

Introduction

SwiftCurrent, the world's first on-line electronic literary magazine, began operation in September, 1984. Its UNIX® based software had been created that summer by Laura Creighton of Softquad Ltd., and installed on a VAX 750 at York University in Toronto, Canada. For the first few months of operation, it was available by dial-in telephone only, but in 1985 became available in all major Canadian centres by collect call on the Canadian data packet-switching network, Datapac, and by those international data services, such as Tymnet, that connect with it.

The concept of such an electronic magazine had been devised by Frank Davey and Fred Wah, the current managers of SwiftCurrent, with input from Dave Godfrey. Their first thought had of a diskette-based journal, distributed by conventional mail, but they had rapidly turned to attempting a magazine that would be accessible to nearly all brands of microcomputer and distributed electronically rather than physically. Davey and Wah described the preferred features of such a magazine to Softquad, a small Toronto company that specializes in UNIX software, which then translated these into an interlocking system of UNIX programmes that provide the user with self-prompting menus and completely screen her from the UNIX operating system.

In its first year SwiftCurrent was used almost solely by writers in Toronto and Vancouver, who appear to have adopted computer technology more readily than writers elsewhere in Canada. Latterly, writers throughout Ontario and the western Canadian provinces have begun using SwiftCurrent, but only a few from Quebec or the Maritimes. Personal subscriptions to SwiftCurrent have been from the beginning concentrated in the Toronto region, even though the collect-Datapac service offers identical-cost use throughout the country. Institutional subscriptions have been slow to arrive, and difficult to process. Libraries and bookstores have been slow to

develop policies for using a service like SwiftCurrent; when they have developed such policy they have invariably attempted to communicate with SwiftCurrent by conventional mail – rather unsuccessfully, in many cases, since SwiftCurrent accounts can only be obtained by an on-line request.

SwiftCurrent was conceived as a low-maintenance electronic magazine, one in which the managers duties would be restricted to responding to electronic mail, verifying that the writers who sought to use the system were indeed 'writers', and maintaining and circulating user manuals. The selection of work for the magazine is done by the writers themselves, & to a lesser extent – through local deletion – by the subscribers. As much as possible, operations such as file deletion, the setting-up of new accounts, and responding to subscriber problems is computer-aided.

The software for the magazine was created to meet specific needs which the designers expected its users to have. It was anticipated that the catholicity of the magazine – anyone who can establish their seriousness as a writer and who owns an appropriate computer can submit work to SwiftCurrent – would lead readers to want to individualize their own reading of it. Consequently, each reader is given her own set of directories, from which she may delete (or to which she may later restore) particular texts or individual authors. It was also anticipated that, as well as submitting their own texts, writers might wish to collaborate with other writers in other parts of the country, and so a 'collaborations' directory was provided, together with instructions for its use. To date, no significant use appears to have been made of 'collaborations'. No complaints have been made about SwiftCurrent's catholicity; perhaps the 'D)etele' option gives users a more satisfying way of expressing their editorial feelings than does complaint.

The problems of SwiftCurrent users have been almost entirely problems in their learning to use either SwiftCurrent software or their own communications software. Some users, particularly those in Kingston, Ont., have been unable to recall the login names they have selected for themselves, or to distinguish upper from lower case letters in those names. Many

Datapac users have floundered because of an inability to distinguish full from half duplex communications. Others have suffered because of misunderstandings of parity, or of data bits and stop bits. Some have been stymied by the lack of a 'control' key on their machines (SwiftCurrent requires a 'control-d' to close and confirm every electronic letter or text file). A few writers have been blocked from contributing because their wordprocessing software does not format their texts into separate lines; a few Apple IIe users have been hampered by their communications port's tendency (at the relatively high transmission speed of 1200 baud) to lose the initial two or three characters of every lines sent or received.

These problems, however, have become more peripheral as the magazine has developed. At first they may be intimidating to the novice computer user. But most writers seem to be so interested in communicating with other writers they persevere through the initial problems in order to avail themselves of the directness and speed of the magazine's mail utility. In fact, it is this communicating aspect of the magazine which gives it the more acute sense of a newsletter. One attraction of the electronic magazine is its immediacy.

Another is the magazine's geographical and aesthetic breadth. We have tried to establish contributors-as-editors in various parts of the country. Though many regions have been slow to respond, those that have bring with them regional sensibilities. The possibility of an exposure of differences is a force that keeps the magazine going.

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