Information Science & Technology and Human Rights: ASIS&T’s Participation in the AAAS Science and Human Rights Coalition*

by Toni Carbo

EDITOR’S SUMMARY

ASIS&T core principles, including intellectual freedom, access to public information and balancing access with privacy, and the author’s membership in the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) prompted ASIS&T to get involved in the AAAS Science and Human Rights Coalition. The Association joins 51 other science and engineering organizations and 70 individuals promoting human rights issues through the coalition, which was launched in 2009. Among the group’s activities are communications to expand appreciation of the scientific and engineering communities’ role in human rights efforts and developing teaching modules on the interaction of science and engineering with human rights. As ASIS&T representative to the coalition, Carbo invites member involvement and contributions to an updated, annotated bibliography of resources on information science and technology and human rights.

KEYWORDS

human rights
intellectual freedom
information access
privacy
information science
information technology
professional associations

As a member of both ASIS&T and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) since the early 1970s, I have become increasingly aware of the overlapping interests and concerns among many ASIS&T and AAAS members, especially as demonstrated in the work of the AAAS Scientific Responsibility, Human Rights and Law Program (http://srhrl.aaas.org) and its Science and Human Rights Coalition. Thus, I approached the ASIS&T Board early in 2013 and asked for approval for ASIS&T to join the coalition, which was granted. I am honored to serve as the ASIS&T representative to the coalition for the near future, and I hope that other members will also be interested in assuming this responsibility.

From its earliest roots as the American Documentation Institute, ASIS&T has been involved in research, education and activities to ensure that individuals around the world can participate in the entire lifecycle of information: from its creation/generation, through its instantiation, organization and management, and preservation, to its dissemination, evaluation and use. Such principles as intellectual freedom, access to public information, protection of privacy of personally identifiable information, balancing access and privacy with security and many others have been addressed at our meetings, in our publications and programs, and through our own actions as

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*The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of AAAS or of the coalition.
The principles are encapsulated in the \textit{ASIS&T Professional Guidelines}, adopted by the Society on May 30, 1992 (www.asis.org/professional guidelines.html). The Guidelines identify and stress the responsibilities of ASIS&T members (and of all information professionals) to employers/clients/system users, to the profession and to society worldwide. High among these responsibilities are treating all persons fairly, being truthful, “adhering to principles of due process and equality of opportunity” and resisting all forms of censorship. These and other core human rights have continued to be addressed and emphasized throughout ASIS&T’s work over its more than 75 years, including, for example, in the continued increase in international activities, such as those of the Special Interest Group/International Information Issues, which last year celebrated its own 30th anniversary.

Although ASIS&T does not engage in political activities as an association, many of its members have actively participated in societal issues through workshops, programs and other activities to address these principles and concerns around the world. These include, for example, UNESCO Information for All Programs, international conferences, as well as courses and continuing education programs, on information ethics, and international publications. Given our history and principles, it seemed clear that joining the coalition could help promote causes that are important to our Association and its members.

In my new role as ASIS&T representative, I attended the July 11-12, 2013, coalition and council meetings in Washington, D.C., and quickly learned that the coalition is a very distinguished group of representatives from the 36 member organizations, 15 affiliated organizations and of 70 individual, affiliated scientists. The member organizations include a wide range of scientific and engineering groups, such as the American Physical Society, American Society of Civil Engineers, American Statistical Association, Psychologists for Social Responsibility and Sociologists Without Borders, and humanities groups, including the American Historical Association and the American Philosophical Association. Affiliated organizations include the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, the Committee of Concerned Scientists, the Fulbright Academy of Science & Technology and Objectif Sciences International. These are organizations that share many values and interests with ASIS&T and with which, in my opinion, we should be interacting much more actively and frequently. Of course, all of them also rely upon information, related technologies and information professionals to achieve their goals and objectives.

The coalition came about as a result of a series of discussions among individuals from 42 organizations in 2005, which led to other discussions and meetings and resulted in the formal launch of the coalition in January 2009. The coalition describes itself broadly as “a network of scientific and engineering membership organizations that recognize a role for scientists and engineers in human rights” (http://shr.aaas.org/coalition/index.shtml). Several working groups were created to address key topics of interest: Welfare of Scientists, Ethics & Human Rights, Service to the STEM Community, Service to the Human Rights Community and Education and Information Resources.

Among the many major current activities four are of particular interest to ASIS&T members:

1. A Joint Initiative on Article 15: Right to the benefits of scientific progress and applications of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (http://shr.aaas.org/coalition/article15/index.shtml);
2. An outreach and communication committee to expand and grow the coalition’s impact as a means of enhancing the contribution of the scientific and engineering communities to human rights efforts
3. Two information resources
   a. teaching modules on human rights generally and discipline-specific ways in which science and engineering have contributed to or led to violations of human rights
   b. review and update of the \textit{Annotated Bibliographic Database on Science and Human Rights}

We continue to work on the draft response to Article 15, which we expect to have completed in October. A summary of the July 2013 coalition meetings with

At the request of the editor of the Annotated Bibliographic Database, I prepared an annotated bibliography of resources on information science and technology and human rights, which will be included in the updated bibliography expected to be posted on the website in the near future. This project was very challenging, both because of the problems of defining the scope and because of the limits on the number of resources to be included. The bibliography is very much a work in progress, and I would greatly appreciate the comments and suggestions of ASIS&T members for what should be included. Anyone wishing to receive a copy of the draft is welcome to email me at tcarbo14<at>gmail.com.

As I continue to work on future updates to the entries, I would like to find an effective way to involve ASIS&T members in the revision and, more importantly, to create our own more extensive bibliography of resources on IST and human rights. In addition, there are many ways that ASIS&T members can be involved in this important work on human rights, and I welcome comments and suggestions on ideas and potential actions.