

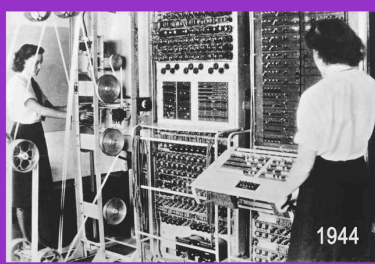
Silliness or Simulacra?: Cartoons of Women in Computing at the Dawn of the Digital Age

ABSTRACT:

In Great Britain, the cradle of early computing, the government's stranglehold on major computing companies through the 1970s helped produce a rapid, gendered labor shift--changing computer programming & operator work from feminized to masculine-coded.

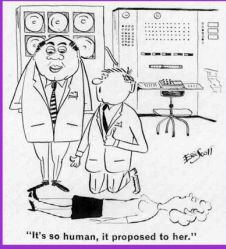
Labor feminization implies deskilling, but often work is deskilled in image rather than in fact. Such images, however, have shaped the material reality of many labor forces on the edges of professionalization, respectability, or mainstream recognition.

This poster gives a glimpse into how cartoons--often seen as humorous, reductive, & inconsequential--helped interpret & shape change, by packaging complex trends & making them culturally legible to a mass audience. Cartoons about computers & their (invariably) women operators speak volumes about the technocratic anxieties & ideals of the quickly-computerizing British state.



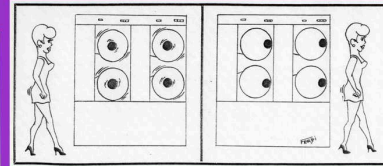
1944

Women's Royal Naval Service workers operating the first digital, electronic, programmable computer during WWII spoke of their fascination with the machine. But many early cartoons of women with computers flipped this fascination, making women into objects & giving the machine the agency to be the subject instead.



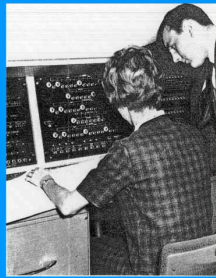
1965

Once anthropomorphized, computers often enacted heteronormative rituals in the workplace for comedic effect.



1970

This cartoon shows a less-gentlemanly version of the conceit. Both gags position the computer as a particular kind of masculine force within the structure of the office, mimicking tropes of sexual dominance.



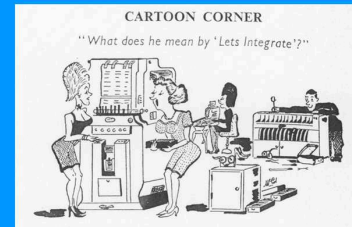
1962

Though advertising images tried to portray an orderly, white collar hierarchy in machine rooms, the reality was messier. Cartoons showed things advertising carefully hid in order to quell management anxieties.



1958

These lackadaisical, working-class machine room operatives would have given potential computer purchasers nightmares. Though the tone is light here, managers had enormous anxiety about machine room operatives' ability to slow or destroy (sometimes intentionally) important work with their monopoly on low-level technical access and know-how.



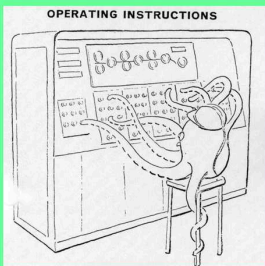
1962

The idea of computer work as white collar was a hard sell in the 1950s and 1960s. Though advertising imagery always showed "professionals," the reality was that early machine rooms were more working-class, representing further "industrialization of the office."



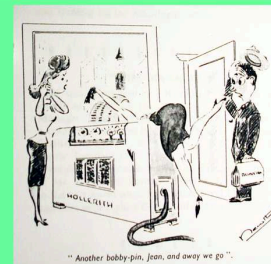
1962

Candid photography of operators often showed expert women in control of machines. This idea sometimes made it onto the cartoon pages--though the message was often weakened by the need for a punchline.



1965

In order to represent the operator's skill in a fun, understandable way, this cartoon had to make her non-human!



1957

These ladies are doing something women operators often did--fixing their own machine. They're made familiar, & made the subject of fun, through their stereotypically feminine tool.

