

Update on Acoustical Society of America Publications from the Editor in Chief

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JASA may be a world renowned journal, but there are many other good journals extant in the world. How can we improve and modernize JASA to be competitive in an aggressive and changing publishing environment?

By way of introduction, I am Jim Lynch, a Senior Scientist at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution three days a week and now the new Editor in Chief (EIC) of the publications of the Acoustical Society of America (ASA) the other two days a week. I am succeeding Allan Pierce as EIC but not replacing him. Each editor brings a unique personality and skill set to the job, and mine and Allan's have some differences. But we also have some strong similarities in our love and respect for science and technology and for the ASA and its publications. The ASA has provided us with a technically excellent and collegial home over the years, and the *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America (JASA)*, *JASA-Express Letters (JASA-EL)*, *Acoustics Today (AT)*, and *Proceedings on Meetings in Acoustics (POMA)* have provided us with excellent venues in which to publish our work. The EIC's efforts as "good steward" of the ASA publications are in some sense a way of paying ASA back for what it has provided us. But let me end this small personal note here. I want to talk about the ASA publications, with some emphasis on *JASA*, rather than about the recent EICs.

Let me start by saying that, overall, our publications are in reasonably good shape. Thanks to our editors, associate editors, staff, and reviewers, our publications are of high quality and either have kept a steady volume of articles published or have increased. Our journal finances have been stable despite general worries about changes in the overall business model for journals. So let me give us all a brief pat on the back for that – we should be proud of our success to date.

But resting on one's laurels and complacency are a guaranteed recipe for eventual failure. There are many good journals extant that are competing for acoustics papers and, moreover, the publishing world is changing rapidly. We need to stay competitive and up-to-date. I think a healthy way to look at the situation (in a colloquial vein) is, "Hey, we're good, but we can be, and need to be, better to survive and flourish." With that statement, let me turn to just what needs improvement and how we can accomplish useful changes going forward. I note that these are my viewpoints presented here but that ASA publications are a society (and world) resource and they need everybody's ideas and input. If you have such input, I would be very glad to get it at jasaeditor@acousticalsociety.org.

Let me start off with the spectrum of four publications that ASA currently offers: *JASA*, *JASA-EL*, *AT*, and *POMA*. Each offers something different to the authors and readers. *JASA* provides a standard peer-reviewed journal; *JASA-EL* provides a home for short, rapidly published results; *AT* provides a "general audience" interface for acoustics to both the ASA and the outside world; and *POMA* provides a home for meetings papers and archives many useful results that would likely not

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be published in a peer-reviewed journal (and some that will because *POMA* is not considered prepublication for *JASA*). These are all useful functions, and I believe our current publications reasonably span the needs of the community.

However, although we may be reasonably good at providing venues in which to publish, I think we can make some further advances in what and how we publish, which I get to next.

Our publications have (at least) four major functions: (1) to archive results, (2) to communicate and discuss new things in acoustics, (3) to educate and inform, and (4) to promote the ASA and acoustics in general. Often, people just think of the first function as being the “mission” of peer-reviewed journals, with magazines (like our *AT*) taking care of the latter three functions. But this is a very narrow view of journals. *JASA*, our flagship journal, has reviews, tutorials, letters, and forums all available for communicating and educating, although these are not as widely used as they could be. I would like to increase that usage. We also have the capacity for special issues, collections, and invited articles, which are generally appealing to the journal’s readership. Moreover, our publications have the latitude to “think outside the box” of the ASA technical specialties, as defined by its technical committee structure. Acoustics has a very broad reach, and it would be good to think of all things acoustic as being within our purview. This might also help us attract new areas of interest and new people to the ASA. I’m not advocating that we ignore our core areas or strengths but rather that we should consider making some routine forays beyond them.

Another first-order consideration for our publications is quality. Just how good are we, really? Well, looking at *JASA*, we are the largest acoustics journal in the world and the most cited – those are certainly a start. We are also healthy financially, have a very good publications staff, and have an excellent, global reputation. These are also good signs. However, by one indicator that is widely used, impact factor (IF), we are decidedly average and need improvement. *JASA*’s IF has hovered between 1.5 and 1.7 in recent years, and I feel that it should be at least above 2.0 for an acoustics journal. (We are a smaller society and technical field than some, so we won’t ever have huge IF numbers, which depend on having a large number of people writing and citing papers.)

It is well known that IF can be “gamed,” with some of the games being ethical and others being rather unethical. For instance, giving free “downloads” of your journal’s papers or

other small perks to authors and/or hard-working reviewers is keeping with standard business practice incentives. I’d actually like to see ASA explore and implement such ethical incentives for participation in our publications’ activities. In the main, my approach to improving IF will be through the “old school” ways: (1) maintaining high technical quality; (2) ensuring speedier publication; (3) retaining excellent editors, associate editors, and staff; and (4) making a concerted effort to attract authors to submit their most novel and important material. These will ensure quality, of which IF is only one metric.

A complaint that has often been made about *JASA* is that the publication process is just too slow. I won’t disagree. So how do we fix this important piece of the process? The methodical, and I believe correct, way of doing this is to gather data (time-in-process statistics) on all the various steps in the publication process, look for the bottlenecks, and then work to eliminate them. These steps include quality control, associate editor assignment, reviewer assignment, time in review, associate editor decision time, author revision time, and time to publication of an accepted manuscript. I’m sure improvements can be made in all phases, but some will be more critical to improve than others. We are hoping to have a full statistical study of the publication chain done by the next ASA meeting in the fall, and we will be implementing further improvements to the system even before then.

I note that we already have taken some steps to speed up the process. We have been pursuing the completion of very tardy (for whatever reason) manuscript files, streamlining and simplifying the initial quality control step, and implementing e-first, all of which will reduce delays. We also will have automatic queuing of reviewers when we implement the Editorial Manager (EM) peer-review system (planned for late August, 2015), which will speed up the reviewer assignment process.

Another big topic for journals nowadays is open access. I’m happy to say that *JASA* now has a “gold” open-access option, which is advertised and described in detail on the ASA Web site. (*JASA-EL*, *POMA*, and *AT* are already fully open access.) I am very supportive of open access because the more people who can access our content, the better. I will try to make as much of *JASA*’s content open access as I can within the constraints of our current “hybrid” financial model (i.e., part open access, part subscription).

Another interesting development that has occurred over the past few months is our transition from PeerXpress to EM as our peer-review system. This wasn't out of dissatisfaction with PeerXpress, which has served us well over the years but with our need to have a larger software package that can offer us more features and flexibility. We have already transitioned *POMA* to EM, and our plans are to move *JASA* and *JASA-EL* over by the time you read this. *AT* is published separately and is unaffected by this change.

Improving communications with our readers, authors, reviewers, editors, and any others concerned with our publications is another issue that we are currently addressing. This article in *AT* is actually one piece of that work, and I might mention in passing that Arthur Popper and *AT* have led the way in such communication and set an example for us to follow. One new way that we now have to communicate with people is via a new "tab" on our ASA Web page, under *JASA*, *JASA-EL*, and *POMA*, called "News and Information." Under this tab, our editors (Kent Gee for *POMA*, Charles Church for *JASA-EL*, and myself for *JASA*) have a podium from which to discuss any and all relevant new information about their journals in an informal, rapidly posted manner. This should be an improvement over the more formal, but less timely, editorials in the past. (*AT* already has this capability, as this article shows!) I am also hoping that we will soon devise a good system for each journal to get input and suggestions from our readers, authors, etc. so that our communication channel is fully two-way.

A very interesting (and positive) aspect of *JASA* is its international nature. Fully half of our papers are from foreign authors. From a personal point of view, as an ocean acoustician who has traveled worldwide and has published frequently with foreign authors, this is a wonderful expansion. From a journal and society point of view, publications and societies have all become quite international, no matter where their home bases are. We embrace this wide view and welcome and value our foreign authors, reviewers, and associate editors. (And we do not keep it a secret that we would very much like our both foreign and domestic authors and reviewers to become ASA members as well. The associate editors are, of course.)

One issue that comes up very often when dealing with foreign papers is language difficulties. As someone who has co-authored a book with foreign colleagues, I am sensitive to this issue. Although it is nontrivial, it is also tractable. The

primary ingredients we want in *JASA* papers are technical innovation and excellence. Given these, we are willing to put in some extra effort to see a good article published, given that the English is good enough to justify a review. If the article is not up to our standards for "reviewable," we will work to update and upgrade our English language assistance capabilities. And even after review, we do not insist on "impeccable" writing (which even native-speaking scientists and engineers have problems with) but rather good, clear, and understandable language.

The final note I want to sound here is encouraging more participation in the journal by two groups in particular: students and early-career professionals. Students don't tend to see much of the publication and reviewing process, and postdocs and early-career professionals really never see much of the editorial process and procedures. Some initial suggestions to help rectify this are to try a "Student Special Issue" and to develop mentoring programs to show all the levels of the reviewing and editing process. These sound like good possibilities, and we are pursuing them. Any and all other such ideas are welcome!

I conclude here by saying that although I am very happy and honored to be the new EIC of ASA publications, I also regard myself as only one small piece of a far larger community enterprise. It takes all of our efforts as a community to make *JASA*, *JASA-EL*, *POMA*, and *AT* the best publications they can be. I look forward to working with the ASA and the world acoustics community on this ambitious goal in the years to come.

Biosketch



James Lynch obtained his BS from the Stevens Institute of Technology in 1972 and PhD from The University of Texas at Austin in 1978, both in Physics. He worked at the Applied Research Laboratories, The University of Texas at Austin, from 1978 to 1981 and at the Woods

Hole Oceanographic Institution from 1982 to present. He is a Fellow of the ASA and the IEEE, a former editor in chief of the *IEEE Journal of Oceanic Engineering* and *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America-Express Letters*, and the current Editor in Chief of ASA publications.