
On the Difficulties of Writing about the History of Computing

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Abstract

My mentor, a historian of computing, has advised me not to use technological concepts, like ‘program’, ‘compiler’, and ‘universal Turing machine’, as subjects of my sentences. Instead, I should use historical actors. For example, I should not write: “During the 1950s, a universal Turing machine became widely viewed as a conceptual abstraction of a computer.” Instead, I should write: “By 1955, Gorn viewed a universal Turing machine as a conceptual abstraction of a loop controlled computer.”

If I stick to sentences of the first kind, my exposition will, at best, capture a development of technological ideas that is detached from the people who shaped the technology in the first place. As a result, my readership, and myself included, won’t realize that a universal Turing machine had different meanings for different actors, nor will it become apparent that the meaning of a universal Turing machine changed over time for each individual actor. Sentences of the first kind can lead to more methodological pitfalls, which I intend to cover in my talk by comparing and contrasting four books in the history of computing (written by: Ceruzzi, Copeland, Mahoney, and Priestley).

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