25 Years DACS

DACS.doc

A Computer & Technology Newsletter

November 2016 | Volume 27, Issue 11 | $2.00

Next Event: Tuesday, November 1, 7:30 PM

Learn how the power of the Internet can spark your creativity and help you to perfect, promote, protect and perpetuate Your Bright Ideas.

Directors' Notes

Danbury Area Computer Society (DACS) Board Meeting Minutes Wednesday, October 5, 2016

The meeting was called to order at 7:05pm by the DACS President, Dave Green.

In attendance were board members Richard Corzo, Bert Goff (Secretary & Treasurer), Dave Green (President), Cathy Quaranta, Jim Scheef, and Andy Woodruff. Dick Gingras and Tom Zarecki were not present. The minutes were taken by Richard Teasdale.

(Names in italics denote responsibilities for actions.)

- The Minutes of the 9/7/2016 Board Meeting were accepted.

Reports

- The Treasurer's report for September was discussed. Bert reported that dues receipts have again slipped in comparison to last year: year-to-date receipts are $608 behind where they were at the end of September 2015. Expenses continue to be less than last year. In response to a question, Bert estimated that there might be as much as a year left before available cash reaches the point that there is only enough left to reimburse members for the unused portions of their dues, and DACS will have to disband. Options for boosting membership were discussed. There was a consensus that social media could be better used to attract new members.
- Membership committee: Jim distributed a report showing 93 current members (including 5 new), and 15 in-grace, for a total of 108.
- Marketing committee: No report. Cathy explained that there is currently no Marketing committee.
- Press Coverage:
  - o Dave reported that a response to the press release for the October general meeting was received from the Daily Voice, indicating that the release had been published.
  - o The New Milford Spectrum published an article about the October meeting but did not send a reporter.
- Website:
  - o Richard reported that the premium edition of Wordfence has been purchased. No further website hacks have happened since it was installed. (Same report as last month.)

Old Business

- Programs:
  - o Jim is writing the review article for the October general meeting.
  - o Bert will follow up shortly with Al Fressola to confirm his talk about Intellectual Property at the November general meeting. He will write the Preview article. Steve Harkness has agreed to write the Review article. Richard suggested that the meeting be publicized to members of the Danbury Hackerspace specifically, since some of them are engaged in entrepreneurial pursuits and may have a particular interest. Andy volunteered to contact Mike Kaltschnee about this, and also to discuss with him possibilities for broader cross-communication about events. (The Danbury Library is another organization which may be willing to discuss cooperative publicizing efforts.)
  - o Bill Saturno has agreed to talk about "cord-cutting" in December. Richard will write the Preview. Jim will contact two particular DACS members who may be willing to write a Review article.
  - o Possibilities for other general meeting topics remain an astronomy presentation, in conjunction with the McCarthy observatory in New Milford, a session by Jay Ferron about Hololens, and a talk from Hi-Link, possibly about Hosting. Richard Teasdale will contact Allan Ostergren for an update on the observatory. Jim will contact Jay Ferron, with a suggested date of January.
- Renovation of the Resource Center (RC): Andy reported that he may have a source for replacement rug. If the source is confirmed, he will proceed

IN THIS ISSUE

Membership Information

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Member of apcug
An International Association of Technology & Computer User Groups

2015 Newsletter Contest apcug First Place

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Apple User Group

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HelpLine

Our former telephone HelpLine has been replaced by our web-based DACS Community Forum at *http://forum.dacs.org*. We have topic-specific forums where DACS members can post questions. Questions may be answered by Workshop leaders or other DACS members. If none of the categories fit your question, just post it to the Ask DACS forum.

Topic	Forum
.NET Programming	ASP.Net and C#VB.Net Workshop
Digital cameras/scanners/image processing	Digital Imaging Workshop
Content Management Systems	Drupal Workshop
Linux	Linux Workshop
Mac and iPhone/iPad/iPod touch	Apple Workshop
PC maintenance	PC Maintenance Workshop
Smartphones & Tablets	Mobile Devices Workshop
Virtual machine software	Virtual Computing Workshop
Desktop publishing and website design	Web Site Design Workshop
Windows	Windows Workshop

with bringing it to the RC. Bert offered to help.

- Topics which might be of interest to the DACS membership: (1) a workshop devoted to Network-attached Storage (NAS) systems, and (2) Slack, a web-based communication system.
  - o Jim has set up a SurveyMonkey account for survey of the membership, to determine the level of interest in a NAS workshop. He will send the SurveyMonkey credentials to the board, for someone else to proceed with this.
  - o Richard has set up an experimental Slack group for the Board. Richard recapped the main features of Slack and urged those board members who have not yet begun using it to do so.

New Business

- Snacks for general meetings:
  - o Dave (drinks) and Bert (snacks) will make the arrangements in November.
- Richard Teasdale will be unavailable to take minutes at the November board meeting. Dave will ask Lisa Leifels if she is available for that task in November.
- Qualifications required for a new leader of the Web workshop were discussed. The board concluded that there is nobody qualified and available among those people who regularly attend workshop meetings. A new leader will need to be found outside the group.
- STEAM - arrangements for DACS participation at the STEAM fair on October 15, which Cathy is managing, were discussed. Although the organizers of the fair have recommended using activities to attract children, the value of doing so for DACS is unclear. The board agreed that free 3-month memberships will be given out. DACS.doc newsletters will be sold for $2 each.
- Options for a gesture of appreciation to Bucky Milam, per Allan Ostergren's suggestion, were discussed. It was agreed that a dinner would be suitable, at which DACS would be willing to spend up to $50 for Bucky and his wife's meals. Other attendees would pay their own way. Richard volunteered to contact Allan.
- Board elections. The 2-year terms of Richard Corzo, Dick Gingras, Cathy Quaranta, and Andy Woodruff will expire in December. So far, Andy has expressed an intention to run for re-election.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:10 pm.

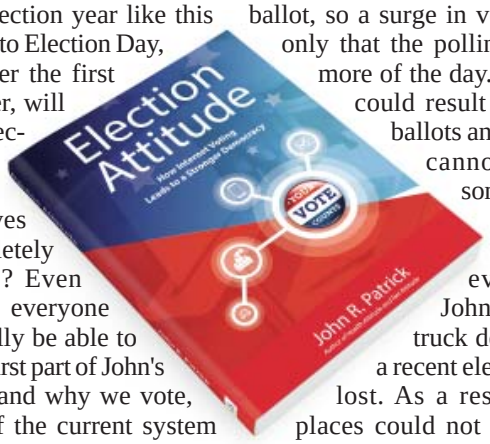
—Richard Teasdale

October Meeting Review

John R. Patrick on Election Attitude

By Jim Scheef

THIS IS SUCH A TIMELY topic that we really wanted the opportunity to hear Dr. John R. Patrick speak before the election. As John pointed out at the start of his talk, in recent years he has published books on, and talked to us about Net Attitude, Health Attitude, and now Election Attitude. "Attitude" is how you approach a topic, problem or opportunity. All the pundits keep telling us that there has never been an election year like this one. But when we get to Election Day, the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November, will the result of our collective decisions about who should be our elected representatives accurately and completely represent each vote? Even before we vote, will everyone who is eligible actually be able to cast their votes? The first part of John's talk was about how and why we vote, then the problems of the current system and after the break, he continued on to potential solutions.



One of John's key points is the complexity and depth of this issue. It could be said that the problem begins with the fact that the framers of the Constitution left the particulars of voting to the states. Since the ratification of the Constitution we evolved fifty unique systems of registration and voting. After the debacle of the 2000 election, Congress gave block grants to the states to buy new voting machines. So now, sixteen years later, we have twelve-year old voting machines. Do you use your 12-year old laptop? Of course not, it would be unreliable and you could not get parts. Many of the companies that manufactured the voting machines are no longer in business, making spare parts nearly impossible to obtain. Over time the number of working machines dwindles. Most of the machines produce some sort of paper audit report - but even today, not all do. So in the grand scheme of things we switched from paper ballots to mechanical machines that had no paper audit trail and now back to paper - in most cases. Here in Connecticut, we vote on paper ballots, but how reliable are the machines that scan each ballot?

Ballots are another part of the problem. Each polling location serves a different mix of districts for everything from U.S. Congressional Representative to your representative in the state legislature. This means that each polling place has a unique ballot. They are printed on card stock that reminds me of IBM punch cards. It's important they are stiff enough to reliably feed thru the high speed scanners in a recount. When we used the old mechanical voting machines there was no paper ballot, so a surge in voter turnout meant only that the polling place was busy more of the day. Now such a surge could result in running out of ballots and one polling place cannot simply borrow some from the polling place across town. Problems can be even more basic. John reported how the truck delivering ballots in a recent election in Florida got lost. As a result, some polling places could not open on time and likely some people lost their opportunity to vote.

Would voting by mail be a solution? John feels that while it offers some benefits, like removing barriers to disabled or sick voters, it introduces its own set of problems. Nearly every state has some form of voting by mail. Here in CT this is absentee voting. In CT the process is: first, you ask your town clerk for a ballot, either by mail or in person. You get a ballot and two envelopes. After you fill it out, the ballot goes into the inner envelope. This envelope protects the secrecy of your vote. This all goes into the outer envelope which you must sign, enter your address and then mail. When I voted absentee I did all this in the town clerk's office and gave them the completed package. So technically I did not mail it. On Election Day, the envelopes are sorted and the sender's name and address are compared to the voting rolls. If you entered the address where you were mailing the ballot instead of your registered voting address, your ballot is discarded. If your name does not match exactly as you are registered, your ballot is discarded. If your ballot passes the voting rolls, then the outer envelope is opened and the security envelope is placed with other valid ballots. In theory at some point, the polling officials open the inner envelope and your votes are added to the votes cast at the polling place. The theory part is that counting these votes requires extra work and they are often not counted unless one of the elections is so close that the absentee votes could tip the results. Of course there is no way for you to know if any of this actually happened as your ballot could have been lost in the mail. In Oregon and Washington State where voting by mail is the default, ballots are mailed to every registered voter.

Could vote by mail be "hacked"? In a district known to regularly vote red or blue, a postal worker could be bribed to take hundreds or thousands of ballots and throw them in the dumpster. This would happen over a period of time so the conspirators just might get away with it even if the postal worker were caught. Do this in enough districts and it could "fix" the election.

After the break, the topic turned to voting over the Internet. John feels that the solution is to adopt an "election attitude" and build a secure, auditable election voting system. Of course the nay sayers immediately scream that the Internet is not secure and therefore Internet voting can never be secure. Our election system is "distributed". There are 50 states, each with many counties with one or, as here in CT, many polling places. Here in New Milford there are seven polling places with two of these located across the street from the other. So to influence an election, the counts from many polling places must be altered. Next there is limited time to complete the "hack". Servers involved in voting would be vulnerable for only a short time - hours or perhaps a couple of weeks with early voting. Compare this to an e-commerce server at Walmart. It must be available 24/7/365 so the hackers can take their time and attack when they choose.

Of course there are servers that do not get hacked. This is not easy. It requires knowledge and a budget but it can be done. Next we need a secure, auditable and verifiable means to record

the votes. John feels this is the Blockchain. A blockchain is a "consensus-based distributed ledger" kept by a number of servers running the same software. All of the servers must agree on each transaction as it is recorded. Once a vote is recorded, it cannot be altered on one server as this would put it out of sync with the other servers and the change would be rejected. This is the technology upon which the digital currency Bitcoin is built. Last the voter must have a secure platform from which to vote. John feels the solution is our smart phones. These devices have sufficient computing power to handle modern encryption, so voting data can be encrypted from the voting software all the way to the server accepting the transactions.

During the question and answer session, John spoke about some of the actual trials of Internet voting that have taken place. These range from a trial for military personnel to a Republican primary in Utah. During this pilot, Mormon missionaries serving overseas were able to vote from 43 countries. Amazing!

I have vastly simplified all of this even from John's talk; in fact I eliminated much of his talk because there is simply too much to describe here. This topic is fascinating and I urge everyone to read John's book, Election Attitude. In it he presents both the problems and possible solutions in his thorough yet easy to read style.

The bottom line is that John will be back next May.

DACS Elections are coming in December

Be a candidate for the Board

Contact Bert Goff at *bgoff@dacs.org*, and say "I want to make a difference for DACS."

Meeting Preview

Software Patents and More - Al Fressola, Esq.

by Bert Goff

Tuesday, November 1, 7:30 p.m.
Location: Danbury Hospital
Creasy Auditorium

DACS is pleased to have Al Fressola, Esq., a partner in the law firm of Ware, Fressola, Maguire & Barber LLP, speak to us about

Intellectual Property and technology.

Al will discuss the multiple aspects of intellectual property such as patents, copyrights, trademarks, and trade secrets and how these apply to technology with emphasis on their application to computer software. Al will share some examples from his extensive experience and looks forward to responding to questions from attendees.

ALFRED A. FRESSOLA, Esq., Partner: Ware, Fressola, Maguire & Barber LLP

The law firm of Ware, Fressola, Maguire & Barber LLP was founded in 1921 and is located in Monroe, CT. The Firm specializes in international intellectual property law.

AL FRESSOLA graduated from the University of Connecticut with an Honors B.S.E.E. and an M.S.E.E. Then he received an Honors J.D. from the University of Connecticut School of Law. Al was admitted to the Connecticut Bar in 1973 and then to the Bars of the U.S. District Court for the District of Connecticut, the U.S. Court of Appeals - Second Circuit, and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit. Al is also a registered patent attorney. He has served as chairman in the Intellectual Property Law Section of the Connecticut Bar Association. He holds memberships in the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the University of Connecticut Computer Science and Engineering Advisory Board.

We are pleased to mention that Al is also a long time member of DACS!

Read the Blog on dacs.org

For the past several months, Jim Scheef has been posting to a blog on the club's website. You can read these posts at *https://dacs.org/category/news/*. We are looking for a few volunteers to help contribute to this blog. To qualify, you must be a member in good standing and be willing to post regularly, meaning one or more posts weekly. You will receive training in how to enter and format the blog posts (a little HTML can be helpful).

Content must be related to the club's mission of learning and sharing information about computers and how we use them. There is tons of interesting and valuable information to share and one person cannot find and post it all.

If you're interested, email the webmasters.

Workshops

Workshop NOTES: November 2016

Apple. Focuses on all aspects of the Mac and iPhone operating systems.

Contact: Richard Corzo (*applesig@dacs.org*).
Meets 2nd Tuesday, 7 p.m. at DACS Resource Center.
Next Meeting: Nov 8

Jobs. Networking and jobs search

Contact: Charles Bovaird, 203-792-7881 (*aam@mags.net*). Go to DACS Community Forum (*http://forum.dacs.org for job listings*.

Linux. Helps in installing and maintaining the Linux operating system. Also of interest to Apple owners using OS X.
Contact: Dave Mawdsley, *linuxsig@dacs.org*

Meets 3rd Wednesday, 7:30 p.m. at the DACS Resource Center.
Next Meeting: Nov 16

PC Maintenance. Review of PC hardware and OpSys maintenance and use.
Contact: Charles Bovaird, 203-792-7881 (*aam@mags.net*). Go to DACS Community Forum (*http://forum.dacs.org*).

Online Business Workshop. Informal member gathering sharing ideas on creating an online source of income.
Contact: Steve Harkness (*onlinebizsig@dacs.org*)
Meets second Monday in Brookfield, or by Webinar.
Next Meeting: Check *dacs.org*.

Single Board Computers Workshop. Explores small cheap computers like Raspberry Pi, Arduino, Netduino, Beaglebone, and more. Meets 3rd Thursday at the DACS Resource Center.
Contact: Jim Scheef (860-355-0034)
Next Meeting: Nov 17

Social Media: Master the basics of Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram.
Contact: Tom Zarecki 914-548-4948; email:*TomZshow@gmail.com*.

Meets on the 4th Wednesday of the month at 6:30pm, usually at the DACS Resource Center, but check the monthly schedule.

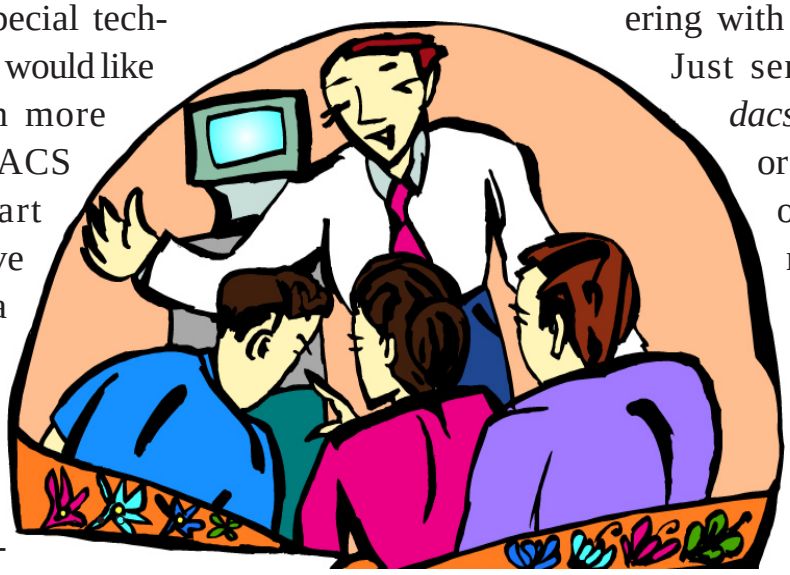
Video Production. The Video Workshop explores all aspects of video capture and production, including both inexpensive and professional choices for cameras and editing software.

Meets on the 4th Thursday of certain months, typically at 7:00 pm at the Resource Center. Check the Calendar for details.
Contact: Andy Woodruff (awoodruff@dacs.org)
Next meeting: Check dacs.org

Web Development/Design This workshop is on temporary hiatus. Would you like to take on the role of workshop leader? It's a great way to share information, learn new techniques, promote your business, and interact with like-minded people. Extensive web knowledge is not required, but a willingness to open a topic for discussion and enjoy the contributions and feedback from the attendees. Contact Annette for more information. Next meeting: Tentative start up again in April 2017.
Contact: Annette Van Ommeren (avanommeren@dacs.org)
Next meeting: Check dacs.org

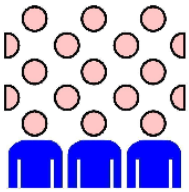
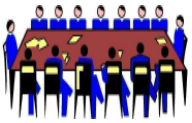
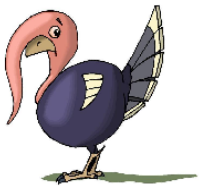
Let's join heads!

Do you have a special technology interest you would like to share or learn more about? Join a DACS workshop or start one. You don't have to be a nerd or a guru—just have a curiosity for what's out there and an interest in sharing or discovering with others like you. Just send an e-mail to *dacsprez@ dacs.org*, or talk to one of our officers at the next meeting, and say something like "I want to start a workshop!" or "Wouldn't it be nice if we had a workshop on . . .?"



November 2016

Danbury Area Computer Society

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
		1  **General Meeting** 6:30 PM	2  **Board of Directors** 7:30 PM	3	4	5
6	7	8  **Apple** 7:00 PM Richard Corzo *applesig@dacs.org*	9	10  **Membership Committee** 7:00 PM Jim Scheef 860-355-0034	11 	12
13	14	15  **Web Development and Design** Annette van Ommeren 7:00 - 9:00 PM *avanommeren@dacs.org* **Meeting Cancelled**	16  **Linux** 7:30 PM Dave Mawdsley *linuxsig@dacs.org*	17  **Single Board Computers Workshop** 7:00 PM Jim Scheef 860-355-0034	18	19  **DACS.DOC Deadline**
20	21	22	23	24 	25	26
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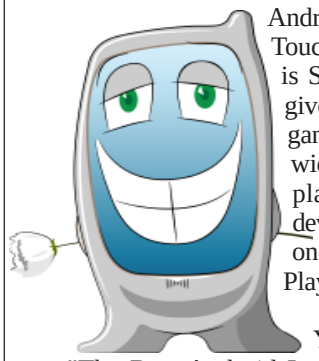
Software Review:

Smart Launcher for Android

by Richard Corzo

AN ANDROID PHONE or tablet, whether it runs stock Android or more likely a customized skin from the manufacturer, has a default launcher that determines how the home screen looks and works. For instance, Samsung's Android skin is called TouchWiz, and HTC's is Sense. The launcher gives you a way to organize your apps and widgets. You can replace your Android device's launcher with one from the Google Play store.



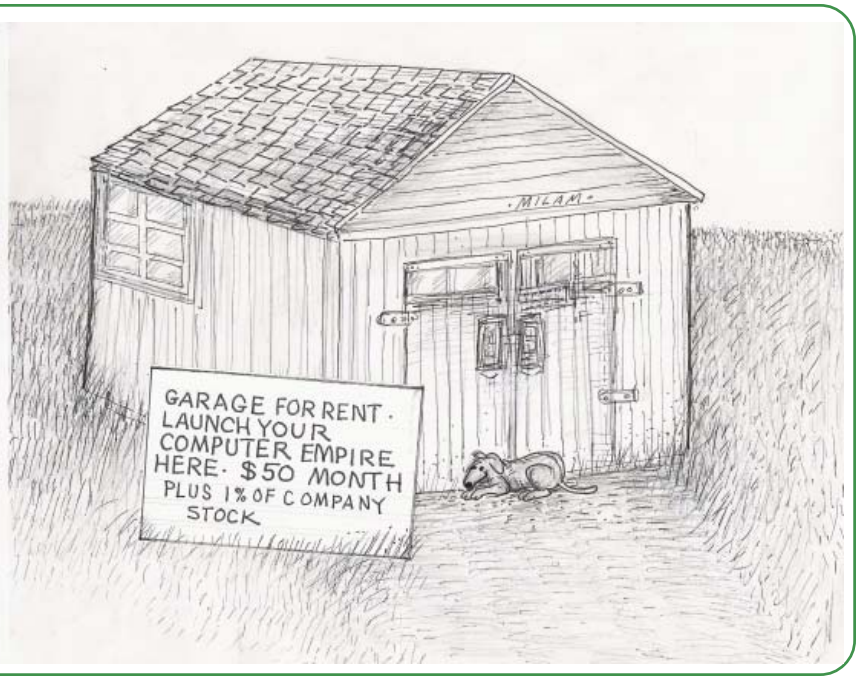
I ran across a YouTube video "The Best Android Launcher of 2016?" which describes ten different launchers. You might prefer one of the others, but the first one mentioned, Smart Launcher, caught my eye. There is a free version and a paid version, Smart Launcher Pro. You can find all the links on the DACS Website (*https://dacs.org/software-review-smart-launcher-android/*).

To understand where I'm coming from, you should know that I have an iPhone and iPad, and a Samsung Galaxy Tab S2 NOOK tablet. The iPhone and iPad have app icons arranged in rows on multiple home screens, with no gaps between the first and last app on each home screen. You can drop one app icon on another to create a folder and then add more apps to that folder, thus packing more icons into fewer home screens. You can move the app icons around to your liking, and when you move one to a spot on the home screen, it shoves the one previously in that spot, and all others following, to the right, to the next row, or to the next screen as space requires. Although iOS has widgets—small windows of information associated with some apps—it doesn't allow them on the home screens, but does allow them to be added to the notification and lock screens.

Samsung's TouchWiz does allow widgets on the home screens, and app icons can fill the remaining space in a grid pattern. Unlike iOS, you can leave empty spots in the grid. When you move an icon to a spot that's already taken, it will shove the existing icon out of the way to some other spot, and it may disturb another icon or two, but otherwise the other icons on that screen don't flow nicely in a predictable manner. You don't have to fit all your apps on the home screens, since there is an Apps list icon that opens to another set of screens with all your app icons, in a grid with no empty spots, on as many screens as are required to hold all your apps. I never found an arrangement of the main home screens that was particularly pleasing or made me feel especially well-organized.

I downloaded the free version of Smart Launcher from the Play store. It provides a single QuickStart home screen with a ring of "bubble" app launchers (the "flower" arrangement), or you can choose a two-row grid layout. You can also specify a different app to launch with a double-click of a button. The "drawer" button in the lower left corner of the screen gets you to all your other apps. There are predefined categories of Communication, Internet, Games, Media, Utility, and Settings. It does a nice job of categorizing all your apps into those categories, listing the apps in alphabetical order within category. To me this made things much more manageable. Only in a few cases did I need to reassign an icon to a different category. The category icons are in a column on the left of the screen, making it easy to switch categories and find another app to launch.

There is no widget support in the free version. For that you need the Pro version. You can upgrade directly from the free version. You'll then be able to launch widgets from the QuickStart buttons, and will get additional home screens on which you can arrange your favorite widgets. You'll also get 19 or so additional categories to choose from, plus the ability to create your own custom category. For example, from the large Media category you can split off one or more of the Photography, Reading, Music, and Entertainment categories. When you add one of the new categories, the relevant apps are moved from their prior category. I did decide to upgrade, and I feel better organized and efficient in accessing my apps.



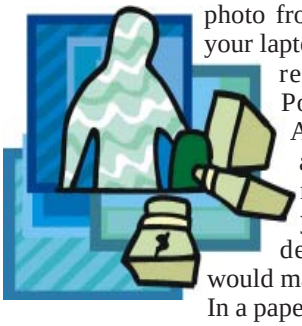
Back to Basics

Device Transparency (DT)

By Eric Moore

AS COMPUTER USERS increasingly have multiple devices-laptops, desktop computers, tablets, smartphones-on which they keep important data, being able to seamlessly access a file from any location or device becomes a challenge. Say if you are on a business trip with your laptop and smartphone, but realize you forgot to copy a report from your desktop computer to one of your mobile devices, you may find it a challenge to get what you need. Remote control software such as LogMeIn can allow you to remotely connect to the computer to download the file you need. Dropbox provides a means of sharing files with yourself and others through a cloud-based storage. VPNs and collaboration services such as Microsoft SharePoint are other possibilities for getting access to a file you need while away from home or the office.

"Device transparency" (DT) is a concept which could provide a seamless means of managing your files from any of your devices. Whether you need to transfer a photo from a smartphone to your laptop, play a music file residing on a Mac PowerBook on your Android device, or access a Word document from home on your tablet computer, device transparency would make this all possible. In a paper published at *http://www.brynosaurus.com/pub/net/devtransp.pdf*, researchers with MIT and the Max Planck Institute for Software Systems describe how such an ideal service would function. (At the time of the paper's writing, there was no service they were aware of that provided all of these features they propose.)



To summarize, the service would provide a means by which "metadata"—information about your files—would be shared between your devices. Such information would include the file types, names, and on which devices the files are stored. Without you needing to be consciously aware of where a particular file is located, you would be able to download the file from the device on which it is stored and open it on any other device you are using (provided it has sufficient storage space). The only requirement is that the device that has the file you need is "linked" into the file sharing service, is powered on, and has an active Internet connection.

Adobe DC to some extent has such features, although it is geared toward working with PDF documents. Services such as Dropbox are available for multiple devices and operating systems, so they can to some extent meet such needs, provided you carefully configure the software on each device to share the files you need. One downside to sharing your files through Dropbox is that they must be uploaded to the "cloud"-which is simply a server that the vendor provides for storing your files. This may be a privacy concern, depending on the contents of the files, and could be costly in terms of the amount of storage space required (especially if you have a large music or photo collection). DT would mitigate this issue, as the files would not be stored in the cloud. It would also alleviate the need of every one of your devices synchronizing copies of all your files. Instead, the sharing of metadata would enable every device to be "aware" of your complete collection of files, so you can download what you need when you need it. Although the metadata may require many megabytes of storage, it would not be nearly so great as the storage space for the files themselves—especially high-fidelity photos, movies, and music files—which could require hundreds or thousands of megabytes of storage.

Device transparency is an interesting concept which could revolutionize how we work without our multiple computing devices. I am interested in seeing if such a service is developed sometime in the future. Depending how well-designed (easy-to-use) it is, and what measures are taken to protect users' privacy, I might consider using such a service for my laptop, desktop PC, and tablet computer.

Eric Moore *is president, Computer Users' Group of Greeley, CO.*

This article was published in the May 2016 issue of the CUGG newsletter, Random Access (www.cugg.org; moore.e.s @att.net). *Reprint is by permission for APCUG member groups.*

There are Many Ways to Join DACS

An easy way to join DACS is to attend one of the monthly general meetings. General meetings are normally held on the first Tuesday of each month at Danbury Hospital. Or join right on our Website via the PayPal link, where you may also pay by credit card without a PayPal account.

General meetings are always free to the public, but only members benefit fully from DACS' many other events, activities, and publications. As a member you become part of a dynamic computer group in the Greater Danbury Area.

You will receive a subscription to *dacs.doc*, our award-winning monthly newsletter, packed with news and information pertinent to computer users of all levels. In addition to interesting feature stories, the newsletter contains a monthly calendar of events and a recap of the the previous general meeting and last month's workshops. Members may also post questions to the DACS Community Forum.

Members may also attend the monthly workshops, where topics relating to computers, peripherals, software, and operating systems are discussed. Workshops meet throughout the month at our Resource Center in downtown Danbury unless mentioned otherwise in the calendar. Occasionally, special topic sessions are also offered to members.

Individual/Family Memberships

Annual membership dues are $40.00 for individuals or for each family living at the same address. Annual memberships which include a printed newsletter are available for $60.00 a year.

Word for the Wise

Update Upsets

By Greg Skalka

MORE AND MORE OF the things we own and use require updates, and a lot of them require updating more and more. When you think of updates, computers typically come to mind first, but so many other products now allow or require updates that keeping them current can seem overwhelming. Updates can be beneficial to insure safety or improve performance, but there are darker sides to this seemingly perpetual updating as well.

It used to be that the product you bought was the product you had, and updates were only for the correction of serious health and safety issues. When changing the product meant physical manipulation of the product's hardware parts, updates were costly to the manufacturers and usually had to be mandated by law to correct some serious safety error on their part. Mandatory Federal product recalls of automobiles for safety issues were the only way to get problems like gas tanks that ruptured when rear-ended or seat belts that became unbuckled in a crash corrected, so that innocent consumers were not further endangered. Sometimes the nature of the problem and the difficulty in making an update meant the product had to be returned or discarded, as there was no economical way to correct the hazard (a toy with small parts that represented a choking hazard for a small child, for example). While these kinds of hazards and the update of product hardware still occur all too often today, the age of computers changed the paradigm of product updates.

The personal computer was perhaps the first consumer product whose functionality was less defined by the hardware you bought as the programming it could contain. Since this programming came in the form of firmware (in add-on peripherals) and software that could be purchased later, the computer as a product was a work in progress. Just as functions could be added easily, corrections to existing capabilities could be made without onerous efforts. Most updates could be, and usually were required to be installed by the owner, and this became the norm for computers.

There are many levels of updating possible in a personal computer, and some are typically overlooked by the owners (until something goes wrong). At the lowest lever, the computer's BIOS, or Basic Input-Output System, can often be updated. This is considered firmware (or microcode), which is programming stored in a semi-permanent manner on a non-volatile memory device in hardware (firmware is software that is not easily erased). In the computer, it is the BIOS code that provides the computer a way to understand the components it contains and how to use them in a general manner. BIOS developers often provide updates to their products to correct hardware compatibility issues and other errors; these updates are downloaded from their web site (perhaps also hosted on the computer manufacturer's site) as a file, and a special programming procedure is typically required to replace the old BIOS file in hardware with a new one. Things can get messed up if you don't follow the update instructions or if you install an inappropriate BIOS file.

The next level of programming in the computer is the operating system; the BIOS helps load this software from a hard drive (or solid-state drive) when booting. Whether you use Windows, Chrome OS, Apple Mac OS or a Linux variant, your OS will require periodic updates to stay current and secure. The amount of control you have over this depends on the OS and the update settings it allows. Chrome automatically installs updates without exception; Windows provides a lot of flexibility in when and if updates are applied.

A third level of programming related to the hardware is device drivers, which apply to internal computer hardware or external connected devices. These drivers also get updated periodically as compatibility issues arise, though most users don't concern themselves with them as long as everything is working.

The final level of programming is the application or program software. Users of Microsoft Office products probably know about program updates to Word and other programs to fix bugs and close security gaps. Updates to other popular applications may be out there, but since they may not be as well advertised by the software vendors, users may not consider any are needed. TurboTax is one program I use that always checks for updates when it starts up; these update both the program and the tax forms it uses.

The ease of updating our technology through software can unfortunately create a culture of incomplete or insufficiently tested products. Manufacturers can rush computers and software to market, knowing that they can provide updates on their web sites later to solve their problems.

When the microprocessor spread from the computer to other products, the software update became the benefit and the bane of these devices as well. In addition to our computers and laptops, we must update our tablets and smart phones as well. My auto navigation GPS receiver can be connected to the manufacturer's web site through a PC (and the Internet) to allow its firmware programming to be updates. The IoT, or Internet of Things, will bring a lot more devices in our homes connected to the web, and a lot more update opportunities.

Like many users of technology, I have a love-hate relationship with updates. I do want my devices to be as protected as possible from hackers, so I want known vulnerabilities patched as soon as is possible. I do like new features (when I am expecting them) and I like broken features to be fixed. I don't like updates that provide unexpected changes to my user experience, or that cause a previously working device or application to crash. I also don't like being locked out of the use of my device while a long and unexpected update takes place. I dread the times I'm in a hurry to turn off my laptop and take it somewhere, and as Windows starts shutting down, it says "Updates in progress - Do not shut down your computer". What I want is full control of the update process, something the vendors are not always willing to give.

I have a Chromebook, and am always apprehensive when I see the little up arrow in the lower right corner of the screen that indicates an update is in progress. Google forces Chrome users to take whatever updates it provides, when it provides them. It never says not to shut down, so I disregard the update arrow, trusting Google to work things out and keep my Chromebook protected and operational.

In that regard Microsoft gets a bad rap, as though they generate tons of updates for their software, they do allow a lot of control of the process. I have Windows set to check for updates, but let me choose whether to download and install them. This is supposed to allow me to delay the update until I'm ready, but it still sometimes surprises me. I've had some problem updates at times, and have had to call Microsoft (yes, they provide free phone support for failed updates) when an update resulted in an error message.

I've also found Microsoft updates don't always know best. I recently had two new computers to set up, and spent a few days getting them updated initially. I am embarrassed to admit that one was a new Lenovo desktop computer that I'd bought for myself two years ago but had never gotten around to setting up. The other was a recent purchase by my dad (an HP desktop) that I offered to set up for my mom.

When I plugged everything in to run my new Lenovo, I knew I'd be in for a wait, as there were probably a lot of accumulated updates over the last two years. After asking Windows to check for updates, it took several hours before it came back with 211 important updates that were needed. I let it download and install them, but progress was slow and I had to let it continue overnight.

When I got up the next morning, it was waiting to reboot after the update installation. I let it reboot and went downstairs for breakfast. When I came back, it said something like: "Failed to configure Windows updates - reverting changes." It had some problem and wanted to undo all 211 updates. I let it go back to its previous state, and it again asked to try these 211 updates. I'd seen things like this before, where Windows seemed to choke on too many updates all at once. I selected only the first 40, and those installed successfully. I repeated with another 40, and another, until no more updates were shown to be needed. Unfortunately, this took several days to resolve.

My dad's HP PC was much quicker to update, as it was much newer. Windows only reported 34 important updates, and I was able to run it through the three update cycles needed to be current in just one day.

Greg Skalka is president, Under the Computer Hood User Group (*www.uchug.org; president (at) uchug.org.*)

This articled is reprinted by permission from the May 2016 issue, Drive Light.

Back to Basics

Your Internet Connection

By Jim Cerny

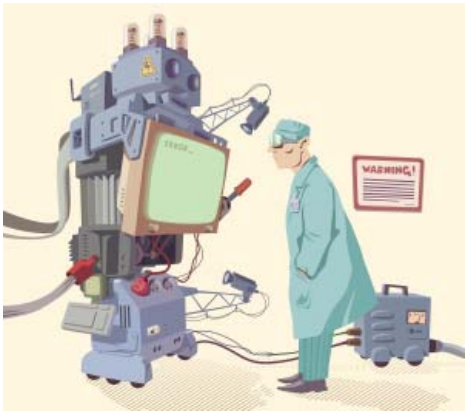
TODAY MOST PEOPLE HAVE and use more than one computer device that can connect to the internet. Smart phones (such as the iPhone), tablets, laptops, and desktops all LOVE the internet. In fact, most of these devices try to connect to the internet automatically. In this article we will look at how you can easily determine the answer to that all important question: Am I connected to the internet?

In the old days of ancient history, people connected their computers to a network (which could have been a private network) with a wire connection (telephone or private lines) perhaps using a telephone modem. Do you remember those telephone modems with the two rubber cups to hold the handset? Ah, those were the days when carrier pigeons were faster! But enough of days gone by.

Today the access to the internet is mostly wireless and devices can be connected to it in different ways. One easy way to see if you have internet access regardless of the device you are using is to try to go to a web page. If you can, the web page will display and you know you have access. If not, you should see a message on your screen that tells you there was a problem.

If you are using a smart phone or a tablet device, you may have a model that can use the cellular phone network to access the internet. This may work just fine, but be aware that you will be using your "minutes" or "bits" which will be billed to your cellular phone bill. I recommend that you only use the cellular network to access the internet when no other means are available.

There are two icons that seem to be universal for indicating that you are connected to the internet - a small bar graph or an "eyebrow" icon. In either case, the more "bars" you have on the bar graph or the more "eyebrows" you have, the stronger the internet signal. You should know where to find these small icons on the screen of your device, usually in a corner. You should know how to get to the "settings" option on your device and there will probably be a setting option that deals with the internet and will show you if you are connected.



Many portable devices (laptops, tablets, smart-phones) are constantly searching for a wireless internet connection. Say you went to a restaurant and wanted to get on the internet. You would look at your device's icon and see that you had no internet signal or a "not connected" message. So you would ask an employee of the restaurant for instructions on how to get connected. They would reply with the NAME of their Wi-Fi network and a PASSWORD (if required). Go to the "settings" option on your device and select the wireless network option. You will probably see a list of all the Wi-Fi networks within range of your device. Although you could try to connect using any of the networks found, you probably want to use the network name given to you by the employee.

Naturally that network should have the strongest signal and be at the top of your list. Select that network and you will be prompted for the password (if needed). Entering the password should get your connection. The nice thing about this is that the next time you return to that restaurant your device may connect automatically without you having to do anything. That is unless, of course, they changed their password.

If you have a problem understanding this for your device, go to Google (on the internet, of course) and ask Google "How do I connect my iPhone to a Wi-Fi network", or "How do I know I am connected to the internet on my Toshiba laptop?" etc. Try to be as specific with your device name as possible. It's nice to know if you are connected and what to do if you are not.

***Jim Cerny** is chairman, Forums Committee, Sarasota Technology UG, Florida www.thestug.org; jimcerny123 (at) gmail.co*

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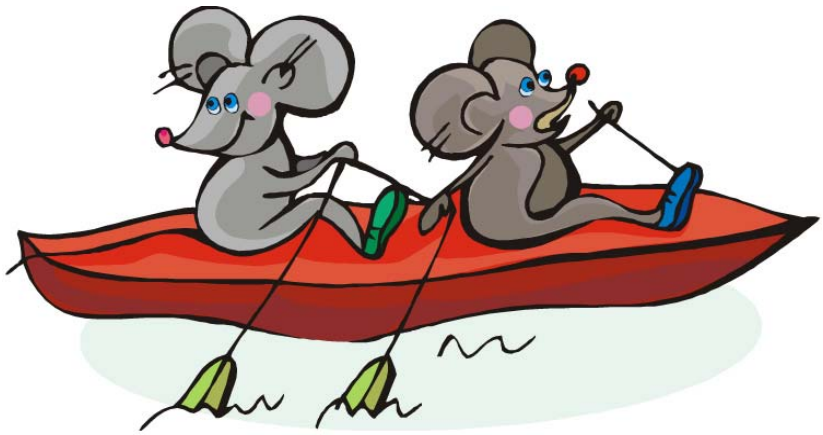

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Cable TV Cord Cutting

January 3
Jay Ferron
Microsoft HoloLens

February 7
TBA