Most human experience goes unrecorded and uncontemplated. Eating, commuting, daydreaming, internet-surfing, tooth-brushing, and the like constitute the largest portion of daily life, yet until recently these moments have attracted relatively little attention from scholars. Over the past twenty years, academic interest in the realm of the everyday intensified. Animated by questions about consciousness, power, and agency, scholars seek to understand the degree to which everyday life may constitute a realm of personal autonomy—in which we make our own decisions about what to eat, what to wear, or which route to take to work—or a sphere in which social imperatives and the determinations of race, class, and gender exercise their subtlest and most profound influence. The larger aim of such work is to document and explain the modes of perception, consciousness, and affect that characterize everyday life. It examines the dynamics of agency and conformity, self-determination and ideology, as they play out through mundane activities, within and against the structures and patterns evident in broader, more discernible cultural elements. If any consensus has emerged from this work, it lies in the sense that the everyday is the arena in which social, economic, and ideological forces collide with, shape, and meet resistance from the idiosyncratic and unruly energies of the individual’s body, psyche, and bank of experience. Everyday routines, Rita Felski writes, “are neither unmediated expressions of biological drives nor mere reflexes of capitalist domination but a much more complex blend of the social and the psychic.”
The goals of the *Everyday Life in Middletown* project (*EDLM*) derive from this body of scholarship. Since 2016, the *EDLM* team has collected, shared, and analyzed day diaries and other commentary from residents of a small Midwestern American city. Our core aim is to capture the moods, emotions, and ordinary doings that escape the attention of social scientists looking at broad trends or journalists who train their sights on major political and cultural events. Unless recorded, these experiences will be inaccessible to future historians; part of the project’s purpose is to establish an archive of the everyday. But *EDLM* also serves a more immediate civic end: to make visible and comprehensible the complexities of human experience that are obscured when we focus on the latest partisan disputes or the distractions of mass culture. The various forms of resistance, accommodation, coping, and subversion that ordinary people employ, even if different in their particulars, constitute a common ground worthy of exploration.

*EDLM* is fundamentally a collaboration between scholars and community members in which both benefit. Its archive is accessible on an open-access website [*Figure 6.1*] and attached to a blog, where diarists and other community members are invited to engage with and comment on the diaries. The project thus constitutes a collaborative community writing project that emerges in dialogue among the diarists and us, the project creators. We identify shared “diary days” and prompt the volunteers to “record what you do, and what you are thinking and feeling as you do it.” Documenting the shared set of experiences that emerge, and creating a space for reflecting upon them, offers a modest antidote to the fevered, technology-fueled polarization of the present day.

By focusing this archival experiment in a single city, *EDLM* resists the delocalization and abstraction of community that the explosion of online communication and media consumption has created. “Middletown” refers to Muncie, Indiana. It is the name that Robert and Helen Lynd gave to this small eastern Indiana city they first made famous in *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* (1929), their seminal ethnographic account of American urban life during the 1920s. Their careful attention to the rhythms and details of domestic experience, work, and leisure prefigured the more recent
Everyday Life in Muncie, the first of the Lynds’ two Muncie-based projects, remains a classic social science investigation and has inspired an abundance of follow-up research and reporting on Muncie. Most recently, such work has focused on the city’s transition to a post-industrial community divided by class, race, and politics. EDLM represents an attempt to continue but also reinvent the tradition of “Middletown Studies.”

To sustain our vision of the archive as a collaborative expression of the community, we use digital tools and formats that empower our volunteers and readers to shape the project. Ideally EDLM will become a popular online
destination where participants encounter both the commonalities that unite them and the challenges their neighbors face, and where they take a role in shaping the project’s scholarly output. The interactive features of online communication—blogging, comment sections, tagging, and visualization tools—help make this possible. This orientation revises the traditional lens of Middletown Studies, which has customarily adopted a detached, anthropological gaze. The knowledge created by EDLM is generated by citizens in dialogue with scholars and each other.

Creating a publicly accessible platform in which people share personal experiences generates challenges involving accessibility, privacy, and legal liability. In what follows, we explain the project’s conceptual foundation, describe the digital tools and methods it employs, document the creativity it fosters among participants, and review how we have addressed the problems that have arisen through the early stages of this developing project, which resides at the intersection of community engagement and digital scholarship.

Origins of the Project

*Everyday Life in Middletown* evolved from a 2016 undergraduate seminar at the Virginia B. Ball Center for Creative Inquiry. Fifteen students, led by professor and EDLM founder Patrick Collier, collected day-diaries and assembled them into an archival and scholarly website and made the documentary film *Everyday Melodies*. These initial diaries are now part of the EDLM archive. In a second phase, the Center for Middletown Studies and Ball State’s Digital Scholarship Lab jointly supported the ongoing collection of day diaries, the development of a more robust web archive, the creation of a prototype of visualization tools that permit users to query the assembled texts, and the production of a forthcoming podcast. The EDLM project staff have now collected more than 200 day diaries and responses to directives (questionnaires) written by more than 50 volunteers. The project’s long-term goal is to export this model to other communities, creating a network of open-access sites for the documentation and exploration of everyday life in the contemporary United States, with particular emphasis on distinct regional conditions.
The questions about everyday life that inform *EDLM* arose as a major theme among intellectuals at the end of the nineteenth century and have only reemerged in recent decades. They emerged from a sense that modernity—that historical complex of industrialization, urbanization, technological change, rising literacy and its effects on media and cultural production, and movements towards greater democracy and self-governance—had radically transformed daily existence. Prompted by the midcentury work of Henri LeFebvre and Michel de Certeau, more recent scholarship has produced a widening body of research and theory about the ordinary. It examines the formation and circulation of moods, the nature of affective states, the avenues through which agency and possible futures appear or are foreclosed, and the “tactics” (to borrow a term from de Certeau) that people employ to cope with and resist prevailing social and cultural regimes. As this plethora of scholarship suggests, the study of everyday life has found new energy in our own era of economic, political, and media disruption, as it did amid the political upsets of the early twentieth century.

The British Mass Observation project, itself a collaborative experiment in theorizing and mapping the everyday, is the principal model for *EDLM*. Launched in 1936 by a small group of recent Cambridge graduates, Mass Observation responded to a perceived crisis of public discourse, the most extreme manifestation of which was fascism. The group launched an “anthropology of ourselves”—a determined tuning-in to everyday life in the hope that an alternative collective consciousness could be forged from its materials. They recruited thousands of British citizens to compile day diaries and respond to surveys about everyday life while also enlisting a corps of “mass observers” who took notes on such cultural events as “all-in” wrestling matches and nights in pubs. They published a half-dozen books and assembled a massive archive (now digitized and available via subscription) covering the 1930s and 1940s. After a mid-century hiatus, Mass Observation re-launched in the early 1980s at the University of Sussex and continues to gather “directives” focusing on everyday life from a national panel of 500 ordinary citizens.
The archive as community engagement

Like Mass Observation, the EDLM archive makes the ordinary available to exploration. Its assembled diaries, as well as a scattering of photographs and drawings and sets of responses to directives (short questionnaires), offer insights into core concerns of everyday life scholarship, including moods, the large and small anxieties that define daily life, and the self-help, future-oriented outlook that seems so pervasive in contemporary culture.\(^6\) Other themes that have emerged organically in the diaries include people’s relationships with their pets, interactions with and attitudes toward media, foodways (including frequent doses of guilt about overeating and fast-food consumption), and caregiving. The emerging picture of shared everyday concerns among largely disconnected neighbors thus begins to sketch out a portrait of ordinary life in Muncie at this historical moment.

The project’s emphasis on community collaboration takes it beyond conventional ethnography or opinion polling. Diary writing spurs creativity, activated through attentiveness to everyday life. Having volunteers write for our blog, in addition to submitting diaries, gives them a voice in the analysis of the primary materials they generate. We also gather input on the project’s form and direction through frequent email correspondence and periodic focus groups with volunteers. Thus our writers’ primary creativity, as embodied in the diaries, also fuels meta-creative acts of two kinds. The first is reflection upon the diaries and the project via dialogue between us, the project creators, and the volunteers, which we discuss below. The second is the literary-critical work of reading the diaries as creative and social texts, performed in blog posts on the archival website and—more rigorously—in scholarly writing.

Seeking this dialogue with contributors and framing the archive as a collaborative artwork breaches the subject/object divide that vexes social science and which must be transcended if the study of the everyday is not to become yet another field in which experts issue generalizations about the objectified lives of others. Otherwise, as Felski argues, “everyday life” threatens to become a term “deployed by intellectuals to describe a non-intellectual relationship to the world.” Whether thus posited as an “inauthentic, gray,
intellectually impoverished” sphere or, more generously, as a utopian “area of
authentic experience”—the everyday can be reduced to a distant, even exotic
realm where academics do fieldwork, like the early anthropologists. For these
reasons we enlist the diarists to help shape policies and develop initiatives.

As important, everyone on the Everyday Life in Middletown staff—we as co-
directors, as well as graduate or undergraduate assistants—contribute diaries
on every submission date. The project thus does not treat the volunteers as
“subjects” or everyday life as a stable object of study. At its core the project
is a collaborative writing of the everyday, seeking to create connection and
commonality, at the primary level of the diaries themselves and the secondary
level of commentary.

This collaborative ethic requires thorough and wide-ranging engage-
ment with the community. The project does not have a single institutional
partner but numerous partners with varying stakes in it. Our primary stake-
holders, of course, are the fifty-four local volunteers who share their thoughts
and feelings. Although their diaries are posted anonymously, with identifying
and sensitive information removed, there is still some risk in conveying their
experiences in this manner. We have also joined with a range of groups and
institutions to share our project and invite feedback. We have done public
talks for local groups ranging from a poverty alleviation agency to civic clubs.
We have purposefully staged events in the city’s poorest neighborhoods in the
hope of attracting the interest of a wide cross-section of the city. Most recently,
we have entered into an arrangement with the Muncie Public Library to hold
diary-writing sessions at its various branches. All of these events allow us to
share our early insights, get feedback, and recruit new diarists. We have also
set up recruiting tables at local coffee shops, stores, and the annual county
fair. Each year, we hold a focus group with diarists and website users to get
input about how to engage them more fully, and to discuss new directions.

Digital Aspects

While such face-to-face engagement is essential, digital tools and methods are
vital to broadening EDLM participation and making it truly public. On the
most basic level, the project is an open-source web publication. The diaries are published within weeks of their submission, creating relatively immediate and friction-free engagement. An original stimulus for Mass Observation, the project that most closely resembles *EDLM*, was the impulse to turn the anthropological gaze inward, toward “ourselves.” It aimed to give voice to its volunteer participants, ordinary people who rarely drew the attention of journalists and historians. But its analog methods required that for the most part those voices were filtered through the interpretive lens of the project’s leaders in reports and essays.\(^8\) *EDLM’s* digital character creates opportunities for community dialogue around everyday life experiences that a paper-and-print archive cannot provide.

Another advantage of the project’s digital nature is the capacity it provides to accept and share volunteer contributions in various formats. Most of our submissions have been written diaries submitted via email, but we have also received photographs and drawings. We plan to use this affordance to greater advantage as we broaden the diversity of our volunteer writers. Diary writing is mainly a practice of educated, middle-and upper-class people, which has limited the diversity of the *EDLM* cohort. The archive’s digital nature, though, would allow us to solicit and share audio and video submissions from those disinclined to write. This ability also presents a partial solution to the digital divide between well-to-do and poorer citizens—a problem any digital project focused on community engagement must take into account. A significant portion of Muncie’s population is impoverished. While a growing number of poor Americans have a smartphone and home access to the internet, the class-based technology gap remains substantial.\(^9\) *EDLM’s* digital character ensures that anyone with access to a relatively inexpensive smartphone can participate. Older residents less comfortable with new technologies are invited to submit handwritten diaries, which a project staffer collects in person. And, as noted above, we have recently partnered with the Muncie Public Library—a key point of access to digital resources for poor residents—to plan a series of diary-writing events at their branches—another step to ensure that technological barriers do not inhibit participation.\(^10\)
As the archive grows and evolves, the capacity of individuals to simply read and absorb its many and varied elements diminishes. As a result, it is important that the website offer some initial interpretation to emphasize the project’s values and aims, and also provide alternative routes through the assembled material. The project blog serves this purpose, as the project’s public face. Blog posts make initial, provisional sense of the copious detail contained in the diaries, but the blog is also a forum for discussion. \textit{EDLM} founder Collier has to date written most of the blog posts, identifying themes, quoting from and linking to some of the most interesting submissions (and thereby creating pathways into the archive), and engaging, in layman’s terms, with the theoretical concepts that undergird everyday-life studies. We have also published featured diaries in their entirety, with short, interpretative introductions. Further, diarists are invited to contribute blog posts, and we are recruiting others in the community who have expressed interest and support for the project to write entries about their experience of reading the diaries. Ultimately we would like the blog to move in this multi-voiced direction, becoming the primary venue for discussion of everyday experience in our community and for input on the project. In this way, not only the assemblage of the archive but its interpretation are conceived as collaborative, community projects. And since the website provides immediate access to the primary data—the diaries—anyone can assess the evidence upon which blog posts or more formal scholarship about the project rests, yet another way in which \textit{EDLM} resists the observer/observed dynamic of much academic work.

We hope the blog will generate interest, persuading readers of the value of everyday-life study and inviting them to engage with the archive in detail. But as the archive grows, it becomes unwieldy and potentially off-putting to users. This problem will only increase over time. In its founding period, Mass Observation struggled with the plenitude of data. A plan for four books based on participant observations in Bolton, known as “Worktown,” yielded just one title as the organizers sagged under the sheer weight and diversity of the archive.\textsuperscript{11} At \textit{EDLM}, after five diary collections of about 200 diaries, simply noting and indexing themes by hand has begun to reach the point of diminishing returns. Tools for searching, identifying themes, and visualizing
the language and sentiments of its documents will not only make the archive more navigable for scholars but, we hope, will empower nonacademic users to develop their own interpretations.

To deal with the plenitude of data, we have developed a suite of tools that users can employ to identify themes, issues, or patterns evident in diaries. The simplest is a basic Boolean search tool that permits users to locate diaries and blog posts with specific words or word combinations. A tagging system indexes specific themes and topics covered in the diaries, directive responses, and blog posts, enabling users to engage quickly with material relevant to issues such as caregiving, dreams, or religion (Figure 6.2). More ambitiously, we have begun to develop a suite of text analysis tools to create new ways of conceiving the archive. Using RStudio, a development environment for the R statistical analysis package, a project staff member produced a prototype that permits text analysis and visualization, including word count, n-grams, and sentiment analysis (Figure 6.3). The prototype incorporates diary text from three of the appointed days (November 14, 2017, February 4, 2018, and April 27, 2018). Visualizations can be organized according to gender, date, and, potentially, other metadata elements we collect when diarists volunteer for the project.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (67)</th>
<th>Alcohol (31)</th>
<th>Animal (113)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Body (16)</td>
<td>Caregiving (39)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children (142)</td>
<td>Clothing (47)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications (125)</td>
<td>Cooking (66)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death (59)</td>
<td>Education (179)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise (66)</td>
<td>Family (127)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance (87)</td>
<td>Food (230)</td>
<td>Guilt (73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health (120)</td>
<td>Home (45)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housework (115)</td>
<td>Hygiene (139)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illness (84)</td>
<td>Internet (54)</td>
<td>Local (191)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage (147)</td>
<td>Material Culture (48)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media (187)</td>
<td>Memory (52)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mood (161)</td>
<td>Music (79)</td>
<td>News (84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play (44)</td>
<td>Politics (82)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pop Culture (105)</td>
<td>Reading (98)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion (69)</td>
<td>Ritual (80)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping (87)</td>
<td>Sleep (221)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socializing (148)</td>
<td>Social Media (73)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports (85)</td>
<td>Transportation (140)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tr (193)</td>
<td>Weather (17)</td>
<td>Work (176)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 6.2:** Image of tags list for *Everyday Life in Middletown*, with the number of times each tag is used.
This trial version will form the template for a more sophisticated, flexible set of visualizations that can help discern patterns within the archive. As the archive grows and the percentage of it that can be reasonably read diminishes, such tools will spur users to more focused reading and sampling.

Creativity

All of these developing, provisional means of engagement with the archive are consonant with our vision of the project as a collaborative, creative endeavor. We offer not a social science database but something more like a participatory public art project. Creativity is the hallmark of the project thus far:
volunteers have made free use of the latitude offered in our broad, standard diary prompt, “Tell us what you do, and what you are feeling and thinking while you do it.” Participants have made the project their own. The diaries are shot through with inspiration, humor, satire, and formal experimentation. Submissions have included long, poetic diaries, illustrations, and imagined dialogues with future readers. And the project has begun to foster dialogue among community members. One particularly creative diarist submitted a blog post riffing on another volunteer’s diary; we offered the original diarist the opportunity to respond, which she embraced. The result is a playful and artistic *pas de deux* in which the writers sample, riff on, and “re-mix” each other’s diaries. In the following section, we offer a sampling of ways in which the project has sparked creativity, insight, and attentiveness in our writers.

**Speaking to the future**

The significance of the ordinary is not self-evident to nonacademics, nor even to academics unfamiliar with everyday-life studies. But the idea of creating a record of today’s world for future scholars is easy to grasp. In various ways, diarists have framed their contributions as addresses to a potential future reader. One writer, narrating a visit to his children’s day care to pay the monthly bill, frames the substantial cost as a political issue and expresses hope for change. “I can only hope that by the time you’re reading this we’ve arrived at a place socially where a different system of preschool and after school care has been determined.” Another writer takes a more satirical view in his darkly funny, formally creative writing. In his diaries, the main body is a largely neutral, concise account of daily activities; but he appends footnotes that situate the day’s events in historical and political context for an imagined future reader. There he registers sharp, often funny protests about inequality, political inertia on climate change, the media-saturated landscape, and more. “I hope that from your future socialist paradise you can look upon our patriarchal capitalist dystopia with compassion,” he writes, discussing the strange looks he gets when he describes himself as a house-husband to his academic wife. He chafes our reflexive belief in progress in a footnote remarking on his
head cold: “A ‘cold,’ or rhinovirus, is a viral infection that I trust no longer exists in your brave future, as it was no longer supposed to exist in ours 50 years ago.” Turning more serious, the writer, having complained about the sticky, humid September weather in the main text, adds in a footnote: “I can hear you laughing bitterly as you read my complaints about the heat, but the effects of climate change are in the early stages of manifesting themselves, and those of us who can still remember cool autumn days miss them dearly . . . . If you’re there, reading this, you know what happens next. I wish I had greater faith in your existence.”

Life-writing

As a long-established writing genre, the diary carries strong associations of self-reflection and stock-taking. As Philippe Lejeune has written, “The diary offers a space and time protected from the pressures of life. You take refuge in its calm to ‘develop’ the image of what you have just lived through and to meditate upon it, to examine the choices to be made.”12 For many EDLM diarists, recording the day evokes a desire to place it in context of a larger life narrative. One of our most prolific and creative diarists frequently reflects on his coming-out as a gay man, his divorce, the repressive setting in which he was raised, and the lingering fear of harm and repression, made acute by today’s political climate. “Yet, as a gay man, I have spent much of my life trying to evade, elude capture, detection, have learned to keep a low profile, fly under the radar, be a people pleaser,” he writes on Nov. 14, 2017.

Here details of ordinary life provide occasions for reflection and threads in a fuller embroidering of Diarist A29’s life story. Diarist A29 is, moreover, the most striking example of someone who has made the diary project his own. He works by recording spoken notes during the day, then spends, often, several weeks fashioning these into formally inventive diaries of up to twenty-five single-spaced pages, with prose interspersed with photos, subheadings, quotations from song lyrics, and more. While his commitment is uncommon, many writers, more modestly, use the day diary to relate the present to the past and the future. Planning a move to his southern home state, a diarist
frets that he may have missed his chance by coming to Muncie for school and his first job. “Granted I don’t regret any of my decisions thus far, but there is a price to be paid for them,” he writes. Another writer, attending winter commencement at Ball State, notes that these ceremonies predictably trigger memories of her first marriage, bookended by her undergraduate and Ph.D. graduations. As this cyclical memory recurs, she notes the gradual change in its emotional weight. “I felt like my graduation day from Ph.D. school was a defining moment in knowing I was done with the marriage and feeling the confidence to make that choice. These thoughts are more neutral than they used to be.”

**Creative noticing and play**

In conversations with us, volunteers have noted that the practice of keeping a day diary causes them to tune in acutely to everyday activities. One writer recorded this phenomenon on Feb. 4, 2018: listening to his iPod on shuffle while doing dishes, he lists the songs and the thoughts they spur, then observes: “I recognize around this point that the diary is making me notice more details than usual.” The diaries not only promote this assertive noticing but record it for posterity—another benefit our writers have observed. In our last focus group meeting, a volunteer remarked that the *EDLM* project has “given us a gift. We wouldn’t have these records of our days” otherwise; he envisioned looking back on them and sharing them with his children years hence.

Channeling this assertive noticing into diary form has spurred creative play. On Feb. 4, 2018—the first diary day of the project’s current phase—Diarist A29 presented two diaries: one in 10,250 words, and one in 16 words: “Sing. Dream. Wake. Play. Die. Fuch. Stuff. See. Eat. Write. Hear. Read. Watch. Tend. Sleep.” These words become subject headings for the longer full diary. Another writer experiments with a more fragmentary, condensed form. This concise diary is arranged in isolated sentences, centered on the page to suggest a poem, some recounting events, some thoughts, without paragraphs or transitions. The fragments compress the feel of the day, and many details, into a short 420 words. Rather than presenting the day as a continuous narrative it crystallizes it into discrete events, thoughts, and feelings:
The children in my house need to make better choices.
Just because you didn’t cause the problem doesn’t mean you can’t do something to fix it.
Starting a non-profit is running a business, so are you ready for taxes, accounting, employees, grant writing? No.
I have to think about the 19th century, Walt Whitman awaits.
Brain-dead, overtired, I feel a need for food that borders on survival-level urgency.

Diary as therapy

Such creative diary-keeping activates both the expressive and the reflective elements of the diary as a genre. Overlapping these functions is what might be called the therapeutic function, in which writers air and reflect on personal problems with significant emotional weight. While the public nature of the EDLM diaries might seem to discourage candor about intimate, emotional problems, other factors may in fact encourage it, including the anonymity of the diaries’ publication and the openness that probably characterizes someone willing to participate in the project. It’s tempting to speculate, as well, that the prospect of an audience beyond the self increases the sense of relief that expressing pain, loneliness, or grief in writing affords. Several writers shared feelings of sadness or depression around the holidays in diaries from December 15, 2018, including a grandmother who reported crying in a store at the sight of gifts that would be appropriate for estranged family members: “While walking to find soup, I think about all the missed holidays I’ve had with my granddaughters and how sad I am. I feel like I wear a mask most days.” Another volunteer, in the most emotionally powerful set of diaries the project has collected, has voiced and processed her grief in the two years since her grown son died of a drug overdose, leaving her to care for his young son. The diaries constitute a version of what Lejeune calls a “crisis diary,” and they record an array of fugitive emotional states: from depressed, overwhelmed, hopelessness . . .
I am awake and not altogether willing to do this project. . . . The enormity of the problems seem insurmountable. . . . Today I am tired. I’m sick and tired.

. . . to reverence, as she tunes into her grandson’s expression of his grief:

I was still looking at my phone, checking important stuff. He said, Gramma, I have a cold rock right here in my belly. It tells me that daddy is just nowhere. I got up and went over to the tub and leaned in to say “Will you tell me that again?” I wasn’t sure that I was listening. He said it again. My mind went into a flurry like the snow this morning. I wanted to take a video so that I could remember it exactly as it was in this moment.

Such clear-eyed facing of painful facts sometimes resolves, later in the day, in clarity and forward-looking re-commitment to her own happiness and health. More than once, such regatherings reference the role of the diary itself in bringing things into focus: 

This has been a meaningful exercise for me today. I appreciate the notion of being mindful of every action that I take. I am pretty sure that my happiness is the direct result of my internal response and external reaction to circumstance both past and present.

At its most ambitious, Everyday Life in Middletown strives to be a remedy to social isolation and an alternative to the endless streams of online reading and writing that express the worst impulses seeking expression in our political moment. Thomas S. Davis has traced a similar drive towards “reconciliation” in the original Mass Observation, among the political upsets of the late 1930s and the onset of World War II. If it is too utopian to view Everyday Life in Middletown as a project of social reconciliation, or too early to claim success, the diaries quoted in this section suggest that, at least on an individual level, the project is benefiting the citizens of Muncie, Indiana, who are participating in it.

Challenges

The project faces a number of challenges, from the difficulty of reaching its loftiest aims of community building to the banal complications of digital
publishing. Building a website alone does not generate engagement, so we continue to devise online and in-person strategies to generate diary writing and to invite readers to the archive. Striking a balance between accessibility and long-term preservation has also been more complicated than expected and has informed our choice of web platforms. Most significant, there is a substantial editorial process involved in collecting and sharing this often-intimate material, one that involves both ethical issues and strategic choices about dissemination. These concerns occupy the largest share of our day-to-day work on the project.

We learned quickly that an “if-you-build-it-they-will-come” approach to the project’s website was insufficient. Initial traffic was modest, drawing some local interest and user responses but not as much as desired. We went through several versions of the project site, drawing upon informal user feedback as well as a more formal user-experience review to make it simpler and more accessible. We employ social media, primarily Twitter and Facebook, to draw attention and drive traffic to the site, as well as to provide another portal through which the project’s online audience can offer commentary and interpretation. These efforts have yielded some fruit according to analytics, but the work of attracting users to the site and making it easy and appealing to use remains a major focus.  

Tension between providing access and ensuring long-term preservation has also been an issue. During the focus group with our diarists, it became clear that our initial platform and content management system, Omeka, was not sufficiently inviting. Key elements, such as the blog and discussions of everyday-life theory, had to reside on another website, separate from the archive, which became unwieldy. More important, without substantial and (given our resources) costly customization we could not make the diaries easily readable on mobile screens. Even Omeka Everywhere, a mobile application, is designed in a manner that emphasized metadata over the diaries themselves. Our users told us they most wanted to be able to read the diaries easily on their phones and tablets and to bypass metadata. As a result we shifted to WordPress as the principal site for reading our diaries. It presented them clearly on mobile screens and facilitated the tagging and linking that we
employ to cultivate interaction with the material. We continue to maintain the Omeka site, however, because it permits us to develop robust metadata that follows Dublin Core standards. This facilitates long-term preservation and access to the material by making it readily transferable to an archival repository. Academic researchers and designers may eventually find the more extensive metadata useful for deeper investigations or more complex visualizations of the material.

Perhaps the most time-consuming element of managing *EDLM* is its editorial process. Publishing material about our volunteers’ private actions, thoughts, and emotions raises questions about privacy and legal liability. We therefore vet diaries carefully and flag potentially troublesome passages for review and possible excision. These might include exceptionally personal disclosures, material that reveals personal information about diarists’ friends, family, or acquaintances, or potentially libelous criticisms. We often consult individual diarists for clarification or permission to include specific language or even whole sections of a diary. We sometimes suggest small revisions. No full names are used, only initials, and we remove other identifying information. Of course, all participants sign releases, and we emphasize that they must choose how much of their personal lives or thoughts they wish to reveal. Nevertheless we seek their okay for passages that may touch on sensitive topics or seem overly revealing.

*Everyday Life in Middletown* remains a work in progress. The archive is growing steadily, and we expect to continue collecting diaries for several more years. Over the longer term, we aim to expand *EDLM*’s geographic reach. We purposely zeroed in on a single community initially for both substantive and practical reasons. The most obvious was one of scale: exploring everyday life in a single place seemed less daunting than attempting a broader project. We also wanted to take advantage of Muncie’s history and reputation as a site of social research. The degree to which communities like Muncie—a Midwestern Rust Belt city—became a focus of political discussion during the 2016 presidential campaigns also made a project centered here seem timely. Most significant was our sense that concentrating on one place made it more feasible to cultivate a genuine sense of commonality based on ordinary daily
experiences, in an age when people seem increasingly prone to sort themselves into (largely online) political and cultural silos. As a next step we intend to export this model to other communities, arranging collaborations with libraries and educational institutions that will create digital commons for their cities and towns. These local initiatives will form a network of linked sites where the everyday is explored.

Digital tools and resources make such an expansion possible without sacrificing the collaborative approach that animates EDLM. Creating a linked set of online digital archives will facilitate sharing of data and methods while still keeping projects at a scale where participant input can be meaningful. More important, the lessons we have taken from building an online commons for sharing and exploring the everyday, especially around issues of access, collaboration, and privacy, will provide a model not only for similar endeavors in other communities, but for many kinds of scholarly projects in which community members create content.

Notes

6. See Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.
8. Mass Observation tried to subvert such power relations by quoting heavily from primary documents and designing books with a surrealism-inspired, montage


15. Our analytics measure the number of hits and time on site.

Works Cited


