A Brief History of
FreeBSD Journal

BY GEORGE V. NEVILLE-NEIL

It was May of 2013, and a couple hundred developers had descended on the University of Ottawa for our annual North American conference. Tutorials, talks, and wandering around ByWard Market in Ottawa while looking for things to eat were part of the deal. Dinners on the first two nights were held in residence, in a big room on the ground floor with a lot of us milling around and discussing the finer points of whatever sub-systems we happened to be working on.

I was talking with a few folks from the project and remember Robert Watson standing just to my left, as he said, "What we could use is a magazine about FreeBSD, something with good technical content, written by developers, for the community." He had a gleam in his eye that I've seen when he's about to ask someone to do something they probably want to do but should think about more carefully before actually agreeing. And yet, they say "Yes."

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Robert knew I'd been working on a magazine called *Queue* for over a decade, so I guess he thought I was the kind of person who might want to start a magazine, which, of course, I was. Robert knows me well and that isn't always an advantage. I answered with, "Huh....," and then looked off into the distance to consider it. "We could...," I continued, and at that point, I knew I would at least give it a try.

Most important things we achieve in life happen with a mixture of luck, skill, and knowing the right people. The *FreeBSD Journal* got its start due to a lot of luck, some great people, and some skill. The *Journal* is the intellectual grandchild of a venerated trade journal from the 1980s, *UNIX Review*. The *Review* was started and run by Mark Compton, who would later be brought in to help create ACM's practitioner-oriented publication called *Queue*, where I would serve on the editorial board, and by so doing, learn enough about publishing to help start the *FreeBSD Journal*.

It was as a member of the *Queue* editorial board that I came to understand how a magazine is produced. With software, we're used to listening to the sound that deadlines make as they go whooshing by, and then recovering by pushing the latest code to the servers, or whatever. But when you publish in print, there is a drop-dead date, and if you miss it, you don't get a magazine that month, full stop. That kind of pressure runs right back into the editorial process, meaning you must not only select authors who write well, but they also need to do it on a deadline. And if too many authors miss the deadline, you get a magazine that's very slim, or nonexistent. You also want to establish a board that is respected, collegial, and gets along well. Imagine, if you will, a room full of luminaries arguing a about a topic, but instead of anyone grandstanding and taking up all the air in the room, they build upon each other's ideas in a sort of techno-nerd version of improv. The best editorial boards and board meetings are like that, and that's what we set out to do with *FreeBSD Journal*.

I thought I knew where to start, and the first person I talked with was the executive editor of *Queue*, Jim Maurer, who had also been running a boutique magazine publishing business for a number of years. *Queue* had published a few pieces by folks in the FreeBSD community and Jim had mentioned that he had enjoyed working with them. It's always cheered me to know that it was the quality of people in the FreeBSD community that had convinced Jim to work on the *Journal*. With Jim on board, I was slightly less panicked, because someone I trusted and who knew the industry had said, "Yes," rather than, "You're crazy!"

Working in open source usually means working with limited budgets, and I knew I wasn't going to get the FreeBSD Foundation to fund monthly, in-person, editorial board meetings at fine restaurants—per the *ACM Queue* model, but I still needed to convince a group of smart people from the community to form an editorial board. All I could offer was some recognition and the chance to work with other smart people on an interesting, shared project, which, effectively, is why many of us started working in open source in the first place. I began emailing people I thought might be interested and made a direct pitch to each one, "Can I convince you to..." —is my usual opener when I want someone to write or join a board or contribute to the project. It's not subtle, but it does get the job done!

I convinced eight people to give it a try, and the first *FreeBSD Journal* editorial board was: John Baldwin, Daichi Goto, Joseph Kong, Dru Lavigne, Michael W. Lucas, Kirk McKusick, Hiroki Sato, Robert Watson, and me. I was shocked by my good luck.

For a magazine like the *Journal*, the editorial board is its beating heart. The board members understand technology and also writing about technology, and they are also the Rolodex (an ancient, rotating paper product that has been replaced by the contacts app in your phone) which is to say, they also have to be connected and reach out to people who also can understand and write about technology. An essential quality for an editorial board member is the ability to ask for the moon and not take "No" for an answer. In the academic world, people must "publish or perish," but not in

the practitioner world. How the board consistently comes up with great authors who produce great articles is shrouded in mystery, but I suspect it has something to do with being very friendly and buying people strong drinks at conferences.

With the board in place, we set out to find funding. We were planning a print magazine, and while the authors were kind enough to write for free, we had to pay for editorial and production services and printing costs. Two early backers were the FreeBSD Foundation and iX Systems. Later, we would solicit advertising, and several companies who were using FreeBSD took out ads to help support the effort.

With the basics in place, the editorial board began bi-weekly, video calls to hash out issue topics. Before we approached even a single author, we had to work out what topics we wanted to cover, issue by issue, for the first year of the magazine. Each topic had to be broad enough to include several articles, and we were also looking to establish regularly appearing columns to give the *Journal* continuity. Our goal was to publish the first issue at the start of 2014, the Jan/Feb issue, and I'm happy to say we made our deadline and the magazine got off to a great start. The main articles in the first issue covered "The New Toolchain" in FreeBSD 10 (Clang/LLVM) as well as booting FreeBSD on the Beaglebone Black, an article all about ZFS, and a piece on FreeBSD for commercial systems. We had columnists in place with Dru Lavigne taking up both the Events Calendar and "This Day in BSD," Thomas Abthorpe on the Ports Report and Glen Barber on SVN Update, which tracked new and interesting features entering the code base. We were off and running.
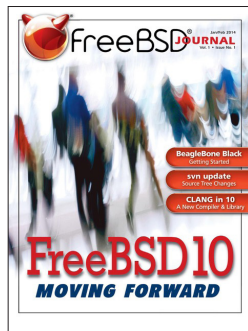
Over the almost 10 years of its publication, the *Journal* has evolved—as it should. What began as a magazine readers paid for, is now free and fully supported by the Foundation. The publishing technology has changed as well, moving over time from print to app-based to PDF-based delivery. The editorial board continues to change when people move on to other projects as they bring in new people and new voices.

My proudest moment with the *Journal*, second only to getting the first issue published, was when I handed over the editorial reins to a new Editor in Chief, John Baldwin. I have always felt that the best projects should outlive us, and that long term continuity and quality are the hallmarks of great systems, be they software, magazines, or any other endeavor you put your mind to. I could think of no better person to guide the *FreeBSD Journal* in its 9th year, and I'm very happy that the *Journal* is still here to help FreeBSD celebrate it's 30th.

GEORGE V. NEVILLE-NEIL works on networking and operating system code for fun and profit. He also teaches courses on various subjects related to programming. His areas of interest are computer security, operating systems, networking, time protocols, and the care and feeding of large code bases. He is the author of The *Kollected Kode Vicious* and co-author with Marshall Kirk McKusick and Robert N. M. Watson of *The Design and Implementation of the FreeBSD Operating System*. Since 2014 he has been an Industrial Visitor at the University of Cambridge where he is involved in several projects relating to computer security. His software not only runs on Earth but has been deployed, as part of VxWorks in NASA's missions to Mars. He is an avid bicyclist and traveler who currently lives in New York City.

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