'Coders' explores the psyche of computer programmers

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By Glenn C. Altschuler

Programming is a “pretty cool experience,” Ryan Olson, a lead engineer for Instagram said after observing someone using his product at a climbing gym.

“I don’t know if there’s ever been historically any other way where you could reach so many people,” Olson added, or where “so few people define the experience of so many.”

For this reason, writes Clive Thompson, a monthly columnist for Wired and the author of “Smarter Than You Think: How Technology Is Changing Our Minds for the Better,” software — and the programmers responsible for it — are “eating the world,” or, more precisely, “digesting it.”

In “Coders: The Making of a New Tribe and the Remaking of the World,” Thompson provides an informative, insightful, accessible and judicious examination of the profession, the characteristics and values of computer programmers, and the opportunities and challenges America’s four million digital architects (and the Big Tech companies that employ them) present to our culture, economy and politics.

Drawing on dozens of interviews, Thompson gets inside the heads of coders. Desperate to stay in a “flow zone” and obsessed with efficiency, he writes, they are often at odds with white-collar norms, slapping on noise-canceling headphones, working in the wee hours of the morning and avoiding meetings. Romanticized in pop culture, their social isolation, irregular sleep patterns and belief that they are the smartest persons in the room, often lead to maladaptive behavior, troubled personal relationships and fragile mental health.

One coder, Thompson reveals, sought to automate everyday emotional work by creating scripts (with a late at work message with a randomly selected excuse to be sent automatically at 9 p.m. if he was still at work).
Though Thompson acknowledges that the list of one-person innovators is long, he demonstrates that the worship of rock star engineers creates “brilliant jerks” who move too quickly, wreck morale and drive talented colleagues away. In any event, Thompson maintains that most truly useful coding is a “team sport.”

Thompson also explains why programming is the one field of professional work in which the percentage of women coders has declined. In the ’50s and ’60s, when computing was a weird, wide-open field, he reveals, employers reached out to women. One executive claimed “an intelligent girl who has the patience to do embroidery has just the right mentality to do the job.” IBM distributed a brochure entitled “My Fair Ladies.”

But as personal computers emerged in the 1980s, and enrollments in computer science courses exploded, young (white) men appeared in school much better prepared for — and interested in — introductory coding work than women. Faced with a shortage of instructors, many colleges weeded out students by requiring classes with heavy workloads and a rapid pace that left behind anyone who didn’t “get it” right away. After a while, gendered expectations about coders became set.

Computer science departments and tech firms “became hotbeds of testosterone.” Facing harassment and more subtle prejudice, many talented women left the field — or chose not to enter it. In 2017, about 25 percent of computer programmers, software or web developers, data base administrators or statisticians, were women. Thompson asks anyone who thinks biology is the reason to explain why the percentage of female coders is so much higher in India, Malaysia and other countries.

Several hot button moral issues associated with software development receive substantive — and perceptive — attention in “Coders.” Hackers, Thompson reminds us, now routinely steal money, destroy data, install ransomware and acquire corporate or government emails, documents and plans.

Encryption enhances privacy but enables criminals to set up dark websites, like the Silk Road online store, which sells billions of dollars of weapons and drugs. Voting machines are remarkably easy to hack. Because social media favors emotional posts, inflammatory content, conspiracy theories and fake news get widely circulated. Artificial intelligence is no better than the data programmers feed into the neural net deep-learning models.

The industry deserves kudos, Thompson agrees, for creating platforms on which billions of people can connect with colleagues, friends and loved ones and disseminate their views to large audiences. But, he implies, they should no longer rest content with the sentiments expressed in a Tom Lehrer song: “Once the rockets come up, who cares where they come down/That’s not my department, says Wernher von Braun.”

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.