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Bringing conversation & democracy alive

HOW DO WE CONNECT WITH PEOPLE WHO AREN'T ONLINE & INCLUDE DIVERSE VOICES

WHEN WE CAN'T MEET FACE TO FACE?

Since COVID-19 started impacting our world, some people have been telling us they're worried about reaching those who aren't online and/or those they believe to be 'hard to reach'.

This topic is prone to assumptions, myths and misconceptions.

First, we're talking about two different groups

Those we believe are **'hard to reach'**	A term used frequently in engagement, although it's not always helpful or accurate. These people know where they are, we just haven't done the work required to connect with them. In reality, the focus should instead be including diverse voices and perspectives, including those unlikely or less likely to participate in mainstream activities.
People we consider are **'beyond our reach'.**	Those who absolutely can't or won't engage online. If you use only online methods that require all participants to have immediate access to a stable internet connection and a smart device, there may be some who are completely 'beyond the reach' of your engagement process.

Secondly, its easy to mis-categorise people

Often people we think will be **'beyond reach'** aren't. They also might not be who you think they are. Don't assume though that these people are all in an older age bracket, that's not necessarily true! Barriers may include things like geographical location or socioeconomic factors.

People who we brand **'hard to reach'** are simply waiting to be found. This group can include everyday people, and it's a mistake to simply assume that a whole cohort of people is automatically difficult to or unwilling to engage.

The engagement work we've done - whether face to face or online - tells us that the **core values** and **frameworks of quality engagement** still hold true.

Good engagement requires careful consideration of who you're engaging with – those impacted by or interested in the decision - and targeting people with fit-for-purpose, appropriate engagement methods.

SO, WE 'FOUND' THEM, NOW HOW DO WE CONNECT?

Here's our thinking on some possible 'methods' for reaching and involving these cohorts in a COVID-19 impacted world and beyond. These are just a few ideas based on our experiences and learnings so far.

The key to it all?
Go to them, ask them what they want and be prepared to provide targeted options and support to suit each different group.

SUPPORTING PEOPLE TO PARTICIPATE ONLINE

◆ **Turn up where they already are.** What online tools is the group is already using or familiar with? E.g. even if they don't want to participate on your preferred platform, they might be meeting elsewhere (i.e. in a Facebook group) and be willing to provide input via that platform.

◆ **Offer alternatives.** Just like in 'normal times', not everyone wants to participate in a group/public meeting. Offer other options such as online surveys and submission processes.

◆ **Provide technical support.** Some people want to take part but need some extra help. Prepare simple guides that step people through the tool or platform, provide 'tech representatives' that can call and 'walk through' the session with participants prior to the day, and have an 'on call' tech person available during every online meeting.

◆ **Cater to specific needs.** Identify any barriers (such as people experiencing language or literacy difficulties or those who identify as having a disability) and work to address them. This might include providing simplified or visual content in multiple formats, content in different languages, an interpreter for your session (yes - they can be part of your online workshop), captioning all your videos, etc.

◆ **Break it up.** Remember that working online and sitting/staring at a screen can be tiring and you need to break sessions up into smaller blocks. Just as in a good face-to-face session, make sure you don't talk 'at' people for too long!

◆ **Bring resources to them (or bring them to the resources)** If your budget allows (or if you have these items on hand), you can provide people with access to devices, data and an internet connection. You can also offer a place for them to sit at an office or location that already has this all available (maintaining correct social distances of course!).

ALTERNATIVES FOR THOSE WHO CAN'T OR WON'T GO ONLINE

It's important to note that engaging during this disrupted period does not necessarily mean engaging only online. Offline methods that don't include face-to-face contact are still on the table.

◆ **Telephone interviews (one on one)** to gather data – exploring people's experiences, suggestions or stories. Once collated you can run a series of mailout feedback processes. Phone trees might also work.

◆ **Small group targeted teleconferences**. This relies on knowing their phone numbers, or inviting them to share this information. The session needs to be facilitated to ensure ability for everyone to share and listen, and insights documented.

◆ **Snail mail.** Use the 'good old' post to share information and gather feedback via submissions, surveys or 'participation packs'. This can be integrated with consecutive rounds of smaller group phone discussions. Remember to build in enough time to accommodate this!

◆ **Text messages.** Provide information and/or ask for feedback via SMS. You could couple this with physical signs or displays that people walk or drive past, prompting them to send in input via their phone.

CORE PRINCIPLES THAT HELP YOU REACH AND INCLUDE DIVERSE VOICES
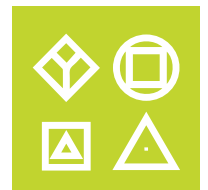
Plan to deliver a meaningful, robust, transparent process. Key factors that could help to ensure many people take part and share different perspectives include:

◆ **Random, independent, stratified selection.** This helps to ensure participants are broadly representative of key demographics in the wider community and can encourage new and different people to participate. Some people won't participate in self-selected activities because they think it is 'not for them' and the usual people will turn up.

◆ **Promise and deliver impact and influence.** People don't want to invest time into something meaningless that doesn't offer them any influence over the decision.

We delved into this this topic (and provided more tips) **in this previous article** on our blog.