

# A Day in the Life

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A lot happens in the day-to-day running of a scientific society like APS. Some things are visible to members: emails about next year's convention, the *Observer* for your reading pleasure, and everyone's favorite, reminders to pay your dues. Many other activities are not generally visible, however. Today, I'd like to share a peek behind the scenes, so you can see the details of one of the most difficult situations that APS has faced since I was elected President.

On Monday, December 16, 2019, I had just settled in to start some much-needed scientific writing when I received an urgent email from APS Executive Director Sarah Brookhart, informing me that the Trump administration was about to release an executive order that would impact APS and other scientific societies in the country. This executive order would require all papers involving research supported by US federal funding to be made freely available immediately upon publication. As I understand the circumstances, an executive order was rumored as early as December 9, 2019. A broad group of science-society CEOs, representing a cross-section of the larger scientific community, became more fully aware of the executive order and its timeline — there was a possibility that it might be signed within the week — on Thursday December 12, 2019. Information about the impending executive order was confirmed by a credible source, Research!America, the next day — yes, on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>.

Under today's system, papers reporting on US federally funded research become freely available after 12 months, and some journals let you pay for open access immediately when your paper is published. Making open access complete and immediate is a great goal and a necessary element of any plan to democratize science. In fact, the APS Board of Directors had just voted nine days earlier to strike a committee to develop tangible, significant efforts to strengthen open and transparent scientific practice. And we have begun the planning process to transition to a future where all scholarly articles will be peer-reviewed and made available upon publication at no cost.

*Under the current system, all APS journals have an immediate open access option which requires*

authors to pay the article processing charges. Authors can self-archive accepted manuscripts with no embargo. Learn more at [psychologicalscience.org/publications/open-science](https://psychologicalscience.org/publications/open-science).

As scientists, we place high value on making our research discoveries available to the scientific community, and many scientists are in favor of doing so via publishing with complete open access. But this executive order could bring far more harm than good. In the short term, the immediate removal of the 12-month embargo period could disrupt the parts of the peer-review infrastructure that are supported by US commercial publishers (under the current system, for example, peer review for APS journals is built and operated by a company called ScholarOne, which licenses its platform to SAGE). The executive order could financially burden individual scientists. If library subscriptions and universities do not cover the costs of publication, then publishers may require individual scientists to pay expensive article-processing charges, which could disproportionately hurt young scientists and those without much grant funding. (Stay tuned for more on this point.) My own lab would be forced to cut a full-time researcher to free up the necessary funds. And the executive order would likely jeopardize nonprofit scientific societies, such as APS, that rely on partnerships with professional publishers for much of the funding that provides member services. All this would happen *imminently*, without any input from the communities it would affect. It was a recipe for chaos.

In response, affected parties mobilized over the weekend and swiftly drafted two letters to the Trump administration. By Monday morning, both letters were complete and scientific societies were being asked to sign on. [One letter](#) was led by the American Chemical Society (ACS). It focused on the problems with an immediate, abrupt change to the current system, as well as the fact that scientific societies like ACS and APS depend on publishing revenues to survive, all while extolling the virtues of open access.

The [second letter](#), led by the Association of American Publishers (AAP), had a different emphasis. It focused rather enthusiastically on US dominance in commercial science publishing worldwide. It implied that scientific publications are a commodity to be sold throughout the world to benefit US industry. And it cautioned against giving away “valuable American intellectual property [...] to the rest of the world for free.” Sentences like these were definitely not to my liking. A scientist’s work should not be the intellectual property of publishers (in APS journals, authors retain copyright ownership of their articles). And it is *precisely* APS’s goal to give away psychological science (Miller, 1969)! It is also APS policy to be an international society. In fact, in addition to striking the committee to advance open and transparent scientific practices, the APS Board had also just voted to reconstitute a committee to internationalize the research and ontology of psychological science in the broadest terms, beyond North American and Western Europe.

APS will always support activities that are in the best interest of science, even when those scientific interests might compete with commercial ones. So why consider signing a letter that conflicts with APS policy? Because these letters were not policy statements. They were political advocacy documents designed to convince a US administration — one that cares more about business and less about science — to stay a hasty and potentially damaging executive order. The AAP-led letter, in particular, used arguments from the administration’s own world view as tools for persuasion.

So there I was, on a rainy Monday in mid-December, being asked whether I’d authorize APS to sign

both letters. The ACS-led letter was an easy yes. But would it be enough? In that moment, I believed that the more strongly worded, AAP-led letter seemed more likely to influence the current US administration because it clearly argued against the executive order on commercial grounds. Interestingly, it also ended up having far more signatures (120 scientific organizations and five commercial publishers) than the ACS-led letter. (Some organizations, such as the Psychonomic Society and the Federation of Associations in Behavioral & Brain Sciences, declined to sign the letter, however.)

While thinking this through, I was required to consider another factor: APS is a nonprofit organization, which means its president and all members of the board of directors are [required by law](#) to act to safeguard its financial health. So I had to consider what could happen if I declined to have APS sign the AAP-led letter, and the executive order went into effect and harmed APS. The entire board could be held legally accountable.

Welcome to a *bad day* in the life of a society president: a looming crisis with two imperfect options. I could refrain from signing the AAP-led letter and risk harm to psychological science and some of the scientists themselves, not to mention possible financial ruin for APS (and possibly legal negligence for the board and me). Or I could authorize APS to sign both letters, one of which included advocacy language that would never appear in any APS policy statement. Which would you choose?

In the end, I gave my permission for APS to sign both letters. In my view, it was perfectly consistent for APS to have a goal such as “achieve complete open access as quickly as is feasible” while also signing advocacy letters to prevent a harmful way of achieving that goal. Shortly thereafter, ACS and AAP submitted their letters to the US government, and they seemed to have the desired effect, at least for the moment. As I write these words, the executive order has been temporarily stayed but is still in play.

This decision to sign or not sign was within my responsibilities as APS President, and the path forward seemed clear to me in the moment. There was no requirement for me to deliberate with or seek approval from the rest of the board, the APS Publications Committee, our team of editors, or the broader APS membership. Nevertheless, some actions can be a really, really good idea even if they are not required. Reasonable people can disagree whether signing the letters was the right choice. And guess what? They did.

Almost immediately, I received emails from the chair of the APS Publications Committee and several of our journal editors, voicing serious concerns, particularly about the tone and content of the AAP-led letter. Should we have signed one letter and not the other? Should others have been consulted before APS signed the letters? Should APS retract its signature from the AAP-led letter (if that’s even possible), and if so, would a retraction be seen by the current US administration as weakness and undermine the scientific coalition?

A vigorous discussion ensued, occupied the entire winter holiday, and took most of the month of January to resolve. The discussion was anchored in a shared goal of finding a productive way forward — one that honors APS’s ongoing commitment to open and transparent science and its growing international focus, the various concerns with the AAP-led letter, and the threats posed by instituting immediate open access by executive order. For me, it’s been a valuable lesson in how to make decisions in the midst of a multivariable problem with competing priorities and obligations.



(Questions and concerns also appeared on Twitter, a forum that I read when I have time but not as part of my APS duties. The tweets quickly led to a [petition](#), which had been signed by about 500 people when this column went to print, protesting APS's signature on the AAP-led letter. Petition and protests are a time-honored tradition in the academy and can sometimes be a useful way to make voices heard. Arguing with each other is, after all, part of our job description.)

The situation, as it unfolded, provided me with the opportunity for a couple of observations that I'd like to share. First, we are a community of scientists who care passionately about psychological science. It's been heartening to learn that most of us share the same larger goal, making a global psychological science open and available to all, even if we disagree on whether I made the best call regarding the signatures.

Second, some of our colleagues feel underappreciated or exploited by today's system of commercial publishing. When a society that is supposed to serve you signs a letter that appears to uphold a system that you experience as oppressive, it's understandable to feel angry. I totally get this. When I was an assistant professor, I thought the whole system of commercial publishing was nuts. I can still hear my younger self in my head: "We write papers for free. We review them for free. We edit journals — a thankless and often painful job full of conflict and discontent — for a pittance. And then we pay to read the papers in print, including our own work. What the ???" Never did I think that I would one day be APS President, let alone be in a position where people perceived me as defending the status quo (rather than preventing a terrible implementation of something that should be done planfully and thoughtfully).

Third, some of our colleagues are deeply frustrated with what they perceive as an apathy toward scientific openness. It's easy to *say* that APS supports open and transparent science across the globe, that we want to give psychology away, but what concretely is APS going to *do* to make that happen? Words are cheap; actions count. I am sympathetic to that sentiment. Nonetheless, I also know that APS remains firmly committed to broadening open access in a way that is responsive to the needs of the scientific community, including undue financial burdens on individual scientists, particularly in an era when grant funding is sparse.

While things might not be moving fast enough for some members' liking, they are moving in the right direction. APS is already engaged in fact-finding and discussions to explore the possibility of making [Advances in Methods and Practices in Psychological Science](#) a fully open-access journal. And the new APS committee to strengthen and expand open and transparent science is setting its own terms and its own scope, and it will be significantly supported and resourced as it works with other APS committees and the broader scientific community to get the job done. These are just first steps.

When I consider the concerns raised by colleagues, along with my extended discussions with the rest of the board, I honestly wish I'd had the benefit of these considerations before making my decision to approve APS's signature on the AAP-led letter. I don't know if these considerations would have changed my decision; to claim otherwise is hindsight bias. I *can* say what I would do if faced with the same decision right now: I would not give my approval for APS to sign the AAP-led letter. And then, I would be writing this column about how deeply worried I am that the executive order will bring harm to APS and science more broadly. And I would be agonizing over whether I made the right decision.

When it comes right down to it, I honestly did not anticipate that my decision to sign the AAP-led letter

would cause some colleagues to question APS's core commitment to psychological science, including open and transparent practices and international participation in the broadest terms. To rectify that impression and provide a much-needed course correction, I have taken two steps. First, I drafted and signed an [open letter](#) to you, the APS membership, with the full backing of the board of directors, communicating profound regret — along with an apology — for allowing APS to sign the AAP-led letter. Second, I drafted and signed a [letter](#) on behalf of the APS Board, sent to the Trump Administration, expressing regret for having signed the AAP-led letter. And here, I will offer one further deeply felt apology, specifically to those who wanted a voice in the decision of whether or not to sign the letters but did not have an opportunity to be heard (also see this [message](#) from the board of directors published December 23, 2019). Sure, there was an urgency to the situation that made a thorough discussion difficult, but it was never my intent to leave anyone feeling excluded or disenfranchised by my actions.

A system of full and immediate open access is desirable, but it will require sweeping reforms, so let's proceed planfully. The process will be more complex than we want and may take longer than we wish. For example, under the current commercial system, the cost to publish one article [is estimated to be, on average, around \\$3,500 to \\$4,000](#), in part because typical profit margins for the publishing industry run around 20 to 30 percent. On the one hand, you might think the cost is set high to serve commercial publishing interests. On the other hand, some of those publishing revenues subsidize activities that are critical to APS's members — from advocating for more grant funding for psychological science at the US National Institutes of Health and US National Science Foundation to supporting student research and offering cutting-edge workshops at the annual convention. If APS lost those revenues, these and other activities would be compromised.

As we look to the future, beyond the difficulties of the moment, let's discuss the pros and cons of various economic models. Once we put an alternative in place, let's test it, and *then* dismantle the current system. Wherever this adventure takes us, it will be better if we face it together as a scientific community. APS welcomes all practical, actionable suggestions for how to broaden open access and encourage international participation. Email us at [apsboard@psychologicalscience.org](mailto:apsboard@psychologicalscience.org) with your most creative ideas. And as we move forward, please watch for future opportunities to participate.

So, there you have it: This is the sort of thing that goes on behind the scenes of a large, diverse society of scientists when an urgent issue drops out of nowhere into your lap one rainy day when you are trying to get some writing done. I hope you found it as interesting to read as it was to live through, particularly if you might want to be president of a scientific society one day. As you can see, a president's job in a difficult situation is to take a holistic view and balance competing concerns. It's also a president's job to admit when she's made a mistake. Whether you agree with my actions or not, I hope you'll be part of the ongoing conversation that will chart APS's future as an unflagging advocate for global psychological science based on open, transparent, and valid scientific practices.

## Reference

Miller, G. A. (1969). Psychology as a means of promoting human welfare. *American Psychologist*, 24(12), 1063–1075