General Delivery

The back benches beckon

Malcolm Clark

It might be appropriate to use this last opportunity to write as the President of the group to review the past year and produce a 'state of the nation' report. Rather than do this, I will simply present a brief mosaic of themes which reflect some of my current concerns.

I have always held the view that the TEX Users Group is an international group. A cursory glance at the membership list reveals many members in many countries. And this is not just because of the use of english as the *lingua franca* of the scientific and scholarly world. It is also because TUG is at the heart of a wide range of TEX-related activities (as usual, I use TEX as a shorthand for all the other bits and pieces which cluster round TEX). Therefore to site the next annual meeting in Britain (a small European offshore island between continental America and continental Europe) seems most appropriate. It simultaneously reflects the international nature of TEX and TUG, while acknowledging the great strides made within Europe in the formation of a large number of user groups, whose combined membership might rival TUG's international membership.

But there is more. It is especially noticeable that a sizeable amount of TEX activity revolves around electronic communication. True, the majority of TUG members and TEX users do not have straightforward (far less 'free') electronic access, but the activity generated by the privileged minority probably represents the bulk of development work going on at present. Aston University will be the host of the TUG meeting. Aston provides the largest repository of TEX material: it aggressively tracks down and installs style files, macro packages, public domain implementations for a wide variety of platforms, and all the other paraphernalia of the TEX-wise. Its recent announcement of a gopher service should simplify use of the archive. Just another good reason for choosing Aston.

The ease and facility of listservers and other forms of electronic communication sometimes fools us into believing that it is enough to create a list and subscribe to it. Since this ignores the majority of TUG members (and TEX users) we must be very wary of the conclusions and any

decisions which develop. It has been an essential part of the LATEX3 project to inform the rest of the world of their progress and current thinking. This places an additional burden on the key personnel in the project, but since LATEX users will be among the beneficiaries of the project, they must be kept informed. The same sort of argument must be true for any other projects which may have far reaching effects on the TEX using community.

Each year brings a few new user groups: the national and language-based groups tend to attract most interest and attention, but we should not forget the many small 'local' groups which are around. This summer I had the pleasure of meeting many of the Santa Barbara User Group. Stimulated by meeting these enthusiastic and able people, Chris Rowley and I are seeking to initiate the West Hampstead TEX group here in London. There is surely scope for many more! At a rather larger scale, I recently attended a conference in L'viv in Ukraine which ended by recommending that a Ukrainian User Group be founded. TUG is commited to assisting groups at all scales, but it is clear that there is no one model of assistance: it may range from the purely symbolic to the practical and substantial.

By the time this is published, the new Executive Director will have been appointed, and my successor will be known. On these two people hinges a great deal. But not on them solely. An individual has only a small influence on TUG. All the membership influences the way and direction in which we are headed. Don't expect either of these two to be a magic bullet which will solve all ills (nor will future successes be theirs alone). We all have a part to play. I am acutely conscious that the stability and smooth(er) development over the last year or so has been aided conspicuously by a number of people. While it is invidious to single out individuals, I will do so nevertheless. I was ably supported by the other members of the Executive Committee, Bill Woolf, Ken Dreyhaupt and Peter Flynn; I am keenly aware of the support given myself, the Executive Committee, the Board, and the membership by Ron Whitney, the retiring Business Manager. These four people helped to make my TUG life so much easier and productive. I am confident that a similar relationship will develop in the future. And naturally there are many other individuals, some on the Board, some who I have met at conferences, and some with whom I have corresponded by email, who have all gone on to make my life as President of TUG rather interesting. I'm reminded of an announcement in

The Times where someone wished all of his friends and colleagues a Merry Christmas, 'except one'. But I could hardly be so uncharitable, or wish to be.

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Editorial Comments

Barbara Beeton

TEX: the past ...

From time to time, bits of trivia related to TEX's history come to light. The most recent is a copy of a letter that Don Knuth found in his files and forwarded to me with the comment that it was "written 2.5 years before I began working on TEX!!"

Dated November 7, 1974, it is addressed to Dr. Daniel Shanks of the Naval Ship Research and Development Center, Bethesda, Maryland; Shanks was at that time a member of the editorial board of the journal *Mathematics of Computation*. The letter states, in part,

> I would like to record my great disappointment in the quality of the new typography in *Mathematics of Computation*. I know that the change was caused by economic concerns, but I don't understand why we can't achieve in the 1970's what was routinely done in the 1870's. The type font is unattractive; the spacing between letters of a word is jerky and not conducive to smooth reading; a lot of the letters look slightly too large or too small. Although the right margin is ragged (and I don't mind this especially), many of the words are noticeably crowded together as if some margin alignment is being done anyway. This unattractive appearance will certainly discourage me from submitting any further papers to *MOC*, at least until all the other journals have deteriorated to the same level.

The October 1974 issue of *Math. of Comp.* was the first set in "cold type" — by a sophisticated typewriter. That method continued in use up to the first issue of 1981, when a switch was made to a composition system (not yet TEX) running on an in-house computer at AMS. The next piece of Don's writing published by the AMS was "Mathematical Typography",* the lecture that introduced TEX to the world at large.

Some more glimpses of the past appear on the following pages, in the transcription of a conversation between Don and Roswitha Graham, president of the Nordic TEX Users Group.

... and the future

Although Don announced in these pages that his work on TEX is complete, many users are concerned that there are things that TEX cannot do, that are nonetheless desirable and consistent with the practice of fine typography. Discussions are proceeding in several electronic discussion lists and at meetings of TEX users whenever they occur. The importance of this topic is such that the column dedicated to "future" topics, Dreamboat, has been moved from its former location near the end of *TUGboat* issues to a more prominent location immediately following this introductory section.

Two articles in this column deal with the state of TEX and possibilities for the future. The first, by Dick Palais (whom old-timers will remember as the founding chairman of TUG), gives a perspective colored by tradition and personal acquaintance with Don and the Stanford TEX project. The other is by Phil Taylor, who, while by no means a TEX newcomer, was introduced to TEX far from its point of origin and approaches the matter from quite a different direction.

Both Dick and Phil are faithful to Don's exhortation to create "masterpieces of the publishing art". If their methods differ, it is because their experience differs; I have never met two TEX users who have learned it in the same way, or even the same parts of it, and it has long since ceased to surprise me when I learn something new about TEX from even a new practitioner. The discussion is interesting, and Phil's article includes instructions on how to listen in or join it.

Another article (p. 510) solicits volunteers for tasks associated with the implementation of LATEX3. This important project, when complete, should provide a TEX environment even more attractive to new users than the present LATEX, as well as flexible methods for implementing the requirements of book and journal designers, features much desired by

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