Too much PSST in Texas

"and these rulers were clear sighted enough to see that the
simplest way of getting mathematics out of a mathematician
is to pay his living expenses."   E.T.Bell

These days, supporting science is more complicated than it was for the
rulers E.T.Bell refers to: they could restrict their support to people like
Euler and Lagrange. In the name of progress, a much larger proportion of the
population is now involved in the scientific endeavour. But is it progress?
By necessity, the majority of the people involved now lacks the proper creden-
tials, and the result is a lot of PSST.

Concerning computer-related PSST at UT, it goes without saying that an
overwhelming amount can be found in the Departments of Management Science & In-
formation Systems and of Electrical & Computer Engineering respectively, since
both lack the proper tradition of research. Moreover, with their close ties
to industry, these departments are structurally unable to nurture on a regular
basis the type of intellectual radical, the type of "misfit" that is needed to
change the status quo. Personally I am always amazed that such departments do
not understand themselves that they lose most of their credibility by the res-
pective additions "& Information Systems" and "& computer", since these make
it so obvious that they jumped on a bandwaggon. But my amazement is naive, for
PSST cannot be separated from bandwaggons.

Our own Department of Computer Sciences --note the plural!-- is not free
from PSST either. It would be a miracle, if it were. For instance, whenever
in an area the teaching is kept primitive so as not to frighten away our unso-
phisticated students, PSST can be observed, and PSST comes in by the carload
when an area is promoted because it yields so many thesis topics that are popular
with average graduate students and employers. (So-called Experimental Computer
Science, specifically created to help the universities to compete for young CS
graduates, is particularly vulnerable to infestation with PSST.)

Besides UT, Austin has many industrial organizations involved in computing
(IBM, TI, Motorola, Lockheed, you name them). My knowledge about them is frag-
mentary, very dependent on whom I happened to meet under what circumstances.
My overall impression of the industrial organizations is --not surprisingly--
that they display the usual kind of incompetence, ignorance, backwardness, and
short-sightedness, but less of the dishonesty that fosters PSST at political
bodies like MCC (and, in all probability, Sematech). Those that have joined
the Software Engineering Movement are, of course, deeply involved in PSST.

Please don't think that the high frequency and the degree of acceptance
of PSST are harmless. They have been a major consideration in the decision of
colleagues to leave UT --people don't say so in public because they don't want
to be unnecessarily offensive-- , may cause others to leave, and have almost
certainly thwarted more than one recruitment effort: since PSST corrupts, it
is particularly repulsive to scientists of integrity.

We have no influence on what happens outside our Department, and only little
influence on what happens inside. But we can discourage internally PSST as much
as possible, and dissociate ourselves as clearly as possible from the PSST hap-
pening elsewhere. For instance, all over the world EE Departments, sensing

their academic respectability in jeopardy, have been observed eager to merge with or rather to absorb the local CS Department so as to boost their academic status; the message, loud and clear, that we are not available would create a clarity that never hurts. When, for instance, the Institute for Creative Capitalism organizes a workshop on The Crucial Importance of the Software Industry for the Austin Area and the Essential Role of The University of Texas at Austin as Technological Support for Etc. Etc. Etc., I don't think we should be involved. It was, by the way, most heartening to see how many people, on seeing its announcement, instantaneously wrote off this workshop as one more PSST-promoting event.

Finally, human nature being what it is, we can fight in the Austin area PSST as fiercely as we like without the danger of reducing it to an acceptable level before the end of the century.

Post Scriptum At the beginning of this text you may have noticed that I did not define PSST. I hope that, as you continued reading, you have noticed that the absence of that definition did not matter. You are perfectly free to use the term PSST for the rest of your life: I donate it herewith to mankind. If you insist on seeing it as an acronym, I can divulge the secret: it actually emerged as an abbreviation for Pompous Simulation of Science and Technology. (End of Post Scriptum)

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prof.dr.Edsger W.Dijkstra
Department of Computer Sciences
The University of Texas at Austin
Austin, TX 78712 - 1188
USA