

Reprogramming history

As a new assistant professor of history of technology, Marie Hicks helps puts women back into their rightful place as leaders in the development of the computing industry.

September 13th 2017 | Katie Vaughn
Arts & Humanities, Faculty
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How did you become interested in the history of technology, and specifically the intersections of technology and gender and sexuality?

Although I decided to study history as an undergraduate, after graduation, in the early 2000s, I worked for a while as a UNIX systems administrator. My mother had been a computer programmer, so I never really thought too much about the gender balance of the field. And yet when I became a sysadmin, all of my similarly young colleagues were men, and all of our older bosses were women. This seemed odd. Our bosses would try to explain that the history of computing wasn't really linear or progressive — that there used to be a lot more women in the field. I looked around for more on this topic, and I realized this was a history that hadn't really been written yet. I decided I wanted to try to figure out why there had been this gender flip in computing.

Why were women replaced by men?

At that time, working in a technical role was actually considered to be lower in importance and prestige than having a normal desk job. And even though the work didn't change when men started coming into the field, when women started training men to replace them the pay shot up. Because the expectation was that men needed a higher salary to support families, and also that if men were doing the work it was somehow more important now, even though it was the same job and the exact same work — and even though these men had far less experience than the women they replaced.

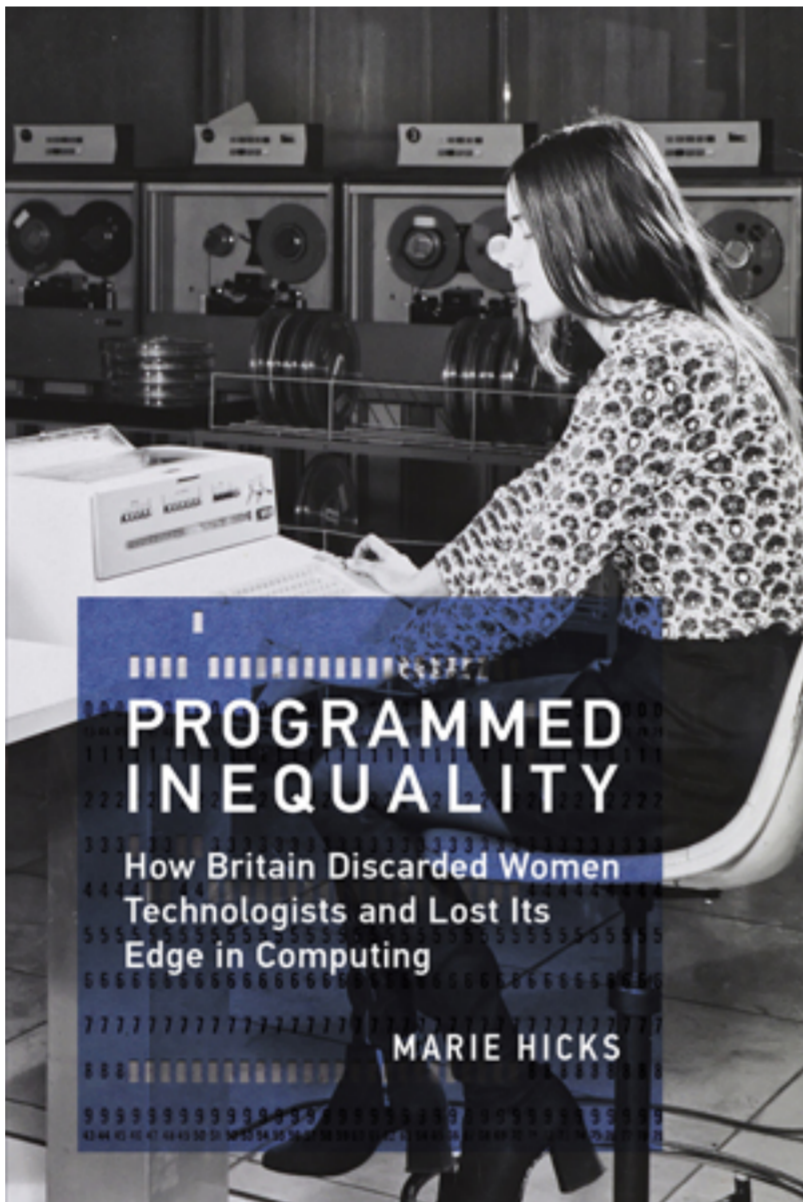
Issues that women in the tech industry face continue to make news. How has the conversation changed in recent years — or hasn't it?

It used to be that this issue hardly made the news. It was "just the way it was," or seen as a niche issue that just affected women, rather than the whole industry, and in fact our whole economy. I wrote [an op ed](#) in the *Washington Post* about the recent Google controversy — the Google memo is just the same tired and mistaken old arguments warmed over again, inferring incorrect conclusions from incomplete evidence and ignoring history. Now we have whole history books to show how wrong these ideas are, so there's absolutely no excuse to keep putting them out there.



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MARIE HICKS



What was the most interesting part of working on your book, *Programmed Inequality: How Britain Discarded Women Technologists and Lost its Edge in Computing*?

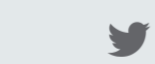
I ran across stories in personnel files of how women computer programmers had to train their male replacements and then got demoted and eventually pushed out of the field. I also found some amazing stuff about how the government decided to exclude the majority of their women workers from equal pay because these women worked with machines.

Please tell us about the Women in Computing History course you'll be teaching this fall.

My history of women in computing class is the first class of its kind, as far as I know, that looks at the history of computing specifically through the eyes and experiences of women. We have an opportunity to uncover a lot of what was going on that never made it into the history books until now. And that can be a very exciting thing to do in a class — to be right on the cutting edge of historical knowledge about a topic.

What's your approach to teaching?

I talk a lot about historiography in my classes — in other words, the study of how history is researched and written. And I give students the opportunity to actually participate in writing history. I often tell my students that history is more about what gets left out than what gets put in. So I send them into the archives, and I ask them to come back to me with a story that hasn't been told yet, a story that tells us something new or unexpected about the past and actually adds to our understanding rather than just reiterating what we already knew. That's hard, but it's also what makes history so interesting.



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