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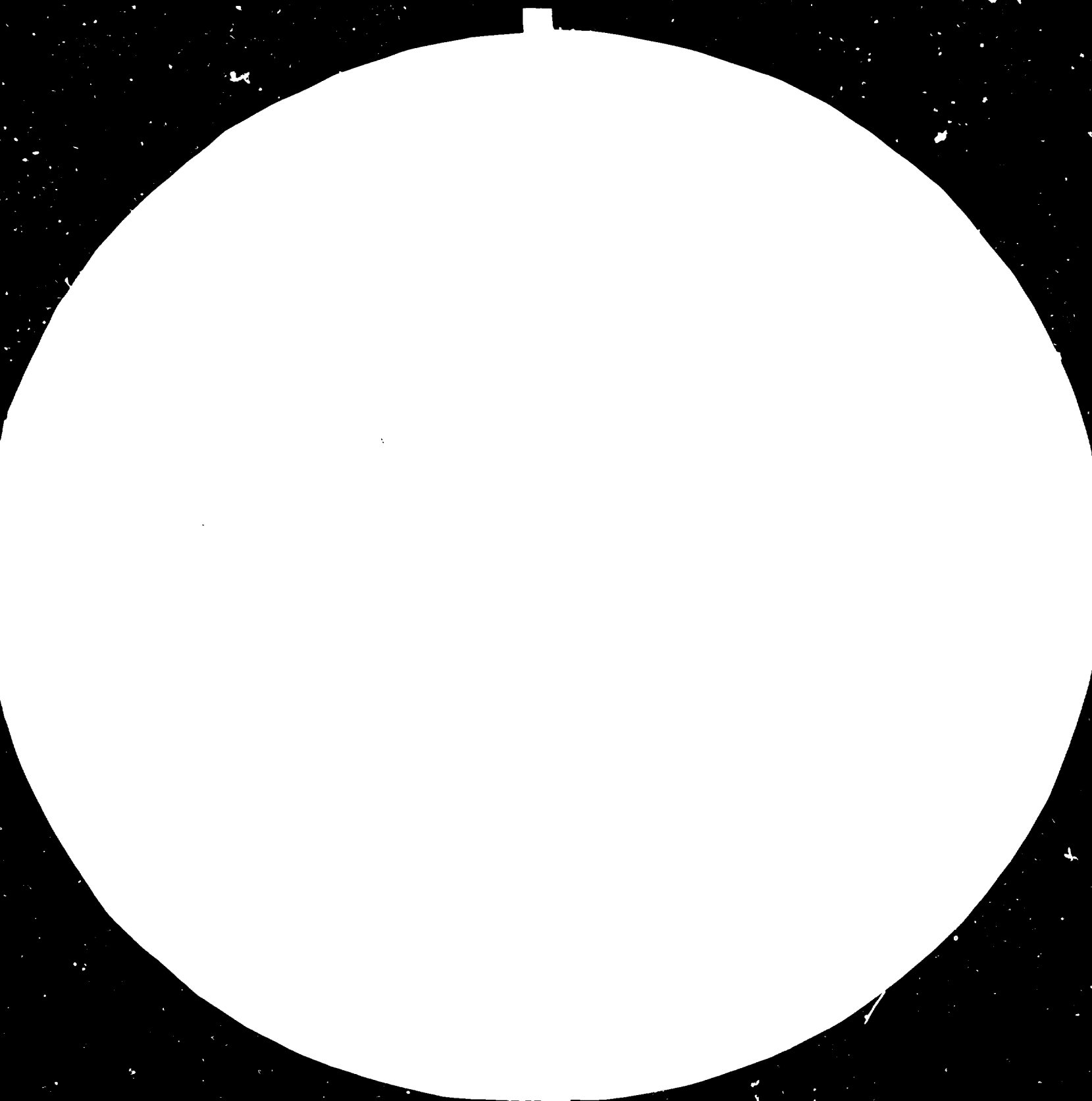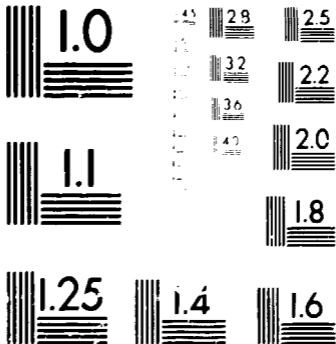
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ACTIVITIES OF THE BRITISH COMPUTER SOCIETY'S
SPECIALIST GROUP FOR DEVELOPING COUNTRIES*

by

J. Sherif**
UNIDO Consultant

The British Computer Society (BCS) is the major representative body of the
computer profession in the United Kingdom. It was formed in 1957 and
currently has about 30,000 members. The BCS has over 30 specialist groups,
the Specialist Group for Developing Countries (SGDC) being formed in 1976.
The SGDC has 200 members, of whom about 50 are resident overseas.
 The chairman is Alan Benjamin; the past chairman was Professor
R.A.Buckingham.

1.   AIMS & APPROACH

      The SGDC seeks to stimulate interest in the problems faced by
      developing countries in applying computers effectively for the benefit
      of their society and national economy.

      It is concerned with the practical and results based application of
      computing as well as policy issues concerning national strategies
      affecting such development.

      It holds the view that computer technology should be matched to the
      real needs and requirements : a starting point is the identification
      of information needs. Moreover these needs should be related to a
      country's mainstream problems and constructed on a factual,
      non-political basis.

      A technology is appropriate not by virtue of being advanced or
      intermediate, but rather through its contribution towards the better
      management of primary resources, in projects not likely to be
      interfered with when there is a change in political fortunes.

2.   OVERVIEW OF ACTIVITIES

      Like other BCS specialist groups, the SGDC was created at the
      initiative of members and is managed by them on a voluntary basis.

It provides a framework through which computer professionals
interested in this area can work together.

The SGDC has sought to promote informed discussion and build a base of
reference information on computer applications connected with primary
activities - water resource management, agricultural and forestry
management, transportation planning, financial planning and informa-
tion management.

The SGDC organises seminars and meetings which have provided a forum
for the exchange of views between specialists in the U.K. and na-
tionals from other countries on visits or pursuing computer-related
educational courses.

Its efforts in compiling reference data include the creation of
annotated bibliographies of published material (1980, 1982). It has
also published the papers submitted to a symposium on the contribution
of computing to assist national development (1982). A newsletter is
published approximately every quarter for circulation to members ,
select organisations in the U.K., and overseas computer societies and
national computer centres.

The SGDC has organised joint activities with other U.K. organisations
active in the field such as the Overseas Development Institute, the
British Council and the U.K. Council for Computing Development.

The SGDC's activities are funded by the BCS, and financial sponsorship
is also sought from other organisations on a project by project basis.

3. DETAILS OF PROPOSED ACTIVITIES

(i) Information Science and Technology for developing Countries

A workshop is being organised in June 1984 at which practical and inexpensive methods of improving scientific and technical information transfer will be discussed. The event is being undertaken in collaboration with the BCS Information Retrieval Specialist Group and the Institute of Information Scientists. The agenda for the workshop emerged from a seminar held in 1983. Organisations with an interest in the workshop include the Royal Society, the British Library, ASLIB and U.K. universities specialising in library and information science studies.

The major issues of concern identified in the 1983 seminar and to be further discussed in June include:

Local awareness, particularly at the policy-making level, of the need to build an information services infrastructure and of the opportunities offered by developments in computer technology and communications.

Training is central to the building of an information services infrastructure, particularly of counter-parts to work with visiting consultants.

Equipment dumping and the lack of product compatibility compound the problems faced by developing countries; moreover micros are frequently sold without adequate vendor support.

Satellite-based telecommunication and battery-powered micros, two developments at the opposite ends of a scale, offer important opportunities.

Funding agencies' role in information technology transfer needs to be examined: Is this transfer being undertaken in an appropriate way? Is enough being done with bilateral programmes?

Requirements studies,encompassing both the soft and hard aspects of IT in information services are crucial. The OECD studies provide a good model.

Institutional framework. The need for a focal point .

Attendance to the workshop is by invitation and it will seek to assess the current status of the field and explore avenues for future activities so that the U.K. can fulfil a more prominent role.

(ii) The Use of microcomputers in Transport Planning and Traffic Management

in developing countries

The SGDC has been provided an important opportunity by PTRC (Planning and Transport Research and Computation) to participate in its summer annual meeting to be held in July 1984. In 1983 approximately 700 delegates attended the Meeting, of whom more than 200 came from 30 different countries.

Within the framework of the PTRC Meeting, the SGDC is organising a two day conference and workshop on the use of low cost microcomputers in transport planning and traffic management with particular emphasis on applications in developing countries.

A panel of speakers has been drawn from industry, the academic sphere and users. The conference should be an interesting inter-disciplinary experiment, bringing together specialists in computers, transport and development. Systems designers and users with field experience will present their views on some 'state of the art' micro packages.

3. **THE UNIDO INITIA'IVE**

There are numerous strategic issues in the field of computing and development which urgently require careful and systematic study. Many of these have been highlighted in the document "Microelectronics applications for Developing Countties : Preliminary issues for concerted action" prepared by the UNIDO Secretariat. While each group will necessarily retain its own emphasis and approach, the SGDC welcomes and looks forward to the evolution of a coordinated program of activities. A framework at the international level can both encourage, and be supported by, activities at the national and local level.

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Ed. P.J.Down   ISBN 0 85501 695 7

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