April Fool's Hoax

Webster's 3$^{\text{rd}}$ International Dictionary contains several pertinent definitions:

April Fools' Day April 1st, when practical jokes are played on the unwary.

hoax to trick into believing or accepting or doing something : play upon the credulity of [someone] so as to bring about belief in or acceptance of what is actually false and often preposterous.

practical joke a joke whose humor stems from the tricking or abuse of an individual placed somehow at a disadvantage.

Well, the attached "news release" certainly fits this description. For the first few paragraphs, I was in turns curious, shocked, horrified, . . . , and laughing out loud. The quote attributed to me a couple of paragraphs from the end was suspicious — I don't think I would have phrased it quite that way. ("We must have been out of our minds!" is perhaps closer to the flavor.) And the date — April 1 — clinched the matter.

You may have seen this document somewhere else, either in print (it appears in the NTG MAPS No. 20, complete with color photos of Don and Bill), or in electrons (`comp.text.tex` is one place where it was circulated). Be reassured that it is truly a *hoax*, a genuine *practical joke*, and indeed *preposterous*.

As Don — Professor Knuth — has stated on a number of occasions, the TEX program is meant to be freely available, but the only person who is allowed to change the source code directly is Donald Knuth. He says on one of his Web pages, relevant to the CM fonts, ". . . I decided to put these fonts into the public domain rather than to make them proprietary, all I have asked is that nobody change them, *unless the name is changed*, so that every user can obtain equivalent results on all computer systems, now and 50 years from now." The same sentiment applies to TEX itself. And to protect his investment of time and effort, Don assigned the ownership of the TEX logo to the American Mathematical Society.

We don't hold it against the perpetrator of the present hoax — Richard Kinch — that his words have been so successful. But we do all hope that the rest of you, who may see this out of context, are not fooled. Read it and laugh, but *don't believe a word of it!!!*

⋄ Barbara Beeton

Microsoft Buys TeX, Plans New Products
Stanford Professor Reaps Windfall

Palo Alto, California, USA (CNEWS/MSNBC) — In a major move into the scientific publishing market, Microsoft Corporation announced today that it has purchased all rights to the computer language and document compiler known as TeX (pronounced, "tech"), and plans a major new product line based on the 20-year-old software.

Stanford Professor Donald Knuth (pronounced, "kah-nooth"), the author of the widely-used TeX software, in a joint press conference at the university campus with Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates, acknowledged that the two had been negotiating for some months. "I felt that two decades of TeX in the public domain was enough. I am reasserting the copyright to my original work in TeX. Microsoft will carry the ball now, and I can get back to my computer science research." Knuth acknowledged he was paid a "seven-figure sum" from Microsoft, which he will use to finance his work on a project he has code-named "Volume 4".

At the press conference, Microsoft chairman Bill Gates said the acquisition was "the kind of cooperation between academia and industry that builds prosperity for both." He added that TeX would "finally give Microsoft a foothold in mathematical desktop publishing" that has eluded the software giant since its founding. Drawing gasps of surprise from the college audience, Gates asserted that "TeX will soon be biggest jewel in the Microsoft crown."

Apparently the jewel metaphor will include a hefty, unavoidable price tag for future TeX users. Gates outlined plans whereby all existing TeX compilers would be phased out, to be replaced by a new Microsoft master implementation written in C++. Beta versions for public testing on Windows 95 and NT platforms are expected in late 1998, issuing from a new 205-programmer project laboratory at Microsoft's Redmond campus. Microsoft TeX for other platforms, such as Unix workstations, will follow at an as-yet unspecified date. According to Gates, "the master TeX from Microsoft will ensure that the incompatibilities across platforms are once and for all eliminated." TeX software is widely used due its portability, although variations among operating systems have been troublesome due to uncoordinated development.

Unlike the technical aspects of the project, Gates explained that pricing for Microsoft TeX has already been firmly set. The single-user retail product is expected to have a street price of about $600 and consist of three CDs. When heckled by an graduate student complaining about a high price for a formerly free product, Gates seemed startled, explaining that a "student edition at $299 is likely" and that "Microsoft will use the revenue to make TeX better."

Most current users of TeX have paid nothing for their implementations, derived from Professor Knuth's formerly-free work. Before leaving the podium, Gates made a final comment that "TeX hasn't changed in years. What kind of a product can that be?", and then handed the microphone to an assistant, introduced only as the project leader for Microsoft TeX.

The assistant displayed an overhead presentation using the current test version of Microsoft TeX. Equations and tables could be seen dissolving into each other in a morphing action between frames. "No one has ever done that with TeX," Gates announced from an audience seat at one point. "It's the kind of sizzle that can really enliven a dull paper at an academic conference." Some onlookers were not convinced, especially when the program crashed midway through the demonstration, resulting in a five-minute delay while Windows 95 was restarted. Microsoft technicians later blamed a third-party display driver.

The impact on the large base of existing TeX users was unclear. During a question-and-answer period, Gates said that the "TeX" trademark would be registered as the exclusive property of Microsoft, and could not appear in any competitive or free software. "We are granting of our own good will until the 3rd quarter of 1998, free use to any existing TeX vendors or public-domain authors. That's plenty of time for an orderly phase-out and change-over to Microsoft TeX, or no TeX at all. After that, our legal department will be contacting them."

A Microsoft attorney added that some of the project personnel would be dedicated to searching the Internet to find non-Microsoft TeX software. "Archives and collections of TeX-related programs will not be permitted. The standards must be enforced, or they become meaningless. We are rescuing a fine piece of work from being diluted into worthlessness. You would not believe the number of programs that have been based on TeX without any central, controlling authority. We will stop this infringement."

Some large organizations dependent on TeX were stunned by the announcment and had not yet formed plans for dealing with the change. At the American Mathematical Society, whose publications largely depend on TeX for typesetting, editor Barbara Beeton was incensed. "I can't believe Don [Professor Donald Knuth] sold us out like this. We should have never based a publishing enterprise of this scope on so-called public-domain software. What were we thinking?" Publication schedules for the rest of 1998 were on hold, and journal editors scrambled to reassure their authors that deadlines would not slip more than a few months.

Certain small businesses are also expected to feel the impact of the Microsoft ownership of TeX. Palo Alto restaurant owner Wu Chen appeared unhappy at the news, stating that "for ten year I print new menu every day with TeX, now I will pay big time." He displayed a crumpled, grease-spotted take-out flyer, and with tears in his eyes explained how multiple columns, exotic typefaces, and daily price changes could all be printed by TeX in a multilingual format. "In Wordperfect this would be a long journey."

Commercial vendors of TeX software stand to lose everything in the face of the new Microsoft monopoly. While most derivatives of TeX were freely published, several companies had made a business of publishing proprietary versions. One anonymous source from a leading TeX firm said that "publishing TeX was a gold mine while it lasted, and the Internet let us mine it deeper and deeper. Now this is a cave-in right on our heads. TeX was a monumental work of beauty and utility, freely given to the world by one of the finest and most generous minds of the 20th century. Now it belongs to a lucky dropout. We're finished."

Date of Publication 04/01/98
For further information see
`http://idt.net/~truetex`
`/30/`

Newsgroups: `comp.text.tex`
Date: 01 Apr 1998 09:45:12 -0800
From: Matt Austern `<austern@sgi.com>`
Subject: Re: Microsoft buys TeX! Knuth sells out!

Richard Kinch `<truetex@IDT.NET>` writes:
    Did anybody else see this news item today?

I saw that, but the story is wrong — in fact, it's quite backward. The actual situation is that Donald Knuth bought Microsoft. He is currently working on rewriting Microsoft Word in Pascal, in accordance with the principles of literate programming. The new release will be closely integrated with Metafont.

You can expect to see *The Wordbook* and *Word: The Program* in late 1998, shortly after the publication of volume 5 of *The Art of Computer Programming*.