

Mass Observation Archive: Transcript



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Kirsty Pattrick: Hi, I'm Kirsty Pattrick and I am the Mass Observation Research Manager and I'm going to be talking about big qualitative data and mass observation.

So, for those of you not familiar, Mass Observation is an archive of everyday life in Britain. Founded in 1937, it continues to actively collect qualitative data from its national panel of self-selecting volunteers. With its roots in anthropology, sociology, and documentary film, Mass Observation seeks to capture people's feelings, thoughts, and opinions. And it's used as a source of secondary data across a range of disciplines, providing in-depth and candid accounts of the everyday, predominantly narrative material, but it also collects creative ephemera, including photographs and artwork and we have a national remit. It's publicly accessible and we're based at The Keep in Falmer, just outside Brighton, as we're in the care of the University of Sussex.

So, for the purposes of talking about big qualitative data, I'm referring to the material generated from our national panel, not material that we receive as a result of our open public calls, which anyone can participate in.

So, the national panel is made up of self-selecting volunteers from across Britain. They are anonymous and we give them each a unique code, an alphanumerical code. As a researcher, you will see their key biographical data, so you would know their age, gender, household status, so who they're living with, occupation and geographical location. There's also an advanced optional biographical form where we request further self-described data on ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion and disability.

They respond to open questionnaires, known as a directive, and this is a term that was used by our founders back in the 1930s and we continue to use. And a directive, we send them out in spring, summer and autumn, and each directive contains two to three topics. This generates really, as I've said, in-depth and candid responses to topics of a social, political and personal nature, examples of these are the Eurovision, that was very divisive, the referendum, equally so, and something such as sibling relationships.

The volunteers are known as mass observers or contributors, and the value is that they respond in their own space and time, documenting what is important to them in that moment, but reflecting back and looking forward. They do not have to have lived experiences of that topic and the questionnaires are therefore constructed in a way that anyone can respond to.

So, this means we'll ask questions about, as I've said, their thoughts and feelings. We might ask them to document the media they've engaged with, what they're listening to, what they're reading. Maybe a list of observations, for example, what's on your bedside table or what's on your mantelpiece or equivalent, and also hypothetical scenarios. So, for example, the directive on siblings, for those that are not a sibling, what that experience might be like.

There's also a longitudinal strength in the data with volunteers having participated for years, if not decades. And in fact, we have 25 who are still contributing who joined in the 1980s.

The data is rich because the nature of the anonymity of the writers and the unique relationship that we've nurtured with them over the years enables narrative accounts to be very open. They often confide in their writing that which they haven't shared with others. It's a safe space for people to share their feelings and opinions on topics, and many describe their participation in Mass Observation as therapeutic, as well as having their voice heard, leaving a legacy and being part of something big.

So, the number of responses, the depth of writing and the scope of material makes the directive collections big data. The current panel is around 600 volunteers with submissions at the moment averaging about 180. And it's challenging, therefore, to know how to make inroads to the data due to its size and scope as responses can vary from three-quarters of a page to eight pages that are submitted.

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Volunteers do not have to respond and there is creative freedom with how they format their response with varying lengths and styles. We encourage mass observers to be reflective, to observe, as I've said, and to look forward, but also capturing that moment in time about how they're feeling now. I've never had a conversation with a researcher who's wished there were more responses. Over the years, our panel size has grown, but even when we were in the sort of early 100, sort of 98 to 110 responses, it's still a significant size because of the size of the responses and how much they write.

Yet there is inconsistency as some mass observers will respond in a linear way, as I said, and others will go off-piste. But also, there's gaps longitudinally. So, researchers are using the material much more in a longitudinal way, but there are gaps because they're volunteers. And there's also no follow-up, unlike an interview. So, when we're designing the directives, it's important that those key questions are formatted clearly. So, for those writers who might get the gist of it and go off-piste, those questions are answered.

This is what a directive looks like. This is Part 1, so Topic 1 from summer 2024. This is just part of Part 1. The other topics were on the general election and singing. And alongside this, you can see some of the statistics for this particular Part 1. So, in total, we received 241 responses, that's quite a peak for us, which amounted to 680 pages. And then you can see the breakdown here between those that we received by email and those that we received by hard copy in the post.

And this is just some visual examples of the type of material it generates. People will interpret the questions how they wish and submit what is important to document and share at that time. And I've said this can be in an electronic format or handwritten. Here are examples of, there was a directive on the high street and someone's illustrated and detailed all of the shops. On the right, there's an image here that was submitted as part of the garden directives. And in the middle, we have got a lovely scrapbook that was submitted with photographs and narratives throughout the pandemic.

People will also respond poetically. They will provide lists and illustrations and also in a scrapbook style. So, we will receive cutouts from newspapers, and like this photograph here on the right, sometimes photographs are peeled from photo albums and Mark Batty writes quite a lot about that.

So, researchers have used the material thematically, with a single directive or comparatively at different points across time. For example, the research team for the above Good Politician publication looked at changes in political feelings and opinions in the 1940s, 1980s and 2000s. Also longitudinally, where researchers have selected a number of writers and followed them across different directives, such as Rose Lindsey and John Mohan, who looked at voluntary action.

It's been used as either a researcher's sole source of data or in a mixed methods approach, for example, a project on the welfare state which used directive responses alongside organisational records from charities and third sector. And these are large project examples, but the same approach of thematic and narrative analysis applies for single directives with much smaller samples. And the biographical data aids sampling, so it really does help people to make inroads more easily by following individuals or types of demographic. Researchers have also been known to sample by the alphanumerical code.

The Mass Observation database and the digitisation of our collections has opened it up to an increased number of researchers and across more diverse disciplines. These resources aid navigation by writers or themes and provide supporting content. The COVID collection, which contains nearly 10,000

submissions, was fully digitised with the help of funding from Wellcome and is now an open access resource enabling users to search by keywords, free text, by writer, as well as exporting large amounts of text using an API to utilise with discipline specific software.

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So more recently, for example, those from computational technology and linguistics have used the digitised collections as a source of large data, the main interest being the scale of text and what's possible to do with this.

So as a written archive, we are working predominantly with narratives, but the materiality of these submissions vary, as I've described, and many directives, many directive themes speak to more creative and visual submissions, such as gardening or personal appearance.

And as you can see here, during the COVID-19 pandemic, submissions included scrapbooks with narratives, photos and illustrations, such as this one at the bottom where it's a photograph of somebody who's collected pebbles each day on their walks and at weekends collected a larger pebble, and this photograph was inserted within the narrative and emailed to us.

As Rachel Hurley describes in her paper on how Mass Observation ruined meta methodology, it's challenging with its inconvenient materiality, its peculiar temporality, and its diverse content. So, the question I pose is to think about how we work with material submitted with this freedom of creativity.

And here are some suggested readings to follow up, which I've referenced throughout.

Thank you for your time. Looking forward to seeing you at the workshop.

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