User groups

Occasionally we need to recalibrate the position of our user group, the NTG, a TEX related association that supports those who are using the Dutch language in TEX systems. There are more such language driven groups. Now, the fact that I write this in English already indicates that supporting a language crosses borders and there is a reason for this. We have members from other countries than the Netherlands and Belgium, and among the reasons for this is that the NTG does more than just making sure that Dutch comes out right: we've always contributed beyond our borders.

1. In the early days, we had to make sure that Dutch hyphenation patterns were available to users. At some point they became part of distributions.
2. In order to use TEX in an institution or as individual we had to make sure that a proper installation was possible. First tapes were used, then floppies, later DVD's and now the Internet.
3. We needed to get users started, so we always published a journal with explanations, reports on developments, installation and what more. Articles can be in Dutch but the more we got involved internationally, the more we also ended up with either translations or originals from other sources.
4. Yearly meetings are needed to keep the group up and running, but also are a way to make those involved meet. In the early days they were more important because there was no Internet and a helping hand or tutorial mattered.

But how does this all translate to 2025. Do we still need a user group and if so, what are its objectives. We could answer this in an optimistic and idealistic way but let's also try to be realistic. Off we go.

1. The patterns are seldom updated but we have to keep an eye on it. For instance in 1996 we had a major update. Updates of patterns are streamlined internationally.
2. We no longer distribute on media, which also makes us less visible to members. The TEXLIVE distribution still has a yearly upgrade.
3. Nowadays we mostly report on developments so that one gets an idea that we're on top of matters. This happens on-line and on-paper.
4. We still meet, although the number of attendants is small: board members and some developers.

It definitely looks like there is less reason for a group. When TEX showed up, computer assisted typesetting wasn't that great. If I look at older books in my collection, like schoolbooks or even rather visual popular science books, many look pretty bad. So, you can imagine that being able to typeset content with math was thrilling. However, I recently was at some meeting related to math in schools, and when you browse booklets sold at such meetings, you have to conclude that when TEX is used, on the average they look not that attractive: as if we're stuck in what decades ago stood out but today doesn't. So, one mission we failed is to make sure that TEX became the standard for producing the most beautiful books in the world.

Those who use and love TEX have a tendency to think that whatever comes out looks great while in fact that is really up to the reader. Most users have little clue about typesetting so they just go with what gets installed and the basic setups. That is of course fine, because why should everyone be a typesetter. The main point I'd like to make is that it should come with being somewhat humble: don't claim that all is great. Much can't compete design-wise. Of course nice looking books are produced but likely they are the exceptions. When articles today look the same as decades ago, that can be seen as good, but it also means that we can stick to what was around decades ago, maybe a bit easier to install, but no more work needed.

You can argue the same when there are claims that there are (tens of) millions users of TEX. These numbers, even if we assume that every one of them uses TEX every day, dwarf compared whatever other system is used. It's not like everyone who needs to typeset something that contains math is in desperate need of TEX. In fact, I bet that many documents can be made to look quite okay in for instance MS WORD if the same amount of attention (and willingness to struggle) is involved as in getting something look nice in TEX. Also, when someone is more or less forced to use TEX, think online usage as imposed by some universities, one cannot really claim that we have so many users. The fact that I have MS WORD on my computer doesn't make me a user: I never use it and never had to. To be honest, I therefore can't even compare it with TEX, and I wonder how many can, but bashing the competition is kind of popular.

Actually, when we mention TEX to an old-timer the response often signals a sub-optimal experience (enforced usage and styling) so we tend not to mention it. It is kind of curious that the 'competition' in command line driven rendering comes from systems with no backslashes, but of course the problems don't change, so in the end one ends up with similar coding and when things become more complex, likely worse coding. But the prominent backslash can trigger an allergic reaction. Maybe our user group is to blame for that: lack of promotion, help, getting around issues, etc.

One can even go a bit further here. The user group(s) distribute installations so that users can independently run the system. I always remember Kees van der Laan (NTG) talking about "TEX as life long tool", and indeed, if you like it and have a use, you stick to it. The learning curve pays back, you accept limitations, you adapt to innovations, it will seldom disappoint you. But there is also some hobby aspect involved. Messing around, maybe as distraction from writing, can be fun. So we have happy and unhappy users. We have users who voluntary use it or who are forced to do so. I claim that we should only focus on the happy volunteers. And likely few of those are member of a user group, but that can be due to bad advertisement or necessity. If we want to survive we need to attract younger users but that is not easy: groups like ours all are dealing with this issue.

So how many of the millions end up in that group of life long users? The number can be neglected but it is those that we serve as user group: for them we have to make sure that the binaries and resources (fonts, patterns, macro packages) are there, that we maintain the guard rails for huge corporations messing with the system and/or interfering. We serve the few hundred, let corporate serve their own, even of they expect and take for granted support from user groups and active volunteers. We need to extract the signal from the noise.

Of course one can claim that we *need* to also support large scale corporate users but let's be real: they don't pay for development, they only support what brings in

money; always ask yourself the question "who owns them" and then "who owns who owns them" as well as "do they really care about TEX and its users". For instance, if you send in an article to some journal, it likely is just seen as a format, it might get keyed in again, it might not be typeset with TEX, and likely it ends up behind a paywall, unless you pay for it being public. We can support users in getting their ideas on paper, we can't expect volunteers in user groups to waste time on the commercial follow up. To some extend the same is true for alternatives. How often have you been trying out something new, only to find out that after a while it disappears, gets sold (and then made to disappear) or becomes unmaintained? In the department of reliability TEX scores quite high.

So, to go back to what a user group should do, and why being a member still makes sense, here are some more actual reasons:

- ☐ We have to make sure that TEX and friends are available for the popular operating systems and hardware platforms. This includes resources needed to render your language. Currently we're up-to-date.
- ☐ We have to help users in defending their rights to use the system they like working with which then also helps bringing up arguments against big tech (and big TEX). This can be a challenge.
- ☐ We have to support archives so that one can use the system over one's live span. We also need these archives for historical reasons (just like we have museums that are typesetting related). There should be a place where those who stop developing can submit code.
- ☐ We can offer mailing lists, keep up a website, host code and be the place where one can go for advice with respect to resources.
- ☐ We have to keep the various (sub)systems up to date because we have seen that for instance font technologies evolve (like OPENTYPE), encoding becomes more international (think UNICODE), rendering targets change (for instance PDF tagging demands and reading from screen). Until now we managed to do so.

We used to have a more active mailing list for general questions. Actually, the NTG hosts some mailing lists that are quite active but these relate to for instance LUATEX and CONTEXT. For most LATEX users platforms like Stack Exchange and Reddit are the place to go. But because these are huge corporate entities user groups are unrelated. One can of course wonder what happens when corporate interests change. The same is true for hosting code on for instance GitHub (or even compile there), how dependent do we want to be; are there ways back? Do we have the expertise and resources to kick in when needed? You only have to look at the rapid developments in USA politics, big tech influence, and 'artificial intelligence' dominance to wonder how (independent) we should position ourselves in the (near) future. We should be ready when someone decides to pull a plug.

This also means that as users we need to communicate and meet, even if that is a small group, as long as we feel the need. We have to contemplate these things and doing so in person works best. One can also argue that even with little to do because it's a running train, we need to keep presence. In that context we need to mention that the NTG has always been one of the active groups with members being involved in distributions (like 4allTEX), font development (funding TEXGyre, testing, early adopting), engine evolution (PDFTEX, LUATEX), and more.

Enough said. Feel free to disagree and tell the NTG board what you expect and how we can be of help. After all, the older we get, the more disconnected we can become.

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