

The sound of data

Electronic T_EX promotion in the nineties

Frans Goddijn

*** Nieuw op FGBBS ***	= Mogelijkheid tot floppyverzending
	= Unieke font-verzamelingen op FGBBS
	= Slim afdrukken op DeskJet
	=>> kies NIEUWS item in hoofdmenu

NTG'S

Nederlandstalige TeX Gebruikersgroep

FGBBS

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Today's wifi, cellular and cable information moves in silence and with speed. We now watch high-resolution Netflix videos while simultaneously receiving emails and backing up our laptops to the cloud.

Elderly persons like me vividly remember the sound that data transmissions used to make. In the eighties, a journalist with a Tandy100 word processor used a set of acoustic couplers on the horn of a phone where the screeching of modem negotiations was very audible.

In the early nineties I had a tower PC and one could hear the hard disc's tock-tock while information was being read and written, a big rumbling fan in the back trying to cool the tower and a nervous mosquito-like buzz from the tiny fan clamped on the CPU. The backup tape streamer produced a loud and urgent whining sound as if a dentist were drilling into a molar. And the CD reader would occasionally start spinning with a soft whirr, or suddenly halt with a hiccup to eject the CD.

When the Internet was almost exclusively available to universities, an alternative network had been built for the others out there and this Fido net worked so very well that its top maintainers assumed the internet would just be a temporary thing; way too complicated for ordinary people.

My PC was a BBS (bulletin board system) node in that Fido network and callers who logged in by calling its dedicated phone number with their modem could exchange mail worldwide with anyone listed in the huge 'phonebook' that was updated daily. International mail could be sent 'on the cheap' using local tariff communication, as the message was handed over to a local hub sharing it with another hub higher up in the tree, to another continent's hub, and onwards to the BBS closest to the recipient. Alternatively, the message would be handed to my system with the "crash bit" set and then, if the user had permissions, the BBS would directly call the destination and the message would be delivered in minutes. My users could pick up and deliver mail automat-

ically if they had a compatible “point” system or they could dial in and use an ASCII menu screen to browse around the options.

In the early nineties new T_EX users without Internet access needed to find someone with the right stack of 15 diskettes, and my Fidonet BBS system, called FGBBS 2:512/214 (phone number +31 26 3217041) provided an alternative. Visitors could still request floppies to be sent but

one could also select parts of the file collection and download these.

Henk de Haan, a young man at Delft University preparing his doctorate in nuclear science about muon catalyzed nuclear fusion, did most of the complex work assembling the many software packages that were required to make the modular FGBBS environment work smoothly. Soon, a ‘waffle’ was made to merge internet email into

the Fidonet message base. We were not the only ones offering such services and Henk sometimes brainstormed with others like the small team that founded XS4ALL, now one of the major internet providers in The Netherlands.

Jason Fesler, an American programmer who is currently with Apple, was pioneering in this field and we were among the first users of his GIGO program which could convert UUCP data into our format and message-base. He also wrote WME, a Windowed Modem Environment which gave our FGBBS the screen presentation and ‘look and feel’ much like MS Windows would later have.

The tower PC would be buzzing and whirring all day long in our little house in Arnhem and my two daughters in their adjoining bedroom got used to the sounds the modem would make whenever a caller connected day-or-night. Two rings, followed by a high-pitched scream of the modem, a lower step pitch, another lower pitch and then silence as the modems agreed on their speed and

protocol.

All that hardware was frightfully expensive compared to what we use today. A good modem cost 1500 guilders (today about € 1200) and the backup tape streamer with four tapes of 400 MB each was 621 guilders (today about € 500). A CD drive was subsidized by NTG.

Henk de Haan provided a steady stream of file updates using his university account and he actively expanded the offering of messages so that callers also had access to T_EX related mailing lists like TEX-NL and newsgroups like comp.text.tex.

To save telephone costs of ‘online’ time, stand-alone utilities like Silver Express were offered to allow callers to quickly get all they wanted and then unpack news offline.

The latest updates of T_EX modules like Babel and L^AT_EX2e were there to be picked up and also a 612 kilobyte(!) “TinyTeX” package could be fetched so one would have functional T_EX setup so small that it’s hard to imagine today.

In a series of updates in NTG's MAPS publication, the sysops reported new developments and also listed the FGBBS file contents. In 1994, the contents of the 4allTeX CD was added and the number of (zipped) file collections was a little over 1500. It was 170 MB in size which was considered a lot of files in those days.

By today's standards, the number of users was not very high. Over six months in 1994, almost 40 individuals contacted FGBBS, accessing it nearly 1400 times to pick up almost 3500 files.

The phone company, anticipating more intense growth, had by then installed a box with 16 telephone lines so FGBBS could, if needed, be greatly expanded.

In 1995, 72 % of callers used 14k4 speed modems, 22 % still used 2400 baud and just 1.5 % had the state-of-the-art 28k8 speed connection.

In 1996 FGBBS had on average three callers per day; a year later a call would come a little less than once a day.

In 1998 the system upgraded to the high speeds of ISDN and users could get internet email facilities for free; once every two days a caller would stop by to use the facilities.

In 1999 the system was finally closed down and once again silence was to be heard in the little family house. Deleting the entire file library hardly made a sound. Just the soft crackle of the hard disk.

Sources:

<http://stuff.gigo.com/resume.html>

<http://software.bbsdocumentary.com/IBM/DOS/WME/>

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