

Special Section Introduction: Mass Observation as Method

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Introduction

- 1.1 Since Mass Observation's foundation in 1937, the organisation has played witness to the great and the small events of everyday life during the last eight decades, recording people's opinions, beliefs and experiences, and making them available for researchers to develop new interpretations of British social life. Although the data produced is often messy and unwieldy and apparently contradicts many sociological assumptions about methodological rigour, the Archive is uniquely placed to offer detailed and exceptionally rich accounts of the fibre of everyday life and to reveal the deep complexities of family, personal and intimate life. As Mike Savage notes in *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940*, 'Mass-Observation is the most studied, and arguably the most important, social research institution of the mid-twentieth century' (Savage 2010: 57). He situates this significance in it providing the focus for the emergence of a new intellectual class in late 1930s Britain of people who identified with a social scientific outlook. Until that point in time, the main point of entry into intellectual circles for newly educated classes was through literary culture, which was often implicitly elitist and hierarchical in its attitude to wider society.
- 1.2 The Mass Observation founders, Tom Harrisson, Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge, were typical of the radical younger generation of literary intellectuals, exemplified by George Orwell and the Auden Group, who sought to waive their social privilege and share experience with the working class.^[1] However, what distinguished the output of Mass Observation from individual accounts such as Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) was the collective participation of its volunteers and contributors, who were interested in understanding society and their role within it. Influenced by the involvement of Jennings and Madge in surrealism, the early Mass Observers were encouraged to collect social imagery which could be presented in a form of montage that reflected the textured and contradictory, essentially intersubjective, nature of social reality. In literary terms, early Mass Observation texts display a late modernist self-reflexivity and arguably it is this that added an extra dimension to the organisation's social research.^[2] Mass Observation became known quickly to the British sociological establishment but at a time when there was only one university chair in the discipline, it was perceived as a threat and contemporary references to it in sociological literature were elliptical (see Hubble 2010: 146-8).
- 1.3 Over time, Mass Observation techniques developed to include comprehensive social sampling and qualitative 'thick' descriptions of working-class practices. Both of these approaches had direct legacies. In the case of the former, Mass Observation personnel - such as Kathleen Box, Geoffrey Thomas and Bob Willcock - went on to form the backbone of the Wartime Social Survey and the Government Social Survey which succeeded it, with Thomas eventually becoming head in the 1970s. In the latter respect, MO can be seen as the forerunner of the Institute of Community Studies, in which Madge, a long-time friend and collaborator of Michael Young's, participated at various points. More generally, however, Mass Observation's focus - unique for the late 1930s - on everyday life as a system set the tone for the rise to dominance of the social sciences in post-war Britain and the process described by Savage in which sampling methods 'mined down to reveal mundane, ordinary life, in miniature' and thus made key contributions to the 'broader process of building a modern, rational, post-imperial nation' (Savage 2010: vii).

- 1.4 However, although Mass Observation participated in the debates around the 1946 Clapham Report that set the future for sociological research by endorsing state spending on social and economic research (see [Hubble 2010: 212-4](#); [Harrisson 1947](#)), within a few years - during which Harrisson left Britain to take up a post as the Curator of the Sarawak museum and the organisation became Mass Observation Ltd, a Market Research company - the organisation's methodology was being unfairly characterised by Mark Abrams, a commercial competitor, as the use of untrained staff to collect 'dreary trivia' and 'boring and unrelated quotations' ([Abrams 1951: 107-8](#)). This account established a dominant negative reception that was to last into the 1980s. Ironically, at more-or-less the same time as Abrams's attack, Madge, who had left Mass Observation in 1940 to work for Keynes, was appointed as the inaugural Chair of Sociology at the University of Birmingham. His concerns, however, were never mainstream and he ended his career in the early 1970s depressed by the onset of theory (see [Hubble 2010: 219-220](#)). By a further irony, though, the rehabilitation of Mass Observation as a movement of interest to sociologists began at a similar time in Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, famously receptive to both student involvement and theoretical approaches. Concerns with movements of resistance and agency which motivated Stuart Hall's 'The Social Eye of Picture Post' ([hall 1972](#)) led to work such as Tom Jeffery's *A Short History of Mass Observation* (1978), which was published as a CCCS occasional paper.
- 1.5 Jeffrey's history was made possible by the establishment of the Mass Observation Archive at the University of Sussex at the beginning of the 1970s. The original social survey element of Mass Observation had tailed away during the market research years and by the mid-1960s, all the historical material from the 1930s and 1940s was mouldering away in the cellars of the London headquarters of Mass Observation (UK) Ltd. However interest in its academic potential was rekindled by the researches of the postgraduate students (and subsequently eminent historians) [Angus Calder and Paul Addison](#) in the late 1960s. The outcome of this interest was an invitation extended to Tom Harrisson from the social historian Asa Briggs to bring the papers of the original Mass Observation organisation to the University of Sussex (where Briggs was then Vice-Chancellor) and make them available as a public archive for research into the everyday life of the late 1930s and 1940s. The Mass Observation Archive has remained in the care of the University of Sussex since its arrival in 1969 and is now a registered Charitable Trust. The years following the establishment of the archive and the initial interest from CCCS saw the reputation of Mass Observation fully restored through the publication of its original material in anthologies such as Angus Calder's and Dorothy Sheridan's *Speak For Yourself* and Sheridan's *Wartime Women* (1990).
- 1.6 More recently, academic attention has become interested in the diaries that Mass Observation asked its panellists to keep for the duration of the Second World War. Many of these such as that of Nella Last, well-known through her portrayal by Victoria Wood in the television drama *Housewife 49* (2006), continued long into the post-war period. The historian James Hinton has argued that these diaries 'take us as close as a historian can hope to get to observe selfhood under construction' ([Hinton 2010: 7](#)) because of their unique specificity: 'Mass-Observation offered a discipline and a context which transcended the purely private, meeting a need to frame individual quests in relation to larger public purposes' ([Hinton 2010: 6](#)). For Hinton, these diaries reveal the everyday unfolding of what, following the work of Charles Taylor, he takes as the central process of modernity: the radical disembedding of individual subjectivity from received sources of meaning. In particular, he suggests that they reveal the variety of stratagems and subtle ways by which women established equality and autonomy in the private sphere during the decades between the great public campaigns of the Suffragettes and the Women's Liberation Movement. The availability of almost the entire historical Mass Observation archive online (to subscribing institutions) ensures that the diaries will be subject to increasing research by social historians.
- 1.7 Since 1981, a contemporary Mass Observation has been run from the Archive at the University of Sussex (which, as discussed below, has now relocated a few hundred metres away from the Library to a purpose-built archival facility). Despite its initial short term ambitions, this launch of a national panel of correspondents recruited to report on contemporary Britain was moulded into a long term life writing project under Professor Dorothy Sheridan, who directed it for over thirty years. The success of what is now called the Mass Observation Project illustrates a continued interest in watching ourselves that links members of today's Britain with their 1930s predecessors. The Mass Observation Panel currently stands at around 500 people, although around 5000 have participated since it was launched. Respondents take the opportunity to use Mass Observation as a reflexive space in which to pause to take a look at contemporary life and their part within it. But beyond this personal space for reflection, participating in the Project also gives respondents the opportunity to become part of a larger whole in the form of Mass Observation Archive, setting their thoughts, feelings and experiences down for posterity. Three times a year, MO participants receive a seasonal "directive," which is a set of open questions (many of which are now commissioned by social researchers) that invite them to write freely and discursively about their views and experiences on subjects ranging from their attitudes to education or social

class to topical issues such as the Falklands War (to name one of the first subjects of a directive in the early 1980s) or climate change. This is now one of the major repositories of longitudinal qualitative social data for the UK.

- 1.8 Following the cultural and narrative 'turns' in the social sciences over the last 15-20 years, this data has been increasingly used by researchers and has had significant impact in many different fields such as, for example, ageing. As Sheridan argues, MO had many attributes at the turn of the millennium that made it particularly suitable for ageing research. First, the majority of respondents were not only over 50 but also well-distributed across the older age ranges. Second, the longitudinal nature of the Mass Observation Project means, for example, that in 2000 they had 18 respondents in the over-80 age range who had been writing for over 15 years, providing a vast wealth of material. The same holds true across all the age ranges:

The project itself is a record of the ageing process over 20 years, whether someone goes from 32 to 52, or from 62 to 82, and if again is taken to mean the process of growing older at any point in one's life, then we have access here to a huge amount of information about the life span (Sheridan 2002: 75).

- 1.9 Third, the particular quality of MO, as opposed to other forms of life writing such as memoirs and autobiographies, is that it does not provide one single monolithic account of a life. Rather, reading across the directive replies of an individual over the years reveals layered life stories made up of description and re-description, which 'enable us to have access to the contradictions of everyday life, and to the changes of people's perceptions of themselves and the world they inhabit' (Sheridan 2002: 75). There is now an established pedigree of ageing research drawing on Mass Observation material (see Thane 2000; Bytheway 2005, 2009, 2011; Bazalgette *et al.* 2011). Following the accounts of Mass Observers across the years in the archive 'it is possible to see the basis for the emergence of a new social narrative of ageing, which both allows for long active post-retirement years and a gradual acceptance of old age, seen not as decrepitude or social problem, but as the attainment of a self-acceptance that transcends any purely medical concept of well-being' (Hubble and Tew 2013, 199).

- 1.10 Since 2000, the Mass Observation Project (MOP) has revised its recruitment priorities so that its composition gradually becomes more representative of the population as a whole but, nevertheless, however young its panellists are when they commence they will get older and so its viability for ageing research will continue. However, as the papers in this collection show, the MOP is equally productive for researching topics other than ageing whether that be how people relate to their gardens or social attitudes to subjects such as gambling or forensic science. Aside from the richness of the data and the potential for longitudinal study, contemporary Mass Observation material is also very distinctive in its orientation to a sense of the future. As Ben Highmore notes in *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday*, 'in the period of Mass-Observation after 1981 diarists were explicitly asked to write for future historians who would want to understand the lives of ordinary people' (Highmore 2011: 92). As a result the accounts produced by Mass Observers are often not only 'thickly rendered' but also permeated with a distinctively 'temporal atmosphere':

Mortality, both the finitude of death and the mourning of passing time, is a subterranean seam that runs through these documents as correspondents consider their (and others') past and futures in the context of the ever-changing present. The future-perfect, or future-anterior, is a tense where hope and fear meld with melancholy (all this will have had to have happened; the future I hoped for and feared is now past), and it is a tense that corresponds to an experience of living historical time. Living historical time infuses with daily time in ordinary life, because as well as living 'now' we also live with the possibilities (with the limits and opportunities) that the future is seen as providing (or will have provided). Being able to see the future as significantly different or substantially the same as the present, places the intimate politics of living within the realm of the day-to-day imagining of narrative cohesion, continuity and change (Highmore 2011: 92).

- 1.11 It is this sense of recording historical experience as it is lived that ensures that the contemporary Mass Observation collection has become a focus for research within academia and beyond. In recent years it has served as inspiration for projects such as Kevin MacDonald's film, *Life in a Day* (2011), provided contextual information for films and programmes such as Channel 4's *1940s House* (2001), and even been awarded the accolade of a collective guest editorship on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme (26 December 2012). Mass Observation continues to inspire others to recognise the value of recording their own lives and communities; recent activities include a day diary of life in Dublin, an hour of observation on Kilburn High Street and a year long diary project for a rural village in Sussex. Alongside the National Panel, Mass Observation has recently initiated an annual Day Survey, revisiting the original 12th of the month surveys that ran throughout 1937. Since 2010, a call for diaries has been made by Mass Observation on 12 May. People from all over the UK participate, providing a snap-shot of British life on that day. In 2013 the 12 May project was adopted by Myogji University in

Seoul, South Korea, who created their own 12 May archive of everyday life in South Korea inspired by and in partnership with Mass Observation. In 2014, the Mass Observation Archive will be working with China Women's University (CWU) in Beijing to collect diaries written by women in China.

- 1.12** The celebration of Mass Observation's 75th anniversary in 2012 heralded new projects and explorations into new technologies and forms of recording everyday life. The JISC funded *Observing the 1980s* project created Open Learning Resources using digitised material from the 1980s Mass Observation Project, the British Library's Sound Archive and the University of Sussex Library. This allowed the Archive the opportunity to explore issues of digitising contemporary life history archives in different media formats, and the ways that students can use technology to help digest them. The Archive has also worked with the British Library's UK Web Archive to experiment with using blog formats to help Mass Observers record their activities over the Queen's Diamond Jubilee weekend. The anniversary also provided the opportunity to reflect on the Archive itself, and all the research work that has been undertaken within it by many disciplines. Mass Observation celebrated this anniversary with a seminar series featuring historians Juliette Gardiner, David Kynaston, Virginia Nicholson and Joe Moran, and film director Kevin MacDonald, who all focused on how Mass Observation featured in their work. The celebration culminated in a three day conference held at The University of Sussex in July 2012, in which over 60 papers were given by researchers from the UK, Europe, China, Australia and the US. One of the striking features of the conference was the diversity of ways in which Mass Observation was being used and by the breadth of disciplines that found a wealth of data in its Archive. In addition to its own conference, Mass Observation was also a theme for the 2012 Future Everything Digital Arts conference in Manchester, whilst its visual aspects were the focus of an exhibition at The Photographers' Gallery in London, curated by Russell Roberts, and attracting over 40,000 visitors during the summer of 2013.
- 1.13** In 2013, Mass Observation moved once more, along with the University of Sussex's other Special Collections, to new premises at The Keep, a purpose built archival repository centre with state of the art storage and research facilities that also houses the East Sussex Record Office and Brighton and Hove Royal Pavilion and Museum's archival collections. Staff in Special Collections undertook the mammoth task of barcoding and recording over 3000 archival boxes of Mass Observation diaries, observational reports, ephemera and survey sheets. The Keep was opened to the public by Her Majesty The Queen on 31 October 2013. Mass Observation see this as another significant stage in its history, in which the Archive and its projects have once again moved into a more public arena. A successful application to the Mass Observation Trustees and the Heritage Lottery Fund in 2012 has established an Education and Outreach programme working with schools and community groups throughout the UK, taking full advantage of the facilities at The Keep and embedding Mass Observation into the communities it has so long observed. The Keep has provided the opportunities to preserve the collection and enable more diverse and innovative modes of project development and archival practice over the next 75 years and beyond.
- 1.14** We turn now to a brief account of the papers included in this collection and draw out key themes emerging from the papers. One of the strands emerging from the collection is that of Mass Observation producing 'big', 'messy' and 'awkward' data. [Emma Uprichard and Liz Moor's paper](#) *The Materiality of Method: The Case of the Mass Observation Archive*, discusses the complexities of Mass Observation data and the range of methodological issues that it poses for social researchers. Drawing on the idiosyncrasy of the data and use of non-systematic sampling, the authors further point out that the 'unwieldy materiality' of the data raises further problems for analysis. Uprichard and Moor observe that the archive and its data are peculiarly 'sensory' and describe the experience of 'getting dirty with data'. In contrast to much of the criticism of Mass Observation as methodological tool, Uprichard and Moor highlight the unique opportunities that Mass Observation offers social researchers in terms of the materiality of method and the sensuousness of the data.
- 1.15** A second key theme that emerges from the collection is that of intimacies, the family and personal life. [Anne-Marie Kramer's paper](#) *The Observers and the Observed: The 'Dual' Vision of the Mass Observation Project* draws on data collected in Summer 2008 from a Directive commissioned by the author entitled *Doing Family History Research*. The project explored the role and status of genealogy in exploring personal and family lives. Observers write using what Kramer describes as a 'dual vision'; on the one hand they observe personal and family lives as a social phenomenon, but on the other, they habitually recount detail of their own personal and family lives. Kramer remarks that Mass Observation is unique in that it offers accounts that are routinely situated temporally within family histories and also within social and geographical spaces. The resulting descriptions of personal and family life presented in Kramer's paper are uniquely rich and reflexive.
- 1.16** [Mark Bhatti's paper](#) also connects to this theme by focusing on Mass Observers' accounts of gardens

and gardening. Bhatti argues that the frequently autobiographical nature of Mass Observation makes it ideally placed to elicit data about taken for granted, mundane aspects of everyday life. Bhatti argues that Mass Observation helps to illuminate some of the complexities of intimate life activities, such as gardening by providing detailed information about for example, emotions, 'resistance' and identity formations, but points out that observers also frequently offset and contextualise these everyday experiences within wider social and structural relations. Each of these positions is routinely borne out in Mass Observers' accounts of everyday life experiences.

- 1.17** The third key theme emerging from the papers is the distinctiveness of the relationship between observers and the data that they produce. [Anabella Pollen's paper](#) for example, *Shared ownership and mutual imaginaries: Researching research in Mass Observation* draws on a rich variety of discussion and insights emerging from the University of Brighton research network 'Methodological Innovations: Using Mass Observation' collected during 2009-10. Pollen combines these responses with responses to the MOP directive 'Being Part of Research' in order to explore the relationships between contributors and readers. Her paper considers the complex nature of Mass Observation material and how it is imagined and understood by researchers and contributors alike. Other papers extend this theme by revealing that people writing for the Archive are both 'observers' and 'observed'. [Dana Wilson-Kovacs' paper](#) *'Clearly Necessary', 'Wonderful' and 'Engrossing'? Mass Observation Correspondents Discuss Forensic Technologies*, considers the use of Mass Observation as tool to aid accounts of the public understanding of science. She argues that Mass Observation provides an excellent resource for unpicking public reflections and representations of both investigative practices and genetic technologies. Wilson-Kovacs argues that popular understandings of DNA technologies are bound up with notions of criminal investigative practice, popularised by TV shows such as *CSI Investigates*. Drawing on specific detail from two Mass Observation case studies, she demonstrates that Mass Observers provide a peculiarly rich articulation of everyday knowledge or 'lay articulations'. For Wilson-Kovacs, the 'worlds of meaning' entrenched in Mass Observers' responses offer great potential for social researchers to understand the relationships between specialist knowledge and how this intersects with everyday, intimate life.
- 1.18** Wilson-Kovacs' paper also connects with a fourth theme emerging from the collection which relates to the opportunities that Mass Observation offers for producing historical and longitudinal accounts, in this case a comparison of two Directives, one commissioned in 2006 on the theme of *Genes, Genetics and Cloning* and the second commissioned in 2011 entitled *Crime and Investigation*. [Emma Casey's paper](#) also interrogates the historical and longitudinal potential of Mass Observation by tracing the relationship of the Archive from its conception in 1937 to its present day incarnation. Drawing on previously uncovered correspondence between the social researcher and reformer Seebohm Rowntree, his research assistant G.R. Lavers and Tom Harrisson at Mass Observation, Casey shows how this correspondence provides vital information about early debates and uncertainty about the sociological and particularly the methodological potential of Mass Observation. Drawing on Rowntree's early study of 'Mass Gambling' conducted in York in 1951, Casey shows that initially Rowntree had commissioned Mass Observation to collect data on this and related topics. Contrasting this early study with a recent Mass Observation Directive commissioned by the author in 2011, Casey discusses the similarities and differences surrounding popular, political and cultural discourses of gambling and argues that much of the early methodological scepticism about Mass Observation and the popular pathologising of gambling remains true today.
- 1.19** [Rose Lindsey and Sarah Bulloch's paper](#) *A Sociologist's Field Notes to the Mass Observation Archive: A Consideration of the Challenges of 'Re-Using' Mass Observation Data in a Longitudinal Mixed-Methods Study* continues on the theme of Mass Observation as offering opportunities as well as challenges for historical and longitudinal research. They point out that given the recent emphasis of the social science community, and the recent drive by the Research Councils for researchers to make increased use of secondary data, Mass Observation is well placed to help sociologists meet these demands. Lindsey and Bulloch's paper demonstrates the particular uses of Mass Observation when integrated into longitudinal and mixed-method social research projects. Connecting also with the third theme of the collection, they also argue that Mass Observation offers an excellent way of exploring sociologists' relationships to the people that they research. The paper argues that there are great possibilities offered by transcending methodological disciplines and boundaries which, they argue are frequently thwarted by a lack of inter-disciplinary working. For Lindsey and Bulloch, Mass Observation makes genuine inter-disciplinary scholarship possible.
- 1.20** The papers collected here illustrate the richness and uniqueness of Mass Observation as a resource for sociologists and others. The data is always historically situated and captures not only the personal biographies of observers but also the fascinating contexts of social, cultural and political events. Observers locate themselves

both as the researched *and* as researchers; as both archivists and as the 'archived'. It is this unique dual consciousness and reflexivity that contributes decisively to the value of its data. Similarly to the way in which the original Mass Observation broke ground in its capacity to uncover everyday life, sociological research using data from the current Mass Observation Project - such as that described in the following papers - has the capacity to transcend statistical polling and penetrate into the very processes by which the social is continuously remade around ourselves.

Appendix 1

Text with unnumbered paragraphs can go here (remove comment markers) *Details of the Mass Observation Archive and how researchers may access it are available at <http://www.massobs.org.uk/index.htm>.*

Notes

- 1 For book-length studies of historical Mass Observation see [Hubble 2010 \[2006\]](#) and [Hinton 2013](#). For a short history available online, see [Crain 2006](#).
 - 2 It should be noted that Hinton downplays the importance of the literary aspect and of Jennings's involvement in Mass Observation (see [Hinton 2013](#): viii-ix, 1-16, 66-75, 368, 376-8). For a critique of Hinton's argument, see [Hubble 2014](#).
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