

News

Assistant Secretary Posner Remarks at the American Association for the Advancement of Science

Assistant Secretary Michael Posner Remarks “Scientific and Academic Freedom in the Digital Age”

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AS DELIVERED

Thank you Sascha [Meinrath], and thank you Norm, for that really warm introduction. I want to thank the AAAS (“triple A-S”) for this opportunity to be here. I’m really delighted to be here to talk about the intersection of science and human rights. It’s an important subject and one that hasn’t gotten the attention it deserves. I also want to thank Seth Bouvier who is our DRL Human Rights Bureau AAAS Fellow and who’s been terrific. And we’re really honored and proud to have actually several AAAS Fellows working in our bureau. And I want to thank Sonni Efron who’s a terrific part of our team and who’s often putting very smart words into my mouth, and so I appreciate that.

Our two communities tend to agree that we have a lot in common — yet we don’t talk to each other nearly enough. When scientists and human rights activists have worked together, the results have been historic.

And few organizations better embody the importance of this collaboration than the AAAS, which has a really strong record of distinguished leadership in both fields.

Over the last several years, you’ve used scientific advancements to document the destruction of villages in Darfur. You’ve teamed up with leading rights organizations to tackle corruption in Kenya. That’s abroad. And here at home, AAAS was far ahead of its time in other human rights struggles, including launching a campaign in 1976 to make all scientific conferences accessible to everyone – from ethnic minorities and women to disabled individuals and LGBT people.

Looking around the room, I am guessing that some of you weren’t even born in 1976, and to you these rights seem axiomatic. But they weren’t. The transformation of these radical notions into unremarkable realities required the efforts of a lot of people, including many scientists. People like Audrey Chapman who I worked with for years when I was at Human Rights First and she was here at AAAS.

Much has changed over the last several decades since I had the privilege of working, for example, with Tanya Yankelovich who is the stepdaughter of Andrei Sakharov. And I represented his family in petitioning for Sakharov’s release from, or, the end of internal exile in Gorky in a proceeding before UNESCO. And it was interesting to me at that time – this was in the height of the Soviet period of the Cold War. But it was interesting for me how much the Soviets, who were so resistant to this notion of human rights, had such respect for science and scientists. And the thought that Sakharov, the winner of the Lenin Prize, the great Soviet, brilliant physicist, was working on human rights really confronted them with a difficult situation. We went to UNESCO three or four times, and they took the petition more seriously than anything else that was done. I’m not

saying that that was the cause of his eventual release and return to Moscow but there's no question that the voices of the scientific community here and globally played an important role in his case and in the case of Yuri Orlov. I was privileged to work with people like Sidney Drell, who did a fantastic job during this period in raising these issues and making the scientific community a universal voice for human rights.

Today, a new generation of scientists has taken up the mantle of human rights. There is **institutionalized** collaboration between scientists, human rights activists, and diplomats. The U.S. Institute for Peace, for example, has an entire center on Science, Technology and Peacebuilding. And, of course, AAAS has a Science and Human Rights Coalition.

All of these efforts are rooted in principles first articulated in the founding documents of the United States. Eleanor Roosevelt brought them to bear on drafting of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And today I want to discuss one element of that, Article 27, which says, and I'm quoting: "Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share scientific advancement and its benefits." So this is at the core of the UN's approach to human rights.

More than 60 years later, we're still working towards a world where everyone shares scientific advancement, and where science and human rights advance in tandem. The rapid rate of scientific change makes it ever more urgent for the human rights community to partner with you, with scientists concerned with fundamental human freedoms, ethics and the advancement of human dignity.

Scientists and human rights activists approach the world from different vantage points, to be sure, but we are alike in one way: We both reach for the universal. Scientific fact is not bound by borders, and neither are human rights. Scientific truth does not change when governments change, and neither do the principles of human rights. We continue to strive toward fundamental truth, in the properties that define our world and the dignity that defines our lives.

From where I sit in the State Department, we see two simultaneous phenomena occurring throughout the world: On the one hand, enormous progress and intellectual ferment produced by the interdisciplinary cooperation between scientists, other academics, human rights workers, diplomats, NGOs and, increasingly, businesses. At the same time, in some countries, we see the enhanced use of technology to monitor, to censor or to chill free expression. We see the erosion of academic freedom. And we see far too many attempts to intimidate intellectuals and to stifle independent thought through threats, interrogations or detentions.

This brings me back to Article 27 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, which envisions a world where everyone **has the right to share in scientific advancement and its benefits**.

This right simply cannot be realized without the climate of free expression that is essential to an unfettered thinking that produces scientific advancement in the first place. As the hundreds of thousands of people who've flocked to Silicon Valley from around the world can tell you, there **is** a connection between personal freedom, intellectual freedom and political freedom... which is why

attempts by a number of authoritarian governments to order up the development of little Silicon Valleys in their own countries have **not** generated the desired results.

The UDHR right to benefit from science matters because of the inherent links between scientific and technological progress, economic progress, and the realization of many other human rights. This isn't a new concept. In the preamble of the U.S. Constitution, the Framers aimed to, quote, "promote the general welfare."

More than a century later, President Roosevelt warned that "People who are hungry and out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made." President Obama in his Nobel Prize speech in 2009 noted that, "Just peace includes not only civil and political rights — it must encompass economic security and opportunity. For true peace is not just freedom from fear, but freedom from want."

We have seen how science and technology have advanced freedoms from want — including from disease, premature death thanks to vaccines, oral rehydration therapy, anti-retrovirals and the use of rigorous scientific metrics to measure development outcomes. Yet the great divide persists when it comes to equal participation in, and benefit from, science. Part of U.S. foreign policy is aimed at helping citizens around the world access scientific and technical advances and knowledge. Still, the rights described in Article 27 are far from being realized.

So I want to offer just a few suggestions as to what Article 27 **should** mean, and I hope **will come to mean** in our lifetimes.

And I will offer the Internet as an example of how the rights set forth in Article 27 are under threat, and how we're working to protect them.

First, under the Universal Declaration, everyone has the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any medium and regardless of frontiers. Combined with Article 27, this means that states must respect the freedom of individuals to seek, receive and impart information about scientific progress, in any discipline.

Unfortunately, this freedom is imperiled in many parts of the world.

In Turkey, for example, a chemical engineer named Kemal Gürüz (KEH-mahl GUER-UEZ) was arrested and jailed on June 25th. He's a well-known defender of secularism in science, and his arrest, his second in three years, appears to be related to his secularism.

Elsewhere in the world, particularly in authoritarian countries worried about possible contagion from the Arab uprisings, we have seen many many other instances of academics subjected to online surveillance and harassment. In some instances, we know that the latest, greatest digital technologies have been used by repressive regimes to spy on and silence their own citizens. Student communications have been monitored. Controversial conversations have been ended. And hundreds of students have been expelled for what they posted on social media.

In Iran, for example, academic freedom is simply nonexistent. More than 600 students and some university lecturers remain in prison for their peaceful expression of political views. Hundreds more have been barred from study, including members of the Bahai' faith who are barred en masse from higher education.

The exchange of information and scientific collaboration and education is happening online — just as 21st Century repression is happening online. And so in practice, I submit, scientific freedom will not exist without Internet freedom. This is academic freedom in the digital age.

Now, the number of people who can access the Internet is growing, thanks to the growing affordability of mobile devices. But the percentage of users who face restrictions on their right to seek and communicate information once they get

online is growing even **faster**. According to new data from the OpenNet Initiative, 960 million Internet users live in countries that impose *illegitimate* restrictions on content; that's 47% of all Internet users.

So this brings me to the **second** implication of Article 27 – that governments should aim to ensure that the benefits of science and technology are available without discrimination. That means when the Internet – or any other scientific advancement – reaches a country, people should be able to benefit from it.

Unfortunately, in some countries, governments deny their own people the opportunity to benefit from the Internet. Cuba recently installed a fiber-optic cable delivering high-speed Internet. But there's a catch: only government officials receive this high-speed Internet. Citizens are left with the slowest and most expensive connections in Latin America on those limited occasions when the Government of Cuba allows them any access at all.

The **third** implication of Article 27, which is related to the second, is that scientific advances must not be used to commit human rights abuses. We've seen examples this year where governments have used the Internet and other technologies to hunt down and silence democracy activists. Syria is the most obvious offender, but there are others. Of course, these actions are contrary to many of the protections in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but we should also think of them as inconsistent with Article 27.

All of these threats should concern scientists as much as they do human rights activists. What can we do about it? Let me quickly sketch out some things that the U.S. government is doing and then conclude.

First, we've made it a foreign policy priority in this Administration to protect the Internet as a platform for scientific and other types of discourse. In December last year, with the Dutch, we launched a group of now 18 countries dedicated to protecting the rights-enabling nature of the Internet, and we worked together in July to pass a consensus resolution in the United Nations Human Rights Council, declaring that human rights apply online.

Second, the U.S. government has many programs in place to expand infrastructure investment and lower the cost of access for people around the world. We are also working with Sascha and his team at the New America Foundation to develop technologies that can be used to connect citizens in places where the Internet is unreliable – or simply doesn't exist. This program is just one of many – by the end of this year we will have funded over \$100 million in Internet freedom programs since 2008.

Third, consistent with the principle that science should not be used to abuse human rights, on April 22nd, the President announced an Executive Order that will stop the transfer of technologies likely to be used by the Syrian or Iranian governments to track down and commit serious human rights abuses against Internet users.

So, that's what the U.S. government is doing. But what can you do to protect the Internet?

We need the scientific community to speak up. We need your voices on a range of scientific and technological issues that affect the fundamental freedoms of people at home and around the world. You bring gravitas and credibility to a public debate and, frankly, provide the voices of reason when distorted discussions of scientific issues devolve into sensationalism or scaremongering.

We also need you to lead. We need you to lead on academic and scientific freedom, and particularly, to help defend Internet freedom. We need you to raise your voices in defense of thinkers, researchers around the world who are increasingly getting into trouble because of what they blog, tweet or text.

More broadly, I'd encourage you to think about the issues in your field in the context of Article 27. Realizing this right means focusing on the hard issues that the AAAS is already committed to tackling: identifying funding and research

priorities that reflect societal needs; ensuring quality science education at all levels; removing barriers to scientific freedom; encouraging international cooperation and the free flow of scientific knowledge. It will require working with, and educating, policy makers on technical issues.

I've offered the Internet as an example of a scientific advancement, and how the principles of universal human rights shape our work. But these same principles apply to advancements in genetics, nanotechnology, and other fields. As I stated at the outset, the human rights and scientific communities have a storied partnership. The challenge over the next 50 years will be for us to work more closely together. I believe these are seminal human rights issues for our time, and I hope you will join us in the effort to advance both science and human freedom.

Thank you.

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