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The Disunity of Computing: Pan-Computer Professionalism and the Tensions of Science and Trade

by Tom Haigh

Date		Friday, December 5, 2003
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Abstract

The idea of a computer professional is as old as the computer itself, but no general and widely accepted definition of the computer profession itself has ever been achieved. By the late 1950s, two almost separate communities had embraced the new technology of the computer. The Data Processing community grew from existing corporate tabulating machine installations, and sought recognition as managerially important. Its main institution was the National Machine Accountants Association (NMAA). The Computing community comprised scientists and technicians using computers for calculation and simulation. Its members sought recognition for the study of computing as a scientific discipline in its own right -- complete with journals, conferences and academic departments. Its main institution was the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM). This talk will explore the development of professional identities within these two communities from the 1950s to the 1970s, paying particular attention to ongoing efforts intended to unite them into a single profession of "computer people". It relies on concepts taken from the sociology of professions and organizations, the history of science, and social history. We will conclude with a brief review of more recent attempts to define professional identities in the computing field, and poses some questions related to the challenges faced by Informatics in defining itself as a new field encompassing one or more new professions.

Biography

Thomas Haigh received his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in May 2003. He also holds the degrees of B.Sc. and M.Eng. from the computer science department of the University of Manchester. As a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Informatics School he is currently teaching the core undergraduate courses in Social Informatics and in Organizational Informatics, and has previously taught at Penn, Drexel and Colby College. Haigh's dissertation project examines the evolution of administrative

information processing over the twentieth century, focusing on the institutional, cultural, managerial and professional relationships of information technology. He is preparing two books on this topic, as well as a third on developments in information technologies and their use in past decade in collaboration with several members of the Informatics faculty. His work has been published widely and presented at many competitive national and international meetings. His awards include a Fulbright for graduate study in the US, the Tomash fellowship of the Charles Babbage Institute, the Life Member fellowship of the IEEE History Center, the Research Fellowship of the Software History Center, and Penn's William Penn fellowship. In 2004 he will be working as a consultant for the Society for Industrial and Applied Mathematics. His homepage is www.tomandmaria.com/tom.

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