**THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN ACCESSIBILITY PRACTICES FOR VIRTUAL MUSIC FESTIVALS**

by

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**A Directed Research Project**

*Submitted to the Faculty of Purdue University*

*In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of*

**Master of Arts**



Department of Communication at Purdue Fort Wayne

Fort Wayne, Indiana

May 2022

**THE PURDUE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL**

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*Dedicated to J, for always seeing the best in me.*

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Thank you to Dr. Dixson, who provided invaluable insight each step of the way. Thank you to Dr. Hampton-Farmer for being relentlessly encouraging, and Dr. Kelsey for always asking great questions (and helping me learn to do the same). Many thanks to Dr. Steven Carr for being so patient with my many inquiries, and for providing the best film recommendations. Thank you to Lindsay Butcher for being a supportive commiserate. The first semester of graduate school would not have been survivable if not for Kevin Stoller, or all of my COM-114 students who without question taught me more than I could have possibly taught them.

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ABSTRACT

A literature review covering both the social construct model and medical model of disability followed by an argument of the importance of leisure and social activities, especially the arts, for people with disabilities. Concluding quantitative and qualitative research through focus groups and surveys, the project ends with a guide to implementing accessibility and inclusion efforts when planning online arts events.

LITERATURE REVIEW

“*Festivals are markers in the evolution of societies...they are litmus tests for the state of relations within and between communities.*”

 (Jarman, 2018, p.120)

## 2020: The Year of the Virtual Event

As COVID-19 made its way around the world, concerts, festivals, and tours came to a screeching halt. The food service industry shifted to carry-out, classrooms logged on to Zoom, and the entertainment industry stepped into the live stream. The status quo approach to in-person events was suddenly out the window: it was time to get creative. In the face of a global pandemic, virtual events proved to generally be an efficient and effective method to engage audiences and share content (Amirkahnian, 2020). Artists ranging in popularity from Alicia Keys and Lady Gaga all the way down to the beloved 80’s cover band at your local dive bar signed on to platforms such as Facebook Live and IGTV to broadcast live shows into the living rooms of fans around the world. Suddenly, when access was lost to one of the things so dearly loved and valued, near-instantaneously a way was made to make it accessible to the masses again. But what about people who routinely, in a non-pandemic era, do not have ease of access to the arts?

Experts are already predicting that future events will continue to incorporate some form of virtual access even as vaccinations and herd immunity allow large in-person events to creep back on to the global calendar (Amirkahnian, 2020). Virtual events are potentially here to stay, which means new research can contribute to how this medium can continue to provide new opportunities for various demographics and industries.  In particular, very few studies have investigated how people with disabilities use social media or livestream features (Sweet et al, 2020). This research project aims to discuss the importance of music festivals for people with disabilities, to investigate the accessibility and inclusion barriers faced as these events move online, and to propose a collection of best-practice standards for virtual music festival planners to utilize when organizing future events.

## Disability Prevalence

This researcher utilizes person-first language, which places personhood as the primary identity before the categorization of physical ability while acknowledging that the Deaf and Autistic individuals generally prefer to use identity-first language as a symbol of community belonging (Dunn & Andrews, 2015). While the definition of disability casts a wide net and is often contested, for the purpose of this research project the medical definition of disability will be used (Linton, 1998; Palmeri, 2006). This definition views disability as any condition of the mind or body that makes it more difficult for a person to do certain activities and to interact with the world around them (Linton, 1998; Palmeri, 2006).

Globally, people with disabilities are a social group constantly increasing in size. The World Health Organization (2017) estimates that about 15% of the global population has some form of disability, with approximately 19% of the United States population represented by individuals with disabilities: around 56.7 million people (Brault, 2012; Sweet et al, 2020). Around 5% of Americans describe their condition as debilitating to the point of routinely needing personal assistance for daily living activities (Brault, 2012). As the aging population is projected to double to more than 89 million by the year 2050, it is important to note that 70.5% of individuals over 70 years of age report at least one disability: people with disabilities represent a growing population that is only anticipated to increase in coming years (Brault, 2012; Jacobsen et al, 2011; Sweet et al, 2020). The most commonly reported disabilities across all demographics in the United States are mobility and cognition (Courtney-Long, 2015). Disability does not just affect those higher in age: children age 17 and younger have a disability prevalence of 17.33% (Zablotsky & Black, 2020).

Establishing social relationships and connections to their community have proved challenging for individuals with disabilities, due in part to mobilization and communication challenges but also the stigma attached to disability (Stough, Sharp, Resch, Decker, & Wilker, 2015; Sweet et al, 2020). Research has shown that individuals with disabilities tend to have smaller social circles and tend to be socially isolated (Robertson et al, 2001; Sweet et al, 2020). People with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed, to be in poor health, to suffer neglect and abuse, to experience discrimination, and to feel a lower sense of value for their lives (Byrne, 2005; Hall, 2004; Hall, 2010). Although great strides have been taken to increase accommodations, historically people with disabilities have been cut off and isolated from society (Cohen & Avanzino, 2010). Ableism, defined as the “stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, and social oppression toward people with disabilities” fuels these adverse experiences (Bogart & Dunn, 2019, p. 650). Without reevaluating how people with disabilities are excluded in our current frameworks, the more likely that as the population with disabilities increases the greater the potential likelihood of incidents of discrimination and disparity (Bogart & Dunn, 2019). When people with disabilities are not included and provided accommodations, there is also a higher likelihood of these individuals being excluded from communities and social experience (Byrne, 2005, Robertson et al, 2001, Sweet et al, 2020).

With such a substantial portion of the population affected a natural increase in interest by researchers has manifested to study the connections between disability and communication, particularly the field of intergroup communication (Fox et al, 2000; Gallois, 2004). Because people with disabilities are regularly stereotyped as dependent, sick and burdensome, or childlike and unattractive, they have frequent negative intergroup communication experiences (Ryan et al, 2005). Researchers, such as Health Communication Researcher Dawn Braithwaite, have called for additional research on specific contexts and individual perspectives of the relationship between communication and disability since much of the work so far has focused on general discussions from able-bodied perspectives (Ferris, 2001; Cohen & Avanzino, 2010). It is not until we have more research that gives voice to people with disabilities who experience negative encounters in communication that we will have a clearer picture of their reality.

As online mediums continue to be a frequent source of shared interaction, especially during a global pandemic requiring physical distance and social isolation, researchers have recognized the critical importance and potential opportunity of virtual experiences to connect individuals with disabilities to their communities and broader social experiences (Cole, Nolan, Seko, Mancuso, & Ospina, 2011; Hynan, Murray, & Goldbart, 2014; Sweet et al, 2020). Despite the recognition of online spaces as potential tools to help facilitate meaningful social connections, there has been a lack of research looking at how people with disabilities use and engage with virtual spaces (Cook & Polgar, 2015) or how they use them for connecting with others (Cifuentes et al, 2009; Sweet et al, 2020). Before we can examine effective approaches for improving online environments for those with disabilities, we should first consider how we view those with disabilities and how that lens affects approaches to accessibility.

## Disability as a Social Construct

To be able to respect and understand these voices, we need to reevaluate the lens through which we conceptualize disability. The social model of disability takes the approach that ‘ability’ is a constructed identity tied to physical bodies and is formed by societal views (Allen, 2011). This model is a direct rejection of the medical model of disability which enables naming practices that limit the independence of people with disabilities: crippled, challenged, special, confined, maimed, retarded (Linton, 1998; Palmeri, 2006). This socially constructed stigma impacts communication as it identifies people with disabilities as scary, unpredictable, or insignificant, and this serves as the primary lens through which others communicate with them (Ryan et al., 2005). The social model of disability shifts the focus from enabling individuals with disabilities to catch up with ableist society and instead turns the focus to deconstructing the “divisions our society makes in creating the normal versus the pathological” (Linton, 1998, p. 2). Viewing disability through the lens of social construction requires us to revisit both the bodies of language and the physical environments that have been shaped to favor “able” bodies. To embrace the social construction view of disability means to reject the medical model’s position that having a disabled body is something to be fixed, something that is broken or less than. How do the images, words, and places we use reinforce these social constructions of abled versus disabled, and therefore further stigmatize and exclude those with disabilities? If music festivals are, as stated by Jarman, important markers of the evolution of societies, can we examine these events and identify progressive acceptance and inclusion of all abilities (2018, p.120)?

## Importance of Music Festivals for Identity Construction

Very little research has been discovered on the benefits of attending music festivals for people with disabilities, and it has only been in the last decade that research has begun examining these benefits even in a broad sense. Research in online environments as a space for social connection has focused primarily on social media use and not virtual events (Sweet et al, 2020). Despite the acknowledgment from researchers that physical accessibility remains a significant barrier that prevents people with disabilities from attending music festivals, there is a lack of academic writing on accessibility for people with disabilities at both in-person and virtual music festivals (Ballantyne et al, 2013; Bossey, 2020; Laing & Mair, 2015) We will examine the general benefits and dissect how these positive outcomes could potentially be even more meaningful for marginalized communities, specifically people with disabilities.

Music festivals offer a unique opportunity to engage with music as both a form of self-expression and as a social activity. In a general context, the music festival experience poses opportunities for social integration to occur: they can create spaces for social connection, identity formation, and enriched self-esteem (Ballantyne et al, 2013; Laing & Mair, 2015; Packer & Ballantyne, 2010). Identity work has been at the heart of the limited research done on the social benefits of music festivals. Packer and Ballantyne (2010) refer to music as “a badge that communicates values, attitudes, and opinions to others...a resource to construct and reaffirm their identity” (p. 218). Many studies have concluded that engaging in a music festival experience allows individuals to participate in identity work, an opportunity to reevaluate how they self-identify (Ballantyne et al, 2013; Laing & Mair, 2012; Packer & Ballantyne, 2010). Having meaningful experiences that allow people with disabilities to engage with multiple layers of their own identities, to allow them a space to express themselves in the identity of their choosing could potentially be a very liberating and empowering opportunity.

Socially, music festivals give people a reason to celebrate, help mark the changing of seasons, and can provide opportunities for new relationships and communities to form (Arcodia & Whitford, 2007; Laing, 2015). A recent trend in state-level wellness surveys has been to measure a community’s well-being by their opportunities to participate in arts and cultural activities, which points to how strongly these experiences are linked with strong desirable community growth (Johnson et al, 2011). The social experience of a music festival can potentially provide a feeling of positive connections to others, a sense of belonging, and foster social inclusion (Ballantyne et al, 2013; Laing & Mair, 2012; Packer & Ballantyne, 2010).

While still a relatively new field of research in the last 13 years, participation in leisure activities, especially in the arts, has indicated the provision of important experiences to enhance the quality of life and to increase social participation opportunities for people with disabilities (Datillo, 2008; Hajjar et al, 2019). Research evidence has shown that when people with disabilities experience social inclusion in arts and cultural festivals they experience increased confidence and greater development of social support networks, improved mental health and self-determination, and a greater likelihood of employment (Johnson et al, 2011).

If it is true that music festivals are a unique space to explore self-identity while also creating meaningful shared experiences, then these events could serve a constructive purpose in helping people with disabilities continue to discover identities of their own choosing (and to bond with others while they do it). If virtual event organizers need to be aware of not just basic accessibility requirements but also factors affecting social inclusion, the difference between the two concepts should be firmly established.

## Accessibility vs Inclusion

One way to move the issue forward is to ensure that all public spaces can be accessed and experienced by everyone. Accessibility can be defined as measures that are put in place in order to address participation by those with impairments (Finkel et al, 2019). A goal of disability rights activism is to see accessibility not as something set aside and treated in isolation but as a functional and essential aspect in every facet of society (Williamson, 2012; Hitt, 2018). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a civil rights law enacted in 1990, “prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life” and provides legal requirements for employment, transportation, schools, and temporary structures (National ADA Network, 2019). The goal of the ADA is to hold public spaces up to standards of universal design so that people with disabilities are able to utilize them: accessible bathrooms, curb ramps, widened hallways, elevators, and other features to allow independent movement. Accessibility may be defined as “measures put in place to address participation by those with impairments, which may be temporary, and physical and/or mental” (Finkel, Sharp, & Sweeney, 2019, p. 2).

Creating and enforcing legal guidelines is a tremendous start, but it cannot and should not be where we as a society pat ourselves on the back and call it a job well done. Many organizations have taken advantage of the law’s caveat that making such accommodations would “cause undue hardship” (National ADA Network, 2019, web). If an organization can prove that making accessibility updates to physical or virtual spaces would cause “undue hardship,” they may be exempt from having to provide them (National ADA Network, 2019). Buildings and facilities are also not required to make these updates until undergoing remodeling or other construction, leaving many older buildings and sites still inaccessible for many (National ADA Network, 2019). While buildings and other structures remain largely inaccessible, online spaces have also met similar challenges. The ADA website publishes a toolkit providing best practices for state and local governments, but ADA accessibility standards are only legally required of government websites (ADA, 2021). Lawsuits regarding website accessibility have generally ruled that private organizations’ websites only need to offer basic accessibility features if they also have a physical location, bastioning legal justification for most private organizations to provide little to no accessibility features in their virtual presence (ADA, 2021).

Creating physically accessible places isn’t enough: just because people can access a location or program does not mean that they will feel included or able to participate. Inclusion is defined as “the fact or policy of not excluding members or participants on the grounds of gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, etc. (Collins English Dictionary, 2019). Social inclusion is viewed as feeling attached and valued, to have “a sense of insiderness and proximity” (Hall, 2010, p. 50). For example, creating an accessible playground might mean meeting ADA standards of having a turf surface for ease of mobility, while an inclusive playground would also include a sidewalk encircling the play space so that children with social anxiety can ease into group play.

If we view enabling people with disabilities through a medical model lens, we are more likely to focus on simply making physical and virtual locations purely accessible: they are “broken” individuals who need accommodations to function. But if we view disability as a social construct, then we are forced to reevaluate how our spaces and programming favor the able-bodied and can use that reflection as a stepping stone to move towards more socially inclusive designs and language. One study found that many Deaf and disabled individuals are prevented from participating in events not just because of physical barriers but also attitudinal barriers in staff, volunteers, and other attendees (Giruaud, 2018). Instead of viewing people with disabilities as a separate category, the social construction lens points us towards ways that structures and systems can be designed to help equip everyone with equality and agency (Keifer-Boyd et al, 2018).One area particularly worthy of reflection and study is how people with disabilities can access and experience virtual music festivals.

One aspect of music festivals that has not been studied in depth is whether these events

can serve as catalysts for social change, particularly concerning the inclusion of people with disabilities (Sharpe, 2008). This question has been raised because of the critical view that community events are never immune from the influence of dominance and can easily reflect the same social constructs that shape other elements of culture (Sharpe, 2008; Wearing, 1998). Leisure events are political at their core as they represent ideological conflicts, promote social causes, and act to exclude certain groups (Jackson & Dunn, 1988; Sharpe, 2008). When accessibility is viewed as merely assisting individual patrons or planning for a handful of specific disability categories, an opportunity is missed to reevaluate entire systems of structural discrimination (Hitt, 2018). If music festivals are designed with only able bodies in mind, they perpetuate the same systems of power that act to ostracize those with disabilities and miss an opportunity to act as agents of social liberation.

While many music festivals use language of social inclusion in their promotional materials (see Table 1), little to no research has been done to evaluate whether festival planners are actively planning to make their spaces not just basically accessible but intentionally inclusive (Carlsen, Ali-Knight, & Robertson, 2007; Laing & Mair, 2015; Sharpe, 2008). Calls for future research have been made regarding how virtual music festival organizers might help facilitate social inclusion (Bossey, 2020).  Particularly, there is an absence of research regarding if festival planners are genuinely aiming to design their spaces around inclusivity by intentionally designing their programming for diverse audiences (Bossey, 2020; Laing & Mair, 2015).

Table 1. Examples of Event Language Modeling Social Inclusion

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| --- |
| MiddleWaves Music Festival, Fort Wayne, IN, 2018: “You’re Cool Enough.”  DayTrip Festival, Los Angeles, CA, 2019: “DayTrip: Join Our Happy Place”  Natural Life Music Festival, Jacksonville, FL, 2015: “Community First!”  Live on the Green Music Festival, Nashville, TN, 2016: “Good music. Good friends. Good vibes.”  JazzRegaeFest, Los Angeles, CA, 2020: “Start as Strangers, Leave as Friends” |

  When inclusion is not clearly defined and designed for, the weight of ‘joining in’ is placed completely on individuals and removed from the dominant power in charge (Hall, 2010). For example, many festivals install metal risers for individuals in wheelchairs to be able to view the stage (which technically creates accessibility), but only one guest may be allowed on the platform with the patron with a disability (limiting social inclusion). It is not enough to simply state that everyone is welcome: inclusion must be in mind at every stage of planning. Without this purposeful effort, music festivals will simply mirror the systemic forces that act to alienate marginalized people.

Multiple studies have reviewed the inclusion of people with disabilities in community leisure events (such as concerts and music festivals) and found many barriers, including lack of awareness and acceptance by event staff, substantial physical barriers, underprepared and untrained volunteers, and a lack of communication between agencies providing services (Anderson, 2000; Giraurd, 2018; Schleien et al, 2013). For music events specifically, the most commonly reported obstacles are a lack of online accessibility information on event pages, an absence of sign language interpreters or accurate closed captioning, or having to prove their disability to buy a special ticket (Strudwick, 2014). A 2015 BBC report found that of the 10 largest music venues in the United States, fewer than 1% of the available seats were wheelchair accessible (Goulder, 2015). One survey of over 200 people with disabilities reported that 95% of them experienced difficulties purchasing tickets to music events, and 83% of them were frustrated to the point that they decided not to go at all (Strudwick, 2014). Because some festival organizers fear that people will “take advantage” of the disability services offered, there is great hesitation to provide information about those services before the actual event (Rosenberg, 2019). This leaves an already marginalized group tasked with the additional responsibility of having to seek out information regarding the likelihood of an event offering basic services needed for their attendance.

A 2013 study found that the social benefits of attending a music festival increased in relation to how much time participants spent at the event (Ballantyne et al). Josh Rosenberg, co-founder of FestServices (an organization specializing in providing accessibility accommodations at music festivals) relayed several stories about attendees with disabilities who couldn’t even make it through one day of a festival because there was no shade offered in the accessible seating areas or because of insufficient accessible restroom facilities (2019). By being forced to cut their experience short, these individuals are missing out on the important social benefits at music festivals.

  Even though music festivals have traditionally been viewed as democratic reflections of the people, it cannot be assumed that these events are automatically spaces that create social change (Hemingway, 1999; Sharpe, 2008). For real cultural transformation to be the focus of a festival means that efforts must be willful and purposeful (Sharpe, 2008). When this work is done intentionally, leisure events such as music festivals can potentially function to resist, redistribute, or overturn dominant forms of power and further add to social equality (Sharpe, 2008). If music festival organizers would view inclusion and accessibility as a fundamental necessity for all their programming instead of bare minimum legal requirements, how might people with disabilities be able to more meaningfully experience social inclusion in their communities?  The most recent research suggests that event organizers can improve social inclusion at virtual music festivals by enhancing disability accessibility, and that careful analysis of virtual events should be conducted to examine instances of exclusion (Bossey, 2020). There is great potential for these increasingly popular community events to provide people with disabilities the opportunity to both develop their personal sense of identity and for them to experience deeper social connections.

## Research Questions

1. What have virtual music festival organizers planned for in their programming for disability accessibility? What barriers do they face?
2. What have virtual music festival organizers planned for in their programming for social inclusion? What barriers do they face?
3. What do virtual music festival attendees wish that organizers would add to their programming to improve disability accessibility?
4. What do virtual music festival attendees wish that organizers would add to their programming to improve social inclusion?

METHODS & RESULTS

In order to gather as comprehensive an understanding of what online accessibility accommodations look like for concerts and online festivals, I wanted to capture the experiences of both event attendees and event planners. Though event planners could speak to what accommodations were offered, a festival experience is co-created not just by promoters and performers but also by attendees themselves (Finkel & Platt, 2020). In order to center the voices of those with disabilities, it felt imperative to hear directly from the people most affected: people with disabilities are the experts when it comes to what makes them feel included and supported (Dolmage, 2014). IRB approval was secured, protocol 2020-420.

**Event Attendees**

I distributed a survey for event attendees through my own social network channels and through several local disability service organizations’ social media platforms, including the local YMCA Adaptive Needs Facebook page, the Anthony Wayne Services Foundation’s Instagram page, a special education parental support group on Facebook, and my personal LinkedIn page. Being the parent of a child with disabilities and a local performer connected to several arts organizations, I relied on a snowball method in which people I was connected with could pass on my email address to express interest in completing the survey to others. The language used in these posts can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Social Media Survey Participant Requests

|  |
| --- |
| Over the last year, many of us have experienced virtual events. A local graduate student, Cassie Beer, is conducting a research project on accessibility accommodations in virtual events and is looking for participants to share their experiences. Participants must be 18 or older, identify as having a disability, and have participated in at least one virtual music event. There will be several options to participate based on your comfort level: an online survey, a Zoom call, or an in-person focus group. If you are interested in participating, please reach out to [beercj01@pfw.edu](mailto:beercj01@pfw.edu) for more information. |

The survey, available in Table 3, was intended to capture both qualitative and quantitative data based on both accessibility accommodations and how included individuals felt during the event.

Table 3. Virtual Event Participant Survey

|  |
| --- |
| 1. What virtual music or other arts events have you attended in the past? 2. What kind of online information do you look for in an event when deciding whether or not to attend? 3. What positive experiences have you had with pre-event online information? What negative experiences have you had? 4. How do you think pre-event information could be improved for virtual music events? 5. What positive experiences have you had with attending virtual music events? What made those experiences positive? 6. What negative experiences have you had with attending virtual music events? What made those experiences negative? 7. Would you prefer to attend music festivals virtually, in person, or a combination of both? Why? 8. What accessibility considerations would you recommend to virtual event planners? 9. Have you had a virtual event experience that made you feel socially included? How did that event help you to feel socially included? 10. Have you had a virtual event experience that made you feel socially excluded? How did that event create feelings of social exclusion? 11. If you could make recommendations to virtual event planners to improve feelings of social inclusion, what might they be? 12. How have virtual music events benefitted you? 13. Have you attended virtual music events that you would not be able to attend in person? 14. Check which services would be meaningful to you/would enhance your virtual music event experience:     1. Community live streaming (being able to watch a live stream with others in a virtual environment)     2. Enhanced closed captioning     3. ASL translators in videos     4. Pre-recorded content     5. Image descriptions     6. Alternative text     7. Customer service specifically for those with disabilities     8. A pre-event accessibility information page     9. Short viewing sessions     10. Frequent breaks in content     11. No flashing or strobing lights     12. No flashing or strobing animations     13. More featured artists with disabilities     14. Live customer service chat     15. Printable schedules     16. Printable step-by-step directions for accessing the event     17. Pre-event package with items to improve the virtual experience (blue light glasses, printed event materials, merch item?)     18. Pre-event video showing how to access all event activities     19. Use of platforms that allow for computer-based audio listening/speaking     20. Use of platforms that allow for phone-based audio listening/speaking     21. A contact person to ask about accessibility information before and during the event     22. Opportunity to provide feedback after the event     23. Strong color contrast     24. Easy-to-read font     25. Inclusive language     26. Limited background noise |

The survey was anonymous to protect participants’ identities and did not ask them to disclose their diagnoses. Thirteen individuals completed the survey. All respondents self-identified as having at least one disability and that they were age 18 or older. As the primary demographic considered in this research, more specific age data was not collected, nor was race, gender, or ethnicity. As a snowball survey in my personal network, I sought to limit any identifying information.

Survey questions were structured around the research questions surrounding both accessibility and inclusion. Considering the lack of research looking at how people with disabilities function in virtual spaces or how virtual spaces can be used to connect people with disabilities in a transformative way, the questions were intended to gather these types of experiences (Cifuentes et al, 2009; Cook & Polgar, 2015; Sweet et al, 2020). For instance, regarding inclusion, attendees were asked to describe positive and negative experiences they have had with event information during the registration process and during the actual event. Other questions specifically asked if there were specific ways that virtual events had helped attendees feel either socially included or excluded. Open-ended questions regarding how virtual events have benefitted attendees and what suggestions they would offer to event planners were also included.

The survey for virtual event attendees also asked about specific accessibility accommodations. Likert scale questions asked about 24 different accessibility accommodations, ranked on a scale from “not at all helpful” to “very helpful.” Accommodations such as live sign language interpreters, strong color contrast, live guest services chats, and image descriptions were included. While some event planners have expressed being overwhelmed or confused when it comes to which accessibility features to include, it felt important to hear directly from people with disabilities about what services they view as the most beneficial to their experience (Rosenberg 2019; Strudwick, 2014).

## Event Planners

For the event planners, I connected with seven individuals I either knew personally or whose online events I had observed. I reached out to ten total, and three people did not respond. Three event planners interviewed were from events in my county in northeast Indiana, two were from the Midwest, and two were from large-scale events focused on a national reach. All of the event planners interviewed worked for music festivals that had been held in person prior to COVID-19 and then moved to virtual once the pandemic began. Music festivals are often set up around a genre of music (i.e. Newport Folk Festival or Rolling Loud Hip-Hop Festival) or as a celebration of a certain event or location (such as Make Music Day or Taste of the Arts Fort Wayne). These events will feature multiple artists, usually with different performances simultaneously occurring at various stages, which encourages attendees to float between locations and to discover new acts. Visual artists, dancers, poets, and other artistic expressions are often incorporated into programming.

One-on-one interviews held via Zoom or phone calls (due to COVID-19 precautions) lasted between 45-60 minutes and included open-ended questions, available as Table 4. The questions focused on what considerations were made for accessibility and social inclusion at multiple stages of the event timelines. The open-ended interviews began with questions regarding the planning process for the virtual events and how early conversations were held about accessibility and fostering environments for social inclusion. Questions were also asked around what voices were included in deciding accessibility accommodations, if any.

Table 4. Virtual Event Planner Interview Questions

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| --- |
| Virtual Event Planners Interview Questions   1. How many virtual events have you helped plan? 2. How early in the event planning process have your conversations started about accessibility? 3. How early in the event planning process have your conversations started about social inclusion? 4. In the planning stages for a virtual event, did you speak to anyone with disabilities about accessibility accommodations? Where did you seek out information about virtual accessibility planning? 5. In the planning stages for a virtual event, did you speak to any outside specialists or consultants about social inclusion? 6. What roadblocks or challenges did you encounter when planning for accessibility? 7. What roadblocks or challenges did you encounter when planning for making people feel included? 8. Were they any accommodations you wanted to make but didn’t know how to? 9. Prior to the event, did you have any attendees contact you with questions regarding accessibility? 10. During the event, did anyone express difficulty in attending the event due to their disability or lack of accommodations? 11. Did you have any post-event surveys? Were there any questions on the survey regarding accessibility? Were there any questions asking attendees if they felt included? 12. What kind of training does your event team undergo regarding disability accessibility? 13. Do you plan on continuing to have a virtual element to this event even after COVID restrictions have been lifted? Why or why not? 14. What do you plan to do differently regarding accessibility in the future? |

The intent behind these questions was to inquire if event planners intentionally sought to hear directly from those with disabilities, from accessibility specialists, or if they simply sought out information from the internet. As the goal of this research project is to create a guidebook for virtual event accessibility accommodations, I was hoping to gain a better understanding of where event planners typically go for their information. Questions were also asked around challenges providing or implementing accommodations, what kind of training event staff and volunteers received regarding accessibility or social inclusion, feedback from attendees regarding accommodations or programming, and any post-event surveys that had been conducted. Overall, both the survey questions for event attendees and the interview questions for event planners were written with the intent of seeking a greater understanding of how social inclusion and disability accessibility shape the virtual music festival event experience (Bossey, 2020).

# ANALYSIS

This section will walk step-by-step through the guidebook that was created with the survey and interview responses in order to show connections between what was uncovered in the research and what was included as suggestions in the resource. The guidebook is designed with the intent to either be available as a virtual or physical tool. Plans for distribution could include making the guidebook available at accessibility expos and conferences or at national advocacy organizations such as the National Disability Rights Network. The ultimate goal would be for websites like the Americans with Disabilities Act resource page to include the document, as well as major event hosting platforms such as Eventbrite or Ticketmaster.

The first note regarding the guidebook content is that some level of brevity was intentionally aspired to. Events can often be shifted from in-person to virtual very quickly, often with only weeks or days to prepare, and event planners may be less likely to access a document that feels overwhelming. The content in this guidebook was shaped around the 13 survey respondents of those with disabilities who had attended virtual events, as well as seven event planner interviews who had experience planning a virtual music event.

**The Introduction**

The guidebook begins with a quick introduction to the topic of online events and the possibilities afforded for those with disabilities within this format. The first main point is the necessity of team buy-in and training. According to the event attendee survey, 72% of participants ranked the use of inclusive language by event staff and performers as being very helpful, which was the highest-ranking of any of the accommodations listed. One event planner also indicated that the most frequent feedback their event survey receives has been that the positive attitudes and willingness to help by the staff made attendees’ experiences meaningful. This section also introduces the concept of differentiating accessibility and inclusion while training staff. While this was largely informed from the literature review, another event planner interviewed stated that accessibility refers to how online spaces are designed to facilitate ease of access and navigation, whereas inclusive design inspires trust and interaction among participants.

The final note in the guidebook introduction is the importance of including accessibility and inclusion in the earliest stages of event planning. All seven of the event planners interviewed indicated that the success of the services and accommodations for those with disabilities during their events was directly related to having thoroughly planned and prepared ahead of time. One event planner interviewed stressed that at each new phase of planning their event, the group would ask themselves who was missing from the conversation and how the plans for the event would impact them. Several of the event planners also discussed situations where they realized only when the event was live that necessary accommodations, such as ASL translators or eliminating the use of strobe lights, had been thought of too late in order to take action on them. The introduction ends with insight provided by one of the event planners interviewed who emphasized that no event was going to get accessibility down perfectly, that what matters is forward motion and openness to feedback.

## In The Planning Phase

The guidebook then moves into a section discussing considerations to be made in the earliest planning phases for an online event. The section opens with supporting research that those who attend events with limited accessibility but good customer service generally receive positive reports from attendees who desire to return (Sweet et al, 2020). The first step recommended is to designate a primary contact for all accessibility accommodations before, during, and after the event. In the event attendee survey, 61% of respondents ranked having customer service specifically for those with disabilities as being helpful to very helpful. Two of the event planners interviewed discussed using an Accessibility Lead and how these individuals ran point for all decisions regarding accommodations and for providing customer service during every phase of the event.

After establishing a point person, the guidebook recommends compiling a list of questions to consider when selecting the online platform that will be used. One event planner shared several of these questions, namely questions about customer service and reviews, which they raised when evaluating possible virtual platforms. Questions regarding screen enlargement software, caption options, and computer-based or phone-based listening were based on at least 51% of event attendees indicating the importance of each of these accommodations on the survey.

After questions to consider when selecting the platform, the next section of the guidebook provides some thoughts regarding how the event is programmed. This section, as were many other parts of the guidebook, was inspired by survey respondents noting that elements of a virtual event that allowed them to connect with other participants in a social way were as important as basic accessibility functions such as enlarged font or closed captions. Built-in breaks during the program were a suggestion of one event planner who has specific experience planning events for people with cognitive disabilities. This event planner shared that allowing time to process information, step away from a screen, or have quiet time allows many people with disabilities the chance to more fully enjoy the event.

Another suggestion for programming was promoting small viewing parties. This concept was used by several event planners and was also suggested by 40% of the survey respondents. One survey respondent shared about an event that send a “festival in a box” kit with wrist bands for their viewing party, event-branded water bottles, and artist t-shirts. This respondent shared how being able to have a “mini” version of the festival within their own home, with a small group of people they felt safe with, provided a much more memorable and shared experience than if they had watched the virtual event alone. This supported what Bossey (2020) found, which was that enjoying music in a communal atmosphere contributes powerfully to feelings of inclusion.

The last suggestion for programming was a “speed-dating” format. Three event planners shared their experience with this idea, stating that the intention was to help recreate the random, unplanned encounters that people have at in-person festivals. One of the most meaningful social elements of a music festival can be meeting new people: waiting in line for food, walking to a stage, at a merchandise table. Building in sessions to intentionally provide attendees–with or without disabilities–allows the critically important opportunity to connect individuals to broader communities and social experiences (Cole, Nolan, Seko, Mancuso, & Ospina, 2011; Hynan, Murray, & Goldbart, 2014; Sweet et al, 2020). “Speed-dating” sessions provide attendees with the option of being randomly assigned to a virtual chat room. Each chat room lasted anywhere from 60 seconds to five minutes and allowed participants to share contact information if they both clicked a “contact” button on the platform. 46% of survey respondents indicated that being able to have an interactive experience was very important to enjoying a virtual event.

The next section of the guidebook addresses foundational elements of a design that allow online accessibility. The suggestions included were pulled from survey respondents, interview responses, and ADA guidelines for online accessibility (ADA, 2021). While much more comprehensive tools are available for building complete websites to be accessible, all of the event planners interviewed indicated that they had used platforms with pre-designed websites instead of undertaking completely new construction. This largely dictated the decision to focus the design section more on documents, simple graphics, or basic web text as opposed to coding or HTML.

Following design, a section is included with suggestions on how to train volunteers and staff around accessibility. Two event planners shared how they had been unsure how to provide this training and had reached out to local disability rights organizations in their communities to train their staff. This decision centered on the voices of people with disabilities as the people from the organizations were also disabled. The training also allowed staff and volunteers to ask questions and role-play various scenarios.

If partnering with an organization or consultant is not feasible, the training section provides some simple tips offered by people with disabilities when it comes to interactions. People-first language was indicated by almost all of the survey respondents as being the preferred method (person with a disability vs disabled person), though this is an area of contention within the disability community. 38% of survey respondents stated that having acronyms or other technical jargon explained throughout events would be helpful to very helpful in their virtual experience. The event planner interviewed with extensive experience in planning online accommodations had stated the importance of repetition and patience when assisting people with the platform or schedule.

The training section also includes suggestions for anyone speaking or presenting during the virtual event. Captions, contrast, providing information before the event, and reading information aloud were all pulled from event attendee survey responses as well as the ADA guidelines (2020). Four event planners shared feedback they had received about not pressuring attendees to have their video cameras on: some did not want to reveal their disability, some didn’t want others to see their living spaces, and others found the practice too anxiety-inducing.

Considering the budget was an important part of the process for all of the event planners interviewed. While the event planners all expressed that most of the accommodations made were of no cost, some did say they were caught off guard by the expense of hiring ASL interpreters or having closed captions outsourced. The event planners who had utilized ASL interpreters provided the considerations to be made when hiring live interpreters.

The notes on captions and slides came from open-ended responses to the event attendee surveys. Two respondents took the time to distinguish between open and closed captioning and shared the different benefits each option offers. Overall, the responses in both surveys and interviews supported previous research that the design and accessibility of online spaces greatly impact an individual’s ability to experience community and to engage in meaning-making activities (Sweet et al, 2020).

Overall, every suggestion in the planning phase is shaped around the idea that music festivals create opportunities for social connection, identity formation, and enriched self-esteem (Ballantyne et al, 2013; Laing & Mair, 2015; Packer & Ballantyne, 2010). If virtual spaces are designed with that intention in mind, the more inclusive the event will be.

## The Pre-Event Phase

The pre-event phase, encouraging event planners to pause, promote, preview, and process, was largely shaped by survey responses indicating the importance of having as much information beforehand as possible. This supported research that pre-event communication provides individuals with disabilities the opportunity to reduce uncertainty and be more prepared to engage with the event (Amirkhanian, 2020; Bossey, 2020; Sweet et al 2020). Survey responses described the importance of being able to find information as easily as possible as early as possible. Survey respondents also expressed frustration at having to go to multiple web pages to find information or have to contact several people before getting an answer. Having all accessibility information available early and with clear contact information provided a much more inclusive experience.

The process section and sample survey were created using feedback from the event planners. Two event planners shared that they had created simple surveys within the ticket purchasing stage that allowed people with disabilities to self-identify and describe what kind of accommodations would help them fully participate. Setting a deadline to request certain accommodations also made sure that the quality of services provided was substantial.

## Post-Event

Venzin (2020) states that event follow-up is essential: most of an event’s continued success comes not from the program itself but what takes place after. All of the event planners interviewed shared how much they learned from post-event surveys about what to improve in the future and what accommodations were helpful (or not). Event attendees shared in the open-response section that being able to watch a recording of the event several times or at their own pace when especially beneficial for those with cognitive disabilities. Guidelines for designing the survey were largely informed from challenges event planners faced in distributing surveys.

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

Limitations to this research included the small sample size of the survey. Future research could attempt to survey a larger number of participants. This research also only collected information around the identity of disability and no other demographic information. More information about participants’ gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and other identities could be collected to identify how exclusion and lack of access is compounded with intersectionality.

Some future areas for research might include evaluating different accessibility and inclusion training modules for event planners and volunteers. This would provide further insight into what to include in training, who should conduct the training, and what kind of measurable impact the instruction has on both the event staff and attendee experience. Future research could also evaluate the intersectionality of disability with other identities, such as sexuality, race, ethnicity, and gender, to evaluate experiences at virtual events. Experiences could also be analyzed based on genres of virtual events to compare how different pockets of arts culture engage and interact with various identities.

**Virtual Concerts & Festivals**

**A Guidebook to**

**Accessibility Accommodations & Building Inclusion**

**Introduction**

2020: the Year of the Virtual Event. As COVID-19 made its way around the world, concerts, festivals, and tours came to a screeching halt. Artists ranging from the local cover band all the way to Billboard-charting stars switched on to live stream, and festivals all around the globe moved to virtual formats. For years, people with disabilities have been advocating for greater online access to the arts, and when the entire world finally needed it, their request was granted at long last.

But just simply clicking “Go Live” on Facebook doesn’t mean that a virtual event is fully accessible: there are issues of closed captioning and translators, of modified programming for people with intellectual disabilities, text descriptions to allow for screen reading software to work for those with visual impairments. In the research for creating this guidebook, surveys indicated that 71% of virtual event attendees participated in an event they never would have without a virtual option. While virtual events present many challenges, they also present many opportunities to connect with new people in new ways. This guidebook is intended to help you, as an online event planner, navigate the world of virtual accommodations and create an inclusive online festival.

*Team Buy-In and Planning Ahead*

Every online event is unique, so the decision to move partially or totally online has to be decided according to the particular situation at hand. The most important element of all is having buy-in among the planning team: if those leading the event don’t fully understand or support the accessibility and inclusion accommodations in place, those elements won’t be well-executed. The team’s attitude towards these changes will also be hard to hide.

Consider how you will approach your team to introduce the ideas in this guidebook. If your team understands why accessibility and inclusion are important, they are more likely to fully support necessary changes and modifications. One important step could be defining disability and how widely it impacts everyone around us. In a broad sense, a disability is any condition of the mind or body that makes it more difficult for a person to do certain activities and to interact with the world around them. The World Health Organization estimates that about 15% of the global population has some form of disability, with approximately 19% of the United States population represented by individuals with disabilities: around 56.7 million people.

Explaining how important festivals and concerts are to developing a sense of self and a sense of community can help further underline the importance of helping those with disabilities feel like are welcome and celebrated. Establishing social relationships and connections to their community have proved challenging for individuals with disabilities, due in part to mobilization and communication challenges but also the stigma attached to disability. While providing accessibility accommodation to ensure that people with disabilities are able to participate in an event, considerations should also be made to look for ways to help all attendees to make meaningful connections, build relationships, and feel a part of something larger than themselves. Translating a song with sign language makes it accessible, including performers with disabilities makes it inclusive.

The key to successfully creating an accessible and inclusive event is to incorporate accommodations into the initial planning phase, instead of scrambling to fix issues after the event is already rolling. This guidebook is intended to help you consider accessibility and inclusion at various stages of planning to help predict needs, issues, and possibilities with enough time to plan. Implementing every idea in this book is probably not feasible or realistic, especially all at once: the goal is moving the needle and including more voices at the table.

When everyone can participate, everyone benefits.

**In the Planning Phase**

**Assign a Lead**

Research has shown that those who attend events with limited accessibility but good customer service generally receive positive reports from attendees who desire to return. On the flip side, if an event has great accessibility accommodations but poor customer service attendees will generally be much angrier and much less likely to attend again. Committing to and preparing for great customer service may be the most cost-effective approach to improving the accessibility of your event.

The first step to building great customer service for accessibility accommodations is to designate a point person. This person should oversee all pre-event questions and communications regarding accommodations, real-time issues, and oversee staff and volunteer training regarding disabilities.

**Consider the Digital Platform**

Before you begin planning a virtual event, you will need to know what accessibility features are even available on a platform. Below are some questions to consider when you are selecting a platform to use to host your event.

* Does the platform have information available about its accessibility options? If so, what options are available?
* Does the platform function with screen readers or screen enlargement software, external closed-captioning applications, etc?
* Are their reviews by users with different types of disabilities?
* Does the platform offer real-time captioning or support manual capturing by an outside source? Is captioning available on the live screen or require a separate window?
* Does the platform allow for sign language interpreters to stay visible throughout different viewing formats?
* Does the platform support keyboard shortcuts for those who may not use a mouse?
* Does the platform allow for computer-based or phone-based listening/speaking?
* Does the platform support screen readers or screen magnification via customizable interfaces?
* Does the platform provide multiple ways for attendees to ask questions or contribute to discussions?
* Does logging into the platform require inputting information to join or require multiple steps to sign in? Does the platform require creating an account?

**Consider the Format for a Virtual Event**

We all know that attending a virtual event can’t fully capture what it is like to attend an event in person, but there are several formatting considerations that can help enhance an attendee’s experience. Many people attend concerts and other events not just for their personal experience, but to engage with those around them as well. Below are some ideas to help foster feelings of social inclusion and community throughout a virtual event.

* **Built-In Breaks:** People with many different disabilities may need extra time to process information or to rest during an event. Having a ten-minute break once every hour gives everyone time to use the restroom or take a breather before soaking up more content.
* **Small viewing parties**: While some may not feel comfortable or be physically able to attend a large-scale event, they may be able to view the event with a small group of people in a home or other location. Presenting “viewing party” options encourages small groups of people to watch together and help recreate some of the communal experience that festivals typically bring. A special registration option for viewing parties might include a “festival in a box” option that provides select event merchandise, supplemental event items, or hosting tips.
* **“Speed Dating” Sessions**: Set aside some time in the schedule for randomized breakout rooms. Several platforms support opt-in sessions where event attendees are randomly paired in time-limited sessions. At in-person events often some of the best conversations and new friendships happen while waiting in line for food or walking from the parking lot. Providing an opportunity for spontaneous meetings can help foster new relationships among attendees no matter their location.
* **Real-Time Chat**: Dedicate an event member to be available for live chat features during all live content. This increases the opportunity for engagement with event attendees, and allows help to be sought out quickly and directly. While some challenges with this feature are discussed later on in the guidebook, it is an option to consider for those with platforms that support the option.

**Elements of Design**

* Ensure that fonts are easy to read, that text is large, and all colors have sufficient contrast (a good guide to check your colors is <https://webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker/> )
* Provide all information in text format (not just graphics) so that it can be read by a screen reader
* Eliminate flashing or strobing lights or animations. If it absolutely must be required, put warnings at the beginning of any sessions including this feature.
* Limit the number of website pages and clickthroughs: this allows augmented communication device users to navigate and access information with ease
* A printable site map can help clarify all processes and communication
* Include accessibility symbols (seen below) where appropriate

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| https://lh6.googleusercontent.com/LsuUxisWKH1SBJ6DHo-XJ4IoAbAu5RvuhG4C5bKK_s2MS-7oNbWZKY0Wy8LNtd7G2wWeiKkcj6aRyiwwDuVO4ebDTIhqyf9JyPjsSIsKwn5rJUdiwk84YjY8Qo4IPAxnZWCS6m4 | Sign Language Interpretation |
| https://lh6.googleusercontent.com/RK4Ux64dMwvLkEjiIyEU6cvX0CKyA7LghHc8xxiQmystTsdCJc3VVdiq_g4_JpkYmgPpflc3GWEhtLPhCfh92PFaNj23J8sIo6w67bcvKdTscTCmnec1tEN16tNQ6AGWgGRftXw | Large print (size 18 and higher) available |
| https://lh6.googleusercontent.com/aKmocjDH2XXiY_ayog9sp-TgpswjFDqW7vtim4-Dxe3dscqSe2bYCNDg4ZKxo4pf6fhm8rHUWs1miD89Q9CrqZ9g3DWdiF2aLgwmubZXppqBr5nhUuB2KSjjJ8AsAAhAJA-fa9c | Closed Captioning (subtitles) |
| https://lh3.googleusercontent.com/pRVRFHwS5tzNDiD0W7kW3-RSBQzCQBCQ-A9PLt0hFG2rIRzqPOZ80aCMyBVALlw9ivx11z6vc0kqRsJ_XnIYeiryLnfYyXCOj-iSa_p-TkB2nXBDuDIhlZw6FjMzQE6BwqbCdvQ | Open Captioning (live transcription) |

**Training Staff & Volunteers**

There are several options available for preparing your staff and volunteers in creating an accessible and inclusive environment. If you have a local disability rights organization or service provider, reaching out to see what trainings they have available is a great option. This helps build community relations and allows your team to hear from trained professionals and often people with disabilities themselves.

If receiving training from an outside organization or group is not possible, below are some helpful thoughts to discuss with your team as a whole when you prepare for the event:

* Everyone is a person first. While preference may vary between individuals or certain identities, refer to individuals as a person first, their disability second (i.e. person with a disability vs disabled person, a child with Down Syndrome vs. a Down Syndrome child).
* Disability is never derogatory: referring to someone as “retarded,” “crippled,” or “idiotic” is harmful and offensive.
* Be mindful of jargon and slang: not everyone may be as familiar with the terminology of online events or the type of festival you are hosting. Explain acronyms and technical terms.
* Exercise patience and kindness when explaining to attendees how to use and engage with the online platform, especially if it is a new experience for them. Repetition, rephrasing, and demonstrating may all be necessary.

For anyone who will be involved in leading sessions, speaking publicly, or performing, here are some additional guidelines to share. Providing the list below as a checklist may be helpful to encourage accessibility and inclusion while allowing these speakers to thoroughly prepare.

* Caption any videos: If you are providing any video content not made by event staff, make sure they are captioned.
* Check color contrast: Slides should have a strong contrast between the background and font. Please contact (Accessibility Lead’s Name) if you would like assistance.
* In every session, be sure to introduce yourself and anyone else speaking. The best practice is for everyone to say their name each time they speak.
* Describe your slides/visuals: Summarize any information and important features out loud.
* Read questions, chats, and polls out loud: If polls or chat responses are included in the program, be sure to read conversations aloud. Pause long enough for everyone to respond between questions, knowing that it may take some longer than others.
* Provide your slides and resource lists as early before the event as possible: This allows us to offer printable versions to attendees who would benefit from a hard copy to follow along with.
* Be Ok with No Attendee Video: Please do not pressure or shame people about having their video features turned off. If attendees are comfortable turning their cameras on, they will do so.

**Consider the Budget**

* If the selected platform does not automatically support translation, what are the estimated costs of closed captioning or sign language interpreters?
* If you have your event materials and platform tested by people with disabilities before launching, what will you be compensating them for their time?
* Is your design team capable of implementing strong contrast, image descriptions, and alternative text? Are these elements able to be reasonably outsourced?

**Hiring Sign Language Interpreters**

If you decide that interpreters are the best fit for your event’s accommodations, here are some things to keep in mind:

* Hiring any interpreters should be done as early as possible
* Confirm that hired interpreters are certified and experienced. The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) keeps a searchable directory of interpreters and their certifications (see Additional Resources for the link)
* Provide a detailed schedule and disclosure of how the event will be shared with the interpreters

**Notes on Captions & Subtitles**

There are key differences between subtitles, closed captions, and open captions, as they provide different benefits and often serve different functions.

* Subtitles only reflect the words being spoken in a video.
* Open captions are always visible and provide not just the words, but other important elements of a video such as emotional responses such as laughter, applause, descriptions of music, and sound effects.
* Closed captions provide the same content as open captions, but closed captions can be turned on or off by the viewer. Many platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram, now offer closed captioning services as a basic feature.

**The Pre-Event Phase**

**Pause:**

Before you go public with your plans and materials, pause for a final evaluation. Consider reaching out to a disability rights organization or service provider to look over everything one last time before you hit publish: they may catch something no one else on your team has or be able to provide valuable insight. What information is assumed or biased? What functions are inaccessible or exclusive? Are the images you’re using to promote the event reflecting the accessibility and inclusivity you’ve been working hard towards?

**Point of Purpose:**

Publicly share all accessibility plans as early as possible. Include how accessibility will be implemented into the festival, what options are available, and how to contact the Accessibility Lead. Don’t just share it once: if you feel like you’re overcommunicating, you’re doing a great job.

Make sure any social media posts and emails include image descriptions and alternative text. Including an option to click a link to access a plain text version of event emails can be very helpful for people with visual disabilities.

**Preview:**

Provide a pre-event release informative video (with closed captions or sign language interpretation) demonstrating how to buy a ticket, interact with the platform, and find information on the website. The video should include different segments of the event, what accessibility accommodations are available, the schedule, and which events will be sensory-friendly.

Create a one-stop page on the event website for all information regarding accessibility information and accommodations. This page should be available before, during, and after the event, and in a printable format. Helpful items to include are:

* What accommodations are offered and how to access them
* The Accessibility Lead’s contact information
* A glossary of terms used frequently during the event
* A clear schedule
* Step-by-step information about how to use the platform
* Detailed descriptions of each event segment, including the format (Q&A, live performance, audience participation, etc.), age-appropriateness, special effects (especially strobe lighting), and length

**Process:**

When it comes to purchasing a ticket, aim for simplicity. If possible, avoid platforms that require attendees to make a new account or enter information over multiple pages. This is also a great time to get a better picture of what accommodations might best serve your audience: use it as an opportunity to include a brief survey about what each attendee requires. Include the Accessibility Lead’s contact information with the survey. It is also reasonable to set a deadline of 48 hours before the event to request any accommodations. See a sample of survey language below.

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| In order to fully participate in this event, I require:  Session interpretation in \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  Captioning: yes / no  Printable materials: yes / no  Other: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  For any questions or more information, contact (Accessibility Lead) at [accessibilitylead@eventname.com](mailto:accessibilitylead@eventname.com) or 123-456-7890 any time before or during the event. |

**Post-Event**

Consider offering an on-demand option to be accessed after the live event: some with disabilities find comfort in repetition and could benefit from being able to watch multiple times or being able to take breaks as needed. Others may find the real-time schedule too demanding or exhausting to keep up with.

The most important post-production item for accessibility and inclusion is a survey. This anonymous, simple tool can help you gather feedback on what your attendees appreciated, used, or didn’t find helpful about the accommodations provided. Some things to keep in mind before creating your survey:

* **Will you send it to all attendees, or just those who purchased an accessible ticket/indicated they had a disability?** Sending it to everyone may give you feedback from those who didn’t identify as disabled, but may provide you with an extensive amount of data to comb through.
* **Will you have selection-only responses or open responses?** Requiring a selection for answers means that you are looking for definitive answers and can be helpful in knowing exactly what services were utilized. Open responses will help you gain an understanding of how the event made people feel or allow them to write in their own ideas or suggestions.
* **Will you incentivize taking the survey?** Consider having a discount code for future tickets or merchandise in exchange for completing the survey to thank attendees for their time and thoughts.
* **How long will the survey be?** The longer the survey, the less likely people will complete it. Try to keep the survey brief, focusing on questions that will best inform next year’s planning.
* **What will you do with the responses?** Share the feedback with your staff and volunteers so they can know the impact of their work. Also think about sharing survey results on your social media or other public platforms alongside what adjustment you will make in the future based on the feedback.

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| Sample Survey  Thank you for taking the time to give us feedback on Event Name’s Accessibility & Inclusion services. We appreciate your thoughtfulness and honesty.     1. What accommodations did you access during the event? (answers should be accommodations your event provided) 2. What accommodations were not offered that would have helped you better access the event? (open response) 3. Did you feel included during the event? (yes/no/sometimes) 4. What could we do next year to help you feel more included? (open response) 5. Do you have any other feedback about the event this year? (open response) |

**The Big Idea**

Accessibility may seem an intimidating endeavor for those who are new to the process, terminology, and considerations. What it all really boils down to is being open to feedback from those who offer considerations on how your online events can be more accessible and inclusive. Creating an accessible and inclusive environment isn’t as simple as checking items off of a list, nor does it have a definitive stage of completion. Being inclusive is a matter of emphasis: there is no end destination to solving inequality or ableism.

As much as having a list of goals to have might help event planners consider accommodations they might otherwise not have, keeping accessibility in mind in all that we do is the ultimate goal. The work of storytellers and songwriters and event planners means always keeping innovation and adaptability at the forefront. Real and lasting change in the arts will only occur when we are always asking ourselves the question: Who is missing–from the audience to the stage– and how can we include them?

**Additional Resources**

* accessIbe: a web-based product providing streamlined accessibility compliance. https://accessibe.com/
* Accessible Festivals: We offer online training for event organizers, staff, and promoters, non-profit organizations, businesses, and creators of all kinds. Training sessions provide information, tips, and strategies for interacting with all people in a respectful, caring manner. <https://accessiblefestivals.org/>
* Americans with Disabilities Act: information and technical assistance on the Americans with Disabilities Act. <https://www.ada.gov/>
* Half Access: a nonprofit organization dedicated to making live music accessible by providing a database of accessibility features at venues worldwide. <https://halfaccess.org/>
* Minds Eye Audio: building a more inclusive community by translating vision into audio for individuals who are blind or visually impaired. https://mindseyeradio.org/
* Registry of Interpreters for the Blind: advocates for best practices in interpreting, professional development for practitioners, and for the highest standards in the provisions of interpreting services for diverse users of languages that are signed or spoken. <https://www.rid.org>

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