



PCAST Letter:

Advancing Public Engagement with the Sciences

July 2023

DRAFT/PRE-DECISIONAL

PCAST Reports

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- A PCAST Working Group studies the topic, solicits information from diverse stakeholders, and drafts a report
- To release a report, full Council must make the decision in public, which includes discussion and voting
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PCAST Science Communications Group Members

- **Saul Perlmutter** (Berkeley) **co-lead**
- **Vicki Sato** (Harvard Business School, retired) **co-lead**
- **Phil Venable** (Google) **co-lead**
- **Lisa Cooper** (Johns Hopkins)
- **Eric Horvitz** (Microsoft)
- **Jennifer Richeson** (Yale)
- **Terry Tao** (UCLA)



Organizations & Experts Consulted

Federal:

Office of Science & Technology Policy
Office of Management and Budget
Center for Disease Control and Prevention
Department of Energy
National Institutes of Health



External:

Kathleen Hall Jamieson (Annenberg Public Policy Center)
Arthur Lupia (U. Michigan)
Art O'Leary (Electoral Commission of Ireland)
Jennifer Pahlka (Co-Founder, U.S. Digital Response)
Renee DiResta (Stanford Internet Observatory)
Beth Goldberg (Jigsaw/Google)



Science & Technology Impact Everyone

Americans generally have confidence that scientists will act in the public's best interests

But there are stresses:



- changing media and information landscape
- legacies of societal inequities
- an overall decline of trust in institutions

Americans increasingly want their values and priorities to be integral to policy development and the decisions that affect their lives

Goal: public policies that are informed by both scientific understandings and community values

To achieve this:

- Provide access to accurate and trusted scientific information AND
- Facilitate dialogue between government R&D agencies, experts, and communities



From “science communication” to “science engagement”

We learned that what we need isn't simply more *talking*.



What we need is more *listening*.

Enable Americans to communicate their values, concerns, priorities, and interests to adjudicate and legitimize policy choices

Foster inclusive, participatory engagement among scientists, policymakers, and the public so that all can be part of ongoing, productive discussions and community-building

This will lead to more effective policies regarding our health, our environment, our national security, and our general well-being



Engaging with Americans to develop public policies informed by science and community values



Examples:

- **Historical:** *Recombinant DNA research in Cambridge, MA*
- **Current:** *Climate Change Response Framework*



Recommendation 1



Issue a clarion call to federal agencies to make science and technology communication and public engagement a core component of their mission and strategy. An essential pillar of this effort is ensuring that experts in participatory public engagement are included in agency senior-level policy development and decision-making processes.



Recommendation 2

Establish a new office to support Federal agencies in their continuing efforts to develop and build participatory public engagement and effective science and technology communications. This office should consist of individuals with a range of expertise who can partner with or be deployed to agencies, including assistance in the use of social science-informed techniques for participatory engagement and cutting-edge digital technologies. The U.S. Digital Service within the Office of Management and Budget and the 18F office within the Government Service Administration may be useful models for this proposed office.



Feedback	Response
Overall response was enthusiastic. (Very positive feedback on the shorter letter format.)	
Be flexible on how recs could be implemented.	Accepted.
Consider changing “included in” to “have input to” policy development in rec 1.	Working group feels a stronger imperative is needed to move from “science communications” (one-way, top-down) to “science engagement” (two-way, participatory) – requires a cultural shift, as well as different expertise.
Participatory engagement with the public should be considered from the beginning of policymaking processes in order to maximize impact and effectiveness of these activities.	Accepted (will implement).
Recent (2021) data show drop in public confidence in scientists, in line with across the board drop in institutions/experts.	Revised to put in context of recent trends (preserving main point).
Sharpen the problem statement – clarify objectives of this letter & recs.	Accepted (will implement by sharpening the text).
Desire for a strong mandate to agencies to have the capacities envisioned in rec 2 (one response raised concern that a new office will detract from in-house agency effort).	The first sentence of rec 2 emphasizes that this new office should “supplement not supplant” agency efforts.





THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

Conclusion

