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inside:

SYSADMIN

A Bit Off the Beaten Track

By Strata Rose Chalup

USENIX & SAGE

The Advanced Computing Systems Association &
The System Administrators Guild

a bit off the beaten track

by **Strata Rose Chalup**

Founder, VirtualNet Consulting; Strata Rose Chalup specializes in large-scale messaging deployment. A sysadmin since 1983, she is now enjoying a sabbatical to scuba dive, read sci-fi, fix her house network, and get enough sleep.

strata@virtual.net



I share odd bits of news with various folks, who often ask me, “Hey, where do you find this stuff?” I definitely use “the standard resources” that everybody uses, such as SlashDot, FreshMeat, and various OS-centric publications.

I’m also slightly tapped into the multimedia community, as well as the Web standards community, and it’s here that I find a number of cool tools and interesting bits. Late, admittedly, by the standards of those communities, but perhaps early by the notice of the sysadmin and IT communities.

I find it worthwhile to wade through rather a lot of chaff to find the occasional sysadmin-relevant grain in the following places. They are NOT arranged by any order of importance.

Dave Farber’s “Interesting People” (IP) [1 - 3 msgs/day]. Some cool tech, not restricted to computers, including inside track and commentaries on telecomm and privacy legislation, as well as forwarded news stories/URLs on those topics. Some very highpowered folks are on this list, and while only Dave can post to it, he frequently approves comments and replies mailed to him. Also covers computing history, usually in the first-person. Recent headers (as of this writing) include “UNIVAC turns 50,” “Why we don’t use digital cash,” and “Feds will data tap under CALEA.” Archives/page at <http://www.interesting-people.org/>

Geeks at Umich [Sporadic, 4 - 6 msgs/week usually]. An informal clan, centered loosely around the University of Michigan but scattered everywhere now. List topics include gadgets and goodies, forwarded IP bits of particular relevance to geeks, open source behind the scenes tidbits and/or choice forwards from the free software world. The latter is especially useful for me, since other than the occasional FreshMeat visit, I don’t follow any dedicated news sites in that area. Topics occasionally include local events of interest in the Michigan area. Recent headers include “Unisys Apologizes for Creating Unintended Consequences of the Computer Age,” “GODZILLA -> In a can!,” “3-inch aluminum cube-o-fun,” and “the eunuchs convention, june 20-29.” That last was not about summer USENIX, it was a link to an actual eunuchs’ convention in India. No public archives; subscribe to geeks-request@monkey.org, or via majordomo@monkey.org

Keith Dawson’s “Tasty Bits from the Technology Front.” [Updated frequently by blog (weblog), more sporadically by email]. A great source for breaking technology news, with a great deal of insider commentary, especially on ICANN atrocities, telecom policy, and major ISP outages. Other frequent topics include cool gadgetry, science, and software tools, along with various odd sound-bites. I am part of a small group of folks who have sent in tidbits to Keith, and we exchange lots of info on a private list associated with TBTF. All our really good stuff makes it into the blog, so you’re not missing anything important! Recent topics included “An illegal prime number,” “European Court of Justice outlaws criticism of EU,” “When it absolutely, positively must be zapped overnight,” and “A Bell goes south.” Archives and blogpage at <http://www.tbtf.com/>

Phil Agre’s “Red Rock Eater News” (RRE). [Sporadic, roughly weekly]. Primarily lists of one-line annotated URLs, labelled “pointers,” on topics ranging from politics to science to technology to social systems. Monthly or so there are booklists of books, arranged by topic, that Phil has read, referenced, or just collected as relevant to the topic of the booklist. I am in awe of the degree to which Phil is well-read, and how many issues he tracks. Being a tenured professor has some advantages! Also includes occasional compelling forwards from educational, tech-educational, and public policy lists. The real gems, usually every 2 or 3 months, are first drafts and final versions of scholarly papers that Phil (and occasionally, list members) have authored on technology-and-society, economic theories of technology application, and the like. Fair warning: these can be very stiff reading, but are incredibly educational. Other content includes polemics and rants on the growing globalism, especially Davos and the like, American politics, university practices, lists of conferences, mostly on technology, crypto, education, CS, AI, and social sciences. Phil has a fetish for good, cheap pens, and you’ll occasionally find indepth reviews of pens sent to him from odd places. Recent headers include “pointers,” “Hague Conference: effects on free speech, consumers,” “Hierarchy and History in Simon’s ‘Architecture of Complexity,’” and “The Information Society in Europe.” Archives and Webpage at <http://dliis.gseis.ucla.edu/people/pagre/rre.html>

Need to Know (NTK). [weekly, on Fridays], In their own words, “the weekly high-tech sarcastic update for the UK.” I love these guys! Lovely cryptic tidbits about the UK computer scene, including ISP foibles, legislation, and notably embarrassing gaffes and Web defacements, as well as updates on privacy and crypto legislation in the EU and overseas in general. Most issues feature a great

tool spotlight, mostly free software but also commercial tools now and then. Other regular columns within issues include media updates, with info on UK TV movies and shows (with capalert links and highlights, and a popular new “junkfood” section about new varieties of nerdchow sighted and tried. Recent topics include “Guardian/Observer plugging ‘dot-com-no-hoper’ Moonfruit, why?,” “Farewell to ORBS,” “Review of ART DROIDS 2000AD museum exhibit, now showing,” “Review of ‘Get Over It’ (Shakespeare in Love meets Bring It On).” Archives and Webpage at <http://www.ntk.net/>.

Dave Winer’s “Scripting News Update.” [daily, sometimes highly prolific]. More of interest to the Web world types, but I work there and try to keep up on what’s going on. Mostly XML, RSS, Web standards, and Web industry news, announcements of related packages and tools, interesting bits of overall computing industry news, and opinion pieces by Dave. The latter are usually either completely cryptic or utterly fascinating to me, given that I don’t overlap with that world very much. One interesting thing that shows up frequently is first-person quotes from industry luminaries on a variety of topics, since Dave has been around forever and knows everybody. Recent topics included “Microsoft-Free Fridays,” an announcement of new Perl XML-RPC implementation, “Google Buttons,” and many pointers to informative rants and amusing satires on Smart Tags (by multimedia industry software developers). Archives and Webpage at <http://scriptingnews.userland.com/> It’s worth noting that UserLand is a freely available scripting publishing environment that Dave is the primary author of.— if Wiki or Blogger don’t quite do it for you, try UserLand.

David Weinberg’s “Journal of the Hyperlinked Organization.” (JOHO). [monthly] Primarily Web development and standards community news and tool announcements, quite highly thought of in that community, with quality and in-depth writing. Recent topics included “save the threads,” “Breaking the spine of books,” “The three-strikes rule for PR,” “Data spidering service,” and “Building a fullsize Robbie the Robot replica.” Archives and Webpage at <http://www.hyperorg.com/>

Owen Thomas’ “DITHERATI.” [Daily, weekdays]. In their own words, “see the digerati dither, daily.” Pompous, ludicrous, and ridiculous quotes by “industry luminaries” who ought to know better, captured and usually poked at with a verbal stick by the good Mr Thomas. Includes the source of the sighting and a brief, usually stinging, comment on the disparity between the quote and reality. Since I don’t follow the “dot com world” or “the industry” too closely, I find this to be a useful remedial education as to the major players and companies, as well as highly amusing. Recent topics included “A FISH, A BARREL, AND A SMOKING GUN,” “Internet: not free Phone monopoly: free, Any questions?,” “Neither rain, nor snow, nor gloom of five-hour compiling sessions,” and “JEWEL IN DENIAL.” Archives and Webpage at <http://www.ditherati.com/>.

Glen McCready’s “0xDEADBEEF.” [sporadic]. Moderated, primarily humor and the occasional highly nifty scientific bits. Some of the humor is not “family friendly,” though it’s usually technically “clean.” Subscribe at 0xdeadbeef-request@petting-zoo.net

The Conversation Continues. [monthly] This is a free newsletter put out by Esther Dyson and staff, and is one of the few “pro” sources I receive. It’s a combination of informative teasers

about articles in Release 1.0, Dyson’s highly respected but expensive subscription newsletter, and fascinating op-ed and industry news pieces from a very interesting perspective, namely mover-and-shaker VC community folks engaging in prolepsis trying to predict the future of “the industry,” or at least new trends and hotspots. Much of it seems pointless or bizarre from here in the quasi-trenches, but bear in mind that your CTO and his/her buddies are probably reading Dyson’s for-pay newsletter, and that Gartner is influenced by Dyson, generating similar stuff in their “vision” subscription sections. Fear. In some ways it’s like watching a road accident, there’s that same fascination and horror upon watching tomorrow’s IT crises being created out of air and dew by very savvy and usually accurate business computing policy experts. Also serves up some ICANN and related news/views since Esther has been heavily involved there. Recent topics included “ICANN Wants You!!!,” “Triumph of the Weblogs (teaser),” “Feedback and Further Conversation,” and a calendar of Upcoming Technology Events. Archives and Webpage at <http://www.edventure.com/conversation/>.

There are a lot more, but these are just the ones I make time to read every few weeks, or more often. Then there are the ones I save for a two or three months, or when I have spare time (ha!) or when I’m procrastinating.

Send me your favorites, and I’ll create a page for the list and announce it to the sage-members, and as an addendum to a future column.