Behind The Scenes At PC Update

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I began as PC Update editor back in September 2019 and with my permanent step into the role, there were a lot of changes in how PC Update was produced and how it could be consumed. From a consumption point of view, it became web based for the first time, with each article able to be individually accessed from the MelbPC website. At the same time, it continued to be produced as a PDF for those that preferred to read it that way. This approach was explained when I first became editor and after some initial feedback, readers grew accustomed to the new format. But how the magazine is now produced has never really been discussed publicly, so I thought it would be interesting to give you an idea of the process that is involved.

When David Stonier-Gibson was still editor, immediately before me, PC Update was produced using LibreOffice. This was a change from producing it using Microsoft Word, and it was done so that anyone in the club could produce it using a free to download open-source tool in LibreOffice, and on any platform (Linux, Mac or Windows). However, it wasn't easy to produce using LibreOffice as there were quirks in getting pages laid out correctly and so it was decided that the process needed to be even easier, so that there were very few technological barriers to someone taking over in the future.

So here's how an edition comes together each month:

In the first place I receive articles in several different formats. Most of the articles that are syndicated from other APCUG magazines are received in Microsoft Word format. Then there are some articles that are received in LibreOffice OpenDocument format, some that are received in Rich Text Format, some that are received in text format and then there are the articles from *The Conversation* where I copy the HTML in and edit it.

From these articles that are received, they are then all copied into WordPress as posts. WordPress is the content management system (CMS) that the MelbPC website runs on and is the most widely used CMS on the Internet. Once the posts are in WordPress, I edit them and insert images where required. When they're finished, I add them to a category in WordPress called PC Update and tag them with the current month and year (e.g. 1221). I save them all as drafts so they're not visible to members until the issue is ready to go out in PDF form.

The next step I undertake is to generate a PDF of each article. This is done with a plugin called PDF & Print by BestWebSoft which has a free and paid version. The free version has all the features that are needed for producing PC Update. The process involves opening each article in a web browser, and then clicking the PDF button at the end, and saving the output. I sometimes make some minor changes to the layout here. If I notice that an article is going to finish with two sentences on an otherwise blank page for example, I will edit the text or reduce the size of an image to ensure it is more compact.

Once I have a PDF of each article, I then employ a piece of software called PDFSam (which stands for PDF Split and Merge). This is proprietary software, but it has a free version and is cross platform (available for Linux, Mac, and Windows). PDFSam merges all the individual PDF files into one file and generates a table of contents to sit at the front of the document and bookmarks to be used by any PDF reader software.

It's at this point that I usually send the issue off to the proof editors, Harry Lewis, Tim McQueen, and Paul Woolard. Once it comes back from them, I make any changes that they have suggested and usually repeat most of the steps I've outlined in the two paragraphs above to get the text of the issue correct. After this, it's time to produce a front cover for the issue.

Over the two- and a-bit years I've used several applications to produce the front cover. They've included

Apple Pages (for Mac), Microsoft Publisher (for Windows) and LibreOffice Draw (cross platform). Lately I've been sticking with LibreOffice Draw as it is cross platform, and it does everything I need. The process to produce the front cover involves going to Unsplash and finding an image that ties in with a general theme for the month (like networking) and downloading that. Then I produce the text for the front cover. The font I use is Ubuntu. Once the front cover is ready, I save it as a PDF. I then open up PDFSam again and combine the front cover and the PDF of the table of contents and all the articles.

The last step is to compress the finalised PDF to ensure that the file size is less than 2mb so that every member can receive the issue via email. For this I use PDF Compressor, which is just a simple website that usually reduces the file in size by about 75%.

So, there you have it. In some ways the original intentions of making PC Update easier to produce have been achieved. There is now minimal times that needs to be spent laying out each issue. It is now also entirely cross platform, and any member of the club could produce it. I've produced it on Linux. Mac and Windows, so anyone else could do the same. The production of the PDF version has added some complexity, with the need to download each article and produce the edition using PDFSam and LibreOffice Draw. But at least this part of the process is still entirely cross platform and once you learn how to do it, it is easy to reproduce each month.