

Some Notes on Clubs

Editorial by Carl Helmers

Mapping Sessions

On April 28 1976 I attended one of the biweekly meetings of the Homebrew Computer Club in Palo Alto CA with Dave Fylstra and Mike Wilbur of Stanford Research Institute as my guides. The meeting was most interesting from several points of view. One of the best features was the session of "mappings" which occupied the first portion of the evening's activity. This activity is one which would be well worth instituting by clubs elsewhere, so I'll describe my impressions.

The mapping session provides a mechanism for various members to advertise what they personally have to offer or what they are personally looking for. It is a way for the persons attending the meeting to find other persons with similar (or complementary) interests so that they can get together for exchanges of software, surplus components, expertise in fixing bugs, etc.

The key to the mapping session is a large set of people (in the Homebrew Computer Club, $n \approx 400$) and an efficient "moderator" to coordinate the session (in the Homebrew Computer Club meeting of April 28, this was

Lee Felsenstein). The moderator selects individuals who have raised hands to indicate they have an announcement. (The mechanism would obviously not work if everyone yelled at once.) Once recognized, the individual selected stands up, states his or her name, gives a short description of interests for the evening, then sits down. The purpose of standing up is to allow others in the audience to get a visual fix on the person so that he or she can be located during a "random access" session at the end of the meeting. After each announcement, the moderator selects another person from those with pending announcements.

The moderator also serves to smooth out the process in several ways. Since various people do not speak clearly enough to be heard throughout the assemblage, the moderator will often summarize and repeat the person's request through the PA system if quizzical looks are perceived at various places in the gallery. Sometimes, if the topic of the person's announcement is exciting or generates extreme interest in the audience, the moderator can decide to obtain an informal poll of interested persons by asking for a show of hands. Also, if a long winded person gets the floor, the moderator has the crucial function of cutting off the speaker if necessary, using a polite but firm approach. Detail discussions are the province of small groups of interested persons getting together later in the evening, and are to be avoided during the mapping session.

The announcements people offer include fixes of hardware problems, special interest applications areas, personal surplus hardware or parts, copies of personal software, etc. For example, at the April 28 meeting, Tom Pittman, author of a Tiny BASIC for the 6800 processor, stood up and described the fact that he had it available with paper tape code and documentation in a package costing a nominal \$5. [See page 76 of July

TOWARD SPEECH INPUT?

Speech by computers is now quite possible and reduced to the form of output peripherals which can be commercially purchased. The problem of "pattern recognition" as applied to human speech inputs is a more difficult problem. For an excellent background tutorial on the subject of speech recognition, see an article by George M White of the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center, page 40 of the May 1976 IEEE *Computer* magazine. (Any good engineering library should have a subscription to this publication as well as the other technical journals of the IEEE).

Continued on page 126

Articles Policy

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BYTE for details.] He then asked interested people to see him during the random access session later.

The reason for describing this dynamic process is to emphasize that it works, that it breeds great enthusiasm in its participants, and that it provides a valuable service. Based on my experience in observing one such session, I highly recommend a mapping session for any club so large that meeting people and finding out their current interests is not an instantaneous process—say, a session with more than 20 to 30 persons.

One or many?

In an editorial in the January issue, I suggested that the Southern California Computer Society was looking upon itself as a possible national organization for computer people. Well, that conclusion was based upon evidence of their publication, *Interface* (far too grandiose for a merely regional operation) and attempts to sign up chapters everywhere. I have since that time gotten feedback of "Who needs a national organization?" from other individuals and sources. The following points of view were in part elucidated by Sol Libes of the Amateur Computer Group of New Jersey and Gary Coleman of the Midwest Affiliation of Computer Clubs in conversations May 1 and May 2 at the Trenton Computer Festival this year.

There is a counter argument to the idea that computer users need a national organization like the Amateur Radio Relay League. The ARRL has a definite need for

its existence in amateur radio because a central bureaucratic entity, the FCC, exists in the US government; and its regulations vitally affect amateur radio. There is no parallel to the FCC in amateur computing, because computers are fundamentally self contained and cannot block other users from access in the same way that a radio station can jam another station on the same frequency. It is not likely that there will be any such regulatory agency for computers, so there is no central need as there is in amateur radio. (Of course, the computer hackers who are also radio amateurs and want to develop various radio data exchange techniques must deal with the FCC; but here established amateur radio organizations such as the ARRL already exist.)

An argument against the very concept of a nationwide organization is not only "Who needs it?", but "Why should our nice local club become a cog in someone else's bureaucratic empire?" This is perhaps the most powerful argument, for unless there is a specific goal to be accomplished at a national level, the real purposes of computer clubs are best served by the local groups which are springing up across the nation. Gary Coleman and Sol Libes both argued that the highest level of organization they could see as a useful concept might be regional affiliations of clubs for organizing computer fests and other cooperative events. About the only nationwide extension of this concept might be the idea of holding a national conference of small computer users and manufacturers. Such affiliations are proposed as fairly informal affairs carried out by correspondence and telephone, with representatives travelling back and forth as business and travel plans permit.

This all leads back to the "real purposes" of computer clubs. These are perhaps best served by small, informal clubs of a local nature whose goals are enjoyment and socialization on computer themes. Examples are the friendly and informal atmosphere of the Homebrew Computer Club meeting cited above, as well as the inevitable conversations which occur at local meetings. In some of the smaller computer clubs, for example the Nashua NH group, the meetings are devoted exclusively to informal "bull sessions" on one or two topics of technological interest.

I'm not going to draw any conclusions one way or the other on this issue, but would like to see some inputs from readers by way of the letters section of BYTE. What positive reasons are there for a national computer group? What are the negative reasons? What are the arguments for keeping the whole idea of computer clubs a local affair? ■

Tool Box Answers

Here are the tools and fasteners hidden in Bob Baker's "Tool Box" [page 39, July BYTE]. Watch for more "Baker Street Irregulars" in future BYTES.

ALIGNMENT	PLIER
AWL	PUNCH
BRUSH	REAMER
CENTERPUNCH	RIVET
CUTTER	RULER
DIE	SAW
DIKES	SCISSORS
DRILL	SCRIBER
FILE	SHEAR
FORCEPS	SOLDER
HAMMER	SQUARE
KNIFE	TAP
LATHE	TWEEZERS
MICROMETER	VICE
MOTOTOOL	WIRECRIMPER
NEEDLENOSE	WIRESTRIPPER
NIBBLER	WIREWRAP
NUTDRIVERS	WRENCH