

WITH NEW TECHNOLOGIES, POLICY HEARINGS CAN SERVE MANY AUDIENCES AND PARTICIPANTS

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Policymaking committees are subsets of larger official bodies such as state legislative chambers, the U.S. House or Senate, city councils, or public commissions. Drawn from the larger bodies, their members address specific administrative or policy issues and make recommendations about new legislation or ordinances and modifications of pending measures. Often, policymaking committees convene public hearings to further deliberations among members, gather information, and give public visibility to the issues at hand.

At first glance, policy hearings may seem to involve only the members of the panel and whoever happens to show up to the official session. That may once have been the case, but current information technologies have opened up many new possibilities to reach distinct audiences and sets of participants in various formats. Hearing materials and proceedings can now be communicated in various formats to panel members, attendees, and citizens watching from afar.

Serving Panelists Who Prefer Paper or Electronic Copies

Committee members who arrive at a hearing bring different levels of background and preparation. Formerly, preparatory materials were provided on paper, possibly in binders holding hefty volumes of news reports, articles, background analyses, and the texts of any actionable items in front of the panel. Today, however, many policy-formulating bodies are moving away from this paper-based approach, reducing the expense of purchasing, storing, reproducing, and disposing of physical copies. They are creating and distributing hearing documents electronically, using the devices now widely available to store and display documents in real time for “paperless hearings.” Current software allows electronic documents to be written on or marked up in much the same fashion as paper documents once were, so policymaking bodies can adapt their systems of record retention to include iterations of electronic documents.

A fully paperless approach has not yet arrived, however, because we are in a transitional period that requires accommodation for committee members who prefer the printed page and those who embrace the new electronic possibilities. The need to accommodate both types becomes more pronounced when certain committee members are not physically present for a hearing and have to participate by conference call, Skype, or watching the hearing on a screen. For some, physical copies may have to arrive by mail in advance, while others can use electronic copies as they also participate by electronic means.

Informing the People in the Room

Hearing attendees who are not committee members or staff tend to fall into three main categories – some of whom want announcements or paper handouts, and others of whom can use advance or on-the-spot electronic documents that can be inexpensively disseminated.

- Some attendees have participated in hearings before and are familiar with operating procedures, committee members, and topics under consideration. They are likely to want to know the agenda, how long the hearing may last, and whether the order of discussion could vary from the planned agenda.
- Another set of attendees are new to hearings. They are best served with introductory remarks or handouts describing basic information, such as whether there is a lunch or dinner break as well as how to find the bathrooms and what to do in case of emergency.
- Also in the hearing room are people who want to offer testimony to the committee. They are likely to be focusing mentally on what they want to say and will need guidance and reminders about how to sign up to testify, any rules associated with offering testimony, and when they might appear in the order of witnesses. Some may be in the room even if no testimony is taken, as they are unaware that some hearings function without testimony. These people will probably have questions about when and how the public can have input.

Welcoming Old and New Media Reporters

Reporters from “old media” – wire services, newspapers, radio and television stations – are likely to be accredited and familiar with how hearings unfold. They will want more access than the public usually gets in order to have the best camera angles, microphone placement, and post-hearing interviews. To do their work, they may need and expect specialized equipment (such as multi-boxes and raised platforms).

“New media” refers to online-only electronic news generators, such as bloggers, podcasters, and online content providers. These kinds of news outlets are much harder to define without resorting to Internet searches or metric reports, but they often have a reach that exceeds traditional media and can get the word out very quickly. A committee holding a public hearing is well advised to prepare for – and accord the same courtesies to – new and old media reporters, even if traditional outlets get some priority because of established ties and routines.

Meeting Citizen Needs and Preferences

Many committees now stream their hearings over the Internet. While some hearings are provided only in audio or time-delayed formats, real-time video is widely available via the Internet or telephone and should be considered the desirable standard. Of course, hearings can also be archived to provide later access. When viewable versions are allowed, acoustics and visuals are paramount. Committee members should be easily recognizable; readable nameplates or superimposed names should be visible; and URLs offered for viewers who want to find more information about members.

At times, members of the public want to broadcast hearings themselves using handheld cameras and online services like *Ustream*. Such spontaneous live-streams can seem preferable for various reasons. Commentaries can be provided online; official sources may not be fully trusted; and certain audiences may want dedicated ways to view proceedings not available to all. Legislative committees and public commissions have an obligation to accommodate these citizen efforts, as long as they do not obstruct the rights of other legitimate audiences or participants. What is more, attention must be paid to the special needs of people with hearing, sight, or speech impairments. Currently available technologies make it readily possible to provide solutions, such as video captioning or set-ups for disabled witnesses to testify effectively.