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hoakley / August 13, 2017 / General, Macs, Technology

Last Week on My Mac: We need to document macOS

I spend an inordinate amount of time searching for information about macOS. Whether I am researching the answers for my section in *MacFormat* magazine, or trying to solve my own problems here, I am also daily reminded of Apple's wholesale failure to provide consistent and complete documentation of its flagship product.

This never used to be the case. In the days of classic Mac OS, when print publishing was growing as a result of Macs, Apple published an exemplary series of books under the banner *Inside Macintosh*, some of which volumes are still in a pile under my desk. It did so despite Mac OS undergoing quite rapid evolution: System 7.0 in 1991, 8.0 six years later in 1997, and 9.0 just two years later in 1999.

I don't know how many technical authors were employed by Apple at that time, but I suspect it was a far higher proportion of total staff than it is now.

Since then, Mac OS X, then OS X, now macOS have become immeasurably more expansive and complex, many more people use Macs, and they need much more support. Yet Apple's documentation for users and those supporting users has all but dried up. Even when you look through guides for developers, few have been substantially revised for several years, and many are completely out of kilter with El Capitan or Sierra.

It's very easy to blame users for not making best use of the information that is available, or to recommend everyone to contact Apple support. But I read, and answer, a relentless stream of questions from users who – for example – did not realise that they had to recharge their Magic Trackpad 2, never knew how to launch an app from the Dock, or couldn't manage their Photos library.

Apple changes things without explaining the new system properly, and without providing us with suitable new tools. One of the best, and most shocking, examples of this was the introduction of the new unified log in Sierra. Almost a year later, Apple has not provided us with an accessible utility which can browse past entries in the new log, nor any guide at all as to how to use or interpret new log entries. All the useful information is contained in the `man` page for the command tool `log`.

Much of the information available is outdated and now incorrect. There was a time when `launchd` – second only in importance to the kernel – controlled and orchestrated most of the services supplied in macOS. Now a large proportion of them are scheduled and dispatched by two systems, DAS and CTS, which are barely even mentioned in Apple's latest developer documentation, a busy part of macOS which doesn't even appear to have a name.

I'm afraid that there is no glimmer of light that Apple intends to change this situation. Indeed, with the next major release of macOS making its way through its last beta releases, there is a good chance that it will soon get even worse when we have to contend with the foibles of APFS and many other changes.

From where I'm sitting, there is only one way that we are going to get better documentation: to create it ourselves.

So far, open and collaborative projects have developed a great deal of valuable software. They have attracted a great many developers, some of them extremely talented, and have been a real success. But open-sourcing and collaboratively-developing software is only part of what computer users need. Most open source projects are proud to have user documentation which is an order of magnitude better than anything provided by Apple for macOS.

What Mac users need most is an open and collaborative project to document macOS. I'm happy to help make this happen, and to donate to it relevant material from this blog in a joint effort to take us all from the dark back into the light.

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31 Comments Add yours

1

Sebastian Andil (@selrond) on August 13, 2017 at 8:49 am Reply ★ Like

Hey!
Having faced similar problems, I'd gladly collaborate on such thing!
What about putting something together on GitHub in the form of markdown sheets? (Something like that: https://github.com/getify/You-Dont-Know-JS)

2

hoakley on August 13, 2017 at 11:55 am Reply ★ Like

Thanks. If there's sufficient support for the project, let's then discuss how and where.
The first task is to get enough people together to actually get it going, I think.
Howard.

3

Sem Schilder on August 13, 2017 at 1:18 pm ★ Like

I would love to help out! (github.com/xvilo)

4

hoakley on August 13, 2017 at 1:19 pm ★ Like

Thank you!
Howard.

5

Andy on August 13, 2017 at 10:44 pm ★ Like

Count me in

6

hoakley on August 14, 2017 at 6:55 am ★ Like

Thank you!
Howard.

7

tbodt on August 15, 2017 at 1:11 am ★ Like

Sounds awesome

8

dos on August 13, 2017 at 11:52 am Reply ★ Liked by 1 person

No. It's Apple who needs to do that. This isn't a free software project – lack of documentation is an argument for abandoning the platform, not for starting a community project of doing work for Apple for free.

9

hoakley on August 13, 2017 at 11:57 am Reply ★ Liked by 1 person

Of course Apple should.
But it doesn't, and shows no sign of even maintaining adequate developer documentation.
It is not Apple that suffers – it is users and support folk who do. We could continue waiting in the vain hope, or do something about it. I'd like to do something about it now.
Howard.

10

Candy on August 13, 2017 at 5:24 pm Reply ★ Liked by 1 person

If you can (a) create another personal computer platform which provides what the Mac does (and I'm also a Linux user, since before 1.0, and no, that is still not it), and (b) convince 100 million users to switch to it (and that's just part of the reason why not), then we've got something to talk about. On any timescale that matters to me (i.e., my lifetime), that's simply not feasible. Writing down and sharing the information that we've each already learned, however, is.

I don't understand this objection to sharing information about a product, simply because the company that built it has a lot of money. If my neighbor had trouble changing the oil filter in his Honda, I wouldn't refuse to share my relevant knowledge simply because Honda is worth $50 billion. Alternatively, I can put that knowledge on the web, and share it with everyone in the world, still at no cost to me. Why does this have anything to do with the company at all?

Do you think that if we all stopped giving each other tips on how to maintain our Hondas, that Honda will go out of business and be replaced by another company which writes better technical documentation? I really don't think it will work like that.

11 multistellarblog on August 14, 2017 at 5:19 am Reply ★ Like

Yeah! Let's abandon the platform!

Yeah, no.

12 No on August 13, 2017 at 3:15 pm Reply ★ Like

Why would you want to work free for a $800 billion company? Let the platform rot and eventually Apple will be forced to do something

13
hoakley on August 13, 2017 at 3:20 pm Reply ★ Like

It happens to be the platform that I choose to use, and the one for which I support others. So that would not help me in the slightest, would it?
Howard.

14 Candy on August 13, 2017 at 5:08 pm Reply ★ Liked by 1 person

So you never do anything without payment? You wouldn't pick up litter off the street, because the government is even richer than Apple and they'll eventually send someone to take care of it? That's your prerogative but I find it's not a pleasant world to live in.

Furthermore, when in the past have you seen evidence that large organizations recognize their failings and are "forced to do something"? Apple haven't recognized the situation so far as being problematic. Has any technology company in history ever stumbled, and realized the problem was they didn't put enough effort into technical documentation?

Adam Smith has been dead for hundreds of years, and never anticipated companies and products as complex as these. It would be neat if market forces could solve every problem, but it should come as no great surprise that they cannot. Isaac Newton has some amazing insights back in the day, too, but 18th century models have proved to be insufficient even in physical law.

15 Charles on August 13, 2017 at 3:39 pm Reply ★ Like

if you have difficulty with something or need info, don't re-invent the wheel, use stack exchange:
https://apple.stackexchange.com

Again, the idea of compiling documentation for a hugely profitable company is debateable, but, creating reams of info that few people will know to access is not a great solution.

16
hoakley on August 13, 2017 at 3:45 pm Reply ★ Liked by 1 person

You miss my point completely. There are many sites which contain scattered information of great value. I know how to use search engines to locate that information, and spend quite a lot of every day doing just that. But it is disparate, fragmented, often outdated, and patchy in coverage.
This is *not* making documentation for Apple. It is making documentation for *us*, those who *use* macOS.
If done properly, it will be very easy to access too.
Howard.

17 Candy on August 13, 2017 at 5:10 pm Reply ★ Liked by 1 person

StackExchange is for getting answers to specific questions. It's not a good format for technical documentation.

Even the StackExchange folks knew this, which is why they created "Stack Overflow Documentation". It didn't catch on, and they stopped accepting contributions last week.

18
Ted Wise on August 13, 2017 at 4:51 pm Reply ★ Liked by 1 person

http://newosxbook.com

19
hoakley on August 13, 2017 at 4:54 pm Reply ★ Liked by 1 person

Yes, that is a superb resource, but it's primarily aimed at security professionals and developers. It is valuable for advanced users and support folk, but is not actually a complete and thorough user manual.
Howard.

20 randomdsdevel on August 13, 2017 at 11:14 pm Reply ★ Like

May I second this? I was going to recommend it myself, but I seem to have been beat to the punch on doing that.

21 John on August 13, 2017 at 4:52 pm Reply ★ Like

Looking around for the technologies described it seems most of it comes from iOS which then gets backported to macOS. This makes sense as most of the technologies not only offer separation and integration, but also energy efficiency concerns. Most of the tighter and lower levels of integration (GCD instead of manually managing a bunch of threads, XPC instead of manually devising userland IPC) seem to have found their way from mobile and embedded targets to the Mac.

22 **hoakley** on August 13, 2017 at 4:58 pm Reply ★ Liked by 1 person

Maybe, although I'm not sure that anyone outside Apple can really know that. But iOS greatly constrains what the user, advanced user, and support folk can do, so it is nowhere near so extensive or capable in terms of use.
For example, I'm working on xattrs at the moment – something which you can do a great deal with, and screw up (!), in macOS. And they did actually originate in macOS.
Howard.

23 Saluk on August 13, 2017 at 7:11 pm Reply ★ Like

Amen.

But, I think I'm going back to linux. At least there is the illusion there of being able to solve issues that arise, and the amount of time I've wasted trying to solve windows 10 or osx problems lately is roughly equivelant to the wasted time that led to me leaving linux desktops.

But good luck with this project, it's sorely needed. I really hope things imrove!

24 **hoakley** on August 13, 2017 at 7:12 pm Reply ★ Like

Thank you for your good wishes.
Howard.

25 has on August 13, 2017 at 8:31 pm Reply ★ Liked by 1 person

You're tilting at windmills, mate. Take it from one who spent a decade trying to save just one tiny part of it from itself (AppleScript/Mac Automation), and has no delusions about what was achieved by that. Nothing will change, and you'll just end up being miserable. It's not your job to fix Apple or its products, no matter how painful and obvious to you its failings are. They will not thank you; that much is sure.

If you're serious about doing it for the users, formulate your plan first—and make it a *realistic* one. Start small and *very* focused; if that succeeds you can always scale up later, but do not even think of trying to solve more than a subset of problems at once. The more ambitious and grandiose a scheme to "save the world", the quicker and more embarrassingly it burns itself out. Always look for quick, cheap, modest wins—the low-hanging fruit—and go for those. It's not dramatic, but you'll get most bang for the least buck without burning yourself out, and prove it can be done (and whether it's really worth doing or not).

For example, you might consider establishing a strong, visible, trusted "expert network" consisting of established, proven bloggers who regularly post HowTos, etc for other users. Plenty already out there, but they've no strong, collective brand identity to tie their contributions together. Think about what it would take to make them stand out as a unified force, and expand their reach beyond their individual bubbles so that a far larger audience will notice them and make them their trusted GoTo for insights and solutions to common working woes.

Look at the Apple "Genius Bar"—it doesn't get attention cos it's full of actual geniuses, it gets attention cos it's a recognized brand with well presented, immediately identified, "market stalls". Building the tech is not the hard part; *selling your product* is. And that is the bit that 99% of bright-eyed, well-intentioned geeks completely fail on. Even though it's not about customers or revenue, treat it as you would a professional startup business venture and you've a lot better chance of pulling something off.

If you're really serious about kicking off, reach out to fellow *OS bloggers with common interests; and if there's positive engagement on that, drop some personal cash on a professional marketing agency to build you out a brand identity and sales plan for your new "guru network". It'll take a few K, but consider how many hours of your time that is worth; believe me, nothing sucks like sinking 5000 hours and having zip to show for it when you're done.

HTH

26 **hoakley** on August 13, 2017 at 8:41 pm Reply ★ Liked by 1 person

Thanks for the suggestions.
The first thing to do is to get some sort of consensus from folk who would support the project, as you say. Only then will we know whether it stands a chance of working.
So far, there have been a lot of very supportive comments, and a few offers of involvement. It has if nothing else shown an almost unanimous and strongly-held opinion that current Apple user (and support) documentation is awful.
Howard.

27 Sam on August 15, 2017 at 10:00 pm Reply ★ Like

"You're tilting at windmills, mate. Take it from one who spent a decade trying to save just one tiny part of it from itself (AppleScript/Mac Automation), and has no delusions about what was achieved by that. Nothing will change, and you'll just end up being miserable."

There's a pretty big difference between "trying to save Mac automation" and "putting up a webpage with some useful information". The former has been done 0 times (*maybe* 1?). The latter has been done millions of times. Is StackOverflow doomed? Is Wikipedia?

"It's not your job to fix Apple or its products, no matter how painful and obvious to you its failings are."

My friend is taking classes in how to repair Hondas. Would you tell him "You're tilting at windmills. It's not your job to fix Honda or their products"? How is this any different? There's a whole bunch of people in the world who already own these products, and they want information about them. That sounds like a fantastic opportunity to me — no matter what the company or product we're talking about.

"They will not thank you; that much is sure."

I don't think gratitude from Apple was ever the goal. Haynes doesn't publish manuals so that Honda will send them a Christmas card.

28

has on August 16, 2017 at 1:27 pm ★ Like

Grand formal schemes to "Let's Work Together And Do X Right" tend to generate lots of noise and end up going nowhere. Sites like SO and WP work because they're grown organically, through ad-hoc contributions by thousands, and even then just maintaining and moderating them is a full-time job demanding ongoing financial support.

Even then, you've always got quality/accuracy/completeness/currentness to contend with, not to mention lots and lots of individual motives and egos to wrangle just to keep the circus on the road. e.g. Go spend a day on the Ubuntu wiki to see how much information and advice is fragmented, duplicative, obsolete, bad, or wrong. What's your process to deal with bad information, abuse, etc?

I've run solo and small group projects; some "successful", some not. Do not estimate the amount of hard work and ongoing commitment required to pull even a small venture off. As others have noted, there are _already_ projects out there (e.g. osxbook) that have attempted to do this before. If you don't understand why those have run out of steam or otherwise failed, you absolutely aren't qualified to start your own.

And above all remember that the best people to produce documentation are Apple themselves. You might well be better organizing 10,000 developers to simultaneously jump up and down on them to do *their* jobs; Apple's investment in any product, including developer docs, is proportional to demand.

29

Avery Davis on August 15, 2017 at 1:11 am Reply ★ Like

I friend and college turned me on to this book nearly a decade ago – http://www.osxbook.com/. It's pretty comprehensive on OS X architecture and it's a bit out of date now, but sets the foundation of what the modern macOS has become.

30

Sam on August 15, 2017 at 9:48 pm Reply ★ Like

I have about 67,000 little nuggets of knowledge about the Mac in my brain, from having written some medium-sized applications for it. I'd be happy to contribute.

31

hoakley on August 15, 2017 at 9:49 pm Reply ★ Like

Wow! Thank you.
Howard.

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