Column

From the Editor's Desk

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I AM DELIGHTED to present the first of two special issues on computing and governance that the IEEE ANNALS OF THE HISTORY OF COMPUTING will publish this year. This issue's articles examine mathematical instruments in United States during the 19th century, algorithmic bias in Britain after the Second World War, and food management in Tunisia during the 1980s. The methods they employ demonstrate that the study of governance can help us strengthen the connections between the history of computing and its many allied fields—in this case, museum curation, gender studies, and environmental history. This issue also introduces our brand-new layout.

The issue opens with an article by Peggy Kidwell that examines the connections that developed in the 19th century between new calculating devices and the needs of U.S. government agencies at the local, state, and national levels. This article uses the history of governance, broadly conceived, to offer a new way of approaching the technological landscape 19th century computing. It suggests that the economic and managerial pressures that government agencies faced that century intensified their need for more sophisticated calculating devices, and that these devices encompassed much more than the tabulating we know from the history of IBM. Surveying technologies, educational tools, cash registers, slide rulers, and balls designed to carry cash are just some of the instruments that you will encounter in Kidwell's piece.

The next article, by Marie Hicks, documents one of the earliest examples of how governments can attempt to leave transgender people out of their computer systems. The welfare state that the British government established after the Second World War was designed to delineate clear gender roles for its recipients, establishing different expectations (and payment schemes) for men and women. Heavily reliant on electronic computing, this gendered system posed a special challenge to transgender people. When a transgender person wrote to the Ministry of Pensions to request a gender change, a special file about them would be forwarded to the government's chief medical officers, who considered them to be abnormal and damaged. Later in the century, the Ministry would cease to honor requests for gender changes by pretending that their system did not "see" gender. In short, Hicks demonstrates that transphobic algorithmic bias has a much longer history than we thought.

The final article, by Kera Allen, analyzes how the Tunisian government incorporated VisiCalc, one of the most popular spreadsheet applications for personal computers, into its Ministry of Agriculture. In the mid-1980s, while Tunisia faced an economic crisis tied to the rising price of grain, the Ministry turned to

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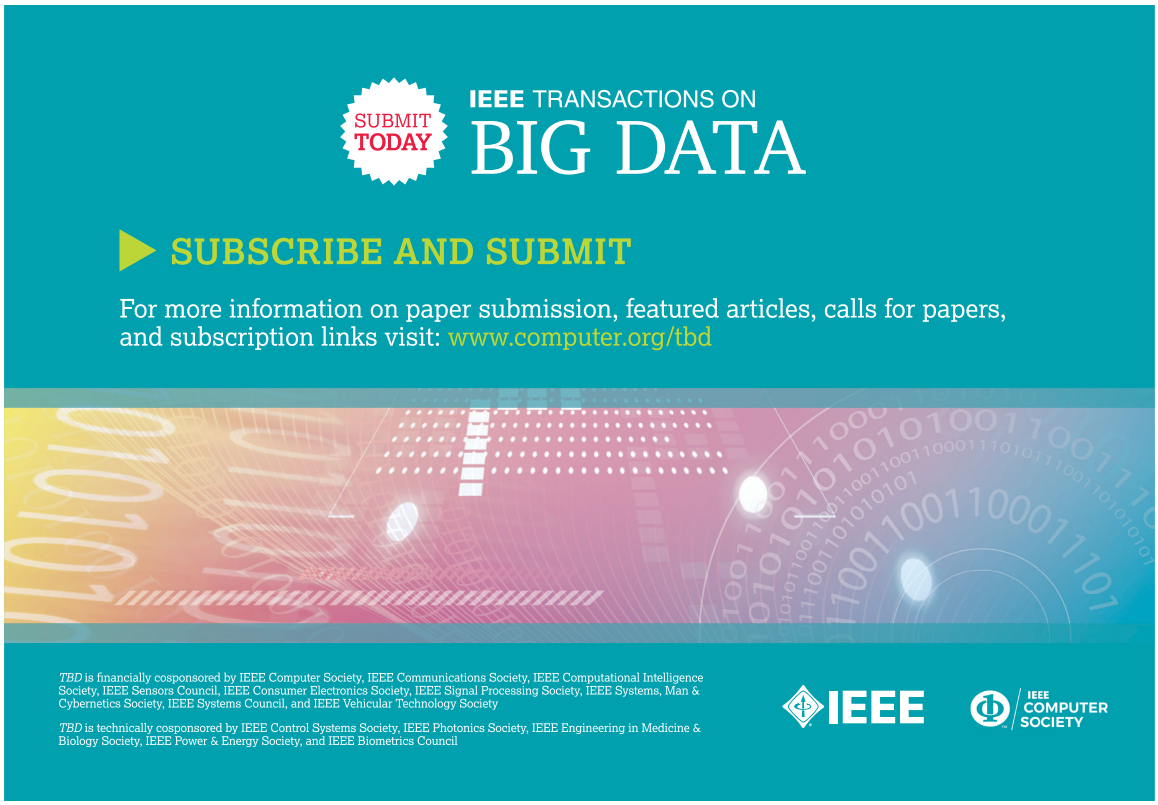
VisiCalc in search for a solution. The speedy calculations that VisiCalc was designed to perform had the potential to revolutionize the otherwise tedious bureaucratic work involved in testing subsidy models. This, in turn, could allow the Ministry of Agriculture to optimize its operations and place the governance of the country's grain in the hands of a few individuals. Allen shows, however, that the financial simulations that stakeholders ran through VisiCalc aligned more with the interests of foreign corporations and governments than with Tunisia's needs.

On a final note, this issue is the first for which I am the new Editor-in-Chief. I would like to thank Nathan Ensmenger for leading the journal in this capacity for the past three years.

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