

Dr Patricia Wright, PhD

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Cientista do comportamento com PhD em Psicologia pela University College London [1966], com interesse na contribuição do design da informação na comunicação com o público em geral, quer em organizações públicas ou comerciais. Até 1968 trabalhou na Medical Research Council's Applied Psychology Unit em Cambridge, quando passou a ser coordenadora da School of Psychology na Universidade de Cardiff, onde a maior parte de suas pesquisas está voltada para informação na área de saúde e para documentos multimídia. Possui diversas publicações, sendo membro de várias revistas científicas e de sociedades como: The British Psychological Society, The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators (GB) e membro honorário da Society for Technical Communication (EUA) e da Sociedade Brasileira de Design da Informação. Em 2005 recebeu o prêmio Goldsmith Award for Distinguished Contributions to Engineering Communication pelo Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE).

Patricia Wright is a behavioural scientist interested in how information design can support communication with the general public whether by public or commercial organisations. After leaving University College London in 1966 with a PhD in Psychology, this interest took her to Cambridge, UK to work at the Medical Research Council's Applied Psychology Unit until 1998 when she moved to a Chair in the School of Psychology at Cardiff University, UK where much of her research has been concerned with health information and multimedia documents. The topics have ranged from personal IT aids for people with memory problems, to a web-based a decision explorer for men thinking about the PSA test for prostate cancer. When she explored interfaces to help people see how changes in their lifestyle could change their health risks, she found that older people differed from young men in the interface they preferred and most successfully used. This led to studies of the information design needs of other sections of the public such as people for whom English was not a first language and adults who considered themselves poor readers. This research suggested that interface designs which offer people choices of how information is presented to them, can accommodate diversity more successfully than trying to find a single solution to fit everyone. She has lots of publications, is a member of the Editorial Board of several journals, is a Fellow of the British Psychological Society, the Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators (UK) and an Honorary Fellow of the Society for Technical Communication (USA), and The Brazilian Society of Information Design. In 2005 she received the Goldsmith Award for Distinguished Contributions to Engineering Communication from the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE). <http://www.cf.ac.uk/psych/home/wrightp1/indexmain.html>

1. When, where, how and why did your interest in information design emerge? Why did you choose it as your main research area?

As a PhD student, at University College London, my research showed that the design of a text could influence the reading strategy people adopted, and hence how well they understood and remembered the text. Then, as I was finishing my thesis, a research job in Cambridge was advertised for someone interested in 'communicating with the general public'. My supervisor urged me to apply and I was lucky enough to be appointed.

2. Your approach towards information design shows that you are deeply concerned about social issues. Could you comment on how social factors influence information design and how infodesign could have a social contribution?

Yes I think information is a highly social commodity. It permeates all organisations in both their internal and external dealings with people. So the design of information, or the lack of it, can have far-reaching consequences with respect to credibility, trust, accessibility, efficiency, profitability, etc. I have long believed that information is good for people and I welcome changes such as those within the health professions in the UK where there is now greater recognition of the value of informed patient choice. The challenge to designers is to provide patients and health professionals with the information they want and need.

3. Thomas Landauer from Bell Communications Research once called Psychology the "Mother of Invention". Do you think there should be a deeper synergy between behavioural sciences and disciplines of invention and construction [e.g., design and engineering] for designing systems that help with intellectual tasks?

I am very much in favour of designing tools that can help with intellectual tasks, and the research domain of distributed cognition has long interested me. Whether in order to create such tools designers need much depth to their knowledge of how the mind works is an interesting discussion point. How much do you need to know about walking to design a better walking stick? Some researchers feel that psychology should focus on exploring what goes on in the mind/brain. In such company I appear to be a maverick with my interests in how using tools, even a pen, can change the way we engage in intellectual tasks.

4. Do you think information design practitioners are really benefiting from the knowledge "generated" by research in this area?

There are numerous factors contributing to the current state of play where most information design practitioners know little of the research that has been done and care about it even less. Exploring these factors could occupy a conference workshop session. There are no simplistic answers because design is a complex, multi-layered activity in which research findings play only a part, but this is nevertheless an important part. A designer's ignorance of which design decisions will create problems for users, can make life frustrating and more error-prone for those wanting to use the products they create or the information they provide.

5. Part of your research deals with people with special needs [the elderly, people with Memory problems, poor readers...]. Do you think information designers should produce specific versions of interfaces aimed at different user profiles/communities or should we go for universal design?

There is a third possibility. There are times when people could be offered options about how the interface appears, how information is presented and in which modality. This could allow people to select designs that suit their current needs / mood / tasks. This approach to design has the advantage of being better suited to incorporating the evolution of new technologies - a factor which can make some research very out-date. How well does research on windows and menus for the desktop screen apply to the mobile smart phone in your pocket? At present there is no clear road map indicating which choices people should be offered and when, but it represents a different design philosophy from 'the designer knows best', and is one in which information users are invited to adopt a new participatory role. When information was printed, this approach to design was not feasible; but it is one of new possibilities afforded by electronic documents and it offers a variety of challenges to innovative design.

6. Some of your studies have dealt with instructions in consumer products. The improvement of instructions faces some barriers such as uninterested users and manufactures who prioritise advertisement. Do you think these barriers could somehow impair the application of research findings to "real-world" projects?

Yes I do think that the behaviour of information users and the attitudes of information providers are among the factors alluded to in my answer to question. 4. Nevertheless the example

you give illustrates how a better understanding of what people actually do with information could be useful to designers. The assumption that people want to read “technical” information is potentially a mistake. Often people are reluctant readers not only of instructions but also of the notes that accompany forms and the warnings on products/locations. Such additional reading tends to be viewed as an obstruction to completing the task in hand, but digital media can offer new ways of providing people with the information they need even when that need may be unrecognised by the reader.

7. Could you comment on your current research interests/projects?

Currently I am involved in several research projects which are at various stages ranging from recent completion to still seeking funds. Increasingly my research is exploring how the multimedia potential of electronic documents can be used to support information users in the tasks they are trying to do, particularly tasks that involve decision-making and often decisions that are taken in the context of choices relating to health.