

SARA Website and Associated IT - Supplemental Guidelines

Date: May 18, 2021

Purpose: This supplemental guidance is offered to reduce the occurrences where SARA receives complaints from a variety of potential situations including:

Interpersonal Communications

1. Marginalization and ridicule due to voicing opinion or asking a question
2. Plagiarism
3. Incorrect science
4. Cyber-bullying (directed against others as well as the volunteer management)
5. Intolerance
6. Slander

Organizational Communications

7. Fairness in business treatment
8. Outdated postings
9. Liability issues
10. Lack of references
11. Lack of peer review

The above situations can occur through the SARA media platform to include email, website, and forums. The email google-serve has a moderator, and SARA relies on its general membership for bringing other website issues to its attention. It is impossible for SARA or any organization to be everywhere at all times and review all postings. SARA relies on members to display professional conduct. SARA will attempt to correct all matters brought to its attention. However, like all internet platforms, members must realize there is a risk to all communications, such as insensitivities involving “petty” differences between members. SARA asks that if members cannot resolve their differences of opinion in a professional manner, then they should move on. Otherwise SARA can moderate them, or exercise its right to correct an issue on the website according to its policies, potential liabilities, and internal management concerns. Hopefully this guidance helps future members conduct themselves properly, as well as provide advice for the management volunteer who must decide what can be posted appropriately on the SARA website.

Background: Two prior documents contain material on communications within SARA.

- i. SARA Section Guidelines, <https://www.radio-astronomy.org/administration>
<https://www.radio-astronomy.org/pdf/sara-section-guidelines.pdf>

In a selected excerpt regarding Section Information Posting Guidelines, it is stated:

1. The BOD will approve Section content or assign that responsibility to the Section Coordinator. If no Section Coordinator exists, the responsibility may be assigned to another person such as the SARA Section Team Leader.
2. Section content will be compiled for BOD review 4 times a year: Jan 1, Apr 1, July, Oct 1 3. BOD/Section Coordinator guidelines for approval of content to include, but is not limited to:
 - Is the information from a government or university site?
 - Is the information from an established organization with which SARA has an ongoing working relationship?
 - Is the information validated or credible, to the extent that SARA amateurs can determine?
 - If the information being posted is draft (such as a protocol or project in development), does it have the appropriate disclaimers noted?
 - If the link being proposed is to a site with projects or works in progress (i.e., not yet validated), does it have the appropriate disclaimers noted?

- Is the material posted of a positive nature, not critical of other amateur researchers? SARA may welcome a diversity of amateur opinion that is positive and can stand on its own merits for further peer review without that material trying to make negative comparisons to other works.
- Is the link potentially damaging to SARA in any legal respect?

ii. Society of Amateur Radio Astronomers (SARA) Standard Operation Procedures Manual, <https://www.radio-astronomy.org/administration>
<https://www.radio-astronomy.org/pdf/operating-procedures.pdf>

In a selected excerpt regarding the webmaster, that person is to

- Maintain website, post material as requested in a timely manner.
- Create and maintain local full-site backups at least once per month.
- Provide power user access to members and/or officers and directors to post articles, delete inappropriate material, etc. Webmaster will consult with President on who should be a power user.
- Linking Policy
 - The Society of Amateur Radio Astronomers reserves the right to accept or reject requests to link to our website. Priority for linking to the SARA website will be given to member's radio astronomy pages and other pages that have a direct relevance to our membership. Commercial sites of a general nature will not be linked. Anyone wishing to link to the SARA site should contact the webmaster for consideration.

Discussion:

SARA management is an all-volunteer organization whereby management feels guidelines are the most practical method of achieving its goals for a professional website and communication system.

A. In regard to the email (interpersonal) communications:

- All new members are moderated on their first post. If the post is radio astronomy or something related, then all future posts are un-moderated. Otherwise engaging in controversial topics and behavior leads to a warning and the post is deleted.
- SARA has a diverse membership from all social, economic, and educational backgrounds from around the world. SARA recognizes cultures are different, and certain behaviors from one culture may be offensive to another. SARA urges members to consider this when responding to a post.
- SARA has members who are beginners, engineers, programmers, radio astronomers and others of different disciplines. All have different skill sets. Some questions may seem to be ignorant to those who are well educated. SARA requests members to understand that the person(s) asking it thinks it is reasonable. SARA requests members to be tolerant and do not respond unless it is in a positive manner. If an email post is offensive, consider deleting it. SARA requests members to conduct themselves professionally and not through tirades or tantrums.
- SARA exists to help members gain answers, learn more about radio astronomy, and for the more experienced to present their successes.

B. In regard to Professionalism, SARA has posted guidelines at <https://www.radio-astronomy.org/node/269>, and SARA asks that members follow these guidelines and use common sense on how to treat others politely:

- Listen, contemplate, be open-minded, and try to understand other members and the context in which they are communicating. Realize the science could be complex.
- If an idea sounds in error, ask questions about the idea, including questions about potential perceived problems.
- Politely provide the presenter your own personal opinions about the idea. Move on if there is no concurrence, rather than belabor an issue for which you have no control over.
- Critique someone's idea only if relevant and appropriate and if the person criticizing understands the topic much better than the presenter of the idea (educational credentials and/or employment could make this obvious).
- Consider that the idea could be extremely relevant and correct but misunderstood by the person criticizing.

6. Ponder whether the person criticizing might not understand the other person's knowledge of a potential problem.
7. Provide feedback that does not say that something won't work, but rather asks how something might work.
8. When criticizing, provide the reasoning, math and observations to support the criticism. Likewise the presenter of an idea should do the same in support of the idea.
9. If something presented is not thought to be correct, then politely respond with a *"That didn't work when I tried it. What might I have done wrong?"*

C. In regard to posting of materials on the SARA (organization) website, consider:

1. There is a legal liability to an organization that controls a website that posts known plagiarism. The organization might have to get attorneys involved. It will need to be very careful, as plagiarism can be illegal. Almost all published papers are automatically copyrighted, officially, and journals are very protective of their legal rights.
2. A vetting board might be a problem to put together, because:
 - a. Many members might not want to subject themselves to the legal risk,
 - b. Time and mental anguish is required, especially if back and forth arguments ensue.
 - c. Plagiarism, IP violations, etc. are probably easier to detect with the right tools
 - d. The Board of Directors will likely need reports and documentation of the communication that transpires during the vetting.
3. SARA members might not be able to adequately vet detailed and complex astronomy papers. Evaluators often need to know more than the people writing the papers. It can be a huge and difficult job. Consequently there can be situations where papers are not understood by SARA and rejected for posting. There is nothing wrong with this.
4. Someone might want to post a paper that is intended to help sell something. Depending on what happens later, when someone buys something, the organization may be dragged into product complaints. There is a difference between an advertisement on a web site, and a technical paper that turns out to be an advertisement/promotion in disguise.
5. It may be better to have:
 - a. An official web page on a topic/category that is entirely written by one known author, assigned by the board of directors, and internally vetted
 - b. A separate way for members to present their ideas, with adequate vetting and with adequate disclaimers. The SARA conference proceedings fit this latter requirement. The conferences and proceedings have been happening for many decades. If someone wants to present, they submit the idea for a conference paper, then present it.
6. SARA at some future might want to post instructional materials on its website for educational purposes. It will be important to understand if the equipment/instrumentation used, especially if from a company, sets a precedent in allowing other companies to request that their equipment and instrumentation be used for instructional materials on the SARA website as well. Criteria would have to be set so that all prospective businesses are given fair treatment if they want to co-produce generic instructional materials on using radio astronomy products that are generally available in the marketplace by a variety of vendors.
7. Generally speaking, SARA will not be posting anything new on its website (Sections or otherwise) that is not associated with:
 - i. an academic institution,
 - ii. a government site,
 - iii. a SARA sponsored project,
 - iv. official SARA information,
 - v. a recognized research institution,
 - vi. a recognized amateur organization of relevance and significance,
 - vii. a training guide for standard radio astronomy telescopes (i.e., SuperSid, Radio Jove, 20m, IBT, scope-in-a-box, etc.),
 - viii. educational information that relates to standard radio telescope kits and their enhancement, or
 - ix. a document based on excerpted materials from such sources.

Material that meets this requirement can be sent for review and posting determination. However, SARA is not taking materials, or linking to materials, of personal observations or writings. The latter can be part of

information members send in the SARA email listserv. Long-term, SARA has been removing materials from its website that are brought to its attention by other members questioning the validity of postings that may be outdated, contain broken links, or generally do not meet current posting criteria.

Conclusion:

No doubt the challenge of maintaining and revamping a website is large not only in vetting appropriate professional materials, but also in addressing interpersonal/organizational disagreements. These are made even more difficult with volunteer staffs and tasks that are tedious. While this document does not solve the challenges, it is hoped that it highlights important ones for awareness.