

A History of the ASA Committee on Scientific Freedom and Human Rights to 2015

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Introduction

The American Statistical Association (ASA) Committee on Scientific Freedom and Human Rights began officially in 1979, when the ASA established an ad hoc committee to address human rights related concerns in the statistical community, both in the United States and internationally. Since then, the committee has expanded both in size and in scope -- the committee now includes ten members and three liaisons, and addresses both human rights concerns and the protection of scientific freedom. Formally, the committee has been charged by the ASA to concern itself “with violations of and threats to the scientific freedom and human rights of statisticians and other scientists throughout the world”, as well as to assist “other responsible organizations on statistical questions related to data on human rights or the use of data to limit human rights”.

With the understanding that the committee has grown and changed dynamically over time, this document highlights the committee’s historical activities, particularly those activities addressing the protection of scientific freedom. It is not intended to be an exhaustive document of the committee’s entire history, but rather, a means of describing the committee’s challenges and successes in the past thirty years. Those interested in delving more deeply into the documented history of the committee may appreciate previous works by Jabine, Claude, and Samuelson (see references). This document provides another resource focused especially on the committee’s activities in support of scientific freedom. In addition to referencing previous historical documentation, information was collected in ten interviews with past and present committee members and supporters. The document was compiled and edited by Steph Eaneff and Dr. Jay Kadane, the current chair of the committee. This work was made possible by the American Statistical Association, as well as by the individuals who generously made time for interviews.

Pre-Committee History

The Committee on Scientific Freedom and Human Rights was formally established in 1979, largely in response to the disappearance of Argentinian statistician Carlos Noriega. In May of 1976, a delegation of ASA members met with Noriega, at that time, the director of the Argentine national statistical office, during a visit to Buenos Aires. Later that year, Noriega left his post at the statistical office. There were reports from those that knew him that he had been pressured by the military government to tamper with official government data. After leaving, Noriega accepted another job, working in Peru in support of the United Nations. In February of 1977, while on vacation in Argentina, Noriega was detained by individuals believed to have been members of paramilitary groups. Though it was never confirmed that he was in custody, he was never seen again. It is presumed that Noriega was one of thousands of individuals disappeared during Argentina’s “Dirty War”, a campaign by Argentina’s military dictatorship against those perceived as political dissidents.

Two years later, in 1979, the International Statistical Institute (ISI) announced that they intended the group’s 1981 meeting to be held in Buenos Aires, Argentina. American representatives of the ASA, several of whom had personally met Noriega during their previous visit to Argentina, raised questions about whether the United States delegation should boycott the event. This conversation provided the primary impetus for the establishment of an ad-hoc committee in 1979, following a petition made to the ASA board of directors by Fred Leone.

The new committee's first order of action was to address the decision of the ISI to hold its meeting in Buenos Aires. Though Fred Leone and Ed Barankin lobbied the ISI to move the meeting to another location, they were unsuccessful in changing the planned venue. During the ad-hoc committee's first meeting, held in August 1979 in Washington, DC, there was vigorous discussion over the most appropriate response by the ASA. Though some individuals advocated for a boycott of the meeting entirely, it was decided that the US delegation would, in fact, attend the meeting in Argentina, but would publicly show their support for the military government's opposition.

The American delegation included Fred Leone and Dorothy Wellington, who set up meetings with senior administrators of the Argentine government. They also publicly met with the families of several disappeared individuals, in particular, with the Mothers of the Disappeared. Following the meetings, several of the dissidents reached out to thank the group. They stated that although they had initially been upset to hear that the American delegation would be attending the meetings, they were appreciative of the visit and for the efforts to draw increased international attention to Noreiga's disappearance.

The international statistical community's involvement in support of the Dirty War's opposition came nearly full circle in 1983, when the new leaders of the Argentine government created an investigative group within the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons. One of this group's supporters was distinguished anthropologist Clyde Snow, who was sent alongside several other American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) scientists and analysts to support the effort. Though not officially associated with the ASA's human rights work, AAAS and ASA have, since the establishment of the ASA committee, worked collaboratively and in parallel to provide both advocacy for human rights causes and statistical support for those tackling human rights related research.

Committee Growth over Time

Since its foundation in 1979, the committee has evolved over time and diversified its areas of topical focus. One of the first major surges in both interest and membership occurred in 1984, when then-ASA president Richard Savage delivered an address on "Hard-Soft Problems". In this talk, he challenged practicing statisticians to apply their skills to solve difficult problems that were "vague, poorly defined [or] elusive", but that would benefit largely from statistical analysis. One of the hard/soft problems highlighted was human rights. Savage asserted that "it [was] important to have a quantitative, policy-neutral summary of the status of human rights", a goal which resonated with many statisticians in the audience, including several who would go on to become committee members.

David Banks, then a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of California, Berkeley, wrote to Savage following his speech to ask how he could be involved in human rights research. Similarly, Herb Spierer also began his human rights related work after a conversation with Savage. Spierer recalls about this conversation: "I was helping to make corporations more wealthy for 20 years, and I wanted to help contribute something." Thomas Jabine, the chair of the committee at that time, helped to coordinate the involvement of a number of statisticians whose interests were sparked following Savage's 1984 presidential address.

The following year, in 1985, the charter of the Committee was rewritten to extend into issues related to human rights statistics, in addition to the protection of scientific freedom, a change advocated for strongly by Doug Samuelson and Fred Leone. The rewritten charter was the product of a spirited

meeting of the ASA Committee on Committees, in which Samuelson presented a case for an expanded mission. Despite a rather contentious discussion, which included a strategically timed lunch break to allow for additional conversations and compromises, the Committee's charter was ultimately expanded to its current form:

"The Committee concerns itself with violations of and threats to the scientific freedom and human rights of statisticians and other scientists throughout the world. The committee also assists scientific societies or other responsible organizations on statistical questions related to data on human rights or the use of data to limit human rights."

In addition to this revised charter, the Committee on Committees also mandated that the committee would not partake in partisan research, specifically, that the committee would not become involved in controversies at the recommendation of partisan groups.

The Committee, now with an expanded charter, has continued to develop over time. Its topical areas of focus reflect both current events and areas of particular interest to appointed committee members, who sometimes serve as advocates for selected causes. Louise Spirer established a newsletter, which has now become an email publication sent to "Friends of the Committee."

Overview of Committee Activities

As reflected by the committee charter, the committee's actions generally fall into two broad categories, addressing both scientific freedom and the protection of human rights. Historically, the committee's activities promoting scientific freedom have been reflected by its support of and advocacy for those engaged in research, both in the United States and abroad. The committee's primary advocacy focus has been on providing support for individuals conducting statistical research, not only statisticians, but also educators, engineers, and demographers.

Work addressing human rights has largely focused on promotion of quantitative, statistically-informed human rights research. This work includes both support of primary research, as well as development of resources and training programs for others working in the field of human rights. Since the committee's inception, the human rights research community has, in general, grown more receptive to the use of quantitative research. Louise Spirer reflected:

"without this push to use statistics, it would have really continued on being more or less hearsay and eyewitnesses. You need that, but you also need the data analysis work... you [have] to have the analysis done properly, and you [have] to be able to prove things properly."

Scientific Freedom

Throughout committee history, letters of inquiry have been used as advocacy tools. These letters serve not only to offer a unified voice in support of scientific freedom, but also as a way of expressing ongoing professional interest in specific causes that otherwise may receive little public attention. One of the first formal actions taken by committee was one such letter of inquiry, sent to the Liberian government regarding the safety of the minister of education. Following a military coup in 1980, a number of government officials were killed in Liberia, including several former cabinet ministers who were publicly executed on a beach in Monrovia. The minister of education, Henry Fahnbulleh, was not among those executed, but remained imprisoned. Ed Barakin, the chair of the committee at that time, drafted and sent a formal letter of inquiry and support. Fahnbulleh was not

executed, and went on, several years in the future, to join the opposition group against those responsible for the coup and executions.

The ASA has drafted similar formal letters of inquiry for other practicing statisticians imprisoned by their countries' leadership, including a Communist mathematician in Uruguay, two Malawian statisticians in the country's public health program, and a university president in Ethiopia. Though it is difficult to assess the impact of a single letter of inquiry, varying levels of success have been ascribed to these letters. In the case of the two statisticians imprisoned by then-president Banda's regime, a number of individuals on the committee felt that the letters had little to no impact. However, in the case of Dr. Alemayehu Teferra, former president of Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia, letters of inquiry may have been much more influential. Teferra was arrested in 1993 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, after criticizing the role of government security forces in the death of 4 university students during an anti-government demonstration at the university. He was held by the government for four years without being charged, and remained in prison until 2003. Following his release, Teferra thanked organizations, including the ASA and AAAS, for their support during his imprisonment, and asserted that he believed his release was due to international attention to his case.

While some committee actions are able to be somewhat proactive, including letter-writing and public support, other actions are, by necessity, more reactive. The death of Chen Wen-Chen, a statistics professor at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), was one such case. In 1981, while visiting his family in Taiwan, Wen-Chen was found dead at the National Taiwan University. Although official Taiwanese reports listed the cause of death as suicide, his patterns of injury were viewed by many as more consistent with being thrown from the building. Wen-Chen, who had been involved in the pro-democracy movement in Taiwan, had been detained for questioning by the Taiwanese the day before his body was found.

Following Wen-Chen's death, Morris DeGroot, then chairman of the CMU Statistics department and a member of the ad-hoc committee, accompanied an independent forensic pathologist to Taiwan for the summer. The pathologist verified that Wen-Chen's injuries were inconsistent with suicide, and suggested that he had likely been knocked unconscious and dropped off of the railing of a staircase. However, the official cause of death as determined by the Taiwanese government remained suicide. As such, Wen-Chen's Taiwanese life insurance did not offer any financial support for his widow and young son.

In addition to the support of the CMU Statistics Department, Ed Bisgyer, then Executive Director of the ASA, also demonstrated personal and professional investment in Wen-Chen's death. Though it was too late in the year to formally enter the program of the ASA Annual Meeting, Bisgyer suggested that Wen-Chen's colleagues organize a public business meeting at the annual ASA event. This event, which both memorialized Wen-Chen's contributions to the community and highlighted the inconsistencies surrounding his death, was attended by over 75 supporters. Though, Wen-Chen's official cause of death remained suicide, one of his life insurance policies (from an American company) eventually paid the claims filed by his family.

The committee's advocacy for scientific freedoms extends not only abroad in countries including Taiwan and Ethiopia, but also to the United States. In the early 1990s, Beth Osborne Daponte, a demographer who studied at the University of Chicago, worked as a Middle East analyst at the US Census Bureau. In her capacity at the Census, she was tasked with generating population projections in the Middle East. The development of these projections was a normal Census Bureau project, and

the Bureau did such work across numerous regions and countries to provide public domain population estimates.

Though Daponte's work was not primarily focused on casualties in the Middle East, it was necessary to generate casualty estimates as part of estimating population size, accounting for birth rates, death rates, and migration. Tasked with projecting the population of Iraq in fall 1991, she was advised by supervisors and colleagues to seek out advice on estimating the Iraqi population, and encouraged to consult with others who had done work addressing the war in Iraq. One such researcher was Bill Arkin, who was working on similar projections in his role at Greenpeace.

In January of 1992, when the population projections were complete for the cycle and the information entered into the public domain, Daponte was contacted by Arkin. At the time, a normal part of an analyst's job was to provide the public, including researchers and media, with information that was in the public domain. In a Greenpeace press conference the following day, Arkin released his figures of mortality due to the 1991 Persian Gulf War, as well as the Census Bureau's figures. The Census Bureau's figures generated a considerable amount of interest. Daponte recalls that after this conference, she was told by her superiors that she could no longer write or think about Iraq, to which she responded by stating that providing information in the public domain was a part of her job.

Two months after the data were shared, in March of 1992, the Census Bureau proposed to fire Daponte. The Bureau cited reasons including a lack of a security clearance, falsification of information, and general untrustworthiness. Daponte, deeply concerned about the implications of these accusations, told her supervisors that if they moved forwards, she planned on reaching out to the press. Daponte remembers that her comments were shrugged off, and that she was told "go ahead". The next day, Daponte met with Washington Post reporter Bart Gelman. Two days later, an article was released in the Washington Post, and her phone began to ring off the hook. The only phone call she remembers returning that day was an unsolicited call from Herb Spirer, who offered his support and the support of the committee.

Backed by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), AAAS, and the ASA, Daponte was able to justify and defend both her research methodologies and her results. After working with ACLU, and presenting the Census Bureau with large book of letters of support, including several from ASA members, the Bureau retracted their proposal. Media outlets covered the Bureau's retraction, demonstrating that the ASA's actions had an impact.

Still, Daponte, realized that she could no longer have a satisfying career at the Census. She took a leave of absence from the Census Bureau to become a Visiting Assistant Professor at Carnegie Mellon University, where she taught, was the Survey Director for a large-scale household survey, and finished her dissertation. The following year, the University of Pittsburgh offered her a position that would allow her to teach and return to international research. Planning to return to the Census Bureau after that year, Daponte was surprised when Census Bureau officials told her that the only position that would be available to her was one writing instructions for survey takers. The ACLU again intervened, and Daponte resigned from the Census Bureau after receiving a monetary settlement.

In Pittsburgh, a number of ASA committee members continued to offer professional support, including Herb Spirer and Jay Kadane. Daponte, already an experienced demographer, became even more involved in the field of human rights research, teaching from the Spirers' book on human rights

data analysis, working as a State Department visiting expert in South Africa, and eventually leading the UN's peacekeeping evaluation section in Office of Internal Oversight Services.

Daponte feels strongly that the ASA committee's ongoing support was critical in her ability to respond to and recover from the professional accusations she faced early in her career. She remembers how important it was to have senior-level statisticians who were willing to look over her research to attest to its validity-- "There was a point at which, if the ASA committee hadn't stepped forward, I'm not sure my career would have survived."

In addition to more direct work supporting scientific freedom of researchers, the committee has also developed working partnerships with statisticians and researchers from other countries, including the Soviet Union and Cuba. Some of the committee's first activities in partnership with other researchers involved a group of academic Refuseniks, individuals whose academic credentials were revoked by leaders in the Soviet Union, and who were barred from leaving the country during the Cold War. In response to these actions by Soviet leaders, the committee wrote a series of letters of inquiry, as well as a number of ongoing personal letters sent via international post to select Soviet statisticians and scientists. By sending these letters, the committee hoped to indicate their continued involvement in monitoring the conditions of these researchers, as they were confident the letters were being monitored by Soviet officials. Doug Samuelson, who was the head of the committee at that time, recalls the story of one young committee member from rural Tennessee, who walked into a small-town post office in his area and shocked them by asking to mail something to Russia. Three months after letter of inquiry was sent to Soviet officials, policies regarding revocation of academic credentials were changed.

In addition to letters of support and ongoing outreach to Soviet Refusenik researchers, a number of members of the committee were involved in helping to publicize research which had been smuggled out of the Soviet Union (including at ASA poster sessions). One such collaboration existed between US statisticians and individuals at the Institute for Signal Processing. This partnership fueled a series of research papers and presentations, as well as a few unexpected challenges. Samuelson vividly recalls having to hand-draw a number of equations from one of the collaborative papers, since his computer lacked signal font.

Collaborative, international research was not limited to work with Soviet Refuseniks. In the early 1990s, Doug Samuelson wrote article on Cuban health care with Herb Spier and Jorge Romeu, a Cuban researcher. According to researchers, Cuba had excellent health statistics before 1989, but then stopped publishing them around the time that the Soviet subsidy stopped. To supplement the lack of Cuban records, other official reports on Cuban demography were shared between researchers in Cuba and the library at the University of Pittsburgh. Since data could not be transmitted directly from the United States to Cuba, all documents were passed through Mexico.

The committee's support for scientific freedom has continued at a relatively steady pace over time, with some temporary periods of increased and decreased activity. One abuse of scientific freedoms currently being addressed by the committee is the repression of statisticians and researchers in Argentina by the Argentinian government. The letter of inquiry sent by the ASA in July 2012 perhaps best describes the ongoing challenge:

"The government of Argentina has been systematically harassing and endeavoring to punish a number of individual statisticians and research organizations that, as part of their ongoing professional and scientific work, collect, compile, and/or disseminate price statistics using methods

that are not approved of by the Argentine Government. These attacks, beginning in February 2011, first took the form of levying of confiscatory fines... and more recently have escalated to multiple fines and, reportedly, to threats of imprisonment under the criminal law."

In response to these systematic violations of scientific freedom, the ASA has taken a number of steps to draw attention to the actions of the Argentinian government, including 2012 a JSM session organized by the committee entitled "Repression of Statistics and Statisticians by the Argentine Government".

Human Rights

Like the work of the committee supporting scientific freedoms, the committee's activities addressing human rights have been both broad in scope and varied in nature. However, one commonly shared element of the committee's human rights work has been an overarching focus on education. Such educational work includes the development of resources such as books, programs, and informal support networks, as well as the direct provision of statistical support.

One topic of continued educational interest is the appropriate design of research surveys and questionnaires. One of several works published by committee members, the book *Data Analysis for Monitoring Human Rights* by Herb and Louise Spirer (1994), was intended to serve as an instructional statistical text for novices. The utility of this educational resource has become clear -- since its original publication in the 1990s, the book has been translated into multiple languages, including Russian and Nepalese. After the book had been published, Herb Spirer remembers being approached by a doctor who informed him that she would go out with local women with Herb's book in her backpack, in case any questions arose.

The educational resources developed and supported by members of the committee are numerous and diverse, and include multiple books, chapters, organizations, and institutional research groups. Work currently being done by the team at the nonprofit Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG), as well as work being done by the Carnegie Mellon University Statistics Department, continue the push to develop new methods and train new statistical researchers working in the field of human rights. Additionally, the committee has a strong history of partnerships with AAAS, especially their Science and Human Rights Coalition, as well as with another ASA group, Statisticians Without Borders. Both of these groups share closely aligned visions, and many individuals from the committee have personal and professional connections with these other human rights research groups. Partnerships between the committee and these groups, as well as others, help to promote both collaborative research and increased awareness of relevant human rights related research activities.

In addition to these groups, many individual contributors from the committee have also been involved in directly providing research and educational support to human rights work. One particularly well-recognized example of the committee's support of statistical research involved a partnership with the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), a network of non-governmental organizations addressing the removal of landmines and support for landmine survivors. Doug Samuelson recalls an initial meeting on Veteran's Day in 1993, in which a group of statisticians met to consider potential analytical approaches to modeling the consequences of landmines. One particular approach was an economic consequence model, run on December 24th, 1993, and fondly dubbed "Doug's Christmas Eve model". The model and the analytical tools developed in support of the project addressed the global economic impacts caused by landmines. Results and conclusions of the research were published in *AMSTAT* and presented at a AAAS

meeting, and, eventually, a Nobel Peace Prize related to these efforts was awarded to Jody Williams, the founding coordinator of the ICBL.

Reflections

Though the committee has changed in membership and scope in the past thirty years, the fundamental ideals of committee remain focused on the protection of scientific freedoms and human rights. However, the committee has changed dynamically over time, reflecting the skills and passions of its members, and responding to continuously evolving global challenges. Past-committee chair David Banks reflected that in the early days of the committee, working to address human rights and scientific freedom was not always considered to be a ‘respectable academic activity’. However, the committee has gained increasing recognition over the years, and its committed members and chairs have helped the committee move into respected position within the statistical community.

The committee has also branched out from its initial work supporting statisticians who have been impacted by social and political injustices. Though such work still remains a prime focus of the committee’s activities, the committee has demonstrated increasing efforts to provide quantitative research support for those working in the field of human rights. This work has taken both direct and indirect forms, ranging from model building and statistical analysis, to supporting professional development for statisticians in developing nations. Over time, the committee has continued to encourage the development of statistical capabilities in a variety of organizations, both in the US and internationally.

As public interest in varied applications of statistics increases, the committee’s role in providing support and guidance for statisticians in challenging positions is just as relevant now as it has ever been. Past committee chair Patrick Ball described one of the committee’s most pressing ongoing challenges as helping other research partners in the field of human rights to think more critically about their data and their analytical methods. In addition to this outreach role, the committee, as mandated by its charter, is committed to continuing to provide support for those statisticians facing violations of their scientific freedoms.

For a number of statisticians affiliated with the ASA Committee on Scientific Freedom and Human Rights, the committee provided invaluable support, and an opportunity to contribute to the global community. Herb Spirer reflects: “I will always be grateful to the committee for what they did.” Like Spirer, Beth Osborne Daponte is also thankful for the work of the committee. She remembers vividly a phone call from Spirer the day after the story of her proposed termination was published in the Washington Post: “When I heard Herb’s voice for the first time, that’s when I knew I would be okay.” While there is undeniably much more work to be done, there is also much that has been accomplished.

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