SCANNET FOR THE USERS

Scannet

Initially Scannet was a physical network, a packet-switched network for Nordic information services. When the Nordic PTTs managed their own packet-switched networks, the role of Scannet changed to a cooperation network, an information network for the Nordic information services supported by Nordinfo.

Purpose of SCANNET

In the first issue of the irregularly issued publication SCANNET TODAY, the new objectives of SCANNET were presented as follows:

Who can benefit from Scannet

- Users of information services
  - Scannet will help in coordinating and act as intermediary for wants and demands on Nordic systems, databases and computer communication
  - Scannet will compile and distribute information about Nordic databases, systems and their availability

Data base producers

- Scannet will help and advise in the structuring of databases
- Scannet will forward requests from the users

Host service organizations

- Scannet will market available databases and services
- Scannet will forward the wants and demands from the users

The services from Scannet are free of charge, but how can it be used

- By subscription to Scannet Today, the newsletter published by Scannet
- By direct contact by letter or telephone to the Scannet coordinator

My role as coordinator

I was employed as the Scannet coordinator in 1983.

I had been working with information retrieval since autumn 1967 at KTHB (Royal Institute of Technology Library), as an information specialist, analysing data from bibliographic databases as a basis for converting them into our system VIRA, preparing search profiles for VIRA, as well as searching online in local and international databases. Later I became head of IDC, the Information and Documentation Centre at KTHB, and as such I participated in national and international activities. Preferring practical work to administration, I resigned from that position. So when the post as Scannet coordinator was announced, I applied and got the job. Scannet as a packet switching network had its service centre at Medicindata in Göteborg, with Sixten Abrahamsson as executive chairman of the board of directors. The need for information about databases available through Scannet was recognized and an irregularly published information bulletin, Scannet Today, was started with Kate Bivins Noerr appointed to coordinate information about available resources.

When Scannet changed from a physical network to an information network, now under the auspices of NORDINFO, the computer service centre was no longer needed and Kate went back to London.

Early in 1983 NORDINFO began financing a research project, “SCANNET- in its new role” and with the support of the Scannet board I started the service as coordinator.
The board was composed of representatives from four of the Nordic countries as well as from NORDINFO and NORDFORSK. Together we prepared a plan for the future SCANNET, its purpose and target groups, as well as a budget. This was sent to NORDINFO for approval. Of course there were reductions in the approved budget, but there was enough to start up the job.

In my role as coordinator, I soon found that marketing services and databases, and compiling directories wasn’t enough, what the information community needed was help, help in accessing databases, help in searching, help in disconnecting from systems, help about equipment and communications. Scannet became, among other things, a help desk.

**My office**

A room was rented at the Byggdok-office at Hälsingegatan in Stockholm. It was a large room furnished with two desks and a conference table, ample space for work and meetings.

It was decided that I needed a Personal Computer, but since they were expensive to buy and under development, I was told to rent a machine.

This machine should have a word processor and a communication program. After a tour at the annual computer fair, I ended up renting an Osborn computer with WordStar as the word processor. WordStar was THE word processor at that time and a very good program. Hardly any machine had a communication program, and of those only Osborn was available for renting.

Osborn was ‘almost’ IBM-compatible, (in those days there were no really compatible machines) and ‘portable’, weighing about 15 kilos! It looked like a fair sized suitcase where the top long side could be taken off. That long side was the key-board and the rest of the ‘suitcase’ contained the computer with two 360k floppy disk drives and a screen about 20 cm in diagonal (an 8” screen)! So I had to rent a small monitor to be able to see what I was writing. A modem, a STAR matrix printer, a telephone with an answering device and my office was complete.

When starting the computer I had to insert the DOS-diskette to initiate the system and the applications. The other drive held the diskette with my texts. My office had a wall-to-wall carpet, so static electricity was a problem. I had to remember to save my files before getting up from my chair, or what I had written disappeared and the computer restarted itself.

I also had some problem establishing communication with the database hosts. This was not because I had never worked with a personal computer before – it was because the modem cable was faulty. When I called the company from which I hired the Osborn, they only said: “We can’t help you. You know more than we do about communications.”

**Scannet Today**

I started straight away to prepare an issue of Scannet Today. The name of the newsletter was already used by Nordforsk and I saw no purpose in changes here, especially since I also got its old mailing list.

The first issue was published in May 1983

I engaged an agency for the typing of a fair copy for the first issue, but the subsequent issues were all prepared at the Osborn. I had to drag Osborn to my old office at KTHB where they had a printer sophisticated enough so that the printout could be delivered to a printing office.

Then I put the issues into the envelopes, put the stamps on and dragged them on a cart to the post office.

Already from the start, the newsletter consisted of two parts:
Short articles with news, information and tips about services, databases and telecommunication
· List of available services and databases with prices and how to access them.

In the first issue I presented 22 hosts with 52 databases. Since databases came and went, a year later I only had 42 databases in the guide.

Telecommunication

An important issue for Scannet was how to access the different databases. The reason for transforming Scannet from a computer network into an information network, was that the Nordic PTTs had their own packet-switched networks, all called Datapak. In order to access a host over a network you had to know its NUA, Network User Address. Note that the user here is the server and not the “online user”. The NUAs were a string of digits identifying the network and the host within the net. It can be compared with country codes, area codes and numbers on the telephone. There could be different NUAs if you were accessing in 300 baud or 1200 baud. Not all hosts were interested in being available through Datapak, it was enough, they felt, if they could be reached directly through a telephone and modem.

The last two pages of the directory in Scannet Today, was a list of NUAs and telephone numbers to the hosts. There was a problem keeping this list up-to-date, since the hosts sometimes thought this information was of no importance to outsiders. I had almost daily contacts with Gunnel Kling at the Swedish PTT Data Section, to exchange information on changes and new servers. We had different sources so we complemented each other. Many of the telephone calls to me as Scannet co-ordinator, were about questions on how to access the different database-sites.

At that time access to databases was primarily with TTY terminals via a modem at a maximum speed of 1200 baud. You had to know how to set the switches on the terminal for the correct speed and half or full duplex, and many questions were put to me about how to do this on the profusion of equipment used in Scandinavia.

I also went to many meetings with the PTTs to discuss developments in data communication and what they planned to do. Also in the other Nordic countries I met with representatives of the local PTTs. The hosts sometimes took the opportunity to make a friendly point about differences in culture between the Nordic countries – as when during my visit to the communications committee of the Danish Parliament, the Danes insisted on offering schnapps at the luncheon – something that would have been absolutely impossible in Sweden.

Hosts, systems and databases

Most of the hosts in Scannet Today in December 1984 were for-profit organizations or had at least to cover the costs for their services. They were therefore happy for the help I could give them in their marketing efforts and I was given free passwords for many services. Those I used when demonstrating their databases on seminars and exhibitions, but I also often had to help them with testing the communications to their sites. This was of special interest when the host was in another Nordic country.

Almost every host used its own Information Retrieval system and each system had its own command language. For this reason the users avoided using too many systems, they stuck to one or two systems that were familiar to them even if there was an interesting database on another host. In order to help here, I made overviews of the commands for the systems presented in Scannet Today, and I also actively worked with the implementation of CCL (Common Command Language) developed for Euronet. When someone asked me why I was so engaged in the standardization of command languages, my reply was that I wanted to find a common command for ending a search session and leaving the host. Everyone agreed with me about that. In a Scannet Today issue for example, I identified the following commands for ending a search in Nordic systems: S, SL, SLUT<CR>/BYE, STOP, STOP YES, /EOF, E, EXIT, LOGOFF, ..OFF, CLOSE.

Most databases on the Nordic hosts were created locally and often, but not always, started with support from NORDINFO or national bodies. After about three years with public funding, the databases were supposed to carry their own costs. This policy led to large and frequent changes in the number of databases available online, where many simply disappeared. But in some cases the databases answered the needs of the users and survived. Among those were databases about business & economics, law, and full text newspaper articles.
Travels and meetings

To make myself familiar with activities in the Nordic countries, I made round trips and visited the hosts, database producers and online user-groups, on site. One meeting was arranged in Stockholm with representatives from all online user-groups trying to identify the most important issues.

In Oslo I tried to explain the packet-switching technique to nurses and at the On-line Conference in London I had a session on Nordic databases.

At the NORD IoD-meeting in Helsinki in August 1985 I left Scannet in the competent hands of Elisabeth Mickos