

SIGART on AAAI's Founding

The Chairman's Message, 1980

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■ This article reprints a section of the January 1980 "Chairman's Message" of the *SIGART Newsletter* (No. 69). SIGART is the Special Interest Group on Artificial Intelligence, of the Association for Computing Machinery. At the time of AAAI's formation, SIGART, with its 3,800 members, was the principal AI organization in the United States, and its primary activity was publishing the *Newsletter*.

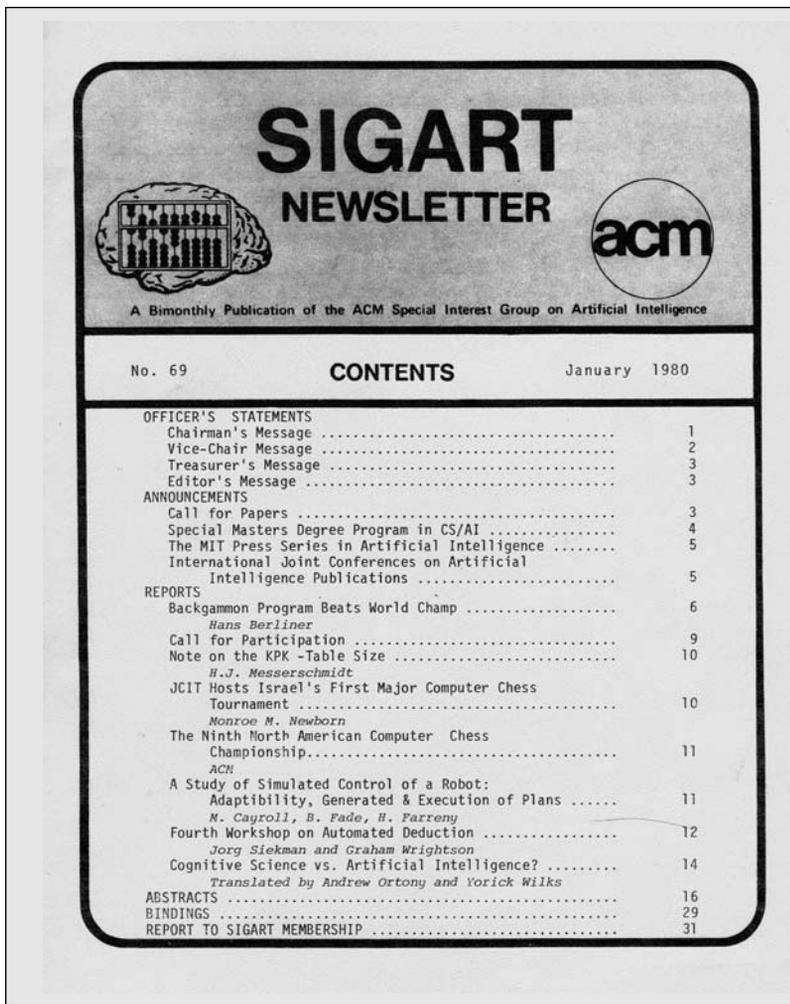
As you probably know, the American Association for Artificial Intelligence (AAAI) is being formed. The field of AI is mature enough that a national scientific organization is needed. Much of the immediate motivation for forming AAAI came from a growing sentiment within the U.S. AI community for a regularly-scheduled national conference.

Could not SIGART function as this national AI organization? Under the current structure, SIGs are set up as arms of ACM and as such must obtain ACM approval for most significant actions, including budgets, new publications, sponsorship of conference, and interactions with non-ACM organizations. This structure may be appropriate for a "special interest group" (although we would argue that more autonomy would be beneficial to the SIGs and to ACM), but not for a national scientific organization, which needs far more independence.

So a new society is born, and adds to the list of organizations directly relevant to main-line AI in the U.S.: SIGART, the International Joint Conferences on AI (IJCAI), and Artificial Intelligence (the *AI Journal*). Each has somewhat different emphasis and constituency: AAAI an in-



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dependent scientific organization, with a regular national conference as a main goal; SIGART as the AI arm within the parent computer science society; IJCAI for international conferences, perhaps evolving into an organization of AI societies; and *AIJ* as the international refereed journal. That these are divided up as they are represents accidents of timing but is also due to the desire to perform functions directly without getting overly involved and bogged down in some previously-existing organization. For example, SIGART could have attempted an annual conference, but many people, including many of the prime-movers in AAAI, strongly felt that the bureaucratic hassle and expense of ACM involvement would be unbearable to the conference organizers, and thus ruled out SIGART sponsorship.

Well, then, if given AAAI, why still SIGART? AI's home is in computer science and AI would do itself great harm in attempting to separate.

ACM is the major U.S. computer science scientific organization and therefore must have a SIG for AI. Part of this is that a significant number of SIGART members would not identify their primary interest as AI, but they are in SIGART because it is a convenient and inexpensive way to help keep tabs on the field. Even if SIGART were to die, many of these people would not join AAAI.

What to do? In the long term, there will be changes in organizational structures, possibly including mergers of independent organizations. In the meantime, all these groups are firmly committed to cooperate for the net benefit of AI. The organizations are strongly shaped by their active participants, and given the large overlap across the groups in those active participants, they are, by definition, in concert. There continue to be profitable discussions among the various officers and editors on how best to cooperate.

An important area for cooperation clearly is publications. To coordinate between SIGART and AAAI, Keith Price [*SIGART Newsletter* editor] and I [SIGART chair] are participating on AAAI's publication committee. [I was chair of that committee at the time.] With Raj Reddy and Alan Thompson, the editor of AAAI's magazine *AI [Magazine]*, we are working out policies to minimize the overlap in the two publications and maximize the appropriateness of each for its respective readership. For example, the [*SIGART*] *Newsletter* will continue to print large numbers of technical report abstracts, while *AI [Magazine]* will print none; and *AI [Magazine]* will feature a comprehensive calendar of AI-related conferences, workshops, etc., something that the *Newsletter* has never done.

Lee D. Erman received his Ph.D. from Stanford in AI. He was a founding member of AAAI's executive committee and its first publications committee chair; he is an AAAI Fellow. He was on the computer science faculty at Carnegie-Mellon, a research project leader at USC/ISI, and principal scientist and program manager at Teknowledge Corporation. He worked primarily in speech understanding, expert systems, and organizing complex, distributed systems for problem solving. Lee was the designer of HearSay-I, the first blackboard system, and was a principal contributor to the follow-ons. In the mid-1990s, he transitioned his career to massage therapy, working primarily with hospitalized patients; his AI complex-systems background has been, much to his delightful surprise, a significant informant for hands-on work with the complexities of live humans.