The end of the typing pool: New technologies, old stereotypes, and emotional reactions to workplace change in British print media

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In 1993, the country singer Mary Chapin Carpenter released the song "He Thinks He'll Keep Her." Already well-known for hits such as "Passionate Kisses" and "Down at the Twist and Shout," "He Thinks He'll Keep Her" was the sixth hit from Carpenter's fourth album *Come On, Come On*, which has now sold over 3 million copies.[1] The song is essentially the story of an underappreciated woman, married at a young age, who spends her life being a wife, caring for children, conducting the emotional labor of running a household and bending to her husband's every whim. The song, with the double meaning of "keep" (as in "keep her" financially, and "keep her" as in her continuing to be his wife), charts her eventual liberation from her husband and the stay-at-home life in which she was taken for granted. She begins a job in the typing pool, for which she receives minimum wage, and the song presents this as a positive development: the entry-level nature of the job, and all that the typing pool implies about repetition, is portrayed as preferable to her life of the previous sixteen years.

Carpenter's song gets at the paradox of the typing pool as a site of women's employment. In the relatively limited range of white-collar employment options for women who were not university graduates or who had not had further specialized training in the later decades of the twentieth century, the typing pool – a centralized room or section of typists which provided services across an entire company – was alternately portrayed as the best "non-professional" employment women could get, but also as a "dead-end" from which only an exceptionally lucky few could rise.

Carpenter's song uses the typing pool as a symbol of personal and economic liberation and is one of very few cultural texts to present the typing pool positively. Strikingly, however, by the time the song was released in the early 1990s, typing pools were disappearing. Although a few would endure later into the 1990s, typing pools

1 Mary Chapin Carpenter, "He Thinks He'll Keep Her," from *Come On, Come On*, Columbia Records (1993). Music and Lyrics by Mary Chapin Carpenter and Don Schlitz.

in larger firms had gradually been replaced by the advent of word-processing technology and, later, by the desktop computer. However, such was the strength of the stereotypes and tropes surrounding the typing pool that they persisted in discussions of women's work and white-collar work for the next decade or more, as well as remaining a short-hand for monotonous, repetitive, thankless work and a whole host of other assumptions. The end of the typing pool – denigrated though it was as a space and a structure – was such a visible and tangible sign of the sea change of technological progress that it generated significant comment and became a way for onlookers to grapple with the wider meanings of technological change, labor processes, and gendered work. Such commentary in some cases belatedly recognized typing as a skill, or considered the work in the context of wider businesses processes more seriously than previously. The continued references to the typing pool also suggested a fixity of association between women, typing work, and subordinate positions in the office. In this way, it functioned as a symbol of an imagined static past in a current world which was presented to readers as changing rapidly.

The focus of this chapter is what might be termed the "long moment" of the dismantling of the typing pool in Britain, as the computer gradually reshaped office work and called into question the normalized existence of a female staff dedicated to typing. As we will see, although the popular perception was often that the typing pool vanished very quickly, the process happened at differing speeds in different workplaces. Nevertheless, with the change – and, crucially, often *in anticipation of* the change – there was much commentary in the press and other public arenas about what it would mean and the impact it would have. Discussions focused on what the workplace might look like – sometimes quite literally with the space of the typing pool gone – and how new and more advanced technologies might change particular processes. There was some discussion occasionally of what this could mean for women's white-collar employment in terms of new opportunities and the ability to move to other types of work with greater responsibility and variety, but this remained peripheral to the range of emotions expressed about new technology and change more broadly.[2]

This chapter draws on discussions of the end of the typing pool in newspapers, magazines, and other public fora in order to capture the extent and range of reactions. These discussions in turn drew on commentaries from industry and elsewhere in the media, functioning as part of the "cultural circuit" in creating a loop of commentary, meaning that many representations of the typing pool were reliant on, and built on, pre-existing and long-established embedded ideas of what the typing pool

2 Trade unionists and feminist scholars did comment on these issues and were particularly concerned about the potential for female unemployment. See, for example, Morgall, "New Office Technology"; Tijdens, "Behind the Screens."

was.[3] Of particular interest here are newspapers (both daily national papers and the local, usually weekly, press), general-interest magazines, and women's magazines (with those considered here being monthly in frequency and aimed broadly at middle-class women under the age of around forty-five). The digital versions of these publications were searched in order to more easily identify passing references to "the typing pool" in articles, features, and advertisements where it might not have been obvious from the title or focus that there would be a reference. Such a method allows the finding of an incidental comment or the stray or unlikely metaphor and allows for a richer understanding of how the typing pool was perceived and conceptualized in its twilight years. It also allows us to discover the extent to which the idea of the typing pool persisted long after its demise and obsolescence, and how, as a gendered and somewhat classed occupation, it pervaded discussions about the negatives of the workplace in particular. The chapter also considers the appearance of the typing pool in responses to the UK's Mass Observation Project (MOP), begun in 1981.[4] MOP gathered written answers to questions on a wide variety of social and cultural issues from its panel of volunteer respondents. Although respondents were self-selecting and tended toward the educated and middle-class, and were often left-leaning politically,[5] the responses help to highlight the embedded understandings of the typing pool in the public consciousness and the ways in which these reflected and built on media messages. Digital searching of MOP's archives allows for the discovery of references to the typing pool in responses related directly to women's work but also in responses to questions that would not at first glance appear to have any relevance at all.

This chapter contributes to growing scholarship on work, gender, society, and technology at the very end of the twentieth century. There is, in general, still very little historiography on women's white-collar work post-1945 in the British context, especially when compared to the range of scholarship which exists for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, although the field for post-1945 work is growing, with important interventions in recent years by Laura Paterson, Laura Carter, and Eve Worth, amongst others.[6] Mar Hicks' work importantly highlights the depths

3 For a discussion of the operation of the "cultural circuit", see Summerfield and Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence*, 13–14.

4 The Mass Observation Project (MOP) is a revival of the Mass Observation social research organization originally begun in Britain in 1937. It was wound down in the early 1950s and then reinstated as the Mass Observation Project in 1981.

5 Hinton, "Seven Late Twentieth Century Lives," 96; Hinton, *Seven Lives from Mass Observation*.

6 On women's white-collar work pre-1945, see Zimmeck, "New Woman in the Machinery of Government"; Zimmeck, "Marry in Haste, Repent at Leisure"; Zimmeck, "Strategies and Stratagems"; Glew, *Gender, Rhetoric and Regulation*. On the post-1945 situation, see Worth and Paterson, "How Is She Going to Manage?"; Carter, "The Hairdresser Blues"; Worth, *Welfare State Generation*.

of gender discrimination in computing and the ways in which women were increasingly excluded as the power of computing became more evident.[7] Writing on the United States, Allison Elias has noted the vast number of women who worked in white-collar employment in this period and it is, she identifies, precisely because of the ubiquity of this work that these occupations for women have remained largely under the radar of historical analysis.[8] In some contexts the fluid relationship between secretaries and typists and the malleability of the boundaries between the two – secretaries typed, of course, but they also did much more – has meant that the discussions of both have become somewhat intermeshed in the historiography; what is true for secretaries is not always true for members of the typing pool and vice versa. As Michelle Murphy has remarked, "[t]he personal secretary's intimate relationship with management; the valuing of middle-class social skills and dress, and her varied tasks stood in stark contrast to the work of the 'girls' operating office machinery in typing pools or at switchboards."[9] Likewise, although there is a significant historical literature on technological change and its impact on society, there is currently less of this for the dawning of the desktop computer age and what it meant for the typing pool. Much of the extant literature on the end of the typing pool and the advent of word processing is by sociologists researching and writing contemporaneously; there is little by historians reappraising this moment from a later vantage point.[10] This chapter, then, offers contributions to the histories of white-collar work, to women's work, to histories of reactions to technological change, to histories of the 1980s and 1990s, and the role of the media as a discursive space for images of gendered work to be reiterated and maintained.

We begin with the history of typing as an occupation for women and the development of the typing pool in Britain. The chapter then examines print media coverage of the development of new technologies and the disappearance of typing pools, analyzing in particular how these developments were conceptualized and the range of emotions expressed. The chapter argues that the strength and persistence of negative emotions about the typing pool is particularly revelatory about attitudes to gender and work but that, within these, there are glimpses of other emotions such as curiosity and excitement, as well as nostalgia for an apparently less-complicated past. There was also some belated acknowledgement of the skill and individuality of the typist herself.

7 Hicks, *Programmed Inequality*.

8 Elias, *Rise of Corporate Feminism*, 7–8.

9 Murphy, *Sick Building Syndrome*, 46.

10 On sociological work, see, for example, Golding, "Problems in the Concept of Secretary"; Tijdens, "Behind the Screens"; Wajcman, "From Women and Technology."

Typing as women's work and the emergence of the typing pool in early-to-mid twentieth-century Britain

Whilst typing pools as a specific means of organizing typing work had not existed until the 1930s in Britain, women had been employed as typists since the 1870s and historians have noted how this very quickly became an almost entirely female profession.[11] By the 1980s, there was therefore approximately a century of this work being very specifically women's work, and half a century or so of the typing pool as a physical space and organizing structure to contain these women in workplace hierarchies.

It is not possible to precisely date the creation of typing pools in Britain as the idea seems to have been picked up from the USA and transported into individual firms piecemeal, but a search of the *British Newspaper Archive* database provides a useful proxy. Articles in 1934 point to the existence of typing pools in York and a 1936 article reports discussion of the establishment of a typing pool at Reigate Town Hall in Surrey.[12] In the following two decades, typing pools became ubiquitous in firms and offices of all sizes. Although typing pools varied according to company size, the central idea was that the typing services across a company – or at least across several departments within a company – were "pooled," meaning that whichever typist was next available would undertake a requested typing task. The belief was that this made the production of typed documents faster and avoided the under-use of typing staff time that would occur were they permanently allocated to particular teams or individuals. The typing pool set-up thus tended to create a high-pressure environment. Workers had very little personal space and autonomy over their work and the work itself was often repetitive and unvaried. In the late 1960s, the sound level in a typing pool was measured at 65 decibels. For comparison, a vacuum cleaner was measured at 69 and being inside a small sports car going 50 miles per hour was measured at 75.[13]

11 There is a significant literature on women as typists and shorthand typists in this period. See, for example, Keep, "Blinded by the Type"; Thurschwell, "Supple Minds and Automatic Hands"; Zimmeck, "New Woman in the Machinery of Government"; Zimmeck, "Mysteries of the Typewriter."

12 "Manageresses etc Wanted," *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, April 20, 1934; "Reigate Economy Committee Proposed," *Surrey Mirror*, April 3, 1936.

13 *The Economist*, March 22, 1969, 67. In 1957, an advertisement for Newalls Insulation Co. claimed that typing pools with plaster walls absorbed only 2% of the sound generated. See *The Economist*, May 25, 1957, 660. For other safety concerns, see "Dangers of Typing Pool Life," *Liverpool Echo*, August 4, 1970. See also Murphy, *Sick Building Syndrome.*

Perceptions and realities of the typing pool

Owing to how it functioned, members of the typing pool were often seen as interchangeable rather than as individuals with some kind of control over their work – a perception which had also been typical for telephonists and filing clerks, and for workers in a range of blue-collar jobs.[14] The typing pool was a significant source of female employment and was simultaneously perceived as a respectable occupation for working-class women to aspire to whilst also being seen as unfulfilling work and as an occupation undertaken by those with low aspirations.[15] The latter notion was also complicated by the fact that there were so comparatively few careers truly open in practice to graduate women or women who had stayed in full-time education to the age of eighteen: therefore, the typing pool for many years had been a site of cross-class employment for women.[16] It was also a site of employment that could be embodied with different meanings: whilst the lack of prospect of advancement in the job might have been keenly felt by some women, or the work perceived as "beneath" them by others in their social circle, the differentiation between white-collar and blue-collar employment that the typing pool symbolized could be of paramount importance for other women. It was also a site of employment for women of all ages, but the language of "girls" referred both to the perceived youth of the majority of the workers and was also a tool of infantilization. Race and ethnicity were also important in women's experiences of the typing pool. Typing pools in all anglosphere nations were overwhelmingly white in the middle decades of the twentieth century, though, as scholars point out for the US context, one of the significant gains of the civil rights movement was the right of women of color to enter white-collar workplaces which had been largely previously closed to them.[17] Thus, for them, joining the typing pool could be a moment of progression and economic and employment liberation. Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe also point to the fact that in Britain, Black and Asian women were granted space in typing pools and office work more widely just at the very moment of technological change in the 1980s, but that work involving the newer

14 Glew, *Gender, Rhetoric and Regulation*, 16–63; Fremlin, *War Factory*.

15 See, for example, "A Choice of Styles for the Office," *Mansfield and Sutton Recorder*, October 21, 1982.

16 The lack of real opportunities for women which were not typing or hairdressing is widely discussed in the historiography on careers from the 1930s onwards. See, for example, Carter, "The Hairdresser Blues"; Spencer, *Gender, Work and Education*. This was also observed by women themselves. For example, a woman born in the 1920s told MOP that "unless you were dedicated to going to university … you were likely to be advised to do secretarial work, which you were led to believe could lead to all kinds of interesting jobs but which in practice landed you in the typing pool." MOP, 1991 Spring Directive, F, born 1920s, South-West England.

17 Elias, *Rise of Corporate Feminism*, 36–37; Murphy, *Sick Building Syndrome*, 55.

technologies remained effectively closed to them.[18] Jessica White's recent work emphasizes that clerical work was often a positive work choice for Black women in Britain, particularly those who were second-generation migrants, but that racism meant it remained difficult for them to enter or to then progress in the sector.[19]

The ability to type – precisely because it was designated as "women's work" and was often done by women as a full-time occupation – was generally vastly underrated as a skill.[20] The denigration of typing work, and more particularly the typing pool as a specifically female site for this work, was the latest installment in a long history of denigrating women's work because it was work done by women.[21] The women-only nature of the work was also seen to justify lower pay and to be less important than work done by men.[22] Furthermore, because it was a process that relied on dexterity of the fingers and accuracy in a repetitive process, it was seen, to a certain extent, as manual labor (although clearly, like much other manual labor, it required significant concentration and attention to detail to avoid mistakes).[23] Indeed, the set-up of the typing pool as a function to deal with the ebbs and flows in the demand for typing work might be seen as a production line for typed documents and was part and parcel of what Juriaan van Meel has identified regarding offices appearing more like factories by the 1970s.[24] Stereotypes persisted that typing pool work was easy, unskilled or – presumably because it involved working with machinery – a mechanical process involving little or no thinking on the part of the worker. One journalist born in the 1950s told the MOP, during an answer to a question about the pace of life, that she did "sometimes think how wonderful it would be to be, say, on a supermarket check-out, doing something quite mindless and without respon-

18 Bryan et al., *Heart of the Race*, 51.

19 White, "Black Women's Work," 519–543.

20 For a discussion of scholarship on the under-valuing of skill in women's work, see Moss, *Women, Workplace Protest*, 5.

21 The literature here is significant. See, for example, Zimmeck, "Jobs for the Girls"; Boston, *Women Workers and the Trade Unions*; Galvan, *Sympathetic Medium*; Mullin, *Working Girls*; Glew, *Gender, Rhetoric and Regulation*; Glew, "Maiden, Whom We Never See."

22 Boston, *Women Workers and the Trade Unions*, 251; Wigham, *From Humble Petition to Militant Action*, 130–32.

23 It is less prevalent in this period but when typing (or typewriting, as it was then called) emerged as mass employment for women, there was significant discussion about whether women were "just" typing without really taking in the material they were reading, or whether they were also cognizant of the material and could think about it and learn from it. Keep, "Blinded by the Type"; Thurschwell, "Supple Minds"; Galvan, *Sympathetic Medium*; Mullin, *Working Girls*.

24 Van Meel, "Origins of New Ways of Working," 362–63. For an example of an organization wanting the typing pool to function even more like a factory, see "Enquiry Urged into Council Administration," *Birmingham Post*, May 3, 1960.

sibility. Or a secretary in a typing pool."[25] Although the typing pool reference is in a new sentence (and is an interesting example of the blurring of roles of secretary and typist), the inference is that this occupation came to her as she was composing her answer and thinking about other jobs where there was, apparently, no responsibility and where the worker could "switch off." Finally, as the typing pool was the site in each office space which was usually almost entirely feminine, it was also perceived as a space in which young, pretty, and impressionable women were located.[26] Typing pools were thus seen, largely by outsiders, as sites of gossip, "bitchiness," and where the male gaze was sanctioned.[27] These perceptions then became cemented and the typing pool became a shorthand for frivolity, inattention to work, and, potentially, malicious conversations in the office.

Despite the various nuances, and differences in identity and the pluralities of experience amongst typists, the typing pool in popular culture was also uniformly positioned as something women must be desperate to escape. The women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s, especially in the USA, pointed to the fact that the typing pool was often not women's choice of employment (a point which also irritated those women for whom it was a positive choice and for whom the work was a source of pride) but it was somewhere they ended up because of the structural discriminations in place for women as workers.[28] However, the notion that the typing pool was somewhere from which to escape had been solidified over decades, no matter that it might be fulfilling work for some of its workers, or that the work being done required significant skills, concentration, and attention to detail.[29] Tropes about the typing pool as a "dead end" and something for women to avoid at all costs were well-established and ever-present by the mid-twentieth century in Britain in both women's magazines and in print culture more widely. In 1964, for example, an advert for the Women's Royal Army Corps (WRAC) suggested that if women were feeling stuck in the typing pool or were "the oldest girl in the typing pool" they could

25 MOP, 1992 Spring Directive, J1549, F, born 1950s.

26 For a discussion of ageism and employers realizing the value of older and more experienced women in the typing pool and secretarial work more widely, see "Sandra Chapman's Column," *Belfast Telegraph*, May 22, 1973.

27 See, for example, Chris Welles, "Male Menopause," *Cosmopolitan*, July 1973, 94–97; Janet Herrtage, "Rubble, Bubble, Toil and Trouble," *She*, January 1976, 19; Joan Burnie, "Whatever Happened to the Mistress?," *Cosmopolitan*, March 1979, 168. See also the cartoon by Bernard Cookson, "With Your Wife, Parker – not Miss Trimbody from the Typing Pool!," *Evening News*, October 1, 1975.

28 Elias, *Rise of Corporate Feminism*, 32–36.

29 Katie Hindmarch-Watson, for an earlier period, notes how personal service work, such as typing and document-production, required specific knowledge and abilities but that this implicitly had to remain hidden. Hindmarch-Watson, *Serving a Wired World*, 7.

join the WRAC instead.[30] In 1970, Hoover, the vacuum cleaner and household appliance company, announced that it had abandoned its typing pool, gleefully titling an advertisement "Who Hates Typing Pools?" and clearly hoping that this would be persuasive enough to attract applicants.[31] *She* magazine in 1972 referred to women being "fed up to the teeth with a dead-end typing pool routine."[32] A *Cosmopolitan* profile of journalist Shirley Lord in 1976 used the language of battle and described her as "having fought her way up from the typing pool," a way of framing a female life story that was very common.[33] It is also telling that women's magazines frequently repeated the tropes of the typing pool as being among the worst places to work, rather than ever thinking about their readers as potential holders of positions in typing pools, which, given the ubiquity of the typing pool and the barriers to entry for other types of administrative or managerial work for women, was likely to be the case for some of their readership.[34]

Although its function remained largely the same over its lifetime, the technology of the typing pool evolved. Changes in technology for copying documents, for example, meant that numbers of staff needed in a typing pool could be reduced from the late 1950s.[35] Electronic typewriters gradually replaced manual ones. In the 1970s, as audio technology improved and dictaphones became widely available, many typing pools switched gradually to a mix of shorthand or copy-typing (essentially typing up from shorthand notes or longhand drafts) and audio-typing (typing from an audio recording).[36] One MOP respondent noted in 1981 that after a period of time out of the Civil Service to nurse her husband, she had not been able to return to her former

30 *Sunday Mirror*, September 6, 1964.

31 The advert ran in a number of publications. See, for example, *Harrow Observer*, February 13, 1970, 40.

32 Janet Barber, "And a Good Job Too!," *She*, January 1972, 26–27.

33 Catherine Stott, "What it Takes to Get to the Top and Stay There," *Cosmopolitan*, August 1976, 47. There were other stories of successful women, from time to time, presented as having escaped the typing pool. See, for example, the story of the novelist Barbara Taylor Bradford in "I've Always Had a Head for Writes," *Daily Mail*, July 16, 1998, 29.

34 In addition to the examples given above, see also the following *Cosmopolitan* articles in particular. Hazel Evans and Anne Lambton, "How to Trap a Rich Man – and Keep Him for as Long as You Want," *Cosmopolitan*, July 1972, 92–94, 127, 131; Judith Krantz, "How to Cope Realistically with Change," *Cosmopolitan*, January 1976, 56–57, 61, 113; Nancy Foy, "Money: How to Earn More," *Cosmopolitan*, September 1979, 138–39, 141. There was one article across this period that was about how to effect positive change: Dinah Hall, "You Too Could Have Any Office Like This!," *Cosmopolitan*, April 1980.

35 See, for example, "Machinery Halves a Government Typing Pool," *Birmingham Daily Post*, February 24, 1959.

36 "RVH Out-patients' Clinic Will End Waiting," *Belfast Telegraph*, August 13, 1968; "Burgh to Streamline its Departments," *Wishaw Press*, February 7, 1969; "Typing Pool," *Harrow Observer*, May 8, 1970.

typing pool job because the typing pool now solely undertook audio typing and she was, as she put it, "totally deaf."[37]

These changes in typing pool technology took place alongside the emergence of computing possibilities. Indeed, data processing (and its necessary corollary, data entry) became a significant feature of workplace operations, alongside the possibilities for partial automation of document production afforded by word processors and the growing prevalence of both computer hardware and software.[38] The typing pool thus coexisted with technological change elsewhere in office work, and, importantly, women were employed as users of many of these technologies, meaning that their typing skills were being combined with other skills more specific to these new technologies.[39] However, such was the power and embeddedness of a static, timeless image that these more gradual shifts were less clear to outsiders.

The trope of the typing pool and reactions to technological change

What happened, then, to the tropes and engrained cultural ideas about the typing pool as the direction of technological change meant that there was no longer a need for it? Owing to its ubiquity in the workplace and, just as importantly, in cultural understandings of white-collar work, the typing pool as an idea featured in discussions of future technologies and offices, even if that featuring was in the negative and was used as a distancing measure. Many of the print media discussions about the end of the typing pool and the coming of the computer age constituted, and built on, negative perceptions of the typing pool. Notably, too, as the mainstream press covered technological transitions there was some recognition that typing itself was a skill and in fact the base skill for many aspects of word processor and personal computer operation. There was some interesting but very preliminary discussion of how the abandonment of the typing pool might affect women's employment. Strikingly, once typing pools had fundamentally disappeared, there was some nostalgia and even romanticizing in some of the depictions, even if the typist herself was still maligned or caricatured. There were, then, interesting shifts but ultimately the culturally imagined figure of the typist in the typing pool adhered to the long-established negative trope, particularly as she became a historical figure rather than a feature of the contemporary moment.

37 Mass Observation Project, 1981 Royal Wedding Directive, C133, Female, South-East England, response to "General" section.

38 Haigh, "Remembering the Office of the Future." For a discussion of this in the West German context, see Schlombs, "Built on the Hands of Women."

39 Hicks, *Programmed Inequality*.

As word processors and then the personal desktop computer emerged, there were all kinds of discussions about efficiency and productivity. There was evidence by 1979 that word processors saved on costs in the typing pool but, at the same time, companies found that savings and efficiency were not as great as they wished if new technology was introduced too quickly and without proper thought.[40] The capability to edit documents on-screen and then to save and replicate them meant that word processors were initially attractive to businesses. However, as some reporters noted, improving the productivity of the typing pool was not actually that important in cost-efficient terms, precisely because typists were the lowest-paid clerical workers. Furthermore, businesses soon realized that much of their outgoing mail, or at least follow-up mail to an initial letter, needed customizing, so the reproducibility of documents via word-processing packages was less important than it initially seemed.[41] Others realized that gathering the data to decide whether to change the typing pool fully over to word processors at this stage would take more time and money at the outset than was wise to spend.[42] There was also discussion about how to manage staff numbers when introducing technology, essentially making sure that staff were either not left with nothing to do or that they were not dismissed or assigned to a new role too quickly. Throughout the very late 1970s and 1980s, too, there was periodic coverage of firms either with too many typists or with too few and struggling to recruit, pointing to the sense of flux and the difficulties with timing in reshaping the workforce.[43] It was a notable feature of this reporting that readers were assured that fears about, or sadness on behalf of, staff potentially being made redundant were emotions that they did not have to feel. Articles were quick to tell readers that staff reductions could be ensured through processes such as "natural wastage," a not particularly palatable business term which referred to staff choosing to leave.[44] The gender of the staff here was paramount, too, in discussions of wastage: although the marriage bar had disappeared from women's employment contracts several decades before, there was still a cultural expectation which aligned womanhood with wifehood and motherhood and which meant some women might leave employment at

40 "Electronic Post," *The Economist*, August 4, 1979, 76–77; Golding, "Problems in the Concept of Secretary," 106.

41 "Word Processors: It Won't sit on Your Knee," *The Economist*, June 4, 1977, 128.

42 "Word Processors," 128; "Last Word for the Word Processor," *The Economist*, July 25, 1981, 83.

43 See, for example, Peter Morris, "Too Many in Typing Pool: Civic Centre 70 per Cent Overstaffed – Report," *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, May 7, 1980; John Reynolds, "Crisis in the Civic Centre Typing Pool," *Uxbridge and West Drayton Gazette*, September 11, 1986.

44 See, for example, "Meet the New-Look Typing Pool: The Key to Saving Cash and Time," *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, May 12, 1978. For a story on the US making the same point, see Jack Hayes, "Computers Engine of Clerical Change," *Chicago Tribune*, March 18, 1990.

least temporarily when they married or were expecting a child.[45] More widely, the assertion that female unemployment was not a concern should not, of course, be taken at face value. It is currently unclear, and indeed hard to determine, how many typists in typing pools were made redundant versus being redeployed or retrained for other roles. As Natalie Thomlinson has pointed out, too, in amongst the emotional heft of (often working-class) male unemployment in this period, female unemployment was far less visible, and it was often hard for the wider public to recognize women's loss of jobs *as unemployment* in the same way as men's was, something which was reinforced by the UK government narrowing how it categorized women's unemployment in the 1980s.[46]

Press coverage went into some detail about new features of workload and team management with new technologies. In 1979 the *Newcastle Evening Chronicle* featured an advertorial about the "Thought Tank 193" which allowed typists to type up dictated text whilst recording was still ongoing. Strikingly, in relation to notions of productivity and efficiency, readers were told that the "supervisor has a full statistical picture of the work going through the typing centre" allowing the supervisor to understand "how each typist [was] coping."[47] This suggests an acknowledgement of the demands of the work, the process of interaction between technology and operator, and an emotional understanding of pressure. The monitoring of a typist's progress was not new in the sense that typing pool supervisors had always overseen and allocated work, but the framing of it in this manner suggested a more futuristic, technology-enabled understanding of a typist's ability to respond to the workload demands made of her.

Likewise, there were numerous articles which marveled at the document-production speed of word-processor technology in the instances where the bulk of the text was uniform and there needed to be only minor customizations for individual recipients. In May 1978, the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* ran a story headlined "Meet the New-Look Typing Pool: The Key to Saving Cash and Time." It reported on the installation of an IBM System 6:

> A computerised machine which types at 1,100 words a minute has proved a big success for a Coventry firm of solicitors.
> It can do the work of 10 typists and, in the nine months it has been working, has become an indispensable time and money-saver. …
> Although the system is highly sophisticated, it is comparatively simple to use.

45 Glew, "A New Phase of Activism," 545–63. Adequate childcare was also a factor in this decision. See McCarthy, *Double Lives*, 323–83.

46 Thomlinson, "Women and Unemployment."

47 "The Office of the Future: What's Going on in the Typing Pool?," *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, September 17, 1979. See also "How Unilever Cut the Typing Pool," *West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser*, February 28, 1980.

> Much of the firm's work involves standardised documents and this "hard copy" is stored on discs which are fed into the computer. …
> The operator uses a traditional typewriter keyboard with additional buttons to produce the computerised copy on a small video screen.
> She can then fill in extra details, such as names and addresses, by typing these on to the screen.

"And you don't have to be a typist to use it," the article assured at the end. "A fortnight's tuition is all that is necessary, though a proficient typist can obviously work the keyboard at greater speed."[48] This was one of a number of moments of at least partial recognition that typing required more skill than had previously been acknowledged. In 1986 the *Western Evening Herald* reported on Plymouth Council's switchover to new word processors, the costs involved and how work would be structured. A Social Democratic Party city council member cautioned, "I would rather have a back-up team of people who can still type and who don't need a word processor to write a letter."[49] Typing was seen as the skill here and the advancement in technology as de-skilling and risky. The "team of people who can still type" was essentially a synonym for the typing pool and suggested both a concern about change and a desire to cling to the old set-up. Such acknowledgement of skill was also a feature of advertisements for training (or perhaps retraining). In 1990 the employment agency Brook Street ran a series of print adverts highlighting the "Brook Audition" package which would, amongst other things, help job seekers develop their keyboard skills and "cross-train" them in other software packages. Although the advert did not outright say this, it is very clear that applicants who were already proficient typists would be much more successful and able to complete the training and assessment much more quickly.[50] Again, this was a tacit acknowledgement that typing as a skill now had added value.

There were also interesting discussions about how women workers would interact with new technology. In June 1979 the *Cheshire Observer* ran an article with the headline "Typing Pool Monotony Eased by Chips" and reported on how "Secretary Linda Brady" typed 1,500 invitations to an event after "one easy lesson." The report argued that "a silicon chip at her fingertips showed the typewriter how to do the donkey work, once Linda tapped out the basic letter, and fed in a file of names and addresses." The process description here is interesting: the labor of producing a typed document is largely described as "donkey work," the silicon chip helps the typewriter

48 "Meet the New-Look Typing Pool: The Key to Saving Cash and Time," *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, May 12, 1978.

49 Guy Fleming, "City Officers Refute Cheap Labour Claim," *Western Evening Herald*, August 5, 1986.

50 See *Sandwell Evening Mail*, Thursday March 8, 1990, though the advert featured widely across a range of publications in 1990.

technology, and the operator does the more complicated elements. Mike Jenkinson, the director of the firm featured in the article, reassured readers at the end: "Word processors don't replace typists, they help them sit back and do something more vital while the machine types the repeated section of letters and documents, such as wills and contracts."[51] The phrasing was telling of shifts in thinking about technology: the image of sitting back conveys relaxing – something which women in the typing pool were accused of doing all too often – but it was in this "sitting back" and doing less physical or mechanical work that the worker was doing something more important. Such reporting gestured at a future reconceptualization of work processes that was not yet mapped out.

It is also significant at the same time that the cemented presence of the typing pool as a part of the workstream in businesses meant that it was difficult initially to see how work might be structured to no longer need a typing pool. In the examples mentioned above featuring the word processors with microchip technology, for example, it was still assumed that the typist would be designated to produce the documents; clearly, the shift from the typing pool creating documents to workers in other roles being able to produce their own documents was a conceptual shift that would take time. Similarly, in the early 1990s, there were numerous job advertisements in which typing pool typists or supervisors were being recruited not to work on typewriters but word processors and, later, WordPerfect.[52] The typing pool was clearly part of the office lexicon and work organization, even if the reorganization of work was not far away – or was already underway – with the increasing availability of the desktop computer by the 1990s. The detailed ways in which work was reorganized with the realization that document-production no longer had to end with the typing pool would be a fascinating topic to explore for this period, but it is outside the scope of this chapter.

The typing pool as a female space was also used as a gendered metaphor in discussions of new technology. The UK publication *The Economist* wrote regularly on technological change and its implications for office and business environments. It attached a whole range of thoughts and emotions to the current state of the typing pool and its perceived inefficiencies. In 1985, it began an article by noting that "[t]he word processors of the future will do more than save time in the typing pool," suggesting there were current inefficiencies or time-wasting or simply less powerful technology.[53] In 1986, a report on early voice-to-screen technology declared that "the door" between the spoken and the written word "is guarded by the formidable power of the typing pool," referring to the power sometimes resentfully attributed

51 "Typing Pool Monotony Eased by Chips," *Cheshire Observer*, June 22, 1979.

52 See, for example, *Liverpool Echo*, August 9, 1990 and *Barnoldswick & Earby Times*, November 4, 1994.

53 "And Now for Sentence Processors," *The Economist*, January 12, 1985, 79.

to the typing pool in the inverse of the actual office hierarchy. Notably, the typing pool as a collective was given these characteristics of power, showing that the "pool" was viewed as a group rather than the typists as individual people.[54] The article suggested that for now the voice-recognition element of the software was subpar and that "a good audio typist can beat the pants off any machine yet devised. But bad ones will soon feel the cold breath of mechanical competition."[55] The mix of frivolous, competitive, and gendered metaphor about the individual audio typist versus giving the machine human qualities – the ability to breathe, even if the breath was cold – suggested a paradoxical set of emotions about technology: it could be more like people, but it could also position itself as better than people. Such discussions and descriptions pointed to a sense of futurity, an understanding of the newness and potential of technology, but also the threat it posed to workers – in this case women workers, whom the magazine was explicitly warning. By 1987, an *Economist* columnist argued that because word processors allowed the easy correction of mistakes, typists had "moved out of the servant-girl stage and have their own servants called word processers[sic] that do the job painlessly."[56] The sense here of "growing up" or "evolution" and new hierarchies is telling of the fact that white collar work remained structured by power dynamics but that a new relationship was possible between user and machine.

There were other things that the typing pool clearly symbolized too, and its feminized nature was paramount in this, though in a more positive way. Writing in 1981 on the projected development of specialized computer systems and the development of word processors, *The Economist* predicted that what it referred to as the "personal 'work station'" of the future, to which every office worker would have access would have its origins in the "friendly word processor (which started life in the humble typing pool) rather than the more daunting data processor (which sprang from the boffin's backroom)."[57] The cozy, feminized word processor was clearly preferred over the intimidating, masculinized, scientific data processor – with the implications that the similarity with the machines used for decades by typists meant that these would therefore be accessible to all, in part because they must be easier to understand.

By the 1990s, the typing pool was evoked in various ways as part of either a nostalgic comment on the passage of time or a continued attachment to a fixed but outdated idea.[58] In October 1990, for example, *The Scotsman* noted in passing that "[t]he

54 Notably, *The Economist* was interested in the concept of giving groups agency. A 1976 article suggested intra-firm competitions and the ability for typists to set their own working hours and work rates. See "Intrapreneurial Now," *The Economist*, April 17, 1982, 47–51.

55 "Technology Brief: Its Master's Voice," *The Economist*, November 15, 1986, 103.

56 "Parkinson's New Law: Need the Future Be Boring?," *The Economist*, May 9, 1987, 20.

57 *The Economist*, July 25, 1981, 83.

58 I am grateful to Amy Thomas for helpful discussions in developing my thinking on continued attachment to a fixed idea.

clicking of typewriter keys may have been replaced by the buzz of a word processor."[59] In 1994, the *Newcastle Journal* reported on the frenetic extent of change over the past decade, noting that "it's hard to imagine that the pace of change could speed up at all." The report continued: "Ten years ago, most journalists were still bashing out their stories on old Remington typewriters, and many offices still had a huge typing pool – the direction of lustful gazes from the workshops and the boardrooms."[60]

Even in describing its demise, the stereotypes of the young, attractive and objectified members of the typing pool were reinforced. The use of "still" implied the long-standing but now archaic nature of the typing pool, whilst also harking back to something which had gone. Similarly, a 1991 article in *Scotland on Sunday* ran with the headline "A Woman's Place is no Longer in the Typing Pool." Clearly playing on the old adage "a woman's place is in the home," the headline pointed to the fact that the typing pool had been women's place in the business world, whilst also drawing on the established notions of trying to escape it. The article focused on a network set up to widen opportunities for women and to provide a source of information about training opportunities, and stands as one of the examples of realizing these technological changes might bring positive change for women.[61]

In August 1981, the *Newcastle Evening Chronicle* featured an article with a local businesswoman about word processors and how they were essentially changing the game in office work. Interestingly, the article had been trailed the week before as an examination of the "silicon chip revolution that is sweeping offices," underscored by the key question "But will that mean an end to that typing pool glamour?," suggesting a romanticizing of, or nostalgia toward, this particular stereotype of femininity and feature of women's work – and also that one of the chief attributes of the typing pool was not the skill and work it offered but the physical characteristics and appearance of those who occupied it.[62] The article, when published, took no such line and in fact might be read as an advertorial for the business in question and the associated training courses readers could sign up for. Notably, though, the article did contain its own ingrained sexism, referring to Hazel Moodie, the business owner, as "petite, pretty and far too feminine for anyone to imagine that she knows about machines."[63] The continued gendering of technology and roles in the workplace was very clear here.

Other passing references in press coverage tell us something further about the immovable stereotypes about typists and the typing pool. In the very decade marked

59 "Stepping Stones to Promotion Across the Typing Pool," *The Scotsman*, October 25, 1990.

60 Peter Cunliffe, "It's All Change in the Office: Technology in the Typing Pool," *Newcastle Journal*, April 27, 1994.

61 "A Woman's Place is No Longer in the Typing Pool," *Scotland on Sunday*, May 26, 1991.

62 Newcastle Evening Chronicle, July 31, 1981.

63 "Who's Afraid of the Word Processor?," *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, August 6, 1981

by the shift from typing pools to word processors to ultimately personal computers, the typing pool stereotype was evoked again and again as a shorthand for women perceived as unserious and untalented. In 1991, the *Daily Mirror*'s preview of TV shows commented "Have you ever wondered what happens to all the hopeful people on *Opportunity Knocks?* You know, the secretaries or hair dressers who dream of the big time but after fifteen minutes of fame end up back in the typing pool or doing old ladies' perms."[64] In 1997, the newspaper *Sunday Life* ran an article about starting work which it illustrated with a still from the film *9 to 5*, one of the archetypal filmic portrayals of female office work (and in the case of this film, female solidarity in the workplace) which still clearly had significant purchase seventeen years on from its release. The section of "Don'ts" at the bottom of the page is headed "Sinking without trace in the typing pool."[65] Although there were typing pools at some firms still at this point, in many more organizations and offices, typing pools were long gone. It is possible that in using this trope journalists were reaching for a shorthand to describe those they saw as broadly lacking in ambition, or to describe jobs that were seen as insufferable, but it is also possible that this stereotype was useable because it was so recognizable and could still be deployed in the face of technological change. Either way, it is notable that the negative sentiments about the typing pool were still uppermost.

Conclusion

The typing pool was a feature of offices in Britain and elsewhere in the mid-to-late twentieth century and the stereotypical depiction of it became a cultural trope and a shorthand for low-paid and low-status women's work. With technological change – principally the ability to create and edit documents at a workstation and, eventually, the widespread availability of word processors and desktop computers – the typing pool became obsolete. This chapter has traced print media discussions of the typing pool from its heyday to the point of its dismantling and just beyond, arguing that so engrained was the cultural understanding of the typing pool that it remained a significant reference point in discussions about the workplace, and the work process, of the future. These discussions conveyed a range of emotions, from excitement and curiosity in some cases to anxiety about the future. In later years, the typing pool was invoked as a means to express nostalgia along with continued disdain for low-status women's work such as typing.

Reactions to the end or the projected end of the typing pool tell us much, then, about society's perceptions of changing technology and changing gender roles. The

64 Discussion of "You've Got to Be Joking," *Daily Mirror*, April 27, 1991.

65 "First Day Blues," *Sunday Life,* August 17, 1997.

end of the typing pool was discussed as a key manifestation of technological change and often in terms of the idea that an annoyance or negative thing was coming to an end. However, the durability of the image, in a period where clerical and administrative work was in a state of flux, signifies an attachment to what were perceived as more fixed and solid ideas of "the office." In turn, these ideas were predicated on the notion of the majority of women in an office workplace being in one, subordinate place, which was disrupted now that the typing pool was gone.

Typing had been so identified with women, but as technology raised questions of how documentation was produced and office processes were constructed, typing's identification with women would have to shift. Although there was some brief recognition that the end of the typing pool would mean that men would now have to learn to type,[66] it is significant how rarely the voice of the typist herself was heard in the coverage of the end of the typing pool. Just as there was little in-depth discussion in the mainstream media of the potential for new work this might bring to women, there was also strikingly little media interest in women typists' own views. This is indicative of both the lesser importance continually attached to women in paid work even at this stage of the late twentieth century and the low status with which this work continued to be associated.

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66 See, for example, "Electronic Post," *The Economist*, August 4, 1979; "Stepping Stones to Promotion Across the Typing Pool," *The Scotsman*, October 25, 1990; "Real Men Don't Type Slowly," *The Times*, July 28, 1999.

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