

A Conversation with ASA Publications Editor in Chief Jim Lynch

James H. Miller, John A. Colosi,
Timothy F. Duda, and James F. Lynch

At the encouragement of *Acoustics Today* Editor Arthur Popper, a few of James F. (Jim) Lynch's close colleagues sat down over Zoom to discuss *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America (JASA)*, its present state, and its future. Before getting into the interview, however, it might be useful to briefly introduce the editor in chief (EIC), his academic background, and even a few of his hobbies (Figure 1).

Jim's early years were more from blue collar New Jersey than from an academic background, and although probably a bit different from that of many academics, still very enjoyable and to his mind invaluable in learning some "people skills." If asked where he comes from, his answer will be "Exit 12," which is Jerseyan for which exit on the New Jersey Turnpike you got off at for a given town. His interest in science came from a toy (by his present standards) telescope, science fiction books (astronomer Fred Hoyle was his favorite author), and the 1964 World's Fair in New York City, where he spent a lot of time when he wasn't haunting bowling alleys. His interest in science includes "pretty much everything," which explains in part why he enjoys the breadth of the Acoustical Society of America (ASA) and its publications.

On a personal level, Jim has a lovely wife, Christine; two grown daughters, Kerry and Holly; and three grandchildren. He is also a dedicated hobbyist. His hobbies include astronomy (where he is president of his local club), keyboard music (where he is working to regain the Chopin Ballades), computer games (he has been a "raider" in WoW for years), and reading all sorts of books; he is a manic bibliophile (including technical textbooks in all areas).



Figure 1. Jim Lynch with several of his hobbies. Photo: T. Duda.

Jim obtained his BS in physics from the Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1972 and his PhD in physics from the University of Texas at Austin in 1978. He currently holds the position of senior scientist emeritus at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI) in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. Jim is a Fellow of the ASA, a Fellow of the IEEE, and former editor in chief of the *IEEE Journal of Oceanic Engineering* and of *JASA Express Letters (JASA-EL)*. He is a recipient of the Walter Munk Award (2009), the Oceanic Engineering Society Emeritus Award (2019), and the ASA Gold Medal (2021).

For more than twenty years, Jim has maintained an outstanding record of service to the ASA. In addition to his service on the Acoustical Oceanography (AO) and Underwater Acoustics (UW) Technical Committees (including AO Technical Committee chair), he served on Executive Council from 2011 to 2015, and has been on a large number of ASA committees dealing with publication policy, public relations, the Internet, nominating, medals and awards, and interaction with the former Soviet Union states. He was also technical chair of the 2006 and 2014 Providence meetings. Since 2014, Jim has served as the editor in chief of *JASA*.

Having introduced our editor, on to the interview!

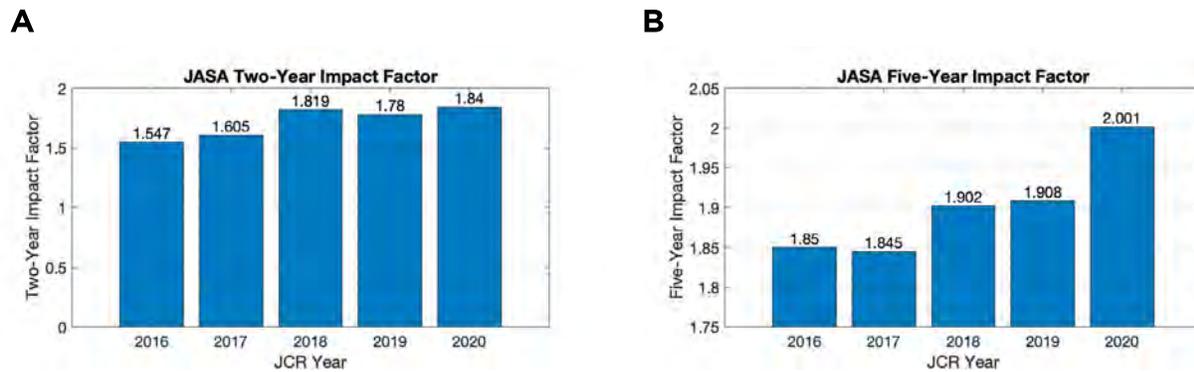


Figure 2. Two- (A) and five-year (B) impact factors from the Journal Citation Reports (JCR) from 2017 to 2021 from Clarivate. JASA, The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America.

James H. Miller (JHM): What is your view of impact factor and other measures of journal effectiveness, and what is *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* (JASA) doing to increase its effectiveness in the competitive publications environment that exists today?

James F. Lynch (JFL): The first thing people ask when they learn that I’m editor of a journal is, “What’s its impact factor (IF)?”

Whether they’re right or wrong, a large number of people believe that the IF is the primary metric by which a journal should be judged. And although that is frustrating to most journal editors, it is an opinion that should be critically examined. So, let’s do so.

The calculation of a two-year IF for a journal is simple. It is the total number of citations in a particular year “to items published in the previous two years, divided by the total number of scholarly items (these comprise articles, reviews, and proceedings papers) published in the journal in the previous two years” (Clarivate, 2020). Citations can be self-citations from the journal or “from different journals, proceedings, or books indexed in Web of Science” (Clarivate, 2020).

The IF shows that the journal’s papers are being read and cited by the active research community. This is important to universities and research laboratories; when you’re hiring or promoting faculty or research staff, you want these people to be in active, fundable, and visible areas.

The two-year IF is more prominent than the five-year IF because it better matches the shorter time scales of cutting-edge research (see JASA’s two-year IF in **Figure 2A**). The five-year IF measures more leisurely, but still academically impactful, research (see **Figure 2B**).

One “merit” of the IF is that it provides a simple tool for evaluating the academic record of people outside your own expertise. The dangers of using such an oversimplification, both of journal quality and of a person’s professional worth, are obvious, but this doesn’t stop people from employing this approach.

Now, let’s turn to some of the “downsides” of the IF.

The biggest downside, from a journal’s point of view, is taking the IF as the *only* metric of journal quality. Indeed, some institutions forbid their faculty or employees from publishing in journals with a low IF, which hurts both the journals (as a negative feedback loop) and the people who feel that they’d prefer publishing in them.

JHM: Because of the downsides of the IF, are other lesser known metrics in use?

JFL: In fact, a major point to make is that the IF is just one metric out of many! Let’s look at other metrics and believe me there are multitudes! We’ll only discuss a few.

Let’s start with a metric that is actually an “IF on steroids,” which is the Immediacy Index. This “...is the

average number of times an article is cited in the year it is published” (Clarivate, 2020). *JASA*’s has almost doubled over the past five years, most likely due to our increased number of special issues and special content articles.

On the opposite side of the “time scale” spectrum is the Cited Half-Life of a journal, which is the median age of the articles cited in a given year (Clarivate, 2020). *JASA*’s Cited Half-Life is over 16 years, which is very long. Thus, *JASA* articles perform well over the long term in regard to citations.

There are other citation-based metrics of journal performance, such as the “Eigenfactor score” and “Article Influence Score,” that we monitor. I’ll simply say that we monitor metrics such as these mostly for “red flag” indicators such as lags behind other acoustics-related journals and, to date, we don’t see any.

John A. Colosi (JAC): Journal citations are one type of metric. Can you tell us about any other ways to evaluate the performance of journals?

JFL: Well yes, there are other measures that consider practitioners and other readers of a journal’s content who may not publish or cite articles but certainly read them and use them.

There are so-called “altmetrics” for gauging impact, which include, e.g., downloads, mentions on social media/blogs, and news coverage. An important altmetric is usage, which includes abstract views and full-text downloads. *JASA* has done great with these measures.

Over the years, both have grown for *JASA*, and in 2020, there were ~5,300,000 abstract views and ~2,000,000 full-text downloads.

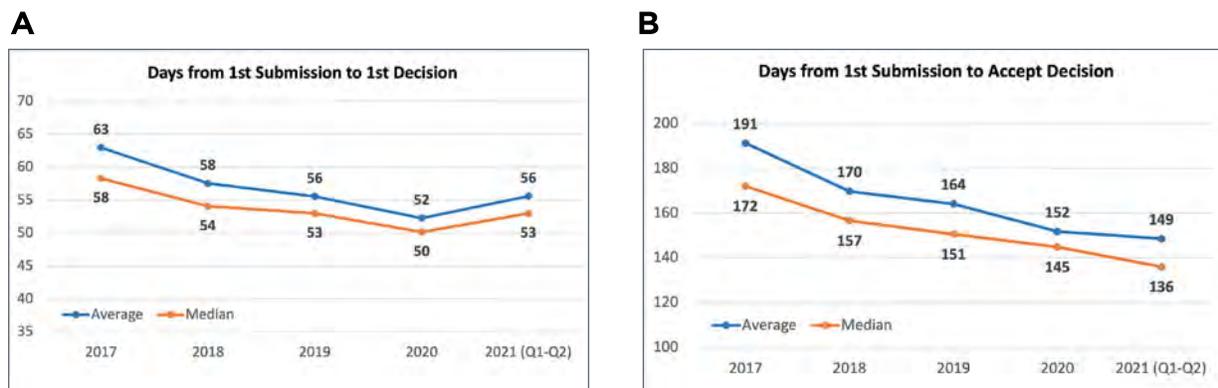
Another important area is our social media presence. We actively promote all our publications on social media, which is increasingly important, especially if you’re going to reach out to younger people, and our staff has greatly increased its efforts in this area recently.

Promotion and advertising of our content has become a very big piece of the “publication equation” nowadays, especially given the large amount of competition that exists. In a sense, the extent to which a journal promotes and publicizes its author’s articles also becomes a metric of journal performance. We are increasingly active in this area.

Timothy F. Duda (TFD): Citations and views are, of course, key for journal evaluation, but what about all-important review and publication speed?

JFL: Over the last five years, *JASA* has greatly reduced the time from submission to both first decision and acceptance (**Figure 3**), and we now feel we are in a relatively good place concerning that particular metric. The slight increases in time during 2021 are almost certainly pandemic related because authors, reviewers, and editors alike often needed more time, given the adjustments to their life that they were making for Covid. And even in normal times there will be some manuscripts that have problems, which means they are going to take extra time. That’s just part of the “handling time distribution curve.” We do take

Figure 3. Median and average days from first submission to both first decision (A) and accept decision (B) for *JASA*.



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care to flag those cases and make sure that the “long tail” of the distribution curve is cut as short as possible.

A crucial part of maintaining quality is the review process. A tough, but fair, review benefits both the author and the journal. Over 1,800 reviewers worldwide reviewed for *JASA* in 2020 (a big thank you to our reviewers!). We try to keep our (eventual) acceptance rate at around 50%.

One area that gets undersold in rating journals is “customer service.” Does the journal get back to authors quickly if there are, e.g., any questions or adjustments? Is the author left in the dark about the status of his/her paper for long periods of time? Getting a timely reply or timely information can make the difference between a good publishing experience and a bad one, and authors remember and vote with their feet when it comes to submitting their next paper. We have made a serious effort to concentrate on customer service, and it has been appreciated.

Let me conclude this long reply to a rather short, but critically important, question with an observation and a suggestion. Judging a journal’s worth by only one quantity, IF, is using an inadequate measure, an opinion/observation that I am not alone in making today. Rather, I would suggest that journals make available a menu of metrics and qualities of their journal(s), of which the above is an abbreviated list, and then let the users (universities, laboratories, practitioners) make their own weighted average of the properties that they consider most important to them and judge from that. I think that, in the long run, this would better serve both the journals and their users. We are planning to do just that.

JAC: Jim, the ASA is attractive to many of us because of the combination of the journal and the meetings. The *Proceedings of Meetings on Acoustics (POMA)* is a great way of combining the two. Could you comment?

JFL: The ASA is attractive for many reasons; it is very collegial, it is very broadband technically, and it accommodates both academics and practitioners of acoustics. *POMA* has a nice niche in accommodating papers from the meetings in a lightly (editor) reviewed format so that people can quickly put a “marker” on new research results and also make a record of practical and engineering results that might not get published otherwise. We have been very happy with *POMA*’s success.

I would note that the “technically broadband, not narrowly focused” and “academic and practitioner” aspects of the ASA are very much strengths for the Society but are actually somewhat problematic for *JASA* as regard raising our impact factor. But *JASA* is committed to serving *all* of the Society’s constituent groups, so we just deal with it.

TFD: You mentioned “outlier papers” that take an inordinately long time, but I think that’s a red herring because most papers go through the system properly. Could you comment?

JFL: A good question! When we report our “time to first decision” and “time to acceptance” statistics to the Editorial Board and ASA leadership, we include both the mean time and the median time. As you know, the mean time is greatly affected by the tail of the distribution, whereas the median statistic filters it out to some extent. One point to note, from an editor’s point of view, is that authors whose papers are on the long tail of the distribution make up a majority of “unhappy authors.” We like to cut that tail down as much as we can!

JHM: What are the effects of the open-access (OA) movement on *JASA* and *JASA-EL*?

JFL: Regarding OA, we are all for opening up everything as much as we can. The more open the access to an article, the more readers and (to some extent) the more citations. *JASA* has had a gold OA option for some time now, and *JASA-EL*, which was formerly a component of *JASA*, has just become a fully gold OA journal, with Creative Commons CC BY licensing. So, we’re onboard with the movement to a considerable extent.

Regarding *JASA*, we will continue as a hybrid journal, which means that we will have a subscription with an option for authors to pay for gold OA because the ASA derives a significant amount of operating revenue from the journal’s earnings as a hybrid operation. If *JASA* went completely OA, it would probably at best break even as a cost center rather than show any net income. As things seem reasonably stable for hybrid journals, we will continue that model.

But, given that, we still make a good amount of *JASA*’s content “free access” for limited periods of time. Special

issues, special content (reviews, tutorials, forums), “*JASA Reflections*,” and technical area picks all are made freely available for significant periods. This is premium content, and so a reader without subscription access is certainly not totally shut out.

JASA-EL becoming a separate OA journal, together with it being a quicker, short-format journal with a lower-than-average article-processing charge (APC), makes it more attractive to funders and institutions that insist on dealing with fully open access operations. *JASA-EL* just transitioned in January 2021 so we will be monitoring its performance metrics very closely, and we have high hopes for its success.

JAC: Do you feel any pressure from either the movement or competitors about OA?

JFL: No, not really. I think the OA movement has tempered a little due to realizing that not one business model fits all. Although OA is a good thing for readers, it can be harmful to technical societies and publishers, which would, in the long run, hurt the supply of good quality journal papers available to readers.

TFD: What are your thoughts on new subject areas for *JASA*? And have you considered starting an “applied acoustics” journal?

JFL: *JASA*’s subject area selection is determined by what is of interest to the ASA as a Society. Groups like the Technical Council and Task Force A of the Strategic Plan generally determine these directions. We can contribute input and opinions, but we can’t charge off in our own directions without Society buy-in. Yes, you’ll find an occasional paper that is a bit “out of area” here and there but that is more to add some spice and variety than to alter our course.

As to an “applied” or “practice” journal, we have recently added that as a section to *JASA* called “Acoustic Standards and Practice.” This works well as a *JASA* section but going to a full new journal would not be justified.

JAC: What about breaking up *JASA* into separate subject areas, similar to Tim’s question?

JFL: Basically, we’re too small both in terms of the number of papers we would receive in any given technical area and in terms of the Society supporting many

separate journals. Big societies, like the American Physical Society (APS) and the American Geophysical Union (AGU), can split the *Physical Review* and the *Journal of Geophysical Research*, respectively, into half a dozen sub-journals and make it work because they have very large memberships and staffs. That’s just not an option for us.

And furthermore, there are now many specialized journals in the areas we might split off into. Gone are the days near *JASA*’s birth (1929) when we were pretty much the only journal specializing in acoustics and the results (in various sciences and applications) that you could derive with acoustics. We have many very good competitor journals that are in focused areas, and, in fact, we all publish in them as well as in *JASA*. For instance, you and I would most likely publish a good oceanography result derived with acoustics in the *Journal of Physical Oceanography* or the *Journal of Geophysical Research: Oceans*. That’s just life in 2021. I don’t see any gain in trying to compete with them by going to more focused sub-journals.

Finally, our being “broadband” in our technical interests and having them all in one journal is a source of strength because it facilitates cross-pollination between fields. If you never see the other field, you’ll never know that there is an interesting technique or result that could help you with your own work.

TFD: Do you foresee a need for different editorial policies and processes for the different technical committees (TCs) in the ASA?

JFL: We don’t have different rules or different policies for the different TCs that *JASA* and the other ASA publications deal with nor do we envision going in that direction in the future. There are two basic reasons. First, there is the practical reason that we don’t have adequate staff to support the extra work that would be entailed in doing that. And second, disputes would quickly arise from one or another of the TCs complaining that others were receiving “preferential treatment.” This isn’t disparaging the TCs; it’s just natural that people and groups worry about being treated fairly. Doing things the way we do currently avoids opening the door to any such disputes.

JAC: Do you think there is any TC specific interest in *JASA* versus *JASA-EL* versus *POMA*? Are the different publications the way you take care of specific needs?

JFL: That's two questions, with slightly different answers. As for TC interest in particular ASA publications, the TCs are fairly even as far as publishing in *JASA* and *POMA*, with the number of publications scaling with journal volume and with membership numbers in each TC, more or less. For *JASA-EL*, the Speech Communication TC does seem to like it more than most, with Psychological and Physiological Acoustics and Underwater Acoustics in second place. I'm not sure why those TCs like *JASA-EL*, and we can look into it. Basically, I'm just pleased that they do!

The answer to the second question is not so much concerned with the TCs as with basic publishing needs. *JASA*'s niche is that of a standard, peer-reviewed, archival journal. *JASA-EL* provides a shorter format, full open access, and a quicker route to producing a peer-reviewed publication. *POMA* is an editor-reviewed conference proceedings, which gives both academics and practitioners a way to publish their conference talk results quickly without the full rigor of the peer-review process. And *Acoustics Today* is our "general public interested in science and its applications" magazine, which is, in many ways, our best public interface. Each publication has its niche and purpose.

JAC: A fun question: In this era of information and disinformation (probably more of the latter of late), what is the role of the peer-reviewed journal?

JFL: A fun question, indeed. One thing that I will state outright is that I do not see that we should participate to any large extent in trying to debunk the large amount of misinformation and disinformation being spread around. It takes 10 times the effort to debunk bad information than it does to create it. So it's a losing battle, timewise. Also, I would point out that many of the "misinformers" are very skilled at debating, whereas scientists, although they may have the truth on their side, can easily be made to look bad by crafty debaters.

The best thing we can do, and indeed our mission, is to put out good, reliable information on acoustic topics of interest and importance. That's what peer-reviewed journals endeavor to do. Is the peer-review process perfect? No, but it puts out the best-vetted material possible and has a very high "reliability factor."

On a related note, I'll also note that we scientists also can have some strong opinions and can be activists in certain

areas. Wind turbines, marine mammal concerns, the effects of common ultrasonic devices, and many other real-world concerns and problems generate as strong opinions among scientific and technical people as any other sector of the concerned population. However, we can't, and don't, allow that activism to be expressed in our scientific and technical papers. As much as it may seem restrictive, we need to keep to the Joe Friday (for those who may remember the TV show *Dragnet*) "just the facts..." attitude. Doing otherwise compromises our publication's integrity and credibility. Commentary on important social issues and policy statements come at the ASA level, not via our peer-reviewed publications. I would note that some Society policy discussion can appear in *Acoustics Today* and some opinions discussed at meeting presentations appear in *POMA*, but these are both simply editor vetted, not peer reviewed. Overall, we make every effort to present careful, well-considered information.

JAC: What are your thoughts on press releases?

JFL: Our publications are monthly or quarterly so press releases about the material they contain are not as timely as you would find in daily or weekly publications. But we do have occasional press releases through the American Institute of Physics (AIP), and, of course, the ASA has them as part of our meetings.

JAC: The "old-fashioned" journal article, with regular text, figures, and format, has been around seemingly forever. What are the new innovations to it, if any?

JFL: The old-style article still has a great deal of life left in it, and I think that format will be around for a good time to come, whether in print (which is diminishing, by the way) or electronically (which is the dominant genre nowadays). But it has a number of augmentations now as well. Audio and video files, extensive amounts of supplementary material, computer programs, and hyperlinks are all commonplace features of a modern journal article. Also, we now are moving to other vehicles that communicate the author's message. Podcasts, video abstracts, "Tweetorials" (short-form tutorials on Twitter), YouTube videos, and similar web-based communications are or will become part of our publication portfolio. We are paying attention to the new channels that arise, and when it looks like there is a good opportunity to better disseminate our material, we will jump

on it. This keeps us in touch with both the younger and older demographic.

JHM: Is ASA Publications staffed at the right level? Could you comment?

JFL: ASA Publications has a rather small (and excellent) permanent staff, enough to cover the day-to-day operations that are needed. When some additional help is needed, we contract out some tasks but really not very often. As to our Editorial Board, we have a very large pool of associate editors for *JASA*, *JASA-EL*, and *POMA*, who are volunteers. Given our Society's (and thus our publications) broad bandwidth of topics, we find that this a good way to ensure that all the technical areas are well covered and that we don't overburden a few individuals. We ask our associate editors to handle roughly a dozen papers per year, which we feel is not overtaxing them given that they are generally working full time to begin with. This model has worked well for the ASA for years and seems to be continuing to work well.

I might mention that our permanent staff is working almost fully remotely. Due to circumstances beyond our control, we gave up a permanent office site about three years ago and found that we could function just as well, if not better, without one. Modern phone and computer conference capabilities make "work at home" an effective option and also a cost-effective one. We have moved all our books and archival journal material to small storage units, and even that material will be culled to a very small amount. The "go to the office every day" paradigm has drastically changed!

TFD: You mentioned that, in addition to quality and timeliness, the journals would also be stressing "promotion and advertising." Could you elaborate?

JFL: As an author, you put in work to produce a high-quality paper and then revise it based on feedback from peer review (which we hopefully have made useful and timely for you.) Now, you want it to be read by people and used! But, given the amount of competitor journals that exist today, we can't just sit back and expect people to come to us based on our journal(s) being "well respected." That gets you some traffic, yes, but it is no longer sufficient. We have to go to people and let them know that we have material that will be of

interest to them. Other journals are definitely doing it, and I don't want to see the ASA journals and articles left behind and ignored!

We now have a reasonably large program of marketing and advertising coordinated with AIP Publishing and are also developing some tactics on our own, especially in regard to utilizing social media. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are channels that we currently use and closely monitor. We also have a podcast called *Across Acoustics* (see acrossacoustics.buzzsprout.com) where we interview authors about their articles. And we are considering also using games, quizzes, contests, handouts, and any other legitimate means we can think of. And there is a new ad hoc ASA committee called the Publications Engagement Advisory Board that will be working on new ideas to attract authors, readers, and any other "shareholders" of our publications content. We don't intend to become "P. T. Barnums," but we don't want to be stodgy, either!

JHM: How does publications involve early-career people and students?

JFL: Let me answer "how much?" first. The simple answer is not enough. This is an area that needs some further work, and I'd like to talk to the Student Council in the not-too-distant future about possible ideas.

As to what we've done, we started the Publications Engagement Advisory Board that has a few of students and early-career members, and we look forward to their and the other members' ideas to enhance our engagement and social media efforts.

Also, we held a workshop a few years ago, which Tessa Bent, John Hansen, our publications staff, and I produced. It was entitled something like "So you want to be an author/reviewer/editor, eh?" and it gave the students and early-career people some contrived papers, reviews, and editorial responses to consider and judge. These items were purposely made to contain mistakes in content and judgment, some pretty outrageous. It was fun producing these spoof documents and even more fun leading groups of workshop participants in dissecting them and how they would respond to them. I'd very much like to do this again because I think it was a good introduction as to how you "play" things in these roles.

JHM: Last question: what are your personal views on the EIC position?

JFL: I think you know me well enough, Jim, to know that for me work is play and vice versa and that I seriously enjoy both my science work and my editorial work. I wouldn't have stuck with EIC work for close to 20 years if I didn't get a good degree of satisfaction from it. Of course, it is very important work as well. We live in a supposedly "posttruth" world and so putting out results that people can trust via the peer-review process as well as well-considered opinions is an important thing to keep doing. So, rate my job satisfaction as "high."

That being said, I'm hoping to stay on as EIC for only one more term and then pass the baton. I'm now a septuagenarian, and my family, telescopes, keyboards, electronics bench, and bookshelf are all beckoning me for more time. I'd hate to disappoint them. And as you know, I've had a few health issues, although I'm not about to do the "old guy" thing and expound on them.

For the next person who takes the job, I would like to pass on some insights.

An editor has to be more than just a scientist/technical person who understands the basics of the material that their journal is publishing. And in the case of ASA Publications, that is hard enough to begin with, given the technical bandwidth of the Society. Indeed, interacting with the associate editors is the only way to do this. An EIC also has to have good people and management skills because the EIC's desk is where all the problems land and just as many are personal as technical. A prime couple of those skills are patience and restraint because your personal competence, intelligence, integrity, and perhaps even lineage will be called into question by an irate author not long after you take the job. Your job is to handle them diplomatically and, in many cases, even legalistically. Having a good wine cellar can be a real help with this.

Learning the publishing landscape is also part of the job because this is a big and complex business and is not taught in the usual science courses that our TC members take. On the job experience, usually as an associate editor,

helps here as well as being someone who has also published a few papers and knows how peer review works on a personal level. Serving on one or more of our publications committees is also useful.

Being an ASA member would also be helpful in learning what technical directions the Society wants to head in as well as in suggesting directions.

And finally, I think that caring about what you do and deeming it an important part of your life is crucial. Having all the other attributes but not caring strongly about the work means that this is not the job for you. It is a simple truism that people do their best working at things they hold as important.

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About the Authors



James H. Miller miller@uri.edu

*Department of Ocean Engineering
University of Rhode Island (URI)
Narragansett, Rhode Island 02882,
USA*

James H. (Jim) Miller is professor of ocean engineering and oceanography at the University of Rhode Island (URI) in Narragansett, Rhode Island. He earned his BSEE from Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1979; his MSEE from Stanford, Stanford, California, in 1981, and his ScD in oceanographic engineering from MIT, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI), Woods Hole, Massachusetts, in 1987. He teaches and conducts research in the areas of ocean acoustics, including the effects of the seafloor on propagation, marine bioacoustics, and the impacts of offshore wind farm construction. Jim is a Fellow of the Acoustical Society of America and served as ASA president in 2013–2014. He is presently chair of the Acoustical Society Foundation Board.



John A. Colosi
jacolosi@nps.edu

*Department of Oceanography
Naval Postgraduate School (NPS)
833 Dyer Road
Monterey, California 93943, USA*

John A. Colosi received BA and PhD degrees in physics from the University of California, San Diego, La Jolla (1988) and the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC; 1993), Santa Cruz, respectively. He holds professorships at both the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS), Monterey, California, and the UCSC (adjunct). Previously, he was a Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, Woods Hole, Massachusetts, tenured scientist. He has authored a book, *Sound Propagation Through the Stochastic Ocean*, and has over 85 refereed publications on ocean acoustics/physical oceanography. He was a recipient of the A. B. Wood Medal and the Medwin Prize in Acoustical Oceanography and is a Fellow of the Acoustical Society of America. His scientific interests are in wave propagation in random media (WPRM), remote sensing, and internal waves and tides.



Timothy F. Duda
tduda@whoi.edu

*Applied Ocean Physics & Engineering
Department
Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution
Woods Hole, Massachusetts 02543,
USA*

Timothy F. Duda received his PhD in oceanography from the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, in 1986. He worked at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, from 1986 to 1991 and has been a scientist at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, Woods Hole, Massachusetts, since 1991. His three primary fields of study are ocean acoustic propagation, ocean internal gravity waves, and ocean-mixing processes. His research into these has included theoretical and observational physical process studies, development of new measurement tools, and computational acoustic modeling.



James F. Lynch jlynch@whoi.edu
*Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution
Woods Hole, Massachusetts 02543,
USA*

James F. (Jim) Lynch obtained his BS in physics from the Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1972 and his PhD in physics from the University of Texas at Austin in 1978. He currently holds the position of senior scientist emeritus at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI), Woods Hole, Massachusetts. Jim is a Fellow

of the Acoustical Society of America, a Fellow of the IEEE, former editor in chief of the *IEEE Journal of Oceanic Engineering*, and current editor in chief of *The Journal Acoustical Society of America (JASA)*. He is a recipient of the Walter Munk Award (2009), the Oceanic Engineering Society Emeritus Award (2019), and the ASA Gold Medal (2021). His primary hobby is amateur astronomy, and currently he is president of the Cape Cod Astronomical Society.

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