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Typewriting Mass Observation Online: Media Imprints on the Digital Archive

Rebecca K. Wright

During the *Mass Observation 80th Anniversary Conference* held at the University of Sussex in July 2017, scholars drew from the Mass Observation Archive (MOA) to develop rich studies on diverse areas of British experience, affirming Mass Observation's role as the dominant archive for British social memory.¹ The conference, however, overlooked a major change in Mass Observation studies that has occurred in the past ten years.² This is the transformation in the way scholars and students access the MOA following the launch of Mass Observation Online (MOO) by Adam Matthew Digital in 2007. Today few researchers consult the material objects gathered by the organization between 1937 and the early 1950s, housed in the MOA at The Keep, University of Sussex. Indeed, on arrival researchers are directed to a computer and the website MOO to start their archival journey with the click of a button. Even though the majority of researchers access the archive through the online interface, there has been little acknowledgement that the MOA is now experienced almost exclusively as a digital archive.

Despite the tendency to view the archives as interchangeable, it is highly problematic to view MOO as equivalent to the MOA.³ Not only is the digital interface transforming how we access and engage with Mass Observation materials but it is also changing the archive, building in new hierarchies and power dynamics. In particular, typewritten documents in MOO have increased in prominence, since they remain the only documents to have been OCRd for

¹ *Mass Observation 80th Anniversary Conference*, Jubilee Building, University of Sussex, 10-11 July 2017.

² One panel did address issues of digital media, 'Technological Developments: Digital, Online and the Challenges of Curation'. The panel, however, was focussed on online cultures and did not confront the historiographical implications of MOO.

³ Liz Moor and Emma Uprichard have addressed the implications of the digital for Mass Observation studies. See Liz Moor and Emma Uprichard, 'The Materiality of Method: The Case of the Mass Observation Archive', *Sociological Research Online* 19:3, 2014. Alongside this there have been reviews of MOO, but these fail to critically unpack the historiographical implications of the online interface. See Nick Hubble, 'Mass Observation Online', *Reviews in History*, review no. 969, 2010 [<https://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/969>].

digital text. This has built in a new hierarchy within the MOA, one in which media is upsetting the promise of democratic representation at the heart of Mass Observation's original mission. This is not without serious historiographical consequences for understanding Mass Observation materials. As media archaeologists such as Friedrich Kittler and Marshall McLuhan taught us long ago, media is never neutral but embedded in the politics of identity, form, and representation, all central to our engagement with Mass Observation materials.⁴ As more people—deliberately or unwittingly—utilize digital text to navigate around Mass Observation Online, the elevation of typewritten material over handwritten documents will amplify selective viewpoints, content and collections, with serious ramifications for the understanding and representation of British social memory. In an ironic turn then, the process of digitization is forcing us to be more critical about the physicality of medium and its impact on how and what observers wrote.

This article draws upon MOO, in particular the collection of 'Day Surveys' collected from 1937-1938, to examine how the digital politicizes the medium in which observers wrote. Although presented as fully searchable, roughly only 29% of the Day Surveys were typewritten and thus have digital text, meaning that there is an unevenness of visibility across this online collection. Considering how typewritten text distorts the MOA through the collections accessed, the representiveness of the national panel, and the content and form of observation, this article traces the impact the digital is having on a formative archive of British social memory. I argue that more attention needs to be given to what Joshua Sternfeld has called 'digital historiography' ('the interaction of historical practices and digital technologies') within the field of Mass Observation studies, adding to a long list of methodological challenges researchers confront when using the MOA.⁵ But I also use MOO to understand how the digital

⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York, 1964; Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, Stanford, 1999.

⁵ Annebella Pollen, 'Research Methodology in Mass Observation Past and Present: "Scientifically, About as Valuable as a Chimpanzees Tea Party at the Zoo"', *History Workshop Journal* 75:1, 2013, pp. 213-235.

archive is politicizing media in new ways as it becomes critical to the physical structure of the digital interface.⁶ As visibility in history depends on writing media (as much as writing content), increased attention must be paid by historians and archivists to the historiographical dimensions of media and its impact on digital historical collections.

I.

Mass Observation was founded in 1937 by a group of British left-leaning intellectuals, the ornithologist Tom Harrisson, the poet Charles Madge and the filmmaker Humphrey Jennings.⁷ Democratic in mission (if not always in practice) the organization sought to uncover the ‘collective unconscious’ of Great Britain. Mass Observation grew as an organization, with paid (and unpaid) employees (known as investigators), who studied the lives of ordinary people in locations that included Bolton and London. The organization also fostered a national panel of observers, who responded to questionnaires (known as Directives) and completed diaries and Day Surveys detailing their everyday lives. Running until the mid-1950s, Mass Observation remains the largest collection of primary materials about everyday life in Great Britain. The project was revived in 1981, as the Mass Observation Project (MOP) and is ongoing today. In 2007 the original collection of materials was digitized and made available on MOO by Adam Matthew Digital, a member of the Sage Publication Group.

The advent of MOO signals a new stage in the life of the Mass Observation project, which has evolved through many iterations since its inception. The opening of the MOA at the University of Sussex in 1975 transformed Mass Observation from being largely forgotten (its

⁶ Joshua Sternfeld, ‘Archival Theory and Digital Historiography: Selection, Search, and Metadata as Archival Processes for Assessing Historical Contextualisation’, *Society for American Archivists* 74: 2, 2011, pp. 544-575; Kate Theimer, Joshua Sternfeld, Katharina Hering and Michael J. Kramer, ‘Digital Historiography and the Archives’, *Journal of Digital Archives* 3:2, 2014.

⁷ For a history of the origins and development of Mass Observation see James Hinton, *The Mass Observers: A History, 1937-1949*, Oxford, 2013.

materials in boxes in an office basement in London) to becoming the major archive for the study of everyday life in Great Britain.⁸ The archive itself (and its former archivist Dorothy Sheridan) has thus been critical in influencing the visibility of Mass Observation materials, and how they are utilized and interpreted by scholars. Over its lifetime, changes in the way collections were accessed, selected and made visible evolved parallel to scholarly interest in specific collections and ways of using the collection.⁹

MOO is the next stage in framing the scholarly apparatus of the MOA.¹⁰ This period has seen the exponential growth of interest in the archive, which between November 2016 and November 2017 has seen 338,504 active sessions.¹¹ The digital interface has expanded the geographical reach of the archive, with active sessions from subscribing institutions across the world. MOO has thus dramatically increased access to MOA materials, becoming the critical matrix through which British social memory is accessed and generated.

To understand how MOO is transforming the field of Mass Observation studies, however, we have to better comprehend how the digital interface frames historical materials. Just like the physical archive, any computer interface, as Margaret Hedstrom argues, presents ‘symbols to users in pre-determined and pre-programmed ways [...] they mediate between users and vast stores of digital information’.¹² Before the MO archive became digital, the archivist was the principal interface between the archive and the user, guiding the order in

⁸ Dorothy Sheridan, ‘Reviewing Mass-Observation: The Archive and its Research Thirty Years On,’ *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Qualitative Social Research* 1:3, 2000.

⁹ One critical shift was the increased access to the ‘Diary’ collection which transformed the archive into a key source for life-writing. Dorothy Sheridan, ‘Writing to the Archive: Mass Observation as Autobiography,’ *Sociology* 27:1, 1993, pp. 27-40; Dorothy Sheridan, ‘Damned Anecdotes and Dangerous Confabulations: Mass Observation as Life History,’ *MOA Occasional Paper Series*, No. 7 [http://www.massobs.org.uk/images/occasional_papers/no7_sheridan.pdf]. James Hinton’s *Nine Wartime Lives* did a lot to popularise the diaries for historical and life-writing research. See James Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives: Mass Observation and the Making of the Modern Self*, Oxford, 2010.

¹⁰ There have been many iterations of MOO since it launched in 2007. New content was added in 2009, 2011 and 2013. The latest iteration was in 2014. Within this article, I draw on this last iteration of MOO as it stands in November 2017.

¹¹ All user analytics for MOO are provided courtesy of Adam Matthew Digital. They are drawn from the period between the 15 November 2016 and the 15 November 2017.

¹² Margaret Hedstrom, ‘Archives, Memory, and Interfaces with the Past,’ *Archival Science* 2:1-2, 2002, p. 32.

which researchers accessed materials. The limited space of the reading room in the University of Sussex Library (the archive's former home before it moved to The Keep) reduced the numbers of researchers allowed in the MO archive, enabling archivists to provide a bespoke service to researchers, with its own logic and order. To navigate through the large amount of materials, researchers were first given 'Survey Reports', then 'Topic Collections', 'Directives', and then the 'Diaries' (which were the most difficult collection to access). As research space grew, catering to up to twenty researchers at a time, the influence of the archivist was diluted, though they remained the primary point of reference for researchers.¹³

When Adam Matthew Digital created the digital interface in 2007 the principal objective was to preserve the curatorial voice in the online environment.¹⁴ To maintain this continuity, the online database replicates the physical form of the archive, divided into eight collections, through which researchers can view individual artefacts. The central feature that transformed how researchers access Mass Observation materials, however, was the keyword search function. This design feature transforms how we navigate through the archive and read Mass Observation materials. While some researchers start moving through the collections from the contents screen, many start their journey with the invitation to search located in the top right hand corner. Today, historians and students are habituated to starting their research process with a keyword search. As a 2012 National Endowment of the Arts study into the changing nature of historical practices recognized, keyword searching is 'a primary mechanism—indeed a ubiquitous practice' for locating historical material.¹⁵ As Google has normalized the search function within everyday practices, historians have transferred this skill to accessing historical archives and databases. Lara Putnam has shown how the search facility

¹³ Fiona Courage, Head of Special Collections and Curator of Mass Observation (13 October 2017), Personal interview.

¹⁴ Fiona Courage, Personal Interview.

¹⁵ Jennifer Rutner, Roger C. Schonfeld, 'Supporting the Changing Research Practice of Historians', *Ithaka S + R*, December 2012.

is transforming historical disciplines, the nature of historical inquiry, and the institutional structures that support historical practices.¹⁶ The impact of these changes can be seen on MOO. Between November 2016 and 2017 there were 222,054 searches completed on MOO.¹⁷ On the website the search function has the second highest number of user hits (after page views), followed by search results, with the advanced search function coming in after details. Moreover, over the past twelve months the average time spent on the archive has dropped considerably (from 7.32 minutes to 5.55 minutes), although researchers are viewing an increased number of pages per session, pointing to the fact that users are locating material with greater ease and facility.¹⁸ It is safe to say that on MOO the keyword search has replaced the curator.

The shift from curatorial voice to the keyword search, therefore, establishes a new relationship between researcher and archive, placing the onus on the researcher to curate their journey. However, the invitation to search gives the impression that MOO is indeed fully searchable. This is a misconception, since the only searchable data on MOO is a small percentage of the overall collection: namely, materials that were originally typewritten. The search function only covers typewritten documents because OCR technology cannot yet transform handwritten texts with the ease and accuracy it does with typewritten text.¹⁹ Until OCR technology improves its capacity to translate handwritten text with higher accuracy (or Adam Matthew invests in manual transcription) the digital text available on MOO will continue to be drawn only from the typewritten materials.

¹⁶ Lara Putnam, 'The Transnational and the Text-Searchable: Digital Sources and the Shadows They Cast', *The American Historical Review* 121:2, 2016, pp. 377-402.

¹⁷ See footnote 11.

¹⁸ See footnote 11.

¹⁹ There is software developing this capacity including *Transkribus*, which is using Machine Learning Software to convert handwriting into digital text. Transkribus software is developed by the Digitisation and Digital Preservation Group at the University of Innsbruck [<https://transkribus.eu/Transkribus/>].

Not only does the search function cover a selective collection of materials, however, but the digital text that sits behind typewritten text is also far from accurate. There has been growing scholarly concern about the quality of OCR technology and the impact this is having on research practices and results.²⁰ For printed material published between 1900 and 1950, accuracy rates are about 95% (roughly 5 in 100 characters are wrong).²¹ However, the typewritten documents collected by Mass Observation were rough, and their material qualities varied considerably, meaning that accuracy rates are much lower than materials found in other online archives. Within MOO, the OCR accuracy rates vary, depending on the strength of the ink, the clarity of type-font used and the condition of paper, often damaged by long periods in inadequate storage. Human errors also inhibit accuracy, and the poor skills of typists means that text is often over-written, with letters struck over and poor alignment. Observers, moreover, frequently corrected, rewrote, and annotated typewritten documents, adding additional observations by hand, and sometimes doodles—all untranslatable by OCR software.

While the published materials produced by Mass Observation has an accuracy rate similar to typeset print archives and newspaper databases, the digital text produced from documents written by the national panel vary considerably in accuracy. For example, the digital text that underlies a typical 1937 Day Survey can read as follows:

I SaXnasy i'otiL^S^^Vu-7 . ?a P «4U A Mti JJci, j Mtca- b^i. LJrp /4tru-AU«^6. . f^eo-sr t& SK 3-'-nn. - 1 A, rv o ^9C 1. -ed- 7 /^.g e d 26. %M--TfexgickLJBaa^ i crksMxs*- (nr .--Btre^ngham-)- politics - None of the political parties are sufficiently altruistic for me. I vote Labour in the elections. Religion - Brought up in the C. of S. (father a lay-reader now training to become a clergyman when he retires from b ank) ftsi-Wd- the LIherak- Gath oVio Chur-^h-wh&n. as- 14-, i»s4s4^--ha»arHS6-m-y-- f l- a-nc egh f nw-my- h-us b and X -i-s-4x-p-r~j^t- in ttes--tBrrarch-- a-nd -t-h e-f-re-e-id i ng Bi-S-hnp-i stone of m-y-g-r-e-a-te-gt fra-e-n-feh - £~vmr8-iTraa,Tred-- anu-m^ son-bap^ireo4-4-H- tb e I. . CaBBiJxUrQ--?-. I never attend church and am not in the least interested in it. 1 am a mystic by temperament. 2. - Housewife, i.e. Cook-sceneral-Nurse-Dressmal.er-Laundress-Secretary &c fj c>k*)v. i I > BvcSPI H'R t(; | ..*?.<. to -15 rs #0-3^ 3. -

²⁰ Tim Hitchcock, 'Confronting the Digital: Or How Academic History Writing Lost the Plot,' *Cultural and Social History* 10:1, 2013, pp. 9-23; See also Joanna Swafford, 'Messy Data and Faulty Tools,' In *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*, eds., Matthew K. Gold, Lauren F. Klein, Minnesota, 2016, pp. 556-558; Carolyn Strange, Daniel McNamara, Josh Wodak and Ian Wood, 'Mining for the Meanings of a Murder: The Impact of OCR Quality on the Use of Digitized Historical Newspapers', *DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly* 8:1, 2014.

²¹ Simon Tanner, Trevor Muñoz, Pich Hemy Ros, 'Measuring Mass Text Digitization Quality and Usefulness: Lessons Learned from Assessing the OCR Accuracy of the British Library's 19th Century Online Newspaper Archive', *D-Lib* 15:7/8, 2009.

Health. Had an attack of lumbago yesterday (after spending nearly two hours shovelling snow).
Better today, but back a little 'uneasy*. [Fig. 1] ²²

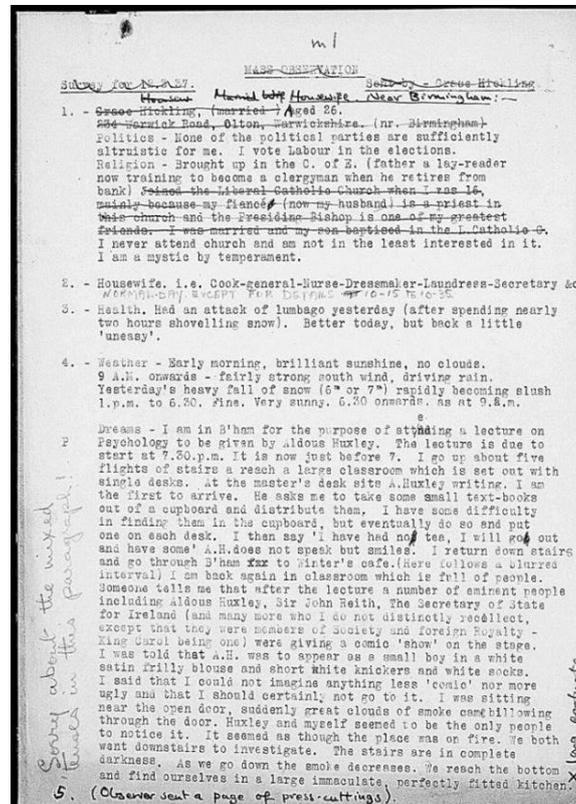


Fig. 1. The material object from which the OCR text is drawn; DS80, Day Survey for March 1937.

The varying quality of OCR data is not just a technical issue to be ironed out. Growing reliance on digital text, as Tim Hitchcock has argued, has significant repercussions for research procedures and results.²³ OCR accuracy rates impact research results because poor precision limits the success of locating an item, minimizing its visibility in search results. The accuracy of OCR transcription is of serious consequence then because it structures what becomes visible and what gets lost. This has its own implications for Mass Observation due to variation in the

²² DS80, Day Survey for March 1937, Day Surveys, Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex. From now on shortened to DS.

²³ Hitchcock, 'Confronting the Digital'.

material qualities of the collection, which lead to fluctuating accuracy rates (and thus visibility) across the collection.

Equally concerning for the adoption of the search function, as Hitchcock points out, is the fact that there is often little information on digital databases about what is being searched. In his words, ‘the user is only ever presented with an image of the original, there is no way of judging the quality of the results’.²⁴ Indeed, nowhere on the Adam Matthew website is there detailed instructions about the accuracy of digital text across the collections. It does detail which collections are searchable, but it does not specify the variation within each collection.²⁵ The unevenness of searchable text on MOO is in contradiction to the promise of completeness embedded in the search interface. Relying on the search function therefore shrinks the archive. This reduces the corpus to typewritten documents which themselves vary in terms of visibility, depending on the material conditions of the document translated into digital text by OCR. This has created a new hierarchy within MOO, structured through the physical qualities of the medium in which Mass Observers wrote and the clarity of their typewriting.

II.

The challenge of securing digital text within the archive is not just a technical problem limited to the usability of the online environment. It matters because it embeds new power hierarchies within the archive, controlling which voices are heard. On a structural level, it determines which collections are made visible for researchers. The diaries (even those typewritten) have yet to be made digitally readable and are excluded from the search function. They do have a keyword index that connects search terms to text. To date, only the directive questionnaires

²⁴ Hitchcock, ‘Confronting the Digital’, p. 13.

²⁵ The website does provide information about which collections are searchable. However, it does not detail which materials are searchable within those collections. [<http://www.amdigital.co.uk/m-products/product/mass-observation-online/detailed-information/>].

(rather than responses from the panel) have digital text, meaning that directives written by panel observers are not searchable. Roughly 29% of the Day Surveys have digital text, although this number is reduced by the accuracy of the OCR transcription.²⁶ The ‘Topic Collections’ contain handwritten and typed documents, and other ephemera such as newsprint, meaning that the OCR quality is variable, while the ‘File Reports’ were typed (although not type-set) and contained tables, corrections, over-writing and paper damage that lower the accuracy of the digital text. The publications have the highest quality OCR due to having been typeset.²⁷

This variation builds a hierarchy into the collections. A simple keyword search on the topic ‘electricity’, for example, captures how digital text embeds navigational pathways in MOO. Although hits in ‘Day Surveys’ and ‘Diaries’ emerge at the top of the list of search hits, 76% of the results derive from the ‘File Reports’ and ‘Topic Collections’ and ‘Publications’, with only a small 14% from the ‘Day Surveys’, ‘Diaries’ and ‘Directives’ (the content written by the panel of observers). The retrieval of one Directive Response is visible because it was written by an electricity substation attendant, and thus linked to the metadata collected on occupation. Not only do these results reduce the scope of electricity in the MOA to 209 hits, a number that minimizes its overall presence within the archive, but they also alter our perspective on Mass Observation materials.²⁸ Most of the search results refer to materials gathered by the paid cohort of observers, meaning that the search function privileges this material over that gathered from the national panel of observers. The material that dealt with observation (rather than self-observation) is therefore elevated in MOO through the search function. This minimizes the voices of the unpaid national panel and exaggerates the

²⁶ This is based on the number of *individual* Day Surveys that were handwritten and typed, rather than the *number of observers* who typed (one or more) Day Survey.

²⁷ The full digital text extracted from the OCR process was provided courtesy of Adam Matthew Digital.

²⁸ Keyword search for ‘electricity’ on MOO [Accessed 21 November 2017].

contribution of the paid investigators, filtering observation through a group that came with their own assumptions about working-class life.²⁹

Relying on typewritten material also transforms the social demographics of the national panel. The lack of representativeness of the Mass Observation panel has been at the heart of criticism of Mass Observation since its inception. It has long been acknowledged that Mass Observation is statistically inaccurate and does not reflect the wider demographics of the nation. During the early period, when the Day Surveys were collected, the majority of the panel were middle-class (10% being working class) and half the national panel was drawn from London and the Home Counties, with only around 100 observers from the North, the Midlands, and Wales.³⁰ This distortion is exaggerated on MOO as it elevates a particular social subgroup: those who had access to a typewriter.

By 1937 the typewriter had become integrated into British professional life and office culture and entered upper-middle class homes. Owning a typewriter, however, was only the first step in typewriting. Typewriting was a learnt skill. Traces of this learning is built into the material objects collected in the archive. Dropped lines curve across the page, words spill together and pencil lines re-work sections. One unemployed male observer captured his process of learning to type by describing his visit to a regular evening class (where he copied from ‘Pitman’s Business Typewriting’).³¹ Straight after his class he practiced this skill by typing up his Day Survey, celebrating his lack of mistakes. This record of an observer learning a skill that would allow him to enter the work-place as a low-level clerk or assistant, reminds us that Mass Observation objects are records of skill-acquirement tied to specific social hierarchies within twentieth-century Britain.

²⁹ Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, p. 24.

³⁰ For a detailed breakdown of the panel see Nicholas Stanley, *The Extra Dimension: A Study and Assessment of the Methods Employed by Mass-Observation in its First Period, 1937-1940*, PhD Thesis. Birmingham Polytechnic, 1981, pp. 147-229. See also Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, pp. 61-89.

³¹ DS300, Day Survey for December 1937.

Analyzing the distribution of medium (between handwriting and typing) across the observers who responded to the 1937-1938 Day Surveys thus reveals distinct social patterns. From a total of 743 observers who responded to the Day Survey, 290 used a typewriter to complete one or more of their reports, meaning that roughly 61% handwrote their survey in opposition to 39% who used a typewriter.³² This percentage is spread unevenly within the group, demonstrating the social dimensions of typewriting in 1930s Britain. A higher percentage of women (45%) than men (36%) responded to Mass Observation using a typewriter. This is unsurprising given that by the 1930s typewriting was gendered, associated with modern working-women. Since the 1880s, the position of 'type-writer girl' had enabled educated women to enter the workplace to fill a growing sector of roles that included secretaries, stenographers and typists.³³ These roles attracted younger middle-class educated women, affording them a degree of independence prior to marriage, when they were pressured to resign from their jobs. As more women entered administrative roles a gendering of work occurred that de-skilled clerical labor, tying it to routine typing activities.³⁴

Having learnt to type to enter the modern office it is no surprise that working-women emerge as the largest group from the collection of typewritten Day Surveys. 41% of women typewriting listed their occupation as working in administrative or professional roles (as secretaries, typists, office workers, stenographers, clerks, assistants, civil servants, editors, copywriters, researchers and journalists) compared to 17% in the handwriting pool [Fig. 2]. These female observers were working in institutions such as the BBC, the foreign office,

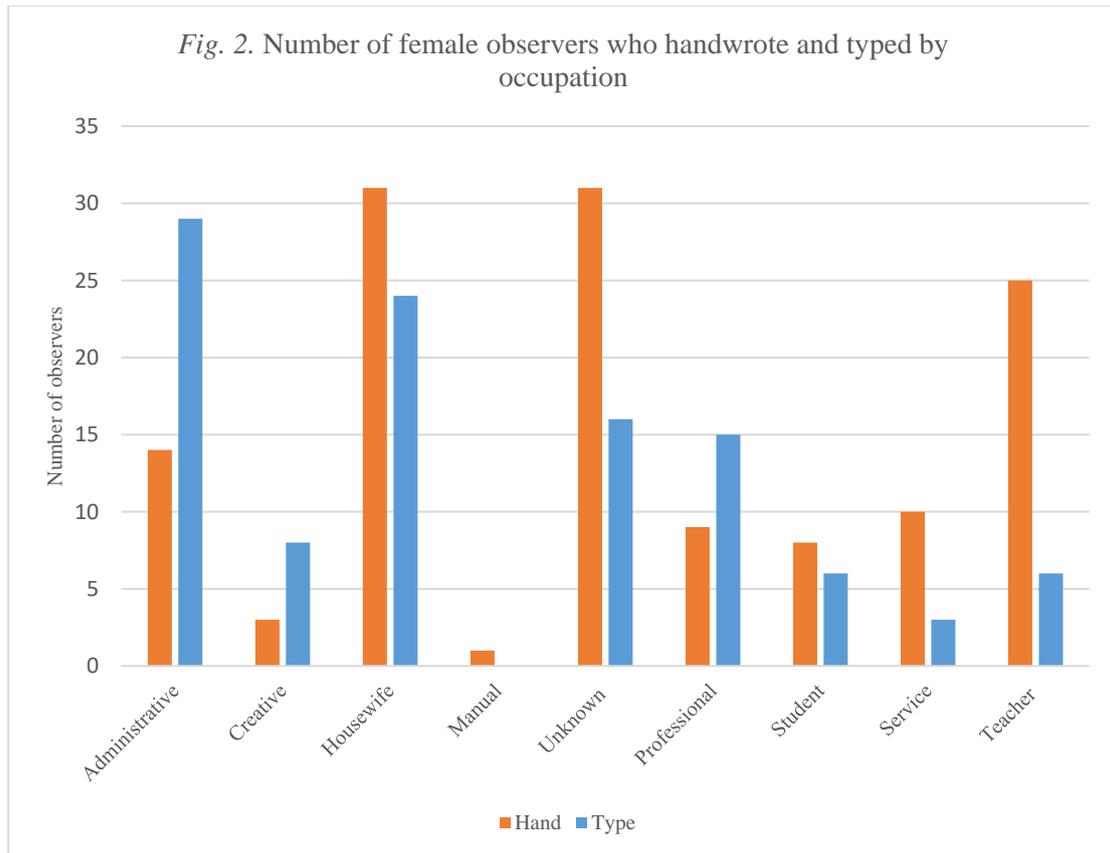
³² I have based my calculations on whether or not an observer typed *one or more* of their Day Surveys because this demonstrates access to a typewriter and/or the skills to use it. Of course, some observers would have dictated their Day Survey, or have had a typist copy it, but this in itself tells us something about the social demographic of the observer and their access to resources.

775 Day Surveys were sent into Mass Observation overall. I have eliminated a pool of thirty-two observers who only completed the April 1938 Day Survey, as this was a 'Time Chart' to be filled in, and thus did not allow a choice of pen or typewriter. Included within this group also were a few Day Surveys that were not visible on MOO and thus excluded.

³³ For more see Christopher Keep, 'The Cultural Work of the Type-Writer Girl', *Victorian Studies* 40:3, 1997, pp. 401-426.

³⁴ See Gregory Anderson, *The White-Blouse Revolution: Female Office Workers Since 1870*, Manchester, 1988.

editing houses, as well as in solicitors' offices.³⁵ The majority experience emerging from the typewritten documents, therefore, is bound to the office and single working woman. Given that in 1931 only 34.2% of women conducted any form of work outside the home, let alone in clerical roles (which accounted for only 11% of working women) this provides a distorted view of female experience during the interwar period.³⁶



³⁵ For the female group occupations included: *Administrative*; office worker, typist, shorthand, secretary, clerk, stenographer, book keeper, civil servant. *Professional*; doctor, chiropractor, social worker, speech therapist, researcher, editor, journalist, lecturer, press secretary; *Service*; governess, housekeeper, hairdresser, shop worker. *Creative*; writer, actress, musician, photographer, poet. The only female who fitted into an unskilled manual occupation was one who was listed as a cardboard-box maker. *Housewife*, *Teacher*, *Student* are more homogenous categories including all those who self-identified as such. When no occupation was listed the observer is categorised as *Unknown*; although we can assume many within this group were housewives without occupation.

³⁶ Gerry Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain Since 1840*, London and New York, 2005, p.149.

The demographics of the handwriting group comes closer to reflecting the experience of women during the interwar period, although it shares the same problem of representativeness built into the national panel.³⁷ The largest group to respond by hand were housewives. Within this category, 56% wrote their Day Surveys by hand, in contrast to 44% who typed. Out of the housewives who did type their surveys they tended to be educated and to have been employed prior to marriage. As a result, a number absorbed the skills learnt in the workplace into their domestic life, with some listing secretarial duties amongst their responsibilities as a housewife.³⁸ These housewives helped their husbands in offices and businesses, while some worked in part-time voluntary secretarial roles, such as one woman who worked as the part-time secretary for the Ancient Order of the Foresters.³⁹ Many, therefore, extended secretarial skills into their domestic lives. For one housewife, learning typing and shorthand and spending an afternoon typing letters was something ‘interesting to do’.⁴⁰

Due to the search function, the voices of specific groups of female observers are minimized. Housewives who lacked a formal education and never learnt to type become less visible. Another key group, women who worked as teachers (one of the best represented and most diligent Mass Observation groups in the national panel) would also be almost entirely excluded. Out of the thirty-one female teachers who sent in Day Surveys, six typed while twenty-eight wrote by hand. Working-class women, in domestic service and working in occupations such as hairdressing, were not likely to type, and would thus lose their limited representation within the archive. The online interface thus reduces the experience of a large portion of female observers, whose handwritten observations are much less visible to

³⁷ It is worth noting that working women were well represented on the national panel overall. However, the typewritten selection weights the collection further towards their perspective. See Stanley, *The Extra Dimension*, p. 167.

³⁸ DS80, Day Survey for March 2017.

³⁹ DS72.

⁴⁰ DS96, Day Survey for July 1937.

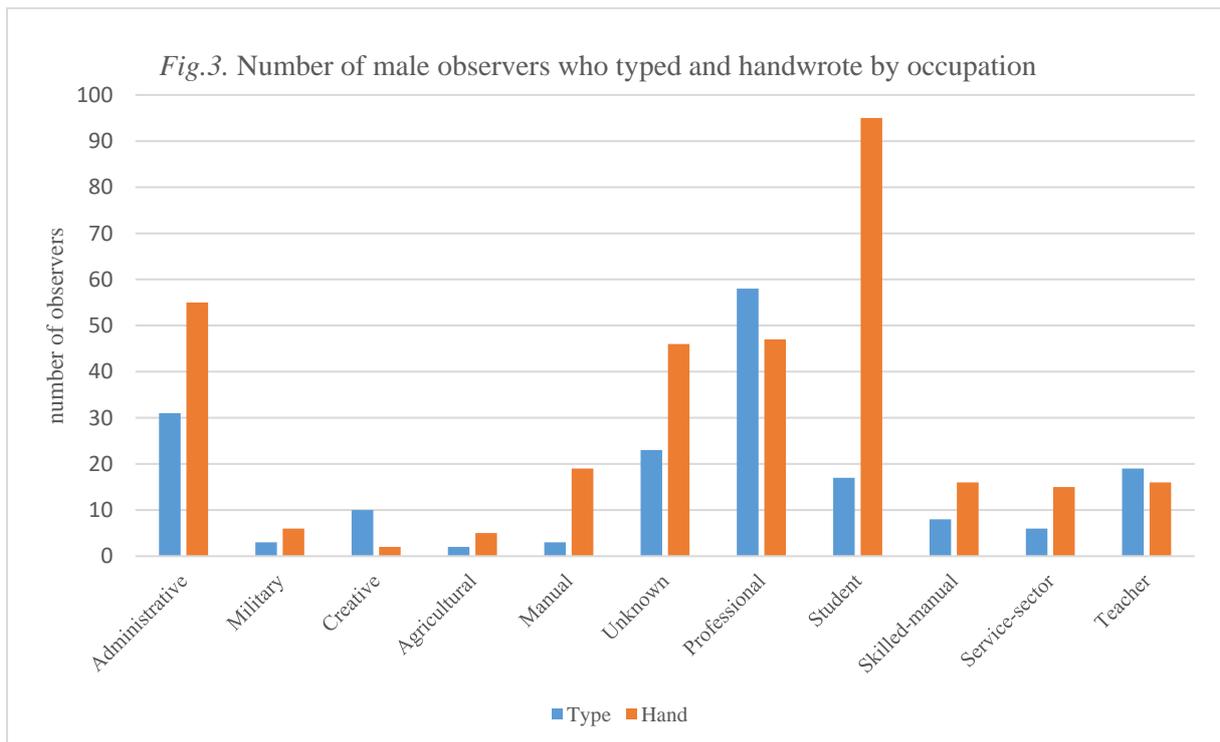
researchers. Not only does this give a distorted view of the life of the national panel, but for an archive valued as a key resource for gender and women's histories, this has serious consequences for the representation and understanding of female experience during the interwar period.⁴¹

The men who responded to Mass Observation by typewriter were similarly drawn from distinct occupational groups and social classes [Fig.3]. The largest group to respond in type were professional workers (journalists, doctors, businessmen, architects and accountants) followed by those in administrative positions (clerks and administrators).⁴² Unlike the female group, however, there remained greater flexibility between social class and the medium in which observers wrote. This illustrates the more complicated status of typewriting for men, which was symbolically loaded with connotations of femininity and lower-level de-skilled work. Men in administrative positions, for example, were equally likely to respond by hand as by type, suggesting that handwriting might have been a deliberate choice to distinguish themselves from lower ranking-work associated with typing. Interestingly, more professional males sent in typed reports, an indication that within this class there was access to secretaries who would have typed-up reports, perhaps even from dictation. Male teachers (in contrast to female teachers) were more likely to type however, as were males who identified themselves as creatives, such as writers and poets. There were other subtle hierarchies built into the distribution of writing medium. Observers classed as unskilled and skilled-manual workers,

⁴¹ Claire Langhamer, 'Mass Observation and Histories of Women,' *Mass Observation*, University of Sussex 2007.

⁴² For the male group occupations included: *Administrative*; officer worker, clerk, bank clerk, cashier in building society, secretary, book-keeper, proof-reader, copywriter; *Professional*; doctor, optician, dental surgeon, radiographer, chemist, sanitary inspector, barrister, civil servant, accountant, architect manager, engineer, journalist, lecturer, export buyer, preacher, estate agent; *Skilled-manual*; factory manager, upholsterer, draughtsman, electrician, instrument maker, railway signalman, switchboard attendant, aircraft fitter, factory under-manager, car mechanic. *Manual*; lathe turner, machinist, wood worker, moulder in factory; *Service sector*; salesman, waiter, cleaner, shopkeeper, grocery salesman, postman, shop assistant, hairdresser. *Military*; forces, major, corporal, petty officer. *Agricultural*; farmer and farm worker. *Creative*; writer, artist, poet, film director, actor. *Teacher* and *student* included all who self-identified as such. When no occupation was listed the observer is categorised as Unknown, and this included the unemployed.

agricultural professions, and those working in the service sector in shops and restaurants, wrote by hand, with only a limited number counted in the typewriting class. Another key group more likely to write by hand were students, and out of the small group of students who typewrote, seven of those were from Oxbridge, demonstrating how typewriting was tied to specific social classes.⁴³



⁴³ This included entries by DS346, DS274, DS195, DS304, DS561, DS332, DS287.

Reliance on typewritten material thus elevates particular social experiences above others. It also distorts the geographical distribution of the national panel. Although roughly half of the observers were drawn from London and the Home Counties, Nicolas Stanley's detailed study of the overall representativeness of the national panel suggests that it was not too far off the spread of population across the country.⁴⁴ However, the reliance on typewritten documents maximizes imbalances, and for some categories, eliminates a large sector of voices from outside the capital. Given the distribution of professional services in London and the South East, it is hardly surprising that 90% of the females identified in administrative positions were located in the capital, in contrast to 54% of those who handwrote. A similar distribution can be found in women who identified as housewives. More housewives used a typewriter in London and the South, with only a few using a typewriter in the North East and North West. There are entire regions, including Scotland and Wales, where only one typewriter is present. As such, female typewriters were concentrated in London, at the expense of the regions. This speaks towards the variation in social roles of women across the UK, and the distribution of education, skills and women in the workforce.

Once again the male group is more balanced. The London bias remains across both the hand and the typewriting collection. There is more of a spread of typewriters outside the capital, distributed across the regions, including Scotland and Wales, suggesting that typewriting was distributed more evenly outside of London for men. However, although there is a more even spread, hand-writers far outnumber typists across the regions. Depending on typewritten documents therefore minimizes the experience of groups in Yorkshire, Wales and Scotland. The heightened visibility of the typewritten documents thus amplifies the existing London bias in the archive.

⁴⁴ Stanley, *The Extra Dimension*.

Elevating typewritten materials has the effect of undermining the democratic vision of Mass Observation to give an equal voice to the mass. By making one form of experience more visible, it distorts the constitution of the national panel, elevating particular social identities over others. It decreases the voice of key groups, particularly already-underrepresented categories, such as working class responders. The conversion from physical object into digital text thus embeds new hierarchies in the archive based on the medium in which observers originally wrote.

III.

The problem is not only one of visibility and representation, however. One need only recall Marshall McLuhan's adage that 'the medium is the message' to understand how medium is essential to understanding what observers' wrote. Handwriting and mechanical writing have long carried distinct social meanings. The automatic writing enabled by the typewriter was seen to eradicate authorial agency, its outputs marked with the connotations of objectivity, efficiency, and bureaucracy. In opposition, the pen was associated with authorial agency, a graphical trace of its author and subjectivity.⁴⁵ These cultural associations influenced how responders approached their role as observers, and determined the types of experiences documented as well as the content and form of the writing.

The typewriter exerted its own materiality on observers' writing. The machine changed the speed of writing, and its rigid directionality structured the page. Moreover, its staccato rhythm, as one observer (irritated by his aunt's typing) noted, was 'not quite the most pleasing accompaniment to Mozart'.⁴⁶ The output of observers, therefore, was intimately tied to their

⁴⁵ See Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era*, Stanford, 2000, pp. 184-219; Dennis Barron, *A Better Pencil, Readers, Writers, and the Digital Revolution*, Oxford, 2009.

⁴⁶ DS287, Day Survey for September 1937.

writing-machines. One student was ‘disgusted’ by his Remington 12, whose keys tapped ‘rather too stiffly’ compared with the Underwoods he had ‘handled lately’.⁴⁷ One female typist apologized for her poor typing, noting that she had begun using an ‘unfamiliar typewriter and consequently making many mistakes in the first few pages’.⁴⁸ She recognized how ‘it is strange how a change of machine throws one out at first’.⁴⁹ Another male teacher was more frank about his poorly typed report, admitting that he was ‘no virtuoso of the typewriter and am rather hurried’.⁵⁰ While one student excused the poor state of his report, blaming the ‘illiteracy of my typewriter’.⁵¹ Not only did the mechanics of typewriting feed into the act of writing, but true to Friedrich Kittler’s analysis of the typewriter, it also influenced thought.⁵² For some observers, typing was more natural than handwriting. One housewife, for example, found ‘it difficult to think comfortably with pen in hand, but perfectly happy writing direct on the typewriter’.⁵³

The associations attached to the typewriter also transformed the way observers performed their role as chroniclers of everyday life. Believed to eliminate subjectivity, some observers maintained type was the only medium to ‘accurately’ reflect experience. One male hospital clerk, for example, apologized for his late report, delayed because he was forced to borrow a typewriter at ‘odd’ moments at work, adamant that his ‘handwriting would never be equal to the occasion’.⁵⁴ When he got access he embraced the capacity of the typewriter to order experience, producing an extensive tabulation that documented the intricate layers of his social life.⁵⁵ One outcome of typing then was that it distanced the observer from the world they observed. Many observers took notes by hand and typed their finished reports, inserting a delay

⁴⁷ DS557, Day Survey for August 1937.

⁴⁸ DS160, Day Survey for December 1937.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ DS477, Day Survey for July 1937.

⁵¹ DS158, Day Survey for August 1938.

⁵² Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, pp. 183-266.

⁵³ DS147, Day Survey for July 1937.

⁵⁴ DS214, Day Survey for August 1937.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

between the experience and its record. One observer admitted to taking three days till she ‘felt inclined to bother with a typewriter’.⁵⁶ This separation transformed observers’ relationship to experience, raising questions about distancing, the operation of memory, and information retention. After a three-day delay, one housewife binned her handwritten notes, for ‘the day being very clear in my memory’.⁵⁷ However, she did confess that some ‘very small details have not been put down’.⁵⁸ The degree of separation introduced by the typewriter (which in the former case resulted in the loss of detail) situates the observer in a different relation to experience than the observer who might have captured it *in medias res* by hand.

Medium, moreover, draws into focus observers’ writing environments. For some, the typewriter tied their Mass Observation activities to the realm of work. Getting the typewriter out for work was a natural segue to writing up their report; an activity that occurred somewhere between invoices and letter writing.⁵⁹ For others, its connection to work limited it to certain times of the day. One report was delayed because an observer, in this case a male bank clerk, was ‘rather busy and too tired in the evening to sit down at the typewriter’.⁶⁰ Each medium thus set up a different set of relations to the act of writing and the writing environment. For example, the portability of pen and paper allowed observers to complete their reports on public transport, in bed, or at stolen moments. In contrast, the location of the typewriter in the office meant that many reports were written during stolen moments at work. One observer would transport his portable typewriter to the canteen to complete his Mass Observation assignment over lunch. Some would use their typewriter late at night, copying their reports in the privacy of their own room.⁶¹ One observer wrote up her report while simultaneously making fudge

⁵⁶ DS12, Day Survey for September 1937.

⁵⁷ DS93, Day Survey for July 1937.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ DS471 Day Survey for November 1937.

⁶⁰ DS431, Day Survey for September 1937.

⁶¹ DS140, Day Survey for July 1937.

(‘wrote a few lines, and then went into kitchen and stirred concoction on stove, and so on’).⁶² Medium raises historiographical questions about the writing environments of observers, raising problems about how privacy, portability, and physical space factored into the substance and nature of the material observers recorded.

Most importantly perhaps, the typewriter transformed the overall shape of the page. The order imposed by the monospaced typewriter established a grid-like structure whose rigidity, as Darren Wershler-Henry has pointed out, extended beyond the paper document: ‘the typewriter remakes in its own image first the page, then the body of the typist, then the world around the typist’.⁶³ The regularity of the typewritten page influenced how observers structured their writing and the nature of the content included. One can track the impact that the monospaced typewriter had on experience by comparing two Day Surveys, one written by hand and one by pen. Both were written by the same person, a young office clerk named Joan, who worked for the BBC and lived in Chelsea. Observers were not restricted to one medium and it was common for them to move between pen and type.⁶⁴ Joan’s choice of medium not only reflected which she believed best represented the type of experience recorded, but also how time was captured, the level of detail included, and the way in which the observer situated herself as a recorder of the world.

Written in September 1937, Joan’s handwritten survey describes a Sunday excursion to Cambridge, where she roamed through colleges, visited a chapel and went for tea. This was a day where she ‘wandered at will and without purpose’.⁶⁵ Time does not intrude too much here, but is referred to only fleetingly; markers which orient the reader in morning, noon or night. Rather than schematically bound, references to time remained loose and unregulated, changing between ‘10-9’, ‘25 to 1’ and ‘3 o’clock’. When clock-time was mentioned (the

⁶² DS147, Day Survey for July 1937.

⁶³ Darren Wershler-Henry, *The Iron Whim: A Fragmented History of Typewriting*, Ithaca, 2007, p. 136.

⁶⁴ DS152, Day Survey for September and November 1937.

⁶⁵ DS152, Day Survey for September 1937.

‘11.20 train’, ‘10.15 went to bed’) there is a sense of routine life intruding. In contrast, Joan’s typewritten November Day Survey captures a morning in the office, cataloguing the routine commute to work, and the mundane tasks, phone calls, and interruptions that punctuate the morning.⁶⁶ The diary follows a regular form as each paragraph begins with a clearly marked time determinant. Where several hours were contained in one paragraph in the September Day Survey, here each paragraph is broken down into ten-minute chunks: 7.45, 8.10, 8.24, 8.35, 8.40, 8.50, 9.00, 9.35. The importance of time, therefore, is central to the directive, and one of her first actions on waking is to put on her watch, which due to running late makes her leave the house at 8.43 rather than 8.35. The tone of the diary is bureaucratic, with precise observation and detailed accounting structuring the record of the day. She even goes so far as to record her own activities, turning the gaze back on herself and describing in detail the process of getting the typewriter ready to perform her office duties. Where the handwritten September Day Survey captures Joan’s emotions about being in Cambridge impressionistically, especially her feelings about the colleges (Queens College ‘being the best thing in Cambridge’), the typewritten diary eliminates overt value judgement and emotion for a tone of objective and impartial observation. The typewriter (as opposed to the pen) becomes a tool to assist her critical role as an objective observer, dispassionately capturing the outside world.

The significance of the medium in which observers wrote thus extended far beyond issues of ease and facility. It reflected the experiences recorded and the way that those experiences, emotions and models of subjectivity were organized and represented. It structured the relationship between ‘observer’ and ‘observed’, delineating lines of objectivity and subjectivity, proximity and distance, detail and memory. Medium, furthermore, was central to

⁶⁶ DS152, Day Survey for November 1937.

the performative nature of observers; how they understood their role as a Mass Observer, and the content they recorded for posterity.

To rely on the documents visible within the keyword searches function thus alters the nature of the writing emerging from Mass Observation. The project as a whole might appear closer to objective observation than if the larger collection of handwritten materials were given equal attention. The distortion has obvious repercussions for historiographical conclusions, influencing what historical evidence and documentation is accessed by scholars. Of equal importance, it has serious ramifications for an archive that has been privileged for what Dorothy Sheridan has called historical ‘autobiography’ or ‘life-writing’.⁶⁷ Where narrative construction becomes the site of analysis, we have to understand how medium transformed the modes in which observers narrated ‘the self’. If researchers increasingly rely on Mass Observation as a valuable source for historical autobiography and the construction of ‘subjectivity’, we need to remain alert to the ways medium affects how that ‘self’ is constructed.

The hierarchy of medium will only be exacerbated when the Mass Observation Project (MOP) undergoes the same process of digitization as MOA. Revived in 1981, the MOP captures the transition to a new writing culture that occurred with the rise of the word-processor and the personal computer in the late 1980s and 1990s. Like the old MOA, the MOP collection remains divided between those who handwrote and those who used a writing machine, such as a typewriter, word processor, and PC. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the percentage of handwritten text to type mirrored that in 1937-38, with roughly 35% of Observers using a mechanical or electronic writing device to compose their day diary.⁶⁸ By 2006, this weighting

⁶⁷ Dorothy Sheridan, ‘Writing to the Archive: Mass-Observation as Autobiography,’ *Sociology* 27:2, 1993: 27-40.

⁶⁸ This number is based on the number of printed and handwritten text sent in to the Summer 1989 Directive ‘Diary for Thursday 15th of June’, the Spring 1992 Directive ‘One Day Diary’, the Spring 2006 Directive ‘One Day Diary’, Mass Observation Project, The Keep, University of Sussex. From now on shortened to MOP.

was reversed, with roughly 68% of observers typing up their ‘Day Diaries’.⁶⁹ Despite computers being expensive items to own in 1989, a few observers responded to the 1989 directive by computer, while the rest continued to use typewriters, electric typewriters and word-processors. Throughout the 1990s, more observers began using the PC as it became a feature of British households, even though many clung to their old typewriters. The 1995 collection of ‘Day Diaries’ reflects this transitional moment, as the medium used by observers became increasingly diverse, with some writing in pen, some continuing to use their old typewriters, and an increasing number using the word-processor and PC.⁷⁰

The variety of media within the MOP embeds a new ranking system into the archive, as the physical materials are transformed into digital text. OCR technology works best on computer-typed documents printed by a laser-jet printer. Those who continued to use manual typewriters, electronic typewriters, and word-processors, as well as those who printed from early *.matrix* printers, would have lower accuracy rates than those who wrote on a home computer and used a laser-jet printer. At the bottom of the hierarchy would be those who clung to their pen. Once again, this would transform the demographics of the national panel, reflecting the social dynamics of Britain in the early information age. Here the technophile, or the early adopter of computer hardware and software, would win over the technophobe, becoming easiest to locate through the search function. The 32% who continue to use the pen in 2006, likely to be of an older demographic, would decrease in visibility. Alongside this, the new wave of information technologies has transformed what and how observers write. The ability to cut, paste, edit, and save data has revolutionized writing culture once again, and as a result, transformed the way observers constructed subjectivity.⁷¹ Just as we have to pay

⁶⁹ Figure based on the Spring 2006 Directive, ‘One Day Diary’, MOP.

⁷⁰ Spring Directive 1995, ‘One Day Diary (Meals)’, MOP.

⁷¹ Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, *Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing*, Cambridge, Mass, 2016; James Baker and David Geiringer, ‘Space, Text and Selfhood: Encounters with the Home Computer in The Mass Observation Project Archive, 1991-2004’ (currently in preparation).

increased attention to the historiographical implications of medium within the MOA to understand how it creates new power structures within the digital environment, so too we should be alert to the complexity of writing cultures in the early digital age to understand which groups and subjects will be privileged by the search function.

IV.

Digital tools are transforming the way we read and process Mass Observation materials. The search function allows us to locate relevant texts, removing the labour of sifting through collections. However, it is through such material encounters that meaning frequently emerges from the MO archive. The digital is fundamentally, as Tanya E. Clement describes, a ‘*logocentric practice*’, elevating the word as the prime carrier of meaning.⁷² But in reading through Mass Observation materials meaning often extends far beyond the word, forcing us to read between the lines to recover nuance, innuendo and insinuation. Moreover, as Liz Moor and Emma Uprichard warn, the digital eliminates the materiality of Mass Observation documents, removing the rich array of meaning carried in material features such as the weight of paper or the smudge of a fingerprint.⁷³ The digital imposes new rubrics of interpretation and emphasis, transforming how meaning and value is located in the archive.

Understanding how the digital is transforming scholarship within Mass Observation thus needs to be included in the canon of methodological issues facing Mass Observation studies. Methodological issues have surrounded the use of Mass Observation materials since its foundation, as outlined by Annabella Pollen in her foundational article on Mass Observation

⁷² Tanya E. Clement, ‘The Ground Truth of DH Text Mining’, in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold, Lauren F. Klein, Minnesota, 2016, p. 534.

⁷³ Moor and Uprichard, ‘The Materiality of Method’; See also Maryanne Dever, ‘Provocations on the Pleasures of Archived Paper’, *Archives and Manuscripts* 41:3, 2013, pp. 173-182.

methodologies.⁷⁴ However, just as researchers have developed methods to grapple with issues of representativeness, singularity and mass, quantification, scale and sampling, and format, all at the heart of MO studies, we need to add a new category to this list, confronting the methodological issues introduced by the digital. This digital awareness might resemble what Joshua Sternfeld has coined ‘digital historiography’, the application of historiographic methods to the generation, representation, and preservation of sources within digital environments and the modes in which we access them.⁷⁵ Digital ‘observation’ would turn the lens back on MOO to understand how the digital interface introduces new historiographical issues within Mass Observation studies.

‘Digital historiography’ would not deny the role that digital methods can play in the next generation of Mass Observation studies. Indeed, the digital has the potential to intervene in Mass Observation methodologies in new ways. Natural Language Processing Software such as *Voyant* and *AntConc* are enabling researchers with little programming experience to process large amounts of data and recognize patterns within large corpuses.⁷⁶ These tools would allow us to conduct what Franco Moretti termed ‘distant reading’ within the MOA and MOP, opening it up to new forms of interpretation.⁷⁷ Digital methodologies could provide new perspectives on key subjects at the heart of Mass Observation studies, such as the ‘everyday’ or the ‘home’. They would allow us to approach these subjects not through object description but by mapping linguistic structures, sentiment, and narrative analysis, to name only a few applications of this software. We could also drill down into the archive by organizing results into demographic groups that could be mapped onto each other. Moreover, digital tools could track objects, terms, and patterns across time, allowing us to process comparisons across the MOA and MOP,

⁷⁴ See Pollen, ‘Research Methodology in Mass Observation Past and Present’.

⁷⁵ Sternfeld, ‘Archival Theory and Digital Historiography’.

⁷⁶ Voyant Tools is a web-based text analysis environment. [www.voyant-tools.org]. Laurence Anthony has developed a suite of software programmes for concordancing and textual analysis. [www.laurenceanthony.net.]

⁷⁷ Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading*, New York, 2013.

as well as chart relationships between the individual and the mass. Indeed, the application of digital methodologies could move us closer towards Harrison's original goal of developing an 'objective social science' attracting new disciplines (such as linguistics and information science) to the archive. As media archaeologists such as Wolfgang Ernst and Jussi Parikka have demonstrated, since historical memory is intimately tied to new media, we need to ask what new historical imaginaries will emerge from Mass Observation as these new tools are developed.⁷⁸

Digital historiography does not mean eliminating traces of the digital from Mass Observation studies. Nor does it necessitate distancing us from the material qualities of Mass Observation objects. Instead, it forces us to confront the materiality of Mass Observation objects to better understand the ways that they structure the digital environment, and as a consequence, our interpretation of British social memory. Rather, therefore, than dematerializing the object, the digital has politicized it as the key site in which knowledge is catalogued, represented and accessed.⁷⁹

Librarians are becoming increasingly attuned to the necessity of objects to be preserved in their original formats and not just extract the contents for digital data.⁸⁰ However, not only do we need to appreciate the materiality of the object, but we have to understand how its materiality is translated into digital text and how this structures the digital environment. Studying the media in which observers wrote, therefore, not only stresses the importance of factoring media into our studies of human history and material collections.⁸¹ It demonstrates

⁷⁸ Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive*, Minnesota, 2012.

⁷⁹ For more on the materiality of digital text see Johanna Drucker, 'Intimations of Immateriality: Graphical Form, Textual Sense, and the Electronic Environment', in *Reimagining Textuality: Textual Studies in the Late Age of Print*, ed. Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux and Neil Fraistat, Madison, 2001.

⁸⁰ Marlene Manoff, 'The Materiality of Digital Collections: Theoretical and Historical Perspectives', *Libraries and the Academy* 6:3, 2006, pp. 311-324.

⁸¹ There was a special addition of *Critical Inquiry* that addressed this issue. See James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Adrian Johns, 'Arts of Transmission: An Introduction,' *Critical Inquiry* 31:1, 2004, pp. 1-6.

how the historical particularity of medium and materiality shape digital environments. Not only do we need to be alert to the ways the digital de-materializes objects, but we need to be more aware of how the materiality of medium is translated into the digital environment entrenching new mechanisms of power and representation.

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