Profile

Stephen Rhind-Tutt
30th Annual NASIG Conference Vision Speaker
Sharon Dyas-Correia

Stephen Rhind-Tutt is the second of three outstanding vision speakers planning to communicate their perceptions at the 30th annual NASIG Conference to be held this May in Washington, D.C. Rhind-Tutt is the co-founder and president of Alexander Street Press, LLC, and is also on the boards of the University of California Press, Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), and the Digital Library Federation. He holds a BA in English Literature from University College London and an MBA from Boston University. The external profiles editor asked Rhind-Tutt to provide responses to a set of queries devised to assist readers in discovering more about this vibrant presenter and his ideas. What follows are some of the questions and the answers provided by Rhind-Tutt.

Are there highlights of your work background you would like to share?

I was lucky enough to get a job with one of the first CD-ROM publishers in 1987. Since then, I've watched how technology has changed area after area of the information industry-- first abstracting and indexing tools, then journals, then books, music, primary sources, video, and now data sets. It's been great fun.

Photo courtesy of Stephen Rhind-Tutt

What are some of the challenges and rewards of your work?

I get an enormous thrill out of seeing students and faculty finding and using content that wouldn't be used if Alexander Street didn't exist. It's a great feeling to take videos that have historically been neglected in academia and make them citable, searchable, and an integral part of a library. And, yes, it's fun to be associated with topnotch filmmakers and their latest

works, and to visit some of the world's greatest libraries and explore their archives.

There are many challenges—we need to keep our technology up to date constantly, and as innovators, make sure we're delivering the latest and the best. We need to be certain that we're helping customers drive usage and helping faculty understand how we can help them. But perhaps the hardest part is to balance the needs of rights holders, who are looking to get good returns for their content, and libraries, that need the lowest prices possible. When we strike a good deal for both, it really feels that we've done our job.

What do you hope to accomplish in your current positon?

For all the information industry has achieved over the past forty years, we've still got a long way to go. Vast swathes of archival material remain inaccessible. Silos abound, making it hard for the user to find a complete, trusted answer easily. Publishing can yet be made cheaper, more functional.

The next phase for Alexander Street is to make our portals and content in key fields stronger and more accessible, and to have richer functionality. We're a significant publisher of video, music, drama, literature, counseling, history, and anthropology—in all of these fields and in our primary-source collections, there are great opportunities to enrich and add more content. At the same time we recognize that many uses of our content will come from other websites, so we have to make sure that our content can be integrated easily into academic workflows.

How does your work relate to the work of NASIG?

NASIG aims "to advance and transform the management of information resources." That's pretty much what Alexander Street is aiming to do, specializing in video, music, primary sources, and our core disciplines.

What makes your background ideal for your work?

I was lucky enough to get a great education. My high school gave me a huge appreciation for the sciences and the humanities, which has served me well. I was able to see how electronic publishing would enable new kinds of scholarship on William Blake as well as calculate how switching from red to blue laser light would increase storage capacity on laser discs. I've also had plenty of experience across most types of libraries—school, public, corporate, and academic—from companies like SilverPlatter, Proquest, Chadwyck-Healey, and Information Access Company.

What is the topic for your vision session at conference in Washington, D.C.?

I've called it "Somewhere to run to, nowhere to hide." I have included "nowhere to hide" in the title because pretty much every organization and department in the information industry must change to survive. All of us have to think about the returns we're making on the money we spend. All of us must think about how open access can help us do our jobs more effectively. We need to work out what each of us does that's unique and valuable. Even the university itself is under pressure from open online courses. "Somewhere to run to" is in the title because I believe that almost all organizations can contribute to a new, richer future if they understand where things are headed and how they can contribute in that new environment. Library budgets may be flat, but the overall amount of money going into the information economy continues to increase. Almost every country recognizes the importance of education. It's a question of identifying the roles we can play and executing them.

Can you give us some highlights or a teaser?

Many trends in technology are predictable. Not just through concepts like Moore's Law, but through techniques such as analyzing dependencies and markets that anticipate new trends. You can see this if you look at history. The rise of streaming video was entirely predictable based on the rates of growth of broadband,

processing power, and the price that video commercials command. For online video not to happen, it would have required several long-established trends to cease—it was much more likely for it to happen than for it not to happen.

So what are the trends today that are obvious?   Where will they take us? What can we project now that's more likely to happen than not?

Why is the topic important?

What I know as "the information industry" – mainly the library side of the business -- began in 1966 when databases like MEDLINE, ERIC, and NTIS were first launched. For the next twenty-five years or so, the industry remained a closely knit community defined by groups like National Federation of Abstracting and Information Services (NFAIS). Then the Web started to have an impact. For many years I, like many of my colleagues, engaged in conversations about the importance of print versus electronic, Boolean logic, pricing models, and similar issues. Then, as the twenty-first century got underway, it suddenly became apparent that outsiders had already delivered much of the work we had seen as our own, and they had done so without paying attention to much of the value we *could* deliver. Things like quality, peer review, preservation, metrics, and semantic indexing have all taken much longer than they should have and in many cases are still nascent.

Understanding the context of technology is important because publishers, librarians, and other information intermediaries have vital roles to play—but we have to understand where and how we can play these roles in a broader context. How much time might we have saved in the early nineties if everyone had accepted that electronic journals were the way of the future?

What do you want to tell the world about you, your family, hobbies, etc.? Are there any fun facts about you that you would like share?

I have three kids. I'm originally from England, but I've lived in Germany, Belgium, and now Alexandria, Virginia. I'm very lucky. My work is closely related to my interests. I love film in all its forms. I love music. I love comics. I love drama, history, and literature. I like to understand how things work (and don't work). This mirrors the products we've developed at Alexander Street, including academic video, music, and databases of comics, film scripts and engineering accidents. I can touch my nose with my tongue.

Rhind-Tutt's vision session promises to be lively, thought-provoking and fun!