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ABSTRACT

Sysops, vendors, Bulletin Board System (BBS) users and journalists mill about the stately Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs, CO, Aug 25-29, 1993, while attending the second annual Online Networking Exchange and BBS Convention (**ONE BBSCON**) there. Over 140 speakers hold forth at least 130 sessions, while in excess of 100 vendors, including BBS software makers Galacticomm, Synchronet and Mustang and modem manufacturers Zoom, Boca and U.S. Robotics, display their wares. ConcernedBBS service providers form the National Online Media Assn (NOMA) to combat heartless State sales-tax collectors and fend off the local telephone, cable TV and even power companies that threaten to steal their action under Pres Clinton's proposed national data superhighway. Remote Imaging Protocol (RIP) implementations promise to bring graphical user interfaces (GUI) to the BBS world, while the Top Ten US BBSs win awards.

Report from the second annual Online Networking Exchange and BBS Convention.

It's likely that prior to the last weekend in August '93, a short golf shot was the only kind of "chip" ever seriously discussed at the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs, Colorado. But from August 25-29, this elegant resort was host to the Online Networking Exchange and BBS Convention (**ONE BBSCON**), and its halls were noisily filled with strolling sysops, BBS users, journalists, and communications vendors hawking their wares.

Among the attending cyberspace luminaries was Ward Christiansen, whostarted it all with the first BBS so many years ago in Chicago. Jim Warren, founding editor of Dr. Dobbs Journal and founder of InfoWorld, was the keynote speaker. Well-known columnist and author John Dvorak was on hand to present the Dvorak/Zoom Awards for Excellence in Telecommunications. It was a magnificent do, and credit for the event goes primarily to Jack Rickard of Boardwatch and Phil Becker of eSoft (TBBS), who are the prime motivators of ONE Inc., the conference sponsor.

More than 130 sessions were held, featuring over 140 speakers. The topics ranged from introductions of new software, such as the latest version of Telefinder BBS for the Mac, to general topics like BBSing for profit and what makes for a good BBS (my contribution). Since the sessions were spread through meeting rooms in five buildings at abouta

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6,000-foot altitude, a lot of propeller-heads gave their cardiovascular systems a healthy workout trotting from one session to another.

Besides the sessions, the show featured more than 100 vendors with their wares on display in two exhibition halls. Along with major BBS software publishers such as eSoft (TBBS), Galacticomm (The Major BBS), Mustang Software (Qmodem Pro and WildCat), Searchlight, and Synchronet were hardware vendors Boca, Hayes, U.S. Robotics, Zoom, and ZyXel, among others. IBM's Team OS/2 was handing out free copies of OS/2 2.1 to sysops to demonstrate how it could run Synchronet's new 32-bit OS/2 BBS. And the nice folks at the Practical Peripherals booth even loaned me one of their excellent pocket modems, so I was able to keep in touch with Computer Shopper via CompuServe.

Cyberspace Under Attack: NOMA to the rescue?

One of the most important developments emerging from this year's ONEBBSCON was the creation of a steering committee to establish the National Online Media Association (NOMA). It is not the first time such a trade organization has been proposed, but this year, the process seems to show signs of succeeding.

An organization like NOMA doesn't come a minute too soon. The BBS industry is facing a variety of serious issues and challenges. Not only is explosive growth drawing attention to cyberspace, but technical, legal, political, and fiscal aspects of doing business in cyberspace are looming like Godzilla's children.

For example, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts recently decided that the Channel One BBS owes uncollected sales taxes and interest on memberships dating back to 1990. Sysops Brian Miller and Tess Heder estimate the bill could come to \$150,000, enough to ruin them.

Meanwhile, in Washington, D.C., the politicians are contemplating the establishment of a national data superhighway. Local telephone operating companies are gaining the right to distribute data along with the telephone services they already supply. Cable companies and even power companies lurk on the sidelines, each craving a piece of the action. All these developments could have a direct impact on the BBS industry in terms of access rights and competition.

So NOMA has its job cut out for it: to provide a single, strong voice to represent the BBS industry. If sysops around the country lend their strength to the effort, NOMA could make a difference. The immediate goals drawn up for NOMA at **ONE BBSCON** are, among other things, to assist in the creation and promotion of industry standards, membership services, and industry marketing; to provide education; and to provide the industry with a political voice, both nationally and locally.

Chairing the steering committee is Phill Liggett of Solutions Inc. (LIGGETT@delphi.com). Since the steering committee is to report by November 30, 1993, I would hope that NOMA is an accomplished fact by the time this column sees print.

More information about NOMA can be found on the Internet. Messages can be sent to natbbs@echonyc.com, and an Internet mailing list is available to all those interested. Just subscribe to natbbs-request@echonyc.com. A conference area is also being made available on the Delphinational information service.

Hardware Wars

On a less political note, the modem price wars raged on at **ONE BBSCON**. Zoom was offering a show special, taking sysop orders for a "V.fast-class" modem for a show-stopping price of \$99. The unit is based on a Rockwell chip set that will incorporate the V.fast features thus far established by the International Telecommunications Union--Telecommunications Standards Section (ITU-TSS, formerly the CCITT).

Since Zoom's unit is avowedly based on the interim ITU-TSS specifications, it is not a proprietary standard. At 24 Kbps, V.fast-class offers a significant boost over the V.terbo 19.2-Kbps standard being offered by some other modem makers. (V.fast-class will also ship in 19.2- and 28.8- Kbps versions.)

Other manufacturers, notably Hayes, will also be offering V.fast-class modems, but Zoom's offer was the lowest I saw for any modem at the show. Elsewhere, V.32bis modems were being offered in the \$120 to \$150 range by vendors like Boca.

Graphics Standards Duke It Out

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On the software front, salvos were exchanged by the various graphicsstandards groups. Remote Imaging Protocol (RIP) support was much in evidence, including a strong representation from its developers, Telegrafix Communications Inc., and its implementers, such as The Major BBS, PC Board, Searchlight, Synchronet, TBBS, and Wildcat.

Not to be forgotten is ResNova with its NovaLink BBS software, which supports RIP. ResNova offers both Mac and RIPPed DOS versions of NovaTerm.

Along the same lines, Durand Communications, a RIP supporter, was showing impressive image-compression software and one of the best file-transfer interfaces I have ever seen. In effect, it puts what looks like an enhanced Microsoft Windows File Manager in your hands, providing drag-and-drop file manipulation through the modem. Meanwhile, Durand claims its lossy image-compression protocol is up to 60 percent more effective than JPEG.

Retired Army Colonel Dave Hughes was there, of course, bearing the North American Preservation Level Protocol Syntax (NAPLPS) standard before him, with Shawn Rhoads of TurboBoard at his right hand.

Other GUI players in attendance included Seth Hamilton with his RoboBoard package, and Maury Markowitz of SoftArc showing First Class for the Mac, which can also be accessed using the firm's relatively new Windows terminal software.

In practical terms, while RIP is showing the greatest vendor strength, NAPLPS is not about to roll over and fade away. It seems that the advent of RIP following 1992's **ONE BBSCON** finally goaded the NAPLPS forces into producing some worthy tools for that standard, including terminal software and conversion programs.

NAPLPS soldier Rhoads of TurboBoard demonstrated a GIF-to-NAPLPS conversion program that is a real whiz. Rhoads' TurboBoard BBS, by the way, supports not only NAPLPS but ANSI and RIP graphics, revealing an admirably ecumenical spirit.

While all the above standards are proprietary packages requiring dedicated terminal software, they should not be dismissed. Such setups can offer distinct advantages for sysops running private boards serving highly targeted audiences.

RIP got one other notable boost at the show. A Dvorak/Zoom Telecommunications Award went to Telegrafix for its Outstanding Advanced BBS Graphics Standard. This, of course, is RIP.

Among the other Dvorak/Zoom award recipients were Dennis Hayes (Lifetime Achievement Award), Aquila BBS (Outstanding BBS Organization, Features and Design), CompuServe (Outstanding Online Information Service), Data Port Network Information System (Outstanding BBS Gateway to Multiple Information Services), and Internet (Outstanding International Connectivity).

Motorola Codex received the Outstanding Hardware Contribution award for V.fast Technology. John Markoff of The New York Times got the Dvorak/Zoom award for Outstanding Reporting in Telecommunications. J. Owen Greeson was recognized for Outstanding Ongoing Software Contributions, and Tim Stryker, founder of Galacticomm and the Superdemocracy movement, received a special award.

#### BBSCON's 10 Best BBSs

On the beauty-contest side, the Boardwatch Top Ten BBS awards were presented.

First place went to one of my personal favorites, Dan Linton's Software Creations in Clinton, Mass. [(508) 368-7139]. This is probably one of the best online sources of shareware games in existence. Software Creations is the support/distribution point for Apogee, Boxer Software, Epic MegaGames, Gamer's Edge, HomeBrew, Id Software, ImagiSoft, and many others. Linton has one heck of a system here, and the only problem I've ever had with it is getting online because it is so popular.

Exec PC [(414) 789-4210] garnered second place, only 43 votes back. This is one of the oldest and probably the largest public BBS in the country. Bob Mahoney claims his creation receives one million calls every seven months. It's simply huge.

Third place went to a dark horse, deltaComm BBS [(919) 481-9399], the support BBS for deltaComm Development Inc., publishers of the Telixcommunications program. While deltaComm is a support board, sysop Jeff Woods says the BBS wants to expand to a full-fledged online service.

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Fourth place went to PC Ohio [(216) 381-3320], another major Midwestboard. Riding herd over it has become Norm Henke's full-time job. With over 15Gb of files, plus connections to Internet and 21 other E-mail networks, that's understandable. PC Ohio is one I've been meaning to get to Real Soon Now.

The Gay and Lesbian Information Bureau (GLIB) [(703) 578-4542] captured fifth place. Jon Larimore runs this TBBS board as a non-profit information and communications resource. It primarily serves the gay, lesbian, and bisexual community, but anyone over 18 is welcome to participate. All that is required for free membership here is to show financial support of or membership in any non-profit community organization. Contributions to the board's "parent corporation," the CommunityEducational Services Foundation, also qualifies callers.

Sixth place went to Westside [(213) 933-4050], the large Los Angeles chat system run by Dave Harrison and company.

Steve Fox wrote the ROS BBS software on which the seventh-place board, Albuquerque ROS [(505) 299-5974], runs. This board is refreshing for its total lack of "adult" materials. It's a 14-line system with over 60,000 files. While mainly a files board, it also has active chat and games areas. It is free, but a \$30 subscription does enhance privileges.

In eighth place was Odyssey [(818) 358-6968]. This is billed as "thelargest adult-based entertainment service in North America and quitepossibly the world."

Joseph Balshone, whom I first met at last year's **ONE BBSCON**, earned a well-deserved ninth place for Wizard's Gate BBS [(614) 224-1635]. This is a board I deeply regret not having reviewed yet. It is free. There is no validation, no verification, and you get 90 minutes on your first call. Balshone won't even accept donations. It, too, runs on unusual software, SH Systems BBS Software, written by Steve Harke. It offers some unique features to which I'm going to devote some attention in a full review. Watch this space.

Tenth place went to another adult BBS, Ron McElvy's Pleasure Dome BBS [(804) 490-5878].

Once the noise had abated and the last of the nerds had departed, the Broadmoor settled into its usual staid gentility. The golfers no longer had to endure elevator dialogues laced with talk of "V.fast" and "bits per second." Once again, a "door" became just an opening into another room.

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