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**Research Methodology**  
**in Mass Observation, Past and Present:**  
**'Scientifically, about as valuable as a**  
**chimpanzee's tea party at the zoo'?**  
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MASS OBSERVATION'S FOUNDING RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Since its earliest days, the validity of Mass Observation (MO) as a research resource has been widely debated and this applies no less to recent Mass Observation Project-generated material, as will be discussed below.<sup>1</sup> MO was established in 1937 by three upper-class and left-leaning young men (schoolboy ornithologist turned amateur anthropologist, Tom Harrisson; journalist and poet Charles Madge; and painter, writer and documentary-film maker Humphrey Jennings), with the aim of providing 'an anthropology of ourselves'.<sup>2</sup> Grounded in the argument that the press and government repeatedly made claims on behalf of the 'man in the street' but never tried to access his views, and frustrated with the 'timid, bookish and unproductive' attempts by the burgeoning academic disciplines of anthropology and sociology to undertake this work, MO tried to establish more imaginative and active means of documenting patterns of popular experience. They hoped to generate material evidence by and of

‘the mass’ that would provide access to the thoughts, feelings and behaviour of the ‘ordinary’ person on a strikingly diverse range of topics, large and small. They used a ‘shoestring methodology’,<sup>3</sup> drawn from (and sometimes working in opposition to) popular understandings of anthropology, psychoanalysis, surrealism and social surveys, and gathered their diverse data from diaries and through ‘overheards’, via participant observation, directives (questionnaires) and day-surveys. The wide range of accounts which ensued covered political opinion and attitudes to race, sex and class as well as records of dreams, meals, mantelpieces and dancing – to name but a few of the project’s sprawling interests. The eclectic formats in which this data was made manifest include photographs, drawings, poetry and prose, printed ephemera, lists, questionnaire responses and first-hand accounts by both paid and volunteer, trained and untrained, observers.<sup>4</sup> Combined with MO’s enormous scale (encompassing thousands of contributors since 1937, resulting in thousands of archival boxes of submissions that each may run to tens of thousands of words), with the sterling work of the Mass Observation Archive (MOA) since its creation in the 1970s, and with the establishment of the Mass Observation Project (MOP) in the 1980s, this eclecticism has helped ensure MO’s current celebrated status as a unique, extraordinarily rich and internationally significant body of material for the study of everyday life.

Susan Pennybacker has noted in the pages of *History Workshop Journal* that the debate about MO for historians now concerns ‘how rather than whether to use it’.<sup>5</sup> It is true that, for the purposes of analysis and interpretation, how MO might best be used is not always clear, particularly given the mixed, experimental and interdisciplinary nature of its research methods. As such, MO provides a useful case study for historical methodology, offering a distinctive opportunity to reflect on the interpretation of unconventional sources through multi-disciplinary methods from across the arts and social sciences. Although MO has no direct comparative parallels, its particular contingencies – from the subjective and impressionistic character of its contributions to their diverse and eclectic form – may well be applied to other idiosyncratic historical materials that prove slippery to handle or are unwieldy in size. Consequently, a critical evaluation of interpretive strategies used to organize and understand MO may also offer research models that can look beyond a single, if vast, archive.

Methodological issues in the revival of MO since 1981 are the focus of this paper. Nevertheless, related discussions about the ‘first phase’ (1937–50s) deserve

consideration, for some of the concerns overlap. Indeed, ‘early criticisms remain in the folk memory’, as Dorothy Sheridan, Brian Street and David Bloome observed in their important account of Mass Observation, *Writing Ourselves*. ‘When we have given seminars on the contemporary project and our research on it’, they state, ‘we invariably receive comments that cite – however vaguely – the existence of these early commentaries and raise in particular the problem of informants / observers, “representativeness”, professional / amateur, and methodology.’<sup>6</sup>

Among the objections to MO’s original research methods, the accusation that it was poor social science was particularly prevalent. In the year of its foundation, a letter to *The Spectator*, for example, described MO as being ‘scientifically, about as valuable as a chimpanzee’s tea party at the zoo’.<sup>7</sup> The founders tried both to reject academic anthropology and also to court it, which meant that notable anthropologists, from Raymond Firth<sup>8</sup> to Bronislaw Malinowski<sup>9</sup>, gave the project mixed reviews, praising its intentions but also criticizing its claims to originality and its apparent lack of objectivity. Later, MO came under fire from sociologist Mark Abrams, who dismissed the project over thirteen searing pages of his 1951 book *Social Survey and Social Action*. Describing MO’s methods as ‘inchoate and uncontrolled’, Abrams said the results produced ‘dreary trivia’ and ‘boring and unrelated quotations’.<sup>10</sup> If social scientists like Abrams found that MO fell short of their expectations, the reason was no doubt that it was sociology only in part. The MO social experiment was indeed predicated on the term ‘science’ (if rather flexibly used), but it was also committed to the investigation of the popular poetry and imagery of everyday life. Pursuing mixed methods, its results, accordingly, were mixed in form. The varied identity of MO has often been discussed in critical terms by its detractors, for the organization and its purposes are not easily defined. Samuel Hynes, for example, in 1976, looked back at MO’s status as ‘at once literary and scientific, realist and surrealist, political and psychological, Marxist and Freudian, objective and Salvationist’, and suggested that such ‘a mixture of such contradictory elements ... would seem to guarantee its failure’.<sup>11</sup>

Rather than perceive these unlikely combinations as failings, however, more recent researchers have noted that such conflicts were a deliberate part of the project. Nick Stanley, for instance, argued in 1981, of MO ‘knowingly employing apparently inappropriate categories from ethnography’ as part of their project of surrealist disjuncture,<sup>12</sup> and Ben Highmore has also observed that MO thrived on

contradiction.<sup>13</sup> What in our own time might be called, more positively, the cross-disciplinary identity of MO, was not appreciated by those who believed that its blend had a negative effect on the quality of its social research. According to Martin Bulmer, for example, MO ‘suffered from the investigators’ conception of what they were doing as a form of art’.<sup>14</sup> As Sheridan, Street and Bloome have suggested, such criticisms seek to fit MO into a particular disciplinary frame, whether documentary photographic project, life history or social science: finding its hybrid heterogeneity hard to contain, they attempt (and fail) to tame it within ‘a single monolithic view’.<sup>15</sup> In another recent assessment of the historical legacy of Mass Observation, however, Ian Walker has concluded that it is precisely the ‘unstable mixture of poetry and sociology, anthropology, surrealism and journalism which continues to make Mass-Observation so compelling and fascinating’.<sup>16</sup> There is consensus nevertheless, even among those who continue to take the MO project seriously, that its early endeavours were ‘chaotically eclectic’,<sup>17</sup> even if they were ‘systematically unsystematic’.<sup>18</sup>

The complex fieldwork methods of the original MO efforts need to be considered in relation both to the later manifestations of the project and to the uses that can be made of MO as a research resource across the disciplines: an appropriate understanding of the original research methods has implications for the choice of an appropriate research methodology. As David Chaney and Michael Pickering point out, precisely because of the complex conditions by which material was generated, ‘the archives cannot now be pillaged indiscriminately by social historians looking for nuggets of information’.<sup>19</sup> The approach to MO as simply a repository of empirical data or as a source for first-person accounts to enliven the historical record – although popular<sup>20</sup> – fails to recognize its distinctive conditions of existence. James Hinton, reflecting recently on precisely these methodological issues, puts such concerns in context. Despite ‘the richness’ of the MO diaries, he says, ‘historians have been puzzled about how to make use of them. Intimidated by the sheer bulk of the material and worried about its representativeness, they have found little to do with the diaries beyond trawling them for vivid illustrations of conclusions already reached from other sources’.<sup>21</sup> Examining the wider context and purpose of the research project by turning attention to the form and construction of the material and to the methods used to compile and interpret it (rather than focusing on what its content may ‘prove’) offers a means of handling what may initially appear to be unwieldy quantities of heterogeneous material across both periods of MO.

## THE REVIVAL OF MO AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE MASS OBSERVATION PROJECT

The cumulative effect of these interpretative challenges and methodological anxieties led to years of analytical neglect. After the pioneering early days, the eventual departure of all of its key members resulted in MO's demise as a social research organization in the early 1950s. Harrison, as the remaining founder member, sold the MO name for use in commercial market research in exchange for the rights to the early papers. They lay unused in the basement of MO Limited until rediscovered by social historians Paul Addison and Angus Calder in the late 1960s. A gradual process of rehabilitation and revival of MO began when the materials from the original project – at that time seen by most academics as 'an obscure set of papers with dubious scholarly appeal'<sup>22</sup> – were moved to the University of Sussex in the early 1970s and established as a public archive. From this moment its reputation grew. Nick Stanley's doctoral project made an early and convincing contribution to the repositioning of MO within British sociology,<sup>23</sup> and it was followed by contributions from Tom Jeffery,<sup>24</sup> Penny Summerfield<sup>25</sup> and Janet Finch, who also argued that MO was a significant social movement which contributed to an 'alternative tradition' of 'imaginative' social research.<sup>26</sup> It was during this fertile period of renaissance, under the initial management of David Pocock, Professor of Anthropology, and archivist and later MO Director, Professor Dorothy Sheridan, that MO was revived in the form of what is now known as the Mass Observation Project (MOP).<sup>27</sup>

Sheridan, Street and Bloome provide a substantial account of the re-establishment of MO in the early 1980s, and its particular and continuing agendas. The new project borrowed some methods and vocabulary from the early period of MO, retained the name, and shared some of the same concerns. It drew on the national panel aspect of the original MO, recruiting self-selected volunteer writers to respond to open-ended questionnaires – 'directives' – on a range of topics. As Sheridan, Street and Bloome have noted, however, the revived MO 'did not begin life as a formal, funded research project with clearly defined academic objectives and an explicit research methodology', and 'no claims were made at the time ... for any kind of scholarly credibility'.<sup>28</sup> Without secure funding, and with no knowledge of how long the project would run, the establishment and maintenance of the volunteer panel and the design and content of the directives could be eclectic and were necessarily shaped by

pragmatic concerns as well as the personal interests of the founders. As in the early days of MO, the principal concern was with soliciting and managing the submissions, and this initially took precedence over how the material might be used. Ten years after its formation, in 1992, Sheridan reflected that the Mass Observation Project's 'essentially *archival* role means that (at least to date) its theoretical and methodological basis is underdeveloped both in relation to its "collecting for the future" function and in comparison with other social research initiatives'.<sup>29</sup> Twenty years on, while it remains true that the project's management continue by necessity to stress practical considerations of archival care, along with the maintenance of the project's volunteer panel of writers, there have been significant advances in its intellectual development, not least through the important and unparalleled body of publications authored by Sheridan herself.

A wide variety of work now makes use of the first phase of MO. This includes undergraduate and postgraduate dissertations, mass-market paperbacks of edited diaries, scholarly and popular histories, studies emerging from sociology and cultural studies, photography and documentary film, television programmes, exhibitions and novels. The MOP, too, now features in a growing body of work from different disciplinary locations, deployed for diverse purposes with a mixture of aims and outcomes. As the status of MO continues to grow,<sup>30</sup> so too the MOP becomes better known; as the project continues to run, the richness of existing material is also enhanced and the possibilities for longitudinal research increase. Thirty years since its inception, then, it is timely to take stock of the significance and potential of the MOP's distinctive research materials, by critically examining their methodological challenges and the diverse and productive ways that these have been addressed.

#### THE REVIVAL OF CONCERNS ABOUT METHOD IN THE MASS OBSERVATION PROJECT

In the wake of the biographical turn in social science and the effects of oral testimonies on historiography, the 1981 re-launch of Mass Observation was not subjected to the same methodological dismissal as its earlier manifestation. As Sheridan, Street and Bloome put it, 'what appeared as a problem then might appear as a strength now: the reflexive turn in anthropology, for instance, suggests a less than rigid distinction between observer / observed and between objective / subjective than concerned the early commentators'.<sup>31</sup> Louise Purbrick writes that Mass Observation

has been invested with new authority because of two fundamental intellectual shifts: what she calls ‘the re-evaluation of signs of subjectivity in academic practice as the only source material of social life that we have’ and, additionally, the embracing of ‘the interpretive role of “informants” as ‘mediations of subjectivity, performances of identity’.<sup>32</sup> Rather than viewing subjectivity as a source of bias or error, researchers informed by new approaches to the interpretation of qualitative social and historical data now value what Jenny Shaw has termed Mass Observation’s ‘emotional richness’.<sup>33</sup> However, methodological questions remain, and the nature and status of the material continue to concern MOP researchers keen to apply appropriate methods of interpretation to a fascinating but complex resource.

Purbrick has argued that there is ‘no model method’ for working with Mass Observation material.

To prescribe one way of researching in the Mass Observation Archive would not do justice to its contents. Mass Observation writing, entangled in everyday life and processes of its representation, inevitably leads researchers in multifarious directions.<sup>34</sup>

Researchers into the MOP come from a range of backgrounds, if largely from the arts and humanities. They include various social scientists alongside scholars of literature, language, psychoanalysis and all forms of history, each bringing distinctive disciplinary tools and training to their interpretations. The particular disciplinary methods and methodologies used by MOP researchers will be examined below, but it is worth noting here 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 submissions to a multiplicity of readings. Indeed, the open-ended quality of the material is undoubtedly one of its attractions. As Alistair Black and Melvyn Crann put it: ‘The potential range of uses to which it is put, and the validity of those uses, is wide and uncertain; and thus extremely exciting’.<sup>35</sup> In literature that examines MO material, and in associated discussions on collaborative networks such as MIMO,<sup>36</sup> a number of areas nevertheless continue to be contentious and these will be addressed in turn.

## REPRESENTATIVENESS

Due attention must first be given to enduring debates about the demographic scope and range of the MOP panel, and to the related question of how far it is possible to generalize from the material – how far it is ‘representative’. This is still asked, in popular responses to MO as well as among researchers who are closer to the material. Undoubtedly, retention of the not always straightforward term ‘mass’ in the title of the project promotes an expectation that the MOP can access more voices, with a broader spread, than other research channels may be able to reach.<sup>37</sup> For those who begin with this expectation – who are perhaps looking for a widespread and in-depth national survey – the understanding that responses to MOP directives come from several hundred idiosyncratic volunteer writers, with contingent demographic characteristics, may come as a surprise or even as a disappointment. Shaw has incisively noted that critics who approach MO from this standpoint:

usually find it methodologically wanting because the writers (mass-observers) are self-selected and therefore not representative. They also tend to home in on the disproportionate number of women, of older people and the middle class, as though all research, whatever its objective, has to start from and with a random sample of the total population. Though many branches of the social sciences have shrugged off a uniform scientism, the MOA is somehow still sneered at on these sorts of grounds.<sup>38</sup>

For those who find shortcomings in the MOP demographic, part of the issue may be with the project’s scale, which is ambitious, broad and longstanding and yet, inevitably, distinctive and particular. As James Thomas astutely points out:

compared with most qualitative research that tends to be small-scale and geographically limited, M-O encompasses a more diverse and larger population sample than usual. There is an irony that, because its panel comes closer to approximating a quantitative survey than most qualitative option sources, it has been criticised more for not reaching a statistical purity that it does not seek to achieve. If the sample was smaller, it is doubtful whether the criticisms would be so persistent.<sup>39</sup>



How far the MOP panel of writers does or does not reach ‘statistical purity’ – and indeed whether this matters – is by no means agreed upon. While a total of 4,500 Mass Observers have contributed since 1981, the current panel stands at about 500 active correspondents.<sup>40</sup> Some are long-term contributors; others stay for only a short time. Just as the make-up of the panel is voluntary, equally there is no compulsion to complete every single directive. Statistical analysis of the panel has shown that, in general, more women write than men, and the age of correspondents tends to be older rather than younger. Writers also tend to cluster around the South East of England and are usually identified as middle class. Despite experimentation by the MOA with a range of different forms of recruitment, the demographic make-up of the panel has proved to be remarkably resistant to manipulation. It is clear that people of a certain kind recognize themselves in the call for contributors. As Sheridan comments:

Writing for MO as it is presently constructed as a literacy practice is congruent with dominant western notions of gender, life story writing, keeping family records, archiving and preserving histories. Not only do women volunteer more often but once they join, they stay for longer and are more constant.<sup>41</sup>

Despite current (and contentious) limits on new correspondents (they must be male, and/or under forty-four, and/or outside of the south of England), it has been observed that ‘the process ultimately self-selects because only people who feel comfortable with writing about these kinds of thought processes over a long time are going to write about them over a long time’.<sup>42</sup>

Rather than seeing self-selection as a weakness, and despite continuing positivist pressures, some users of the MOP, have argued that the ‘volunteered’ nature of the material is, in fact, one of its unique strengths.<sup>43</sup> The freedom to respond, as well as the relative freedom encouraged in the form of response, for all of the difficulty of interpretation, is appreciated by both researchers and contributors – as one MO correspondent puts it: ‘One isn’t cornered or compromised, only invited’.<sup>44</sup> This aspect gives MOP writing some of its distinctive quality. The desire to write for MO has been described as ‘an autobiographical impulse’, but the archival nature of the project clearly also attracts those with a historical consciousness.<sup>45</sup> Correspondents give generously of their thoughts, feelings, experiences and opinions in part because they enjoy the process as self-developmental or even therapeutic, but also, at times, as

a kind of social altruism, as an oppositional ‘ordinary’ voice against ‘official’ culture. As one correspondent said of his motive for taking part: ‘I just did not like the way modern history is being recorded’.<sup>46</sup>

In relation to the demographic characteristics of correspondents, some researchers make reductive readings, noting, for example, that despite the panel’s breadth and variation, ‘the “average” Mass Observer is a middle-aged woman in the south east of England’.<sup>47</sup> Some readings homogenize the project’s demographics in order to argue that the panel allows access to the voice of ‘middle England’<sup>48</sup> or that it provides access to the ‘traditional backbone of British society’.<sup>49</sup> Other researchers have worked with the particular constitution of the panel in order to acknowledge its biases and thus ‘make a positive virtue of the skewing of the sample’.<sup>50</sup> The particular make-up of the panel, if understood as older, female-dominated and specifically located and classed, can be a positive benefit to those who particularly wish to study, for example, women’s experience, gerontology, the South-East of England or the middle class. Carol Smart points out that for her study of family secrets:

this composition of predominantly middle-class writers was potentially a bonus. This is because of the cultural relationship between class position and perceived respectability. While the secrets of both middle- and working-class families might be of equal interest, there is something particularly significant in the discovery that middle-class families (and aspiring middle-class families) had many secrets that they were anxious to keep from public knowledge.

‘If it were not for this archival collection’, she goes on, ‘we might have few other ways of accessing the family secrets of the middle class in the recent past.’<sup>51</sup>

The issue of class bias in the MOP, although positively acknowledged in such approaches, is not wholly resolved by them. For Teresa Cairns, the MOP panel complicates and challenges notions of class.

[Correspondents] elaborate a sense of class as mutable and fluid; therefore to argue that the current MO panel is mainly lower middle class is itself challenged by correspondents’ own interpretations of their class position. They acknowledge working class origins, middle class lives; a sense of being both but neither.<sup>52</sup>

Helen Busby also makes a useful point about the spread of correspondents in relation to the longitudinal aspect of the project. ‘Given that they also write about both parents and children in a range of directives’, she argues, what MOP correspondents write ‘also contains a wealth of material on the experience of social mobility.’<sup>53</sup> Mike Savage, who has examined class itself longitudinally across different phases of MO, also shows that MOP correspondents have nuanced understandings of ‘their mobility between class positions’,<sup>54</sup> thus reinforcing the argument that the demographic status of the panel members is much more complex than it may first appear. Moreover, as Sheridan has observed, MOP contributors tend to attempt to speak not only for themselves but ‘on behalf of’ other populations.

They speak for, or represent, variously, the working class, the lesbian or gay community, women as mothers and housewives, ‘people like me’, ‘ordinary people’, people of a certain generation or age, people of a certain locality, people of a certain political persuasion, identified by for example, voting allegiance, or newspaper readership. Identification with these collectivities may be simultaneous, or may shift over time and in relation to the substantive theme of the writing. The ‘we’ may represent a whole class or the people in the same street. The most clearly articulated collectivity is ‘ordinary people’, ‘ordinary’ being understood in its affirmative sense ... sensible, regular, decent people in opposition to the political elite.<sup>55</sup>

Researchers looking for findings that may support generalization have argued that the panel is not in fact particularly unrepresentative of national patterns. Alun Howkins and Linda Merricks, for example, have noted that the regional distribution – that is, ‘that 50 percent of women and 52 percent of men in the panel lived in the South East’ – accords very closely with ‘national’ distribution of population’.<sup>56</sup> In her study of ageing, Pat Thane claims that the backgrounds of the MOP panel are not ‘seriously unrepresentative’, since they are ‘comparable to a very high proportion of the British population at the end of the twentieth century’.<sup>57</sup> Yet other researchers agree that the inherent *difference* of the MOP panel is more significant than whether it is nationally representative or typical – impossible to determine in what is, after all, not a quantitative survey. According to Busby, researching health and sickness through MOP writings: ‘It is unusual, even exceptional, to find a panel of volunteers writing

for a social archive over a number of years; there was a possibility that for my purposes this distinctiveness might outweigh the disadvantages of its lack of literal representativeness'.<sup>58</sup> Shaw agrees. In her interpretation, 'instead of worrying that the M-O writers are not "representative" enough in categorical terms, we may come to see that the way in which they are unrepresentative (i.e. they write for MO and are driven by some form of artistic impulse) is the reason that they, and their material, are so valuable'.<sup>59</sup>

### SINGULARITY AND MASS

The varied textures of MO documents do not compress easily into analytical categories, and should not, in any case, be forced into false generalizations. Although it is possible to develop theories about popular opinion and everyday experience through the material, it is, as Rachel Hurdley has poetically put it, 'a particular case of the possible'.<sup>60</sup> Highmore notes that 'In the best writing that uses M-O, the particularity of respondents' quotes are never held hostage by overriding arguments: they always remain little islands of singularity, fractals of a life-world that exceed an argument'. He defends this emphasis on the particular thus:

Wasn't this what M-O was all about; wasn't this part of its democratic mission to give space and time to the voices of the ordinary, rather than sieve them through till they merged into something else? Variety rather than consistency strikes me as a crucial element of this archive and one that inoculates itself in advance against some of the more brutal demands of positivist science.<sup>61</sup>

Any pursuit of generalizability is countered by the specificity of detail. As MO co-founder Tom Harrison wrote in relation to MO diaries: 'At this degree of intimacy, the word "typical" is no longer suitable. No one is privately typical of anyone else'.<sup>62</sup>

Notably, MOP correspondents themselves can be vocal about the idiosyncratic nature of their contribution, and may resist the idea that the project is conglomerated research, at least in the commercial and conventional sense of 'the gleaning of specific information on a wide scale for incorporation into a prediction wherein I should be one unit in thousands of identical units'. As this Mass Observer states, for example, 'When I am writing to the Archive I am expressing myself as an individual, a personality in my own right, not a cipher or a statistic to be manipulated and

aggregated'. He continues: 'If I am not seen as distinct from everyone else in the game I do believe that I should pick up my ball and go home'.<sup>63</sup> Writings from a single person in the MOP, however, always speak about wider social experience in the context of everyday politics, reflections on history, public attitudes and beyond. As Highmore has argued, singularity in the MOP is certainly not 'individuated individualism'.<sup>64</sup>

Theoretical approaches to working with, and extrapolating from, material that does not conform to a standardized format or to statistical representativeness have been widely considered by MOP researchers. Many defer to the persuasive rationale first outlined by Sheridan, Street and Bloome in their pioneering and influential publications about methodological approaches to the MOP.<sup>65</sup> Following Mitchell, the authors accept the value of the 'telling' case study as against the 'typical'. In this approach:

A telling case shows how general principles deriving from some theoretical orientation manifest themselves in some given set of social circumstances. A good case study thus enables the analyst to establish theoretically valid connections between events and phenomena that were previously ineluctable. From this point of view, the search for a 'typical' case for analytic exposition is likely to be less fruitful than the search for a 'telling' case in which the particular circumstances surrounding a case serve to make previously obscure theoretical relationships suddenly apparent. Case studies used in this way are clearly more than 'apt illustrations'. Instead they are means by which general theory may be developed.<sup>66</sup>

Such approaches are clearly indebted to Clifford Geertz's notion of 'thick description',<sup>67</sup> in their concern to extrapolate from single cases outwards rather than the other way around, or as Sheridan, Street and Bloome put it, 'not to generalise across cases, but to generalise within them'.<sup>68</sup>

In the interpretation of MOP writing, subjectivity and intimate detail are prioritized rather than aggregation, and methodologies from auto/biography rather than quantitative social science have been promoted as the most appropriate ways of understanding the material. Sheridan has characterized the MOP in these terms:

There is no doubt that the resulting material constitutes life history material, rich in detail, diachronic, not representative of the population, but encompassing a very wide range of lives and, like most other life story data providing insights into the subjective experiences of people through their own narration.<sup>69</sup>

David Pocock described MO as ‘unique because it describes the concrete and specific contexts of particular lives, details which are lost in large-scale summations’,<sup>70</sup> but arguably it is the push and pull of singular and collective, part and whole, fragment and mass that makes MO so complex and so dynamic, along with its distinctive position as a historical research resource that so tantalisingly appears to offer both longitudinal *and* cross-sectional, quantitative *and* qualitative dimensions.

### QUANTIFICATION

The dominant and preferred case-study approaches appeal to ‘analytical induction’ rather than ‘enumerative induction’ methods,<sup>71</sup> and have tended to dismiss quantitative approaches to the MOP material. For Sheridan, the MOP ‘cannot really support quantitative or graphical summaries which make any claims beyond the documentation of the characteristics of the sample’,<sup>72</sup> and James Thomas has reiterated that the project ‘cannot and does not seek to address precise statistical issues of “how many”’.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, a small number of researchers do attempt to use the MOP in this way, and their approaches, while problematic, are worth discussing.

Geoff Lowe, for example, jointly with Professor Pocock, designed in 1989 an MOP directive on the subject of Relaxants and Stimulants in order to establish links between substance use and creativity outside a laboratory setting. The directive asked correspondents to write about their experience of substance use, and the 619 responses were tabulated on a ‘nine-point scale’ of creativity by eight ‘independent raters’ with no knowledge of the aims of the study. Lowe described how ‘averaged ratings’ were then used as ‘bivariate scores’ and how ‘Pearson correlations were calculated for each pair of raters on each of the two dimensions based on each set of reports’. The findings – which supported a low but positive relationship between the use of stimulants and creativity – demonstrated, according to Lowe, that the research design ‘seems to have worked well’.<sup>74</sup> However, the use of solicited social research data written for a particular purpose and audience as evidence of ‘creativity’ seems

fraught with methodological problems. In studies such as this, seeking objective data correlation, not enough attention is paid to the particular status of MOP writing, which is viewed as an unproblematic generator of facts to be mined for ‘evidence’ and statistical frequencies, rather than as complex, variable, subjective material solicited so as to access experience, opinion and feeling.

In another example of quantitative mining, Sloboda and O’Neill tabulated information extrapolated from responses to their commissioned 1997 directive on the subject of Music and Dance.<sup>75</sup> This study is similar to Lowe’s in that the MOP is not put in historical or methodological context, but simply offered as a form of data generation. The authors list ‘the activities and functions spontaneously mentioned’ in the directive responses in relation to everyday music listening, and then quantify these in terms of percentages. The principal finding of the study is that for fifty percent of the respondents music has nostalgic functions. However, it could be argued that by reducing reflective and sometimes extensive writing to numerical information, the authors do violence to the qualitative nature of MOP material. They do not, for example, take into account the particular demographic of the writers – which could be salient here, in terms of age. Nor do they address the nature of the source material and related issues – its being solicited rather than spontaneous, for instance, or the fact that it may not only include present-day thoughts and feelings, but also look back reflectively across a lifetime. Indeed, such varied temporal considerations (futures as well as pasts) are frequently encouraged in the open-ended, historically-inflected questionnaire structure of the directive, which of course shapes the responses.

Researchers have applied a number of interpretive strategies to MOP material, sometimes combining quantitative methods alongside the more obvious fit of qualitative approaches. They may combine MOP materials with other research sources to flesh out areas not covered by the demographic of the panel or may combine panel and poll to test MO’s qualitative content against quantitative data, such as that generated by market research organisations, such as MINTEL.<sup>76</sup> In terms of enumeration, even if researchers fall short of actually numbering content in MOP, there is acknowledgement that in the scale of such a project, patterning exists across responses. Commonality of response, however, while offering empirical security, cannot always provide explanation or insight. In the study of morality in ethical shopping practices by Matthew Adams and Jayne Raisborough that uses MOP directives, the authors allow that ‘content analysis may reveal quantitative patterns of,

for example, descriptive variants on the use of ‘good’ but, they argue, ‘this would not offer the kind of description we feel is necessary to explore how people are making sense of ethics and consumption’.<sup>77</sup> The ‘how’ cannot be reduced to the ‘how many’. As Peter Dickens and James Ormrod put it: ‘When we use MO data we do so to show *how* an idea is articulated, not to argue that this represents public opinion or a social trend’.<sup>78</sup>

In some cases, the qualitative nature of MOP material is utterly resistant to quantification, and as Shaw argues, often the most exciting material is that which cannot be presented in numerical form. In Shaw’s instance, correspondents to her jointly commissioned 1992 directive about Pace of Life were asked to think of a machine that represented the way that they lived their lives, in the hope that ‘metaphor-based research might get beneath the dominant discourses of self-presentation to more complex experiences of power and subordination’. Quantitative categories are clearly redundant here, when the objects invoked include ‘cursors, shredders, Alessi coffee pots, ferrets, refrigerators, sewage plants, the *Guardian* newspaper, rose bushes, racehorses, cars and old settees’. Shaw observes that this kind of material is ‘inherently impressionistic ... Its interpretation and utility depends more on a close reading of the contextual material than on what can be presented in a tabular and decontextualised or abstract form’.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, there is not always a standard format to MOP responses. Correspondents can include photographs, drawings, scraps of fabric, pages from magazines and 3D models in their submissions, while their writing may take the form of poetry, lists, reportage or stories, and at times may even be wholly tangential to the themes of the directive. The complexity of the material is certainly part of its challenge, though one that is relished by researchers. Adams and Raisborough, for example, argue that MOP materials offer a productive means ‘to dislodge the certainty of researcher defined categorizations and “categorical approaches” more generally’,<sup>80</sup> while Shaw champions MO as a way ‘to jump-start researchers out of methodological ruts and trigger new trains of thought’.<sup>81</sup>

#### SCALE AND SAMPLING

Even when MOP material provides a straightforward response to a researcher’s question, issues of sampling and interpretation remain. A methodological concern for researchers in both phases of the MO project concerns the archive’s size: where does one begin or end? MO in its original form was always concerned to accumulate a



wealth and variety of materials, even if what was to be done with it was not always clear. MO's commitment to 'mass empiricism' has been identified by Highmore as a strategy allied to the organization's radical attempts to study everyday life on its own terms. 'The radical positivism of Mass-Observation', he notes, 'suggests (potentially) a project so vast that, rather than commenting on the everyday, it would become coterminous with it.'<sup>82</sup> The accumulative impulse, however, was not without its criticisms. A press review in *The Listener* in 1937 complained: 'The facts simply multiply like maggots in a cheese and leave no shape behind them'.<sup>83</sup> Hynes described the 'mass' of early MO as 'numbing'.<sup>84</sup> This can just as well be the case with the contemporary MOP; researchers report feeling challenged by the sheer quantity, where even a single document by a single correspondent on a single theme may stretch to fifty pages.

Various sampling strategies have been employed by MO researchers to make headway with such volumes. A single respondent may supply a telling case study,<sup>85</sup> or a number of contrasting individuals may be chosen, as in Hinton's *Nine Wartime Lives*.<sup>86</sup> Some researchers examine all of the responses to a given directive, while others create a 'pragmatic sample': Busby, for example, considered all responses that had been received by a cut-off date.<sup>87</sup> Shaw, wanting to be even-handed in terms of gender, considered all the responses from men and added the same number from women.<sup>88</sup> Some researchers read through all of the material to get a sense of overall and recurring themes and to ensure that they do not 'lose interesting material'.<sup>89</sup> Others take smaller and more random selections. Savage, for example, in his study of class, looked at twenty-four men and forty-three women – that is, at all those with surnames starting with A and B. As he points out:

This is therefore not a systematic reading of all the responses, but equates to a sample of around 10% ...This strategy faces the objection that my use of the sources is partial in not sampling every letter, and does not do justice to the qualitative nature of the study itself. This is an objection with considerable force: nonetheless, there is equally a danger that in seeking to read and present summary findings of several thousand responses, which are not part of a representative sample and hence not likely to improve the reliability of the findings, may offer false security.<sup>90</sup>

Savage relies instead on the theoretical approach of saturation, where research is conducted up to the point where ‘little more is being gained by reading additional amounts’. Some sampling may be purposive, with researchers only examining responses from tailored groups, for example, women who have given birth, people under sixty-five in employment, or those who have had a specific experience, for example, of the Second World War. Others examine topics longitudinally across MOP directives or across MO as a whole.<sup>91</sup>

Although MOP materials can be rich sources for topic-driven research approaches, the sometimes unruly material also has the potential to frustrate. As in any research project, the ‘findings’ may not correspond to the aim of the research. David Field, for example, began with the idea that he would reuse existing material from a 1994 directive on Death and Bereavement ‘to examine the widely held hypothesis that the lay public are fearful of death and dying’, but admits that the material did not support this assertion.<sup>92</sup> Although some researchers state that their projects are theoretically driven from the start, Thomas has suggested that the most appropriate method for using MOP material is to ensure that ‘the material reflects the position of respondents rather than the preconceived assumptions of the researcher’. Many MOP researchers do apply variations of a grounded theory approach (even if not by name), where data themes and emergent theory are in a dialogic relationship. Through this method, Thomas explicitly recommends that ‘the researcher allows himself to be ‘surprised’ by the material he comes across, being prepared to reformulate his initial approach’.<sup>93</sup>

MOP material certainly has the capacity to surprise. Researchers commonly document an initial reaction of feeling overwhelmed in the face of it. Summerfield comments on this.

The volume, depth and diversity of this vast collection of material ... provokes something like culture shock in researchers familiar with sources less rich in intimate details about people’s lives, thoughts and feelings, but more tidily sorted and thoroughly catalogued, such as government social surveys, opinion polls and newspapers.<sup>94</sup>

In many cases, it is the intimacy in particular that shocks, unsettles or moves. This can be as result of subject matter – where correspondents, securely anonymous, are free to discuss topics that are out of bounds in everyday conversation and sometimes remain

unknown even by their own family – but also of form. Purbrick has suggested that ‘testimonies gathered by the solitary and anonymous act of writing can be more intimate than that produced by an interview where the person being interviewed may seek to engage or deflect the interviewer, to please them or guard against them’.<sup>95</sup> Researchers have reported laughing or fighting back tears when reading submissions, and anyone who has spent time in the MO archive will testify to the snorts and sniffles that punctuate the scholarly silence of the reading room. How, then, to do justice to the writing, and also to acknowledge the emotional engagement that can occur through reading?

As with all research, there is always the danger of using only the data that best supports any argument being posited and ignoring that which does not fit. In the MOP there is an additional temptation to draw only on the most elegant or entertaining of the writers. Sensitive researchers recognize and try to avoid the dangers of decontextualizing ‘a correspondent’s response from its wider and supporting narrative’,<sup>96</sup> and also from its position in that continuum of the everyday which is what many researchers hope to access through MO. Other researchers are at pains to represent the full spread of contributors, but admit that it is hard to identify common patterns and as well reflect disparate experiences.<sup>97</sup> Perhaps most interestingly, researchers may also attempt to engage with what is *not* said. This may be done by paying particular attention to those writers who will not or do not respond to the topic, or who profess difficulty with the theme. Valerie Swales, for example, uses this as a point of departure in her study of correspondents’ favourite things, drawn from the 1988 Objects about the House directive. She asks, ‘What does such a commonly acknowledged difficulty [to respond to the question] signify? ... It is this point of resistance and tension which must be the entry point into the written discourse’.<sup>98</sup>

#### FORM AND FORMAT

It is important to consider the nature of the material as a particular kind of writing if the full richness of MOP contributions is to be appreciated. Many researchers have followed Sheridan in seeing the MOP documents as a form of life-writing and, in many cases, researchers have applied life-historical methods to their interpretation.<sup>99</sup> The form taken by MOP writings, however, includes the autobiographical but is not limited to it. Researchers across disciplines have characterized the writing in a number of overlapping ways. Many look to MO materials as sources for the study of

everyday life and, in these instances, it is the complex state of the writing as ‘ordinary’ (embedded in everyday practices, concerned with everyday experience, or written by those who characterize themselves as ordinary) which is a central defining feature.<sup>100</sup> MOP submissions are also solicited, however, and researchers must always temper their pursuit of ‘ordinariness’ against this aspect.

It has been observed that some of the tasks set in the directives – such as, for example, to enumerate all of one’s relatives for a directive about family – ‘might be culturally alien and an act of obedience’.<sup>101</sup> Others point out that ‘the style and tone of the directives is prescribed and produces set responses’.<sup>102</sup> MOP directives have a characteristically friendly, chatty tone and correspondents may, over time, have built up close and sometimes enduring personal relationships with the archive staff. Although this doubtless contributes to the continuance and health of the project, researchers sometimes admit that the form is not necessarily what they would have chosen had they designed the research project themselves.<sup>103</sup> As a consequence of this mode of address, researchers have noted, some responses can seem ‘affectionate and jokey’,<sup>104</sup> and some correspondents treat the archive as a kind of pen pal.<sup>105</sup> Responses may be gossipy, dramatized, embellished, vivid and conversational. Researchers have sometimes, perhaps unwittingly, described MOP materials as ‘letters’ rather than ‘data’ or ‘reports’.<sup>106</sup> It should be remembered, however, that despite their epistolary appearance, responses are produced for the purposes of social and historical research and the tone and style of the directive, as much as its content, shapes the language used. Writers may attempt to ‘mirror’ the directive,<sup>107</sup> and they may also demonstrate a ‘desire to please’,<sup>108</sup> as they consciously or unconsciously pick up on clues to how to get their contribution ‘right’. Ultimately, Sheridan has proposed that the correspondents’ contributions are best described as inhabiting a distinctive ‘MO genre’, a hybrid form that draws on ‘the family letter, the school essay, the newspaper report, the personal diary, the testimony and the confessional’.<sup>109</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In outlining some common themes in and methodological approaches to the interpretation of MOP material, this paper demonstrates the diversity of strategies in MOP researchers’ methods and methodology, but also emphasizes the project’s inherent and essential complexity. Just as MO co-founder Harrison has been

described as a ‘methodological pluralist’,<sup>110</sup> so too do contemporary MO researchers employ a range of strategies to organize and interpret the materials that they study. To challenge the value and status of this material and these approaches is not to bring the reputation of MO into question but to test its strength. For it is surely true, as Hubble has suggested, that rather than detractors, ‘the people who most often question the representativeness of the MO panel are researchers who actually want to use the project’.<sup>111</sup> By showing the research challenges in examining hard-to-define material, we may be able to come closer to understanding the particular complex characteristics of what is under scrutiny, rather than smoothing them over. MOP research remains open-ended: what has been done with it is not the sum total of what may be done, and its methodological challenges are not wholly resolved. As with the earliest days of MO, the material shifts between formats and slips between disciplines.

This situation is further complicated by the interpretive role of the MOP panel. Like all human beings, they will not fit neatly into tick boxes; moreover they are ‘reflexive about how well they “fit” the categories into which they assign themselves, or are themselves assigned’.<sup>112</sup> In MO, researchers and the researched are not wholly segregated from one another. Indeed it is perfectly possible to have inhabited both domains, as in the case of this researcher and probably others.<sup>113</sup> Theory and history-making are not the sole preserve of the researchers who commission and use MOP material. As (carefully named) *correspondents*, through MOP, as Sheridan points out, ‘writers become *participants in* research rather than *subjects of* research’.<sup>114</sup> As she and others have argued, there is no monopoly on research insights in MO: ‘Mass-Observers themselves are as reflective and thoughtful about issues raised, methodological and theoretical as well as ethical and political, as the academic commentators’.<sup>115</sup>

MOP documents may be difficult research materials, but arguably, this defining characteristic thus provides an apposite window on the necessarily complex and confused nature of lived experience. This productive aspect can, in part, be credited to the distinctive nature of the research method. As Shaw argues,

Standard questionnaires and surveys do not allow access to multiple meanings and contradiction. They are designed to eliminate them. However, contradiction is central to social life and ways of researching it need to be found. The fluid,

complex and interconnected M-O data, on almost a random number of themes, is one such.<sup>116</sup>

Sheridan has also observed that lives-as-lived are messy, and that it is important ‘to retain some of that messiness in our own accounts lest they become simply straightjackets that fracture the integrity of the reality they purport to “represent”’.<sup>117</sup> The sense of confrontation researchers may experience when material will not fit neatly into prescribed research categories can offer a productive way to understand the similarly messy social world. Inconsistency, heterogeneity and even incoherence are part of the world we live in. The mixed and disruptive methods of MO provide a unique means of access to that experience and offer a satisfying challenge to established ways of thinking in contemporary history.

### **Annebella Pollen**

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

In 2009, Louise Purbrick, Principal Lecturer, School of Humanities, and Mark Bhatti, Principal Lecturer, School of Applied Social Science – were awarded a year’s funding from the University of Brighton’s Research Innovations grant. The project, *Methodological Innovations: Using Mass Observation* (MIMO) was to establish a research network for the purpose of sharing and debating cross-disciplinary methodological approaches to understanding and interpreting the unique documents of everyday life held in the Mass Observation Archive at the University of Sussex. Assisted by the project’s Research Fellow, Annebella Pollen, and with the support of the then Archive Director, Dorothy Sheridan, the MIMO team hosted a lively electronic discussion list of 150 international members from across disciplines and professional boundaries, organized two archival workshops, and staged a national conference (*Engaging Mass Observation: New Perspectives on Contemporary*

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*Material*) and an accompanying exhibition (*Making Sense of Everyday Life: Mass Observation as Participatory Research*). This article uses ideas and material generated through these fora and the author is indebted to the inspiration and assistance of Purbrick, Sheridan and Bhatti throughout.

1 Mass Observation in its broadest sense – as an organization and a body of material covering the period from 1937 to the present – will be referred to throughout this article, as MO. Material from the post-1981 Mass Observation revival, although known over the years by a number of different names, will be referred to by its current name, the Mass Observation Project (MOP). The location where the materials are stored, and the organization that manages them, is referred to throughout as the Mass Observation Archive (MOA). Mass Observation originally featured a hyphen in its name, but this was officially dropped in 2006. Where hyphenated formats of MO have been used by authors cited, these have been retained.

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27 According to the MOA website, [http://www.massobs.org.uk/mass\\_observation\\_project.html](http://www.massobs.org.uk/mass_observation_project.html) (accessed 4 Jan. 2012),



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‘The Mass Observation Project (MOP) is a unique UK-based writing project which has been running since 1981’. It exists ‘to provide a structured programme within which “ordinary” people can write directly about their lives in the knowledge that what they send in will be archived for posterity and used for social research’; and ‘to create a resource of qualitative longitudinal social data with an emphasis on subjectivity and self representation which will contribute to our understanding of everyday life in the late 20th and early 21st century’.

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[http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/pdf/Designation\\_List.pdf](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/pdf/Designation_List.pdf) (accessed 18 Aug. 2012). MO extended its public profile further in 2007 by making a selection of papers available through a new MO Online resource via Adam Matthew Digital. Faber Finds reissued eleven original MO publications in 2009.

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109 Dorothy Sheridan, 'Using the Mass-Observation Archive', in *Researching Ageing and Later Life: the Practice of Social Gerontology*, ed. Anne Jamieson and Christina Victor, Buckingham, 2002, p. 77.

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111 Nick Hubble, MIMO, 14 Sept. 2009.

112 Anne-Marie Kramer, MIMO, 9 Oct. 2009.

113 My own experience of the MOP began when I joined as a short-lived correspondent in the early 1990s; I returned to MO in a research capacity in 2005.

114 Sheridan, "'Ordinary Hardworking Folk'?", p. 26.

115 Sheridan, Street and Bloome, *Writing Ourselves*, p. 102.

116 Shaw, 'Surrealism, Mass-Observation and Researching Imagination', p. 12.

117 Sheridan, Street and Bloome, *Writing Ourselves*, p. 285.