

SOME REPLIES TO USRA CEO DR. TALAAT’S RESPONSE TO MY EDITORIAL “TAKING ACTION AGAINST HISTORICAL CENSORSHIP BY USRA”

Dr. Talaat challenges a number of statements I make by citing a series of facts to each of which I reply.

USRA Fact: USRA/LPI (Lunar and Planetary Institute) has never blocked the Wayback Machine from archiving LPI websites.

Reply: It is not alleged that USRA/LPI blocked the Wayback Machine from archiving LPI websites. It is alleged that USRA/LPI requested that archive.org block public access to some scans of LPI websites. Under the archive.org Terms of Service: "If the author or publisher of some part of the Archive does not want his or her work in our Collections, then we may remove that portion of the Collections without notice." This includes blocking public access to a scan within the Collection. The publisher, in this case, would be USRA/LPI. For copyright purposes USRA/LPI, as the creator of the entire layout of these websites, is also an author. The author of a single document posted within a site (like a report or an abstract) could not (successfully) demand that scans of other content be removed or blocked. The timing of these scans being inaccessible is also telling as it commenced with USRA/LPI's scrubbing of what it decided was "DEI" material from its own websites. It could be that USRA management is not completely aware of the actions of its employees, as will be indicated below. I would suggest that as both the publisher and an author, that USRA management query archive.org about who specifically requested that the scans of these sites back many months. They have not responded to my queries on the subject.

USRA Fact: Whenever AG chairs have requested full lists of redacted material, USRA/LPI has provided those lists.

Reply:

I have previously been in communication with the AG chairs to try to create a timeline of events associated with USRA/LPI's treatment of the AG websites. Here are a few of the items I have recorded, which I reproduce with the approval of the individuals identified:

March 21. Jamie Shumbera of USRA/LPI has a telecon with AG chairs informing them that changes would be coming to AG websites. Details of when and how things would be restored/redacted before websites came back online were characterized as vague/incomplete. A request was made for a full list of material that would be redacted. The response was "no full list will be furnished".

April 21. SBAG site back online. SBAG asks for list of every document removed. LPI responded that a list would not/could not be furnished.

May 14. MAPSIT site back online. When asked, Shumbera provided a list of removed files (two total).

May 14. Lori Feaga meets face to face with Jamie Shumbera (LPI) and asked again for a list of the redacted SBAG material and was told again "no full list will be furnished".

June 30 (four days after the editorial to which Dr. Talaat is responding). MEPAG receives a list of redacted material.

July 7. SBAG receives the list of removed files, in response to a request by Lori Feaga made on June 27 (the day after the editorial to which Dr. Talaat is responding).

USRA Fact: USRA/LPI did not block the Wayback Machine from archiving any portion of the AG sites on June 26, 2025, or during any other period of time.

Reply: See the Reply to the first USRA Fact.

USRA Fact: The only materials USRA/LPI removed from public view were those containing references to DEI. We removed DEI material swiftly to ensure the timely implementation of the Administration's directives on DEI-related matters.

Reply:

The report I received from a scientist that non-DEI material was also removed, could be simply a difference in opinion in what constitutes "DEI material". As at least one federal judge has commented, the Executive Orders are not clear as to what constitutes "DEI". By USRA/LPI's own admission, NASA had provided no direction as to what constitutes "DEI". USRA/LPI has not reported being given the specific direction by anyone in the government to remove archival material from any website it manages.

USRA's "Fact" might be more accurately stated "The only materials USRA/LPI removed from public view were those containing what we concluded were references to DEI. We removed this DEI material swiftly to ensure the timely implementation of our interpretation of the Administration's directives on DEI-related matters."

USRA Fact: USRA/LPI did not block the Wayback Machine from archiving any LPSC websites or portions of these sites on June 26, 2025, or during any other time frame.

Reply: See Reply to the first USRA Fact.

Dr. Talaat continues:

Furthermore, the author's unsubstantiated claim that USRA/LPI lacks integrity by "...misrepresenting the history of our community" and "...is a threat to the long-term stability and continuity of many decades of community scientific records" is unfounded and irresponsible.

Reply: It is actually well-founded and responsible. Falsifying the record of events and materials presented at a scientific conference, as USRA/LPI has done, is irresponsible. The material removed does span decades. Whether it will ever be restored, at this point in time, is unknown.

USRA's actions were taken only after careful consideration and consultation with NASA and our lawyers.

Reply: By USRA/LPI's own admission in their prior postings, NASA has not responded to their queries, so there is no consultation with NASA. Like most organizations acting in anticipatory obedience to power, there is an enormous amount of fear. I can only imagine what the consultation with their lawyers was like.

USRA/LPI is firmly committed to scientific integrity and preserving the history and contributions of the community. As stated in the Fact Sheet: DEI Content Removal from LPI Websites, all records we removed from public view are securely archived and can be restored.

Reply: USRA/LPI's act is without scientific integrity. The loss to the community of the history and contributions of the community damages our community. The damage only grows the longer the community is forced to incur this loss. Protestations notwithstanding, when or whether these records can be restored is unknown.

We have sent the removed abstracts to the first authors in case they do not have their own records. We have also posted some redacted files, with the approval of the AG chairs, on the AG websites.

Reply: The first sentence is not wholly true. Many of these authors discovered their work was removed and had neither been notified nor sent a copy of the removed material. Since AGs were refused a full listing of their removed materials, I have to assume they were not all given copies of those materials either.

These accusations, based on misconceptions and misinformation, are particularly troubling given the author's call to boycott the Lunar and Planetary Science Conference (LPSC).

Reply: I think accusations of misconceptions and misinformation have been dealt with. A "boycott" of LPSC is called for in "Conditions for Attending LPSC 2026" (Another editorial on this site). "These steps include restoring all purged abstracts (except those where NASA has specifically directed or first authors have requested removal), and committing to preserving academic freedom of speech at the conference." Because I think these are reasonable demands in the face of USRA/LPI's political actions, I have signed the petition and would call on others to do so if they agree.

LPSC has stood for over 50 years as one of the most respected and impactful conferences in planetary science. It brings together researchers across disciplines, career stages, and countries, fostering the open exchange of ideas that drive the field forward. Since 1972, USRA/LPI has been a trusted steward of the conference and its scientific material, working in close partnership with NASA and guided by the input from the planetary science community to deliver a scientific program of the highest caliber.

Reply: I agree. It is unfortunate that USRA/LPI has demonstrated itself to no longer be a "trusted steward of the conference".

In my view, boycotting LPSC would have serious and lasting consequences for planetary science. These actions would harm the broader community by disrupting vital scientific research and the dissemination of new findings and ideas, weakening collaborations on the next generation of mission concepts, and limiting training and networking opportunities for students and early-career researchers. Such actions would fracture the community, rather than strengthen its collective voice and impact, especially at a time when a unified planetary science community is critical.

Reply:

There can still be an LPSC with USRA/LPI limiting itself to local organizing activities and had another organization or a consortium assume the programmatic responsibilities. If USRA/LPI also copied the archival information of LPSC proceedings to another organization or consortium of organizations, and relinquished their copyrights to the public domain, I think the concerns of the petitioners would be obviated.

The current situation is untenable. If the Administration demands a halt to all "climate change" research, because it is baseless and harmful, there is no reason to expect that USRA/LPI would not restrict LPSC sessions perceived to be related to the topic and proceed with purge of that material from past meeting sites. If the Administration were to come up with a list of enemy scientists whose work needs to be denounced and not referred to in proper scientific research, there is no reason to think USRA/LPI would not purge (or remove from accessibility) the work of those people. This kind of thing has happened in the past in other countries.

USRA continues to be a vigorous advocate for NASA science on behalf of its member institutions and in coordination with other like-minded organizations. I call on all members of the planetary science community to unite around the common goals of promoting and advancing planetary science research, encouraging collaborative efforts among researchers across all career stages, and promoting scientific discourse by participating in LPSC.

Reply: USRA has many fellow-travelers among the university members of its Council of Institutions, who are likewise "bending the knee". Right now, the common goal to which Dr. Talaat refers is not as global as he would imply - it is everything except research and other activities to which the Administration objects. That does not advance science, planetary or otherwise. It encourages certain collaborations only among some researchers. Others are necessarily excluded.

We are living in a time where all of us will be judged by history for what we stand for and what we stand against. I do not believe the attacks on science and the attacks on our fundamental rights can be waited out. America is undergoing fundamental change that must be resisted. While there is a place for open opposition and demonstration, there is also a place for merely informing government officials that we absolutely desire to be compliant with their executive orders, but that we need far more explicit direction regarding the application of those orders to individual

projects for us know how to comply correctly. Is that absolutely without risk? Of course not. But I would not so willingly give away my integrity or my principles in the (false) hope that risk can be reduced to zero.

Mark V. Sykes, Ph.D., J.D.
Speaking on behalf of myself,
July 14, 2025