Interviews with SIG/III Co-founders: Reflections of Toni Carbo and Michel Menou
by Daniel Gelaw Alemneh

If I have seen farther it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.
—Sir Isaac Newton

As part of the 75th ASIS&T anniversary and the 30th anniversary of Special Interest Group/International Information Issues (SIG/III) in 2012-2013, we interviewed SIG/III co-founders, Toni Carbo and Michel Menou. It is very fitting to open our interview (our "Cofounders Reflections") with Sir Isaac Newton's famous saying.

While it is true that leadership potential is inherent in almost every individual when he or she is born, it is the opportunities provided as people grow and mature that lay the real foundation for development of leadership skills. Taking advantage of these opportunities and learning from their experiences is what makes leaders in almost any field.

These interviews provide a great opportunity to learn from two pioneers in the founding of SIG/III in the early 1980s. Their reflections on a variety of issues, including where we have been, give us insight that will help us all maintain the legacy of SIG/III and make a lasting contribution to ASIS&T and our field.

Toni Carbo's Reflections

Toni Carbo first became involved in ASIS&T when she entered the master of science program at Drexel in the fall of 1971. Carbo learned about ASIS&T (ASIS at the time) from Belver Griffith and Carl Drott and decided to run for chair of the student chapter.

“I was delighted to be elected and to attend local
chapter meetings and the annual conference,” she says. “Several members, including Tefko Saracevic, Michael Buckland and Stella Keenan, were especially kind and helpful during my years as a student member and over the past decades. There are many other individuals who have helped me tremendously since I first joined, some of whom, sadly, are no longer with us.”

When reflecting on her career, Carbo says that while there are many people she admired and whose work she followed closely, she never really tried to emulate anyone – her education and work experience allowed her exciting and unexpected opportunities to develop a unique career path.

“I think that as the fifth of seven daughters [with no brothers], I have always been encouraged to be independent and carve out my own path,” she adds.

Carbo has traveled extensively outside the United States, primarily for work-related projects and international conferences and workshops; she also lived in the U.K. for three years. “I have been on all continents except for Antarctica, and I plan to get there some day. My favorite city in the world is Paris, and I have been there 21 times,” she says.

Through work and travels, Carbo made many friends and colleagues – all of whom helped her learn about multicultural and diverse information communities. Working on international information ethics and policy projects, information literacy programs and other activities, as well as participating actively in groups like IFLA and the International Federation for Information and Documentation (FID), made Carbo realize how much she did not know and that we all need to expand our perspectives beyond familiar national and cultural boundaries.

“For example, organizing a workshop for UNESCO on indexing and abstracting back in the 1970s, and working with NATO AGARD, the British Library and other groups, helped me realize how much I didn't know,” she says. “I realized that I was not alone, and I thought that ASIS, my own primary professional association, could expand its programs and activities to help all of us increase our awareness and understanding.”

This perception is what prompted Carbo and the other founders of SIG/III to start the organization.

“Then I did the easy part,” Carbo jokes. “I told my dear friend, Michel Menou, that we really needed to do this, and I suggested that he should start the SIG. He did the hard part and the vast majority of the work. I assisted as much as I could by helping to get others involved and doing some tasks to help with the process.”

Carbo says the broad goals of starting SIG/III were to help all of us expand our awareness and understanding of our increasingly global village and to find ways we could harness information and appropriate technologies to improve the quality of life for people around the world.

But there were more specific objectives, Carbo says:

- Recognize the many contributions of members outside the United States
- Increase international membership
- Conduct programs and develop publications to share information and provide continuous education for all of us
- Build and strengthen networks among information professionals around the world
- Expand ASIS&T programs and activities around the world through chapters, programs and co-sponsorship of meetings and workshops
- Bring in support to help individuals from countries and areas with fewer resources to become members and, if possible, participate in conferences
- Provide opportunities for us to have fun with our international colleagues

When asked what achievements she is most proud of as a founder of SIG/III, Carbo cites her vision in getting Michel to take the lead in starting it.

“I am also pleased that I have been able to help SIG/III get selected articles from the International Paper Contest published in the International Information and Library Review (IILR), which I edited for many years. This also helped several authors get helpful feedback from reviewers, so they could improve their scholarly work.

“I’m also happy that I have been able to help bring in some outside resources to support our activities, such as the donations from Elsevier and also the contribution provided through my service on the Elsevier Foundation Board,” she adds.

Though Carbo doesn’t think there were any major obstacles to achieving
SIG/III’s goals and objectives, she acknowledges that getting sufficient funding and encouraging more people to get involved with activities are always challenges.

“Working with members, including many fine students, and a good dose of patience and enthusiasm always seem to help in meeting challenges. We have certainly used these as we built the SIG over the years,” she says.

Carbo sees three critical issues facing ASIS&T and SIG/III today: 1) budget restrictions limiting individuals' abilities to participate more actively in events like the Annual Meeting and SIG activities; 2) increased competition among the many professional organizations with more demands on individuals' time; and 3) ongoing challenges of getting people to understand what we do and why it is important and valuable.

“Personally, I think that reducing the length of time for our annual conferences was a big mistake. We are trying to cram far too much into too little time, resulting in fewer high-quality programs being accepted, competition among concurrent sessions, and too little time for key networking opportunities. I have heard from many colleagues that taking the time and using the funding to travel to such a short event is very hard to justify. This is especially true for those who have to travel long distances, especially from other continents,” she says.

Carbo’s vision for SIG/III is that it will continue to provide high-quality programs, webinars, sessions and publications to benefit members and the wider global information community and that it will bring in more active members to lead it in the future.

“SIG/III is an extremely valuable asset to ASIS&T and to the global information community, and I expect that it will become even more valuable in the future. I am excited about continuing to do whatever I can to help make this vision a reality,” she says.

In terms of how being active in ASIS&T has helped Carbo in her professional life, she says, “I could write a 10-volume work to respond to this question! To begin with, I have made many outstanding friends around the world with Michel Menou at the top of that list. I have learned so much from all of them, and their energy and enthusiasm have kept me excited about our field and our future,” she says. “I have also had many wonderful and fun experiences with them, including exploring new places, different foods, learning about different cultures and even getting some dancing lessons. The energy and enthusiasm of this amazing community are contagious and invigorating.

“Secondly, I have explored and learned about new technologies, practices, issues, developments, changes, types of knowledge (including traditional knowledge), cultures and traditions. The knowledge, skills and attitudes I have learned have expanded my competencies tremendously.

“Thirdly, I have gained a lot of experience in chairing and serving on different committees and groups, starting with my first responsibility when I became a member, as chair of the Committee on Intersociety Cooperation (CISCO). I learned a lot about many of the other organizations in our field and their different perspectives and experiences. Serving as president and a member of the board provided another very helpful set of experiences in working with society leadership and our wonderful ASIS&T staff. I think there is no question that without my involvement in ASIS&T over the 40-plus years, I never would have had such a successful or fulfilling career – and life – as I have had,” she concludes.

Carbo advises young ASIS&T members to get involved as fully as they can in ASIS&T. “Build your network in part through active participation in ASIS&T and also in other groups within your local area and globally through social networks and other online activities. Travel and explore new places as often as you can. Reach out to others; don’t wait for them to come to you,” she says. “Ask for help – go up to that individual whose work you have admired and introduce yourself. That’s how I first met Tekfo Saracevic. Take risks; don’t take the job for which you are fully qualified, because that’s one you should have had years ago. Have fun – socialize and, if possible, dance!”

Carbo summarizes her top reasons young professionals should become involved in ASIS&T: 1) you will learn a lot and grow in your career; 2) you will expand your horizons and learn about new opportunities, ideas and perspectives; 3) you will meet outstanding leaders in our field, as well as many individuals who are up and coming leaders and others who are just starting out; and 4) you will have fun and make friends.
Responses from Michel Menou

Michel Menou says that publications, especially the Annual Review of Information Science and Technology (ARIST), were the door through which he became involved in ASIS&T. “I inquired with the executive director if the society were open to foreigners. He said, ‘Yes, of course.’ So I joined. In 1968, I guess,” he remembers.

Menou attended a few Annual and Mid-Year Meetings and was active enough to be selected for the special section on "young information professionals," which appeared in the Bulletin and was subject to a special exhibit at an Annual Meeting.

“With the launch of SIG/III, I became even more active, if I may say. That was 1981,” Menou says. “It seems I kept involved. Until last year (2011).”

When asked if there was a particular person throughout his career whom he admired and tried to emulate, Menou responds that there are “so many that mentioning only a few would be unfair to the others.”

“If one practical example is nevertheless to be given, I’d mention Peter Havard-Williams, who led Loughborough and later University of Botswana departments of information studies. Peter always mentioned the Loughborough connection as a catalyst in spreading information science across the globe, with due attention to local socio-cultural environments,” Menou says.

“We just wanted to have fun,” Menou joked when asked if there was a specific objective, goal or reason to start SIG/III.

“OK, I'm kidding, but we had fun too, did we not? In the early years, we had for instance, the ‘hectic travel award’ for the colleague having achieved the maximum number of miles, stops and places visited abroad over the year. Not to mention the secret parties in a room of the Annual Meeting hotel,” he says. “On the serious side, if information science is to be a science, it has to be universal, thus based upon observation of what goes on throughout humanity. It can't rely only on the observation of information use by small groups of yuppies living in major cities of the North, as had been the case for many years. The goal was to facilitate exposure of information activities outside the United States and Canada and to provide a focal point for international concerns.”

His observation that there were almost no contributors to the Annual Meetings from outside North America is what prompted Menou to take a leadership role in founding SIG/III. More generally, he elaborates, there was a need for a hub to connect ASIS&T members to developments in all countries and international colleagues to those taking place in North America.

As one of the founders of SIG/III, Menou says he’s “not proud of anything, because pride is a dangerous sentiment. I am satisfied and happy that the SIG attracted over the years so many talented and dedicated members and officers who keep working hard. I am happy for them that they were so often recognized with the SIG-of-the-Year award,” he says. “Yes, OK, I might be proud of SIG/III when it will celebrate its centennial, because then I won't risk to misbehave, contrary to what I often did.”

Menou says many activities carried out by SIG/III can be regarded as achievements:

- international sessions at the Annual Meeting
- international receptions at the Annual Meeting
- Infoshare program to support international colleagues
- international column in the Bulletin, which for many years carried contributions from colleagues outside the ASIS&T community
- International Paper Contest
- reduced membership fees for colleagues in developing nations.

Though there have been many achievements, Menou says there were, and still are, many obstacles:

- Many colleagues outside North America having seen, and still seeing, ASIS&T as an unreachable promised land when they simply don't know it
- Bureaucratic and financial constraints for paying membership dues and attending meetings in the United States faced by colleagues in many countries
- Marginal interest in international issues among many ASIS&T members, which was natural but has steadily changed.
“How do we overcome them? Hard work, patience, continuity and support from countless good people,” Menou says. He adds a special salute to Jan Krcmar who “invented” the SIG/III auction, through which the SIG has been able over the years to fund its outreach activities.

“Information science emerged as a response to the recognition of the vital role of information in human activities and the need to organize its control and access in front of the information explosion,” Menou says. “Thanks, if I may say, to the spread and rapid change in information technologies, the chaos which we face now is far greater than it was then.”

Yet, Menou says, there is still lack of a clear definition of the scope and boundaries of the field, which he thinks is one of the most critical issues facing ASIS&T and SIG/III today. “Today, any particular object or activity is turned into an i-science of some denomination. The common core is to be rebuilt,” he adds.

As far as his vision for SIG/III, Menou says, “If and when ASIS&T becomes a true international society, it should disappear.” Until then, it should pursue its course.

“It should probably try and make more extensive use of available technologies to offer more opportunities for international interaction. For instance, I’d welcome regular webinars which would allow for discussing key issues in information provision from a cross-cultural perspective,” he says.

Menou says being active in ASIS&T was valuable to him in his professional life because it gave him the opportunity to help many colleagues from different countries take advantage of the fine connections he enjoyed within ASIS&T.

He advises young ASIS&T members to cultivate critical thinking and not to dwell on a career, but instead concentrate on doing the best they can in a responsible way. He says young professionals should become involved in ASIS&T because “there is no other place to get the gist of current knowledge and questions regarding information as the lubricant and energy in the growth of human knowledge.”

“You will gain visibility and be connected to the finest people in the field,” he adds.

(Note: The full video interview with Michel Menou available at http://tinyurl.com/lyvfew2).