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# Horace Hockley Award Winner 2014

Information designer **Rob Waller**, recipient of the 2014 Horace Hockley Award, reflects on his encounters with the ISTC and technical communications over 40 years.

I was delighted and honoured to receive the Horace Hockley Award at the 2014 Technical Communication UK conference, and this has led me to reflect on how my world of information design has intersected with that of technical communications, over the forty years or so I've been working.

There is a great deal of overlap between the roles of technical communicator and information designer, and a degree of shared membership of the ISTC and the IDA (Information Design Association). If you asked each to describe their role, you may get surprisingly similar replies: we organise content logically, write it clearly, and design it so it is usable. So what is the difference?

Although both professions do a similar job, I can see a contrast in the audiences we serve, the content we work with, and the delivery systems we typically use. Information designers tend to work for a general, non-specialist audience of consumers and citizens. Our clients are typically service brands, such as financial services companies, or public sector organisations. Because of this, much of our work needs to be graphically polished, sensitive to visual branding, understandable by audiences of all backgrounds and abilities, and mindful of marketing imperatives. In fact our clients are often marketing managers, and our products include signs, exhibitions, leaflets, transaction documents such as bills or forms, websites and apps. My own company, Information Design Unit<sup>1</sup> designed wayfinding systems for hospitals and museums, documents for

financial services brands, bills for energy or phone companies, timetables, and forms. We only rarely worked on user guides, and technical manuals, and most information designers would look blank if you mentioned DITA.

The two professions also differ in the degree and manner of our emphasis on verbal and visual channels. Information design comes from a graphic design heritage, into which principles of clear writing have been introduced from fields such as instructional design, journalism and technical communication. And some information designers focus entirely on diagramming and data visualisation. In contrast, the term technical communicator is usually synonymous with technical *writer* – to outsiders at least. But it has always seemed to me that scientific and technical communicators have understood the value of the visual rather better than many information designers have appreciated the verbal. Medical, scientific and technical illustration has always been central to those fields.

My first encounter with the ISTC was within a couple of years of starting my first job at the Open University in 1974, where I was a member of the Textual Communication Research Group. Led by Michael Macdonald-Ross, this group brought together instructional design, cognitive psychology, linguistics and graphic design. Michael actively sought connections with relevant fields, including technical communication, and was involved with an attempt to set up a reflective, theoretical forum for professional communicators, called the Kapp Circle<sup>2</sup>.

I gave a public lecture to the Kapp Circle in 1976 – my first ever. I remember little about the event, although I recently found the paper I gave. It was somewhat chastening to see how little my thinking has moved on in nearly forty years. The paper explores the role of graphic design in helping readers cope with long or complex text. Its essential message is: we all have too much to read, and need to read selectively or strategically – we can best do this if there are visible structures to guide us. My concern has always been to identify the role of visual design in

documents – to assert its function as an essential, not a decorative element, and to counter the oft-heard view that design solutions are a matter of opinion, personal preference and intuition.

Other encounters with the ISTC over the years included my company designing *Communicator* in 1989, and being consulted about the pioneering Technical Communication BA programme at Coventry University<sup>3</sup>.

The Information Design Association itself came from a meeting between our fields – in a conversation at Tecdoc 87 in Eastbourne, Julie Baddeley and I found we had both been thinking about a new professional association. Her agency Baddeley Associates offered technical communication with a strong design orientation.

I've distinguished between two professions here, but perhaps they are better thought of as two aspects of the same profession, doing essentially the same job in different commercial contexts. In fact, for many years in the USA, the equivalent of the IDA was the Information Design SIG of the Society for Technical Communication (although judging by their current website this appears to be now defunct).

Technical communicators and information designers should be making more effort to learn from each other, to hold joint events, and to present common cause in the face of the deluge of complex information we all experience, both in the workplace and in our everyday lives. **C**

<sup>1</sup> Later acquired by the branding agency Enterprise IG.

<sup>2</sup> Named after Reginald Kapp, pioneer theorist of technical communication, who co-founded the Presentation of Technical Information Group, one of the three associations that merged in 1972 to form the ISTC.

<sup>3</sup> Instigated by ISTC luminary Don Hinson, but implemented in a School of Art, this course integrated writing and information design in a single programme.

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