

Assessment of the impact of the A-S-O-R Acronym
Andrew G. Vaughn, ASOR Executive Director
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Sharon Herbert asked me to write my assessment, as the chief administrative officer of ASOR, on what impact changing the acronym A-S-O-R might have on ASOR's business interests and related activities.

What is an ASOR?

In talking to the public, my response to this question has revolved around describing what the acronym does not describe—how it causes confusion. I would say that “research” is pretty accurate. We are indeed a scholarly society, a “learned society.” “American” can confuse because 1/3 of our members live outside North America, “Schools” can cause confusion because it's a vestige of a 19th century way of doing scholarship by establishing research centers. I would then say, “Oriental,” in addition to being politically insensitive, causes people to think of Asia and China. My conversations with potential members, donors, or foundation heads then typically turns to telling the story of what we do.

Does changing one word really make a difference?

I've spent almost 15 years telling people what an ASOR is not. In this context, I think that yes, changing this single word (“Oriental”) makes a difference. I have found that most public members move quickly to an understanding of “what is an ASOR” after they get past the word, “Oriental.” With the aid of a good tagline (as the Ad Hoc Committee recommends), I think that we can tell our story with either ASOR or AARCHE.

Does our current acronym have branding value and recognition?

Name recognition, history, and longevity

In short, yes—120 years of recognition for excellence. We have been recognized as the “gold standard” by a former Secretary of State (Kerry), and Irina Bokova (Secretary General of UNESCO) has recognized ASOR in at least three plenary addresses. Just last month, Assistant Sec. Marie Royce (a Trump appointee) held up ASOR and our work. Foreign ministry officials in France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Italy know the ASOR name.

Local stakeholders and officials in Middle Eastern and North African countries know the acronym A-S-O-R, and they have a positive association with that name. Grant funders, from ALIPH (Swiss) to Prince Klaus (Dutch), to the Getty, Kaplan, and Whiting, all know the ASOR name. Further, it is my sense and assessment that the loss of branding and name recognition would be pronounced among speakers of non-European languages, particularly among native Arabic and Farsi speakers. It has been my experience that “ASOR” is something that they simply understand as an “ASOR.” It's a strange English word anyway, and so they don't try to translate the words found in the acronym. It is simply a vocabulary item known as “ASOR” that they describe by what we do.

Stated another way, one longtime ASOR member who works in Jordan reach out to me to comment (paraphrased), “I'm not sure people know how well known the name 'ASOR' is known around the entire region.”

Branding, style sheet, and logos

Following a long and thorough process, we created a new logo five or six years ago. The logo is fresh and clean, and we have a style sheet for all communications and for our website. We can certainly do that work again with a new acronym, but there would be a cost in terms of time and money.

The prior branding initiative cost about \$30,000 for the consultant, travel, and other direct costs. The website development was identified at \$28,500 in our audit. That initial website development cost has been supplemented with at least \$50,000 of staff time for transferring multiple old platforms and websites to the new website (ASOR Blog, ASOR CHI website, Boston University files). Our past experiences lead me to conclude that development of a new website (with the acronym and URL *aarche.org*) would cost somewhere between \$50,000 and \$100,000—depending on how much we could automate in the transfer. I realize that is a large range, but much would depend on how much of the transfer we could automate. Because our WordPress site was built in customized steps, I think that it is likely that automation would be difficult.

The more significant cost is not monetary. In my mind, the larger cost is how much we would lose from changing all of the semi-static URLs to *aarche.org* from *asor.org*. We have made an intense effort to develop online resources since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and all of that work would have to be redone. We would most likely have to cease temporarily out efforts to develop online resources for at least 6-9 months—at a time when they have never been in higher demand.

The society name and our publications

The biggest impact from an acronym change will arise if we need a new ISSN. I do not think that *NEA* and *JCS* would not need to change their names or receive a new ISSN. It is certain that *BASOR*—*Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* will change its name, but a new ISSN is uncertain if the acronym *BASOR* is maintained.

I have been told that the Library of Congress (LOC) often assigns a new ISSN if one of the first five words changes. In our case, keeping “Schools” instead of “Society” may mean that we do not require a new ISSN. That would be positive for us in terms of institutional subscriptions. Kari Roane of UCP summarized the situation as follows: “[I] think that retaining “Schools” makes it less likely that the Library of Congress will require a new ISSN. Changing only one word instead of two is less of a change—even to my eye it flows in a more recognizable fashion. **But I have to caution that there is simply no way to know for sure what the LOC will do until the paperwork is put through.**” Kari continued with an assessment of sales even if the LOC required a new ISSN if “Schools” was retained: “In terms of sales, we’re looking to avoid market confusion. While I can’t quantify the amount of confusion avoided—sticking with ‘Schools’—it seems to me that it would be slightly less changing one word instead of two.

Trustees will remember that ASOR went through this process when changing *The Biblical Archaeologist* to *Near Eastern Archaeology*. Librarians are used to name changes, but ASOR experienced a significant drop in subscriptions when that change (from *BA* to *NEA*) was made. A new ISSN and new name would likely result in some institutional subscribers taking a fresh look at *BASOR*, which is not good in the current economic environment. In terms of ASOR

and AARCHE—we know that institutions will subscribe to *BASOR*, and it is unknown if a change to *BAARCHE* would impact subscriptions.

How do we legally change our name, and should the tagline be a part of our name?

The name of our organization is spelled out in our Articles of Incorporation, and our law firm (Arnold and Porter) has informed us that we must amend the Articles of Incorporation in order to change our name. As a non-profit that is incorporated in the District of Columbia, amendments to the Articles of Incorporation must entail a ratification vote by the membership.

On the other hand, our society can change our tagline without amending the Articles of Incorporation—that is, if we do not make a new tagline part of our new, legal name in the Articles of Incorporation. Indeed, we changed our tagline five or six years ago to “Unearthing the Past Since 1900” with a vote of the Board. I thus encourage the Board to consider the tagline and our name in the Articles of Incorporation separately.

Complications or issues of branding and identity—how my assessment has changed

It might be helpful to self-disclose that my opinion and assessment has changed since I completed the initial survey in March. If one looks at the graphs and percentages, one observes that the membership was split. Like me, those responses may be very different now that “Oriental” is off the table.

From looking at the numbers and graphs, I can tell that I was one of the few people that had been a member for more than 20 years who wanted a completely new name and acronym. In retrospect, I yearned for a name that succinctly summarized “our story” in three or four words. I wanted to end up with something akin to “Society for Classical Studies” (SCS) like happened with the American Philological Association. In my mind, if we could agree on a name that worked as well as SCS, the benefits of telling our story in a few words would outweigh all of the troubles that we might encounter.

The events and experiences of May and June reinforced the need to remove “Oriental” from our name, and I am pleased and proud that the ASOR Board has taken decisive action on that.

Related to finding a name that better describes our areas of work, the increased attention to Eurocentric issues of equity and inclusion led the Ad Hoc Committee to conclude that the terms “Near East” or “Middle East” should not be used in a name. With that decision (which I don’t debate and with which I do not disagree), the ability to choose a three or four-word name that describes our society became even more difficult. For me, if we had a better name and acronym (other than A-S-O-R) that would tell our story, it might be worth whatever costs, complications, or challenges we might face.

The question that faces the board is whether or not a name like AARCHE accomplishes so much that we should move away from the acronym A-S-O-R and all of the history and benefits associated with that 120-year-old acronym. One also should ask if the financial and other costs (tangible and intangible) are justified.