

Lend Me Your Ears: Mass Observing Contemporary Adult Reading Aloud Practices

Title page

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Abstract

Reading aloud receives a great deal of attention as something done with children and as a potential teaching tool, but less is known about the oral reading that we, as adults, may do for various purposes across our everyday lives. This article explores one element of a two-year project recording and analysing contemporary adult reading aloud practices. It reports on an analysis of all 160 Mass Observation Project responses, examining the ‘atypical typicality’ of correspondents’ reactions to the topic and their own practices; their analytical acts as researchers classifying practices and investigating artistry; and the stories they tell about how we both express and create relationships with individuals and larger groups through our oral reading practices. Contemporary adult reading aloud practices, as presented, analysed and narrated by the Mass Observers, are ubiquitous, often invisible, hugely varied and *matter* to us as individuals and communities.

Keywords

Reading aloud; oral reading; everyday reading; literacy practices; Mass Observation; adult literacy

Introduction

This paper reports on the Mass Observation element of *Reading Aloud in Britain Today*, an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project examining contemporary adult reading aloud practices: that is, whether, when and why adults across Britain today may read aloud rather than in silence. Raise the subject of adults reading out loud and one is likely to be greeted with surprise at the idea of adults ever reading aloud at all, or faced with the follow-up question ‘you mean with children?’ Is this because we, as adults, rarely read out loud? Or is it that we rarely talk or write about these instances? In much of the Anglophone world today, ‘reading’ signifies a silent, individual practice, with reading aloud the exception, that which needs specifying (Radway 1994; Long 2003; Duncan 2008, 2012). Once, reading historians tell us, the reverse was true: ‘reading’ meant oral reading, with silent reading the more unusual or surprising form (Manguel 1996; Pugh 1978). Something changed, but was it primarily a change in how people read, or in what we meant, or mean, by ‘reading’? Almost certainly some did read silently the ancient and medieval worlds (McCutcheon 2015), just as some read aloud today (Duncan 2015). What has shifted, I am arguing, is the nature of the dominant understanding of ‘reading’, and which practices are more and less visible under this dominance.

The New Literacy Studies literature on literacy as a social practice, along with the ethnography of reading more broadly, contain three ideas which are central to this situation, and this study. First, that literacy is something contextual, socially-situated and multiple: reading and writing can be different things for different people, with different purposes and in different contexts. Secondly, that a literacy practice includes the personal and social meanings beneath the observable literacy ‘event’ (Barton and Hamilton 1998; Baynham 1995; Kalman 2008). Shove, Pantzar & Watson’s (2012) conceptualisation of social practice as composed of three interacting elements – competences, materials and meanings – usefully reminds of the centrality of meanings to the fluid ‘dynamics’ of any form of social practice. To research literacy as a social practice, therefore, one must access not only what is done (and can be observed) but the meanings beneath or within, which require the perspectives of the readers and writers themselves (Baynham 2000; Duncan 2012). Thirdly, and crucially, some literacy practices have more power or visibility than others in certain contexts. Brice-Heath’s (1983, 2012) seminal Carolinas studies highlight *power* and the distance between the (out-of-school) practices of particular communities and the practices made powerful as

‘school’ literacy, while Elster (2003) examines *visibility*, noting how certain Jewish religious literacies are made invisible by ‘the dominant discourse of the modern era [...] a scientific and technological literacy’ (2003, 685): the encoding and decoding of factual information. The dominance of these ‘alpha literacies’ (Brook, cited in Elster, p. 686) within educational and research contexts means that other forms of literacy, including many adult reading aloud practices, can be made invisible.

But what do we actually know about contemporary oral reading practices? Reading aloud is frequently examined as a teaching tool and/or something done to (or with) children to prepare for the ultimate end-goal of adult, individual, *silent* reading (Gibson 2008; Gil, Larios, and Balibrea 2017; Hoffman, Roser, and Battle 1993; Pergams, Jake-Matthews, and Mohanty 2018). Little attention is paid to the reading aloud that adults may do at home, work and in the community. There are ethnographic studies of the literacy practices of particular communities which feature examples of oral reading, particularly within family or religious contexts (Baker 1993; Besnier 1995; Brandt 2001; Mace 2012), but there have been no major studies with a specific focus on the purposes and meanings of adult reading aloud. Building on a small-scale pilot study (Duncan 2015), the aim of the wider Reading Adult in Britain Today project is to find out whether, when, where, why and how adults today may read out loud or listen to others reading (see Duncan & Freeman, forthcoming, for an examination of the survey element of this project).

Methods: Mass Observation

Reading Aloud in Britain Today (2017-2019) is a multi-method project consisting of a questionnaire, interviews and audio-recordings alongside a Mass Observation Project directive. The focus of this paper is what we can learn from the 160 responses to the Mass Observation Project directive. Both the original (1937 to early 1950s) Mass Observation and the present-day revived Mass Observation Project (1981-) (hereafter MOP) can be seen in terms of multiple layers of duality: being both social science research and a political movement; both data collection and collaborative writing; and examining both ‘what people do and what they think about what they do’ (Johnes 2017). The original Mass Observation’s ‘twin pillars’ – volunteers who wrote about what they did, and paid observers who took notes of what others did (Summerfield 1985, 440–41) – are echoed in the present-day MOP’s ‘dual vision’ (Kramer 2014). MOP’s 500-odd volunteer writers, known as ‘correspondents,’ are invited to respond in writing to ‘directives’ sent to them three times a year. Kramer (2014) argues that this writing is characterised by ‘a dual vision:’ part autobiography and

part ‘amateur sociology’, ideal, as Sheridan, Street & Bloome (2000) have argued, for understanding the role of literacy in people’s lives.

Though the MOP has previously run directives on literacy such as *Uses of Reading and Writing* (1991), *Reading* (1993), *Mothers and Literacy* (1995), and *Books and You* (2010), these have told us little about what was read aloud as opposed to silently and why. I worked with the MOP archivists to create a directive (see appendix) asking the correspondents about their experiences, memories and feelings about reading aloud and listening to others read, and to keep a reading aloud diary. This was sent out to 507 correspondents in the summer of 2017. 160 responses were returned by the end of January 2018, 96 by email and the rest posted in. This is slightly below the MOP target of 175 per directive but considered by the MOP to be a healthy response. About half of these are between 1 and 3 pages in length, about a quarter between 4 and 7, just under a quarter under 1 page, and the rest 8 or more pages.

Much is written about MOP as a research enterprise or methodology, including observations that the correspondents cannot be considered representative of the UK population as a whole (being too female, too old, too southern, and too middle class), and their writing lacking in objectivity (see Pollen 2013 for an examination of these criticisms). MOP writing was of course never intended to be representative or objective, but rather to provide the ‘illumination’ and ‘surprise’ that an individual life and perspective can offer, potentially ‘disrupting’ established narratives (Sheridan 2017). Further, Moor & Uprichard (2014) write of the ‘unwieldy materiality’ of MOP data, referring to both the physical excess of the hundreds of pieces of paper (of different colours, shapes and smells, many written in different styles of handwriting and colours of ink), as well as to the methodological challenge presented by hundreds of separate pieces of writing, each providing an individual offering of personal narrative and analysis. In this way, the correspondents are less subjects of research and more writers and researchers themselves. For this paper I am drawing on, or playing with, these ideas about the nature and affordances of MOP writing and what this means for analysis. Below, in Findings, Section 1 explores the ‘atypical typicality’ of the MOP sample and what we can learn from their reactions to the topic as well as from the practices they cite. Section 2 examines the offerings of the correspondents as researchers, and Section 3 looks at the work of the correspondents as writers or storytellers.

Findings

Section 1: The atypical typical

As noted above, methodological writing on the MOP rightly stresses that the MOP correspondents cannot be considered typical or representative of the UK population. However, this ‘atypical’ group may actually be well-placed to offer a kind of ‘typicality’ in relation to the focus of this (or any) directive. They are not self-selecting in terms of previous interest in or engagement with reading aloud; this directive dropped through their letter boxes or into their email accounts because of their relationship to the MOP not because of any previous relationship to the directive topic. There is nothing to suggest, from either the number or the nature of the responses, that those who either do more or less reading aloud, or particularly like or dislike it, were any more or less likely to respond.

Crucially, the MOP correspondents can also take their time to respond: several correspondents indicated that they started the directive, and then left it, returning, after further reflection, some hours, days or even weeks later. Changes to ink colour also suggests that others may have done the same, without mentioning it. The MOP offers a ready and waiting group of adults, committed to providing their views on the directives sent to them three times a year, topics they are not necessarily pre-disposed to, or rehearsed in, but topics they are willing to think through carefully. This means that the MOP correspondents do offer a rare form of typicality and therefore a unique opportunity to capture initial and reflective reactions to the topic of adults reading aloud, and examples of reading aloud practices themselves.

a) Reactions

The overwhelming reaction is that of surprise: surprise at the topic and surprise at their own practices. Correspondents express their surprise at adult reading aloud being the subject of a MOP directive. For some this is simply a reaction to an unusual topic. F38 (I will refer to correspondents by their age and gender) considers it ‘one of the strangest directives.’ Others specify that their surprise is based on the feeling that reading aloud is usually associated with children, as F72 notes: ‘adults and reading aloud don’t go together.’ Some express surprise at a directive dealing with topic that they love but rarely hear discussed, while for others their surprise is linked to a strong dislike of reading aloud or a sense of its irrelevance, as M82 writes: ‘I see no point’.

The second element of surprise may be more interesting. Twenty correspondents write of their surprise at coming to *realise* (this word features heavily across the responses; for this reason I have italicized it in this section), through the directive prompts, that they read aloud more than they had previously thought. Many start their writing noting that they read aloud

little and yet eventually end up writing about a great many more reading aloud practices (including many discovered through keeping a reading aloud diary), suggesting that they too read aloud more than they first thought. M28 captures a common refrain:

I imagine like other people, I had thought very little about reading aloud [...] It was something I immediately associated with childhood. However, the more I've thought about it, I've *realised* that I read aloud or am read aloud to in a variety of ways.

Similarly from M58 'My first thought [...] Reading aloud - me, never [...] reflection shows that is clearly not true' and F61, 'my first reaction – I don't do it. But the more I thought about it, the more I *realised* that I do actually read aloud, more than I thought I did.' M96 explains that despite memories of reading aloud in the past, he doesn't think he reads aloud in his present life, and yet, 'having written that I suddenly *realise* I am saying these words aloud as I tap them out on the word processor. Something I must be doing continuously without *realising* it.' Likewise, M44 writes that he needed help from his wife to record when he reads aloud because he simply doesn't notice most of the reading aloud he does; it happens without him '*realising*'.

Not one of the 160 correspondents writes that they have never read aloud, though three declare that they never read aloud in their present lives. These three, however, present different attitudes to reading aloud. F23 remembers reading aloud and being read to as a child and hopes that she will be able to read aloud to children of her own one day. M88 explains that while he read aloud to his children when they were small, he does not read aloud at all now. However, he goes on to explain that he does understand that other adults may take part of reading aloud practices that have nothing to do with children. M71 wrote the shortest directive response of them all, consisting only of these words:

I own 8000 books, never read aloud, have never read aloud. Never since Primary school, in the 1950s, had books read aloud.
I have never married and have no children. The Directive is an irrelevance.

The above is only snapshot of the range of reactions to adult reading aloud present across all 160 responses, from those surprised by the amount of reading aloud in their lives (however small or big), to those who had already been aware of it (whether they love it or hate it) but were nevertheless surprised to see a directive on the topic; from those who read aloud a lot to those who do it very little; and from those who associate reading aloud with childhood and

children to those who see it as a core part of their (adult) work, creative, romantic or religious lives.

b) The Practices

The lack of a necessary predisposition towards the topic of adult reading aloud also makes the MOP writing of value in terms of the range of oral reading activities mentioned and the prevalence of certain practices. After reading through the 160 responses several times I read through twice again, noting down all the different instances of reading aloud mentioned and how many correspondents mentioned each, before grouping them into 20 categories (in bold below).

88 mentioned **memories from childhood and youth**, including memories of reading aloud and being read to at school and home or of seeing one parent reading to another. 58 wrote of reading aloud as part of work roles, both more **generic work practices**, such as reading aloud from information boards, reading aloud in collaborative writing tasks and reading aloud or listening to minutes read at meetings, as well as more **specific work activities**, such as reading relaxation scripts as part of mental health work, reading aloud as a magistrate in court, as a receptionist confirming an appointment or a nurse reading notes to a patient. Reading aloud for **study purposes** features 48 times, including reading aloud for language learning (for example, Basque), reading aloud to memorize and reading aloud to better understand difficult text. 34 wrote of reading aloud as part of **individual or communal writing processes** to hone writing or get help from others to ‘proof-hear’ and 47 wrote of reading aloud as part of **dealing with correspondence**, reading emails, letters, cards or invitations to others in person (because they may be interested, cannot read, cannot see or have their hands full) or sharing them over the telephone.

64 wrote of reading aloud, alone or with others, **to follow instructions** (including listening to a GPS), **timetables or recipes or to choose food products while shopping**. 60 mentioned reading aloud as part of **preparing for or giving speeches**, talks or lectures, including eulogies, wedding speeches, and at important events, such as an AIDS/HIV benefit or at protest marches, and 20 noted reading aloud to play **board games, bingo, or do crosswords or quizzes**. 18 read aloud or listen to others reading as part of **book group or writing group activity**, 11 as part of **play-reading groups, drama groups or amateur dramatics**, and 38 read aloud **poetry**, including at gatherings, as part of performance poetry, and simply to one other person or to themselves. 9 wrote about reading aloud when **singing**, including as a choir, chanting or singing hymns. 50 mentioned reading aloud or listening to

others reading as individual or communal **religious worship**. 14 read aloud to **help** those who cannot see, cannot read or are unwell, including reading aloud to record a talking newspaper and a woman who remembers reading aloud to her mother who had never learnt to read.

38 say they read aloud bits of **books or stories to other adults** – partners, friends or family, while 53 listen to **audiobooks, ‘book at bedtime’ or plays on the radio**. 81 wrote of reading aloud **with children**: not only stories and books but also mathematics problems and other bits of homework. The most prevalent group of practices, at 116 mentions, though, was not reading with children but reading aloud as part of **engagement with the news or social media**, such as reading tweets or other social media posts to others or reading ‘snippets’ from the newspaper across the breakfast table. At the other end of the spectrum, there were four mentions of **miscellaneous solitary practices**: reading aloud from a knitting pattern, doing throat exercises prescribed by a doctor, and two declarations of reading aloud when completely alone in order to hear a voice.

Beyond this picture of commonality and difference, six headline points are worth highlighting. First, despite its strong cultural association with the idea of reading aloud, reading with children is not the most commonly mentioned practice by the MOP correspondents (though it did get 81 mentions). The most prevalent practice amongst the MOP correspondents is reading aloud to share news from papers or social media with others: a communal engagement with, or mediation of, the outside world. Second, not all reading aloud of books or stories is done with children, much is done with other adults. Third, not all reading aloud is done with other people at all; a great deal is done when completely alone (and while one person notes that he rarely reads aloud because he lives alone, two others explain that they read out loud precisely because they live alone). While some practices are clearly to serve others (for example, to console, entertain or inform), others are to serve the reader, for example, to understand, memorize, or write.

Fourth, reading aloud is ubiquitous in the workplace, for both more generic work purposes (for example the reading of extracts of minutes at meetings) and for highly specialized activities: from offices to shops, legal to medical, teaching to the creative industries. Fifth, forms of reading aloud are a key part of much religious worship (though the MOP responses included only Christian practices), whether read, heard, sung, chanted and/or recited. This suggests that these practices are a significant part of the lives of those who engage in regular religious practice, but may be invisible to, or underestimated by, those who do not. Finally, the responses demonstrate considerable engagement in forms of creative

writing, poetry and drama, indicating that as much as telling us something about reading aloud in Britain today, this directive (as several correspondents noted) may tell us something about contemporary adult life, specifically that it involves more than work or family.

Section 2: Correspondents as researchers

Within the original MO's idea of a 'science of ourselves' through the efforts of 'men and women of goodwill' (Summerfield 1985, 443), and the theorizing of the present day's MOP's 'dual-vision' (Kramer 2014), rests the idea that the correspondents are not subjects being researched, but rather researchers themselves (Sheridan, Street, and Bloome 2000), individually writing up their own findings or analyses in response to each directive. This means that for this directive, there are actually 160 sets of findings. This is reminiscent of Kristin Thomson's influential concept of 'cinematic excess' in film studies, where an excess of 'materiality' (which may be about costume, props, plot or acting) threatens or rather resists the illusion of the cinematic whole (Thompson 1986). Similarly, the 'unwieldy materiality' of the MOP responses resist the usual research illusion that 'data' can be smoothly compacted into a sleek set of findings. The MOP correspondents as researchers write about themselves, others and their communities, each creating individual analyses that resist incorporation into the standard data 'reduction' and 'display' (Miles and Huberman 1984) that academia may sometimes demand.

Clearly these 160 pieces cannot all be presented here (though I would urge any reader to visit the archive and read them all), and so in an attempt to nevertheless recognize correspondents as researchers, here I am reporting on two notable shared analytical acts: the classification of practices, and explorations of the relationship between the artistry and purposes of reading aloud.

a) Classifying practices

The directive did not ask respondents to classify their own or others' practices but this is exactly what many have done, at least implicitly, writing about their practices in particular groupings (alone, at work, with children, for example). This is one of the ways that the responses are most clearly analyses rather than simply description. Fifteen correspondents, though, were explicit in offering a classification or typography. Nine offer classifications by situation or context, for example, F79 offers a four-way split: Quaker activity, throat exercises prescribed by the doctor, within her French classes, and reading newspapers aloud in French. F53 provides nine situations where she reads aloud, including sharing items from

the BBC news feeds on her phone with her partner and reading aloud with a cat in bed on a Saturday morning. M74 offers a four-way classification of practices, not his own, but rather of situations where he believes reading aloud happens today: reading to children at bedtime, teachers reading to pupils or students, reading papers at meetings and reading at church.

Four correspondents classify by purpose. F29 identifies three purposes of reading aloud: redrafting text, to regain focus when reading for pleasure and to bring people together socially. F47 also produces a classification of purposes, but with a two-way division of purposes: practical, for example reading instructions and to better understand information, vs life-enhancing: to be funny, for entertainment, or to develop a relationship. One person (M52) offers a classification through the text types themselves (including jokes, recipes and TV listings) and another, M74, offers a binary classification based on the degree of deliberation or planning involved. He contrasts the deliberate, planned instances of reading aloud he does as a film editor, writer or parent (for example, read-throughs of scripts or reading a book to a child) with the ‘countless everyday occasions when we indulge in wholly forgettable instances [...] the ‘listen to this’ at the breakfast table.’

Here, the correspondents are writing as researchers, not only noticing their and others’ practices but working to characterize and categorize them in some way, thus analyzing the role of reading aloud in adult life.

b) Artistry and purpose

The directive invites correspondents to think about whether there is a relationship between *why* they read out loud and *how*. The 160 responses present a clear consensus that this is the case. F29 explains that she aims to be loud and clear when reading for a lecture audience, but whispers if reading aloud to herself as part of her writing process or to focus on what she is reading. Many echo this general idea: if reading for others you need to be loud and clear, while if for yourself, you can read however you like, whether whispering or booming.

However, some correspondents provide more complex analyses, exploring how they may be using their voices and bodies in different ways depending on the purpose of the reading. M79 explains his nerves at being a new magistrate, having to read aloud in court and learning the importance of eye-contact for highlighting the significance of what he was reading: ‘If I did not make eye contact with the person being read to, it negated the importance of what was being read.’ Similarly exploring professional reading aloud, F71 writes about conducting marriage ceremonies, noting several different factors at play: the

need to comply with the law means that the text has to be read aloud exactly as written; the need for everyone in the room to be able to hear means the text has to be read at an appropriate volume and pace; and the (highly challenging) need to represent both the gravity and the joy of the ceremony for those getting married means ‘it was important [...] to strike the right manner; too much informality was inappropriate, but a certain warmth and sincerity had to come through in the voice.’ In both these examples, we see choices made and skills exercised in order to convey more than the message contained in the words of the written text: to convey the significance of the occasion, to ritualize a stage in a legal process and, potentially, a stage in a life-course.

F26 offers a different example, writing that she attends a local Catholic church once a week, enjoying the familiarity and how ‘your voice gets lost in a mass of other people [...] It makes me feel like I belong.’ Here, like the marriage example above, the purpose of the reading is not primarily about conveying a new message contained within a written text. In both cases the readers and listeners are likely to already possess a good sense of the meanings of the texts, and have read or heard them before, in some cases many times. Rather, something else happens when the voice ignites those words, unifying two people or a congregation.

These analyses tell us that *how* one reads aloud is linked to *why* one reads aloud (not only to the presence or absence of an audience), and that the purposes of reading are diverse, as Griffiths (1999), Elster (2003) and Yandell (2012) and have argued, and not always about decoding or communicating a previously unknown meaning. What we could call the artistry – that is the combination of skills and judgements – of reading aloud (and reading more broadly) therefore varies from practice to practice, but could include decisions about volume, pitch, pace, stress on certain words and phrases, use of eye contact, facial expressions and body language, and probably more, to convey something *through* the written text, rather than simply *from* it.

Section 3: Correspondents as writers or storytellers

Another ‘way in’ to this data is to remember that whatever else they are doing, the correspondents are writers in a collaborative writing project (Sheridan 2017), selecting and sharing the stories of their lives. This could be seen as related to their researcher role, presenting their findings through storytelling, as Van Maanen (1988) suggests ethnographers frequently do, but it could also be seen as distinct, as not so much a way to report their observations but as a way to deal with elusive meanings, as both Pavelenko (2007) and

Baynham (2000) have considered the narratives of research participants. Further, Baynham (2000), analysing both interview data and MOP responses, argues that a narrative approach is particularly valuable for literacy research, highlighting the distinction between the observable nature of a literacy *event* and the ‘insider accounts’ necessary to fully understand the meanings of the social *practice*: ‘how participants understand, value and construct ideologies around what is being done’ (2000, 100). Here I am following Baynham in seeing participant narratives (which for the purposes of this paper I am considering the same as stories) as “vital clue[s] to thinking” (Ishiguro, 1989 cited in Baynham, 2000; 101) or extended “speech acts” (Maranhao, 1993 cited in Baynham, 2000; 102), ways for participants to both grasp and express what matters but is hard to put into words.

More simply put, when asked about reading aloud, what stories did the correspondents tell, and what can these stories tell us? There are too many stories to recount them all here, but I will examine examples of stories on two recurring themes: loss and pain, and youth and encounter.

a) Stories of loss and pain

Many correspondents tell stories of reading aloud at funerals, and/or reading aloud to those ill, in pain or dying. F72 writes of reading at her mother’s funeral, finding a poem by a writer she knew her mother loved, and reading and re-reading it out loud, over and over, in advance to learn it by heart in order to have a chance of getting through it on the day. She remembers that during the funeral, she found the last verse so hard that the chaplain reached out to touch her and encouraged her to take it slowly. She reiterates, ‘it was hard, but I knew she [her mother] would have loved the poem.’

As personal as this story is, it also shares a number of features with other funeral stories. It highlights the significance of taking on the role of reading at the funeral of a loved-one; the importance of choosing words that the loved-one loved; the need put on a decent performance in order to serve the both loved-one and the community; and the near-crushing difficulty of all of this. The identity expressed is that of someone who loved and was loved, one side of a unique, personal relationship with the deceased, whether as sister, daughter or lover. Yet in stepping into the funeral reading/eulogy tradition another identity is expressed as well: an identity as part of a cultural group, whether religious or secular. The story told seems to be one of how these two identities co-exist: the particular, individual or personal, and the communal or cultural. With the union of these two identities comes both the importance and difficulty of doing the reading and doing it well.

The stories of reading aloud to those ill, in pain and/or dying are more varied. M82 writes that when his wife became weak with cancer, he began to read aloud to her, usually outside on a bench in the fresh air. He notes that this habit has continued, though, he seems to be suggesting, she is now stronger. F66 remembers reading aloud to her own father after her mother died and his dementia deteriorated and also volunteering to read aloud in a hospice, and recently finishing (aloud, alone) a book in honour of the woman she had been reading it to, who had passed away before the end of the book. F26 writes about reading to

My dying friend, bed-ridden and no longer able to go outside, particularly enjoyed listening to poems about nature and the seaside. It made her feel nostalgic and she imagined herself walking along a beach with sand between her toes.

These accounts are all different yet they share the characterization of reading aloud as an act giving or sharing solace. Reader and listener share a distraction, an escape, a story and, once again, the meeting of the particular, personal or individual (time, place, love and voice) with the wider cultural or communal: the book or poem they are reading.

b) Stories of youth and encounter

There is an even more common story, an archetype or perhaps stereotype, running through the majority of the responses, linking experiences in childhood or youth with later adult practices, from stories of being read to as a child creating a love of listening and reading, to memories of bullying or boring teachers putting them off for life. These are stories that locate present attitudes or practices in past experience. Yet, there are others, also about youth, which are a little different.

M60 recounts a memory from his school days when a school-mate got hold of the ‘scandalous pulp novel’ *Skinhead* – just one copy between the thirty children wanting to read it. Instead of fighting over it, and entirely without discussion, they went into an empty school laboratory where a girl called Alice started to read it out loud:

Even at the time I marveled at the contrast between her delivery - which was that of dutiful daughter reading out to her mother from the back of a packet of flour the recipe for making Victoria Sponge – and the salacious, and, to us, inflammatory material on the page.

He remembers this strange, electric, rebellious happening, vivid almost 50 years later (*Skinhead* was published in 1970), something he ‘never until now thought of in the context of

reading aloud; for decades I regarded it as a spontaneous expression of, I don't know, primitive Communism or some such thing.'

M93 tells another story.

I chanced one evening to accidentally receive Radio Cairo which was broadcasting, in Arabic I suppose, an extremely long reading [...] by a man whose voice and style were so intense and passionate, that I was mesmerized by it all, and was compelled to listen. I didn't understand any of it, but recognised that some sentences were from time to time repeated as in an heroic poem. The passion and intensity of the reading increased to an extreme degree as the reading continued until, abruptly it ended- very precipitately as if the reader had been shot dead. I sat stunned: its emotional effect was enormous although I understood not a word.

He finishes by noting that over 50 years later he can still hear that voice.

What do these two stories tell us? They both present a paradox in that they are quite specifically 'about' reading aloud. In the first, the contrast between the delivery and the content is striking, and in the second a lone reading voice triumphs over hundreds of miles and across languages. Yet they are also *not* about reading at all, but rather about chance encounters. In the first, the teenage boy has an encounter with a countercultural (and highly controversial) text, a wider cultural movement, and the chance of being able to access it, in a group of other youngsters, an empty room and a few minutes of freedom before discovery. In the second, a young man has an encounter with someone from across the world, a chance meeting with a voice reading a poem in an alien language and yet a somewhat familiar tradition.

Just as in the stories of pain and loss, the reading voice forms a link, a line, an oscillation between the individual, particular or personal, and the larger, communal, or cultural, creating – potentially – a recognition of simultaneous difference and kinship, familiarity and the new.

Discussion and conclusion

The MOP responses – longer, shorter, handwritten, typed, word-processed, angry, glowing, unsure, comic, didactic – are a unique, long-term resource which will allow us to better understand the role of reading aloud in contemporary adult life. MOP writing, as discussed, is part sociological data and part autobiographical writing, part analysis and part storytelling. The three lenses used in this paper – the 'atypical typicality' (the elusive question of what is and is not typical or representative relates to the wider question of what is

and is not legitimate to learn from and who dictates this), correspondents as researchers and correspondents as storytellers – may also provide lessons or reminders for future literacy research. And yet, correspondents also included in their responses poems they had written, accounts of conversations they have had and lists of books they had read, when and to whom. MOP correspondents' contributions are notoriously complex to 'capture' in a short article; there are ideas and accounts enough for several volumes. To say that MOP writing presents analytical challenges (and the challenges are considerable, not least that one can never be sure one is reading the handwriting correctly and therefore any 'count ups' are approximate) is to miss the more interesting point: not only does MOP writing *resist* being tamed, it takes the reader-researcher to a place where a neat analysis no longer seems desirable, and to the realization that the actual power of the MOP can only be experienced sitting a corner of the archive building itself, touching, reading and rereading as many of the individual pieces of paper as possible. The real academic/researcher contribution comes, then, not from a written analysis of the responses but in the co-creation of the directive in the first place.

Yet there are things that one article can say. These 160 pieces take us further than before in understanding contemporary adult reading aloud. Here we have voices of surprise at the idea of adults reading aloud apart from to children, surprise at the extent of some of our individual (and previously unnoticed) reading aloud practices, and surprise, for some, at the chance to talk about this aspect of their reading. These 'surprises' are all different but together tell us that adult reading aloud practices are indeed largely invisible. These surprises also provide a useful reminder of just how different one's own literacy practices may be from one's neighbour, and therefore of the challenge of fully understanding the role that literacy plays in someone else's life. The list of practices performed by this group of adults include the more often-cited practices (reading with children, in worship or performing poetry), while also, illustrating Sheridan's (2017) point about MOP writing being able to disrupt dominant discourses, presenting a picture of reading aloud far more varied and quietly ubiquitous across various life domains: work, leisure, learning, romance and creative life as well as family and faith. Correspondents write of adults reading to each other as well as to children, of reading out when completely alone as well as with larger and smaller groups, and to understand, memorize, write and feel as well as to communicate, share or inspire. Another group of 160 adults would certainly reveal some different practices and attitudes (and may not include a man, as this group does, who reads aloud to alleviate his wife's constipation), but it is just as likely to reveal some of the same. The consensus within these MOP responses suggests patterns that may well be replicated in the wider population.

As researchers, the MOP correspondents classify their practices and explore their artistry, sharing findings about the diversity of purposes and their relationship to how we may read aloud. As storytellers, they tell tales of pain, loss and forms of ‘being there’ for others, and of youth encountering worlds of difference, working between individual human connections and larger, communal traditions. They say something about the thundering significance of forms of reading which may, at times, be neither particularly frequent within any one individual life nor widely visible culturally, but still *matter*.

In this way, the MOP writing for this directive also tells us something about reading more broadly: that reading is not one act for one purpose requiring a pre-determined and finite set of skills, but rather a bigger umbrella than we may have realised, under which sit a diversity of practices, involving different bundles of skills, acts of judgement, challenges and pleasures. Reading is engagement with text but not always to find out what is written. Taking heed of Brice-Heath’s (1983, 2012) warnings that our literacy classrooms (whether for children, teens or adults) need to be informed by the real-life language and literacy use of different communities, we should be working from definitions of reading that take account of this range of practices and purposes, and acknowledge the skills and judgments involved in forms of oral reading as well as their potential importance within the relationships and communities that sustain us.

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Appendix:

Part 2: 'Lend me your ears: when adults read aloud rather than in silence'

This Directive is about how and why adults read *aloud* in their everyday lives. We want you to write about all of the instances where you experience reading aloud, either as speaker/reader or listener, however long or short these moments might be. This may be alone or in a shared experience with others, at home, work, or within your community or communities.

We would like you to reflect on all the occasions when you read aloud, even if only a few words. For example, an article in the newspaper, a TV guide, a book, menu, bingo numbers, religious text or a letter. Reading aloud is often thought of as reading to children. If this is something you do, we would be delighted to hear about it, but we are also particularly interested in other adult reading aloud practices, including those performed alone or shared with other adults.

Please start each part of your Directive reply on a new sheet of paper with your MO number, sex, age, marital status, the town or village where you live and your occupation or former occupation.

Remember *not* to identify yourself or other people inadvertently within your reply. It is best to use initials instead of real names

How you read

We are keen to hear whether you read aloud in a very quiet voice, murmuring or whispering, or you may shout it out, chant or sing. You may read aloud in different ways with different texts or for different purposes. We are interested in all of these.

If you read aloud, or listen to others reading aloud, in a different language from the language or languages you may usually use for communication, we would love to hear about this.

You may have experience of reading aloud as something planned (perhaps even rehearsed) or you may have experience of reading aloud that was spontaneous and/or unexpected.

You could write about why you do it, how it feels, how you developed this practice and why you think it is important to be reading aloud rather than reading in silence. What does reading aloud give you? What does the voice bring?

Do you find that others read aloud in similar ways or differently? Why do think this is?

What proportion of your reading is aloud rather than silent?



The Mass Observation Project

Summer 2017 Directive

Technology

We are also interested to hear about your experiences and thoughts on the role technology plays. Do you, for example, read aloud from digital devices or listen to audio books? Do you listen to 'Book at Bedtime' on the radio or something similar?

Task: Reading aloud diary Please complete a week's diary briefly listing instances of reading aloud, or being read aloud to:

- *Where* are you when you are reading aloud or being read to? For example, is it at work or at home, in your leisure time, in community life or another domain?
- *What* kind of text is it? For example, a recipe, a poem, a newspaper article or something else?
- *Who* are you with when you are reading aloud, or being read to? If you are reading aloud with others, why is this important?

Finally, if anything comes to mind that you usually do, but didn't do this week, please note this down too.

Reflecting on the past and the future

What have been the situations in which you read aloud, were read aloud to, or took part in shared reading aloud, in the past? Please tell us more about when and why this happened.

Were you ever taught how to read *aloud* in particular? Or did you find a way to learn certain techniques?

Is your experience of reading aloud today similar or different to your past? Why do you think this is? Does it *feel* different today?

Looking to the future do you think your experience of reading aloud, to yourself or others, might change? Why do you think this is?

Feelings and Challenges

What memories and emotions do you attach to the practice of reading aloud? This could be in the present day, or reflecting on your past.

Are there times when you find reading aloud particularly challenging, or particularly enjoyable or fulfilling?

This study/project

Finally, in reflecting on these questions, do you believe that it is beneficial to create a record of adult reading aloud practices across Britain? Why do you feel this way?

Please post your response to: **Freepost: RTGU-AYJE-YSSC, The Mass Observation Archive, The Keep, Woollards Way, Brighton, BN1 9BP** or by email to: moa@sussex.ac.uk
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