

Reviewing Mass-Observation: The Archive and its Researchers Thirty Years on

Dorothy Sheridan

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Abstract: The papers resulting from the 1930s social research organisation, "Mass-Observation" were established as a public archive at the University of Sussex in the early 1970s. Since then they have attracted a steadily increasing number of researchers not only from within the academic community (from art history, social history, anthropology, psychology, sociology, media and cultural studies and literature) but also from the wider community (film, TV and radio programme makers, journalists, community workers, oral and local historians, novelists, playwrights and artists, photographers and documentarists, teachers and school students). This more recent use of materials which were originally collected for other purposes at other times has been substantial. As a result, the Mass-Observation Archive can be seen as a prime example of the ways in which social research data can be re-evaluated within new research frameworks, in response to new formulations of research questions, and even within entirely new methodological paradigms. This paper briefly describes the Archive and the history of its (secondary) exploitation.

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1. The Papers Come to the University of Sussex

Throughout the late 1950s and the 1960s, the papers generated by the "Mass-Observation" (M-O) studies were stored in an office basement in London and had been largely forgotten within the world of social science (see STANLEY 1990). Their rescue from neglect and further physical deterioration can be attributed to Asa BRIGGS who, at the time the papers arrived at Sussex in 1970, was Vice-Chancellor at Sussex. The University was less than a decade old and still actively expanding its sphere of interests and assets in relatively experimental directions. The offer of a home to a collection of what must have seemed to many academics an obscure set of papers with dubious scholarly appeal was characteristic of the "Briggs era" at Sussex. It is no exaggeration to say that much of the subsequent development and promotion of the Archive, particularly by the present author as its archivist, has been fired by a need to persuade the University that it was justified in saving the papers and that it now can boast of supporting a resource that is unique and valuable. [1]

2. Research Interest in the Late 1960s

The earliest interest in re-use of the papers came chiefly from social historians seeking new sources for their research on the period of the Second World War in Britain. Since Mass-Observation had begun work in 1937, its coverage of wartime is particularly extensive. Two young scholars who were working in this area were instrumental in alerting BRIGGS to the potential of the papers as an important resource for the period. Paul ADDISON, now professor of History at the University of Edinburgh, first re-discovered the papers in the late 1960s and made substantial use of them in his research on social and party political developments during World War Two, published as *The Road to 1945* (1975). His friend, the now eminent historian Angus CALDER, was one of BRIGGS' postgraduate students at Sussex in the sixties. He too used the papers. His thesis on the Common Wealth Party introduced him to an interest in wartime Britain and he drew heavily on the collection for his comprehensive study of the Home Front in Britain 1939-45, published as *The People's War* in 1969. CALDER was the first of many writers to be questioned on his reliance on Mass-Observation evidence. In the preface to the second edition of his book, in response to criticisms by Margaret COLE and Henry PELLING, he wrote:

"They [Mass-Observation reports] were indeed produced by inexperienced people in very difficult conditions. But for me they were an indispensable aid to tracing popular views and reactions in all kinds of fields, from aerial bombardment to greyhound racing. ... [they] must indeed be used with caution as I recognised when I was handling them, but their biases and shortcomings are so evident that it should be easy to allow for them. I stick to my idea that they are probably the richest source of material available to the social historian of the period ..." (CALDER 1971, Preface to the Second [Panther] Edition). [2]

Despite the scepticism which greeted the re-use of M-O, Asa BRIGGS was sufficiently convinced of the papers' value that he was prepared to expend his own resources (including apparently his own office at the outset) to accommodate the collection. He invited its flamboyant owner, Tom HARRISSON, who had been one of the original founders of Mass-Observation, to come to Sussex to set up the collection as a public archive. HARRISSON was made a Visiting Professor and the Archive was established as a charitable trust in the care of the University. The VC officially opened the Archive in 1975. [3]

3. Subject Coverage of the Mass-Observation Archive

Mass-Observation's origins and history have now been well-documented in a number of publications (STANLEY 1981, STANLEY 1990, JEFFERY 1979/1999, CALDER 1985, SUMMERFIELD 1985, SHERIDAN, STREET & BLOOME 2000). The resulting archive reflects the wide variety of M-O's attempts to record everyday life from the late 1930s into the early 1950s: food, clothing, housing, money, family relations, leisure activities, work, politics, religion, race, class and above all, responses to wartime conditions: conscription, bombing, separation from loved ones, feelings about propaganda and wartime morale. The gradual

shift away from broad social questions towards consumer behaviour which began in the late 1940s was accelerated when, in 1949, Mass-Observation was registered as a limited company. With a few exceptions, the studies conducted in the early 1950s were in response to specific contracts and commissions focusing on public purchasing habits and particular commodities and products—soap powder, washing machines, crisp breads, dog-worming tablets and so on. There was a revival of the "old" (i.e. more ethnographic and qualitative) form of M-O in 1959 when HARRISSON returned to England from Southeast Asia to re-group some of the original team for a trip back to Bolton (*Britain Revisited* 1960). However, this was a blip in an otherwise relentless movement towards large quantitative surveys with the rapid publication of results in the form of short consumer reports rather than in books as had been their practice throughout the war years whenever publication could be achieved. While the older papers were forgotten in the basement of M-O UK Ltd, some of the printed material (mostly ephemera—labels, leaflets, booklets, posters) was transferred to the Imperial War Museum, a revealing indication of what was considered to be the most valuable part of the collection at that time. The managing director in these later years was Len ENGLAND who had begun work for M-O as a young diarist in London in 1940, and had made a career for himself within M-O together with the research director, Mollie TARRANT, who had also begun work for M-O as a young teacher reporting on a voluntary basis from Southampton during the Blitz. Both Len and Mollie were committed to preserving the early papers even if the consensus within the new M-O UK Ltd was that they were an embarrassing reminder of an unscientific and somewhat unethical past. [4]

4. Secondary Research Use Since 1970

Over the years the secondary use has taken four main forms:

- a. *The use of the material as historical evidence in support of a research project on a particular theme:* This was one of the earliest kinds of use and it remains the most popular. ADDISON and CALDER, as mentioned earlier, were the first to exploit the papers in this way even before the collection came to Sussex. Tom HARRISSON's own book, *Living through the Blitz* (1976), was written when he came to Sussex with the Archive. His study is based on wartime reports on the impact of air raids on the civilian population. Other researchers included Penny SUMMERFIELD for her *Women Workers in the Second World War* (1984) and for all the other titles that followed the Archive's launch¹. For every book, there have been five to ten articles, theses, research papers, TV or radio programmes and student essays on subjects on a wide range of themes. The most popular areas remain the evacuation of

¹ Selected titles include: *Propaganda in war* (BALFOUR 1979), *Labour and society in Britain 1918-79* (CRONIN 1984), *War Games: the Story of Sport in World War Two* (McCARTHY 1989), *The Persistence of Prejudice: anti-semitism in British Society during the Second World War* (KUSHNER 1989), *The Churchill coalition and wartime politics* (JEFFERYS 1991), *From Prohibition to regulation: bookmaking, anti-gambling and the Law* (DIXON 1991), *Popular reading and publishing in Britain 1914-50* (MCALLEN 1992), *Constructing girlhood; popular magazines for girls growing up in England* (TINKLER 1995), *The Facts of Life: the creation of sexual knowledge in Britain* (PORTER & HALL 1995), *War and the British: gender, memory and national identity* (NOAKES 1998).

children from urban areas, women and wartime, food rationing, air raids, propaganda and film. This kind of use is often assumed to be fairly unproblematical in the sense that many researchers do not always attend to the provenance of the data. This can occasionally leave them open to criticism of the kind levelled at Angus CALDER. In some cases (see for example, HARPER & PORTER 1995), researchers have retraced M-O's research on a subject and applying new analytical categories to the original data have come up with alternative interpretations. In other cases, researchers have taken subject matter not previously analysed by M-O (see HOWKINS 1998) or developed methods of analysis using categories (gender for example) which had not been employed by M-O (see Liz STANLEY's re-analysis of the 1937 day diaries, 1995a). This re-examination of the evidence at a deep level is a more recent approach, and has provided a useful model in the teaching of social research methods particularly within the course "Critical approaches to Mass-Observation" which the present author teaches as part of the Sussex MA programme, "Life history research: oral history and Mass-Observation". [5]

- b. *Use of the papers to understand M-O as a whole and its role in the social, political and cultural milieu of the thirties (and forties):* In this kind of use, researchers are exploring the phenomenon of Mass-Observation itself. Nick STANLEY's thesis (1981), which concerns Mass-Observation's first three years, is an early example of this approach. Tom JEFFERY followed with his short history of Mass-Observation (1979/1999), a paper which grew out of his doctoral research on class in the 1930s. Liz STANLEY's paper (on Mass-Observation's Saving and Spending study in Bolton) explored the relationships between Mass-Observation and Social Scientists at the time, outlining networks and lines of influence which had not been understood in earlier considerations of Mass-Observation (1990). Liz STANLEY has also taken a postwar M-O study on sexual attitudes and behaviour and re-located it within the history of social research on sexuality (STANLEY 1995b). Other authors in this category include CALDER (1985), SUMMERFIELD (1985), GURNEY (1997), MacLANCEY (1995). [6]
- c. *Use of the papers to explore issues in relation to the process of doing research, including methodology at both the collecting and interpretation stage, ethical issues and practical issues:* Again, this has been the approach most useful in teaching research methods. Liz STANLEY, as mentioned earlier, has pioneered much of this work to good effect. The interest in the more subjective and personal accounts of everyday life (as evidenced by the substantial collection of diaries and other personal writing which form part of the Archive) has fed into more recent debates on life story and autobiography (SHERIDAN 1996). [7]
- d. *Use of the papers as a way of developing new projects and of learning from the way in which M-O operated:* Many projects which claim to have been inspired by the original initiative have been set up since the Archive was opened. The most longstanding example is the "new" M-O project itself which was launched in 1981 and which continues to flourish today. The re-creation of a panel of volunteer writers along the lines of the wartime panel has

resulted in a collection of papers at least as large as the original diaries and directives replies put together. In operating this present project, and in using the resulting data, it has been necessary to address all the key issues of methodology and interpretation which confront those working on the earlier papers (see SHERIDAN, STREET & BLOOME 2000). [8]

5. Policy on Access

As the above description of use demonstrates, the Archive has been open to research use from the outset. The possibility of closing the collection until after it had been sorted and listed was discussed by the archivist and trustees in the 1970s when funds were being sought for both cataloguing and conservation. The risk of loss and damage has always been high. The physical state of the paper, which was wartime quality and in some cases badly damaged by having been stored in damp and inadequate conditions, was worse than that of many much older archives. However, it was decided that the collection would remain open and, in retrospect, this proved a wise decision. Many researchers became significant advocates of the collection and were supportive in securing funds, for example, from what was then the Social Science Research Council, from the Manpower Services Commission, from the British Library, from the Nuffield Foundation, from HEFCE (Non-Formula Funding in the Humanities), from the Heritage Lottery Fund and, most importantly from the University of Sussex itself. The researchers' historical knowledge and enthusiasm created a kind of synergy with the work of the Archivist and as a result their understandings of the significance of the material could inform the process of arrangement and description. The small numbers of users in the first ten to fifteen years of public access meant that relations between researchers and Archive staff could retain a kind of easy intimacy and mutual respect within which the security of the material could be safeguarded. The Archive is now part of the much larger Special Collections unit at Sussex but priority is still given to the quality of research support to scholars as far as resources permit. [9]

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Author

Dorothy SHERIDAN has been the Archivist at the Mass-Observation Archive since 1974 and has published a number of books and papers related to the collection. She is Head of Special Collections at the University of Sussex, Co-Director of the Centre for Life History Research and a Senior Lecturer in History.

Contact:

Dorothy Sheridan
The Library, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9QL, UK
Phone: +44 1273 678157
Fax: +44 1273 678441
E-mail: d.e.sheridan@sussex.ac.uk
URL: <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/massobs>

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