

Members' Forum review

Summary

The Members' Forum currently operates under the authority of the AASUA Communications Policy.

Its particular structure has been controversial since it was instituted, and some recent member complaints about discussion threads have led to Executive temporarily suspending the forum in its entirety, due to content which violates the policy.

The current document reviews the background of the situation, and lays out some alternatives for Council to consider.

Background

History

The Members' Forum was initiated in the Communications Policy on April 18, 2013, as a vehicle for members to communicate with each other on issues relevant to the union. After research and implementation of a compatible website, the forum was created on January 28, 2018.

Current Policy

The Guiding Principles in the Communications Policy¹ include:

1. Keeping members informed of the activities of the AASUA (“bylaws, policies, services, initiatives, and negotiations”).
2. Enabling members to publicly discuss issues of concern to them.
3. Using electronic communications to ensure timely dissemination of information and effective two-way communication.
4. Protecting members' freedom of expression and academic freedom.
5. Providing an equitable, non-discriminatory, harassment-free environment for communication.
6. Providing consistent, accurate information to members, media, and the public.
7. Protecting members' privacy.
8. Protecting the Association's ability to work in the members' interests.

The structure and functionality of the Members' Forum has been discussed by Council, and at present the policy specifies the following:

- No discussion forum permits anonymous posting.
- No discussion forum is moderated; members are responsible for the content of their own posts.

¹ The Communication Policy can be found here: <https://aasua.ca/common/Uploaded%20files/Policies%20and%20Procedures/AASUA-Communications-Policy.pdf> (You will need to be logged in to the website in order to access this link.)

- Posts that violate the Guiding Principles may be flagged and reviewed by Governance Committee (or failing that, Executive). Posts in violation may be removed.
- All members are automatically subscribed to the Members' Forum, with the option to unsubscribe themselves.

Suspension of the forum

On June 10, Executive decided to remove a thread in the Members' Forum in accordance with policy, on the grounds that it created a discriminatory communication environment (contrary to Guiding Principle 5). Immediately thereafter, a new thread began discussing the removal, which Executive also deemed to violate the Guiding Principles. Executive received feedback from members indicating that these threads were undermining the Association's ability to represent members, and so decided to suspend the forum entirely until Council could review the situation and decide on an appropriate long-term remedy.

Competing interests

The removal of the forum, of course, is contrary to Guiding Principles 2 and 4 – it would remove one venue from those available to members for sharing their opinions with the rest of the membership.

Based on the evidence, its retention without change undermines several of the Guiding Principles. Some members are actively unsubscribing from *all* AASUA communications because of the content coming through the Members' Forum. Others are simply blocking or ignoring communications. This undermines our duty under Principles 1 and 6 (to keep members informed). Also, it tends to undermine members' trust in AASUA, which reduces our ability to bargain on their behalf (Principle 8). As mentioned above, the content has repeatedly been posted that can reasonably be interpreted as discriminatory and harassing, which violates Principle 5.

Survey

The recent AASUA Website Survey included some items specifically referencing the Members' Forum. Some participants also included comments specifically referencing the Members' Forum.

This survey was open for responses from June 8 to June 30 (23 days). It was developed and released before the threads discussed in this review appeared and were taken down. A total of 376 responses were collected, including at least 11 from each of the seven constituency groups. This represents about 10% of the total membership, based on numbers from May 2021.

Following is a summary of responses that bear on the Members' Forum.

Question 6 in the survey asks how valuable various types of website content are to respondents. **Figure 1** summarizes the responses by content type and response category.

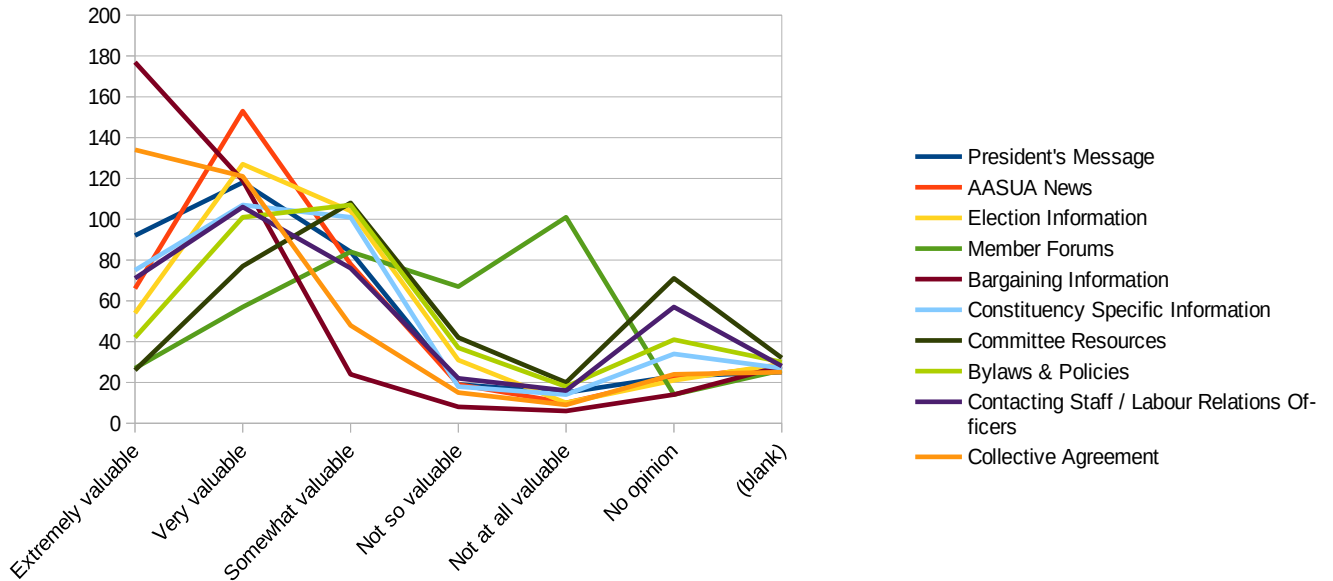


Figure 1: Ratings of how valuable different sections of the AASUA website are.

Excluding blank responses and responses of “No opinion”, over 75% of respondents chose “Somewhat valuable” or more for all categories except “Member Forums”. For that category, the number is 50%.

In **Figure 2**, we see the respondents’ responses to question 9, which asked how respondents felt about the frequency of different categories of communications.

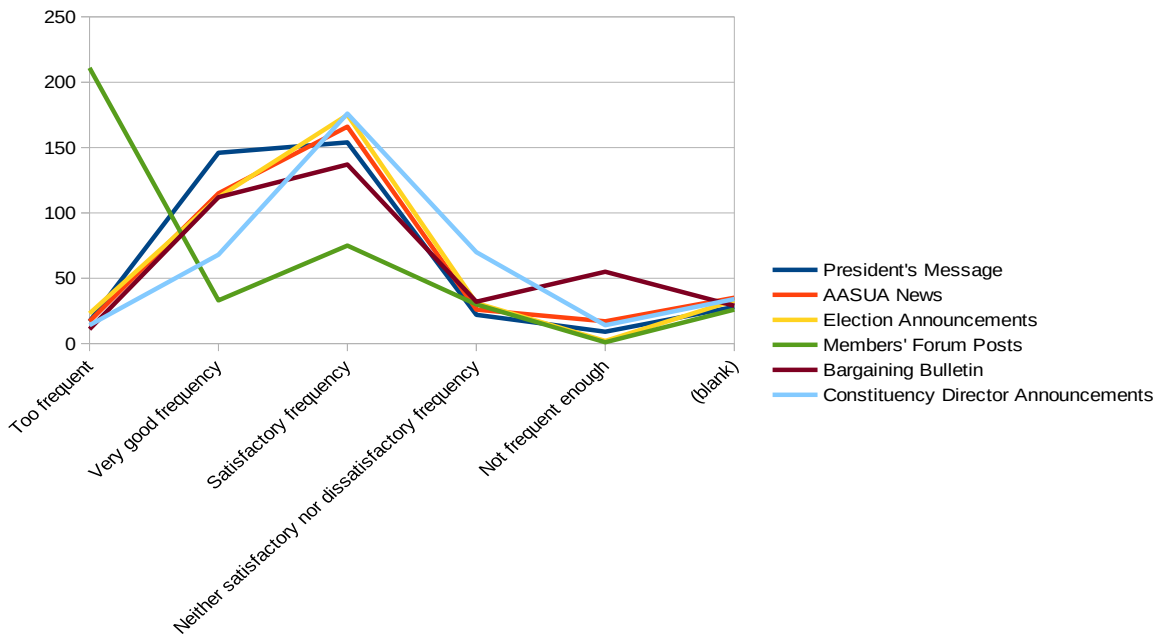


Figure 2: Ratings of the frequency of different communications.

Here, 60% of responses (excluding blanks) said that communication through the Members’ Forum is “too frequent”. All other categories had less than 7% “too frequent” responses.

Question 10 in the survey asks how interested respondents are in various communication topics. **Figure 3** summarizes responses to this question.

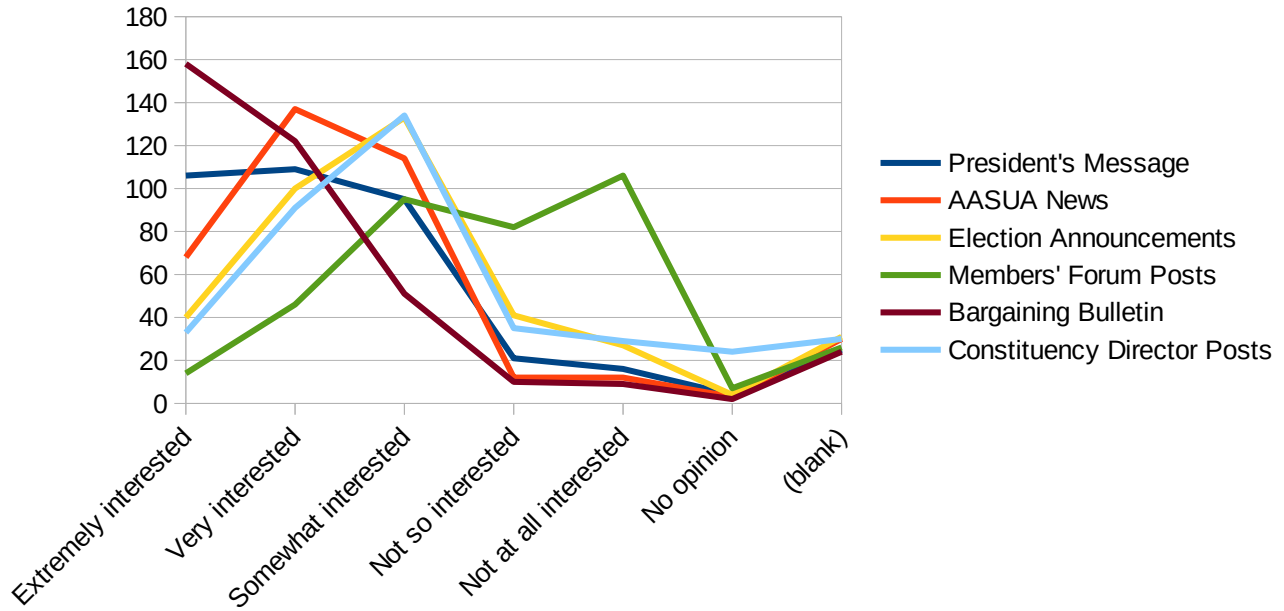


Figure 3: Ratings of interest in different communication topics.

We see that, for all other categories, 80% or more of respondents (again excluding blank and “No opinion” responses) report being at least “Somewhat interested” in that category. For the Members’ Forum, only 45% report being at least “Somewhat interested”.

Finally, question 11 asked whether respondents would prefer being automatically subscribed to communications of different types. In **Figure 4**, we see that most respondents prefer to be automatically subscribed to all types of communication (60% or more), with the exception of Members’ Forum posts, where 69% report a preference to **not** be automatically subscribed.

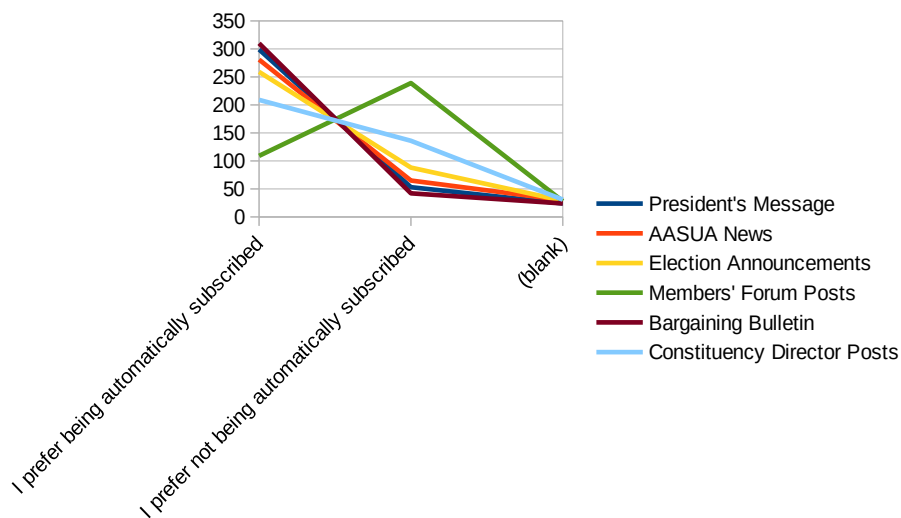


Figure 4: Subscription preferences for various communications.

There were various points in the survey where respondents could give text answers to more expand or clarify their thoughts. Included below is a selection of text responses that refer directly to the Members' Forum, representing a range of perspectives that were offered.

Member's Forum should be opt-in!!

The member's forum is important, I realise that. But I worry that it is divisive in several different ways: both in the positions staked out by some of the posters and in the frequency of notifications. I would probably sign up for it if I was given the option, but even now I might read 1 in 8 or 1 in 10 posts, and often I end up rolling my eyes---regardless of whether or not I agree with the post. Building up solidarity has to be job one right now, and the members forum is, I fear, an impediment to solidarity, not a pathway to it.

I think the forum is well-intentioned, but for it to function it would need to be more heavily moderated. It is basically inactive except when certain people decide to use it as a megaphone for their bigotry, which I am not interested in. If a set of rules were put in place to limit discussions on the forum to topics that are actually relevant to AASUA, and those rules were strictly enforced, I can see the forum being a useful feature. But otherwise it should just remain closed. There are plenty of places on the internet where people can go to rant about whatever they want.

We are in the midst of some deep culture wars that extend far beyond the university. I don't think we'll resolve them here on AASUA, and any forum should be run separately (e.g. Facebook etc), not officially AASUA.

Censorship is a perilous and fraught undertaking for any organization.

The forum emails definitely make me want to disengage from AASUA and need to be dealt with. Filling people's inboxes is not the place for personal discussions or debates, especially when they are not union business related.

Member forums can be abused, as this week has shown. No version of academic freedom guarantees an email blast to all your colleagues and admins could justifiably intervene, particularly when posts target the basic human dignity of others.

I appreciate free speech even when I don't agree with what is being said. Don't stifle debate!

the forum is useless and only encourages long-winded rants. It provides no valuable information and only makes AASUA look like a joke.

The animosity in the members forum is very destructive to AASUA. Too many people seem to have too much time on their hands to post the way they do. The tone by some frequent contributors is very offensive and not at all conducive to a respectful, professional environment in which to work. Strong measures to censure these individuals need to be taken and the executive needs to be more definitive in their actions and not back down as I have witnessed with respect to the worst offenders. This is harming the entire organization.

The recent abuse of the Member Forum has influenced my ranking. Properly moderated and/or with more functionality (so we could, for example, each choose to mute or block conversations and/or individuals) would be appreciated.

I would love to be able to opt out of specific threads on the Members' Forum while still being able to receive notifications in general. The forum should adopt a code of conduct. In my opinion it is currently being used to bully a marginalized group under the guise of free speech. The ESPB code of student behaviour may be a good starting point: <https://epsb.ca/ourdistrict/policy/h/hg-bp/> (My child seems more aware of issues around cyberbullying than some profs)

Other associations

Other academic unions in the province have also considered the issue of hosting discussion forums for members. Below is a summary of the current approach taken by the other members of the Confederation of Alberta Faculty Associations (CAFA), and by The University of Calgary Faculty Association (TUCFA), which is not currently a member of CAFA.

AUFA (Athabasca)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Largely dormant “union issues only” list • Communicate through messages to members, regular meetings, social events • Internal Slack channel for “activist and volunteer base”
GMUFA (Grant Mac)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forums only for specific groups (GFC, Job Action Committee, etc) • Members of these groups are automatically subscribed • no formal policy
MRFA (Mount Royal)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tried both member-only and public. Little uptake, lots of effort to administer. • Private Facebook group. Worked well, but eventually became controversial and opened MRFA to legal liabilities. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Now moderated posting and no comments. Useful, but not a forum and does not reach entire membership.
TUCFA (UCalgary)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No forum.
ULFA (Lethbridge)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No forum.

None of the associations surveyed has a discussion forum that is available to all members, and that defaults to sending emails to all members whenever a message is posted on the forum.

Options

There are several approaches Council could choose to take. The three main approaches are presented below, each with a corresponding action required by Council.

Status quo

One option, of course, is to determine that the principles which support the maintenance of the forum absolutely outweigh those which led Executive to temporarily suspend it, and to retain the forum unchanged.

This option would require no change in policy. However, it would mean that the office staff would likely continue to receive a large volume of complaints about the forum. This is a material cost to the Association in terms of person-hours that would otherwise be devoted to supporting members' interests.

In the event that Council opts for this approach, Governance Committee has prepared the following motion to reinstate the Members' Forum.

Motion: To reinstate the Members' Forum, and retain its function as currently specified in the Communications Policy.

No more forum

Another option is to strike the Members' Forum entirely out of policy, making the suspension into a permanent removal.

This would involve adjusting the policy to reflect Council's decision not to retain the forum. Without the forum, Governance Committee / Executive would no longer be in the position of having to adjudicate the boundaries between free speech/academic freedom and a discrimination-free environment, freeing up their time and that of the office staff for advocating and working on behalf of the members. On the other hand, it would mean one less venue where members could express themselves.

According to the survey, 50% of respondents find the Forum to be "Not so valuable" or "Not at all valuable".

In the event that Council opts for this approach, Governance Committee has prepared the following motion to revise the Communications Policy accordingly.

Motion: To remove the Members' Forum from the AASUA website. To revise the Communications Policy, section 4.0.4, to remove the final two paragraphs referencing the Members' Forum. See document "Communications Policy (no forum)" for the specific changes.

Note that implementing this option does not prevent members from independently setting up a discussion forum through a third-party platform.

Opt-in forum

Much of the feedback about the forum is based on the fact that members are automatically subscribed to it, meaning they get a message every time someone posts to the forum. One option would be to reverse that: by default, have all members unsubscribed, so that they would need to actively opt in before receiving emails.

This would involve a minor change to the communications policy, and would retain the forum as a venue for member communication and expression. The need for some oversight would remain, as allegedly discriminatory and harassing content would still need to be reviewed by Governance Committee / Executive if members complained. The need for elected representatives and staff to spend time managing the forum would remain, under this approach.

In the survey, 69% of respondents expressed a preference to not be automatically subscribed to Members' Forum communications.

In the event that Council opts for this approach, Governance Committee has prepared the following motion to revise the Communications Policy accordingly.

Motion: To modify the Members' Forum on the AASUA website so that it is an opt-in rather than an opt-out forum. To revise the Communications Policy, section 4.0.4, changing the final paragraph to read:

“All members shall have access to the “Members' Forum” by signing in to the AASUA website. For members who wish to follow the discussions, clear instructions for subscribing will be provided on the website.”

See document “Communications Policy (opt-in)” for the specific changes.