Meet Our Researchers

Now we are at The Keep, we thought it would be a nice opportunity to introduce you to some of the people who have been recently researching the Mass Observation Archive.

Researcher: Dr Rose Lindsey, Research Fellow in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Southampton.

This month we met up with Rose who has been using the archive for her research project on volunteering. We met for a coffee and here’s what she had to say.

How did you first hear about Mass Observation?

Years ago I watched a television documentary about Mass Observation (MO) and from then on I wanted to get involved with the archive.

What were your reasons for using the Archive?

In 2011 I was working for the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC) at the University of Southampton. I realised that all MO writers are volunteer writers and thus would be well placed to write about volunteering. With colleagues at the TSRC we commissioned the ‘Big Society’ Directive in 2011.

We were thrilled to get almost 200 responses and I am always struck by the incredible generosity of writers who respond to the directives.

The archive is vast and can seem daunting to new users, how did you approach it?

When we were designing the ‘Continuity in Volunteering’ project we were taken aback by the size of the archive. Almost 4,000 people have taken part in the last 30 years, which represents thousands of pages of writing.

Luckily MO were able to provide us with individual writers’ characteristics and their rates of response to directives. This enabled us to identify a variety of writers who have been long-term responders. We decided to ‘follow’ 40 people who have been writing for a long time, some since 1981, to investigate whether their attitudes towards volunteering have changed or continued over time.
What has your experience of reading through Mass Observation material been like?

I’ve been surprised by the range of emotional responses I have had to the writing. I have laughed, cried, felt angry, thought ‘me too!’, felt wonder, been shocked, and learnt things about myself through my responses to pieces of writing. I have also been surprised by how much ‘back-story’ writers give, in their reflections on their lives prior to writing for the MOA; and by how the events that people prioritise in their back-stories can change over time. Although I haven’t met the writers I feel as if I know some of them very well.

Whilst researching, was there anything that surprised you?

Yes, several things. The first is that when I read responses to the Big Society directive, I formed views about the writers. When I went on to read more writing by the 40 writers we chose to follow through time, I was surprised to find out that some of my first impressions were wrong. It made me see the value of reading more than one piece of writing from a particular respondent.

The second surprise was that even when I was reading a transcribed version of an individual writer’s work (and couldn’t see the handwriting and hadn’t looked at the writer’s MOA number), I was able to recognise the writer by her/his style and tone of writing.

What are you working on at the moment?

We have continued to work with the MOA on another project which brings together lots of different pieces of information about individual writers, such as their occupations, ages, regions of where they live, which directives they have responded to, and how often they have written. The aim is to bring this all together into one interactive database. This should enable visitors to select what writing they want to read, and to decide if they would like to ‘follow’ individual writers.

This project is being funded by the Economic Social Research Council (ESRC) and we will be starting work on this in the new year.

Finally, what would you say to someone thinking about using Mass Observation?

Do it! It’s a brilliant research experience. You’ll be joining a great research community. But before you make any decisions, visit the archive, or an online resource like ‘Observing the 80s’, and read lots responses to different directives. This will enable you to have a really good think about how the archive might fit your research questions, and the methods you could use to analyse Mass Observation Project writing.

Thank you for your time and for sharing your experience of Mass Observation

Kirsty Pattrick
Mass Observation Project Officer
November 2014
Meet Our Researchers

For our Spring Bulletin, we are pleased to introduce you to a researcher who has used Mass Observation significantly in her studies and even moved countries to do so!

Researcher: Natacha Chevalier, PhD student in Contemporary History and Associate Tutor, University of Sussex.

We met up with Natacha at The Keep in early 2015 and this is what she had to say about her experience of using Mass Observation;

Discovering Mass Observation

In 2008, whilst doing my BA dissertation on rationing (in Britain during WWII), my supervisor said something like: ‘If you are interested by the Home Front, Mass Observation Archives could be interesting for you’. One sentence in the middle of a long discussion, nothing memorable and I forgot it. Four years later, I was in Birmingham, doing my MA, when suddenly, the name ‘Mass Observation’ just popped up from my memory. I had a look on Internet and that was it! I was hooked. So, instead of going back home to Geneva, we (husband, cat and myself) moved to Sussex for me to do a PhD based on MOA material

Why the Mass Observation Archive

I wanted to use testimonies from those who were there at the time, but not politicians or elites, I was seeking ordinary people, people like me, like my parents, a secretary, a housewife. I wanted to know how it was to be there, what people thought, felt, how they managed. My thesis is about food, but my interest is on all aspect of the wartime experience. What better source than Mass Observation?

Where to begin

Like a scientist, I started my research by categorising things. I used the research engine in a specific way with key words, to see what was available. Then downloaded material related to my topic (food), to build a kind of mental picture of what kind of information I could find/use. With the diaries I noted around 30. I read a few pages every 3-4 months of each diary, after that I had 15 left, then I read one year (1940) and finally chose 8 diaries on the quantity and significance of the ir mentions about food.

Of course, with time, I could dig deeper... But the categorisation of material according to my need was the first step. If I had just skimmed through it in order to find something interesting, I’d still be doing it.
Reading the diaries

It was the first time I’d been happy that one of my children was dyslexic and dysgraphic, as it gave me the perfect training to decipher some of the handwriting...

More seriously, it’s amazing, after nearly four years, each time I go back to a diary, I still find another piece of information, another perspective, a detail unnoticed before, it’s endless. I’m always amazed by the richness of the sources.

And the relationship between the researcher and the source is also very special. When one goes so deep into the intimacy of someone else’s life it creates a unilateral bond to some extent, between the reader today and a stranger, probably dead by now.

Surprises

The similarities and the difference with us today. Sometimes there is a feeling of a shared experience, again, with a perfect stranger. Similar personal issues. Honestly, when I read one diarist’s description of her effort to lose weight I felt I’d found a sister! However, I also have this impression that people were different somehow, let’s say more pragmatic, less emotional, and more private than today. That being said, I was also surprised by the candour and the openness of the diarists I read.

The emotional side of it was unexpected too. I did not expect to ‘feel’ something for the diarists, but as I was reading their testimonies, I surprised myself liking one diarist while disliking another. It can be an issue, as it can bias one’s perspective. And it is funny as they become ‘your diarists’. When I present a paper or discuss a topic related to my research, I have now this tendency to say ‘one of my diarists....’

What now

In addition to my thesis I am working on a couple of publications. One on wartime Christmas and one on the relationship between the global market and local food practices. I also have upcoming projects, one on wartime housewives and another on wartime creativity to cope with food restriction and scarcity.

Advice

Careful, it’s addictive... Seriously, I would recommend you have an idea of what you’re looking for, your topic, rather than focus on what you need. Things can, and will, change as you explore the material, but if you do not have a guiding line you can get lost as the material is so interesting and the archive huge. Look at what other researchers have written, to give you an idea of what you can find, and what can be done with the sources.

The digitalised material is wonderful, it saved me a lot of time and ask the people working at the Archive, they know their material, they are precious allies and guides.

Kirsty Patrrick, Mass Observation Project Officer, March 2015