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The Social Construction of Rob Kling

It is with fond remembrances and great admiration that *The Information Society* marks the passing of Rob Kling, Editor-in-Chief from 1995, Professor and Director of the Center for Social Informatics at Indiana University. Rob died suddenly and unexpectedly of cardiovascular disease on May 15, 2003. In the days that followed his death many close friends and colleagues commented on Rob's prodigious talents in emails, in print media, and on a special web site set up at Indiana University. They all noted, in various ways, his sharp wit, his remarkable memory, his masterful scholarship, his ever-expanding realm of interests, his enthusiastic, humorous, engaging approach, and his intellectually dynamic and thoughtful spontaneity.

For the last 30 years Rob Kling has shaped the field of Social Informatics. He wrote and edited four books and published over 85 journal articles and book chapters that helped define the salient issues about computers and society. More importantly, his systematic empirical studies about the use and impacts of computerized information systems in diverse organizations pioneered new approaches to examining complex, socio-technical phenomena. Rob's research focused on the ways that computerization transforms work, and how computerization entails many social choices. He combined qualitative and quantitative research methods to study situated computing, from the ways that clerks, professionals and managers use computerized information systems, in a wide variety of organizations, including local governments, manufacturing firms, and service firms to the practices and infrastructures of scholarly communication, such as socio-technical interaction networks (STINs) and the Internet.

Rob Kling was a complex, multi-faceted, multi-talented man in his own right; but by allowing himself to be shaped by the larger informatics community, he became something more. So while most remembrances would end on this note of praise and solemn admiration, I'd like to reflect further on what shaped a phenomenon like Rob, and what we have really lost in his passing.

We made Rob what he was—the sharp edges and the bubbling energy. Those trenchant critiques that cut so sharply were honed through years of debate with unrepentant, technophilic computer scientists (like myself) and policy makers in academia, industry and government, and others who resisted his push to make the social issues central to technical debates. He mixed a holistic, multi-perspective approach (perhaps a legacy of his EST days) with a love of technology (yes, he was a gadget guy). He championed social issues with a realist approach, but I think he harbored some resentment toward those who did not take him seriously. That insecurity probably pushed him onward in his relentless assault on one-sided presentations about computing futures—whether utopian or distopian—and motivated his careful empirical studies of computing in context. The dismissals he perceived within computer science studies fueled his expansive outreach to a wide range of disciplines and communities and agencies. I know that he was particularly proud of his Honorary Ph.D. from the Free University of Brussels, the IFIP Silver Core Award (which hung in the entry of his home) and his positions on key panels at the National Science Foundation and other funding agencies that would provide the financial wherewithal for advances in social informatics. He was often frustrated, however, by the delays, biases and packaging constraints of publication in the top journals of the various disciplines that touched his research interests. Such experiences fired his passions and fed his preoccupation with a need for other outlets, while also grounding his realizations about how the Internet and scholarly communication would be shaped. He brought all of this, as well as his community of colleagues and contacts, to his editorship of TIS.

Rob's students might believe themselves to be more battered and scarred by the experience—more shaped by Rob, than shaping of him. But as his student, I can recount many instances of hearing the ideas of other UC Irvine Ph.D. candidates reflected in Rob's latest complaints and admonitions about my own work. If nothing else, we taught him that there is bad research about information and communication technologies (ICTs)—studies that do not engage useability or acknowledge the complex social environments of ICT conceptualization; that there are wrong answers about ICTs—ones that do not attempt to engage multiple perspectives; and that there are bad writings about ICTs—those that do not speak to scholars in other disciplines, and are inaccessible to the wider interested public. But I think we gave him much more than that, and he responded by treating his graduate students as extensions of himself, although I doubt that he thought of us that way. He balanced his highly critical, almost abusive remarks, with conciliation and very generous opportunities and contacts—eventually. His sometimes harsh approach was tempered with time, and people say that after he met

his wife Mitzi, he mellowed out considerably. (Thanks, Mitzi!)

The group of scholars that Rob mentored, both officially and unofficially, have extended his vision of social informatics and infused it with their own energy. In editorial comments and in far-fetched examples embedded into dinner conversations, he showed us how to make the point, how to pose the poignant question, how to marshal the defenses and gather up the resources we would need to beat back the tide of asocial discussion. We learned, as a community, that a vibrant information society entails a contest of wits and wills, and that it matters who wins and who shapes its institutions.

Rob Kling was a humanist, an evangelist, a germinator—he was a scholar on a mission. He leveraged other peoples' thoughts and works; he was generous with his thoughts and yours. As many have noted, he always had some interesting, poignant insight to share—that's because you shared yours with him! In this way his accomplishments are the community's accomplishments. This does not in any way detract from his achievements. (Rob would be the first to eschew a 'great man' explanation, but he would also be flattered by one centered on him.) Rather it helps us better appreciate what he has left us, and what we have lost.

Rob understood scholarship. He recognized that it is a relentless ongoing struggle to be heard, and he helped us shape the platforms from which to speak—from the TIS forum, to computers and society courses and areas of study he helped legitimize, to the agency programs that fund our research—at national and international levels.

With Rob's passing, we have lost a focal point for a widely diffused community—someone toward whom we could channel our own energy for high impact—the way a magnifying glass concentrates light. In my own view, social structures are energized by agency and shaped by institutions. Rob was an energizer. . . (just think about Rob as a big fuzzy pink bunny that keeps going and going and going—exactly the kind of thing that would set him off in a full-body chuckle) . . . and in many ways we were part of the institutions that shaped his contributions.

We all made Rob what he was—and he *was* something, wasn't he?

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