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More hassles hit
computer group

"Conversations with Fred," Middlesex News,
Framingham, Mass., 1/11/93, age 5A

The fear and loathing continues at the bulletin-board system run by
the Boston Computer Society's Macintosh group.

In October, many of the volunteers who ran the system quit in a
dispute over fundraising and started a Boston chapter of the rival,
California-based BMUG.

Now many of the volunteers who took their place have themselves quit,
charging the BCS is censoring public messages and deleting private
electronic mail.

The BCS says they are childish pests with a grudge out to ruin the
system for everybody else.

The system's latest woes began with a technical glitch. After the
first round of resignations, none of the new system operators knew how
to re-connect the system to the international Fidonet network (the BBS
actually runs on an MS-DOS machine, using software that even an MS-DOS
user might have trouble figuring out). The BCS central office sent in
their MS-DOS BBS guru, Martin Hannigan, to fix the problem.

But then Hannigan got involved in day-to-day operations of the system.
He deleted public complaints about the BBS or the BCS. He reduced the
security levels of the new volunteer system operators, so that they
could no longer perform such tasks as maintaining and cataloging files
uploaded by users. Those who wanted their access restored had to get
Hannigan's personal permission he said this was to give out new
passwords to help defeat a hacker who had supposedly broken into the
system.

A number of the new volunteer system operators resigned in protest.

One of them, EarlChristie, tried to explain why, posting the
following public message:

"With great regret, I have decided to resign as File Manager of the
BCS Mac BS. I feel that the continuing influence of Martin Hannigan
and others from BCS Central has caused irreparable harm to the
atmosphere of trust, helping nd community that this BBS once
embodied. Sincerely, Earl Christie"

Hannigan promptly deleted the message, saying he would not tolerate
slander, accusations or "flames" against individuals in public
messages. A public area set up to discuss "rumors" was suddenly
restricted to BCS "activists."

Christie still had enough of a security level to take advantage of a
BBS feature that lets system operators send an electronic-mail message
to everybody on a "distribution list." He used it to send his
message to 1,500 other BBS users.

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Hannigan responded by denying everybody access to e-mail for a day and a half while he went about deleting all of these messages although a least one member complained in a public forum later that everything else in his e-mail box had been deleted as well.

"It's wholly inappropriate for them to be paying people to censor messages critical of the organization on their own BBS," Christie said. He adds he finds it particularly disturbing in an organization "where the goal is to promote technology in society" and to help individuals use their computers.

Hannigan would not comment, referring a reporter to BCS President Bob Grenoble.

Grenoble said there was no censorship, just deletion of "disruptive" and deliberately inflammatory messages by people using the system for their own personal, and juvenile, grudges.

"We've got a bunch of 30-year olds acting like 10-year olds," he said. "That's not what a bulletin board is for."

He pointed to Christie's use of the distribution list. "That was totally a disruption" that came close to overloading the system, he said.

Grenoble said Hannigan has the full support of the BCS Mac directors to take such action so that members can use the system for what it was intended: to get the most out of their computers. He added that as soon as a new round of volunteers is trained in running the system, Hannigan will step away and the Mac group will resume full control.

Responding to continued complaints, Hannigan wrote: "Unfortunately you fail to realize that this is a private BBS. Funded by BCS members dues it can be run as the OWNERS see fit. If it accepted public funding that would be an entirely different story."

That's where we turn to Bob Richardson, a retired physicist at MIT's Lincoln Labs, who joined the BCS in 1986.

"Both sides (in the BCS dispute) made mistakes, there's no question about it," he said. But Hannigan's actions are the more grievous, he said, because the censorship will drive people away.

"He's not the BCS," Richardson said. "He's an employee of the BCS."

Richardson said the dispute is deeply disturbing. He doesn't want the BCS to get a bad name, because it does so much good for so many people. But he doesn't feel it's right to tolerate Hannigan's actions.

Richardson recently sent a membership check to BMUG, the Berkeley Macintosh group that now finds itself with a Boston outpost.

"I joined BMUG because the friendliness and the real happiness that used to be available on BCS Mac isn't available anymore," he said.
