused stuff – we’d run couple of workshops on podcasts; we’d used Lumen 5 video software to create short promotional videos (...) again really for sharing on social media, on Twitter (...) Beyond that, university was quite late in the game in terms of using digital media more strategically (...)’ (P6, May 2020).

Notably, this interview also highlighted the existent tensions within the university between its communication and engagement strategic objectives and the problems with the pragmatic approaches of thinking about online technology simply as a means of reaching and targeting new audiences. While adoption of online tools for public engagement is growing within academia, the questions of how we can utilise online technology strategically, to support the development of activities that really focus on meaningful engagement and active public involvement, provide a major opportunity that can be addressed by research.
Chapter 3. Research Design and Methods

To achieve its practice-informing goals, this study drew on an action research approach, which is generally understood as a form of inquiry that pursues action (or change) and reflection (or understanding) all at the same time (Greenwood and Levin, 1998; Stringer, 1999). From a conceptual viewpoint, both theory and practice are involved in a reciprocal relationship in action research, interacting with each other to generate knowledge that not only contributes to the literature of specific fields but also offers practical solutions and interventions for intended change and improvement (Dick, 1999; Stringer, 1999; Reason and Bradbury, 2001; Lim and Chai, 2015). To do so, action research actively engages participants, seeking their contribution at different stages of the research process, including the conception and refinement of an action plan that is resultant from research findings. In this respect, according to Gapp and Fisher (2006, p. 159) action research presents: ‘a very effective alternative to social science research methods in that it is: practical, participative and collaborative, emancipatory, interpretive and critical. The process of action research is very effective in identifying creative solutions.’

3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

Within the action research framework, three case studies of digital public engagement conducted by KCL arts and humanities researchers were examined. These included: (a) an online conference; (b) a series of online workshops; (c) a larger digital project that incorporated several online engagement activities designed to strategize and deliver alternative cultural experiences in the time of Covid-19 (see detailed description in Section 4.2). These three case studies were chosen based on practical considerations (time and availability) as well as the need to provide a varied sample representative of a wide range of technological, organisational, and cultural opportunities and implementation barriers that accompany digital public engagement – including those issues specific to KCL and the Faculty of Arts & Humanities. For each case study, project organiser/s were interviewed in addition to other key persons responsible for assisting with planning/implementation of public engagement activities, including members of the AHRI team. Furthermore, to situate this study within the wider context and to
ensure that it corresponded to the most current thinking on digital engagement and arts and humanities research, I conversed with Being Human Festival (the UK’s national festival of the humanities) about their digital strategies and contingency plans.

Table 1: Research Participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>Project organiser</td>
<td>KCL (CS1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>PE officer/ technical support</td>
<td>KCL (AHRI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>Project organiser</td>
<td>KCL (CS2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>Project organiser</td>
<td>Independent (CS2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>Project organiser</td>
<td>KCL (CS3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>PE officer</td>
<td>KCL (AHRI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>PE officer</td>
<td>independent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For each case study, data was collected in cycles according to the four-phased process of action research: ‘planning, acting, observing, and reflecting’ (Melrose, 2001, p.162). In the initial stage, two strategies to facilitate cross-case comparison were developed: a common evaluation form for reporting on each case study and a semi-structured qualitative interview script to guide each case study examination. The aim was to enable participants to share meaningful experiences while stimulating a reflective process and informal, honest conversations, that is why the interview questions were designed as open-ended. Moreover, throughout the data collection process, case study teams were encouraged to shape the interview questions to better suit their specific cases as well as to add any additional topics they wanted to address. Because of the restrictions associated with Covid-19, all of the interviews were conducted via online platforms, in particular Microsoft Teams and Zoom.

In addition to interviews, the second and third stages of the action research process involved the use of observation methods – including attending and actively
participating in planning meetings for each case study and direct observation of planned public engagement activity/event(s). Lastly, following observations of practice activity the final set of qualitative interviews were conducted; participants provided feedback on their own practices and skillsets and were encouraged to contribute in identifying suitable solutions for change and improvement. Incorporating multiple qualitative methods through action research is generally recommended by scholars (see. Stringer 2007) and helped this study to triangulate data generation and produce more complete explanations.

The data collected was then thematically analysed using inductive coding techniques. Initial coding was data-driven rather than drawn from theory or existing research. Codes were organized into subthemes and broader themes associated with main research questions and then correlated across three case studies to compare the findings. To enable the reader to evaluate my interpretations of case study materials, I present interview excerpts underpinning my analysis and some reproductions of case study visuals.

3.2 Case Studies Overview

The following section provides the brief overview of the three case studies under analysis.

Table 2: Overview of the Action Research Case Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Case Study 1 (CS1)</th>
<th>Case Study 2 (CS2)</th>
<th>Case Study 3 (CS3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title:</strong></td>
<td>Memes: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism?</td>
<td>Crafting a circular economy</td>
<td>Accessing Cultural Experiences in Isolation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of Activity:</strong></td>
<td>Online Conference</td>
<td>Virtual Workshops/ Network Meetings</td>
<td>Virtual Workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeframe:</td>
<td>One-time event: May 2020</td>
<td>Series of workshops: May-June 2020</td>
<td>Series of workshops: June - September 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size/Scale:</td>
<td>Large: over 500 attendees</td>
<td>Small: 10-15 attendees per event</td>
<td>Small/Medium: 18-20 attendees per event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience Reach:</td>
<td>International audience</td>
<td>National audience (UK-based)</td>
<td>International audience (London and Tokyo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants:</td>
<td>Academics/students/general public</td>
<td>Designers/makers/individuals &amp; representatives of organisations</td>
<td>Academics/museum &amp; gallery professionals/artists/makers/creatives/community engagement professionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Platforms Used</td>
<td>Microsoft Teams Live Events Teams Live Events Q&amp;A</td>
<td>Zoom Padlet Google Maps</td>
<td>Zoom Miro Padlet Google Jamboards Google Slides Slack</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Case Study 1**

The first case study was the annual Centre for Digital Culture's conference titled *Memes: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*? that was initially cancelled due to Covid-19 pandemic but was later adapted to take place online. The theme of the conference focused on memes and their cultural, economic, and political implications, and brought together scholars, students and general public interested in this subject.
The conference took place via Microsoft Teams Live Events platform and included two panels of keynote speakers as well as a Q&A session that was moderated by the appointed chair. Microsoft Teams Live Events was chosen as a default platform following KCL institutional advice and because of concerns over security issues associated with alternative video conference platforms, such as Zoom. The event attracted a large international audience from all across the globe (Brazil, India, Russia, USA among others), with more than 1000 registered attendees. Following the event, the recording of the conference was made publicly available online and is now accessible through YouTube and Centre for Digital Culture’s website. It has been viewed 1,400 times so far.

Case Study 2

The second case study – Crafting a circular economy – involved a series of virtual workshops that explored the work of creative individuals and organisations engaging with the circular economy. The project was framed by the growing need to rethink linear economy and advance our understanding of alternative business models and practices that can support sustainable growth in the creative industries. In this way, the core purpose of the online workshops was to gather the perspectives of a range of individuals from different backgrounds – designers, makers, scholars and representatives of organisations – about their understanding of and interaction with the circular economy. Event participants were expected to actively contribute to the discussions and were also seen as collaborators in the development of knowledge and potential applications of the project. In addition to its collaborative and co-enquiry aims, this project was designed to develop a network of individuals and representatives of organisations with a common interest in developing sustainable creative enterprises.

Initially, the project was planned to take place in the AHRI’s REACH Space4; however, following Covid-19 restrictions, most of the planned activities were translated into an online format. The three online workshops were hosted on Zoom and used a digital collaboration platform Padlet. Within Padlet, specifically, functions that were used included: notepad/post-it-style posts and comments, plus the ability to add links,  

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4 REACH Space – space for Research and Engagement in the Arts, Culture and Humanities (REACH) launched in October 2019 by the AHRI.
videos, photos, locations (map) and other content. Between 5 to 15 people attended each event, with 42 attendees overall.

Case Study 3

The last case study – Accessing Cultural Experiences – was a King’s Together funded project developed in collaboration between King’s College London and Keio University in Tokyo. The project included a series of virtual workshops that explored how cultural organisations can provide remotely deliverable cultural experiences for isolated audiences using existing, every day or repurposed technologies. Workshop teams were comprised of academics, museum & gallery professionals, artists/makers/creatives and community engagement professionals in London and Tokyo. More specifically, the participants were invited to (1) explore and address key challenges around designing, developing and delivering cultural experiences remotely and (2) use adapted design sprint methodologies to rapidly develop an open source pilot or prototype of a remotely deliverable cultural experience. It is important to note that unlike Case Study 1 and Case Study 2, this project was initially designed to take place online and was also interested in exploring remote collaborative design processes and ways to improve and support them for people working in the arts and cultural sector.

Six virtual workshops were hosted on Zoom, and involved using Zoom breakout rooms, whiteboard software Miro, Padlet, Google Slides and Google Jam boards. In addition to these, an online communication platform Slack was used throughout this project to offer updates on the project, facilitate ongoing discussions and networking opportunities. 18 to 24 people attended each event.
Chapter 4. Findings

The findings of this study are presented across three sections. Section 4.1 focuses on the key opportunities of digital methods for public engagement that researchers articulated. Section 4.2 examines the main challenges identified with respect to planning and running public engagement activities virtually and discusses some aspects to engagement that could not be successfully translated into an online format. Finally, building on the above, Section 5 provides a summary of recommendations for future strategies (institutional and individual) to better support public engagement in online realms.

4.1 Going Digital in Public Engagement: Opportunities

4.1.1 Widening Engagement and Reach

As indicated earlier, the ability for wider engagement and audience reach is often identified as a key reason for academics to utilise online technology for their public engagement activities (Ross, 2012). This opportunity was certainly evident in the analysis.

The advantage of digital formats in reaching larger audiences than face-to-face events was widely cited by researchers. This was particularly evident in the context of CS1: moving the conference online had a clear benefit of making the event more easily accessible to broader publics, regardless of their geographic location. Virtual conferences also reduce the costs typically associated with attending traditional conferences and allow for higher flexibility around schedules and time commitment for attendees. In CS1, this resulted in significantly higher attendance numbers than previously anticipated. More than 1100 people registered for the event; and while it is not easy to calculate the exact number of people who attended the conference for its entire duration (the numbers fluctuated as people joined/left at various points), the statistical data from The Teams Live Event attendee report indicated that around 1600 people joined the conference overall. Importantly, these are the highest ever attendance numbers in the Centre for Digital Culture’s public engagement history.

Alongside the increase in attendance, researchers referenced the possibility to connect with new and more diverse demographics of people, in terms of age, academic
level, occupation, and national contexts. CS1 post-event evaluation showed that the virtual conference attracted not only a traditional academic audience (i.e. PhD students and scholars), but also involved undergraduate students, non-specialist publics, creative industry practitioners, and community partners. Post-event evaluation also showed audience global diversity, with attendees joining from around the world, including Europe, Brazil, Russia, USA and China. Notably, the global diversity also related to the conference presenters. The project organisers indicated that many of those participating overseas speakers would have been prevented from attending in the case of a face-to-face conference, due to time availability or travel costs: “We had speakers from the States, Canada, Europe and the UK and not everyone who is a panellist would have made it to the conference had it been held in London. (P1, May 2020)

The advantage of online formats in expanding engagement activities’ international impact and reach was also observed in CS2 and CS3. Initially, the CS2 project focused on London; the workshops were to be held in central London at King’s College. Through online workshops, however, event organisers were able to engage with designers and makers across the UK and in Europe. This was acknowledged as a particularly significant opportunity, which added a novel international dimension to the project and shaped its further development. Similarly, in the context of the CS3 project the digital format allowed involvement of international engagers from the Keio University in Tokyo, facilitating cross-cultural comparisons and debates. The rich data that these workshops elicited had a direct impact on the subsequent development of Tokyo workshops, thereby raising the global profile of the project.

Additional opportunities identified with respect to extending and widening engagement with arts and humanities research related to the use of digital photos and videos on social media to make a record of the public engagement activity and to share online. The dissemination enhancing abilities of social media tools are well documented in the literature (NCCPE, 2018) as is the significance of using photos and videos as a means of extending the legacy and accessibility of research work (Mollett, et al. 2017). An example offered in the context of this study is the video recording published on YouTube following the CS1 online conference; and the opportunities this provided to facilitate immediate and global access to the conference content, while also ensuring the wider legacy of the event. More detail on the output-sharing affordances of online methods is provided in section 4.1.4.
4.1.2 Cost-efficiency

Cost-efficiency was the second most frequently cited opportunity of using online technology for public engagement activities in the arts and humanities. As one interviewee put it, ‘going digital is simply cheaper’ (P3, May 2020), as it allows to significantly reduce, if not completely eliminate, a range of typical set-up costs, such as venue hire, catering, travelling and accommodation expenses.

Indeed, the general consensus among interviewees was that organisation of face-to-face public engagement requires much bigger financial resource, which is often unavailable or involves time consuming grant application processes. The existence of a funding gap when it comes to financing public engagement activities in the humanities was also cited by participants. While periodic funding calls, including internal King’s initiatives, do exist and were recognised to be valuable, the amounts of money individual researchers can draw down was reported to often be insufficient (especially when compared to the larger levels of funding available within STEM disciplines). There was felt to be an amplified struggle for early career researchers (i.e. PhD students and postdoctoral staff), who commented on the difficulty to draw down pathways to larger impact money and on the lack of formal workload allocation for applying for these types of grants.

Given that funding is often recognised as one of the biggest barriers to uptake of public engagement in the arts and humanities (TNS-BMRB, 2015), digital methods can be regarded as particularly promising for academics in this field in that these methods are generally less financially resource-intensive. The reduced cost to organisation also leaves space for higher levels of flexibility and experimentation when it comes to thinking about the activity’s design and delivery of outcomes. An example mentioned by one of the interviewees related to the opportunity they had to reallocate funds previously assigned for catering and venue hire fees towards investing in several interactive online platforms (with flexibility to experiment with these different approaches), developing the webpage and creating a video record of the workshops.

With these opportunities in mind there were, however, several concerns raised in the interviews:

- A public engagement specialist commented critically on institutional appetite for online events due to their perceived cost-efficiency, suggesting that the
current fixation within institutions on getting “quick” returns on their investment – i.e. achieving larger attendance numbers at a low-cost - dilutes the value of engagement. Resource-intensive, collaborative public engagement should be about making small but meaningful interventions and this central objective must not be discounted as we transition to digital formats.

- Two researchers in the interviews also pointed out that institutions tend to underestimate the real capacity required to organise public engagement online. Whilst the set-up expenditures with digital methods are small, the time-investment and the logistical and administrative duties when planning and delivering activities online are reported as large, requiring additional allocation of funds. This needs to be better reflected in universities’ funding models.

### 4.1.3 Enhancing Inclusivity, Interactivity and Collaboration

While the benefits outlined in the previous sections may seem relatively straightforward, this section aims to probe more deeply into the ways online technology can be utilised more strategically for socially engaged and collaborative research, in particularly the affordances of digital format for enhancing inclusivity, interactivity and co-creation with the public. The observations of three case studies elicited some rich data in this respect. Follow-up interviews aimed to explore these themes further, with researchers asked to identify what strategies they considered to be the most successful in ensuring their online events and activities were inclusive, collaborative and engaging. A synthesis of these evaluations is summarised below.

When hosting events online, small group discussions were reported to be the most effective for eliciting greater interactivity, informal communication and collaborative work with and between participants. In this respect, the benefits of using breakout rooms were widely cited. A feature in Zoom, and other video conference sites, breakout rooms allow the host to split the initial virtual meeting into smaller separate sessions. Used in the context of CS2 and CS3 respectively, this strategy proved to be particularly beneficial for managing concentration levels, fostering audience-led discussions and debates, and ensuring that all attendees were engaged and involved in developing ideas. When virtual meetings are large in size, individual voices are often at risk of being lost, especially those who tend to be more introverted and may feel
uncomfortable contributing to discussion. Assigning breakout rooms helped minimise non-participation.

Researchers also emphasised how a pre-assigned breakout room strategy helped them manage group dynamics more effectively. An added benefit of the Zoom breakout option is that it allows the host to allocate subgroups in advance, while also permitting the host to jump in between subgroups to provide support during discussions. A thoughtful approach to assigning breakout rooms mitigated some of the inherent power imbalances within the groups, enabling greater inclusiveness and diversity of perspectives, as CS3 researcher emphasised:

\[
\text{‘I tried to separate people so that they weren’t from the same organization (…) because lots of people knew each other. Secondarily, I tried to get a gender balance. And then I also looked at trying to balance out people who were from cultural organisations but weren’t necessarily in a tech capacity; vs people who were working a bit more with technology (…) this helped ensure the diversity of ideas (…) I also tried to balance people in terms of their experience with technology (…) so there is always someone in the groups who is familiar with different platforms used (…)’ (P5, August 2020).}
\]

Notably, the researcher also suggested a more deliberate consideration of the subgroup (re)allocation choices in the context of online events; there can be more control for the researcher over these decisions when compared to physical events:

\[
\text{‘I think it makes you think a bit more about why are you moving people into specific groups (…) You’ve got much more opportunity if you want to shuffle people and want to be very deliberate about that (…) because in real life people tend to group according to who they know and deliberately splitting them up may be quite socially awkward. So, that’s definitely a nice way of being more in control of that. (P5, August 2020).}
\]

In addition to breakout rooms, the use of chat box and Q&A functions was widely cited as a means of extending interactive discussion and commentary in online events. These tools offer informal “backchannel” communication (non-verbal; real-time) within the main online meeting, where attendees can make notes, share resources and insights, hold discussions and ask questions, as well as offer real-time feedback.
Researchers indicated that achieving such collective synchronous interaction would have been challenging in the context of conventional face-to-face events and emphasised the opportunities these tools created for eliciting active contribution in the discussions (especially from less confident participants) and for promoting conditions for greater information sharing and collaborative work.

In the conference-based setting of CS1, leveraging the benefits of the Q&A function was recognised as particularly valuable. Previous research has indicated various problems with a traditional conference environment: lack of feedback, uneasiness about asking questions, and participation inequality resulting from a unidirectional single-speaker paradigm (Anderson et.al. 2003; Sá et al.,2019). Even when conducted virtually, formal conference presentations still entail a single focus of attention, whereby the audience is positioned at the back (inactive/observing) and the presenter is placed in the front (sharing the screen/active) (Sá et al.,2019). Integrating Microsoft Teams Q&A option as a platform for a backchannel conference communication helped address this, providing an irregular means of interaction and thus shifting the dynamics from a unidirectional transmission to many-to-many interaction, without interrupting main channel communication. This in turn suggests online technology’s capacity for facilitating more participatory conference environment.

Other opportunities drawn with respect to maximising engagement, interactivity and collaboration online related to the integration of external digital tools and platforms within the main virtual meeting. There are many specialised collaborative tools that are now available online; each offering different functionality and having its own sets of benefits and drawbacks. In fact, some researchers found such overwhelming choice challenging to navigate. In this respect, experimenting with different tools and platforms is to be encouraged. For a useful guide to different tools and platforms, see: https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/creating_and_running_virtual_events_-_april_2020_v1.pdf.

At the same time, researchers strongly advocated for a purpose-driven approach; the type of collaboration that researchers are looking to engage in and the particular aims of knowledge production that this collaboration is looking to facilitate should dictate the most appropriate platforms and content. Two such platforms used within the context of the CS2 and CS3 projects were Padlet and Miro:
• **Padlet (www.padlet.com):** is a free online multimedia tool that acts as a cork board by facilitating participants to post notes in a common place. Any type of file can be posted on Padlet (video, text, link) and it can be viewed instantly on the wall so it provides a valuable way to compile resources.

• **Miro (www.miro.com):** is an online whiteboard platform, designed to make cross-functional teamwork and collaboration easier. When creating a new project, Miro appears as a blank, unlimited canvas that can be then populated by insertion of digital sticky notes, text, voice and video chats.

Through allowing easy and quick ways for participants to place ideas on virtual walls, both Padlet and Miro were recognised as excellent tools for hosting brainstorming sessions and creative mind-mapping exercises, providing more diverse and efficient ways to co-construct knowledge. The tools also helped to conduct interactive thematic debates among participants. In CS2's first virtual workshop, for example, participants were asked to post responses on Padlet about the terms they used to describe their own work and also about their understanding of specific terms and principles connected to the circular economy. The possibility when using Padlet to insert comments on others’ posts or to react with a voting system (anonymously) meant that workshop participants could receive immediate feedback from others as to their contributions on the wall, which in turn elicited some fruitful discussions around differences in terminological understandings.

Finally, researchers commented positively on Miro’s and Padlet’s ability to archive brainstorming ideas and pull these up when needed (Fig.1, 2). While in the context of CS2 a different Padlet board was used for each workshop, CS3 built on the same Miro whiteboard throughout all six virtual workshops, and participants could access the board outside the main sessions. This strategy helped extend participation in the discussions beyond the timeframe of single workshop and promoted opportunities for more inclusive knowledge-building processes:
Taken as a whole, these case studies of practice provide evidence of the many affordances of digital formats to elicit interactivity, public involvement and co-creation, thereby supporting the potential for collaborative socially engaged research. Indeed, online platforms allow for lots of different kinds of interactions, which don’t have to feel like poorer substitutes for face-to-face versions. Instead of dismissing online activities as ineffectual or simply trying to replicate physical events online, researchers emphasised the need to ‘shift the current thinking’ in academia towards fully embracing new formats and contributing constructively to making them better.

Fig.1: CS2 Padlet Discussion
4.1.4 Sharing Outputs and Evidencing Impact

An additional advantage of using online platforms like Padlet and Miro is that they allow visualisation of collaborative knowledge-building processes and produce clear representations of the outcomes of online discussions (see Fig 1, 2). These outputs can be then used to successfully increase engagement with, and understanding of, projects’ research findings, making the research process more open and transparent. They can also be made publicly accessible to participants and others after the event:

* Miro allows you to look back at discussions. When you do it (brainstorming) in person you still do it with sticky notes and putting things on the wall. Inevitably you do it in a central location...and people do take pictures and stuff, but we do rarely go back to these pictures. So, knowing that there is not only something you can carry on building on but something that you can always come back to and refresh your memory is very useful (...) these can also be easily shared online (P5, August 2020).*
The above statement also points to the more interactive nature of digital data visualisations. Ideas captured on online platforms appear far more accessible and engaging than just photographs taken of traditional whiteboards. Visually rich, interactive data was also recognised to be more dissemination-friendly since the outcomes of online discussions (ideas and resources shared) can be easily embedded on project websites and then shared through social media. Padlet, in particular, allows the user to export the virtual walls created in several ways, including PDF or spreadsheet, or onto websites or blogs.

In this way, researchers also stressed that data visualisations produced through online platforms (i.e. Padlet/Miro) can be used to provide evidence–based arguments when evaluating the impact of the event – for example, when producing concrete data for reporting on the delivery and immediate outputs of public engagement activities and analysing levels of engagement. Other opportunity-based points raised about evidencing and evaluating impact with online methods include:

- **Recording:** The ability of videoconferencing sites to securely record and store sessions without recourse to third-party software was commented on. Researchers emphasised the advantage of online formats to real-time encrypt meetings, to backup recordings to online remote server networks (“the Cloud”) or local drives, which can then be shared securely for purposes of evaluation.

- **Integrated analytics:** Most video conference applications employ dedicated analytics tools, subsequently allowing for a more convenient collection of basic event statistics (i.e. Attendee Report, Webinar Reports). This readily available quantitative data gives researchers the ability to clearly assess who registered, who attended, and for how long. Some services also offer geographic analysis and other ways to allow participants, decision-makers and the broader community to assess the representativeness of online participants, making evidencing event impact and reach easier.

- **Transcript Analysis:** Since Q&A transcripts are automatically logged for virtual events, they can be later analysed for evaluation and research purposes. The self-documenting nature of online sessions was reported to open up virtual conferences/seminars to analysis and evaluation in ways not normally provided to researchers within face-to-face settings - speeding up the refinement, analysis
and dissemination of knowledge related to the learning processes involved during the event.

4.1.5 Enhancing Future Research and Career Development

Finally, researchers reflected on how using online methods for public engagement had upskilled them as researchers, both in terms of rethinking their current academic practices and supporting the development of professional skills:

‘I am learning how to use different platforms - so there is an upskilling process going on for myself.... so from an academic skills perspective or just professional skills perspective there is an advantage just in having to adapt to this’ (P3, May 2020).

‘For example, I am much less concerned about how I will run synchronous seminars now (…) or how to manage live activities, breakout rooms etc. It has been very confidence building experience, especially given the fact that this is where the things are going probably for quite a long time at least for part of teaching and for the rest of my research (P5, August 2020).’

As the above comments suggest, participating in online engagement helps build researchers’ confidence in online environments and hones their ability to effectively manage technology, design and communicate content online. Collectively, these kinds of competencies were said to enhance researchers’ capacity to deliver technology-enabled teaching and learning in their current university context. Indeed, researchers stated that many strategies and tactics used when planning and delivering digital engagement activities (in particularly collaborative and co-creative approaches) could be successfully replicated for online learning environments. An enhanced adaptability was also mentioned – engaging in online environments promoted more flexible and responsive approaches to designing and delivering activities and managing risks. While again being directly applicable to online teaching, such skills are also transferable to on-campus contexts, providing wider institutional benefits.

Learning more about online engagement and exploring fieldwork through digital formats was also cited as providing the basis for re-evaluating traditional
research strategies and considering wider applications of online methods during the whole research cycle. Two respondents commented on how the experience changed their perspective on the efficacy of online tools for qualitative interviewing, making them feel more positive about applying online interviewing methods.

**4.2 Going Digital in Public Engagement: Challenges**

**4.2.1 Challenges resulting from institutional practices**

As a part of this study’s attempt to understand the barriers to uptake of online engagement methods amongst arts and humanities researchers, participants were asked to evaluate the existing institutional practices and comment on the role of the university and the Faculty in supporting their online public engagement activities. The majority of respondents felt positive and enthusiastic about King’s post-Covid commitment to developing digital engagement strategies; an overall perception was that the Faculty of Arts & Humanities and King’s share a positive ethos around online engagement and do a good job of advocating and supporting it.

However, a few issues were raised as potential challenges:

- On a practical level, researchers commented critically on the current King’s College London policy to use Microsoft Teams as the default video conferencing platform for internal and external video communication. While Microsoft Teams was generally recognised as a more secure platform, in particular when compared to Zoom, there are certain challenges with this platform around permission setting that make it more difficult to navigate. Researchers noted that the process of setting up an account with Microsoft Teams was user-hostile, a complication much exacerbated during events with a large number of participants joining from outside the institution. Another reported inconvenience with Teams Live Events was the necessity for a dedicated AV specialist responsible for monitoring the event and managing the Q&A. While these difficulties could be avoided by opting for another platform, the fact that Teams is the only platform officially supported by King’s - the only platform where additional IT support could be offered - limited the scope for choice, meaning that in some cases (CS1) it was technology guiding the design of PE activity.
• The difficulty in navigating the administrative structures inside the university when setting up online events was also picked up by several respondents. Examples range from struggling to understand who should be contacted to offer up practical support when setting up Teams Live Events within an institution due to lack of clarity within professional service teams, to the bureaucracy of university. The latter includes the slow process of securing approvals and getting the correct information from the IT team, and challenges with coordinating this information within the department.

4.2.2 Challenges resulting from Training and Skills Gaps

The issue of technical skills/appropriate training was another well-cited challenge when it came to using digital engagement methods. As previous research has indicated, and as would perhaps be expected, the researchers’ confidence to undertake public engagement activities largely depends on their previous experience, training, and the possession of appropriate skills. Not surprisingly then, the initial lack of this was noted by all of the respondents as the main barrier to thoughtful organisation and planning of public engagement online.

In particular, respondents reported that the urgency at the time of the initial lockdown to conduct all engagement activities ‘virtually’ had left little time and opportunity for them to get up to speed with various online platforms available and to undertake appropriate training. Three respondents specifically commented that the specialist skills required for digital public engagement lay outside of conventional public engagement training and cited the difficulties of a ‘learning as we go’ approach:

*This is all the learning curve as we go (...) and I don't really have the time to spend a week learning how to use this system in order to be able to run an online event while also doing everything else I do during the week. I think that's the hardest part, not having the skills and experience to know what works and what does not*.”

(P3, May 2020)
The most challenging thing has been not having any training…you just do not know what to expect (…) I have never personally been a part of online conference, so not having any previous experience meant that I had to look for things online to know what are the questions I needed to ask myself (…) very basic things like how chairing a panel works, and the role of the chair to notify the speakers of time, how do you do this (P1, May 2020)

The above comments also show how the time invested in learning new online platforms can feel like a conflict of interest due to the pressures of “ordinary” academic workload. The issue of competing priorities has been previously recognised as one of the key constraints on researchers’ participation in public engagement (Burchell et.al, 2017). Thereby, the additional effort required to obtain the sufficient levels of technological competency to engage with publics online can be seen as further exacerbating this issue, putting an additional pressure on researchers’ time.

Other points with respect to training gaps raised in the interviews included:

- Participants commented on the existing ‘informational overload’ that followed the Covid-19 crisis, feeling confused by the abundance of guidelines for carrying out online events.
- Despite the perceived abundance of resources, several researchers still mentioned difficulty in finding specific guidelines for arts and humanities researchers and suggested that the majority of toolkits available on digital engagement are too generalised and not necessarily relevant for their specific needs. In addition, researchers commented on the lack of any formal ethical standards and expectations being introduced. It thus became researchers own responsibility to research and operationalise ethical considerations within their own online engagement activities, which was widely cited by researchers as being a challenge.
- Finally, the perceived lack of training available around evaluation of online engagement activities was also picked up on. Digital formats were recognised to offer many potential opportunities around evaluation and evidencing of impact. However, researchers still mentioned lacking in specialised skills required to work with the analytics tools embedded in different software (i.e. collect and decode quantitative/qualitative data with Teams/Zoom) and cited
the need for more guidance on how to effectively measure participation in online events.

4.2.3 Online vs face-to-face interactions: Challenges in the Online Space

Finally, as researchers reflected on the differences between online and face-to-face interactions, they identified the following key challenges arising from delivering public engagement activities online:

a) Managing Technology

In general, respondents shared concern with the technological complexities of the online space. As one interviewee puts it, ‘there is always this fear around tech - everyone has that fear of how this is going to work’ (P1, May 2020). More specifically, issues were raised around technological limitations of specific software (e.g. included features/ capabilities) and practical problems with navigating and managing digital technology while running online events. For example, reflecting on her experience using Zoom, CS3 project organiser comments critically on how even the simple task, such as timekeeping, can become a challenge in an online environment: ‘even time management online is really hard (...) all the reactions on Zoom are visual and actually for variety of reasons it would be more helpful if there were some audio cues to indicate when the time is running out [for the speakers]’ (P5, May 2020).

Particular challenges were also reported arising from varied levels of digital literacy — how comfortable people are using different forms of IT – which also have to be addressed and navigated carefully. While some online platforms were recognised as being quite easy and intuitive to use (i.e. Zoom/Teams), others like Miro and Padlet required more practice and more advanced technological ability from both facilitators and participants. Correspondingly, researchers reflected on how the difficulty in navigating unfamiliar tools can hold up interaction and alienate some participants, especially in collaborative tasks. Moreover, the need to switch between different platforms – i.e. the need to ‘jump’ from the main video meeting on Zoom to access Miro or Padlet boards - was reported as adding to the time management issues and confusions experienced by both project organisers and participants.
Notably, problem-solving was also reported to be more challenging in the online space:

*Sometimes there is no easy solution [to technological problems] or you find the solution you think is going to work and it breaks, or you don’t have a back-up. Also, you don’t necessarily have the time to respond to the problems reactively, you have to think about that beforehand…this is can be quite challenging (P5, May 2020).*

As the above comment suggests, with online events there is little to no time to deal with problems reactively - if technology fails or if one of the speakers gets cut off - there is not much one can do in the moment. Instead, any potential technological issues should be considered and addressed in advance, which was recognised as adding additional pressure and administrative work for the event organisers.

**b) Managing concentration and engagement levels online**

The difficulty with managing concentration and engagement levels online was further cited by researchers. Several respondents commented on how monitoring interactions and determining when participants are engaged online can be tricky due to the lack of nonverbal cues available to offer immediate feedback:

*I still think that not being able to read the room is really difficult…without having some sort of feedback mechanism, it is really difficult to grasp where people are [engagement-wise] (P5, May 2020).*

Ensuring high quality conversations online was also recognised to be more challenging due to the perceived attention deficit in the virtual space - people can much more easily lose focus, get distracted, or simply leave an online event:
Moreover, as the above statement suggests, the multitasking ability of the technology - including speaking, listening, writing, and or viewing videos and PowerPoint presentations - can be over-stimulating, meaning that some of the information transmitted is likely to get overlooked by participants during online interactions. This issue was also recognised to be exacerbated by the so-called “Zoom fatigue” problem - the draining effect associated with the increased and prolonged use of video conferencing calls.

Overall, as the risks of people’s concentration being diverted increases in the online setting, the challenge remains for facilitators to find better ways of keeping their audiences cognitively engaged without overwhelming them with too many forms and methods of communication.

c) Aspects that couldn’t be successfully adapted into an online format

Finally, across all three case studies the main issue in translating physical events into online formats was enabling networking between participants:

*As we were planning, it was quite clear: we can do presentations, we can do introductions, we can do structured Q&As, but we cannot do other forms of networking (...) as Teams Live event only allows presenters to share their screen, it does not allow event attendees to communicate with each other, so this is when the interface dictates what you can and cannot do, so this part of the conference was lost* (P1, May 2020).
As the above comments suggest, when it came to networking the fully online format was recognised to limit a degree of spontaneous engagement between participants, both during and following the activities. In the case of CS1 and CS2, this was partly recognised as stemming from the limitations presented by specific software – for example, the limited ability for interaction between participants offered by Teams Live Event. The issue of “Zoom fatigue” was furthermore recognised as a factor in this. After several hours of non-stop screen time, participants can feel discouraged to partake in any additional networking activities.

Notably, in the case of CS3, communication platform Slack was utilised as a way to potentially tackle these issues, to offer a communication backchannel for participants to engage outside the main sessions. Nevertheless, the strategy did not bear the anticipated results as engagement with Slack was recognised to be rather limited. As P5 states:

> We need to find another way of doing Slack – Slack was not working for one reason or another. Perhaps we need another way to encourage informal asynchronous discussion outside of the main group (P5, May 2020).

The challenge thus remains for researchers to find other platforms and other more creative solutions for encouraging networking opportunities in the online space.
Chapter 5. **Next Steps: Recommendations and future strategies**

Based on the findings provided above, this final section offers some pragmatic strategic pointers regarding digital methods of public engagement that should apply to both individual researchers and institutions. Section 5.1. outlines the individual strategies that arts and humanities researchers could consider ensuring the successful implementation of their digital public engagement work. Section 5.2. provides some wider institutional recommendations to better support and empower the uptake of online public engagement in the arts and humanities disciplines.

### 5.1 Towards a more strategic incorporation of digital technology

The need for more strategic incorporation of digital technology to empower meaningful and impactful public engagement online comes up frequently during this study. It is important to note that this study was conducted at the height of Covid-19, when there were a lot of fears shared by researchers around what might and might not work in the online space. The findings presented in this paper, nonetheless, highlight that there are various advantages that digital formats offer for engaging the public with arts and humanities research – from widening participation and reach to promoting conditions for greater information sharing and collaborative work. At the same time, however, the outcomes of this study also pose some broader questions about the nature of online participation. Above all, perhaps, this study suggests that there is a need to change our mindset when it comes to utilising digital methods of engagement. Rather than trying to replace and recreate face-to-face interactions, effort should be made to support the development of activities that take full advantage of new formats and embrace the affordances of the virtual environment. With this in mind, the following key recommendations could be considered by arts and humanities researchers in their future digital engagement work:

- First, the findings of this study highlight that **there is no one-size-fits-all solution for engaging with the public in the online space**. The choice of the specific online platforms and processes used should be guided by considerations of the purposes of the proposed activity (what are you trying to achieve?) and
the needs of the participants (who are you engaging with and why?). In particular, careful consideration should be given to the matter of scale and depth – i.e. whether the aim is to reach broader audiences and scale-up engagement with research, or the focus on smaller-scale interventions and achieving higher levels of collaborative action. As the results of this study suggest, finding the right balance between these two objectives might not always be possible. Being clear about your priorities from the start and working out what you can and cannot achieve with the digital methods employed thus becomes increasingly important.

- While some of the practices that are used in face-to-face contact modes can be adapted and utilised in the online context, researchers should be mindful of the specificities and limitations present in online participation – i.e. the issues of limited attention span, multitasking natures of technology, Zoom fatigue.

Utilising a combination of methods and tools that foster different types of interactions (content-participant; participant-participant; facilitator-participant) can be a useful strategy to ensure active participation and cognitive engagement in the online space. At the same time, researchers should be careful not to overwhelm their participants, keeping in mind that creating rich, cognitively engaging tasks does not necessarily require sophisticated technologies and tools. Focus should primarily be on how high-quality interactions and group work tasks can be supported, rather than the mode or technology for doing so.

- Equally, when planning their online public engagement activity researchers should ensure that their set-up supports inclusive engagement and provides for varying levels of technological competence. One idea from a researcher was to use surveys prior to event/activity to ensure that the platforms used fit both the activity's intentions and participants’ levels of comfort with using different forms of IT. Another idea was to assign a pre-task to the group before the main event that is geared specifically towards showing participants the key functions of the platforms used. Sharing “how to” videos and / or guides that explain the platforms and tech used during the event could also be useful in this respect.

- Consideration could also be given to appointing a dedicated online facilitator and or producer to assist with technical aspects of executing online
events/activities. As this study demonstrates, managing technology while trying to facilitate high quality interactions online can be a really challenging task for researchers. Splitting the roles with a ‘presenter/facilitator’ and ‘technical support/producer’ working together can help ensure smooth running of an online event.

- **Researchers might consider reviewing their strategies around digital event networking opportunities** – e.g. examining how they can integrate co-creative approaches to facilitate more effective forms of networking in the online space. As discussed on page 31, all three projects analysed in this study struggled to achieve their perceived networking goals. A suggestion put forward independently by two researchers was to involve participants in the development of networking ideas and methods. Instead of defaulting to one approach or the other, it might be worth checking with participants first whether networking is something that they want from this event and if so, encourage them to contribute to the design of networking strategy. Such an approach can help establish the most appropriate channel for attendee connections to develop and ensure that the networking opportunities provided are well-tailored to participants needs.

- Lastly, with respect to evaluation and impact, the findings of this study suggest that future online public engagement strategies might usefully place greater emphasis on enabling the digitisation of data and research outputs. As discussed in section 4.1.4., online platforms offer a wide-ranging opportunity for sharing project outcomes and visualising knowledge-building processes. This could enable the development of project impact narrative to be appreciated and evidenced easily - an aspect that should be considered by researchers (and institutions) strategically, especially when submitting the REF (Research Excellence Framework) Impact Case Studies.

### 5.2 Institutional Recommendations to support meaningful and impactful public engagement online

#### 5.2.1 Addressing Training Needs

When it comes to institutional practices, the analysis offered in this paper highlights the need to provide better training opportunities (formal and informal) to empower
researchers to undertake meaningful and impactful public engagement online. Specifically, a perceived lack of specialised training in digital methods of public engagement for arts and humanities researchers, a reported lack of robust frameworks around ethics in the online space and the fact that researchers are not all trained to effectively evaluate their own digital engagement work were reported by interviewees as a challenge.

- Correspondingly, universities might consider a review of the amount and depth of training in digital engagement methods that arts and humanities researchers receive through their institutional training programmes. This work should be designed to ensure that the training provided empowers researchers to:
  
  - Think more strategically about the task of planning, designing and implementing public engagement activities in the online space. It should enable researchers to identify what is required for their own engagement work and what key considerations to make when planning online engagement – i.e. purpose, participants, ethics, evaluation.
  - Develop confidence and technological competence to engage with a variety of non-academic audiences online. This suggests that the training provided should focus on: a) introducing different tools and platforms for online engagement; b) explaining how to use more features and functionality with the specific software; and / or c) developing greater ability to work to the existing capabilities of the software.
  - Embed evaluation practices into their digital public engagement work. There should be more dedicated online evaluation training available that enhances researchers’ awareness of the importance of doing evaluation online, their confidence in using different evaluative techniques (including the ability to work with analytics tools integrated within different online platforms), and their ability to effectively communicate the impact of their digital engagement activity.

- In addition to formal training, universities should also consider developing and facilitating informal forms of training – i.e. introducing a system of peer support and mentoring around digital methods of public engagement.
This could include the development of departmental, cross-departmental and cross-institutional online knowledge-sharing spaces.

5.2.2 Addressing Funding Needs

A further challenge that emerged strongly from this paper concerns the ways in which online engagement activities, in particular within arts and humanities, are currently funded (or underfunded). It was widely felt that universities should reconsider the capacity and the amounts of money required to finance digital public engagement. While the costs of setting up digital engagement activities are often low, this does not mean that organising online engagement is cost-free – there are certain aspects that do require considerable financial support.

- In particular, researchers insisted that if institutions are serious about supporting high quality digital engagement activities, their funding structures should reflect the costs of administrative labour for researchers, as well as the costs of hiring an online facilitator /technical support specialist to assist with technicalities of running these types of events.
- To further incentivise high quality engagement in the digital space, institutions could also consider introducing small bursaries for researchers to spend on specialised training programmes (i.e. NCCPE courses on meaningful online engagement) and/or other online professional development opportunities that enhance researchers ability to undertake engaged research activities online.
- Equally, universities could consider allocating funds for researchers to consult and possibly buy-in some external expertise to aid with evaluation of their online engagement work. Meaningful evaluation of engagement is a complex task, especially with larger projects. While providing quality in-house training to up skill researchers is one approach, there will likely be some cases demanding more in-depth expertise that could be afforded through collaboration with dedicated evaluation specialists.
- Finally, universities should consider making funding for arts and humanities’ digital engagement activities available in a flexible, rolling manner. While the need for more substantive funding for public engagement in the AHSS was recognised by all interviewees, researchers commented on the
importance of being able to access small grants in a flexible, efficient way as this ensures that they can respond proactively to engagement opportunities.

In conclusion, it must be noted that the list of suggestions and observations provided above is based solely on the qualitative data collected for this research, and thus should not be interpreted as offering some universal solutions and answers. The analysis presented in this paper, nonetheless, provides a useful starting point for future studies – both in the UK and other contexts – to consider in more longitudinal analysis the various potentialities of digital format for engaging the public with arts and humanities research. This study might also inspire greater discussion of the ways in which the challenges associated with stimulating more meaningful interactions and networking opportunities online might be overcome. The author of this report thus prompts further research on this topic, encouraging contributions and criticisms from others.


Tatum and Jankowski, 2010. Tatum and Jankowski, Openness in Scholarly Communication – 16 October 2010


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