

Open vs Closed Online Discussions – What are the pros and cons?

Resource type: provisional guidance

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The following table highlights where different approaches to visibility and membership can be beneficial. In some cases hybrid approaches may be feasible but in others, genuine trade-offs exist that mean getting the best of both worlds isn't always possible.

Priority / agenda	Visible threads Open membership	Hidden threads Closed group
Creating a safe space		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="1106 943 1827 970">:- logins to private space make participants feel more secure <li data-bbox="1106 975 1883 1145">:- sharing bios of all participants prior to when the discussion starts helps individuals understand who is in the group (and how much they can be trusted), value the range of experience and expertise convened, and get a better sense of how they (would like to) fit in. <li data-bbox="1106 1150 1883 1219">:- closing the circle to new members helps to reinforce a sense of intimacy among participants <li data-bbox="1106 1224 1883 1292">:- sharing confidentiality guidelines prior to discussions helps to engender a shared sense of good practice, responsibility and trust

Format of event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> :- Longer event to maximise potential for promotional efforts (and word of mouth) to take effect :- Dip-in / dip-out facilitation in office hours :- Weekly summary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> :- Shortest possible duration that minimises project team costs and grabs the attention of busy attendees :- Intense on and off-list facilitation across time-zones :- Daily summary
Being inclusive / representative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> :- Advertising an event widely in advance can help reach not just a greater audience, but potentially a more diverse one as well. Success depends on attracting the right type and balance of people, and on gathering and monitoring data prior to the event :- Stakeholders are less likely to feel excluded, even if it not possible that 100% could take part 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> :- Brokering agreement to join an event with a diverse set of stakeholders (including those who may not ordinarily understand, align or engage with each other) can be easier to achieve using 'behind the scenes' methods. :- Individuals from less powerful constituencies may find it less threatening to raise their voices in hidden groups, where the potential for trolling activity online (or recrimination offline) is relatively low. :- Managing over-dominant individuals is easier as the project team will have had contact with most (if not all) participants in advance
Demonstrating engagement externally	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> :- Visibility to external stakeholders before, during and after the event provides an opportunity to publicly demonstrate fulfilment of a specific mandate to open engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> :- Once over, events can (and have) been opened up for external stakeholders to view. Requires consensus among participants. :- Multiple phases of engagement can (and have) been built-in to broaden participation if required. Depends on consensus among participants
Motivating a group of peers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> :- Mass email invites, social media work, webpage / real-world adverts :- Having the opportunity to join an organised event and to have your views directly presented to wider audience on a specific issue is appealing (though less than prior to the emergence of social media) :- Stakeholders (individuals or groups) can easily participate or observe, as they choose. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> :- One-to-one contact (email, phone) followed by targeted email promotion :- The possibility of engaging with a select group of peers is a relatively strong proposition :- The credibility of co-constructed outputs generated from an event is potentially higher (depending on audience) if participants are generally seen as 'high-value'

Treating highly politicised issues	:- Airing politicised / controversial issues in public may help to sensitise new audiences	:- The possibility for nuancing discussions is higher, as stakeholders feel less defensive :- Participants are more likely to contribute because they feel safer / more comfortable
Treating complex / technical issues		:- Participants are less likely to be put off by questions / comments by novices or 'outsiders' who cannot relate easily to them
Co-constructing powerful outputs	:- Statements in discussion outputs are directly attributed to specific discussion comments (unless explicitly stated otherwise)	:- Statements in discussion outputs are generally anonymised and paraphrased to protect the identity of individual participants :- Project team can explicitly add 'convenor perspective' to outputs to help tailor, solidify, and direct messages to key target audiences. :- Participants understand that their perspective may not necessarily be represented in the output
Metrics to demonstrate value for money	:- Volume of registered attendees (motivation) :- proportion of attendees from specified constituencies / backgrounds (diversity) :- Web-traffic to the discussion (consumption) :- Quantity of perspectives shared (contributions)	:- proportion of contributors to attendees (participation inequality) :- representation of specified constituencies / backgrounds (diversity) :- Quality of peer dialogue (coding)