



USER SERVICES' WATERGATE INFORMATION MANAGEMENT IN A MULTI-VENDOR ENVIRONMENT

by

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Introduction

User services' main function is the dispersal of information to the user community in the form of consultation, documentation, newsletters, short courses, and seminars. Because of this it is in the best interest of user services to establish well-defined procedures to control the processing and dissemination of information. This is especially important in a multi-vendor environment.

Users at The University of Toledo have local access to two PDP 11's located on campus and remote access to a UNIVAC 1110 and an IBM 360/75 through the J. Preston Levis Regional Computer Center in Perrysburg, Ohio. Our computing power is a relatively new offering and has been in wide usage across academic departments only since 1972. User services has led this development by introducing faculty members to computer techniques to suit their individual needs. Thus, although our coverage is shallow, it is relatively broad. This would appear to be typical of computer centers with multi-vendor offerings.

Dirty Tricks

As computers came and went, switching users from one machine to another was (unfortunately) frequently the case. It is and has been our goal to shield the applications users from the negative effects of system modifications and vendor changes. Ideally the user should be unaware of which machine he is using. The procedures required should not differ across computers. On the other hand users that wish to examine the differences in systems have the opportunity to do so.

Plumbers Unit

In order to maintain this appearance of homogeneity, user services must act as a buffer to protect users from premature "leaks" of raw information. Information is restricted to the user services' staff and is filtered before reaching the user. Usually in-coming information first encounters a full-time staff member. This is by association with outside sources (contacts with other universities with similar computers, for example) or by referral from a student employee or user. A decision is made at this point to adopt or reject it (shelve is a kinder term and probably more accurate). If it is decided to process the information, other full-time staff members are notified and encouraged to test it. The first person obtaining experience with it produces written instructions which are distributed to the rest of the staff, with all such documents comprising our internal documentation library. ~~This is done~~ to encourage testing as well as to keep the staff informed. At this point the information is still not available to the user public.

The next step in processing is to expose the information, under controlled conditions, to a captive audience--the student help. Student consultants are required to attend once-a-week discussion periods. Part of the time is devoted to lectures on new information. Students are shown examples and instructed to test them, reporting any errors or discrepancies.

After a reasonable testing period, formal documentation is produced according to standards which require an explanatory paragraph, a list of frequently used options, suggested

values for parameters, and an example set-up.

The Organization

At this point it is important to note that our documentation is modularized and organized by application and not by computer. Users requiring particular software are directed to the computer on which it is available. When there is a choice of more than one computer, other characteristics of the user's need are examined. For example: the size of the data base needed, current loads on the computers, and core and peripheral storage requirements. Note that ease of use is not a consideration. Of course, it is unrealistic to assume that all of the computers can be used with equal difficulty for a given application, but this is the aim and I believe that our information processing system brings our procedures close to it.

Moving to a second machine for a similar or dissimilar task calls for the user to secure the proper document and perhaps no more than a change in the calling control cards is all that is needed to insure a successful run. The positioning of the pertinent information is identical to that on the first document and the terms used do not vary depending upon the computer. For example, IBM calls its system control language JCL. UNIVAC calls its language ECL. In our publications both are referred to as "control cards."

The Cover-Up

"Leaks" are sometimes unavoidable and are indeed desirable in the case of a user interested in the "means" of computing. These security breaches can be handled with tact to the benefit of the user and user services. Flatly denying information can only cause hostility. The user should first be warned that "we're in test mode." If his need is urgent (real or imagined), instructions can be hand-written on a scrap of paper, thus restricting the legitimacy of formal publication to properly tested documentation.

This type of communication can be very beneficial by leading to in-depth, informed testing and promoting good relations with Computer Services by letting the user debug. Pointing out errors to Computer Services creates a superior feeling--a desirable emotion in an area that tends all too frequently to intimidate.