

The Strix Award: In Honour of Tony Kent's Life & Achievements

The Tony Kent Strix Award was inaugurated in 1998 by The Institute of Information Scientists. It is now presented by UKeiG in partnership with the International Society for Knowledge Organisation UK ([ISKO UK](#)), the Royal Society of Chemistry Chemical Information and Computer Applications Group ([RSC CICAG](#)) and the British Computer Society Information Retrieval Specialist Group ([BCS IRSG](#)). The Award is given in recognition of Outstanding Practical Innovation or Achievement in the Field of Information Retrieval. Last year UKeiG was delighted to announce that the winner of the prestigious award was Maarten de Rijke, Professor of Computer Science at the University of Amsterdam. The Award was presented to him by Doug Veal (Strix Chair) and David Ball (UKeiG Chair) in London on Friday October 20th 2017 in recognition of his major and sustained contributions to the field of information retrieval and web searching.

Professor de Rijke is a well-known and highly respected member of the international information retrieval community having made considerable and widely recognised contributions to the field. He has an impressive and formidable high impact publications record in a range of areas including semantic search, semi-structured retrieval and social media. He has produced influential research outputs on the large-scale semantic analysis of online content and on the analysis of subjective aspects of information (sentiment, credibility, memory, reputation and experiences). His contributions to information retrieval, in particular to the fast evolving areas of computational methods for analysing, understanding and enabling effective human interaction with information sources, have been profound.

Professor de Rijke leads the Information and Language Processing Systems Group at the Informatics Institute of the University of Amsterdam. It is one of the world's leading academic research groups in information retrieval and intelligent information access, with projects on self-learning search engines, semantic search and the interface between information retrieval and artificial intelligence. Further details of his nomination and career can be found [here](#). Maarten was presented with the award at the Tony Kent Strix Annual Memorial Lecture at The Geological Society, Burlington House, Piccadilly, London during the afternoon of Friday 20th October.

The 2016 Strix Award winner Maristella Agosti, Professor in Computer Science, Department of Information Engineering at the University of Padua, Italy, presented at the event. Professor Agosti has built a worldwide reputation for her work in many aspects of information retrieval and digital libraries. She was one of the first people to work in information retrieval in Italy where she acted as a catalyst for creating a vibrant and internationally recognised IR research community.

Her lecture was entitled "Behind the Scenes of Research and Innovation." She writes: "We often excel in producing scientific achievements, but at times turning those achievements into innovation and technology transfer can be a tall order. Furthermore, even though we

may document our findings well in scientific publications and reports, we are far less accomplished and proficient in documenting and explaining how the complex process of transforming scientific results into innovation has been performed and proven successful. In general, most of the knowledge of this transfer process remains only with those taking part in it, while certain aspects such as the time and context when the transfer took place may be rich in lessons to be learnt and provide opportunities for future teaching in diverse fields. This talk addressed the complex process of transforming research outcomes into innovation using some relevant examples in the fields of information retrieval and digital libraries.”

A link to a video of the lecture is available [here](#).

To celebrate the Award and the man who inspired it, UKeiG is reproducing below two extracts from the Tony Kent Strix Award booklet, republished every year as the roll call of luminaries it celebrates expands. Previous winners are listed [here](#). The Annual Lecture series is sponsored by Google.

Foreword

Tony Kent was not only a rotund jovial man, but a man of many parts; a leader, an innovator, a teacher and someone highly active in the international information scene. He made a major contribution to the development of information science and to information services in the UK and internationally, particularly in the field of chemistry.

After his death in October 1997, a group of us met for lunch and each spoke of what he knew of Tony's life and work. From each speaker's recollections came new revelations to each of us of the breadth of his work and the influence he had exerted in the information field. Out of this new appreciation of the achievement of this modest man grew the idea of an Award to commemorate him and his work.

A proposal for the Strix Award was submitted to the Council of the Institute of Information Scientists (IIS) (of which Tony had been a Fellow) for the setting up of an annual Award in recognition of an outstanding practical innovation or achievement in the field of information retrieval. These achievements could take the form of an application or service, or an overall appreciation of past achievements from which significant advances had emanated. The Council approved this proposal, and agreed that the Award should be presented after the Institute's Annual General Meeting in September each year.

The initial luncheon group then became the Working Group to turn this into reality.

In addition to the tribute accorded by the IIS in the form of the Award, Doug Veal, as Chairman of The Royal Society of Chemistry's Chemical Information Group, organised on March 11th 1998 a special half-day seminar in memory of Dr Tony Kent. The meeting afforded an opportunity to step back from today's hectic pace of on-going developments in the information field and look at earlier developments, which paved the way for many of the information systems as we know them today.

Four speakers traced firstly the background environment in which Tony worked; then his contributions in his early days at the Chemical Society; his software development phase

and finally the philosophy that guided him in his developments. It is these contributions that form the backbone of this booklet. As news of the proposed Award spread, additional tributes were received from as far afield as the United States and New Zealand. These additional tributes have been included.

The Working Group would like to thank the many that have either contributed with donations to the Award or have written in their appreciation. Particular thanks go to Val Metanomski of the American Chemical Society for his unstinting help in coordinating American contributions and especially for preparing a special tribute that dealt with Tony's impact on the American scene - much of which was not widely known in the UK.

In compiling this Tribute Booklet, the Working Group has been happy to act as recorders to the contributions that Dr Tony Kent accomplished in his lifetime.

Derek Barlow, Alan Gilchrist, Doug Veal, Peter Vickers.

Tony the Philosopher: The Pioneer of Practicality and Good Sense

Tony Kent was a totally unassuming man who profoundly affected - transformed indeed - the lives of the people who were privileged to be touched by him. I am one of those people.

It was in about 1984 that I found out that microcomputer software could be used to classify and retrieve microfilm, exciting news for a content analyst for whom multidimensional classification is at the core of intellectual life. I saw an advert in the *Financial Times* for a system from a company called Imtec. I went up to Stanmore and tried to explain what I wanted to a bemused salesman who ended up giving me Tony's number in order simply to be rid of me. I remember the sausage and salad lunch we had in Chimes, Pimlico's then brand new English Cider bar, while I tried to explain content analysis, business intelligence and trend reporting in less than half an hour. Unlike the Imtec salesman, though, his eyes did not glaze over, but he tugged his beard in astonished perplexity, while asking difficult questions about specifying what I wanted. We agreed to meet again at his home and office, Stud Farm, in a couple of weeks.

It was a hot day in early August. I was uncharacteristically in tie and jacket, Tony and Jenny, his wife, were far more comfortably dressed. Tony had been planting oak trees, while Jenny was deadheading roses and tending to the barbecue. It was then we first started talking about the only thing for which Tony showed any reverence: the living world of nature, especially birds. He always said that if it had been his choice, he would have lived the life of an eighteenth century cleric with a passion for botany. On any other subject, Tony's attitude was one of profound and slightly mischievous irreverence, especially on the subject of the computer industry. So, even before seeing STRIX, I knew I had found a soul brother.

After lunch Tony showed me STRIX on his early Imtec micro. It did not take very long for me to see the power of this technology to change the way people work and even think. Remember, I was looking at free text retrieval from the point of view of someone with a lot of experience in developing and executing multifaceted classification with large collections of newspaper, magazine and journal articles. I saw that if easy multivariate

classification were to be combined with the total safety net of every single word being indexed, knowledge could be managed in a vastly cheaper, faster, more convenient way than most people in those days could even conceive. I knew right then and there that Tony could be on the way to making it big time, if only people could be made to understand how to use it. And combining this technology with content analysis, we could together make a significant impact in the hypermedia of the future (which was finally born to the world misshapen and organisationally handicapped, as the World Wide Web).

We decided to work together to find funding for the development of text retrieval and content analysis as tools for future media. I somehow arranged a meeting with some very senior Philips executive in Eindhoven to discuss including us in the development of its Megadoc optical disk document management system. Although we did not succeed in our objective, I recall us deciding to cement our relationship by trading shares in our companies over a beer or three on the return ferry. That is how I became a Director of Microbel and Tony became a Director of Trend Monitor. Every week, he would come to London to work on a client site. I would meet him at Warren Street station at 9:30 a.m. where he would hand me the not even luggable Imtec, which he had lugged all the way from Newark, so I could use it for the day to gain enough experience with Strix to write my specification.

The two great things about Microbel as a company were Tony's total dedication to the continuous improvement of the product and his deep caring for all its stakeholders, including its Directors, its employees and its customers. Customer care could mean staying up all night, driving 400 miles in a day or just ever so patiently and cheerfully sorting out their often self-inflicted difficulties over the phone. Product development took the form of late night conversations between us over whisky and late night programming sessions with cigarettes and coffee.

The company's greatest drawback came from one of Tony's greatest charms: his fundamental disinterest in money and what it could buy (with the notable exception of Safaris in Kenya). Many times Tony and I were lectured by his wife and fellow-director, Jenny, on how "pathetic" we were when it came to sales and marketing. Sometimes during the many financial crises, her criticism would develop an edge of desperation, but she knew he would never change. And she loved him for it, too. Microbel survived thanks to its exclusive UK agent, John Crowther of Business File and its Dutch agent Fred van Bremen of Informatica Avies, which is why Strix became a major player in the UK Executive Recruitment market and the Dutch Library and Government markets. Derek Barlow also made valuable contributions, saving the day on more than one occasion.

As for Strix itself, for a lone programmer, it is a near superhuman accomplishment. Tony knew exactly what was needed from a full function text retrieval package and then he did it, himself. He was obsessed with retrieval speed and efficient memory usage. He also designed the most easily usable search procedure for non-information specialists that I know. To my knowledge, its set-by-set logic is still unique. But Tony was decidedly not interested in what he called the "bells and whistles" of software design. This attitude was Microbel's second greatest drawback since in the Windows environment it turned out that software sales and marketing depended much more on the Window dressing than on core functionality and usability. Although he knew this sorry truth - I told him enough times -

he would not be diverted from what he considered to be his more important (and more fun) programming priorities.

As a co-director of two companies with Tony, I was in a privileged position to induce him to write about those priorities in prose. In his opinion, writing prose was just another irritating impediment preventing him from doing what he liked to do best which was to write code. One of my greatest successes was a letter he wrote to an Aslib magazine I edited in 1991 called the *Intelligent Enterprise* in response to a dialogue I had started on a “new dawn” of practice, rather than theory centred information management. The week before, the already legendary Cyril Cleverdon, former Chair of Information Transfer at Cranfield, congratulated me for “desecrating” the concept of information science and celebrating the end of mentalism in the field which theorises that minds have innate organisational structures which it is the job of information science to discover.

Here are some excerpts from Tony's letter:

Dear Jan.

It is of course a great thing to be optimistic; if I were not an optimist I would have given up banging my head against the notion of “information science” twenty years ago. But it is also important to be a realist; and the reality is that it is more ego enhancing to invent theorems for even a non-existent subject like information science than it is to get on with the job of providing folk with systems that find the information that they want.

If there is a central truth that can be identified in this field it is that there is not, and never will be, one best way of achieving the goal. Neither free text retrieval, nor classification, nor statistical analysis, nor weighted search, nor any of the 101 other ways doing things necessarily suffice on their own.

I will no doubt be accused of elitism if I expressed my long-held view that the processes of information management and retrieval can never be simplified to a point where they may be conducted by half-wits (which is why incidentally it is a waste of time and effort to sweat blood building pretty user interfaces and the like). Finding useful information is an intelligent process requiring intelligent people because at the end of the day only the intelligent can recognise what is useful.

Let us apply the procedures of science to the evaluation of information art and practice and stop kidding ourselves that there is, or ever will be a science of information.

In our own Trend Monitor Reports (December 1991), he wrote:

Though speed and versatility are desirable goals for full-text retrieval products, they should not hide the need for information analysis and organisation. Until systems developers recognise this need, we will continue to be bombarded with new systems that retrieve information as badly as now, but faster. [Meanwhile] the trend towards the release of more word finder utilities and few true text database systems continues.

The future for most of these needle-in-haystack products is gloomy, however, because searching essentially unorganised text is liable to produce essentially unorganised and

relatively useless results. Text databases, on the other hand, combine an organising structure, along with the convenience of being able to find every word or code.

This needle-in-a-haystack mentality is exactly why nowadays the World Wide Web is so often a waste of time and a source of confusion and why metadata is seen to be the next great hope. In our July 1991 edition, he wrote: *“I refuse to believe that knowledge can be inferred from any conceivable software system”*. This opinion reflects what Tony wrote five years earlier in his generous introduction to Trend Monitor's first intelligence report published by Aslib in 1986, called *Computers & Communications: A Panoramic Synthesis*.

“As the power of the nuts and bolts of information technology has grown at a rate that is spectacular, and even awesome, there has been a growing belief that all problems may be solved if only enough power is thrown at them. In my particular area of interest, we have seen the burgeoning of systems for providing access to huge volumes of scientific, technical and business information. These systems operate and continue to multiply in the belief that if you make the haystack big enough and provide a large enough Magnet, you will be able to find the needles you want. You will certainly find needles. But what of those items of information that cannot be attracted to the magnet (made no doubt from clay or straw) which may be the most sharply pointed for your problem, as well as all those needles the magnet attracts having nothing to do with your problem.”

He went on to recommend the report on the basis that

“it illustrates the benefit that comes when thought rather than brute force, is applied to the problem of converting raw information into knowledge”

And here is a final quote from Trend Monitor Reports (December 1989) illustrating his humble, anti-hype view of the true capabilities of the software he enjoyed so much inventing and writing:

“Making life easier for text-retrievers is a great objective. The fact this perceived need exists, begs the question as to why it should be difficult in the first place. What is really required is a recognition that real literacy (as opposed to computer literacy) is a necessary prerequisite for the effective use of information, and that computer technology can only, at best, provide gadgets that reduce drudgery.”

In conversation he constantly warned that many of these “gadgets”, such as automated relevance ranking and sophisticated thesauri, may be of use to information experts who understand exactly what they are doing and can treat results with the necessary scepticism. He emphasised that they can be positively dangerous for non-experts who believe the vendor hype that a “software solution” will solve their information needs. In these terms, the current pack of World Wide Web search engines would be the epitome of danger. Tony insisted on starting the software development process from an understanding of users whom he treated as authorities in their own domain and “idiots” when it came to understanding the software domain.

This unrelenting focus on user needs was what made him insist, from the very first day we met, again and again that I come up with the dreaded specification when I used to gush about the enormous potential of text retrieval software to manage multimedia content in

a networked future. It was only about two years ago when I met Simon Eaton, a self-made expert in mind mapping and thought illustration, that I began to think again seriously about the specification. We decided that Tony would concentrate on writing a Windows DLL for a search engine and we would specify its user interface. And it was only last August that Simon came up with a comprehensive new metaphor for managing the computer environment which would form the core of the long awaited interface specification. We arranged to meet Tony on October 17 to show him the first draft outline of the specification. He died two days before. But he had left behind an uncharacteristically well documented DLL, called WINEng, which performed all of Strix's core search functions in a Windows environment. I am pleased to report John Crowther has seen our specification and we are negotiating a deal to roll out our new user designed interface to the computer environment powered by WINEng by next autumn!

Years ago, when I lived in Pimlico with Gay McManus, Tony used to stay the night once a week. After supper, it was usually Scotch and ideas innovation time, well into the night. Gay used to tease us that we were always just about to make it, but we never quite did. However, as the ancient Chinese Book of Changes perseveres in saying over and over: "Perseverance furthers". If we do finally succeed in the mission we started nearly 15 years ago, in one sense, Tony will not have made it. In another sense, he will have literally made it. He will have made it for us. The beauty of Tony was that he did not really want to make it in the first sense. Only the second sense - making it for others - mattered. Lucky others; lucky us.

Jan Wyllie