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# Horace Hockley Award 2019

**Rahel Anne Bailie** proudly accepted her award at this year's TCUK conference. She explains how she has become an expert in content strategy.

When I received the email from the ISTC telling me that I'd been awarded the Horace Hockley Award, I was very surprised. After all, I've been known for my content strategy work for the past two decades, as a transition from a decade of technical communication. So it was a definite honour to be nominated for an award named after a fellow who spent his career promoting what, today, we'd call a centre of excellence for technical communication.

## A solid start in techcomm

In 1989, I was hired by Philips Electronics as a proofreader, probably one of the last years that such a job existed. This was in Montreal, during the dying days of Philips manufacturing computer hardware in Canada. The move from writers-and-typists to writers inputting content into a rudimentary word processor created the need for a production coordinator. The proliferation of user support material — we produced a range of such material for multiple computers and in multiple languages — was a content production line.

We did everything by ourselves. Our translation coordinators created their own glossaries, and manual versions of a translation memory. We did usability testing as part of shaping our user experience, though that discipline didn't exist yet. (We called it field testing.) We went from linotype to laser printing, and took measures to save on printing costs. We calculated paper costs and checked page proofs. I still love the smell of printers' ink, and can calculate page signatures<sup>1</sup> in my sleep.

## Technical communication in many forms

Technical communication has been a golden thread throughout my career, even as I changed verticals<sup>2</sup>. In 1992, I moved to Vancouver and took a job in the Public Legal Education department of the provincial Legal Services Society (LSS). Our remit was

to publish a different sort of technical communication: how-to information for people who didn't qualify for legal aid but couldn't afford a lawyer. Again, we did everything from user research to persona development, to low-fidelity prototypes, to analytics, to localisation in many languages for immigrant groups. Our publications ranged from booklets adapted for multiple cultures, to comic books for low-literacy populations within First Nations (indigenous Canadian) tribes. To me, this was next-generation techcomm. Same goal, just different content in a different form.

## Broadening my scope, advancing my career

What was important to me was to broaden my horizons so that I could excel at my craft. I ran the Plain Language Society for a few years, with its meetups focused on legal and contractual content, I taught Document Design in one university's techcomm programme, and later developed an Information Design and Development certificate programme for another university. I also started attending Society for Technical Communication meetups and conferences, and eventually sat on the international board of directors. The old saying of 'the best way to learn something is to teach it' definitely holds true, and I put what I'd learned to practical use, for example, I single-handedly designed the structure and coded the first LSS website, and wrote all the copy. This was to a chorus of 'why have a website; the World Wide Web is a passing phase.' Recently, someone reminded me of a presentation I gave on 'extreme usability' — a method I developed for clients reluctant to invest in up-front user research — which we now call 'guerrilla research'.

A lot of this took place before the days of the World Wide Web, when our meetups went by different names. I'd learned the theory and practices of technical communication, and felt that it would be a good idea to understand how

the professions around me — business analysis, project management, software development, management consulting, and the brand new fields of usability and information architecture — worked. Hence, I began attending their meetups, as well. It satisfied my natural curiosity, but also helped me understand how the jigsaw puzzle of practice areas came together to solve a business problem.

In 1997, I went back to technical communication, this time to the super-geeky side of telecommunications, where besides finding out about things like packet-switching, I learned about automating documentation, single-sourcing, and the magic of content management systems. Communication may have been the common thread of my career, but combined with my desire for efficiency — I very much detested doing rote work that could be automated — the next logical step for me therefore was to move into consulting.

## Content strategy as an extension of techcomm

Soon after I left client-side work in 2001 for the wilds of freelancing, I floundered while trying to figure out what to call myself. A content management consultant? (No, I don't write code, sir, I'm on the content side.) A management consultant? (No, I don't do financial turnarounds; I do content turnarounds.) When Ann Rockley published her book on content strategy in 2002, I knew I'd found my niche. That didn't mean I had given up techcomm. Instead, it meant I made sure that in addition to the marketing content that was the focus of an organisation's worries, the other 80% of content, from specifications to knowledge bases, did not get forgotten.

Fast forward a decade, and times have certainly changed. Now, the holy grail is personalisation. How do you create, tag, and deliver content for multiple countries, clients, audiences, and the various stages of a customer journey? While many companies struggle to bend their Web CMSs<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A signature is a group of pages that are printed on both sides of a single sheet of paper that once folded, trimmed, bound and cut, become a specific number of pages depending on the page size and the size of the press sheet. [www.designersinsights.com/designer-resources/understanding-and-working-with-print](http://www.designersinsights.com/designer-resources/understanding-and-working-with-print) (accessed 10 November 2019)

<sup>2</sup> A vertical market is a market in which vendors offer goods and services specific to an industry, trade, profession, or other group of customers with specialised needs. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vertical\\_market](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vertical_market) (accessed 10 November 2019)

<sup>3</sup> A content management system (CMS) is a software application that can be used to manage the creation and modification of digital content. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Content\\_management\\_system](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Content_management_system) (accessed 10 November 2019)


into submission (never mind that, as CMS guru Deane Barker says, no one actually writes in the CMS), technical communicators who have used a Help Authoring Tool or a CCMS<sup>4</sup> raise a jaded eyebrow here; they've been doing this for years. The reaction to this super-efficient model of content operations ranges from disbelief to disdain, but my experience has shown me that technical communicators can certainly teach the rest of the organisation a thing or two (or ten!) about how to produce content at scale.

<sup>4</sup> A component content management system (CCMS) is an authoring environment that allows for granular manipulation of content.

### References and further reading

Rockley A, Kostur P and Manning S (2002) *Managing Enterprise Content: A Unified Content Strategy*. New Riders Press, Berkeley, CA.

Bailie RA and Urbina N (2013) *Content Strategy: Connecting the dots between business, brand, and benefits*. XML Press, Laguna Hills, CA.

So in a sense, I've come full circle, in the same way that a springy toy is a long, single loop of circles stacked on top of each other. I'm now Director of Content at an organisation that develops AI-powered healthcare apps. The ability to understand and manage the complexity that such a position brings would never have been possible without exposure to the principles behind technical communication. The techcomm profession has provided such a gift, and the expertise is needed in the content world now more than ever. 



**Rahel Anne Bailie** is the Director of Content for Babylon. Rahel is a Fellow of the STC, a member of the Information 4.0

Consortium, and part of the Content Strategy Alliance. She is an instructor in the Content Strategy Master's programme at FH-Joanneum in Graz, Austria, and contributes to curriculum development. She has written two books, contributed to several others, and published many articles.

## Your ISTC directory

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The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators (ISTC) is the largest UK professional body for people engaged in technical communication. The ISTC encourages professional development and standards, provides research resources and networking opportunities, and promotes technical and scientific communication as a profession. To join the ISTC, change your grade, or get involved in what we do, contact the ISTC office by email [istc@istc.org.uk](mailto:istc@istc.org.uk) or phone +44 (0) 20 8253 4506.



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