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## Using the Mass Observation Project: A Case Study in the Practice of Reusing Data

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**Abstract** Mass Observation was founded in 1937 to collect subjective, qualitative data on everyday life in Britain, and has continued to record the ordinary and the everyday ever since. Mass Observation's purpose has always been to make the data it collects available to a range of disciplines to apply their own methodological approaches upon, resulting in data that can be reused within different projects and disciplines. This paper will use Mass Observation as a case study to illustrate how a sociological shift in attitude towards subjective data has played out in the use of a dataset traditionally viewed as a historical archive. I will review how the data itself is used to define and design methods of analysis, examining the epistemological implications of this approach to research design and the new dimension to the researcher-data subject relationship that is introduced. I will conclude by suggesting that research using Mass Observation exemplifies the methodological opportunities and insights that can be gained by adopting a broader, multi-disciplinary research approach to reusing data.

**Keywords** subjective, qualitative, reuse, methodology, data

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The reuse of data within the social sciences is increasingly being encouraged within UK research as a way of undertaking new analysis rather than simply validating old findings. The practice of reusing data in the social sciences has been enhanced by the establishment of the Qualidata archive in 1994 (Lindsey and Bulloch 2014), the purpose of which was to house data sets collected as part of the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded research projects. These datasets are made available for other researchers to use (in accordance with conditions of access) either

to validate the original findings or to apply new methods and objectives to find new results (Moore 2006; Savage 2007). Researchers and funding bodies continue to consider the expense of collecting new data in a world of economic austerity within academia, whilst also recognising the time and effort that both researchers and their participants give to projects which may only use a small part of the data they give. Advances in technology can also provide new ways of interpreting old data, for example by applying distant reading techniques to large volumes of qualitative data. These opportunities have coincided with what Purbrick (2007) identifies as an intellectual shift in the social sciences that recognises the value of subjective sources to understand social life and enables disciplines previously entrenched in objective data to re-evaluate sources such as the subject of this paper, the Mass Observation Archive.

The collection of data primarily for the purpose of reuse has been the *raison d'être* of Mass Observation ever since its foundation in 1937. Mass Observation has been recording everyday life in Britain for over 80 years, but has focussed on a particular kind of data collection since 1981 in the form of the Mass Observation Project. This paper will concentrate on this particular era of Mass Observation, looking at the methods used to collect and analyse data over the last four decades, and how these might contribute to contemporary discussions around the reuse of data. I write in the capacity of the Curator of the Archive, but also draw on my experiences of using its data within my own Doctoral Studies. My objective in this paper is to provide a case study to consider how the concept of reuse can innovate

a variety of methodological approaches and inspire solutions to some of the challenges that social scientists can face in their quest to reuse data.

The paper will outline the methods by which Mass Observation collects its data, and how this shapes the principle of being available for multiple opportunities for reuse. It will then demonstrate how borrowing from other disciplinary methods can help social science deal with some of the conundrums of data reuse, drawing in particular on methods from oral history. It will go on to look at some of the epistemological considerations that must be made within research design, for example, the new dimension to the researcher-data subject relationship that is introduced when using data collected by another party. I will conclude by suggesting that research using Mass Observation exemplifies the methodological opportunities and insights that can be gained by adopting a broader, multi-disciplinary research approach to reusing data.

## What Is Mass Observation?

Mass Observation was founded in 1937 and is an ongoing independent social survey organisation that is currently based at the University of Sussex. It has been collecting qualitative data on everyday British life since 1937 in the form of surveys, observational reports and life writing. The archive of data collected by Mass Observation is cared for by the University of Sussex, where it is made available to researchers from academia and the wider public. Rather than gathering the data for its own purposes of analysis, Mass Observation's objective is to make it available for researchers

from any discipline to utilise. No single researcher has a monopoly on the data meaning that it is open to multiple opportunities of use and reuse using different disciplinary and methodological approaches.

Since its foundation in 1937, Mass Observation's objective has been to record everyday life in Britain using a combination of techniques. Its activity can be split into two periods, first running from 1937 until the mid-1950s and then from 1981 to the present day. It is important to stress that other than for one short period, Mass Observation has always preserved its independence from governmental institutions. In his history of Mass Observation, Hinton (2013) quotes from a letter from one of the original founders, Charles Madge, to the British economist John Maynard Keynes that describes how independence was essential to the effectiveness of Mass Observation: 'our approach is as personal as possible, since working-class people react strongly against any "official" inquiry' (Hinton 2013:126). The only exception to this independence was for an early period of the Second World War in which Mass Observation was commissioned by the British Ministry of Information to produce reports on public morale. The relationship was short and acrimonious, with tensions arising between Mass Observation's approach of a disinterested objectivity that sought to publish 'grass-roots' opinions on public morale, and governmental concerns that 'did not relish unsubstantiated criticism of their work being circulated' (Hinton 2013:200). From the termination of the relationship in early 1941 to the present day, Mass Observation has remained independent.

Between 1937 and the early 1950s, Mass Observation employed a team of investigators to undertake ethnographic fieldwork. They collated observational reports, interviews and surveys centred on different themes that ranged from the most intimate to the broadest of current affairs. Mass Observation combined this work with the recruitment of a volunteer panel of writers from around the UK, who responded to themed questionnaires and/or kept diaries of their daily lives. The project was described by its co-founders as 'an anthropology of ourselves' (Madge and Harrison 1937) in which the thoughts, experiences and opinions of the 'mass' of everyday Britons would be recorded. The social survey aspect of Mass Observation abated in the 1950s, and the mass of data collected in the form of paper documents lay dormant until its transfer to the University of Sussex in the 1970s when it was opened as a public access archive.

Since 1981, MO has revived its active recording of daily life, working with a new panel of volunteer writers who respond to themed questionnaires that are sent out three times a year. The questionnaires are termed Directives (as they were in the 1930s), in that they 'direct' the volunteer writers. We work with researchers to develop these Directives, which are normally based around three themes. The themes respond to events in current affairs, trends in contemporary culture or relate to a researcher's specific focus. The Directives comprise a series of questions or open-ended prompts to encourage respondents to draw on their opinions and experiences in order to write in as much subjective depth as they can. Their responses are anonymous, allowing respondents to be as open

as they wish. Although we might work with a researcher to devise the questions, the responses are not restricted for their sole use, and are usually available for public use within three months of issue. This means that the respondents are aware their responses may be read by many researchers with different objectives. Nearly 4000 people have volunteered since 1981. Some may only respond to one or two questionnaires whilst others have participated in the project for many years, and around 100 have participated continuously since 1981. Responses can vary from a few lines through to many pages, with each writer's own objectives for participating influencing the way that they interact with the Directive, and therefore the Project. The Panel comprises volunteers and is, therefore, a self-selecting sample that tends to lean towards older women participating for longer periods of time whilst younger writers tend to dip in and out. The result is a highly subjective and far-ranging set of life writing, qualitative in nature and voluminous in quantity.

### Why Does Mass Observation Collect Data?

Contemporary Mass Observation does not undertake in-depth analysis of the data collected other than for our own personal, academic research (my own Doctoral studies being such an example). Mass Observation has always collected data for others to use, and other than some very early publications by Mass Observation, its dissemination has lain with external researchers. We need to go back to the original foundation objectives of the organisation to understand why. When it was founded in 1937, Mass Observation sought to find out what ordinary peo-

ple thought and experienced in the world around them. They wanted to provide an alternative voice to the politicians and media that dominated the social commentary of the time, highlighting why independence from official bodies was so important to them and why it was so fraught with tension in the short period that they collaborated with the UK government in the early 1940s. Mass Observation was interested in the everyday, in the conscious observations and the unconscious revelations that its participants might bring, seeing its Observers as 'meteorological stations from whose reports a weather-map of popular feeling can be completed' (Madge and Harrison 1937). Madge and Harrison likened their participants to cameras with which they wanted to photograph modern life; the team of investigators were trained to capture without distortion whilst the untrained volunteer panel would provide subjective views (Madge and Harrison 1938). Their intention was to collect data that would be available for any interested researcher to use in order to produce interpretations that could be shared with other experts and the public at large (Madge and Harrison 1937). Its work in those early days was situated within a set of scientific principles to create data of particular use to those studying psychology, anthropology and sociology (Madge and Harrison 1937) and over the years, its data has certainly been used by multifarious disciplines.

### How Do Researchers Use Mass Observation?

The Archive of Mass Observation has been available at the University of Sussex since the late 1970s for any researcher to access. I have worked to provide researcher access to the Archive for nearly 20 years,

and throughout that time have witnessed different disciplines apply their techniques of analysis to its data. Although still used extensively by historians, the material collected since 1981 is increasingly being used by a broader range of academic researchers, including sociologists, linguists, accountants and medical students. This potential was recognised in the creation of a project entitled *Methodological Innovations: Using Mass Observation* that was funded by a 12-month University of Brighton Research Innovations grant in 2009-2010. The project's objective was to set up a research network that would enable researchers from a variety of fields to discuss and share their methods when using Mass Observation's data. Its success demonstrated the willingness to learn from other disciplines and the eagerness to understand what opportunities working together on a source such as Mass Observation could open up. The project's Research Fellow summarised that 'the scale, depth and diversity of the format, and the tone and content of the material, along with the longevity of the project, opens MOP [Mass Observation Project] submissions to a multiplicity of readings' (Pollen 2013:218).

That various disciplinary lenses could be applied to the data to produce different interpretations of the same source material is fascinating, but for the scope and purposes of this paper, I will concentrate on the use of methods more commonly associated with historical study within sociological research. In the early 1990s, Sheridan (1993) compared the sociological tradition of early Mass Observation with the contemporary Mass Observation Project the latter being more related to the development of oral history, in both its strengths and weaknesses, during

the 1970s and 1980s. By situating the Project within the tradition of oral history and life writing, she was able to draw on their disciplinary methods to deal with the issue of representation. She argued that researchers' discomfort with self-selected groups was symptomatic of what was considered 'scientific' sociological research, an issue that historians were seemingly untroubled by (Sheridan 1996). Her reference to historical methods suggests the possibility that borrowing methodological processes from different disciplines could help address some of the methodological unease with which social science researchers approached MOP, for example, adapting historical methodologies that require reuse data.

Considering Sheridan's references, it is, therefore, useful to frame the use of an archive of data such as Mass Observation within methodologies relating to reuse. The collection of data is the basis of empirical research within the social sciences, and the methods used to collect and analyse this are informed by the research designs familiar to that discipline. The data is collected for the purposes of answering specific research questions, and therefore the research design is tailored to fulfil this requirement. On some occasions, the data collected may be revisited again, either to validate the original project's findings (Savage 2010) or to provide context for another set of data. In the last decade in the UK, research projects, particularly in the social sciences, are increasingly being asked to reuse data, meaning that we have to learn how to:

- Collect data with the purpose of preserving it and making it usable in an entirely different context; and

- Develop methodologies for dealing with the complexities of reusing data that has been collected by another researcher and in another context.

Whilst social science researchers have been grappling with the issues that reusing data presents, historians have simply seen it as the ‘bread and butter’ of their practice (Langhamer 2008:1). Sheridan describes the discomfort felt by social scientists in using material from the Mass Observation Archive in the early 1990s by recognising a ‘common popular belief about what constitutes “proper” or scientific social research’, and comparing this to historians who found it less problematic due to being used to the fragmentary nature of historical sources (1996:2). At this point, Sheridan (1993) sensed that use of Mass Observation had shifted from the scientific principles set out by its founders in the 1930s, towards disciplines akin to oral history and life writing practices; however, in recent years, I have witnessed a return to viewing the material collected as data. This shift has come with growing interest from different disciplines, particularly within the social sciences, with a rising recognition of the potential methodological innovations (as well as financial savings) that come with the reuse of data (Purbrick 2007). These developments render an archive, especially one such as Mass Observation, as a place of opportunity in which new forms of innovation and methodological interdisciplinarity can be explored.

By using Mass Observation as a case study, we can understand some of the implications of reusing data collected within other projects and identify issues to be addressed and methods to encourage reuse.

## Mass Observation as Reused Data—Issues to Consider

All historical archives are available to be used as data by being subjected to secondary analysis techniques. In the case of Mass Observation, we have a slight anomaly: other archives of data are the by-product of lives lived or institutions being run. They are collected as products of these processes rather than for the purpose of research. Mass Observation is collected explicitly for contemporary and future research. A researcher may work with Mass Observation to ‘commission’ a Directive. They will work with staff to translate their questions into the language that the Mass Observation Panel of writers will be most familiar with, but also into a way that will make the data collected applicable to other research questions from other researchers. The researcher does not have a direct relationship with the Mass Observers, relying on the Mass Observation staff to send out the questionnaires and collate the responses, then making them available to researchers via the Archive’s reading room. Instead, a triangle of ‘negotiated relationships’ (Shaw 1998; Kramer 2014) is created, forming an interesting additional dimension to the normal research relationships that has to be taken into account within the methodology of the researcher. Mass Observation plays the role of data collector, data controller and ethical advisor. It could be seen as the gatekeeper to this data, but instead sees itself as working in collaboration with the writers to allow them to participate in research in a way that endures AND protects their anonymity. In fact, Mass Observation is a true product of collaboration between itself, the researcher and the researched: the extent of trust

required throughout these relationships is paramount and places huge importance on Mass Observation's role as the pin that holds this together.

Unlike many other data sets designed and produced for a specific research project, the data collected by Mass Observation is available to any researcher to use immediately that it becomes available. This means that a researcher working with Mass Observation to commission or design a Directive does not have exclusive rights to the material collected as a result of the questions being sent out. They could be sitting in the reading room, taking a look at the data for the first time and be next to another researcher from a completely different discipline, using responses from the same directive. Moore (2006:23) considers whether using Mass Observation data should be considered as primary use or secondary use, particularly when viewed in light of her suggestion that by applying new methods to data in the process of reusing it, we are transforming the data through a process of re-contextualisation,

it is not so much that we now have a new entity to be termed 'secondary data', and which might require a new methodology to be termed secondary analysis, rather, that through re-contextualisation, the order of the data has been transformed, thus secondary analysis is perhaps more usefully rendered as primary analysis of a different order of data.

Taking this into account, we can now begin to look at the issues that can arise when using Mass Observation that would be a similar issue to those of reusing any other data set.

As a doctoral researcher in the social sciences (Courage 2018), I experienced first-hand the implications of using data that I had not gathered directly myself, whilst being in the excellent position of being able to consider the different techniques of dealing with such data as I have seen applied by researchers over many years of being the Archive's curator. My research consisted of analysing responses to a Directive on higher education that was sent to the Panel in spring 2016. From this analysis, I created a landscape of how Mass Observers understood higher education, against which I selected four individuals to look at in depth. I drew on the entire breadth of writing they had contributed to Mass Observation over a period of years, covering multifarious themes which allowed me to put their views on higher education into a broader perspective of their opinions and experiences of their lives and the world around them. As I mentioned above, Mass Observation acts as the 'go-between' between the researcher and the writer.

This provides an easy method of collecting a significant amount of data for the researcher; I was able to access over 140 detailed, in-depth qualitative responses to my questions on higher education within three months of working with staff on composing the Directive. To have gained a similar amount of data through face-to-face interviews would have taken me many months, if not years, and to have gathered a panel of suitable volunteers of that size would have been a task of sizable time, effort and expense.

Taking advantage of Mass Observation's readymade panel, therefore, makes much sense, but with it,

I had to accept the shortcomings that are present in any project that reuses data. I was unable to return to individuals to clarify areas that were not clear in their written response. I could not follow up on interesting avenues that were hinted at within their writing, and I only had as much information as each writer was willing to give me. Rather than seeing this as a restriction, I adopted methodologies that suited the data available. In approaching the four in-depth studies, I adopted the *Gestalt* approach suggested by Hollway and Jefferson (2000), in which I drew upon a large volume of their writing on various themes across the years to gain a greater understanding of the *whole* of their lives.

Other researchers have also explored the potential for the nature of MO data to shape the methodological decisions that they make around their research. Moor and Uprichard (2014) use the MO Archive to demonstrate the application of materiality as method, concluding that the ways in which the data are accessed and explored are 'ontologically and epistemologically intrinsic to the data' (2014:3.6). Similarly, Savage's (2007) work on temporal change in social class identity draws on MO to examine the opportunities that reusing data affords the research method.

Reusing data also has implications on the control of the sample that you can use as a researcher. You have no say on who has been used, and potentially no contextual information on them. You may have to work with a slightly different demographic to that which you would ideally use. This problem and researchers' approaches on how to deal with it are exemplified in the criticisms of representativeness that are often levelled at Mass Observation, and the

arguments that researchers have used to counter this. The perceived lack of demographic representation within the MOP's volunteer Panel is possibly the most persistent criticism levelled at the MO Project. As with other self-selecting samples, the process of volunteering requires individuals to be willing, able and available to participate. Although the Archive has made conscious efforts over the years to make the Panel more representative of UK society, its composition is persistent in certain traits. Younger members tend to write for shorter periods, whilst older females tend to be the persistent respondents, sometimes writing for over 30 years. These criticisms have been countered by encouraging researchers to accept that this is an inevitable trend within the Project, with recent sociological research concentrating its efforts on who is writing rather than who is not writing. Purbrick (2008) utilises a case study methodology that deals with disparity within the writers, unified by their participation in the project rather than other demographic traits. Kramer (2014) used the representations that did exist within the panel to appreciate alternative vantage points to those provided by other data sources, whilst Lindsey and Bulloch (2014) chose to celebrate the populations that are represented, rather than abandon the data as being unrepresentative.

## Summary

This paper has given a brief introduction to Mass Observation and its Archive of data, using it as a case study around which to discuss the opportunities and challenges that arise when reusing data. Its nature as a largescale anonymised, qualitative data source provides a unique opportunity for researchers



to come together to share methods and discuss implications, and renders it a safe space to explore the epistemological and methodological issues of using data that has not been collected for a single purpose. As social science continues to explore the

opportunities that are locked away in old data sets, Mass Observation demonstrates how researchers can overcome perceived barriers to reusing data, celebrating research within new contexts and using new technologies.

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