

Dr. Arthur Steven Pollitt †



Company Director, former Reader in Information Science and UK ISKO Coordinator Steve Pollitt died, after a short illness, on the 15th of November 2004, aged 53.

Steve Pollitt is no doubt best known for his innovative and visionary research in com-

puter science, information retrieval and knowledge organisation, spanning more than thirty years. Like the practice of classification he so avidly promoted, his work was characterised by establishing relationships and connections, realising the potential of traditional knowledge organisation tools in new information environments. Deeply inspired by the pioneering work of S.R. Ranganathan and the Classification Research Group, Steve recognised a parallel between relational database management systems and faceted classification, and the value of exploiting such knowledge structures at the system interface for “navigating in-dimensional space.” This marrying of his early beginnings and expertise in computer and, subsequently, information science and retrieval with later interests and a focus on knowledge organisation culminated in his View-based Searching technology and its progression from innovative research to successful commercial product.

Steve was born in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire, on November 23rd 1950 and brought up in the neighbouring village of Thornhill. After studying at Dewsbury Wheelwright Grammar School, he pursued his interest in computing by gaining a BSc. (Hons) degree in Computer Science from Hatfield Polytechnic, UK, in 1973. His study at Hatfield included a period of industrial training at the Marconi Research Laboratories and subsequent employment as Computer Applications Technologist to which he attributed the genesis of View-based searching:

“The seed which grew into View-based Searching was probably planted way back in 1973 in the early days of online searching. The Marconi Research Laboratories at Great Baddow in Essex had developed an Automated Ultrafiche Terminal capable of storing enormous quantities of

information on high density microform...This was a rich area for research and development...”

Following brief periods of employment as a Research Assistant at the University of Leeds and then Lecturer at Leeds Polytechnic, Steve was given the opportunity to pursue his keen research interests at the University of Huddersfield, where he spent much of his working life. Dave Watson, a friend and colleague, recalls their early days there:

“There are three words which keep coming to mind when I think of Steve at the University; passion, enthusiasm and commitment. Steve showed all of these qualities throughout his University Career and beyond. He and I started together at the University in 1979, and I can remember his enthusiasm in abundance even in those early days of our teaching careers. Steve always showed a passion for teaching and research.”

This passion for research resulted in him completing an influential PhD, under the supervision of Professor Karen Sparck Jones, entitled “*An expert systems approach to document retrieval*,” in which he developed the CANSEARCH system for cancer therapy clinicians, and a subsequent year’s sabbatical as a Special Expert in Information Retrieval at the National Library of Medicine, Maryland, USA. This interest in interfaces for medical databases was to permeate much of his career. Upon his return to University of Huddersfield, Steve established and became Director of the Centre for Database Access Research (C²DAR), producing a prolific research output throughout the 1990s. He was promoted to Reader in Information Science in 1997, allowing more time for his insatiable interest in research.

In addition to pursuing his own research interests, Steve was always keen to participate in the wider research community. Before his sabbatical in the USA, he was very active within the British Computer Society, notably chairing the Information Retrieval Specialist Group between 1979-1984 and becoming a Fellow in 1987 and a Chartered Information Systems Engineer in 1990. However, in later years, although

not forgetting his computer science roots, Steve sought out groups such as ISKO that specifically focused on knowledge organisation, becoming its UK Coordinator in 1995, shortly afterwards acting as consultant and joint editor for several conferences, and serving on its Executive Board. Steve enjoyed seeking out “like-minded people” and felt a particular affinity with library science and its traditional knowledge organisation tools. Although he published a book (*Information, storage and retrieval systems: origin, development and applications*), numerous journal papers and reports, including three funded by the British Library, his real enjoyment was presenting this work in person at conferences and meetings.

Those who have seen and undoubtedly remembered his presentations will recall his energy and sheer enthusiasm. Steve was passionate, almost evangelical, about his work. His presentations were lively and always entertaining, once incorporating the theme from Star Trek and, on another occasion, Hepworth Brass Band (he himself being a musician and brass band music one of his many interests outside work). He loved to debate, often (depending on the audience) gleefully questioning the merits of the traditional information retrieval paradigm – of exact, near match and specification-based interfaces – in favour of selection, browsing and discovery. This single-mindedness and commitment is also recalled by former colleague, Dave Watson:

“Steve always had a high degree of commitment to all that he undertook and believed in. He involved himself in debates at University level about the direction of information systems, always putting over his particular views, from which he never wavered...no one will ever doubt his belief in what he was doing.”

It was this strong belief that, in 1999, led Steve to leave the University of Huddersfield and establish his own company, View-based Systems Limited, with fellow Director Howard Lockwood and programmers Patrick Braekevelt, who had worked with Steve as a researcher since 1995, and Pat Woods, also from the University of Huddersfield. The VBS team further developed Steve’s View-based Searching technology for the commercial arena, including workforce planning and profiling systems for the UK National Health Service. Despite transferring his work to a commercial context, Steve still kept abreast of and involved in academic research, described by fellow Director, Howard Lockwood, as a “true academic.”

Steve loved life, grasping every opportunity and exploiting it to the full. Whether academic or social, his interests were diverse and wide-ranging, and he enjoyed sharing these with his family. From leisurely reading (although he would always observe a connection to incorporate into his own research) about language, evolution, psychology or philosophy to playing in a brass band, fervently supporting his beloved Huddersfield Giants rugby league team, sailing his catamaran or skiing down a mountain. Steve relished being busy, and that’s how I will remember him, together with his energy, warmth, boundless optimism and sense of humour.

Our thoughts are with Steve’s wife, Pam (whom he married in 1978), and children, Daniel and Amy.

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