Re-publication on the www: freelance writers defend copyright

A quick look at the US-based National Writers Union website shows how one group of fellow freelancers is defending legitimate intellectual property rights in the information age.

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Published: December 27, 2000 Last updated: December 2, 2015

While not about interpreting, this site has compelling information for all of us who are concerned about our legitimate intellectual property rights in the new web-world.

A click on www.nwu.org will take you to the homepage of the National Writers Union, an AFL-CIO affiliate in the United States. The NWU is a union of freelance writers and therein lies the connection to us: most interpreters are also freelancers.

In 1997 NWU members took legal action to protect themselves against copyright violation of a new kind. The articles and press releases on the NWU site are an excellent introduction to the wider issue of intellectual property rights in the instant world of the Internet.

After losing in District Court in 1997, the writers won on appeal before the Circuit Court in 1999. As the NWU press release stated: "The ruling last fall made clear that it is copyright infringement for a publisher to put a freelancer's work on-line or otherwise reuse or resell it without explicit written permission." The publishers, of course, appealed and in November of 2000 the US Supreme Court announced that it would hear the case. The compelling history a primer on how freelancers can act collectively. Read more about the case here.

The NWU didn't stop with the court victory. Click on "Publication Clearing House" to read how they went on to set up a structure to help writers collect royalties.

"Interpretation on the Internet" is a much-heard phrase these days. But we seem to group many variations under that heading - typing a translation in a chatroom-type environment, actual voice work from a computer, instant transmission on the Internet of interpretation done in a conference room, posting of interpretation in either voice or text format on a website after the fact, etc. As an organisation that has always believed that interpreters hold rights over their work (see our recommended contract stipulations on recording), AIIC must confront the issue and will surely be discussing it at future meetings.

In the meantime, it would be interesting to hear what experiences you, our readers, have had. Have you done voice work on the Internet? Have you ever been informed that your work would be transmitted over the Internet? Have you ever found your work posted on a website? Post a comment and let us know.
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