Editor's Note

This issue of the Braille Research Newsletter was scheduled for release as No. 4 in the series originally entitled the "Braille Automation Newsletter." It contains the Proceedings of a Workshop held in 1976 on suggestions for revision of the braille literary code for English Grade II Braille (American Version). It also contains an editorial statement prepared at about the same time as the Workshop was held, the content of which we felt to be not time-bound, and so it is included here.

The Proceedings, like the Workshop itself, were prepared under a collaborative arrangement between the American Foundation for the Blind, and the Special Interest Group on Computers and the Physically Handicapped (SIGCAPH) of the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM). We are grateful to both organizations for permission to distribute copies to our readers.

Despite the many delays encountered in preparing the Proceedings, their publication merits close attention as a significant attempt to anticipate the social and intellectual climate of change that appears to be under way in the area of braille codes revision. The matters discussed impact on the largest language family of the world; it is crucial that changes that occur, if any, are widely agreed to, so that divergencies among users in the several continents where English is read and written can be minimized. We therefore encourage comment from readers, comment we shall try to reflect faithfully in the Newsletter itself.

Leslie L. Clark, April 1978

Editorial

Since the last issue of this Newsletter, three events have occurred that are related in multiple ways. The first of these events was the death of a valued colleague and magnificent human being, Richard Snipas, Vice President of Triformation Systems, Inc., who manufacture the ISE, BD, and LED series of braille output terminals. The second of these events was the appearance of the Proceedings of a workshop conference on computer transcription of the ink print text and its impact on possible changes in the rules of English braille. The third event, or rather nonevent, has been a certain slackening of the forward thrust in transferring applicable technologies to the user community of braille readers.

Richard Snipas, only 35 years old at the time of his death, was a diabetic. His loss of vision came early on in the beginning of a professional career in braodcast engineering, and the loss was total when he took a courageous step of changing from a secure and high-salaried position to that of an officer in a struggling new firm dedicated to bringing the advantages of braille printing technology to the many thousands of blind persons who would thereby benefit with new employment opportunities and an enriched personal life. I need hardly remind readers of this publication that the impact of availability of braille terminals from serial production lines shocked the world community into considering in its full context the implications of the bursting of a swelling wave of technological development upon a domain of production of reading materials that, until that point, was characterized by labour intensive production and a dwindling corps of humans who were capable of such labour: for the first time, an aperture into the community of braille users was opened for the utilization of laboratory development of the software (and dedicated hardware) that had been built for some years. (This fact does not in any way compromise the significant achievement of our colleagues at the Darmstadt Computer Centre and at the University of Muenster who developed numerically controlled stereotypers, even earlier on.) Mr. Snipas may soon be remembered as much for his involvement in the development of a glucose analyser (now called the Snipas Glucose Analyzer, by Triformation Systems, Inc.) now under evaluation in the United States.

Richard Snipas was best known to this writer as one member of an ad hoc research group (named the "autobraille group" previously in these pages) which is dedicated to exploring the utilization of machine-readable texts for automatic transcription of ink print into braille. His intellectual brilliance, his ability to assume a disinterested technologists' viewpoint,

and his readiness to solve technical and strategic problems, were of inestimable value to his co-workers. One was so soon captured by his wit, intelligence, and his civilized personality that one was sometimes embarrassed to find that, in walking and talking with him, one's enthusiasm caused one to surge ahead at speed before realizing that Dick was lagging because of his difficulty in moving about. He was, in short, one of those remarkable people who, like John K. Dupress, have so far overcome sensory and physical impairments that within a few moments those who speak to them become quite unaware of any limitations at all; it becomes a bit shocking to realize once again that this was not entirely so. He will be sorely missed personally and professionally by many others than this writer.

The availability now of the Proceedings of the workshop on changes in the rules of braille for computer transcription, announced as in preparation here in Issue No. 2, gives grounds for emphasizing aspects of braille production in which Dick Snipas was intimately involved. These Proceedings--available in limited quantity upon application, at no cost, from the undersigned--could presage a continuing look at what modifications could be made in the rules of braille to make such transcription cheaper and faster, yet without impairing the essential readability of the braille code. Although concerned only with English braille, American version, the impact of such study can be very widespread, given the size of this language family, and the motivation it may give to those in other language groups to undertake similar efforts. Certainly it is the case that without computer assisted intervention in braille production, the maintenance of reasonable cost, while enhancing the variety and number of materials in braille, will never be reached in any other way now envisaged. (Note that this opinion is proffered with the understanding that volunteer production of braille will be continued at least at current levels, a condition that in itself may well depend on the introduction of new technologies into the domain of volunteer production of braille master copy.)

For this desirable goal to be reached, extensive further examination of the detailed rules of braille must still be undertaken, in a fashion akin to the workshop sessions reported out; further meetings including other members of the English-speaking community (such as Australia and New Zealand) will have to be held to incorporate these and other proposed changes; the participation of ministries of education and of large scale press producers of braille must be enlisted; and, certainly not least, a concurrent research undertaking along the lines suggested by Tobin and Douce in Issue No. 2 must be initiated with international collaboration. Then changes must be submitted to appropriate braille authorities. Without such follow-on, these Proceedings will become yet another sacrifice to the occupation of shelf space, unloved and unread, into the future. This is not an outcome that I believe would be embraced by any of the participants.

This theme of engagement touches upon my last concern, that of a certain slowing down of impetus that one felt was in the air when this <u>Newsletter</u> was initiated. Perhaps I reflect only a personal perspective here, and perhaps the "air" is not sensed by those solely interested in the technological aspects of braille research and development. It is not easy to capture the core of this concern, but perhaps it has to do with the realization on the part of the "blindness community" that, once having opened the door to technological innovation, the managers of that community are ill-prepared to cope with the consequences. Technologies assault the blindness system from all sides; there are proposed innovations in production at every level, from that of the individual student reader and note taker, through the volunteer groups producing braille with methods sanctioned by long-time use, to the presenting problems of large scale braille production. Nor does the technological group speak with one voice; there are too many possibilies to explore and test. One curious result of the situation, which one might well have anticipated, is to hold off the wave with a barricade of demand for exhaustive market analyses. We are asked to demonstrate needs, numbers to be served, monies to be spent, in highly articulated descriptions of impact of introduction of technologies. This demand is, on the face of it, of course, exactly what the research community has been demanding for some time, and one of the strongest voices in the demand for better figures on which to base projections of need has been that of Professor Robert W. Mann of MIT. One is tempted, however, to label the current requests for such studies as an indicator of a failure of nerve--because braille readership is declining, because braille is expensive to produce, because it is not "cost effective" in impact on the community of blind and visually impaired, and so on. If there is one concensus threading its way through the life of persons like Richard Snipas, through meetings like the braille rules workshop, and through the efforts reported in these pages, however, it is this: that braille is the fundamental basis of literacy for the congenitally blind, and that braille usage will escalate when material is provided of interest to braille readers. Add to that the sentiment that for certain purposes braille is actually superior to all but a few other options, as for example in accessing reference materials, and the inference is clear: that the opportunities for enhancing braille through technological transfer become not only targets of opportunity to measure the social utility of science in the service of humanity, but a matter of conscience for the blindness community in serving its constituents faithfully. Can we do less for those like Richard Snipas who offer personal examples of the courage and determination necessary?

Leslie L. Clark, July 1976

TO: SIGCAPH/ACM and BRN Recipients

FROM: L. L. Clark

The Proceedings of the AFB/ACM Workshop on the Compliance of Computer Programs with English Braille, American Edition that is attached is accompanied by an Editorial that I wrote shortly after the end of the meeting.

The Editorial was originally intended to accompany that number of copies of the Proceedings that were to be sent to those persons who were recipients of the (then) Braille Research Newsletter.

Since your name appears on both the ACM/SIGCAPH list of members, and the Braille Research Newsletter list of recipients, we are enclosing the Editorial separately in this mailing on behalf of the Association for Computing Machinery.

If all this seems more complicated than life in the real world ought to be, let me say that I agree with the sentiment!