The Mass Observation Archive
Occasional Papers Series

The Mass Observation Papers Series has been established to offer a public platform for some of the many original and creative research projects currently being carried out at the Archive. In accepting papers for inclusion in the Series, the editors would give preference to papers which:

(1) are substantially based on research in the Mass Observation Archive

(2) demonstrate a creative and original approach to the analysis and interpretation of material in the Mass Observation Archive.

(3) contribute to the wider debate on the theoretical and methodological issues involved in using the kinds of material encountered in the Archive: e.g. literacy practices, life history/auto/biography, ethnography.

The series editors are committed to publishing papers which are of a high quality but which, either because of length, or because they represent work at an early stage of research, may not yet be ready for publication in scholarly journals. Publication in this series would not preclude subsequent formal publication of all (or part) of the paper in other contexts, providing suitable acknowledgement is made. We would particularly like to encourage the submission of papers by new researchers, including school students, undergraduates and adult education students. All papers will be reviewed by the editors and also sent to be refereed by appropriate scholars.

The final paper will be published in A4 format either online or in print. It should not normally be longer than 40 pages. It will be issued with an ISBN. Print versions will be sold by the Mass Observation Archive at a price to cover production costs and postage & packing.

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Reading Mass Observation Writing:
Theoretical And Methodological Issues In Researching The Mass Observation Archive
Occasional Paper No. 1

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INTRODUCTION

Scholars and students from all over the world and from a broad range of disciplines use the materials in the Mass-Observation Archive. Most of the materials in the Archive are writings, especially the materials collected since 1981. Most of the writings have been solicited by the Archive from volunteers throughout the United Kingdom who write about their lives and communities for the Archive. This paper has been written to provide users of the Archive with some assistance in using this material because the Mass-Observation Archive differs in many ways from other social history archives and other research collections. Throughout the paper the reader is directed to books, journal articles, and research papers that can provide greater detail on topics that may be of relevance and interest. These references are available in the Mass-Observation Archive or in the general collection of the University of Sussex Library.

PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

One purpose of this paper is to raise awareness of various research and methodological issues involved in using and reading the materials in the Archive. The paper will deal with problems concerning:

* *How the writings in the Archive might be read and understood (there are many ways, a few of which are described in this paper);*

* *How representative the writings in the Archive are of the society in general and of various communities and groups in our society;*

* *How the writings in the Mass-Observation Archive might be used in conjunction with their other research.*

Another purpose is to describe the operations of the Mass-Observation Archive (since it began adding contemporary material to the original holdings in 1981), and to discuss implications for researchers, students, and others using the Archive.

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MASS-OBSERVATION ARCHIVE

Mass-Observation started in 1937 as a 'people's anthropology' of life in Britain. Ordinary people were asked to write about their daily lives and the events in their community. Other methods were also used to collect information about the lives of ordinary people: surveys, observations, interviews. The first phase of Mass-Observation occurred from 1937 until 1950 with a good deal of attention devoted to the recording of civilian life during the Second World War. The papers from that research were brought to The University of Sussex and the Mass-Observation Archive opened in 1975.

The second phase began in 1981. Professor David Pocock and Mass-Observation Archivist, Dorothy Sheridan, recruited people from all parts of the United Kingdom to write about their lives either in the form of a diary or more often in the form of detailed replies to questions on specific themes. Since 1981 an enormous bank of written information about life in the United Kingdom has been accumulating including over 400,000 pages of typed and hand written material representing the combined contributions of over 2,500 volunteer writers.

Since its beginning, the basic process has remained the same. The Archive asks volunteers throughout the United Kingdom to write about specific events and issues. The people - known as Mass-Observation correspondents - send their writings to the Mass-Observation Archive Project at The University of Sussex Library which stores them. Researchers, students, and others, come to the Archive, and read what has been written. A fuller account of how the project was launched and how it relates to the work of earlier Mass-Observation has been written by Dorothy Sheridan in '"Ordinary Hardworking Folk": Volunteer Writers in Mass-Observation, 1937-50 and 1981-91' in *Feminist Praxis 37/38*, 1993.

KEY TERMS

Correspondent. The person who replies to a directive, sometimes also called a **Mass-Observer,** or the member of the volunteer **panel**, or simply the **writer.** Correspondent conveys the sense of a mutual relationship and is preferred over "respondent" or "subject." The correspondents are self-selected and unpaid.

Directive. A directive is an open-ended set of questions and prompts designed to stimulate people to write, rather like a questionnaire but less structured. The word was originally used by early M-O to "direct" volunteers to write about a particular subject.

Mass-Observation Archive. An archive in the Library at the University of Sussex was set up in the early 1970s and opened to the public (by appointment) for research use. It holds all the papers of the original Mass-Observation (1937 until the early 1950s), and all the new writing about everyday life in the 1980s and 1990s. The Archive is funded primarily by the University of Sussex and is a Charitable Trust.

Mass-Observation Project. This is also known as "Mass-Observation in the 1980s and 1990s." This is the contemporary collection of writing by volunteers throughout the UK in response to the Archive's requests. Unlike the papers from the early M-O (which includes surveys and other research carried out by paid investigators), these papers are all sent in by volunteer Mass-Observers. The project has been financed from various external sources, including the Manpower Services Commission, the Nuffield Foundation, the University of Sussex Development Fund and donations from Friends of the Archive. It has also carried out paid commissions for the BBC and individual funded researchers.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE ARCHIVE'S PROCEDURES

Each year, 3 or 4 directives are sent to the M-O correspondents. Each directive contains up to three themes, divided into sections. Most of the themes related to personal experience and feelings and opinions on a subject (holidays, health, old age, education and so on); some of them ask for a one-day diary for a specified day; some ask for a more continuous record (for example, monitoring reactions to media coverage of the Gulf War).

The directives are usually mailed out in February (the Spring Directive), May/June (the Summer Directive) and October/November (the Autumn/Winter Directive). Correspondents have about three months in which to reply unless for some reason a specific deadline has been applied. Preparations for mailing begin about 3 or 4 weeks beforehand with the drafting of the directive. Most of the directives are designed in-house and are based on ideas and suggestions from Archive staff, from visiting researchers, and from the correspondents themselves. A few of the directives have been commissioned by external researchers and the design is then a collaborative effort between Dorothy Sheridan (who now directs the M-O Archive) and the commissioning researcher. Every attempt is made to make the directives interesting and varied so that at least one part of it will appeal to all correspondents. An account of the production of a recent directive, "Background to the Spring 1993 Directive", is available for consultation in the Archive.

The first replies are received within one week of the mail out. The heaviest return is usually within the first six weeks. Some people do not reply until they receive the next directive . A 60% to 75% response can be expected from most directives, which at the time of writing might be 500 contributions. Most correspondents use the freepost system so that the Archive carries the postage costs. Some correspondents reply more than once, or send in sections separately, or send in unsolicited contributions on themes that are important to them. Many include personal letters. When new people join the project they are issued with a unique M-O number and they are asked to put this on all their replies.

A system of numbers was introduced in 1983 so that people could write without being personally identified. The unique number can be used to link directive replies from the same person together and to check basic biographical details, but only Archive staff can link number with name and address. Most correspondents welcomed the introduction of numbers and said that they felt able to write more freely.

It also became necessary to introduce a formal arrangement over copyright so that the Archive could allow researchers to read, copy and quote from the writing without having to contact the writers for their permission each time. New correspondents are now asked when they join whether they would share copyright with the Archive. This means that, once a writer signs the form, 1,000 consecutive words from any of his or her contribution to the

Archive may be reproduced providing the Archive Trustees have given permission. The researcher must agree to abide by all the conditions governing the use of all the Archive's holdings. The Archive may charge for publishing extracts and the fee is used towards the continuation of the Project. Over the years, most correspondents have shared their copyright, but a few have quite reasonably chosen not to do so. Their contributions are filed with a red cover to alert researchers that they may not quote without the written permission of the writer.

The replies are opened, checked and dated by Archive staff. Each contribution is recorded on the person's card. Later, selected information is transferred to the database. This process includes scanning the reply for any information which we may need to respond to or record, and also for anything which might identify the person to a reader. Batches of post are then passed to Dorothy Sheridan for her to read and acknowledge. It is sometimes possible and necessary to respond individually but most correspondents receive a standard letter (re-written frequently with news and comment) which is topped and bottomed by hand and often includes a personal note.

The replies are then filed in alpha-numeric sequence. All letters, diaries or personally revealing items are detached for filing in the Personal Files, embargoed for 30 years from receipt. Correspondents can also ask that a particular piece of writing be placed under embargo, and other writings may be placed under embargo at the discretion of the Archivist. The replies are divided into those from men and those from women and counted and boxed accordingly. At this stage they are ready for consultation. No original papers are ever allowed out of the Archive so the research must take place on the premises. It is usually possible to order copies from Archive staff and the charge made for photocopying reflects the time it takes to remove and replace items as well as the copying itself. Even though the contemporary writing is very recent, and the paper usually still in good physical condition, researchers are asked to treat it in the same way as they would treat older archival papers, keeping them in order and taking care not to bend, crease or tear the papers. In line with usual archive practice, researchers are also asked to take their own notes in pencil. This avoids the possibility of the papers being marked indelibly. Researchers have access to limited biographical data (age, sex, marital status, town or village of residence, and occupation). The Archive staff are available to assist researchers and consult with them about uses of the Archive. The Archive is also used for teaching university students and the Archive staff are involved in this educational activity.

READING MASS-OBSERVATION WRITING

The materials in the M-O Archive are primarily written materials. And, the primary activities of people using the Archive are *reading* the materials and *writing* (writing notes, reports,

papers, radio scripts, etc.). Perhaps because the centrality of *reading* and *writing* is so obvious, the importance of reflecting on the nature of *reading* and *writing* may get overlooked. These processes are not as transparent as they might first appear and recent research has raised many complex issues regarding the meaning and uses of reading and writing, many of which are relevant here.

There are many different ways to read the materials in the Archive, indeed there are many different ways of reading in general.

The purpose of these section is to describe four different ways of reading. There are many others, and it is likely that anyone using the Archive probably reads in several different ways. By reflecting on how we are reading the materials in the Archive, we are better able to make explicit our assumptions about the nature of knowledge, about who the Mass Observation correspondents are, and about the nature of research itself.

1. Reading and Writing as Knowledge Transmission

One way of reading is to assume that the writer is sending us information he or she has gathered about the world. This is often called a transmission model of reading and writing because knowledge is transmitted from one place or person to another.

To read the Archive materials as knowledge transmission fits at least some of the goals of the Archive. Ordinary people are transmitting knowledge about their daily lives and communities to scholars, students and others. The M-O correspondents can make available, to people using the Archive, knowledge about daily life in the UK that is otherwise unavailable or at the least very difficult to get. Further, they make available knowledge from one period of time that may be useful to people decades later.

One implication of reading the Archive materials as knowledge transmission is that the M-O correspondents are defined as reporters or as field workers, gathering information and passing it on.

Although the M-O correspondents are directed in their information-gathering activities by the directives they receive from the Archive, they vary in how they respond. Some M-O correspondents follow the directives faithfully, responding to each question or task point by point. Others treat the directive as a whole and respond in general. Still others ignore the directive nearly entirely and instead transmit the information they think is useful.

There is also variation in the styles of writing used by the M-O correspondents: some respond with exposition, others with narrative, some write as if writing a letter to a friend, and occasionally a few may write a poem as part of their response to a directive. One way to view the variety of ways of responding is that they are transmitting different types of knowledge and different contexts of knowledge (e.g., personal context, community context, historical context). For more discussion on types of knowledge in different cultures see the chapter by Maurice Bloch titled "The Uses of Schooling and Literacy in a Zafimaniry Village" in the book edited by Brian Street listed in the bibliography.

There are limitations on reading the Archive materials as “knowledge transmission.” First, we all have our biases and perspectives. What gets reported often reflects that. Who we are also affects what we report.

Many M-O correspondents are very aware that they have biases and they will often note in their writing that they are only describing things from their own perspective. M-O correspondents often make special efforts to gather information from other people so that what they report is not limited to their own point of view.

A second limitation in reading M-O writing as knowledge transmission is that sometimes M-O correspondents have other purposes than just knowledge transmission. They may be commenting on an event or giving a political opinion (indeed some directive tasks ask for that). Some M-O correspondents enjoy the intellectual stimulation and writing practice involved in responding to a directive, and so they are not just reporting. Writers may also be constructing personalities/identities as writers that are different from how they represent themselves in other contexts. For instance, they may present themselves as "researchers," as "observers", as "social commentators," as "ordinary people" (see below), all of which affects the "knowledge" they are "transmitting."

In sum, when reading the Archive materials as “knowledge transmission,” some important questions are:

** What is being reported?*
**Who is doing the reporting?*
** What kind of report is it?*
** What is the nature of the knowledge that is in the report?*
**What kinds of knowledge are being transmitted?*
**What contexts of knowledge are being implied?*
**What kind of reader is being imagined?*
** In what way is the knowledge from different reports cumulative?*
** What limitations are there about the knowledge being transmitted?*

2. Reading and Writing as Knowledge Construction.

Whenever we read, we are affected by what we already know about the topic and by the experiences we have had. Thus reading is not just a matter of getting knowledge from the written text but is a process of knowledge construction.

Similarly, when we write, both what we write and how we write are influenced by our knowledge and experiences, by our knowledge and experience as writers, and by our purposes for writing. Our writing is also affected by our reading.

For example, consider the Education directive (Spring 1991) from the perspective of reading as knowledge construction. The M-O correspondents began by *reading* the directive. They interpreted the directive based on their own background experiences and knowledge, perhaps interpreting the directive differently from each other. Then, when they began writing their responses they did more than just report information about education, they constructed knowledge as they wrote. They selected what to write about, they choose how to organise the information they presented, how to make it coherent, and reconstructed events from memory and from their interpretations of what had occurred or was occurring.

One important implication derived from viewing reading as knowledge construction is that the responses of the M-O correspondents might be considered reports of their perceptions, memories, and interpretations of events rather than just unmediated descriptions of events. For some researchers using the M-O Archive, this is exactly what they hope to get. They are interested in what people in the UK think about a topic or how they perceive themselves, their family, their friends, their future, their past.

From the viewpoint of reading as knowledge construction, the M-O Archive is like a survey or a large-scale experimental task. The directive is like a survey questionnaire or an experimental prompt, and what the M-O correspondents write is like an answer to a survey question or a response to an experimental condition, respectively.

To the extent that researchers, students, or others using the Archive, are interested in people other than the M-O correspondents - for example, they might be interested in the views of education of people in the UK in general - researchers have raised issues concerning:

**How well the correspondents represent the broader population?*
**What segments of the population do they represent?*
**To what degree and how can inferences be made from their responses to the perceptions, views, and interpretations of others?*

Some ways of addressing these questions are discussed later in a section titled, “How can writings and findings from the M-O Archive be integrated with other research and scholarship?”

Recognizing that background knowledge and experiences mediate what is written does not negate the importance of the writing collected by the M-O Archive project, rather it redefines the data as perceptions, views, and interpretations. Also, such an acknowledgment redefines the M-O Archive Project as similar to a survey or an experiment.

There is at least one more important implication to reading the M-O Archive as knowledge construction. Researchers and others using the Archive are themselves readers. Their background knowledge, experiences, and purposes affect their understanding and interpretations of what they read and write no less than occurs for the M-O correspondents. The disciplinary background researchers and students bring to their reading also affects their understanding and interpretation. Given reading as knowledge construction, researchers' reports - like the writings of the M-O correspondents - are constructions of knowledge and not just factual reports.

3. Reading and Writing as Social and Cultural Practices

We are used to thinking of writing and reading primarily as mental activities. But even a quick reflection indicates that writing and reading are activities for establishing and maintaining social relationships, too. We may write letters to friends to keep a friendship going. We may write warnings, directions, and other things, to control or influence people’s behaviour. Sometimes we use writing to end social relationships (which is a kind of social relationship, too): redundancy memoranda, notes discharging a milkman or other service provider, letters ending a romance, etc.

But writing and reading are not social only through what is communicated, but also in the activity itself. Some writing and reading activities bring people together (e.g., writing a group report, bedtime story reading to children, writing a scrapbook) while other writing and reading activities separate and isolate us from others (e.g., writing a letter in private, writing a private diary, reading a book in a library carrel).

One interesting dimension to our writing and reading activities is that within a cultural group or society (or even within a sub-group), there are more or less shared ways of engaging in those activities. Furthermore, our cultural institutions such as schools are often set up to promote those shared ways of writing and reading. Since the ways in which we engage in writing and reading activities are shared, they can be called writing and reading practices. One advantage of calling them practices instead of an activity is that people ‘play’ with

writing and reading practices (vary the practice to create new social relationships and new social meanings) and they adapt writing and reading practices to particular situations and to new situations. For additional discussion on cultural variation in reading and writing practices see David Barton and Roz Ivanic's *Writing in the Community,* Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole's *The Psychology of Literacy,* Shirley Heath's *Ways With Words,* and two books by Brian Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice* and *Cross-cultural Approaches to Literacy.*

One implication of reading the M-O Archive as Social and Cultural Practices is highlighting the social and cultural processes involved. First, the M-O correspondents are establishing various social relationships with both the Archive and with the researchers reading the Archive. Part of this social relationship involves social identity. By how and what they write, the M-O correspondents are promoting a particular social identity for themselves. This social identity may be working class, writer, ordinary person, artist, teacher, parent, son/daughter, elder, observer, responder, or more subtle and complex social identities that are difficult to describe with a few words. The social identities they present are part of the message and information communicated to the reader.

The writer's establishment of a social identity has implications for the reader's social identity and may promote a particular kind of reading. For example, the M-O correspondent who presents an identity as an observer promotes the researcher as a reader of reports from field workers. The M-O correspondent who writes as a son about his family promotes the researcher perhaps as a voyeuristic reader. The M-O correspondent who presents herself as an ‘ordinary’ person may be inviting the reader to be a co-conspirator in writing a history of ‘ordinary’ people.

A second implication of reading the M-O Archive as social and cultural practices is that it highlights various social purposes of writing for the Archive. Writers may be trying to establish or maintain a social relationship (albeit with an institution and with an unknown audience - although many do write notes to the Archivist, Dorothy Sheridan, and so they do have a known person for at least part of their audience). As the writers establish and maintain a social relationship with the M-O Archive and Project they involve themselves in a set of social and cultural activities they might not otherwise be involved in (the cultural practice of making history by recording it). Writers may also be trying to influence opinion of future generations or they may be promoting an explicit or implicit political agenda.

Other purposes for writing for the Archive do not directly concern the readers of Archive material. Some M-O correspondents note that they use writing for the Archive (as well as other writing activities) to get some space and time for themselves, to separate themselves from families, children, spouses, etc. The status of the Archive - its association with the University and its academic purpose - provide sufficient rationale that they feel they can claim some time and priority for themselves for writing to the M-O. Some M-O writers use

their replies to directives as practice for learning to write better, while others use writing for the M-O Project as an outlet for their creative ability or need for expression. Many people use the Archive for intellectual stimulation, forcing themselves to think about and explore issues they might not have explicitly thought about or exerted effort in thinking about. Of course, it is rare that there is only a single social purpose or social relationship involved. The purposes and social relationships may change from directive response to directive response and even within a directive responses.

The writing and reading that researchers do also needs to be viewed as social and cultural practices. One implication for researchers is to be aware of the assumptions and limitations of various social and cultural practices with regard to knowledge, description, interpretation, and narrative. Part of this awareness involves questioning the match, complementary nature, mismatch, or incompatibility of the writing and reading practices of researchers with those of the M-O correspondents they are reading.

4. Reading and Writing as Contested Social Practice

It was suggested in the previous section, that mismatches and incompatibility may occur between the writing and reading practices of M-O correspondents and those of researchers. Conflicts may occur over how the M-O correspondent and the researcher are defining each other.

Conflicts may also occur in assumptions about the nature of knowledge. For example, a directive may be organised to elicit expository responses (following a “scientific” model of knowledge) while M-O correspondents may choose to write different kinds of narrative instead, redefine the question, or ignore the directive completely and write about something *they* feel the researcher should know about and be interested in.

There may also be a conflict in how researchers present their findings. Some researchers may package their findings from the Archive as scientific reports and coherent histories (understandably so) although the collection itself is not a single coherent history.

The conflicts that may emerge from various writing and reading practices are not just between the M-O correspondents and researchers, they may also be part of what M-O correspondents are reporting. For example, one M-O correspondent described her experience going to court because she refused to pay the Poll Tax. She not only describes what occurred, but her description also reveals conflicts in reading and writing practices between the Court and the M-O correspondent. The way the Court used written language limited the act of civil disobedience in which she was involved and so she had to contest the reading and writing practices of the Court in order to highlight her act of civil disobedience.

Perhaps it should not be surprising that the reports of M-O correspondents often involve conflicts about writing and reading practices, either explicitly or implicitly. For at least the past four decades reading and writing have been a topic of strong debate and conflict in contemporary society , and not just by academics. From discussions of the teaching of reading and writing in school, to teacher strikes over testing, to calls for a written constitution, to the elimination of passports in the EC, and elsewhere, reading and writing are sites of turmoil. Further, a number of social and cultural theorists have suggested that language practices in general (including reading and writing) are the sites of much social conflict since it is through language practices that social control is largely maintained in contemporary society rather than through use of force.

Recognising that writing and reading are often contested social practices, leads to a series of questions that may be useful to researchers using the Archive:

How are Mass-Observation correspondents defined?- as recorders, as subjects, as readers, as mediators, as interpreters, as authors, as actors?

How is the relationship of the M-O correspondents to others defined?- as representative of a group, as a representative from a group, as marginal, as atypical?

How is the writing correspondents do defined? - as report, as correspondence, as field notes, as diary, as data, as letters?

How is the directive defined?- as prompt, as task, as experimental condition?

How are the researchers defined? - as interpreters, writers, field workers, surveyors, readers, as well as by disciplinary identities (as anthropologist, as historian, as sociologist, etc.)?

How is knowledge is defined? - as events, as a collection of facts, as perceptions, views, and interpretations, as social practices, as background and experience? as representative?

How is knowledge produced? - extracted, discovered, transmitted, created, constructed, collected, organised?

How is knowledge presented - as description, as personhood, as hierarchies of concepts, as social practice, as narrative, as carnival?

Do particular uses of the Archive usurp the role of the M-O correspondents as researchers themselves, and as researchers, their 'right' to provide interpretation of events?

These conflicts, among others, will not be resolved by merely acknowledging all sides as valuable and ignoring what the conflicts reveal about the various enterprises that come under the rubric of writing and reading. But rather than view the conflicts as problems requiring resolution, the conflicts can be viewed as points of inquiry revealing yet more insight about everyday life in the UK, the nature of social life, and the nature of inquiry on social life.

WHO ARE THE MASS-OBSERVATION CORRESPONDENTS?

The M-O Archive keeps a list of the M-O correspondents' age, gender, occupation, and the general geographical location of their residence. But this list provides very limited information. All new volunteer writers now complete a "Biographical Information" form which contains additional information about living situation, marital situation and occupation. These forms are available to researchers so they can read people's own descriptions of their jobs, etc. A statistical analysis of the age and the date volunteers started writing for the M-O Project shows both a broad range and a very flat curve. One implication of this statistical analysis is that it is difficult to make generalisations about the M-O correspondents with regard to age or other demographic variables.

Overall, more women than men write for the M-O Archive. This phenomenon may be due to a concerted effort by the M-O Archive to include and emphasize the voices of women since those voices are rarely heard (for more information see Dorothy Sheridan's article "Using Mass-Observation Archive as a Source for Women's Studies," in *Women's History Review*, Spring 1994). It is the impression of the M-O staff that there are few writers from ethnic minorities, although no systematic data have been collected on this issue. Similarly, no systematic data has been collected on writers from linguistic minorities. Ethnic and national identity cannot be assumed from location. In a recent study, interviews with M-O correspondents in Scotland and Wales showed that some M-O correspondents had moved there from England and did not identity their ethnic background as Scottish or Welsh. That study also showed that the linguistic repertoire of an M-O correspondent and even their 'home' dialect could not be inferred from their writing. M-O correspondents who's 'home' language might be Gaelic, Welsh, or a language variety other than Standard English, predominately wrote in Standard English when writing for M-O.

Assumptions about social class and economic status from listed occupation may also be misleading. The educational histories of M-O correspondents (found in responses to the Spring 1991 directive) show that many M-O correspondents had working class backgrounds, and many of them still identify with the working class even though from the outside they may appear middle class. A number of M-O correspondents also came from families wealthy enough to afford private schools throughout. But attendance at private schools is also not a good indicator of past or current socio-economic class status. Some M-O correspondents passed scholarship examinations and some others had families who made great sacrifices to obtain a private school education. Also worthy of note, many M-O correspondents had a disrupted or de-railed education, especially women. They were unable to continue their schooling as they had wanted because their family lacked the money, because they failed an exam (although they may have been very clever in school),

because they were ill, because their parents did not think further schooling was important, among other reasons.

What then can be said about who the M-O correspondents are?

In their replies to the Spring 1991 directive and in follow-up interviews, M-O correspondents often described themselves as 'ordinary' people. They often express a shared sense of creating a history of ordinary people - ordinary as opposed to those they describe as "kings and queens," "the posh," "the big cheeses," and "the media."

> *[W632] - instead of being the history of kings and battles and so on it was actually the living history of people that experienced and went through these times of change.*
>
> *[R1671] - I believe in letting the people voice be heard, and there is a kind of history that is far too reliant I think on, you know, documents that simply retell the discourse of big cheeses.*
>
> *[M1498] - I think ordinary people have few chances to express their opinions in the media generally.*

Many described themselves as observers rather than participants, as on the outside, as on the margins.

In sum, given the great variability and range of the M-O correspondents and the fact that many indicators might be misleading (e.g., location, occupational status), great caution should be exercised in generalisations about who the M-O correspondents are. The responses to some directives may provide researchers with a better 'picture' about the background of a particular correspondent, such as the response to the Spring 1991 directive on education, the Spring 1991 directive on uses of reading and writing, or the Spring 1993 directive on growing up. Since many M-O correspondents have participated for a long time, researchers may find it useful to read the entries of an M-O correspondent over time, across many different directives, which provides a kind of life history. These two suggested means for getting background information about particular M-O correspondents have the advantage of getting descriptions of correspondents in their own words.

WHAT KIND OF WRITING IS THE MASS-OBSERVATION ARCHIVE?

Sometimes the M-O Archive is described as ethnography, as history, as auto/biography, as diaries, or as social commentary. But it is difficult to put a single label on the kind of writing that is in the M-O Archive. Sometimes a directive has asked for a diary, a recording of what occurred on either a single day or over several days or even months. Other directives have asked for opinions, history, or description. But the M-O correspondents may respond to a directive in a way not suggested: part of a diary may be social commentary and description,

an opinion may involve a long narrative and history, a description consist of a diary of events, and occasionally poems and copies of newspaper articles and other materials will either be embedded or attached. Thus, not only is it difficult to put a single label on the M-O writing, one cannot easily label the genre of writing based on the task in the directive.

The diverse nature of the writing for the M-O Archive may be a consequence of the vast range of literacy activities in which the Mass Observers are involved. A study we conducted showed that the Mass Observers often wrote for their own purposes in addition to writing for the Archive, many belonged to groups or classes that used writing extensively, many had strong views about the importance of writing in their lives, and most writers were conscious of different genres of writing and they were clear about how writing for the M-O Archive was different from their other writing. Below are some quotations from Mass Observers describing the difference they see between writing for the M-O Archive and other writing they do.

> S2207: *I don't really write sort of essays as such in any other context and creative writing is - well it's either sort of personal experiences or fiction - I suppose it's [writing for M-O], the style's a bit different ... the Mass-Observation is more ... formalised*
>
> B1215: *I write to M-O in the same style as I would write to a friend. I just write as I speak and like to be relaxed about it.*
>
> W632: *when you leave work and write for the Mass-Observation or other letter writing or somethings, it's letting down your hair and, you know, writing in a whole different style*

Differences in how Mass Observers view their writing for the Archive - as "formalised," as writing to a friend, as writing in a whole different style [from writing at work], etc. - reflects both the openness of the Archive to diverse genres of writing as well as a shared ownership between the Archive and the Mass Observers in defining Mass-Observation as a particular genre of writing - *"a whole different style."* Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "carnival" may be helpful in understanding the M-O Archive as a genre of writing. A carnival not only has many different voices, talking about different topics at the same time, but talking in different styles and genres - yet, all of the voices, topics, and styles come together to make the "carnival." Although the Mass-Observation is not a "carnival," its many different voices, topics, and styles of writing (which often reflect recognisable genres) do come together as a unique whole.

HOW CAN WRITINGS AND FINDINGS FROM THE M-O ARCHIVE BE INTEGRATED WITH OTHER RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP?

The M-O Archive is a unique enterprise. It is both a rich corpus of data about life in Britain accumulated over time, and, it is also a combined people's ethnography, collective auto/biography, and social commentary that can be read like any ethnography, auto/biography, or social commentary. The past experiences of researchers and students using the Archive have been very productive in articulating a range of ways that the writings and findings in the M-O Archive can be used either by themselves or in conjunction with other research efforts and findings. We list here five ways although there are others. Each use depends primarily on the stance of the researcher. Although various writings will suggest that one use or another is more appropriate, it is ultimately the researcher's view and use of Archive material that determines the contribution of Archive material to a research project.

The Representative Case

One way to read the M-O Archive is as a representation of people in the UK. Although the M-O Archive involves a large number of people from all over the UK, statistically speaking, it is difficult to determine whether the responses of the M-O correspondents to a particular directive or question is representative of the people in the UK as a whole. In brief, caution should be used about generalising from the responses of M-O correspondents to the population as a whole.

However, the M-O Archive can be viewed as representative in three other ways. First, the M-O correspondents do represent a segment of the UK population, even if they do not represent the whole and even if it is difficult to determine what segment it does represent. In other words, one can be reasonably certain that the opinions and feelings expressed by the M-O correspondents represent the feelings and opinions of a large number of people in the UK - people like themselves - even if it is difficult to determine how large a number that is or what the demographic characteristics might be.

A second way in which the M-O correspondents are representative is that they are often writing for (on behalf of) a particular group. For example, an M-O correspondent may state that she or he is writing on behalf of working class people or on behalf of anti-government people or on behalf of teachers, etc. Although the M-O correspondent has not been elected to represent that particular group, they take on the responsibility of representing that group within and to the M-O Archive - in many cases, to make sure that 'voice' is not missing from the historical record. When the M-O correspondents write in this manner they often make it clear they are doing so and they are often careful to separate out personal views from the perspective of the group they are representing. Representing, as used here, takes on a

slightly different meaning from the statistical use of that term made popular in newspaper opinion polls and market surveys. Here its meaning is more like a *re - presenting* of a group's position, perspective, or experience.

But the third way in which the M-O Archive can be viewed as representative is perhaps more useful. Rather than conceiving of representation in terms of the individual, it is the slices of life that are viewed as representations of everyday life. Just as an anthropologist provides descriptions and pictures of the everyday life of a community or group she or he is studying, the M-O correspondents can be seen similarly. And just as the representation an anthropologist gives of a community or group is not discounted because she or he is not as an individual representative of that group, so too the representations given by M-O correspondents of everyday life of the community and groups in which they live can be viewed as valid although they may not be a representative individual in the statistical sense. Of course, just as we would have concerns about the ability of the anthropologist to get the complete picture and to present that picture in a way that insiders would, so too we can be concerned about M-O correspondents. Professional anthropologists have training and academic background that helps them produce valid descriptions and narratives. Although most M-O correspondents do not have similar academic training and background (although some do), because most M-O correspondents are long-term insiders (who may also be located on the margins - as noted in the section above on Who Are The Mass Observers?), their reports may provide insights not usually available in the reports of professional anthropologists. In sum, they provide *a* representation of everyday life in the UK.

The Telling Case

Mitchell's essay on case studies (in Ellen, 1984 - listed in the bibliography) is particularly relevant in explaining how data in the M-O Archive provide legitimate social science material for a study of writing practices. Rather than applying 'enumerative induction,' as in much scientific and statistical research as a means to generalising and for establishing the representativeness of social data, Mitchell advocates what he terms "analytical induction":

> What the anthropologist using a case study to support an argument does is to show how general principles deriving from some theoretical orientation manifest themselves in some given set of particular circumstances. A good case study therefore enables the analyst to establish theoretically valid connections between events and phenomena which previously were 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 whereby general theory may be developed (Mitchell, 1984, p. 239).

With respect to the material in the M-O Archive, this approach suggests it can be fruitfully read not just for the 'lively examples,' as much media use of the Archive has tended to do, but as a way of exploring theoretical propositions through specific cases. For instance, if one is interested in the argument that women use writing as a means of gaining social space or a 'voice' in contexts where they are otherwise 'silenced' then material in the M-O Archive might help the researcher to explore what this means in greater depth and to instantiate in concrete terms the relationship between gender and writing. The data can help provide 'telling' cases of what it means to be excluded and how women in specific circumstances reclaim space. For example in her interviews for the ESRC research project (1992-3), W632 makes it clear that the men in her family seldom listen to her, whereas writing for M-O is by definition writing for an audience that is interested in what she has to say. B1215 (also in her interview for the ESRC research project) created for herself space and time in which she could sit on the couch doing her own reading and writing (not just for M-O) and her children learned that this was 'mummy's time' during which she was not to be interrupted.

The proposition that gender is related to writing through such notions as 'voice' and identity then is a legitimate starting point - the existence of some social data to support the argument suggests further inquiry is justified and also provides some guidance on what direction that might inquiry take. Researchers might look more closely at the minutiae of social interactions around the family for evidence of authority and rights and not just to larger more evident situations where these are manifest in the public domain.

For researchers interested in literacy practices there is further support here for the proposition that writing takes its meaning from context and that it is associated with power relations: Writing cannot be treated as a uniform neutral given and the kinds of writing associated with dominant discourses, as in school and media, are not the only ways available to people to develop literacy practices and to challenge dominant power relations. This is what Mitchell means by the analyst's attempt to "establish theoretically valid connections between events and phenomena which previously were ineluctable." It is in this way that the Mass-Observation data can provide 'telling' cases and researchers can develop more sophisticated ways of reading it.

The Illustrative Case

One use of the Archive has been to provide 'illustrations' for particular theories or findings. Researchers often rummage through folders until they identify a narrative that illustrates an *a priori* theory or a finding from perhaps a statistical study. If the illustrative use of the Archive goes no further, its potential to inform theory and findings is limited. However, some researchers have used the 'illustrative' case to provide interpretation and explanation for findings from other studies. In brief, the materials in the M-O Archive often provide the

detailed information, description, and narrative that enhances findings from other studies, perhaps leading to an explanation of findings. But 'illustrative' cases may also be set in dialectical relationship to findings of other studies, or even to each other. The researcher may find an 'illustrative' case that only partially fits the *a priori* theory or findings. The discrepancies should cause the researcher to identity or speculate about issues or factors not considered that should be (which enriches the *a priori* theory or findings) or the discrepancies might challenge the *a priori* theory or findings and cause them to be reconceptualised. In sum, the illustrative case can be - perhaps should be - more than illustration.

The Reported Case

Many of the writings in the Archive are descriptive and observational. The M-O correspondent acts and writes similarly to an ethnographer or journalist. Examples include an account of a street party on the day of the Royal Wedding in 1981 (Responses to Directive No. 2), a description of a hospital ward or of a school room where details of the place and the activities of the people there are recorded. The writer may be an active participant in the event and include her or his own involvement, or the writer may be distanced, recording as an observer. Even writings that are not explicitly descriptions or observational reports can be used as reports. When the writings in the Archive are treated as reports, the M-0 correspondents take on the role of 'field workers' and co-researcher, and their writings can be viewed as reports from the field, social description, from 'your research team.' Many of the anthologies created by the M-O Archive use the writings of the correspondents in this way - as a collection of historical reports which collectively give a broader and perhaps different historical report than might be found in other histories.

The Rhetorical Case

In some ways the rhetorical case is similar to the reported case, since they both involve reporting and description. But the rhetorical case involves treating the writings as social commentary, not simply description or reporting. Sometimes, because of the nature of the directive (perhaps asking for social commentary), or the writer's intentions, or the particular subject matter covered, a writing will suggest itself as rhetorical, as social commentary. The story, account, or description makes a political or ideological point, and may very often be a deliberate and explicit attempt on the part of the writer to give testimony - to put their viewpoint on record for posterity and to a wider audience. One example would be the account by one Mass Observer of her visit to the courts as result of her refusal to pay the Poll tax (Special Report sequence, W623). The account provided not only describes what happened but also makes a historical and political statement. Such writing can be treated as both a reported case and as a rhetorical case, depending on the view of the researcher and on the researcher's agenda. Part of the value in viewing writings as rhetorical cases lies in

what they can tell us about the relationship between personal experience and the formation of political ideas, and in what they tell us about the ways in which institutions, policies, powerful figures and dominant discourses impact upon real people in their everyday lives. Of course, we should also be open to the social commentary of the M-O correspondents, and respond to it as we would to all social commentary, allowing ourselves and others, as well as our research, to be influenced, enlightened and educated by it. One powerful use of the rhetorical case occurs when researchers take the stance that they are 'researching with' (see Cameron et al., 1992) the M-O correspondents, and the researcher reflects on and carefully orchestrates the various 'voices' of the M-O Archive, including his or her own.

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