LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Melbourne, 14 August 1978
(From notes supplied by the Chairman, Mr C. Billington)

Appreciation was expressed for: Mr Hudson's talk on ED library files, the recorded message user assistance scheme, the improving DCR documentation, and the wallet of introductory material for new users.

Little enthusiasm was shown for the recommendations in the ATC paper "Professional Awareness and Development".

Word processing was considered an important application area, and users were experimenting with a variety of hardware and software. Although no method was considered ideal, access to the COM was important.

Ribbon quality was suspected as being the cause of increasing line printer ribbon problems.

Some instances of confusion over the billing of maintenance charges was reported, and accounts were often paid without understanding. Mr Billington said that explanatory assistance could be obtained from the Purchasing Officer, DCR, Canberra, (Ms L. Ruschena).

Concern was expressed that the recent 25% increase in CSIRONET charges might reduce system usage and hence lead to yet further increases in charges.

Adelaide, 15 August 1978.

No notes of this meeting have been received.

Perth, 17 August 1978.

The meeting was devoted to Mr Hudson's talk, which was well received by a small but enthusiastic audience.

(END)

Dear Editor,

The April *Newsletter* contains an article on page 3 outlining the basis for the recent 25% increase in computing charging rates. In the article it was stated that provided revisions were made to computing estimates, "users need not fear that less resources are being made available for computing".

In our Division, non-salary allocations seem to be held this year to about the same amount as last year, so that money available for computing has in fact gone down by about 25%.

Could some clarification of the financial position of computing users and the Division of Computing Research itself be given?

Robert Bell
Division of Atmospheric
Physics
12 September 1978   Aspendale, Victoria.

This reply has been received from DCR:

Dr Bell's query regarding computing charges and allocation of funds for computing raises issues of interest to many of our users. Background facts are :

(1)   Funds available to meet the 1978/79 operating costs of CSIRO (excluding CSIRONET which operates on a recoveries basis), have been increased by about 5% over 1977/78. CSIRONET costs to divisions amount to just over $2 million out of the total of around $45 million operating costs.

(2)   Allocation of funds between Divisions is a matter between the Executive and Chiefs, and

(3)   Allocation of funds within a Division is the responsibility of the Chief.

The April *Newsletter* article entitled 'Increased Computing Charges' on page 3 was written without foreknowledge of the 1978/79 budget. Perhaps the sentence quoted above should have ended with an additional clause "provided that the revised estimate is approved". It is noted that divisions are making extensive use of P1 processing which, at $0.15 per resource unit, is about 30% of the 1977/78 P2000 standard priority rate. If a division is pressed for computing funds a case should be made to the

Executive for supplementary funds.

It is difficult to see what further clarification we can offer in this matter. The basis of our charges was explained in the *Newsletter* article referred to by Dr Bell, and is also given in our *Services Note* No. 1 'Accounting, Computing Charges and Crediting'. We always welcome suggestions and comments regarding the relative charges for various services, and on many occasions such suggestions have resulted in Head Office accepting recommendations from us for variations.

T.S. Holden
Technical Secretary.
(END)

CROSSFIRE

by Sagittarius

[The views in this column are not necessarily those of DCR.]

It is unfortunate that in a bimonthly production such as this *Newsletter* it is difficult to engender an active correspondence. Nonetheless I invite correspondence on any subject raised in this column, or on any related issue.

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It is interesting to trace back through the development of the network to the first remote Teletypes driven by a PDP8. Someone, sometime, decided that BEL (CNTRL/G) would be a good delete character, no doubt for excellent reasons at the time. One would have to query the reasons a decade later, in the light of modern terminal design. Most terminals these days have BACKSPACE, RUBOUT and DELETE. On VDU terminals it is possible to allow backspacing and overtyping of errors. Surely a less clumsy scheme could be devised for handling typing errors than CNTRL/G and CNTRL/K.

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The advantages of structured programming are now almost universally accepted. Structured programming has been one of the most important developments in computer science since Mr Turing invented his wretched machine. While it is obvious that FORTRAN has many deficiencies as a language, it will be with us for many years yet, if for no other reason than the huge investment in software already made.

The IFTRAN preprocessor allows the FORTRAN user to harness the tools of structured programming while maintaining compatibility with all his previous work. I therefore challenge any FORTRAN programmer not using IFTRAN to defend his position against a charge of PROFESSIONAL INCOMPETENCE!

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The price of minicomputers is steadily declining, and the appeal of 'owning your own' is undeniably strong. Nonetheless, many systems are acquired on the basis of very dubious cost-benefit analyses. I would like to hear from anyone with a general purpose mini system who considers that it gives cost effective results in comparison with the network. Some interesting aspects of the discussion would include:

1. Were the costs of floorspace, air conditioning and building alterations considered?

2. How much manpower is expended in maintaining the system, installing system releases, reprogramming existing systems etc?

3. Is the system under-utilized, over-extended, or just right? Comment on the cost implications.

4. How does the current configuration compare with that originally proposed for the job?

5. In what respects is the service better than that obtained from the network?

6. Is the whole thing primarily an ego trip for a handful of programmers?

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Aficionados of the twisted art of 'ED box' programming may well find the SNOBOL language to their taste. It combines the pattern oriented nature of ED with powerful facilities for writing self-modifying programs of total incomprehensibility. As a powerful, abstruse, disgusting language its only competitors are ED and APL. Try it, you'll like it! (See *Computing Note* No. 13 for an introduction to SNOBOL)

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One of the more esoteric uses of the typesetting package COMTEXT is for the production of computer typeset forms. Organisations accrue hundreds of forms over the years, ranging from invoices to leave requests. Minor changes can mean considerable costs and delays while a revised version is sent out to graphic artists,