

MAPPING VIRTUAL ACCESS IN CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

**Disability Community Needs
and Preferences in Virtual
Access**

Project Managed by Alison Kopit

**Supported by and with collaboration from the
Museum, Arts and Culture Access Consortium
(MAC)**

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WHAT IS THE MAPPING VIRTUAL ACCESS IN CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS PROJECT? SUMMARY AND CONTEXT

SUMMARY AND CONTEXT

Mapping Virtual Access in Cultural Institutions (MVACI) is a project designed, managed, and implemented under the Museum, Arts and Culture Access Consortium (MAC). It grew out of the COVID-19 pandemic, when many cultural institutions turned to virtual programming to continue to reach their community through lockdown and limited in-person visits. Once cultural spaces re-opened (late August 2020 for New York City), many cultural institutions returned to in-person programming and dropped some or all initiatives to provide virtual access to their programs, installations, performance work, and the art in their space. A goal of MVACI is to identify the elements of virtual access that are essential to accessibility and discover how a sustained approach to virtual access can support the disability community. Furthermore, the research seeks to uncover effective and preferred methods for facilitating access for disabled users of virtual programming.

This project is particularly fitting to MAC, as MAC aims to advocate for access to cultural spaces and experiences, center the needs and desires of disabled people, and train cultural institutions to expand cultural programming and disability centeredness in their work. We hope that this report will be a powerful and useful resource to cultural institutions.

This iteration of MVACI is a continuation of an earlier iteration also funded by The FAR Fund and managed by Bojana Coklyat. In this first phase which began in September 2020, Coklyat and the MVACI subcommittee (a group of several people in different roles in MAC who served to support this project) gathered data mostly from staff of cultural institutions that were providing virtual programming. Coklyat and the subcommittee identified a need for a second phase of the project that sought further input from the disability community about specific needs and desires related to access in the virtual space.

Beginning in the summer of 2022, Alison Kopit took over the second phase of the project. Along with the MVACI subcommittee and other members of MAC, she organized outreach, disseminated a survey, and analyzed survey results in July and August of 2022. They used the data collected to devise focus group questions and source for focus group recruitment. Focus groups were conducted in October 2022 to gather data about what disabled people desire and need out of virtual access. Transcripts from the focus groups were coded and analyzed. The data is synthesized here in hopes that it provides cultural spaces with meaningful information about how to serve, center, and affirm disabled populations through virtual programming.

In surveys, the main questions focused on the type of virtual programming that users engaged with and the frequency, asking them to consider March 2020 through to September 2022. Survey participants were asked what types of events they would like more of and the benefits of virtual programming. Participants shared how frequently they felt their access needs were met, and shared about

both accessible and inaccessible experiences. Information gathered here was used to formulate questions for the focus groups. In the focus groups, key questions surrounded what makes an experience accessible, as well as what makes an experience inaccessible. Participants were asked to dream big about the future for virtual access, and they shared creative and powerful ideas about what they imagine to be possible in a more accessible future for virtual programming.

For the purposes of this project, “mapping” is a way of examining the landscape of virtual access through a process of surveys and focus groups with disabled users of virtual programming in cultural spaces. The data was gathered, synthesized, and separated into themes. Findings and recommendations in the report are shared according to these themes.

The umbrella term ‘virtual access’ is used in this project to mean access to cultural institutions through online platforms to programming and performance, art exhibits, educational content, and community events. Platforms could be synchronous interactive video platforms such as Zoom, as well as asynchronous experiences, such as exhibition tours on museum websites, and more. We were not only interested in the content of the program, but the whole experience including outreach and registration, navigation of platforms, community guidelines and social experiences.

THANK YOU

This project would not have been possible without the participants, all of whom generously shared their stories, dreams, and needs with MAC via surveys and focus groups. No data about the disabled experience is more valuable than that of people with lived experience of disability, and it is because of the participants that we can put forth this report. We have not named the participants to protect confidentiality, but all input was valuable and essential to this project, and we thank all participants for trusting us.

Thank you to Bojana Coklyat, for her leadership in the earlier iteration. By identifying and calling for the need to center disabled people in a further iteration of the project, she unlocked new dimensions for participation in this work.

Thank you to The FAR Fund who has supported this project in its several iterations and made this research possible.

FRAMING VIRTUAL ACCESS

- *Synchronous or asynchronous:* Virtual access includes synchronous engagement – such as tuning in to a talk happening at a specific time, or asynchronous, such as a self-directed gallery tour that can be completed on one’s own time.
- *Hybrid:* Virtual access can also include events that have both an in-person and an online component. At hybrid events, participants can decide whether to engage online or in-person. This could include a livestream of an event happening in real time, or a separate online event with similar content to an event that also happened in person.
- *Interactive or non-interactive:* Virtual access could be interactive, such as a community forum, discussion, or workshop, or it could be non-interactive, such as attending a webinar or performance.
- *Multi-format:* Virtual engagement could include online performances, museum exhibition tours, community groups, workshops, lectures, and other activities.
- *Cultural Institutions:* Cultural institutions include museums, performance spaces, dance studios, gardens, libraries, community organizations, or any other space that produces arts and cultural work.
- *Broad understanding of access:* We asked people to consider many types of access when thinking about virtual programming. We also considered the ways that access is not exclusively about disability,

but can be about other aspects of lived experience or identity as well. In the context of this project, we thought of different types of access as follows:

- *Linguistic Access:* This includes all aspects of language equity, including interpretation (of American Sign Language or other languages), translation of written materials, and captioning.
- *Sensory Access:* This includes audio description, and tactile experiences, as well as other aspects of the environment, such as allergens.
- *Technological Access:* This can include reliable access to technology such as computers, phones, iPads, and Wi-Fi connections, as well as the resources and guidance for how to learn and use the technology commonly needed to participate in virtual programming.
- *Financial Access:* Many disabled and otherwise marginalized people experience financial barriers, and so issues related to the cost of programming came up frequently. Increasing financial access might include making events free, providing scholarships, or having sliding scale options.
- *Physical Access:* Physical access includes the ability to enter and navigate a physical space with ease. While this is not often relevant to virtual programming, participants often brought up physical access to compare their virtual experiences to their in-person experiences.
- *Cultural Access:* This might include welcoming and inclusive community guidelines, scheduled breaks, embracing a range of ways to communicate, and respect for varying levels of energy and engagement.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

We use quotes throughout this report that come directly from survey and focus group participants. We chose to preserve the language choices of the participants, and because of this, the language may depart from some of our typical organizational language practices.

METHODS

OUTREACH AND PARTICIPATION

We used MAC's network to send out surveys to cultural institution listservs, disability agency listservs, and disability-community newsletters. We also sent surveys and invites to individual disability community members sourced from social media and the personal and professional networks of MAC members.

Survey participants were asked if they wanted to participate in a focus group, and those who indicated interest were contacted via email to participate when we arrived at that stage of the research. We also reached out to cultural space listservs and other disability community groups. One of our goals was to make sure that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities were invited to participate, as this group is often left out of research initiatives. We sent invites to day programs in hopes that this would allow us to reach more of this population.

Because MAC is a New York-based organization, New Yorkers are over-represented in the participant pool of both the survey and the focus groups. 65 people with disabilities participated in the survey. Of those, 48.4% were immunocompromised and 14.1% were uncertain about their status. Participants ranged from the 18-25 age group to the 60+

age group, with seven people in the range of 18-25, 19 people ages 25-35, 11 people ages 35-45, 14 people ages 45-60, and 14 people older than 60 years of age.

COMPENSATION

Surveys

Survey participants were not paid.

Focus Groups

Focus group participants were paid \$50 each for an hour and a half of participation.

LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES

While we sourced information from our various networks of cultural institutions, we recognize that we have not found as diverse a group as may make up the disability community, and that people who experience significant barriers to virtual participation are likely not in our sample pool. Because of systemic oppression, including the politics of guardianship and marginalization of disabled people, people living in spaces of confinement, such as institutions, nursing homes, and prisons are likely under-represented or not represented in this sample, though we did not collect data about these demographics so we cannot know for sure. We hope for greater access for these parts of our community as well and hope that the ideas and recommendations put forth here will benefit the wider disability community, including those who are under-represented or not represented here.

We also were challenged by realizing partway through data collection that 17 people who had signed up for the focus groups were misrepresenting themselves. Signs such as providing conflicting identity information, refusing to fill out paperwork, requesting alternative payment methods, and declining to turn on their cameras or speak in the focus groups, along with the specific groupings of signups gave us this information. When we would try to engage with these participants, they refused in various ways and we were unable to

pay them or get accurate identification information, and along with the support of our funder, we decided to discount the qualitative data they contributed in the focus groups. This group of people in large part said they were from day programs when asked about their participation status in the sign up forms. Once we realized the error, we realized we had fewer participants from day programs than we thought. Because of this, we ended up running a sixth focus group (that we had not anticipated running) the following month with a group from a day program that MAC has a relationship with. This new focus group ended up being instrumental in providing us with data we would have otherwise missed.

Lastly, the surveys and focus groups were conducted in the summer and fall of 2022, and the COVID landscape has changed significantly since then. Whereas vaccines were more effective at preventing COVID at the time, they are less effective now. These changes may mean that needs and desires surrounding COVID safety may be different now as well. Because COVID rates are always changing, best practices are too; it is important to make clear that this research has not captured information from 2023 or later.

OVERALL FINDINGS

Virtual programming is often stigmatized as not as meaningful as in-person programming. However, the data that we gathered through focus groups and surveys suggests that with the right planning and access provisions, virtual programming can be impactful and meaningful.

60.9% of survey respondents consider access features when deciding which virtual events to attend. When asked what features make a virtual experience accessible, 41.7% of participants included auto-captioning in their selections, 45% included real-time captioning (CART), 15% included ASL interpretation. 58.3% of participants included breaks as a part of an accessible experience, 33.3% included content warnings, and 36.7% included plain language. Not all virtual access is equal, preferable, and accessible. Surveys and focus groups allowed us to source disability community wisdom to provide information about how to best serve the community through virtual access. We found that virtual programming has the potential to provide desired flexibility, and often virtual access has elements of accommodation and access built in solely by nature of it taking place out of physical space. We learned information about barriers to virtual technology and how to improve it, as well as the logistical challenges with virtual programming. Participants discussed the need for large

scale shifts toward disability culture, and a strong desire for more dynamic events and access solutions. Virtual access provided an avenue to combat social isolation and continue connection in times when in-person connection was not feasible.

"As an immunocompromised person who also cannot drive and am often sick or in a great deal of pain, I often don't get to participate in things. I miss so much of everything. So virtual programming has really opened up everything for me, to be honest. It has made everything possible for me. It has afforded me access to programming, but also to be community. To be a part of things again."

While the pandemic opened many new opportunities for virtual access and provided protection from COVID-19, the benefits of virtual programming go beyond COVID protections (though COVID protection remains incredibly important and a priority for many disabled people).

We learned that the vast majority of people who took the survey were still using virtual programming every day or several times per week in the fall of 2022. Of event types, talks and lectures were most frequented, followed by webinars and workshops, and then discussions. Virtual performances were least often attended.

In the surveys and the focus groups, we found that disabled users of virtual programming had strong feelings about pacing and other cultural aspects of access to be very important, such as including breaks and content warnings. Because of this, we believe that it is important to advocate not only for service-based accommodations such as real-time captioning, audio description, and ASL interpretation, but aspects of access that are intrinsic to the facilitation and organization of the event.

"How can we get able-bodied people to dream big for us? I hope virtual programming will be a part of the cultural experience."

When asked to dream big, one participant said, "How can we get able-bodied people to dream big for us? I hope virtual programming will be a part of the cultural experience." We hope that this report will motivate cultural workers (disabled and non-disabled people) to be a part of a culture shift, where virtual access is deeply valued and considered, thus centering disabled people and other members of marginalized communities that benefit from virtual access with creativity and care.

THEMES, FINDINGS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

FLEXIBILITY

Many disabled people discussed that the flexibility of virtual events supported their access needs and allowed them to participate more freely and with fewer barriers. Here, flexibility includes *when* someone can attend (i.e. has asynchronous options), but also the general increased flexibility of the format, which means that people do not have to plan for transportation, crowds, and other environmental factors that may be a barrier. The ability to control one's physical and sensory environment as well as having to plan for transportation often makes virtual programming more accessible than in-person programming.

FLEXIBILITY: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Transportation is challenging for disabled people because of the cost and unavailability of accessible public transit in many cities. Paratransit options often leave the customer reliant on unreliable options. Transportation can also take a great deal of energy or

cause discomfort or pain for many disabled people. Being able to be in a flexible location can allow more disabled people to participate, manage pain, and save energy. These barriers are multiplied in cross-disability space when many disabled people are trying to gather and find a meeting place everyone can access.

- Virtual programming allows people to avoid crowds, which can feel unsafe or overstimulating for many neurodivergent people.
- Being able to control one's own environment allows users of virtual programming to control the lighting, volume, allergens, and sensory stimulus, which is a beneficial aspect of virtual programming. Conversely, in public settings, there may be triggering elements in the environment that individuals had not planned for or could predict. Virtual access provides an option for lower sensory stimulus.

"I have extreme environmental sensitivities to fragrance and perfumes, and even when places have scent free policies, it's really hard to enforce and so I usually get sick in places with people. And I also have hyper mold sensitivity and museums are often old buildings, and even if they don't think they're moldy, most buildings are moldy. So [virtual programming] means I can be safe."

- Disabled people do not always feel safe to disclose their impairments or disability identity. Virtual programming leaves more space for choice about when, where, and how to disclose. While some people with less apparent disabilities might be able to choose whether they disclose in in-person space, people with more apparent disabilities cannot.
- Disabled people discussed the value in being able to hire people to work on virtual events from geographically different places, as well

as opportunities to be hired themselves. Disabled people experience higher rates of unemployment than the general population (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics), and possibility for virtual engagement opens more opportunities.

- Virtual programming allows people to attend programming asynchronously, which can benefit people experiencing flare-ups.
 - *Recommendation:* Provide recordings of events to give people who need extra processing time the opportunity to pause and rest during the program or re-watch as necessary. This makes time for a wider range of processing experiences. Participants said they appreciate a follow-up email with recordings and any relevant materials from the event.

BUILT-IN ACCESS IN TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL PROTOCOLS

Built-in features of video conferencing technology such as auto-captions and the camera on/camera off feature have the potential to meet a range of access needs. That said, cultural spaces must use these built-in features intentionally and pair them with adjusted social protocols for disabled people to fully benefit from those features. The use of these built-in features alongside the growth of virtual programming during the pandemic made it clear that virtual access can significantly broaden the range of people who can participate in cultural programming.

BUILT-IN ACCESS IN TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL PROTOCOLS: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- While auto captions are not sufficient for everyone, many people reported that the Zoom auto captions increased their ability to understand and communicate in virtual events. Of survey respondents, 41.7% said that auto captioning makes their experience accessible, and 45% said that live-captioning, or

Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) makes their experience accessible. Captioning can be beneficial to people who are d/Deaf or hard of hearing, as well as people with auditory processing disorders, traumatic brain injuries, and more. Several people also indicated that auto captions and live captions are not the same as far as user experience and efficacy, and that when events do not specify which one is being used, they often feel that their access needs are neglected.

- *Recommendation:* It is important to differentiate in an invite about whether auto-captions or CART will be used, and to provide information at the beginning of the event about how to access the captions.

"I am deaf. I wear a hearing aid...I actually have a lot more confidence in my job and I'm able to hold meetings and lead meetings and be able to really understand what everybody is saying so I can comment and have questions and be able to communicate like everyone else."

- The ability to turn the camera off builds in access for people who may be receiving care or medicating during a cultural experience. The flexibility of virtual programming allows people to eat, drink, and take medication. Some people discussed the need to take stigmatized medication, so virtual participation means that they can medicate more freely. This feature also provides great built-in access and possibility for participants to turn off their cameras to worry less about their facial expressions, or to rest in ways they might not feel comfortable if they were in person or had their camera on. When organizers enforce a "camera on" policy, they miss the chance to embrace this form of access. Many disabled people also have limited access to personal space, and so this

access to relative privacy through the ability to turn off the camera can be important.

- *Recommendation:* Do not expect cameras to be on during events. To make this a norm, clearly state at the beginning of events that participation is welcome with the camera on or off.
- *Note:* Other participants recognize that having the camera off can be an access barrier to people who rely on reading lips. Negotiate these access conflicts openly and with creativity.

COVID SAFETY

For many cultural institutions, virtual programming came out of the advent of the COVID pandemic and lockdown. That said, once cultural institutions re-opened and COVID-19 mandates around gathering were removed, many cultural spaces went back to prioritizing (and celebrating) in-person engagement. In New York City, the re-openings happened at the end of August 2020 and the mask mandates dropped around March 2022. However, many disabled people still prefer and need virtual programming because COVID safety remains a necessity – especially now that many public places have dropped all COVID-related protocols and requirements. Many disabled people are still home – both because of the pandemic and otherwise – and discontinuing virtual access can severely impact cultural exposure and social opportunities. Committing to virtual access is a bold and meaningful commitment to the disability community.

COVID SAFETY: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

"[Virtual programming] continues to keep me safe in COVID. As a vent user, I'm not able to mask for long periods of time without needing my mouth to breathe. So, despite being high risk for pulmonary

and respiratory infections, virtual programming means I can come with less worry for my safety.”

- Because the city and most cultural spaces are no longer requiring these precautions, there is a continued need for virtual programming. Our survey data reported the following as significant factors of whether a disabled person could attend an in-person program.
 - *Masks required: 76.9%*
 - *Vaccination required: 73.8%*
 - *Outdoor: 50.8%*
 - *Capacity restrictions: 53.8%*
 - *Distancing requirements: 50.8%*
 - *Community spread at a certain level: 44.6%*
 - *Contact tracing: 29.2%*
 - *Testing: 27.7%*
- Some people also noted that the lack of enforcement of precautions can be an access barrier itself. Because many people have noticed cultural workers not enforcing the set protocols and guidelines, people often no longer have hope in the precautions.
 - *Recommendation:* When setting COVID precautions, it is helpful for cultural spaces to publicly commit to enforcing them and updating websites when protocols change. Because most cultural spaces no longer uphold protocols, it is important to fill the gaps with virtual programming so that disabled people may still be involved. Eliminating masking and vaccination protocols leaves out the disability community.

SOCIAL ISOLATION AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

Many disabled people, especially those who cannot travel independently, those with intellectual disabilities, and those with

chronic illnesses and autoimmune disorders experience social isolation. Many have experienced social isolation far before the pandemic and the virtual access during the pandemic opened new opportunities for social connection and cultural experiences.

SOCIAL ISOLATION AND INCLUSION: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The ability to attend international events or for cultural spaces to be able to host people who do not live in the geographical area gives opportunities for professional and social networking, as well as more diverse perspectives. This benefits cultural spaces as well as individual attendees!
- Virtual programming opens opportunities for people living in rural areas to access community and cultural programming. The more people one is exposed to, the greater professional development, career and employment opportunities, and social opportunities one can have.
- Often, the cities with the most arts programming are cities that are expensive to live in. Because disabled people are often poor, have lower incomes, and have lower access to employment, it is more difficult to live in those cities. Virtual access can distribute resources to people who cannot afford to live in New York City or other big cities due to care, accessibility, and cost.
- Disabled people, especially those who live in group homes or congregate housing, often cannot travel independently or leave home. This population is one that is frequently neglected by cultural spaces, and virtual programming offers a meaningful way to connect.
- Some people have found that cultural spaces they have previously been involved with are now holding meetings in-person. People who are involved in these spaces virtually would like the ability to be included in conversations and decision-making in a virtual way.

- *Recommendation:* Work toward greater possibilities for hybrid participation in leadership and decision-making roles.
- Many people moved away from big cities during the pandemic, and virtual programming has allowed them to maintain social contacts and be involved with the same communities, groups, and cultural spaces, as well as forge new connections. Virtual programming is a way to connect socially and to continue to be exposed to new ideas.

"It has been so wonderful to feel so connected with the world outside of where I am now. And I would really, really hate to see that end."

- Disabled people who are recovering from surgeries, live further away for financial reasons or care-based reasons, or have chronic illnesses or flare-ups benefit from being able to socialize through virtual programming. Many disabled people discuss the joy of being able to connect with other disabled people (many of whom they may share other identity characteristics, backgrounds, or experiences with as well) through virtual programming. Some also discuss the joy of being able to participate in intergenerational community online and access peer support, as well as have possibilities for collaboration.
- Some people feel socially excluded when cultural spaces assume that it is a purely positive thing to be back in person, and do not acknowledge that it means that they are pushing some people – presumably valuable members of the community – back into isolation.
 - *Recommendations:*
 - Make it a priority to acknowledge the complicated nature of cultural spaces being back to in-person programming and that there are valuable members

of the community who are not able to be present because of this.

- Continue to bolster virtual and hybrid programming to offset the impact from the return to in-person programming.
- While participation can be meaningful to some, required participation and small group participation can make many people socially anxious or uncomfortable.
 - *Recommendation:* Provide the option for participants to opt out of exercises or reflect on their own instead of going to breakout rooms. Presenting the option of going to a quiet breakout room can also be beneficial.
- In small groups, many people feel included when they are invited to contribute and share, especially through taking turns so that everyone knows they will have time they are invited to share.
- Disabled users of virtual programming say that they feel more included when they are asked for their input, can participate in introductions, and – in the case of repeat events – when people recognize and acknowledge them. In groups where people come back week to week, some disabled people feel like they belong when others in the group recognize them and know their name.
 - *Recommendation:* Take the time to get to know people in small groups!

"Dreaming big. Virtual programming can be another tool we have to confront/break isolation."

FINANCIAL BARRIERS

Disabled people experience high levels of unemployment, under-employment, and poverty. In 2022, According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 7.6% of disabled people are unemployed (non-

disabled people are 3.5%), and many more (almost 80%) are not considered a part of the labor force (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). According to statistics in the Annual Disability Statistics Compendium, in 2019, 25.9% of disabled people ages 18 to 64 who lived in the community were reported as living in poverty, compared to 11.4% of their non-disabled peers (2020 Annual Disability Statistics Compendium). One study in *Disability Health Journal* analyzing Household Pulse Survey data reports that:

During the Delta and first Omicron waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, 52.0% of people with disabilities had difficulty paying usual household expenses [...] In contrast, 23.7% of nondisabled people had difficulty paying usual household expenses. Adjusting for all demographic factors (including job loss, and work for pay), people with disabilities were 2.78 times (CI [2.65, 2.93]) more likely to have difficulty paying usual household expenses during the pandemic than nondisabled people. (Friedman)

Virtual programming can be a way for people to access information, resources, and experiences from cultural institutions when they may not otherwise be able to pay admission, transportation, and other commuting necessities. That said, technology and Internet can also be expensive, and people without reliable technology or Internet connection may experience barriers to virtual programming.

FINANCIAL BARRIERS: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Disabled people have higher rates of poverty and lower income than the general population, especially those on SSDI or fixed income. Participants report that virtual programming saves money on transportation and admission to a cultural space or event. Also, because a great deal of virtual programming is free, it enables participants to attend without having to pay museum admission

fees. Participants hope that virtual programming remains, in large part, free.

- Some disabled people do not have computer access, or cannot bring their computers with them to other locations, such as their day program, limiting how and when they can engage with virtual programming.
 - *Recommendation:* Partner with service organizations that provide tech access, provide options to join events over the phone, or make sure a portion of the offerings are asynchronous or recorded.
 - Some participants may be unfamiliar with the technology and therefore unable to participate. Organizations such as DOROT (www.dorotusa.org/) provide training to older adults, and could be a meaningful partnership to support more older adults in accessing cultural programming.

"I would love for accessing virtual programming to be affordable above all."

TECHNOLOGY AND LOGISTICS

Many of the barriers of virtual access are related to technology and logistics. Focus group and survey participants were specific in discussing what aspects of technology and logistics explicitly help and which hinder access.

Disabled people do a lot of advocacy at events, often including informally training facilitators on how to pin interpreters or prompting them to turn on auto captions on Zoom. Some of this happens via direct message, and some of it happens with the full group. Because of this, disabled people often split attention when they are trying to attend an event.

When the presenters and hosts are prepared and comfortable with the technology and access, disabled participants often feel more welcome. Contrarily, when facilitators are not familiar with access technology, it puts the onus on disabled participants to advocate for themselves and explain. Find ways for all members of your programming and facilitation team to learn about access technology and access practice prior to events so that your events can run as smoothly as possible.

TECHNOLOGY AND LOGISTICS: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview of Access Technology

American Sign Language (ASL) Interpretation: Sign language interpretation can happen both in-person and virtually. Providers of this service are certified and can work with agencies or as independent contractors.

Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART): CART is live captioning provided by a transcriptionist. Like ASL interpretation, CART can be used for meetings, events, or performances.

Auto-Captions: Some auto-captions are built into platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet, but there are also separate auto-captioning programs, such as Otter.ai that can be embedded in platforms, pulled up in a separate window, or used on a phone or personal device to capture conversation.

Audio Description: Audio description is description of visual material, that can be either pre-recorded or captured in real-time, generally used by blind and low vision individuals, and others who do not have access to visual material. Audio description can describe live action like a performance, or still images, like a painting. It can be integrated into the art or accessed separately through another channel or a separate device (usually with a set of headphones).

Sound Description: This is written or signed language meant to describe sound cues, music, or other auditory information.

Plain Language: Simpler language that avoids using jargon, big words, or complex sentences. Plain language allows for a wider range of people to access information. People with intellectual and cognitive disabilities, children, less-proficient English speakers, and many others can benefit from plain language.

Visual Agenda: Agendas describe the order of events and timeframe. Visual agendas use icons and images to describe the order of events and timeframe, often alongside text.

Breaks: Breaks are used in programming to give people a protected time to stretch, use the bathroom, change locations, take medication, eat or drink, or regulate. While people can usually come and go in virtual programming fairly easily, some people will not want to miss content and will forfeit these needs in favor of the program, so it is best to include breaks in longer programming.

Livestream: Livestreaming a program is filming a program and presenting it virtually in real time so that people who are not in person can tune in from home. Livestreams can take the form of virtual watch parties where many people gather and can use the chat to react and interact with one another as the event unfolds. Livestream watch parties move usually-passive events to something more interactive.

Hybrid Events: Hybrid events include both in-person and virtual participants, and might solicit participation from both groups, or are sometimes more focused on the in-person participants, while the virtual participants are engaging more passively. The quality and accessibility of hybrid events can vary widely, as it can be difficult to get a clear image and strong audio content when filming. Hybrid

events are most successful when there are access coordinators, point people, or hosts, both in the virtual room and in-person.

Content Warnings: Content warnings inform the audience member or participant about topics that might be emotionally activating, as well as sensory components that could trigger reactions such as migraines or seizures. Common content warnings include domestic abuse, sexual violence, or gun violence. They might also include sensory components such as flashing lights, fast movement, or sudden loud noises.

Access Point Person: This is a designated person who can support with technology and access issues during a virtual program. It is best if the person in this role is not the presenter or someone with other responsibilities during the program. It is best to bring attention to this person at the beginning of a program so that people can direct message or otherwise contact this person during a program if access issues arise.

Access Check: Access checks orient a group to the types of access that are available during a program, as well as check in about what participants might need to be able to fully participate.

"I feel more included when there's time taken for regularly checking in during the course of an event. And allowing for space that some needs of attendees might have changed as things have started to unfold. It feels more accessible to just give a certain amount of spaciousness and patience."

Access Strategy and Tactics

- 35% of survey respondents found content warnings to be an important part of an accessible experience. Logistically, it is

important to give people these notes in advance of the program so that they can decide if they are interested in attending.

- *Recommendation:* Put content notes in event invites. These should include both information about themes or topics, as well as sensory information related to visual and auditory material.
- Events tend to run more smoothly when there is a tech check in before an event begins to ensure that all tech and access components are in place. Then, at the beginning of the event, it is helpful to outline the access provided (and how to use it), as well as the agenda for the event.
 - *Recommendations:*
 - Create an agenda that includes the amount of time for each section and the time of the breaks. Include information about the chat and how it will be used in the event.
 - Label and pin ASL interpreters.
 - Have pre-event access checks where access providers arrive in the Zoom room before participants. During this time, have providers rename themselves in ways that indicate their role. During the event introduction, mention these people and services and make sure that participants know how to access them.
 - *Example of an access check:*
 - Hello, and welcome to [performance]. To begin, we'd like to start with an access check. [Name] is here as an ASL interpreter and is pinned on your screen. There is also audio description available provided by [name]. If you'd like to access the audio description, please call [number]. Auto-captioning is available by

clicking the “more” button at the bottom of your screen, and then “closed captioning”. [Name] is here as access support, so please feel free to DM them on this platform or call or text them at [number] if you are experiencing technology or access issues. Please use the chat to [describe the uses of the chat and chat-specific access for this group]. Is there anything else that participants need to be able to fully access and participate in today’s program?

- The chat can be a site of access friction. Not all disabled people can access the mute/unmute function or other buttons and functions of Zoom. That said, some people – especially people who are non-speaking or d/Deaf – may rely on the chat as the way that they are able to participate.

- *Recommendations:*

- Be intentional about how the chat can be used. Prioritize reading chats aloud. Having multiple modes of communication available is more accessible, but might require a designated person to read aloud from the chat, as it is often difficult for a presenter to focus on their material as well as read the chat aloud.
- If the chat is a source of distraction, only have people write in the chat at designated times. If this provides a conflict for some, perhaps they can DM their chats to a designated access representative who can read the chat aloud at a break in the content.
- Ensure there is an access point person both before the event to contact about access questions and concerns, and during the event itself. This person should be identified at the beginning of an event and

their role should be explained. They should manage tasks such as making sure the interpreters are pinned/spot-lit, troubleshooting tech issues, and being able to help participants through direct messages or otherwise if they experience tech issues. Someone in this role can also be understood as support for the facilitation team/presenters, because their presence means the presenters do not have to split attention and troubleshoot if issues arise.

- Some people report that they prefer for people to turn the camera off before moving location, because when people walk with the video on it can make others dizzy.
 - *Recommendation:* These norms can be established in the introductions to the event. In a small enough group, there may also be an opportunity for people to co-create or collaborate on these norms and guidelines.
- Some participants report that cultural workers often are not attentive to access for blind and low vision users of virtual programming.
 - *Recommendations:*
 - Be aware that some people call in via phone and do not have access to the Zoom video, including the controls and buttons.
 - Make standard the practice of having all participants state their name before speaking.
 - Make sure all images and visuals that may be a part of a presentation or exhibit are described.
 - Be aware of legal obligations to web accessibility, such as in Title III of the Americans with Disabilities

Act. Web access legislation often relates to web accessibility for people who use screenreaders.

- Remind all participants in a program to state their name before they speak aloud.

Asynchronous versus Synchronous

- Asynchronous events or recordings create opportunities for people with different schedules or on various time zones to be involved. In the survey we conducted, 57.8% of respondents said that they consider whether they can attend on their own time when selecting what events to attend. This suggests that it would be beneficial for cultural institutions to prioritize having asynchronous options for cultural programming.

Pre-Event Communications and Registration

- Participants experience access barriers when virtual events require them to register ahead of time, especially if registration time does not extend all the way until the time the event starts. Participants report that this is an access barrier because of changing schedules, as well as not being able to anticipate whether they will feel well enough to attend. Some also discussed the executive function challenges that come from having to plan too much in advance.
- When the event link is not easy to find, people report being deterred from attending.
 - *Recommendation:* Send an email close to the event with the link included is helpful, as well as reminders (text reminders are helpful to some people as well).

Documentation and Cyber-Security

- Participants were worried about cybersecurity and privacy, and want cultural workers to explore these issues and be transparent about cybersecurity practices in virtual programming.
 - *Recommendations:*
 - Store recordings on a secure server
 - Provide information in registration about whether events will be recorded and whether participants will be visible on these recordings. Do not make last minute decisions to record an event.
 - Use waiting rooms and registration lists to make sure all participants are known.
 - Make sensitive meetings password-protected or use platforms that use encryption, such as Jitsi.
- Some disabled people hope for more transparency around the documentation (recordings, materials) of the events. Who has ownership of it? Who can edit it? Who has access, and where does it go? This is often not transparent at the time of registration, and/or is not stated at the start of the event, and participants do not feel they have consented to this sharing.
- Assistive technology such as screenreaders accept different formats. While google docs and PDFs might be accessible for some people's technology, they are not for others.
 - *Recommendation:* Check with participants about what they need and/or provide multiple formats. You might also consider having an ASL version and/or an audio version as well, depending on your participants.
- Participants said they appreciate a follow-up email with recordings and any relevant materials from the event.

Internet Connection

- Unstable Internet connections can be a barrier to disabled people, especially those who live in residential settings with others. When Internet connection is unstable, people often get signed out of their event and it can be frustrating to try to get back in. At events that have a cap, sometimes someone gets signed out and cannot get back in because the event is at capacity.
 - *Recommendations:*
 - While this issue is difficult for a cultural institution to mitigate, making sure that participants do not only have the Zoom link, but also the information to dial in from a cell phone can be valuable.
 - Providing recordings allow people to access the material asynchronously when they are in a location that may have a stronger Internet connection.
 - If hosts notice that participants get kicked out of the Zoom room and re-enter, it may be appropriate to provide a summary of what they missed or description of the current content.

SHIFTING TOWARD DISABILITY CULTURE

Virtual access is not solely about technology, access features, and specific provisions. While these nuts and bolts of access are essential, participants in this project explained that they hope that cultural workers make a shift to embrace disability cultural norms. The integration of disability cultural norms can shift virtual programming practices for the better.

SHIFTING TOWARD DISABILITY CULTURE: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Disabled people (as well as other marginalized people) are often asked for input and to consult in an informal, unpaid way.
 - *Recommendation:* It is great to consult with disabled people and ask for advice and feedback. That said, this is labor that should be paid. If you are asking disabled people to consult about access, paying them well is a concrete way to demonstrate your commitment to the disability community, as well as recognizing this labor in public ways when appropriate and when they give consent (for example, naming people in the written materials for a program).
- Many focus group attendees and survey respondents stressed that the quality of access providers and ease of accessing captions and other access provisions is crucial. It is important to have those needs met without having to ask for them.
 - *Recommendation:* Build access into the design and budget of events early. This will make it more possible for disabled people to attend and participate fully. Ask for feedback from the disability community about the quality of the access provided and incorporate the feedback in future programs.

"I would like all public virtual programming to come with sign language and captioning as part of access infrastructure, not as a request that an audience member has to make in advance."

- Virtual events are often too fast paced. Disabled users of virtual programming reported needing more time to respond to questions or to react, both verbally or in the chat.

- *Recommendation:* Include an agenda and information to prepare in advance to enable and encourage more full participation during an event. Many disabled people script what they might say in a meeting or discussion. Find ways to incorporate possible conversation topics, ice-breakers, and questions into agendas, event invites, or program descriptions.

"My hope is that nobody needs to request accommodations anymore. That it would be a default offering and just like how people can enable captions and audio descriptions on movies, people can have the option to do the same for all virtual programming."

- Sometimes virtual programming seems to neglect needs that would arise in person. For example, sometimes a long webinar needs to have a break to facilitate access. While there may be more flexibility and possibility for people to take a break during the event, attendees are often torn between needing to take a break and not wanting to miss the content. Of survey respondents, 58.3% of people said that breaks make their virtual experiences more accessible.
 - *Recommendation:* Incorporate breaks! It is an easy, costless way to facilitate access for many people.

"I feel most included when I'm not the only disabled person in the room."

Setting an Access-Centered Tone

- *Recommendations:*
 - Include a transition period at the beginning and end of an event to help participants feel more included and to give the space to connect with other people.
 - Make it clear that you are prioritizing access. Invite people to interrupt if they are experiencing access conflicts, and to turn off cameras and be comfortable.
 - Clearly state information about access features, gaps, and possibilities in the invite allows disabled people the autonomy to opt in or out depending on needs.
 - Make it explicit and clear that all people will be welcomed in whatever state they arrive in, and that multiple forms of participation and communication are valued equally. When organizations place value judgment on the virtual version of something being less valuable than the in-person version (or state that they wish they could be in person), disabled people often feel left out or that their lived reality is not respected.
 - Orient to the reality that not all disabilities are apparent. It is important not to assume non-disabled status as the default.
 - Set community guidelines or ground rules for inclusion, and make values clear to set the cultural tone. Encourage participants to speak from their own experiences, not assume experiences of others, and not to share outside of the virtual room. Ask participants for other guidelines they would like to share in a small group can make people feel more welcome.

"One thing that I took away from 2020 is that literally every producing theater could potentially produce some sort of virtual or broadcast piece of art if they want to. Literally every season they should just work it into their season, work it into their budget... We've shown that we can do it. We've got the skill set now we've gotten over the humps."

MORE DYNAMIC ACCESS SOLUTIONS NEEDED

Participants discussed the range in quality of virtual programming and discussed the need for more dynamic access solutions. They wanted cultural workers to think beyond simply livestreaming an event, or providing automatic captions, but to get creative about how to produce an event to facilitate a full and dynamic experience. The more dynamic access solutions there are, the more people will be able to participate. Dynamic access solutions lead to more perspectives and can expand cultural understandings.

MORE DYNAMIC ACCESS SOLUTIONS NEEDED: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Language justice is disability justice. Many people report wanting to experience more language interpretation and have more languages represented in virtual programming, to experience more decentering of the English language and North America-specific content, and a framing that links access to language justice.
 - *Recommendations*
 - Consider the general population of your community. Are there ways you can expand and seek greater language justice? For example, if your museum is in an area where many people are Spanish-speakers and you regularly have Spanish language

opportunities in person, these same community members may want to participate online.

- Consider applying for grants that enable more language and communication justice. There may be grants specifically for CART, ASL, and other access provisions could deeply improve and show a commitment to access and language justice. In access-specific grants, interpretations into languages other than ASL may also be an option.
- Including access workers in program grants so that the funding covers access features of the project.
- Some participants hope for virtual reality experiences, as this can increase engagement with content and make it more customizable. One participant discussed their experience at an in-person Vincent van Gogh exhibit that used virtual reality. Others expressed that they would like to have these virtual reality experiences from their own homes. People expressed that virtual reality brings a more in-depth sensory experience alive and can make the exhibit feel more vibrant, while also allowing people to feel safer and more accommodated in their own homes.

"It was a great experience, the virtual headset. It just made everything come alive."

- Some disabled people discuss hybrid events that simply livestream the in-person event as inaccessible and unengaging; many miss the fully virtual experiences they had earlier in the pandemic. When the sound and the image is not high quality, and when virtual participants are neglected or not encouraged to participate in facilitated ways, the events are often disappointing. Many want more intentional virtual events, where virtual attendance is valued just as much as in-person (or where virtual is the only option for participation). When cultural workers have more tools for dynamic

virtual programming, participants report feeling more active and interested. Users of virtual programming report wanting to feel that virtual participation is not a last-minute add-on to an event.

"I think it would be cool for every in-person event to have a virtual equivalent and not that it has to be exactly the same because physical spaces and virtual spaces call for different things, but [...] both options for every event with the same theme or topic."

- Disabled users of virtual programming suggest that access not be conceptualized solely as logistics, but as a creative project that informs imagination – as something that is integrated and central to art.
- Participants reminded cultural spaces that virtual access is an access tool for disabled workers and artists! Virtual programming means more opportunities for people to work and participate from home and remain in the employment sphere. Virtual programming also yields more opportunities for disabled artists to show their work.
- Multi-sensory programming that engages multiple modes of learning is more dynamic and accessible. Disability-related or not, people's learning styles and attention spans range.
 - *Example:* Whereas an event where one person speaks engages one mode of communication, a more dynamic program might include videos and visual art (with captions and verbal description), a storytelling component, and an audience-engaged activity.
- For asynchronous virtual tours, interactive maps and choices of where one can navigate are engaging.

- *Recommendation:* Invest some creativity in developing online asynchronous experiences that are customizable and allow people to access the content they are most interested in, as well as the opportunity to engage at their desired pace and depth.
- Focus group participants acknowledge that virtual programming can be challenging for a variety of reasons, but also suggest that more transparency about dropping programming can maintain trust.
 - *Recommendation:* If a cultural space is taking a break from virtual programming for budgetary reasons, for example, it might be useful to say when it will be implemented again. If there is less cultural programming because of the budget, make it clear when the budget is written for the next year and how you will commit to virtual programming at that point.

"I think it's important that there be more attention going forward for spaces to have some sparking of joy. And as well, spaces where there's this kind of context established, that there's room to be present with somber feelings as well."

- Some would like there to be more virtual resources for disabled children who live in rural places or do not have cultural resources available to them.
 - *Recommendation:* When planning new virtual initiatives, outreach to people in rural areas could be valuable! People may only be on listservs for local cultural institutions, so connecting with colleagues working in different regions can be a way to serve a greater regional area.

"[I hope that virtual access] becomes the norm and not the exception. So many in the community have endured job loss because their jobs refused to accommodate accessibility needs, but the pandemic has proven it can be done. I hope they don't do away with it as they push for more in person things."

- Many participants hoped for virtual programming that educates the general public about disability justice and access, and that resources specifically about virtual access could be shared.
 - *Recommendation:* Guides such as [CRIPTic Arts Being Hybrid: A Cheap and Easy Guide to Hybrid Events](#), ["Accessibility: Resources to Help Ensure Accessibility of Your Virtual Events for People with Disabilities"](#) by the National Endowment for the Arts, and ["How to Make Your Virtual Meetings and Events Accessible to the Disability Community"](#) by Alaina Leary of Rooted in Rights were written since the pandemic began and specifically engage with virtual access. [Disability Justice: An Audit Tool](#) was written by disability justice leader Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and co-envisioned with Stacey Park Milbern.
- *More content requests:*
 - Opportunities for singing and dancing
 - Theater programming, specifically Broadway musicals
 - Garden tours and exposure to other cultural spaces in natural settings
 - Interactive game show-type events
 - History tours of local places, as well as distant ones

"The people in power don't want to change anything, and the people who did the trainings don't have the power to enact institutional change"

- When more people hold knowledge about access, more dynamic access options are available.
 - *Recommendation:* Incorporate workplace trainings on accessibility so that more cultural workers are trained – having a sole person responsible for access and who holds all the knowledge is not sustainable and does not center disability. Continue to connect with other cultural workers about access and these trainings so that they are not forgotten once they are over.

"I want people to understand the world is always in a pandemic. Disabled people know this. BIPOC know this too. Queer people know this. And many of us have overlapping identities. We are always living in one or another 'pandemic' of a kind, and it's just that some people have the luxury of forgetting and some of us don't. So we are asking that people don't forget the needs of everyone. That we continue to think about how we provide access and support to those with the least access and the least support. Structurally and individually."

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QUESTIONS? COMMENTS? FEEDBACK?

Please email MAC at info@macaccess.org with questions, comments, and feedback. We would love to engage with you.