Telecommunications Electronic Reviews (TER)

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REVIEW OF: Bernard Aboba. The Online User's Encyclopedia: Bulletin Boards and Beyond. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1993.

by Nancy Buchanan

"This is not a book! (Had you fooled, didn't I?)" So begins the introduction to Bernard Aboba's The Online User's Encyclopedia: Bulletin Boards and Beyond. This work is an updated version of 1992's Bulletin Boards and Beyond, written as a manual for the BMUG Bulletin Board. The author contends that The Online User's Encyclopedia is a guide, and "Guides are written for people who want to participate and try things out for themselves." Despite this assertion, I consider Aboba's work a book, in fact a very useful and admirable book. It combines concise background and overview information with clear, easily followed how-to instructions and examples. For the user who wants to know what something is and how to do it, this is the ideal guide--er, book. It is appropriate as a primer for beginning and intermediate users, and a reference work for advanced users.

The range of topics Aboba covers is impressive. The book is divided into five main sections: QuickStart, The Internet, Store and Forward Network Guide, Tutorial, and Memories and Visions. QuickStart begins with background information that addresses such issues as "What can I do online?" and "What are global computer networks?" He also includes my favorite, "What are global computer networks NOT?" Other QuickStart subjects include security, bulletin boards, non-Internet networks, and civic and community computing. The Internet section is the largest part of the book, featuring a wide variety of information: an introduction to what the Internet is, access, e-mail, file transfer, libraries on the Internet, USENET, real-time services, Z39.50, WAIS, Gopher, World Wide Web, and TCP/IP. The Store and Forward Network Guide provides practical information relating to a variety of networks and platforms, including UUCP and FidoNet. The Tutorial section is a compendium of useful techniques, such as file conversion, compression, and file transfer between Macs, PCs, and UNIX. Memories and Visions is a collection of writings by various authors about the past and future of electronic information.

In all the sections (except Memories and Visions), Aboba's goal of providing a guide has been more than achieved. He has successfully identified the important information about each topic and presented it accurately and understandably. Many subjects start out with a section titled "What is . . . ." This question is then answered in a to-the-point manner, followed by (when appropriate) more information on how to access and use the item under discussion. Major programs are identified, and examples complete with screen replications are presented. When different systems or programs require different commands or ways of doing things, this is clearly noted. Sources of additional information, many on the Internet, are listed.

For the advanced user, the true value of The Online User's Encyclopedia is the way it brings together important information about a large number of subjects, taking into account a variety of platforms and programs. It is a valuable reference tool. Readers can confidently turn to this volume to look up such varied information as: the Hayes command set, a compression and decompression guide, a summary comparison in table form of eleven computer networks, how to establish a USENET newsgroup, and commands for using several major e-mail programs. When appropriate, information is presented in well-executed tables and charts, making quick, factual information easy to locate within the chapters.

Aboba's style deserves special mention. He presents information in a clear and concise manner. In keeping with his view of this work as a guide, the author focuses on the pertinent, practical aspects of his subjects. Each major section is divided into small, clearly-identified subsections that aid the user in identifying the information he or she wants while also dividing the section into easily-digestible portions. The writing is neither too complex for newer users nor too simplified for more knowledgeable users, and it is never condescending. Best of all, the author displays an enjoyable sense of humor. In a section of the Introduction headed "Warning from the Librarian General" Aboba notes:

> Please read safely. In particular, there is one thing you should never do while reading this guide. Do not read and drive. After all, the Internet is a data highway, not a real highway, and reading this guide while driving on the freeways won't get you anywhere you want to go.

The one problem with the book is not the fault of the author: its age. It was first published in November 1993. Therefore, changes and developments since that date are not included. Products and services that have become prominent since then are not covered in the depth today's readers might like. For example, the World Wide Web is covered in seven pages, and a text-only browser, Mosaic, and Cello are mentioned. Netscape is not featured. In addition, the numerous and originally very helpful references to Internet resources have become less useful, as some have had address changes or have disappeared. The time problem is also noticeable in the appendices, which include lists of resources and directories of products. The introduction states that updates are on an anonymous ftp archive (current URL is ftp://ftp.netcom.com/pub/ma/mailcom/ OUE_Updates (ftp://ftp.netcom.com/pub/ma/mailcom/oue_updates)). The open files at this address are in html format and include slight additional information, and none are more recent than March 1994. However, one of the files notes that only registered users of Aboba's book can access the updates. Registration is not mentioned in the introduction as a requirement for accessing the updates, but this is implied in the information on how to register via e-mail that is included at the back of the book.

Despite the datedness problem, this book still meets the author's goal of being a very useful guide for users, along with being a valuable resource for trainers. And I suggest all satisfied readers encourage the author and publisher to produce an updated edition.

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REVIEW OF: T. D. Pardoe and R. P. Wenig. Data Communications & Networking Dictionary. Fort Washington, PA: Professional Press Books, 1992.

by Tim Bucknall

This dictionary contains about 1400 terms, accompanied by extensive cross references from abbreviations and acronyms. The definitions are accurate and concise--often only a single sentence. The brevity of the definitions make this work useful as a quick reference guide for experienced networking professionals, but could prove frustrating to novice users because the definitions themselves often contain jargon and terms which need to be looked up elsewhere in the book.

Although the dictionary contains a wide range of terms, it often seems to be weighted more towards communications than networking. The networking terms that do appear are more often related to large internetworks than towards LANs. For example, the authors go to great pains to include the names of most of the world's large networks (e.g. Taiwan's PACNET and Japan's VENUS-P) but omit more common LAN terms such as "peer-to-peer network."

Perhaps a more significant problem for current readers may be the book's 1992 publication date. In a volatile and expanding field, new acronyms and terms are created almost on a daily basis. As a result, this dictionary is missing several terms (e.g., the POP mail protocol) which have recently grown in importance.

In summary, the dictionary includes most major terms (along with a host of more arcane ones), and its definitions are generally brief and well written. The focus of the dictionary, however, along with the use of jargon within definitions, may make the book less suitable for novice users. In addition, the 1992 publication date may prove problematic for all users.

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REVIEW OF: Ian Theakston. NetWare LANs: Performance and Troubleshooting. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995.

by Ann Thornton

LAN management involves the delicate balance of many elements: network hardware, access control, passwords and security, resource sharing, transmission control, data integrity, backup procedures, and more. In addition, the PCs that are the processing units of the LAN are increasingly powerful, and the applications that they run are increasingly complicated. Lack of knowledge or insufficient monitoring of any LAN component can cause interruptions in business, lost customers, and misplaced information.

A successful network requires careful planning and preparedness on all levels. Systems managers need a knowledge of practical techniques that can improve a system's efficiency and predict the availability of the network. In addition, a methodical approach to troubleshooting can help create a more reliable network.

NetWare LANs: Performance and Troubleshooting by Ian Theakston gives readers the tools and techniques to develop a considered and planned approach to local area networking. The author's purpose is to show systems managers that practical methods can improve the efficiency of system operations, make network performance more predictable, and promote better management of corporate resources.

Intended for the manager who already has a knowledge of network topologies and who is already familiar with Novell NetWare, the book includes several chapters on performance monitoring techniques. Not only is network performance discussed, but because the workstation itself can be a major bottleneck, Theakston includes a chapter on workstation performance and tuning. For both network and workstation performance monitoring, he outlines simple enhancements which can greatly improve overall system efficiency. The author also discusses common problems associated with using Microsoft Windows in the NetWare environment, network printing, and the selection and monitoring of applications for networks.

While the author suggests studying NetWare documentation for details on network design, installation, and operation, he describes in his book the principles behind those procedures presented in the NetWare manuals and relates them to other procedural and political considerations. Theakston explains how to make the best use of support resources, establish good relationships with user departments, properly document a problem's solution in case of a re-occurrence, and conduct a thorough problem investigation. The author pays particular attention to fault logging and documentation, including the need to document the existing system. Theakston's book provides sample forms for gathering documentation on existing systems and lists specific data to gather when faults are logged.

The chapters on structured troubleshooting are particularly valuable. While more experienced LAN managers will find that many of the techniques discussed are intuitive, a return to the basic principles presented here can be useful when an impasse is reached in the resolution of a NetWare problem. The book explores the first stages of problem investigation and then moves to detailed problem isolation. Troubleshooting Ethernet, Token Ring, NetWare, and applications are all included.

NetWare LANs: Performance and Troubleshooting provides an in depth look at the principles of good LAN management and offers valuable suggestions for the creation of an effective system for the most important applications. The book, aimed at an intermediate audience, is recommended for systems managers who seek a structured approach to maintaining a credible, reliable NetWare LAN.

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REVIEW OF: Tracy LaQuey. The Internet Companion Plus. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1994.

by Kristin Vogel

The Internet Companion Plus is the second edition of the earlier work, Internet Companion, which was also written by Tracy LaQuey. The new edition includes an updated foreword by Vice President Al Gore. Designed to serve as a beginner's guide, the topics covered in the book include Internet history, etiquette, security, e-mail, and location of information, as well as basic UNIX commands.

Summary

The Internet Companion Plus contains seven chapters--each sub-divided into 4 to 6 topics. Preceding the first chapter is a foreword signed by Vice President Al Gore detailing the need for materials guiding people through the Internet's "uncharted territory." Chapter One, "What is the Internet and Why Should You Know about it?" begins with conceptual information on the history of the Internet and where it came from, and some statements about where it is going. The politics of the Internet and government involvement in its growth and evolution are outlined. Section titles include "Whence It Came," "It Keeps Going and Going..." and "Mrs. Smith Connects to Washington." In this chapter, the reader is introduced to the first of many inset boxes used by LaQuey to present related quotes and facts about the Internet.

Chapter Two, "Internet: the Lowdown," begins introducing the jargon of the Internet and more specifics of Internet history. Its aim is to address the "principles that underlie the Internet." Descriptions and brief introductions to e-mail, remote login, and file transfer are included here, as the three main Internet applications to which the reader will be introduced. Section titles include "A Network of Networks," "In the Beginning," "Who Runs the Internet?" and "Acceptable Use."

"Communicating with People," Chapter Three, addresses the e-mail function of the Internet and its use as a communication device. LaQuey describes the parts of an e-mail message, functions of e-mail and how to address messages being sent to other systems/commercial services. Listservs, Usenet News, talk, Internet Relay Chat, and interactive audio and video applications are addressed as additional methods of communicating with other Internet users. General practices, etiquette, tips and guidelines for use of the Internet relating to communication are covered. Examples of the section titles include "Conferencing: Group Speak," "Interactive Discussions," and "Netiquette, Ethics, and Digital Tricks of the Trade."

Chapter Four, "Finding Information," is filled with directions for using Telnet, called remote login, file transfer, and client/server applications. Examples such as online library catalogs, bulletin board systems, and Freenets are used to explain the use of remote login. In describing file transfer protocol, the author explains how it works, what anonymous FTP allows, the file formats and transferring compressed or program files. Briefly discussed is how to find information using e-mail. The final portion of this chapter details Gopher and its indexing components Veronica and Jughead, as well as Archie, WAIS, and an introduction to the World Wide Web. Three WWW browsers, CERN's LineMode, Lynx, and Mosaic, are described. Section titles include "Accessing Interactive Services," "Online Resources," and "Finding Resources and Files."

The fifth chapter, "Internet in-the-Know Guide," focuses on Internet culture, issues of network security, and how to find help in documents such as Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). Network information servers and tools are also described. Section titles in this chapter include "Legends on the Internet," "Games," "Security Issues," and "Finding Email Addresses: The Sequel."

Chapter Six, "UNIX on the Internet: A Survival Guide," begins with the statement that many computers on the Internet are running the UNIX operating system. Beginners are encouraged to learn basics of UNIX commands and structure. LaQuey presents information on how to login, logout, and find help. Commands that are covered include listing files, deleting and renaming files, and creating files using an editor. Outlined editors are vi, PICO, and emacs. Uploading files is briefly discussed along with the use of Kermit. The UNIX e-mail programs of Elm and Pine are described. The TIN newsreader functions are also covered in this chapter. Section titles include "Logging In," "Getting Help," and "The UNIX File System."

The seventh and final chapter is entitled "Getting Connected." The purpose of this chapter is to outline for readers the various connections to the Internet that are possible. LaQuey excludes commercial services such as CompuServe and America Online from this discussion and focuses on methods such as dial-up,

direct connection, and full dial-up with SLIP or PPP. In concentrating on choosing a provider, the section outlines the use of products, special interest/professional groups, community networks, and other alternatives. The book concludes with a discussion of the issues involved in connecting a business or organization to the Internet.

The appendix of the book includes URL's that may be of interest to beginners as well as ones that would be good starting points for exploration. A table on Internet resources/applications and how to obtain them is provided. A lengthy list of Internet providers with basic information, such as how to contact them, and price information that was current at the time of publication, is included. The final section of the appendix, just prior to the index, is a suggested resource list for more information on products and topics covered in the book.

Evaluation

Introductory Internet books face a competitive market. In order to succeed, the author must grab the reader with the title, cover, and chapter headings. While prospective buyers are browsing the bookstore shelves, any chance reading they do in the beginner's guide must be conversational and understandable. These are not easy things to accomplish in an area such as the Internet that is laden with jargon and changes rapidly. How well does The Internet Companion Plus do this and how altered is this edition from the first?

There are many features of this book that easily meet the above- mentioned criteria of conversational tone and understandability. The tone of the book is very casual and it is easy to read throughout. The use of inset boxes with anecdotes and Internet facts captures the reader and pulls out the best examples of how the Internet works well to intrigue the beginner to learn more. Humorous examples of jargon are used to increase approachability for the reader.

The Internet Companion Plus has changed most obviously from the earlier edition by the creation of the chapter "Unix on the Internet: A Survival Guide." Other than that, the chapter headings and subsections remain unchanged for the most part. The inset boxes contain many of the same examples but many others have been substituted with other entries. The nearly unchanged appearance of the book, with the exception of shape, make the changes hard to find without close scrutiny of sections.

After reading this book, I had several vague reactions that needed clarification. I found that as someone who has been using the Internet for several years and who is drawn to browsing Internet books, I wasn't sure all of the standard basics had been covered. I went back and followed topics that jumped out as straightforward --Internet history and e-mail. In both cases I came to the conclusion that the material was all covered but that the book's organization divided information up into different chapters and certainly didn't follow more "traditional" organizational forms. Internet history was covered in sections of the first two chapters interspersed with information on the political aspect and on the future of the Internet. E-mail had its own chapter but also was found in the fifth chapter on "advanced Internet." This organization structure was present on other topics that I followed as well. The information was there--it just wasn't necessarily all together.

Another reaction that needed clarification was the dismay I felt about the section on the World Wide Web. Mosaic, the primary graphical browser mentioned, was described as a "killer app." I double-checked the copyright date because I had noticed it earlier only in passing. It had vaguely stuck in my head as being recent. As with many Internet books, recent becomes very relative. The July 1994 date at the end of the author's preface perhaps explains the prominence of Mosaic. Or does it?

Certainly work was in progress to develop other browsers and for individuals whose livelihood depends on the developments and changes faced on the Internet this would require deft handling. In spite of this, the section on the World Wide Web has certainly been expanded from the first edition and covers the rudimentary features of the Web.

I was pleased by the way LaQuey handled the need for a glossary. Rather than providing a separate glossary, new terms are presented in bold and included in the index. When readers are searching for a definition, this also provides them with a context and the conversational tone of the book will pull them into that section for more information.

Overall, I believe that this would be a good book for a beginner looking for information on the Internet. It is very much a generalist book and would not be a resource for anyone that needs a complete introduction. It is not written to be read with the computer turned on and in front of the reader as is evidenced by the last chapter which gives the first information on how to become connected to the Internet. It would be more appropriate to read this book by the fire or on an airplane and later start working "hands-on." Readers are likely to come away with a good sense of the Internet and what it is and be ready to move to a stronger "how-to" book that would serve as their manual in times of question when using Internet resources.

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