Connecting Communities

How to Run Online Interfaith Dialogue

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**DIALOGUE
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Preface

The Dialogue Society is a registered charity established in London in 1999 to advance social cohesion by connecting communities through dialogue.

This manual is the product of a dialogue between several partners, FNC: Faiths, Neighbours, Changemakers, The Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University, and students from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

We are indebted to the Westhill Foundation, which funded this research; this manual would not have been able to come into being without their support.

We thank the London School of Economics and Political Science Volunteer Centre for their support in providing an opportunity for us to cooperate and receive consultancy from students through their Community Engagement Programme, specifically for the topic of this manual, the field of online dialogue.

This manual has been penned by Canon Dr Andrew Smith from FNC. It serves the primary aim of informing the practices of online interfaith dialogue by identifying and providing community-centric guidance on how best to bring faith communities together. We have always found that the most successful dialogues occur when there are clear objectives, and attention has been paid to detail. Therefore, this manual, the pros and cons illustrated within it, and its overall analysis of power has been developed to ensure dialogue can occur equitably and fruitfully.

Please get in touch with us to let us know if and how the manual was helpful, to give any feedback and comments about the manual's content, style, structure and to any other enquiries. Please see the inside cover for contact details. Our future, at least partly, will be online, and such research is important in furthering our understanding of how to engage in community building online most effectively.

We hope that this manual and perhaps others will be helpful to you and that you will enjoy exploring dialogue online.

The Dialogue Society

Introduction

Since the COVID 19 pandemic, lots of people have started running inter-faith dialogue meetings online using software like Zoom or Microsoft Teams. There are lots of resources about how to run discussions online and some simple outlines on interfaith dialogue (e.g. https://www.interfaith.org.uk/resources/dialogue-online). We hope this resource will develop this understanding of how to run online interfaith dialogue as people continue to use this as a model of meeting. The information here has come from interviews with a number of people who have run many online meetings and reflects the growing experience and expertise in this new way of meeting.

When we talk about online Interfaith Dialogue, we are referring to the meetings where people participate in discussion through seeing and hearing one another. This is different to the kinds of events where the speakers are the only ones who can be seen and heard and other people contribute by typing in questions. We are also only dealing with meetings where everyone is online, rather than hybrid meetings where some are in a room and others join in online. Both of those are legitimate ways of meeting but not what we are addressing here.

Pros and cons of online interfaith dialogue

There are lots of positive reasons to meet online and people increasingly see it as a legitimate way to meet and not just a second-best alternative. Here are the main positive reasons that people cited for meeting online:

It saves time and money

There is no doubt that for many people this is a huge plus for online meetings. An hour's meeting takes little more than an hour, rather than the time to travel to and from a physical venue. If you are meeting in person and do not own your own building, then running an interfaith dialogue meeting incurs costs of hiring a room, providing refreshments, paying speakers travel expenses, etc. Meeting online removes all that, and software can be used for free, albeit in a more limited but perfectly useable way.

It increases participation

Several people we interviewed commented that meeting online for interfaith dialogue increased participation. Across the board people said that the numbers of participants had risen and that people were attending and contributing who had not done so before.

Here are some of the reasons why online meetings increase the numbers attending and contributing:

You can stay at home

There are a variety of reasons why staying at home can be a positive reason for online meetings. Firstly, it is just easier than the effort of going out. Some people find going out to evening meetings, especially when it is dark and cold or wet, prohibitive especially if they are using public transport or do not feel confident being out after dark. For some people, life is extremely busy and being able to participate from home opens up the meeting to people who are unable to get away for a meeting. For those with mobility issues, it can be a great way of being fully included in the meeting. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it has been noted that some people contribute more openly and honestly from the safety of their own home without having to be physically present with others. Having online dialogues can be a great opportunity to include more people and have a greater depth of conversation.

It is democratising

A feature of some software, such as Zoom, is that everyone is represented in the same sized box. Whilst you can make speakers' images prominent by 'Spotlighting', the usual setting is for everyone to be represented as the same size. This can be very empowering for people who are not the formal speaker and who feel that others have a greater importance than themselves. Online, the speakers, faith leaders, young people, members of congregations are all represented in the same way: everyone is equal.

It is easy to include different people

Being online means that you can participate from anywhere as long as you have access to the internet. People have noticed that online interfaith dialogues have become international as people join in from round the world;

this can be brilliant for hearing different perspectives and experiences. People can participate on the move or if they are away from home but still want to join. Others can join even if they feel uncertain about interfaith dialogue: it is easy to leave a camera turned off or leave the meeting with the click of a button. This means it is much easier to include people who are nervous about attending an interfaith dialogue meeting. This ease of access also means it is easier to include speakers who would not be able to travel to a meeting, so it opens up the possibility for contributions from around the world or from senior faith leaders with busy diaries.

Despite all these positives, there are some downsides to online interfaith dialogues and the following were cited by the people we interviewed:

Technological issues

Inevitably people need a computer or smart phone and the skill to use the software, but they also need stable and reliable access to the internet. This can exclude those living in poverty or from areas where the internet is expensive, restricted, or unreliable. It also favours those who are familiar with IT and find it easy to use.

The technology is unforgiving, and mistakes seem much bigger on-line. In person, a short gap whilst a person sorts out a presentation is not too bad – on-line it feels like it takes hours. Presentations that are not very engaging in person are really tedious online. It needs much more planning and thoughtful presentation to be good.

There is a strange phenomenon with meeting online, which is that everyone has a very different view of the meeting. This is especially true with large meetings where more than one screen is used as everyone sees the speaker and themselves on the first screen. Consequently, people can have very varying experiences of the meeting by seeing different people on their screen, which might mean a different balance of genders, ethnicities, or faiths. In current versions of some software like Zoom, people can move the boxes round and so change the look of the meeting, but without anyone else knowing. So, someone could put all the men at the top of the screen and all the women at the bottom (or vice versa) or separate out different religious groups, etc. We need to be aware that people have different experiences of a meeting and might be seeing a mix of people quite different to what we see.

Loss of physical connection

It is undeniable that meeting online loses some of the elements of physical meetings. There is no real opportunity for the informal chatting and networking before or after meetings, which are often a highlight of a meeting and where so much friendship is sustained and business gets done.

There is less emotional engagement when you are online and only able to see people's faces. Good interfaith dialogue is not just an exchange of ideas, but it impacts people emotionally and spiritually, and people are transformed through the encounter. Whilst this can happen online, it is much harder than in person. Online interaction loses some of the subtle body language that helps you read how people are responding to comments so it is much harder to know if people are feeling agitated or uncomfortable.

Having looked at some of the pros and cons of Online Interfaith Dialogue, we are now going to look at the practicalities of running really good events.

Inviting people

Be clear about your aims for the meeting so you know who the appropriate people are to invite. If it is open to anyone then share it widely: remember, the benefit of being online is you can include people from around the world.

Timing will depend on who you want to attend but be aware that after an hour many people find it hard to concentrate online, and after 90 minutes most people have mentally switched off. Leave people wanting more rather than desperate for it to end.

Don't over subscribe, keep the meetings small to encourage participation. It is really hard to have dialogue online if you cannot see everyone. In our experience, twenty is about the maximum for a successful meeting. Be aware that there is a high drop-out rate of people who say they will come, often up to 50%. Allow a few extra to join, knowing that some people will drop out.

Encourage people to log in 5 minutes before the start time so that you can start and finish the meeting on time.

Send out agenda or aims before the meeting so that people have chance to reflect on the topic before the meeting.

In online dialogues you need to take security seriously. Meetings have been 'Zoom Bombed' by having obscene or hate-filled words and images shared during the meeting, causing great distress to other participants. If it is an open event consider having a registration system so that you can see who is coming beforehand to discourage people from just casually clicking a link to join in.

Remind, remind, remind (and then remind again). People are notoriously bad at remembering that online meetings are happening. Send a confirmation out when people book, giving the link to the meeting. Then send a reminder out the day before and on the day, and possibly half an hour before it starts, each time including the link. Then be ready to have people contact you saying they cannot find the link for the meeting.

Hosting the meetings

Have a co-host, whenever possible, who manages the logistics of the meeting, such as letting people in and setting up breakout groups; it's really hard to manage those tasks and lead a meeting effectively. It is also a level of security in case your own internet goes down, as they will be able to keep it going whilst you log back in.

Decide if you are going to have a waiting room. This is usually best as it allows you to control people's entry into the meeting. You can let speakers in first so you can set up, and you can filter other people. But beware: lots of people's names on their computer are not their own names – it might be the name of their spouse or the make of their phone.

Open the meeting at least 10 minutes before start time. This means you can check everything is working, bring in any speakers early and make sure any presentations work, and then start admitting people with a few minutes to go so that you can finish on time.

Chat to people when they arrive. One of the negatives of online dialogues is the lack of informal chat, so create that environment by welcoming people as they log on and chatting to different people. Others can only listen, but it creates a good environment and people often start to join the conversation. Having a few minutes' awkward silence at the start does not create a good atmosphere for dialogue.

If you are using breakout groups, this is the time to get them set up. Decide how many you want and allocate people as they enter the meeting.

This allows you to make sure you have a good mix of faiths, genders, etc, in the breakout rooms and saves time during the meeting when you to send people to them.

Make sure you know how all the features work, especially security, so that if someone is abusive or your meeting gets Zoom Bombed, you can quickly either eject the person or stop the meeting. The ability to control this is now common across different platforms so keep yourself up to date with how it all works. This includes being able to restrict people's ability to change their names or write messages in the chat so that they cannot write anything hurtful.

Keep meetings very simple and focused and do not try to do everything in one meeting. Remember that the aim is to create dialogue between people, and this needs nurturing and space for people to contribute. Try to limit business and notices and do them at the end, but accept that things will go wrong sometimes, so don't worry about perfection.

Make notes and use them to keep the meeting moving. A thirty-second gap will feel like a long time.

Encouraging dialogue

if you are new to hosting online interfaith dialogue meetings, it can feel a bit daunting, but the best advice is to do what you would normally do. It is different from an in-person meeting but not that different. What you want to achieve is the honest sharing of ideas and beliefs that opens up a conversation and leads to understanding and the potential for change in the participants.

It is harder to have a good conversation online as only one person can talk at a time so getting the ebb and flow of a conversation that you would have in person is more challenging.

Set the tone for a good conversation from the start. Be chatty and welcoming as people enter the meeting, introduce people to one another as you would in a face-to-face meeting. People enjoy making contacts and having space for the networking that is a feature of in person meetings.

Start by inviting everyone to introduce themselves but be clear about what you want them to say, otherwise it can use up your meeting time. If you have 10 people in a meeting and they all introduce themselves for 2

minutes, that's 20 minutes gone before you have started! Asking them to say their name, which faith, if any, they identify with and where they are from is probably all you need to ask. You might want to include their preferred pronouns, which is an increasingly common way to start a meeting.

Set clear instructions about how the event will run so that people know what is expected of them. When will they contribute, how long can they speak for, can they interrupt speakers or must they wait until they have finished?

Getting a discussion going can be hard online, but once it gets going it can produce some really deep insights so plan the start carefully to help people feel relaxed and ready to discuss.

Have some good open questions to help people get started with a discussion and have these planned in advance. Give people a few moments to think about the question before asking if anyone wants to say anything.

Keep a careful eye on who is wanting to speak, and encourage people to use the electronic 'hands up' as it is easier to see who is waiting to contribute.

Ask everyone to 'unmute' when you are having dialogue. It does allow for a more natural conversation and removes the stopping and starting and telling people to 'unmute'.

Encourage people to have their cameras on wherever possible. Not everyone is able or willing to do this, but it does make dialogue easier when you can see one another. Explain to people that they can blur or change their background if that makes them more comfortable. Learn how to do this so you can help them if needed.

Take a moment to ask individuals who have not said anything if they want to contribute. This often produces good contributions from people without the confidence to speak up voluntarily.

Use breakout rooms as these can be great chances for people to speak with a much smaller group. Assign people to lead these whenever possible so that the conversation flows easily. As a host, you might want to move between groups so that you can keep an eye on what is happening and step in if a group is struggling.

As a host do not join a breakout group until everyone has gone so that you can help people who have not used them before. Practice using breakout rooms before a meeting if you are not sure how to use them.

Use different tools to help people interact. There is an increasing variety of software and apps that encourage participation and discussion and can enhance the dialogue experience.

Managing controversy

As with any good dialogue, having clear guidelines gives people the security that this is a space where they can contribute honestly and openly without fear of criticism or intimidation. It does not mean we all agree but the group learns to disagree well and live well with difference. There are various guidelines for dialogue available that you can use. For example, The Feast have produced a set that is widely used (https://thefeast.org.uk/resources#guidelines).

As was mentioned above, make sure you know how the security features work so that you can mute some participants, or, if need be, remove them from the group or close the meeting in extreme circumstances.

Be aware of who is in the group, especially if you do not know everyone. Ask people to identify which religious group (if any) they identify with and where they are speaking from. It can become a global conversation without you realising it, and it maybe that people are speaking from places where certain subjects are taboo or illegal so conversations might need to be sensitive to that. Knowing who is in the group and how they choose to identify will enable you to address people properly, and to ensure that different voices and perspectives are included.

Using music, visuals, and silence

These can really enhance the dialogue and move it from the dialogue of the head to a dialogue of the heart and spirit. It is well worth thinking about how you might use them to create the environment for dialogue or to enhance the meeting. Try to avoid endless powerpoint presentations as they can stifle the mood of a meeting as it is harder to see all the people, and consequently participants can feel less connected with one another.

Test everything beforehand. As has been said, online meetings are unforgiving, so log in early and check that presentations can be shared and can be seen and heard.

When a presentation starts, ask people to indicate to you if it is all working, especially if sound is involved as what you hear might not be what others are experiencing.

Make sure any text or pictures are big enough as presentations do not fit the full screen and so will be smaller for others, and some might be joining by phone.

Think about how images might be perceived by people you do not know, possibly from different countries, faiths, or cultures. Are there any that might cause unnecessary offence and could be changed? Do you have a good mix of representation in your imagery?

One of the consequences of online interfaith dialogues is that images can be seen next to one another that might otherwise be kept apart. For example, someone might be displaying text from a Qur'an or the Guru Granth Sahib whilst someone is drinking a glass of wine. The two people might be hundreds of miles apart, but the images might be next to one another for other people. Putting those texts next to alcohol would be forbidden and deeply offensive at an in-person meeting but might happen on screen inadvertently. If people are displaying sacred texts or images be alert to what is happening in other boxes so you can intervene and ask people to change their image or behaviour if necessary.

Sharing silence can be as powerful online as at an in-person meeting. It can be enhanced by creative imagery being shared or asking people to light real candles and hold them up for everyone to see. The temptation is for people to mute themselves at this point, but that doesn't create shared silence it separates people. It might seem counter-intuitive but shared silence is much more powerful if people are unmuted. You might hear background sounds but that makes it genuine as you would hear them while sharing silence in a room. It creates an atmosphere of being together much more than if people turn off their microphones and isolate themselves.

Power and Control

All interfaith dialogue meetings need to be aware of the power dynamics in the meeting. Someone will have organised it and invited people, and some

people will have power through titles, age, gender or ethnicity. Power can be exercised to limit discussion or to create space for others to be included. The same is true online. There are all these power dynamics, plus others unique to the online environment. The challenge is to recognise where power lies and use it to enhance rather than restrict the dialogue.

As a host you have power in a number of areas that you might want to think through before you start.

Will you use a waiting room for when people join the meeting? This is good practice for security and the smooth running of the meeting, but it gives you power to include or exclude people. How will you use it equitably so that people are not denied entry for prejudicial reasons? If the meeting is for a specific group of people, such as one gender or specific faith groups, make that very clear in the publicity, so that others do not feel excluded if they try to join the meeting.

With some software you can select how the chat function works, whether people can send messages to everyone, or just the host, and whether these are seen publicly or privately. Each option has implications for the meeting. For example, if people can message one another, they might criticise others in the group or send unwanted messages. If messages are seen publicly, it can be distracting when someone is speaking. It is important to think through the implications of the different settings and choose one that is right for your meeting. You can change it partway through if needed. But be aware that you maintain this control of how people can or cannot communicate with one another.

The host can control people in ways unimaginable in a face-to-face meeting. They are able to mute people, remove them to a waiting room, or expel them from the meeting at the click of a button, without them knowing or being able to reverse the decision. The host chooses when to end breakout groups and people are brought back to the main session automatically. They cannot finish a sentence or make a final comment – the power is all with the host. Whilst these can be useful, or even necessary measures, it gives the host new levels of power that need to be recognised and used carefully to encourage the best dialogue.

Unlike an in-person meeting people can easily take pictures of an on-line dialogue meeting without anyone realising. This can be problematic for

people who do not want their picture taken, or are in an unflattering position when the picture is taken, such as yawning or eating. To take control of this, it is good practice at the start to request that no one takes screenshots during the meeting. You can then take a screenshot at a set time and give people chance to turn cameras off, or on, and to compose themselves as they would do for any other group photo. Make sure you have consent if you are going to share or use the picture. This is especially important if under-18s are present.

Conclusion

Running online interfaith dialogue events present new opportunities and challenges, as well as all the potential and pitfalls present in any in-person meeting. The only type of meeting that everyone we spoke to agreed did not work was a hybrid with some people in the room and others trying to join in the discussion online: one group always felt overlooked and genuine dialogue was impossible because of the different experiences of the two groups of people. Whilst online meetings were a necessity during the COVID 19 pandemic, they have now become another model for dialogue practitioners to adopt. No doubt, for the foreseeable future, people will continue to run both in-person and online meetings and growing in proficiency at running online events will be essential for everyone choosing this way of engaging.

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