



BSD Now and Then

BY BENEDICT REUSCHLING

The BSD Now podcast recently celebrated its 600th episode, which seems like a perfect opportunity to give FreeBSD Journal readers a behind-the-scenes look at this long-running BSD show.

Humble Beginnings

BSD Now started in 2013 as a podcast hosted by Allan Jude and Kris Moore. I was a regular listener back then, excited to hear the news in the BSD space. That space quickly became “the place to B..SD” as Kris so famously quipped. The show offered both news and tutorials, the latter of which Allan recorded separately. He once told me that this was difficult because you had to both type and explain what you were doing. Typos or other unexpected computer glitches meant either undoing the changes and cutting the recording or starting over altogether. From the beginning, the show has offered a feedback channel via email for the submission of ideas, show content, or discussions about anything in the BSD space, and the feedback is read at the end of the episodes. Often, people use it to ask questions about installing or using BSD. Sometimes, Allan has offered his vast knowledge of ZFS to help users build their NAS at home or understand difficult-to-understand concepts.

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Kris also offered his perspective from the PC-BSD side and everything about modern Unix desktops. This combination contained all the good bits I was looking for as a BSD user. Since you only had to wait a week for the next dose of BSD Now, it meant that my BSD batteries, which always became supercharged after a conference, would not deplete so fast. This went on for several years and this brief description of the early days of the show does not do it justice—and Allan and Kris could tell many more stories from that time!

I vividly remember when BSD Now became something more for me than just a podcast I listened to. We were at FOSDEM and had gone as a group to one of the many good restaurants in Brussels. As we sat at a long table waiting for dinner to arrive, Allan mentioned that Kris Moore intended to step down from the podcast as his life was getting busier. They were looking for a replacement moderator. Hearing this, I innocently asked what would be involved in that. I sometimes cannot keep my mouth shut and at that point had not even considered stepping in. Allan explained the process briefly, how they would meet

for an hour each week for recordings, and some of the technical logistics behind the show. This all sounded exciting, and as I was always willing to help when I could, I said that I'd be willing to join. Allan liked that and we continued our discussion on other channels (also: dinner had arrived).

The change was not announced until we had done a recording in a separate room at the AsiaBSDCon venue on March 16, 2017. This handover episode 185 gave Kris a chance to say goodbye and me to introduce myself. These early episodes proved to be a bit bumpy, but eventually, I got the hang of it. It was good to practice my English every week and keep up to date on the BSD space at the same time.

Becoming Independent

BSD Now was running as part of the Jupiter Broadcasting podcast network. It meant some cross-pollination between the shows, as listeners would likely also taste the other shows available under the same umbrella. Also, Allan has been a popular figure since his TechSNAP days, which probably boosted the listener-ship. The network also provided a lot of logistics like post-production. For them, it was just another episode to cut into shape and publish in time, which allowed us to focus entirely on the recording and content.

The podcasting world has seen some mergers and takeovers. In the fall of 2018, it was announced that Linux Academy would merge with Jupiter Broadcasting. In turn, a company named A Cloud Guru bought Linux Academy. With the typical restructuring of operations these mergers often encompass, we would still run the show under the new company name. Allan was well connected to the original Jupiter Broadcasting people like Chris Fisher and Bryan Lunduke who launched the network in 2008. In episode 347 (April 23, 2020), we announced that we would become independent of Jupiter Broadcasting. (*Chris Fisher would make Jupiter Broadcasting an independent operation again in August 2020*). This involved changes, and much like becoming a self-publishing author, it meant taking care of a lot of managerial items around the show. Lucky for us, we retained the talent of Angela Fisher for behind-the-scenes work like posting the finished episodes to the many podcast channels. And we still managed to put out weekly episodes like before. JT, our producer started doing production at about episode 100. He had been the producer and helped with production work of the Linux action show (LAS) since 2013. Chris Fisher decided to take the show in a different direction and didn't need his assistance in that role anymore. At about the same time Allan was looking for a replacement for the original producer TJ. Due to JT's involvement in development of the lumina desktop with Ken Moore and working on PC-BSD, Allan had asked him if he was interested in replacing TJ. That's how he became our new producer and has been ever since. He would prove to be an invaluable help in doing the hour-long post-production editing, and that allowed Allan and me to spend our regular hour per episode without extra overhead. While we never relied on click-through rates or other viewer-dependent marketing to finance the show, it was still necessary to compensate people for their efforts. For the longest time, Colin Percival's Tarsnap has been sponsoring the show, and we never cease to praise the backup service he runs. This regular sponsorship allows us to continue

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our little podcast as an independent operation. We have always been thankful for his continued and generous sponsorship!

How the Sausage Is Made

An episode starts with the two moderators agreeing on a recording date. Once we've found a convenient time, we let our producer, JT, know about it. He then prepares the show notes scaffolding in a shared document. We all contribute stories to BSD Now and send them to the producer. Sources vary from stories we find on tech news sites, forums, individual blog posts, submissions by listeners via email, and the usual suspects. The latter are sites that regularly put out content we cover (in the length that we prefer) and that are either BSD-focused or have a history of independently covering the BSDs well.

JT then tries to fit it into a show episode based on some criteria: newsworthiness, actuality (breaking news), long and shorter items, and who is recording next. This last bit is important because some of us moderators are more versed in certain topics (*except for me...maybe I'm there to keep things balanced!*) and can provide extra detail during that piece in the show. Longer news items with current events tend to become headlines, while shorter ones either get a spot in the news roundup or even the beastie bits. It all needs careful curation to fit into the 45-minute time slot. Longer recordings need cutting when a story tends to overgrow the episode. To prevent that, we aim for the 45-minute mark. Interviews and special episodes go somewhat longer.

Before the recording starts, we moderators agree on who will cover which items in the show

When an episode stub is filled with items and posted to our ever-growing show doc dumping ground, I fill out some metadata. This includes the recording date, tags based on the news items in the show, and the title of course. Yes, you can blame me for all the nonsensical episode titles that make you roll your eyes when an episode pops up in your podcatcher. Back in the early days of the show, there used to be a rule that the episode title had to be made up of three words. Not sure where this limitation came from, but maybe marketing had a say in it (catchy title and all). This is both a blessing and a curse: keeping the title short ensures we don't start with a whole sentence and short is easy to remember. On the flip side, it's not always easy to come up with a cool title based on the content of the show. For example, if there were a story about NetBSD running a big ferris wheel, what would you call such an episode? "Wheel of Fortune?", "Big wheel NetBSD," or perhaps "Wheeling NetBSD"? I usually spend a bit of time inventing something. (None of my co-moderators have ever protested or even demanded I change the title before recording.)

Once all that is in place, we have our show notes ready to record an episode. Ideally, the notes are ready in time to let everyone look at the stories and prepare. But life and circumstances sometimes don't allow that, and we read a story on air for the first time. That's not ideal but does allow for a fresh reaction when reading the content.

On Air

Before the recording starts, we moderators agree on who will cover which items in the show, and that lets each of us cover our favorite part. We typically take turns going through

the material. This has worked well as it gives the other person time to recover from a long read and even prepare for the next article.

We moderators can see each other during the recording session and that has proven to be invaluable. We can see if someone is finishing up their piece soon. Giving nods, hand signals or even holding up items we're currently discussing are all informative for the other person. Remember, we are not sitting in the same room during recording. Also, we are not in a professional recording studio. Even though we use the same audio equipment for recording, a smooth-running show can still turn bad during a recording. Loss of Internet connection, construction work outside the window, airplanes, or delivery men ringing our doorbells during recording have all caused interruptions in the past. Luckily, these events are not common. Our producer can fix some audio glitches during post-production, but he can't do magic. If things go bad, we must re-record a bit or (worst case) a whole episode! This is tough. Since we do all the episodes from top to bottom without stopping, we can not easily insert missing pieces or recreate the exact words we spoke. The audience would notice those things as they would not sound natural.

Audio troubles have been a common occurrence and sometimes we don't realize it until listeners tell us about it. It could have been that one of us was too silent, or that the audio tracks shifted together, and we talked over one other. Microphone settings may change unexpectedly. I recently realized that the headphones I had used since my first episode had died. At first, I thought the cause was a bad volume setting on the other end. After testing, I found that one side went dead. I have since switched headphones and can hear my co-moderators as clearly as if they were standing next to me. Audio can be a tricky business!

Special episodes are the ones we do as interviews with people in the larger BSD space.

Specials

Allan did a lot of podcasting, even before BSD Now we do as interviews with people in the larger BSD space. We also did some recordings during conferences where we could conveniently drag someone into a quiet corner to ask them some questions. This is both exciting and unpredictable as we can't create a show notes document up-front. We do write up a couple of questions when we are interviewing our usual recording spots, but during a conference, we need to come up with them as we go along depending on the interviewee. I am always glad that people are willing to do this. They reach a wider audience through us and can talk about what they are working on, call for testers, and provide some background info on how they got started with the BSDs. That is the question Allan and Kris always asked as the first question and we keep that tradition alive.

I was intrigued by the interview Kris and Allan did with Bryan Cantrill in episode 103. I had never heard about him, but I replayed that interview multiple times as an evergreen because of the Unix backstories and rants. A lot of listeners shared this excitement, so it was prudent for them to do a follow-up interview in episode 117. We had hit a nerve and looking back from where we are now in the IT sector, it is amazing to see some parallels and histories repeating.

Other people were kind enough to be interviewed by us, offering their unique experiences and expertise. Michael W. Lucas became a regular and must have been the most in-

interviewed person over the years. Not only do we cover his blog posts about his progress in book writing, but we also love interviewing him when a new book becomes available. Michael's interviews offer a fascinating insight into the self-publishing business. The written and spoken word combine to each other's benefit!

We also had guest moderators from time to time. This happened when we could foresee that one of us needed a longer break (because life happens to everyone), so someone else had to take over. I did at least two episodes with Dan Langille of BSDCan-fame—just one of his many achievements. Episode 404 (BSD Now moderators not found) was super special in that all moderators were replaced. This had to be planned in advance because we needed to find and convince replacement moderators. Our producer, JT, managed that and seemed to have a lot of fun producing the special.

Other special episodes are those where the counter hits a certain number. Geeky numbers like 386, 486, and others deserve something special. I'm a bit worried about episode number 666 but look forward to 686. We recently talked about what we should do once we hit 999. Maybe call it a day and announce the end of the podcast after such a long time. We might as well keep going past the big 1k episode—the sky is the limit and it's too early to tell.

Scheduling episodes is not always easy. Holidays, conference visits, unexpected sicknesses, or other things happen. These days, we keep a buffer of one episode to cover for a week of absences. For holidays like Christmas or New Year, we usually plan something special and record that up-front. This extra work during a busy holiday season is offset by the time it buys to spend our usual recording day with friends and family.

Comings and Goings

Our lives became busy, and Allan needed a break from weekly recording. First, we switched to recording two episodes per week, giving us free time the other week. As time went on and the busyness increased even more, we brought in Tom Jones at episode 400 (see the pattern?) as a third moderator. This meant that both Allan and Tom had to record only once per month, while I remained the constant element every two weeks. Tom provided his network expertise to the show and was able to comment on these topics more than I did.

Allan did a lot of podcasting, even before BSD Now. In an interesting twist, he launched the 2 1/2 admins podcast in his off week. All of us would not enjoy the weekly BSD news if it had not been for Allan and his courage in trying the experiment of a BSD podcast. As the last member of the original BSD Now moderators, he told us in 2023 that he would leave the podcast to make time for his company Klara Systems. In episode 512 (patterns, patterns), recorded live in front of an audience during BSDCan in June 2023, he announced this decision. To keep the show going, he brought in Jason Tubnor, who had done podcasting before. Allan is still sticking around our private production channel and still offers his help and perspective if needed. Our producer, JT, became the new mastermind behind the scenes, both in the pre-and post-production, as well as the business side of the show. He launched our new Patreon donation levels, put up all the past episodes, managed the website and so much more.

Jason brings a lot of experience in both OpenBSD and FreeBSD to the show. Often, he provides extra info on certain topics, be it security, running BSD in production, or virtualiza-

Allan did a lot of podcasting, even before BSD Now.

tion with bhyve. I look forward to chatting with either Tom or Jason before the show starts. These catch-ups were often so informative, that we decided to record them as well for our higher-level Patreon sponsors. This includes our current projects, insights, mini-rants, upcoming events, and other dealings. After that, we start the official show recording as we have done so many times before.

Audience Matters

Producing an episode every week is still an amazing achievement, and the audience expects a new episode every week. People have told us they are hopelessly behind in listening to episodes or just jump ahead a few weeks. Others send in their thoughts about pieces we covered or follow up on a question someone posed that we could not answer. We have had surprised blog authors thanking us for covering their online writing. For me, covering the blogs is rewarding in that it gives us content and the blog some extra traffic it would not otherwise get. It may also encourage them to continue blogging about BSD or Unix in general, which will then re-appear in a future episode. Who knows, some good collaboration may start when a listener gets in touch with the blog author about something they wrote about.

On more than one occasion, people have recognized me from hearing my voice. Be it at BSDCan where people I've never met before approached me to say "hi" or the occasional student in my University mentioning the podcast. It's great to start conversations like that and I usually want to know what they like about the podcast. We're far from the celebrity status and I don't know if I would want that life, but there are people out there who look forward to our show every week and appreciate the efforts we put into it. Feedback emails keep us going. It is a rewarding experience whose value is not about how many listeners we have, but the individual benefits everyone draws from it. We have answered a whole lot of technical questions over the years and I'm sure it helped spread the use of BSD.

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Future Dealings

People often ask us why we do not bring the video back they did at the beginning of the show. For one, it is difficult to lip-sync a video when doing editing and doubles the effort when not just showing our faces, but also websites or even videos we cover. JT would have to bear the brunt of the editing work. For us moderators, it would be less of a problem and our software does record the video during the recording sessions. Some listeners have also commented that the video does not give them any added value. Be it the shape of my face or the fact that they listen to the audio while commuting to work (and 45 minutes seems to be a sweet spot), video is not seen as a benefit to some. As a compromise to those who like to see us, we have recently added the raw video as an option for our Patreon sponsors. This is as raw as it can get without any editing, but if you want talking heads, they are there (for a price).

Will there be other changes, either in the way the show runs or who is speaking into the microphone? We do not have any specific plans, but as the history of the show has shown,

we sometimes must adapt to changing times and circumstances. The show is unique, just as the BSDs are. Podcasts remain as popular as ever and we seem to have carved out our little space. All of this is thanks to our sponsors and the listeners, who have been with us for over 600 episodes. Without people blogging, writing code, doing events, and writing articles about the BSDs, we would have nothing to report. I am excited about what we will be covering each week and how it will be received by the audience. If that does not change, then this remains each and everyone's place to be...SD.

BENEDICT REUSCHLING is a documentation committer in the FreeBSD project. In the past, he served on the FreeBSD core team for two terms and was vice president of the FreeBSD Foundation. For more than 8 years, he administered a big data cluster at the University of Applied Sciences, Darmstadt, Germany. He's also teaching a course "Unix for Developers" for undergraduates. Benedict is one of the hosts of the weekly bsdnow.tv podcast.

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