

Call for Submissions: Reflections on Computing History

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Annals of the History of Computing will publish its 50th volume in 2028, an occasion for some historiographical reflections on computing history during the past half-century. This proposal for a special issue is to publish a collection of reflections—"think pieces"—on how approaches to the study of computing history have been changing and on what may come next. We invite authors to contribute essays, typically of 2,000–4,000 words. We seek contributions by both established and early-career scholars who have written on computing history.

Like early histories of science, early work on computing history was often done by computing practitioners—builders and users of computers. Early studies were also largely internalist, focused on ideas and their realization in machines, and they often emphasized the roles of "pioneers". A major shift since that time has been toward more externalist history, emphasizing the social construction of technology; it has also been shaped by the hermeneutical tradition to read with more suspicion now and to look for subtexts beneath the texts.

There have been several books and articles on the historiography of computing. *Annals* had special issue twenty years ago, "New Directions in the History of Computing". Thomas Misa's guest-editor introduction (Misa, 2007), Jim Cortada's "Studying the role of IT in the evolution of American business practices" (Cortada 2007), and Martin Campbell-Kelly's, "The history of the history of software" (Campbell-Kelly 2007) are particularly relevant. The last was criticized by Donald Knuth in his Kailath Lecture, "Let's not dumb down the history of computer science" (Knuth 2014), to which Campbell-Kelly briefly responded in "Knuth and the spectrum of history" (Campbell-Kelly 2014). Doron Swade's *The History of Computing: A Very Short Introduction*, discusses approaches to computing history in its first and last chapters. Finally, Aspray's edited collection of chapters on writing computing history (Aspray 2024) has valuable articles on historiography. All of these works may suggest issues topics for discussion or response.

The following quotes from two founders of *Annals* give an idea of how they thought about history fifty years ago. It is a broad view, though one that puts the machines and the people who developed them at the forefront.

In a field changing so dynamically as ours, when yesterday's innovation at times becomes obsolete by today, there is a tendency to downgrade the importance of historical examination—the emphasis is more on the future than on the past. Yet such critical examination, accompanied by even more critical debate and commentary, can help reveal the brilliant from the blunder, the creative from the mundane, and the true breakthrough from the shallow triumph of the day. In this manner we gain the insight to better distinguish between the wheat and the chaff of today—to learn from past accomplishments and from past mistakes how to better shape the future direction of this field.

— Aaron Finerman, AFIPS Pub. Comm. chair, Foreword, *Annals* 1:1 (July, 1979), p3

We intend to record here the entire development of computing—from ancient, primitive marks on stone or clay to the latest computers, from technological breakthroughs in hardware and software to the origins of significant applications, from the cultural environments and pressures that influenced or were influenced by computing to the computer and computing industry itself.

— Bernard Galler, EiC, "About this issue", *Annals* 1:1 (July 1979), p4

The field to which Finerman refers is computing itself rather than computing history, as the latter scarcely existed yet. Advancing computing by learning from its past may still be one reason to study its history; many recent technical achievements in computing architecture and programming languages have quite early roots. We may also learn from the past how much of computing history received relatively little attention in the early years. There has recently been more attention to the multiplicity of interests that have shaped computing and to the roles of a great variety of participants, and *Annals* has dropped the emphasis on first-hand accounts from the official statement of its scope. It might be more appropriate to say that the notion of whose first-hand accounts contribute to computing history has become far broader than it used to be.

A very far from exhaustive list of possible topics:

Changing attitudes toward historiography in general and concerning computing in particular.

Whose first-hand accounts are a part of computing history?

Who writes computing history?

How are computing-history sources chosen and how are they interpreted?

Reflection on roles of museums and archives.

Recovering neglected work in computing history.

The politics of computing and the politics of its history.

A comparison of the themes of some early and recent *Annals* articles.

The changing emphasis from computing machines to software and to its uses.

Histories of computing in popular culture over the years.

An interview of early *Annals* editors by the current editor.

The variety of ways to address technical material in computing history.

How to work with scarce or ephemeral sources: networked communication, obsolete digital formats, or records of startups or short-lived companies?

How computing historiography is related to historiography of other scientific disciplines.

Timetable

Please send 200–500 word abstracts to the editor by February 1, 2027 for consideration for the issue. If accepted, full submissions (made through Author Portal) will be due on June 1, 2027. They will be peer reviewed as essays, for clarity and cogency, rather than as research articles. With possible revision, final versions will be due January 3, 2028.

Bibliography

Aspray, W. (ed.), 2024, *Writing Computer and Information History: Approaches, Connections, and Reflections* (Rowman & Littlefield).

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Misa, T., 2007, Guest editor's introduction: New directions in the history of computing *Annals of the History of Computing*, 29:4, (Cct.-Dec.), 6-7.

Swade, D., 2022, *The History of Computing: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford).