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SPEECH BY MR ONG PANG BOON, MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, AT THE ANNUAL DINNER OF THE SINGAPORE COMPUTER SOCIETY AT THE ISLAND BALLROOM OF THE SHANGRI-LA HOTEL ON SATURDAY, 30 JULY 1983 AT 8.00 PM

It is my pleasure to be here tonight to attend your annual dinner.

1983 is a significant year as it has been proclaimed World Communications Year by the United Nations. Adoption of the theme - Development of Communications Infrastructures - by the world body underlines the importance of communications infrastructures to the economic and social development of all countries around the world.

Singapore is no stranger to world communications. Ever since Raffles came, developing communications infrastructures has been one of Singapore's major endeavours. All these years we have strived to exploit our strategic location. We have developed Singapore first into a sea-junction and now, an air-hub as well as a telecommunications centre in the Far East. Today, communications infrastructures and services are important to the economic development of Singapore on two counts. Firstly, they are one of the major contributors to the national economy. In 1982, transport and communications activities were the second leading growth sector after the financial and business services, accounting for 27 per cent of the overall growth of Singapore's Gross Domestic Product. Secondly, they play an indispensable supportive

role in every other economic activity. To illustrate my second point, just imagine how a day would be like to an average Singapore businessman if he were deprived of the use of his telex machine or the ubiquitous telephone!

As we move to higher technology-based and service-oriented industries in the next decade, there will be greater demands for quick if not instant communications and access to information. Our communication facilities must therefore be continually upgraded and our workers be trained to be more efficient and productive. Government has recognised the usefulness of computers as a powerful productivity tool, if properly utilized, in improving our communications infrastructures.

There are already a good number of computer applications in the communications sector today. The long range radar system which our air traffic controllers use to control all flights coming to Singapore is computer driven. So are the display boards and televisions at Changi Airport, which provide the travelling public with up-to-date information on flight arrivals and departures. Telecoms with its computerised telephone switching system is one of the largest computer users in Singapore with over 200 computers in continuous operation. For many years, PSA has made use of its Container Handling Information System to keep track of container movements at the Port Container Terminal.

The next few years will see even more computer applications in the communications services. Of interest to the general public are a number of new services which Telecoms plans to introduce, such as televue, telemetering, telealarm, telecontrol and the electronic mail. The televue service will provide an easy means for the public to gather information such as shop prices and home education materials from a remote computer by using

the telephone and the home television set. With telemetering, instant reading of household PUB meters is made possible without sending a meter-reader to the homes. The telealarm service can keep households under 24 hours surveillance and report the outbreak of any fire or break-in immediately. With telecontrol, you can make use of the phone to switch on or switch off your electrical appliances at home. The electronic mail, which is a longer term project, will enable the public to send or receive messages, letters, bills, magazines and newspapers without the service of a postman. To introduce all these new services, Telecoms will be making extensive use of computers.

All these new computer systems will help to further upgrade the capability of our communications infrastructures. But I am told by the computer experts that there are two parts to a computer system - the hardware and the software. The hardware is easy to come by. What determines whether the computer will run or crash (to borrow two computer jargons) is the software - the programmes or the instructions to the machine, and the people who develop and maintain these programmes. To this definition of computer software, I think we should also include the computer users - the managers, the supervisors and the clerks who must learn to live with this relatively new tool and exploit it fully. There are many past examples about how computers have become run-away monsters or white elephants because of poor and inadequately developed software.

In establishing the National Computer Board (NCB), the Government has recognised the importance of software development to a viable computer industry. One of the tasks assigned to the NCB is to train and develop manpower of the right calibre and level of expertise to service and

support the national drive towards computerisation. In this respect, professional bodies such as the Singapore Computer Society (SCS) could play a very useful supportive role. I see the role of SCS as being two-fold. Firstly, to continually upgrade the skills of computer professionals and preserve a high standard of professionalism and discipline amongst its members. Secondly, to establish good rapport between computer professionals and computer-users so that both parties could draw out the best from each computer system we have installed in Singapore. I am confident that SCS will play this role well. In fact, I am glad to see that the over 1,300 members of SCS today form a credible nucleus of capable computer professionals who will help to spearhead Singapore's entry into this new field of high technology.

On this note, may I wish you every success in your programme for the next one year.

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