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Administrative Committee Report: Panel on Public Policy

The primary mission of the Panel on Public Policy is to represent the interests of the general public on matters of public policy related to acoustics and the advancement of science (bit.ly/2TUu7wE).

In June 2001, at the Chicago meeting of the Acoustical Society of America (ASA), the President and Executive Council authorized the formation of an ad hoc Panel on Public Policy. The inaugural meeting of the Panel convened at the Pittsburgh meeting in June 2002 and was integrated into the ASA infrastructure as an Administrative Committee in 2007. Now, nearly 20 years later, the Panel continues its work to identify and address public policy concerns related to acoustics and the advancement of science. This is the essential purpose of the Panel and its mission aligns with but also extends the Society's commitment "to generate, disseminate, and promote the knowledge and practical applications of acoustics" (acousticalsociety.org).

During its first 17 years of operation, the Panel focused on a number of questions with relatively wide-ranging societal, cultural, and global implications. However, within this larger framework, a significant fraction of time and effort has been devoted to societal concerns centering on the influence of noise on a variety of human as well as on nonhuman animal activities. From concerns related to the acoustic environment of the classroom to the soundscape of our national parks, cities, and oceans, Panel members work to determine whether it is in the interest of the Society and its members, and to society more generally, to prepare and advance policy positions on questions of science and human rights that arise in the workplace, in the halls of justice, and the corridors of government. The Panel has considered numerous policy-related questions over its lifetime, including:

- (1) What should the ASA have to say on reverberation times and noise levels in classrooms?
- (2) What guidance can the ASA offer policy makers on the complex question of anthropogenic ocean noise and its impact on marine mammals and other forms of sea life?
- (3) Should the Society weigh in on the question of universal rights of persons with disability?

These, and many other like-minded questions, occupy the attention of the Panel on Public Policy at each ASA meeting.

Now, as the Panel emerges from its nearly two decades of operation, a new course has been set and new challenges await its members. In addition to the implementation of a restructuring plan designed to further enhance inclusivity (see **Reorganization and Inclusivity**), two initiatives with the capacity to alter the tenor as well as the structure of future meetings were considered at the ASA meeting in Victoria 2018. One outcome of those deliberations was a consensus to place greater emphasis on questions relating to the rights of acousticians, scientists, and engineers around the

Panel on Public Policy

world to carry out their work in a free and open environment. A second initiative to concentrate more attention on environmental concerns related to acoustics was also advanced. Although both of these areas have been of interest from the earliest days of operation of the Panel, the decision renews the commitment of the Panel to these public policy concerns by integrating two new subcommittees, the ASA and Human Rights Subcommittee and the Sound and the Environment Subcommittee, as part of its infrastructure.

The Acoustical Society of America and Human Rights Subcommittee

Although the ASA has a long record of commitment to a human rights agenda, that commitment was recently reinvigorated by accepting an invitation to become a Member Organization of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Science and Human Rights Coalition (SHRC; bit.ly/2KUOXoS). The mission of the SHRC is centered on the tenets of Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (bit.ly/2MOWMwA), an international covenant that is an outgrowth of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (bit.ly/1O8f0nS). There are four principal elements that form the core of Article 15, and they serve as an operational framework for the work of the ASA in the human rights arena.

- (1) Recognize the right of everyone to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications.
- (2) Conserve, develop, and diffuse science and culture.
- (3) Respect the freedom indispensable for scientific research.
- (4) Recognize the benefits of international contacts and cooperation in the scientific and cultural fields.

Arguably, the work of the ASA in this area has been blunted by the lack of an operational procedure within the Society to monitor, prepare reports, and pass action recommendations to the Executive Council regarding human rights questions and issues that relate to the mission of the ASA. Although that work has been, and continues to be, authoritatively informed through our association with the SHRC, the vision and mission of the ASA in this arena will be served more directly by ramping up our own internal attention to human rights questions that are immediately relevant to the Society as the work of the Panel moves forward.

Sound and the Environment Subcommittee

The charge of the Sound and Environment Subcommittee is to identify concerns related to the impact of climate change on the affairs of the acoustic community. How will the impact

of extreme weather and the attendant disruption of otherwise stable planetwide natural systems affect the work of ASA members studying underwater acoustics; colleagues tracking the influence of anthropogenic noise on the health and welfare of terrestrial and aquatic species; or efforts to monitor atmospheric and oceanic conditions? Attention to these and the myriad other climate change concerns will occupy the work of Panel members serving on this subcommittee as the work of the Panel presses on.

Reorganization and Inclusivity

Structural rules established early on in the life of the Panel called for the involvement of a diversity of the many technical areas comprising the ASA membership. This structural requirement was formulated to ensure that “no Technical Committee or other ASA constituency hold a majority vote of the whole (bit.ly/2TUu7wE).” Although efforts to satisfy this directive have been to a large extent successful in that all 13 technical committees (TCs) have been represented on the Panel at one time or another, a proposed rule change will ensure that this goal is achieved on an ongoing basis. To ensure representation from each TC, a liaison from each committee will have a seat on the Panel and will be tasked with the responsibility of representing the interests of the Panel at each TC meeting by reporting on the proceedings of each meeting and soliciting input related to public policy questions and concerns from its members. By opening a direct channel of communication, our goal is to achieve the Society’s mandate and air a full and robust consideration of ASA-relevant public policy interests.

Public Policy, the Acoustical Society of America, and the Future

There is much more to say with regard to where the Panel on Public Policy is heading than it is about its accomplishments, which are substantial in their own right. Although the publication of ASA Policy Statements (bit.ly/2TR62qL), brief declarations stating the position of the ASA on questions of public policy, have been the mainstay of the work of the Panel thus far, as the Panel moves forward, members of the Panel as well as of the ASA membership at large will be encouraged to consider the implementation of other, more extensive, policy-promoting instruments. In addition to issuing policy statements, the founders of the Panel, former Executive Director Charles Schmid, then-President William Hartman, and the first chair of the ad hoc Panel, Edward Walsh, envisioned the limited publication of more detailed reports and

comprehensive white papers that address policy matters of vital interest to the organization. Although policy-related documents of this ilk are unexercised thus far, that situation can and should change. The ASA is recognized as the world's premier acoustics society and, as such, a solid argument can be made that the responsibility to provide data-driven, objectively prepared, and authoritatively written scientific reports on questions of relevance to the acoustics community falls squarely in the lap of the Society. There is no doubt that the cost of conducting business at this level is high, in terms of both human energy and financial resources, but the cost of inaction on this front may very well be even higher.

The Politics of Science and Public Policy

Although not an innately political organization, the ASA leadership understands the essential role that scientists, engineers, and scientific organizations play in the formulation of public policy relating to the scientific and technologically complex acoustics questions of the day. One broad question that emerges from this understanding is both apparent and foundational: "Do all public policy questions centering on 'acoustics' demand input from acousticians?" A lucid, if quarrelsome, reply to that question one may argue is yes. If an issue rises to a level of societal interest such that policy considerations are initiated, then balanced, rigorously objective, scientifically validated guidance from experts in the area is important, if not essential.

A second and equally critical question emerging from a discussion regarding the future of public policy and the ASA is to what extent our Society should invest in this arena. The answer to that question, one might argue, depends on the nature of the specific question under consideration, primarily its complexity. Technologically sophisticated and complex questions will, of necessity, demand the consumption of greater resources than simpler ones. Furthermore, efforts to prioritize policy concerns within the organization are expected to play a larger role in Panel planning as inclusivity goals are achieved and the magnitude of the need for policy-driven engagement increases. Panel members welcome that challenge and urge members of the Society, especially students and more junior members, to join us in this endeavor. Consider contributing to the process by sharing policy concerns with TC Panel liaisons and by attending the open meetings of the Panel. A more inclusive Society is, without question, a vital, more progressive, and forward-thinking Society. Lend your voice to this call for action and help take the ASA to new heights in the policy-making realm.

Policy Making and Policy Implementation

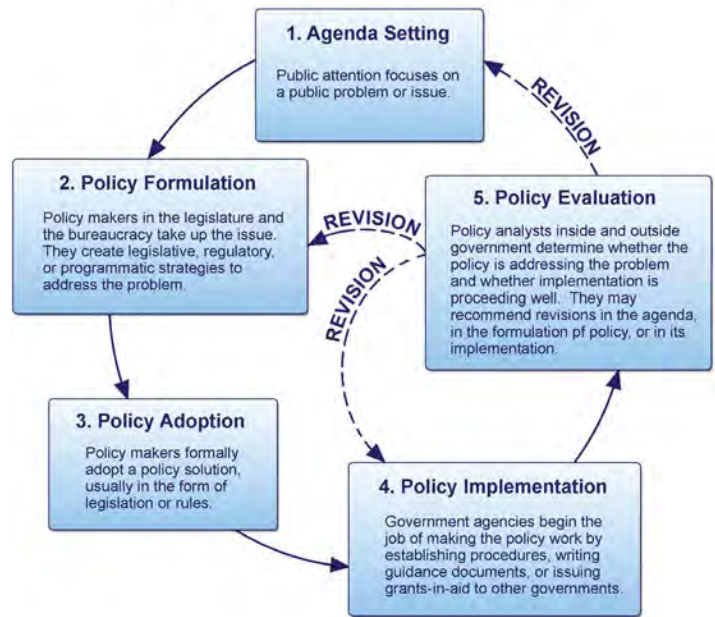


Figure 1. Policy making is a cyclical process. It begins in the agenda-setting stage with recognition and definition of a significant public problem and an organized call to government action. In response, the legislative and bureaucratic machinery of government may formulate, adopt, and implement a strategy for addressing the problem. Analysis of policy effectiveness, in turn, often reveals shortcomings in formulation or implementation or new problems to add to the policy agenda. Adapted from "A Diagram of the Policy Making Process," with permission (bit.ly/2FfL2Sk).

The Cyclical Nature of the Policy-Making Process

Before concluding, it may be worth reviewing the process whereby public policy is enacted. It is cyclical in nature, as suggested in the form of the flow chart shown in the **Figure 1**.

From the critical agenda-setting stage to the implementation and evaluation stages of the process, one key question that scientific and engineering organizations like the ASA have to internalize and resolve is the extent to which participation in each stage in the process should be formalized. To what extent and how, for example, should the ASA strive to take the lead in setting an agenda related to relevant public policy questions within the acoustics community are essential considerations when contemplating a coherent plan of engagement. It is at the early agenda-setting stage in the process that the influence of engagement can be most significant and most lasting. Solid scientific and engineering guidance based on rigorously applied rules of objectivity and reason, promulgated in a free and open

Panel on Public Policy

atmosphere of exchange, can lay the foundation for meaningful deliberation at the next phase, the policy formulation or legislative phase that sets the stage for implementation.

How, then, does an organization like the ASA achieve this level of engagement? In the spring of 2015, four ASA Task Force Committees were established to advance the goals emerging from a Strategic Leadership for the Future Summit (bit.ly/2O879wN) that convened one year earlier and that was organized to address the question, “How will ASA need to change the way it does business... to maintain its position as the premier scientific society in acoustics?” (bit.ly/2JgSDnV). One evident change was to extend its mission by augmenting and enriching its commitment to public policy questions of interest to the Society.

Epilogue

A subset of the questions on the desk of the Panel on Public Policy today has been reviewed, and it is the consideration of these issues that will shape the future of the participation of the ASA in the public policy arena. As the Panel strives to refine and expand its mission and to develop innovative mechanisms to advance its goals, cultivating inclusivity remains a top priority. Although its mission remains essentially unchanged, it may well be time to consider a minor revision but one with powerful implications regarding the mission statement of the Panel, “to identify and address public policy concerns related to acoustics and the advancement of science,” by extending its humanistic scope to include the phrase “and the welfare of humankind.”

NEWS

from the Acoustical Society Foundation Fund

I appreciate the opportunity to inform the membership and friends of the Acoustical Society of America (ASA) about the Acoustical Society Foundation Fund. The Fund derives from tax-deductible gifts and supports scholarships, grants, fellowships, and other special programs of the ASA. In future issues of *Acoustics Today*, I plan to feature each of these programs.

The William and Christine Hartmann Prize in Auditory Neuroscience was established in 2011 through a generous donation by Bill and Chris Hartmann to the ASA to recognize and honor research that links auditory physiology with auditory perception or behavior in humans or other animals. The Prize includes a cash award of \$4,000

and a travel stipend to attend the ASA meeting where the award will be presented. Cindy Moss of Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, is a recent Prize winner and writes, “It’s not every day that you’re awarded a prize for work you love. I was thrilled and honored to be recognized with the Hartmann Prize for my research linking auditory neurophysiology and perception in echolocating bats. I’m now on sabbatical in Hong Kong, where I took very few personal items with me, but I did bring along my Hartmann Medal.”

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Mission of the Acoustical Society Foundation Board:

To support the mission of the ASA by developing financial resources for strategic initiatives and special purposes.

ASFF For more information, contact James H. Miller at miller@uri.edu