COMPUTER LABORATORY
KNUT BOEHMER

The usual introduction to the Computer Lab annual report points out how the previous year has seen major changes for the OI in terms of IT—however, I would dare to claim that especially the first half of 2020 saw changes that dwarf anything prior, due to a major shift in everyone's life brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. But even before then, we saw bigger changes in the way the OI has begun to present itself online, with livestreaming and in-house video productions becoming a new normality, allowing us to expand the OI's reach to a wider audience.

COVID-19

As much as I would like to put any other update on the "big first headline," COVID-19 and its changes were the major event for IT (alongside every other area of life) in 2020. When it became clear that everyone was going to be sent home eventually, in mid-March I speedily prepared for any situation or question I could come up with to work from home. The highest priority was, of course, to ensure everyone's continued access to any programs or files they needed to continue working, alongside with making sure everyone received training in areas they may not have been too familiar with at the time, like online video conferencing. A number of training videos for all aspects of the daily work-at-home process were created, and a lot of communication with all our users happened over a short period of time. After the first huge wave started to ebb, the "new reality" settled into a strange rhythm—slow days with few requests would be followed by a week without a chance to catch my breath, followed by slow days without warning, but overall I managed to stay on top of requests (or at least I'd like to think so).

Breasted Hall's AV System

The new AV system in Breasted Hall, completed in spring 2019, took some training to get used to, but once we had started to explain the potential to staff and word got around on campus, Breasted Hall became one of the most requested auditoriums on campus. With the capacity to display video from up to five devices, eight wireless microphones, and full livestreaming capabilities, we saw many conferences rent the space.

Our Members' Lectures, previously pre-recorded and manually edited by an outside contractor, are now being livestreamed and are available on demand immediately after the talk concludes, where previously those who could not make it to the OI in person had to wait for weeks until we received the footage back. We also hosted the president several times, as well as a public discussion with a US senator.

Unfortunately, all this of course came to quite an abrupt stop when campus closed in spring 2020, but we tried our best to transition this new experience to our online platforms, predominantly YouTube. Also, once the building is safe to be used again, likely in 2021 at this point, we will go back and pick up where we left off, striving to make Breasted Hall one of the most attractive places on campus to hold talks and interviews.

Zoom Transition

When the WebEx agreement with campus ran out in November 2019, the decision was made to transition to Zoom as new meeting platform—of course, no one knew at that point what importance it would gain in 2020. While initially used very little, and with access only unlocked for a few staff at the OI, once the stay-at-home order came down in March 2020, the user base grew a lot overnight. After several purchases of license bundles, the university eventually decided on a campus agreement, giving every member of the community full access to Zoom. Obviously, that meant many individual training sessions, as well as some experimentation on what formats worked best for what kind of events—we have had "standard" individual meetings, group meetings, online classes, job interviews, prerecorded talks, and live Members' Lectures, to name only a few, with every type having slightly different best practices in terms of audience size, interaction, and presentation. Adding to that, Zoom as a company had to rapidly grow: since they were under an unprecedented amount of public attention and scrutiny, the playing field was constantly shifting, and training and supporting faculty and staff was a challenging, yet interesting, task.

Postdoc Conference

Organized by Delphine Poinsot, the 2020 postdoc conference held (still largely in-person) in early March was the first fully livestreamed conference the OI has ever done, offering people who were not able to travel to the United States due to restrictions to and from their home countries the opportunity to still participate. It also marked the first time talks were given by participants not physically in Chicago, via web conferencing software.

Mesopotamian Professorship Search

One of the biggest challenges in the early days of work-at-home was the ongoing search for a professor for Mesopotamian archaeology. While the first shortlisted candidate was able to travel to campus, giving talks and in-person interviews, the other candidates were unable to come. So, in order to not delay the interviews, the entire process had to be transferred online. Over the course of two weeks, a total of three lectures, three workshops, and almost seventy individual half-hour interviews were facilitated, avoiding any larger technical problems.

Microsoft SCCM / JAMF / Cloud Backup Rollout

Starting in spring 2020, the university's IT Services finalized campus agreements with several service providers to allow a more centralized management of on-campus computers. For Windows PCs the decision was to go with Microsoft SCCM, while the decision for Macs was to go with JAMF. Since the OI does not have an active Active Directory implementation in place, this is a major first step for all Windows machines as well. Once fully implemented, these monitoring programs allow for a much better overview to ensure crucial updates, that security patches are installed, and that digital security measures like encryption or safe passwords are set up correctly. Since I am overseeing over one hundred computers on my own, being able to direct my attention and resources more efficiently will be a big help.

Going Forward

The "work-at-home reality" is still in full swing by the time I am wrapping up this report, with no end in immediate sight. While it's strange to know it will be a while before I see most of my colleagues in person again, I am still determined to ensure everyone has the best IT support possible, even if it's only remotely. Our communications may have shifted, but I see several different paths

that have opened, allowing more efficient, quick ways to help one another and to present the interesting topics we deal with on an everyday basis to the general public. We are striving to improve our online multimedia and social-media content, as well as come up with new ideas that hopefully will allow the OI to stand out in the online landscape.

In any case, I must express than I am extremely proud to assist and contribute to the hard work that many of my colleagues put in every day, despite the ever-intimidating, tumultuous, and daily shifting circumstances that are the spring and summer of 2020.

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