

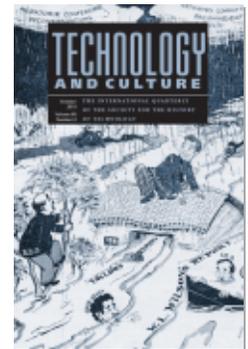


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Programmed Inequality: How Britain Discarded Women Technologists and Lost Its Edge in Computing by Marie Hicks
(review)

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(Review)



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In an America divided over guns, books like this are important to permit different perspectives a voice, whether in agreement or not, and to promote diversified scholarship and public discourse into the future.

ASHLEY HLEBINSKY

Ashley Hlebinsky is the Robert W. Woodruff Curator of the Cody Firearms Museum, managing over 30,000 artifacts and recently serving as project director on a full-scale renovation of the museum that sought to educate on the complex histories of firearms.

Programmed Inequality: How Britain Discarded Women Technologists and Lost Its Edge in Computing.

By Marie Hicks. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017. Pp. 352. Hardcover \$40.

Programmed Inequality focuses on the British government's reluctance to leverage a group of trained women workers when attempting to strengthen the nation's computer industry during the 1960s and 1970s, even though these women accounted for the majority of the workforce in government computing and data processing departments beginning from the Second World War. Marie Hicks unpacks the history of these women operators of office machines and computers for UK civil service offices from 1930 to 1979. Hicks emphasizes a process of labor feminization, where gendered civil service ranks and promotion policies greatly limited the career choices of women typists and operators but spurred their unionized resistance. *Programmed Inequality* offers a much-needed perspective on the history of computing by focusing on gender as a fundamental structure of the workforce, a structure that dictated every aspect of the British Civil Service's computing practices and eventually hindered the nation's further development of its computer industry.

Chapter one examines women who operated the Tunny machines or Colossus computers for codebreaking at Bletchley Park during WWII. Many of these women continued to work in government sectors after the war (pp. 47–48) but had to cope with unequal pay and prohibitions against married women in the sector, even as the restriction was lifted in 1946. Chapter two charts the creation in 1948 of the “machine operator class” in the Civil Service for employees, mostly women, who worked on “calculating, punch card, and accounting machines” in government (p. 70). This was part of the Civil Service's responses to the growing number of women employees and the Civil Service's interpretation of machine-aided office work as simple, and hence as women's work. This new rank made the women ineligible for the standard meritocratic pay scales and promotion opportunities and effectively confined them to low-level jobs.

Chapter three unpacks the labor shortage in computing in the 1960s that offered plentiful opportunities to women as well as men to take on new

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responsibilities in computing both in government and industry. In contrast to the emerging promises for women in chapter three, chapter four presents an image envisioned by the Civil Service throughout the 1960s of “computer men” (p. 155). The Civil Service attempted to recruit programmers from the “executive class” only. The group, which lacked programming expertise, was almost exclusively men (p. 156). The machine operator class, comprised mostly of women who were trained to use data-processing machines or early computers, was considered unsuitable for the job of programming and, later in the 1970s, for “assistant programmer grade” jobs (p. 220). Chapter five examines women operators’ efforts to fight for higher wages and equal pay in the 1970s, including strikes and passive resistance (such as slowdowns) at government computer installations. Hicks argues that even though the government merged and nationalized several computer companies into International Computers Limited (ICT) in 1968 to better handle competition from IBM, and centralized the management of all government computers in 1972 (p. 197), Britain’s strategy of consolidation neither saved the industry nor solved its labor problems. Fundamentally, the government did not acknowledge the importance of women operators to data processing and programming, and hence failed to enlist this valuable technical workforce for the nation’s computer industry.

Hicks’s well-substantiated critique of the British government’s oversimplified assumptions about automation and other technological changes and its gendered categorization of jobs makes *Programmed Inequality* an essential text in undergraduate courses on the history of computing and for classes in technology and society. Historians of technology and gender will be thrilled at Hicks’s uncovering of the intricate historical processes of deskilling women’s work. While some scholars may desire more on the technical specifications of Britain’s computer systems, Hicks has presented a carefully woven history that considers Britain’s unique economic and political contexts and includes the voices, motives, and reasoning of civil service leaders, women operators, and industry practitioners. Her deeply researched history of women’s labor in computing is an indispensable part of the post-WWII history of computing.

HONGHONG TINN

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