

President's Message

How Universal Is Our Message?

Clinton J. Andrews

Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ 08901 USA

■ **THE SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS** of technology are a global concern. Technological systems span all of the continents and connect nearly every human. The unintended consequences of human innovations are even more widespread, if you include space junk and radio noise. Associated ethical dilemmas are ubiquitous and are not confined to particular cultures or jurisdictions. We might expect that people all over the world would want to discuss technology and its social implications. But that is not the case. At least not with us.

IEEE members live all over the world, although they are not present in proportion to the general population of each country. They are disproportionately represented in English-speaking countries, especially in North America. The regional representation of the IEEE Society on Social Implications of Technology (SSIT) members is similar to that of IEEE as a whole except in Asia, where we are vastly under-represented outside Australia and New Zealand. Even in India, which has the largest number of Asian SSIT members, the proportion of SSIT presence is less than half of the proportional IEEE presence. China, Japan, and South Korea, combined, represent 21% of the world's population but have less than 3% of SSIT members.

Some of the under-representation may be due to economic barriers, because IEEE and SSIT membership carry a cost. A while ago, IEEE instituted a country- and income-based discounted membership arrangement to try to mitigate this effect. SSIT does not have such a program, but maybe it should.

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Perhaps, it is partly a language barrier. Both the overall IEEE and the SSIT membership distributions show an Anglophone bias. As more and more professionals learn English, and as on-the-fly, AI-supported online translation services improve, this barrier will diminish.

Maybe it is partly political. SSIT's publications, conferences, and web posts address sensitive topics such as the right to privacy, protection of intellectual property, pursuit of economic advantage, and ethics of warfare, for example. Our subject matter is not only technical, and it may be risky or offensive to some.

Could it be cultural? Much of what we talk and write about SSIT applies a critical lens to the world of technology. Critical thinking is a mainstream part of some educational traditions, but is it universally valued?

Critical thinking, according to a widely used definition, means "reasonable and reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do," and such thinkers are disposed to pursue truth to the extent possible, represent positions clearly and honestly, and care about the dignity and worth of all people [1]. Every clause in the previous sentence could stir controversy: only some truths have an objective basis and many others depend on the eye of the beholder; communication is a culturally grounded act; and no real society values everyone equally [2], [3].

Wading further into the deep water, we can appreciate that claims for universal values are also controversial. Efforts to measure them find modest support, in the sense that many people in many countries recognize values such as power, achievement,

hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, and security [4]. Such universality only holds in a probabilistic sense, and there are plenty of outliers. This does not leave us stuck in moral relativism, but it does suggest that we need to be practical. A pragmatic view of universal values is that all people have reasons to value, say, non-violence, even though not all people currently value non-violence, to paraphrase Mahatma Gandhi [5]. This “ought” versus “is” distinction admits that values are aspirational.

OUR COMMUNITY ASPIRES to think critically about the social implications of technology. Our membership distribution suggests that we have opportunities to bring a wider range of people into these rich discussions. We should consider practical steps toward a wider conversation. These steps should test, rather than assume, that we hold the truth, communicate it successfully, and demonstrate respect for others. Let us bring our conferences to under-served regions, recruit authors who bring alternative and even divergent perspectives, and continue seeking more diversity in our leadership. Let us reduce the financial and linguistic barriers to participation, acknowledge that our subject matter is seen through political and cultural lenses, and aspire to relatively more universal relevance. ■

References

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Clinton J. Andrews is the President of the IEEE Society on Social Implications of Technology. He is a Professor and the Associate Dean for Research with the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA.

■ Direct questions and comments about this article to Clinton J. Andrews, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ 08901 USA; c.j.andrews@ieee.org.