An open letter to the TUG Board

It has been suggested by those whose opinion I respect that my somewhat emotive statements concerning the plan to split TUGboat from the automatic benefits of TUG membership whilst retaining TTN was not calculated to lead to sympathy for my cause. Whilst I accept this, I also know that once an idea has become entrenched it requires more than moderate words to cause a re-consideration of the situation, and I therefore feel that the force with which I put my points was not out of proportion. However, as many board members were not present at the meeting, and as it will no doubt take some time for the minutes to be circulated, I would like to briefly re-iterate my point of view and to explain it.

The proposal, as put at the meeting, is to reduce the membership fee by $20.00, and in addition to make TUGboat available as an `optional extra' for a further $15.00; TTN will continue to be sent to all, and its content will be enlarged and improved. The arguments adduced in favour of this are that (1) TUGboat is of interest to only a minority of members, whilst (2) TTN is of interest to all.

Clearly (2) is at best debatable, and at worst totally flawed: several speakers emphasised that they did not want to receive TTN. Proposition (1) is interesting, and the obvious question is "on what is this assertion based?" When were the members polled to ask if they valued TUGboat or not? How much of this argument is based on hearsay and rumour, and how much on fact?

When I received my first TUGboat, it was almost completely incomprehensible to me: I had no idea what the majority of articles meant. But then the same was true for The TExbook, and for the Algol-60 and -68 reports: they were initially complete gibberish, expressed in a language that only the congoscenti could possibly understand. But I did not give up: I persevered. And each time that I re-read TUGboat, or The TExbook, or the Algol-6X reports, I learned a little more. And when the next issue of TUGboat arrived, I was able to read a small amount of it without excessive effort, although other parts remained a mystery. But again I did not give up; again I persevered; and with each issue of TUGboat my understanding grew.

But as my understanding grew, so did my love of TEx; each article was a further insight into the
brain of its designer and creator, Don Knuth; and the more I learned, the more I wanted to learn.

And finally the day came when I felt confident enough to propose an article of my own; not too long, not too technical, but my first faltering step as an active member of the \TeX{} community, no longer completely passive and totally dependent on others for my every \TeX{} need.

And all of this came about through the magic of \textit{TUGboat}, under the inspired editorship of the irreplaceable Barbara.

Then, several years later, I received my first copy of TTN. I was horrified: it was almost completely filled with the disgusting details of the infighting which had taken place before, during and after the 'night of the long knives'. It was about \textit{TUG}, not about \TeX{}.

But I did not join TUG to learn about TUG; TUG is simply a vehicle, not an independent entity with a de facto right to existence. It exists for one purpose and one purpose only: to propagate the word about \TeX{}.

And in that last sentence I summarise what I believe is at the heart of this somewhat heated debate: TUG should be about \TeX{}, not about TUG.

Now you can argue that (a) TUG members need to know about TUG activities, and (b) that TTN carries \TeX{}-related matter. With (a), I can take no exception: of course we need to know about TUG activities. But we do not need a whole magazine/journal/w-h-y devoted to the subject: a few pages in \textit{TUGboat}, ready-prepared by the present/incoming TTN team so as to minimise the load on Barbara, is all that is required. But with (b), I take great exception: there is no need for a second TUG publication about \TeX{}: it already has a first-class publication in \textit{TUGboat}, and anything which competes with it simply serves to diminish its value. When I have read a useful snippet in \textit{TUGboat}, and need to find it again at some point in the future, I can either consult the on-line indexes, or scan the back covers (modulo the ragged-right, "aren't we clever designers?", Vol. 7, no. 1) to find the article of interest. I do not want to have to remember whether it was in TTN or \textit{TUGboat}—I want to know that it was in \textit{TUGboat}, the definitive \TeX{} journal.

But yes, I agree; more articles for beginners are needed. But their place, too, is in \textit{TUGboat}, at the very beginning; and each article thereafter should be a little more complex, until the final one is of the level demanded by Joachim Schröd and others of his intellect. And by structuring it in this way, the reader will be gently led, just beyond the limits of their own ability. And with each issue their ability will grow, until they, too, are contributors to the wonderful world of \TeX{}, not merely passive users.

And therein, dear Board, surely lies the flaw of your proposal: you seek to divide the \TeX{} community into providers and users, thereby emulating all that is awful about the appalling world of Word Imperfect and Quark SlowBoat. Please ask yourselves: is this really what you want?

Three final points, purely concerned with finance. (1) Do you really believe that there exists an organisation stupid enough to pay $60.00 for \textit{TUGboat} alone, when it can pay $55.00, throw away its copy of TTN, and still receive \textit{TUGboat} for $5.00 less? (2) Do you really intend to raise your prices to students, by charging them $5.00 per year more than they are presently paying? $20.00, being 50% of the proposed TUG subscription, plus $15.00 for \textit{TUGboat}, is $35.00; (these were the exact figures given at the business meeting in response to Anita's query, although seemingly no-one present noticed this); at the moment a student pays 50% of $60.00 ($30.00) and receives \textit{TUGboat} as an integral part. And (3), what about economies of scale? As the number of copies of \textit{TUGboat} which you produce diminishes, the unit cost increases; is it your covert intention to make \textit{TUGboat} so expensive to produce that you can eventually justly cease its publication altogether?

Yours very sincerely,

Philip Taylor,
The Computer Centre
Royal Holloway and Bedford New College
University of London
Egham, Surrey TW20 0EX,
England