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How books helped make computers mainstream

Early public encounters with computers were shaped less by direct use than by description and explanation. Long before laptops and smartphones became common, print media helped bring the technology to a wider public.

That history is at the center of “README: A Bookish History of Computing from Electronic Brains to Everything Machines” (MIT Press, 2025), a new book by UC Santa Barbara historian W. Patrick McCray. In the book, McCray examines the essential role books played in familiarizing Americans with computers and helping move the technology from specialized research settings into everyday life.

“For computers to become widespread, people first had to imagine what they were, what they could do and why they mattered,” said McCray, who currently serves as the Kluge Chair in Technology and Society at the Library of Congress. “Books were one of the most important ways that happened.”

“README” traces a half-century of computing history, from the aftermath of World War II through the dot-com crash of the early 2000s. Using a carefully selected mix of iconic and lesser-known titles, McCray explores how print culture shaped public understanding of electronic brains, cybernetics, artificial intelligence, personal computers and the internet, offering a literary lens on the rise of information technologies in the United States.

Rather than focusing on machines alone, McCray centers his narrative on how people learned to think about computers. In the late 1940s and 1950s, books about electronic brains introduced readers to machines that were largely inaccessible outside of government and industrial laboratories. During the cybernetics era, authors used print to explore ideas about feedback, control and intelligence, often blending science, philosophy and speculation.

“Books helped make these machines legible to people who would never see one in person,” McCray said. “They created a shared language and set of expectations around what computers were supposed to be.”

As computing technologies evolved, so did the books that accompanied them. Programming manuals, popular science titles and do-it-yourself guides in the 1970s and 1980s reframed computers as personal tools rather than institutional systems. For many early adopters, reading about computers preceded owning one.

“People learned how to use computers by reading about them first,” McCray said. “That’s easy to forget now, but it was fundamental at the time.”

In “README,” McCray argues that books did more than explain technical functions. They also conveyed values and ideologies, shaping how readers understood computers as part of broader technological, social and cultural change.

“Books were places where hopes and anxieties about computing played out,” McCray said. “They weren’t neutral. They helped define what people thought computers should be used for and who should have access to them.”

The book follows these themes into the 1990s, when the rise of the personal computer and the internet fueled widespread optimism about digital technologies. Even as online media expanded, print continued to influence how people made sense of rapid technological change. By the time of the dot-com boom, McCray demonstrates, books had already helped normalize the idea that computing was central to modern economic and cultural life.

“README” also situates books themselves as technologies — durable, portable and authoritative tools for organizing information. Unlike ephemeral media, books allowed readers to spend extended time with complex ideas, revisit them and share

them across generations.

“Books have a kind of staying power,” McCray said. “They gave computing a sense of legitimacy and seriousness that mattered, especially early on.”

Originally trained as a scientist, McCray has long been interested in how technical knowledge moves beyond expert communities. He is the author or editor of eight books and a fellow of both the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the American Physical Society. That interdisciplinary background informs “README,” which bridges the history of technology, publishing and American culture.

“I wanted to write a book that treated books not just as sources but as actors,” McCray said. “They actively shaped how computing developed.”

While “README” focuses on the past, McCray sees contemporary relevance in its themes. As new technologies such as artificial intelligence continue to emerge, he argues, older forms of media still play a role in shaping public understanding.

“We tend to assume new technologies replace older ones,” McCray said. “But history shows that they often coexist, and that older media can be crucial in helping people make sense of what’s new.”

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