Ab Epistulis

Steve Peter

Not long ago, I saw a post on one of the discussion lists asking how to convert a TeX document into Word, "because that's what publishers want." I've recently been working with a group at work to revise our production guidelines for TeX manuscripts, and I began to ponder the question in more depth. Why do publishers want Word (if indeed they do), and what can we do as a community to change that?

For math-heavy books, whether math, physics, or economics, we not infrequently work with TeX files throughout the production process, whether the book is ultimately provided in camera-ready copy by the author, or is produced by a TeX-enabled compositor. Without a doubt, the biggest pain point in the process is with copyediting (for all books) and indexing (for books where the author does not supply camera-ready copy). As the publishing industry moved to outsource these two processes, a vast army of freelance and independent contractors arose, but very few saw fit to gain expertise in TeX. In fact, expertise per se isn't even required, just enough knowledge to be able to work directly in the files without breaking too much.

In essence, it isn't necessarily that publishers are demanding Word, it's the freelance community that is requiring it, and the publishers lack a pool of TeX-savvy talent to draw from to be able to break that dependency. It seems to me that this represents an opportunity to expand our community.

For years, we've been growing by word of mouth among colleagues in the academic disciplines. One mathematician tells another about TeX's abilities in handling all sorts of complex equations; a historian tells another how BibTeX or JabRef can handle the complexities of managing a bibliographic database (no math here, just academic writing); and so on.

Now, we need to engage another sub-community of the (academic) publishing world: the freelancers. Copyeditors and indexers need to know that they can gain a competitive advantage by learning at least enough TeX to be able to work directly in source files. (Speaking from personal experience, more and more of my own freelance work has gone over to TeX-based copyediting, away from TeX programming.)

How will this engagement happen? The key is going to be education, especially in a casual way. If you do encounter a freelancer curious about TeX, show them the simple stuff to dispel the fear and uncertainty. We don't need to turn freelance copyeditors or indexers into hardcore TeX experts who shun any trace of commercial software. We do need to show them just enough to be able to do their specialized jobs as part of a TeX-based workflow.

If we can enable a painless workflow, the publishers will come.

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