SIGDOC Reminiscences 1981-88

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Back in these ancient days SIGDOC was a very relaxed organisation full of personal opinion, and hominess. To give you the flavour of that far off time, I shall present this report as a personal anecdote rather than a proper technical document. Please forgive me, those of you with more formal and well balanced notions of history.

State of Computing Before Windows

The world was full of computers that required the user to know where a file was   possibly to know where the deck of cards was that contain the program and its data. The following cartoon from June, 1985, right in the middle of our period will show you what software and operating systems were available   not that Windows wasn't available then, but it was small change in those days. If you get all the jokes on the spine, you are very old!

For most of that period, we had very few screens where you filled in the blanks   when we did fill in such things, they were mostly forms with orange letters on a black screen. Green screens were the norm, but the ISO said the standard should be orange on black. Only the Lisa (hands up all those who remember this predecessor of the Mac!), then the Macintosh, changed the screen to the image of paper: white background with black letters. I remember seeing my first Lisa in about 1982. But this white background didn't catch on for some time. We had more choices than just IBM and Apple. Xerox was still a player, as was Digital Equipment (not just hardware but a whole architecture and its quite wonderful software); HP didn't just make printers; Cray Computers were synonymous with "super computer," and most people thought computers were big (=servers). There was still a device called tty (Teletype) that punched paper tape. Most computer typesetters in newspaper offices still used that paper tape stuff.

State of Documentation

A quick look through * reveals the following interests in documentation:

•We worried about how documentation could be written for programs whose interface can be tailored to suit the user. (In the end this hasn't proved to be much of a problem since few people do much tailoring.)
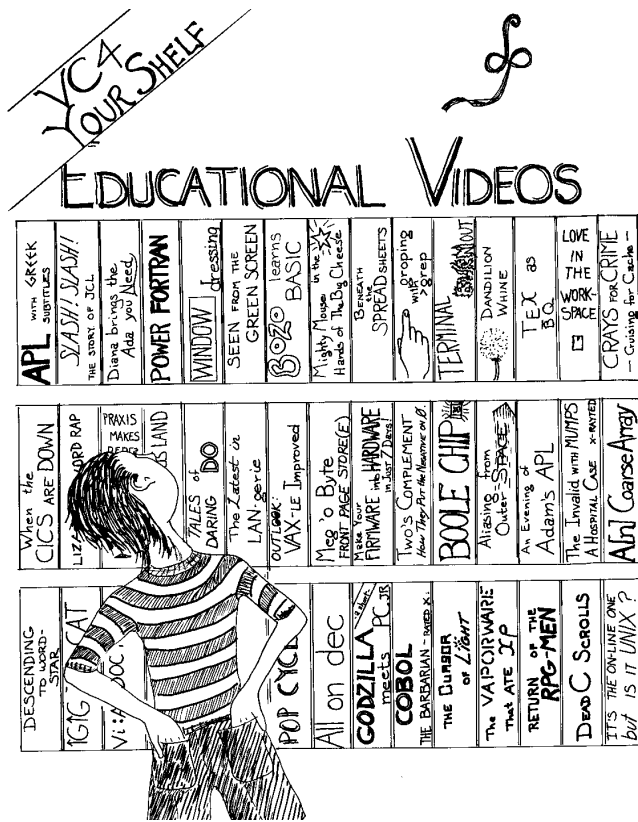
Figure 1: VCforyouself.

the real thing rather than English-teacher's notions of what is real.

•"Effective" documentation. What is "effective"? what is "reality"?

•Getting in at the start of a project rather than after all the [bad] decisions have been made, and our only job is to document the bugs to turn them into features.

•Inter-society liaison

•Maintaining documents [now we would say web pages].

•Electronic publishing

•User testing

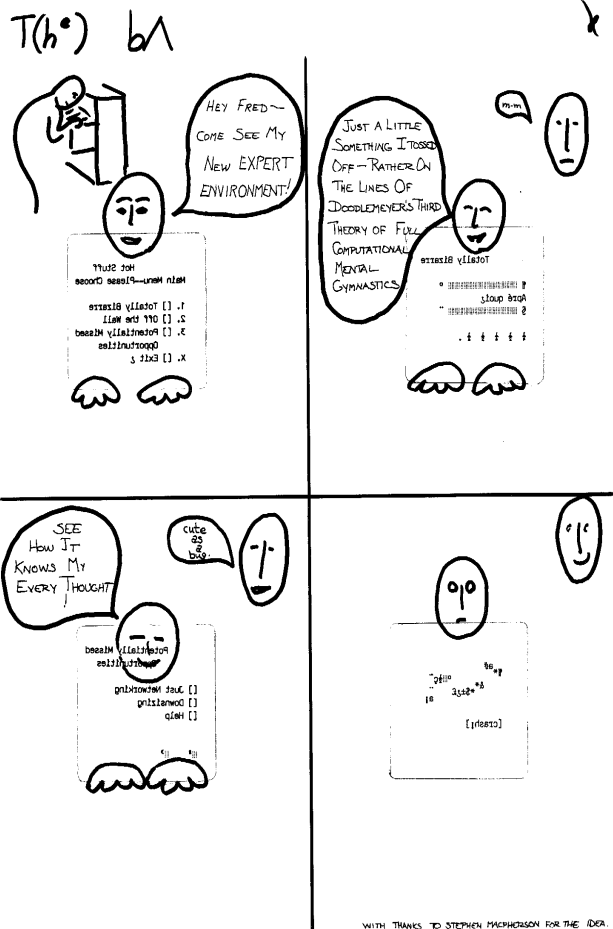•National Bureau of Standard and then ISO wanting to standardise documentation (something to do with

•On-line Help - Not much has changed. It was bad then, and is mostly very bad now except that it has colour and finger-wagging paperclips.

•Minimalism - Some areas have succumbed, but Operating System Bugs and maverick systems (such as FrameMaker) have killed that idea.

•Structuring Information - Still hasn't really caught on, but we continue to think about it.

•The technical writer is replaced by C.A.S.E. tools, "automatic documentation," "well-structured COBOL", and so on. Well, most of those programs are gone and we are still here.

•Which diagrams do we use for C.A.S.E descriptions of processes and data?

•Getting people to write well: avoiding "/" to mean anything and everything; to avoid "interfacing" with machines and people; and other idiocies. Of course we are losing the battle but being _ _ _-active about it nevertheless (did I think of using that word?!)

•Designing courses to teach systems documentation and technical writing in general that gives a sense of

Figure 2: The bore.
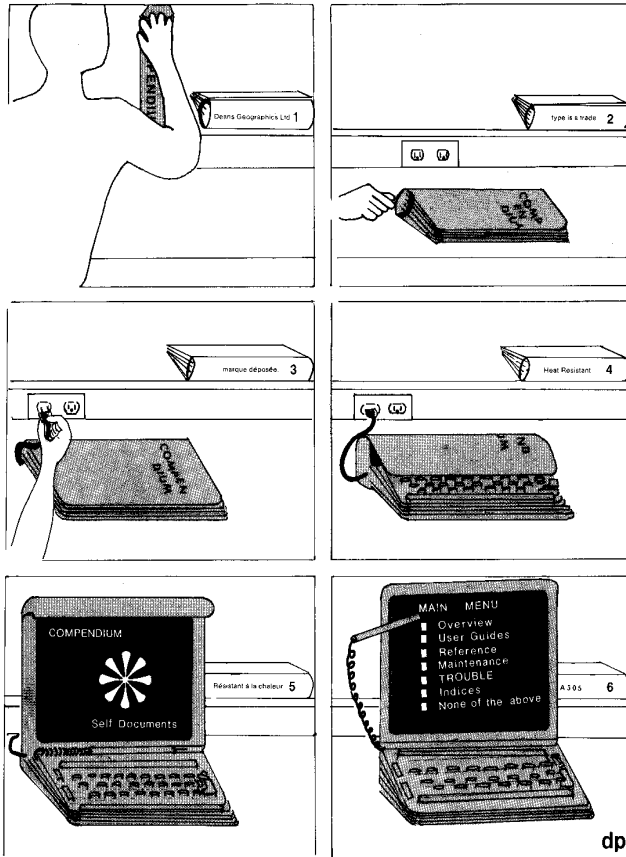
**THE COMING
OF A MANUAL**

Figure 3: The coming of a manual.

putting semicolons followed by comments in the same place within programs, and quibbles over square and curly brackets.)

•Creation of Transactions on Documentation.

•Internationalisation of documentation

•Reading on screens

•User-friendly interfaces   mainly consistency

•Copyright

The fuss over ACM insisting on copyright of what we wrote. One speaker at a conference would not submit his paper for the proceedings because of the copyright law, and the paper was printed in *.

•Adaptive documentation (whatever that was)

•Design reviews for documents.

•Expert Systems

•Editor's work

Funny anecdote here: I often put the issues together myself, and no terrible blunders in my spelling had ever been noted by ACM Headquarters. Readers wrote horrible things to me about my competence, and right they were, but nobody else would take on the job! Then once I decided to make a pun on editorial powers, deliberately confusing "Edicting" and "Editing", using the editorial remove mark to get rid of that C. Somebody in Headquarters made the correction, and I lost my pun!

•Rhetoric and its connection with documentation

As you can see, we were either ahead of our time, or all of you are behind. The issues are often the same now as then. I note that in November, 1981, we discussed publishing the newsletter on-line. Probably some would object to that happening even now. We also discussed the problems of the technical writer doing documentation of undocumented source code or uncompiled code. Of course nobody took us seriously, and the result was the stupid expenditure on the "Y2K Bug" which was simply lazy managers not wanting current documentation   no bug involved.

State of SIGDOC

Our newsletter (*), there were no Transactions in those days, was all done in the editor's home or office and sent to ACM in the snail mail. It was assembled on large sheets, provided by ACM, by pasting strips of galley-printed stuff on anyone's printer. The best printers in those days were the daisy-wheel ones. Titles were added using adhesive lettering, such as Letraset. We usually received material printed on whatever machine the author had available. There was little chance to edit the material unless we wanted to retype the stuff (no scanners then for the common writer). The large sheets were then reduced and printed by ACM headquarters.
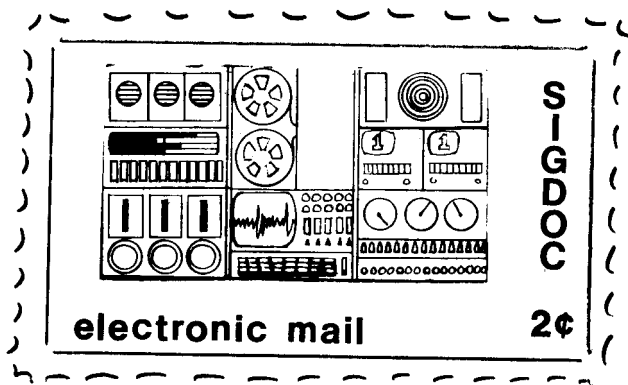
Figure 4: E-mail stamp.

Conferences

In those years we decided to have a conference outside of our sessions with the huge ACM Conference. The first was a joint conference of SIGDOC and SIGOA in Los Angeles in 1982. I fear that what I really remember about this conference was arriving from Toronto, settling into the motel, thinking I would have a good rest when I received a phone call from the manageress. She had a problem that she hoped I could solve. It seemed that someone from Grenoble, France, had arrived at the motel who did not speak French. As I was Canadian, did I, perchance, speak French? And could I translate for this woman who was having difficulty about a credit card? Thinking this was a 5-minute task, I came cheerfully. I should have guessed: this very lovely woman was not only in the motel for the conference but was also giving a paper in an English she could read but not converse in. So there I was in California, expecting, at most, to have to say six words of Spanish as my other language. Instead I spent three days as a French-English translator. All the papers I must have listened to attentively in order to translate them, but I remember nothing except stress.

The next conference was in Seattle, and the conference was without anyone other than SIGDOC people. We had much stuff about air planes.

SIGDOC'84 was in Mexico City. There was much preparation for this one, I remember, and my staff enjoyed it immensely when our Conference Chair, Sergio Figueroa, would phone because inevitably I would speak to him in broken English quite unintentionally! At the time the officials invited to the conference were rather unused to have a woman chair of an organisation to deal with, and apparently our New York representatives were unused to doing things, such as tipping in restaurants, any way but the New York way. Clearly there were many cultural exchanges happening all round.

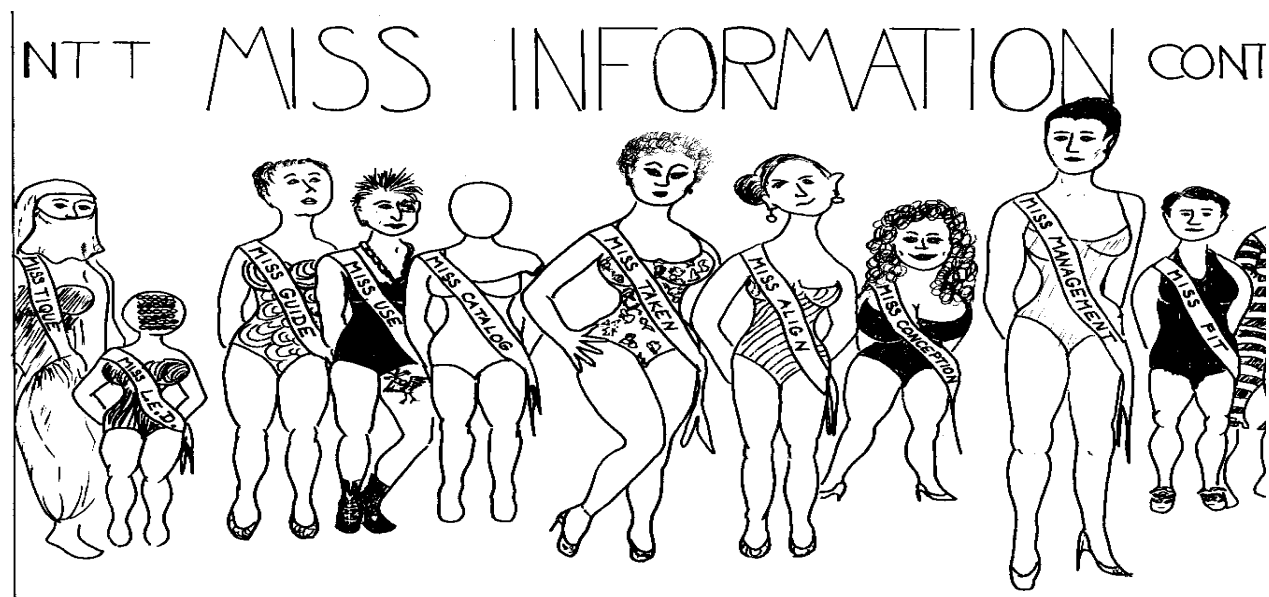It was also an expensive flight, I remember, because I brought to of my staff along on the strip. We decided

Figure 5: Miss Information Beauties.

to save money by making a connection between a holiday flight to Acapulco, and a short-hop flight from Acapulco to Mexico City. The way there was fine. On the way back, the Mexico City to Acapulco flight was delayed, and the Canadian Airlines holiday flight left just a couple of minutes early. We landed to see our light taking off! That cost three additional one-way tickets from Acapulco to Toronto so much for cutting corners. SIGDOC'85 was in Ithaca, New York. It was a splendid place to visit, and the food, papers, and atmosphere were top notch, but I remember no amusing stories worth passing on.

SIGDOC'86 was the conference I mounted in Toronto at the University of Toronto. It was my attempt to mix some computing in the humanities with documentation you know the line: if you can write poetry, you'll be a better documentation person. Well it didn't work, frankly. But I think most people had a good time and received information they didn't think applied to them. Also in 1986 we had a special workshop conference with SIGIR, led by Michael Lesk in Snowbird, Utah, perhaps all this activity in 1986 explains why there was no meeting in 1987.

SIGDOC'88 was in Ann Arbor, Michigan, managed by Stephanie Rosenbaum and her staff at Tec-Ed. Russ Borland and I moderated the sessions, and I think we were both impressed by some young documentation specialists working on Andrew (still), but with some newer results.

SIGDOC'89 was in Pittsburgh where Andrew was front and centre again.

The Joseph T. Rigo Award

In 1986 SIGDOC was a mere 10 years old, and I thought that while computer scientists were able to receive the Turing Award, then documenters ought to be able receive an award for their achievements. I conferred with other members who thought this was a good idea, so I set ought figuring out how we would have some award unlike the STC plaques that were designed to hand in someone's family room, a thought I found somewhat offensive. I certainly didn't want anything as useless and (in my opinion ugly) as a basketball award. We chose to name it after our founder, Joe Rigo, who helped put system documentation on the map, and we did not wish to create anything cheap and tawdry with his name on it.

I made some drawings of something that would make a handsome paperweight, looking like an asterisk but one that would sit at an angle on the desk. It was not glorious, but my assumption (and you remember the old adage about assuming) was that sports award designers had the imagination of, well, sports award designers. Then I looked up trophy-makers in the yellow pages.

I can't remember why I chose May Marx of all the possibilities. Possibly it was her address, one reachable by public transport (one of my long-standing peculiarities is that I do not have a car and have never rented one, even out here in the West, where people assured me when I moved here 10 years ago that it is impossible to live without a car). I walked into a studio filled with both large and small sculptures, clutching my shoddy, little design. But I showed it to May, and she smiled. They we talked about SIGDOC and the purpose of the award. She showed me some of the gorgeous statuettes that looked, at least artistically, more desirable to achieve than the Oscar! She then took a piece of Styrofoam, and as I watched she created a shape, including the beloved asterisk, and explained how she would caste it and polish it. It was my idea that the piece would be delightful to have on one's desk, and would be a piece of sculpture more than an ugly plaque. And May decided to take the sculpture and put it on a turntable and to place the plaque part on the bottom. I had to promise that SIGDOC would buy 10 of

Picture: May Marx.

them. So I signed away the future of technical writing, hoping that there would be 10 worthy recipients of this award.

The first recipient was Dr. Sergio Figueroa Balderez who brought our conference and the concerns of documentation as a serious subject to Mexico, particularly to his university, Univesidad Automata Metropolitana in Mexico City. The second recipient was Dr. Edmond H. Weiss who had travelled across the U.S. and Canada teaching technical writing techniques and raising the profile to the level of a senior management subject. The thirds was Dr. R. John Brockman who has not only taught and written about technical writing of the present day, but, at least to my mind, contributed to the expansion of the subject of technical writing by giving us a history.

A Final Funny Story: The Great Deal on Hardware I haven't dared to look in Gale's Encyclopedia of Associations to find out if they still give out personal addresses of chairs of SIGs, but back in those days they did. Thus, one day I picked up the phone in my office to find that ACM or a librarian had directed some poor chap in Colorado to phone me for help. It seemed he had managed to get a great deal on the purchase of some computer equipment from a firm going bankrupt. He had what he was certain was terrific computer equipment (of which I had never heard), but he didn't know how to use it. He thought that possibly I would be able to tell him what he needed to know. We discussed the fact that he needed hardware and software manuals, and how he might track them down (assuming the company had managed to stay in business long enough to make them). At last he asked me about the name SIG-DOC and exactly what "system documentation was." It is, I explained, what makes your purchase a great "deal" or an expensive boat anchor. He hung up.