Technologies of Writing
Aileen Douglas

The displacement of human work by that of machines is a significant social issue in contemporary society, and one that has long intrigued the popular imagination. One kind of work now performed with much less frequency by human beings is that of manual writing.

The Printing Press – My work focuses on the eighteenth century and a major research interest of mine is the representation of physicality and the body. Most recently I have been studying relationships between the technology of the printing press and the practice and understanding of script. In the early eighteenth century, observers such as the novelist Daniel Defoe could announce that manual writing was at an end, and that the printing press had ‘out-run the Pen’. In fact, the opposite was the case, as printing encouraged more writing of various kinds.

There is a colonial aspect to this as well. Writing was understood as a mark of civilization. The Incorporated Society for English Protestant Schools in Ireland, active from the 1730s on, intended to make Ireland Protestant by making Irish children literate and inculcating in them habits of labour. The archive of the Society, in the library of Trinity College Dublin, shows an obsessive interest in the writing samples produced by children in Charter Schools all over Ireland.

Distinctive autography – In the early modern period, the shapes of letters on the page, the ‘hand’ in which a document was written, was determined by the function of that document. In the eighteenth century, many of these various hands disappear or are simplified and English round hand, the ancestor of modern handwriting, emerges. The idea that handwriting is distinctive, and reveals character, now develops. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the collection and interpretation of autographs is a prominent aspect of polite culture and engraved autographs of notable individuals appear in print.

As print expanded, the ‘author’s hand’ became a novel focus of interest. A poet such as William Blake, who was also an engraver, could control all aspects of his works’ production. Other writers of the period, such as the Irish novelist Maria Edgeworth, understood contemporary interest in the autograph as an unwelcome aspect of literary celebrity, and made it a theme in her fiction.

While researching my recent book, Work in Hand, I presented my findings at a number of conferences and events in Ireland and abroad. Questions and observations from audiences confirmed my sense that the historical technological shift my works describes helps illuminate changing ideas of how technology and the human relate in our digital age.

Aileen Douglas holds a BA (Mod) from Trinity College Dublin and a PhD from Princeton University. She began her career at Washington University in St. Louis, returning to Trinity in 1993, and is now head of the School of English. Her most recent publication is Work in Hand: Script, Print, and Writing, 1690–1840 (Oxford University Press, 2017). Also in 2017, she co-organized Swift350, an international conference at Trinity to mark the 350th anniversary of the birth of Jonathan Swift, and was elected President of the Eighteenth-Century Ireland Society.

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