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# Mass Observation: Emotions, Relations and Temporality

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**WORKSHOP REPORT**

# 1. Introduction

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This document reports on a workshop hosted by the University of Warwick on 11<sup>th</sup> June 2019. The workshop was organised by Dr Pru Hobson-West and Renelle McGlacken (University of Nottingham), and supported via the Animal Research Nexus Programme (AnNex), funded by the Wellcome Trust. The aim of the workshop was to critically consider some of the larger conceptual and methodological themes raised by the use of Mass Observation as a research tool, particularly (but not exclusively) when researching animals and interspecies relations.

Participants were invited on the basis of their previous or planned use of the Mass Observation Project and included Dr Julie Brownlie (University of Edinburgh), Professor Nickie Charles (University of Warwick), Dr Rebekah Fox (University of Warwick), Dr Rachel Hurdley (Cardiff University), Dr Anne-Marie Kramer (University of Nottingham), and Kirsty Patrick (Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex).

Three presentations were given by participants who drew on their own experiences of using the Mass Observation Project: Nickie Charles gave a talk on emotions, Renelle McGlacken on relationality, and Anne-Marie Kramer on temporality. However, the workshop format was designed to be informal, and to encourage maximum participation to allow us to build comparative understanding across several topics. The discussion was audio-recorded, to ensure an accurate record and to facilitate the production of this co-authored report.

## 2. Background to the Mass Observation Project

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The Mass Observation Project (MOP) is based at the University of Sussex and represents a unique repository of rich textual accounts which span the breadth of 'everyday life'. These accounts are produced by the MOP's voluntary correspondents, who are referred to as 'Mass Observers', and whose writings are guided by 'Directives' which entail a set of questions or prompts on a particular topic. The majority of Directives are designed through collaborative paid commissions with external researchers, although some themes are in-house and others suggested by Observers themselves (Bloome et al, 1993). Mass Observers are situated across the UK and are self-selecting; the panel is not and does not claim to be representative. In 2019, there were 310 active writers on the panel, a high proportion of whom are located in South East England, are women, and are over the age of 61 (Mass Observation Winter Bulletin, 2019).



The Mass Observation Project is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation, in the care of the University of Sussex and based at The Keep in Falmer, Brighton.

### 3. Emotions

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The first theme we considered was emotion, and in particular the idea of comfort and discomfort. Nickie Charles gave a presentation reflecting on this topic via her experience of commissioning the 2009 Directive entitled 'Animals and Humans'. This prompted much discussion of the range of emotions articulated in MOP writing, as well as methodological questions related to both writing and analysing emotion.

#### *Range of emotions*

Nickie gave examples of Observers expressing positive emotions in their writings on animals, for example via accounts of pets as 'companions and confidantes'. However, she also identified feelings of discomfort including jealousy, guilt, resentment, and even horror, such as when older Observers discussed the killing of an animal they had perceived as their pet, but which had been kept by their parents as a source of food. The presentation then opened up a broader discussion about whether certain animals are considered 'grievable' or not (Redmalm, 2015). Whilst the sociozoological scale (Arluke and Sanders, 1996) might suggest that animals such as fish create less of a bond, Nickie reported that some Observers became very attached to pet fish and mourned their loss.

The presentation then moved on to consider the topic of animals raised for food. Again, a wide variety of emotions can be read through the accounts: responses ranged from anger at certain groups, such as vegetarians or animal rights activists, to admissions of denial and the desire not to know how farm animals are killed or kept. In sharing insights from the archival materials, relationships with animals are revealed as a crucial part of the emotional landscapes of childhood and adulthood.

In the discussion, and reflecting on the 2016 Directive 'Using animals in research', Renelle McGlacken reaffirmed the importance of the topic of denial, or the desire not to know (McGlacken 2019a). As with the Animals and Humans Directive, some Observers self-identified as hypocritical and, in doing so, demonstrate an active reflection on their own positionality. As part of the discussion, Julie Brownlie usefully raised the question of how to interpret emotion from these accounts; noting, for instance, that for some sociologists of emotion, anger and (hidden) shame are closely linked (Salmela and von Schev, 2017). This led onto a broader methodological debate about the role of the analyst in identifying or naming emotion in the accounts, and, as we now discuss, how and whether emotion is written into MOP materials.

### *Writing emotion*

As was made clear by Observers in the 'Animals and Humans' Directive, some recollections were being shared for the first time, illustrating that the MO can function as an outlet for emotions that might be considered socially taboo. However, linking nicely with the later theme of temporality, Nickie noted that even when reflecting on childhood memories of pet-keeping, emotions are not located 'in the past'. Rather, during the process of writing, some Observers appeared to be reliving their emotions and reflecting on their current thoughts, feelings, or behaviour (for a fuller discussion of writing emotion see Charles, 2017).

This is an example of the wider point that it would be misleading to assume that Observers have pre-existing fixed views that were simply being recorded; rather, Mass Observation reflects views 'in the making'. For example, some Observers in the 'Animals and Humans' Directive reported that they had looked up information on the internet whilst responding to the Directive or even that, as a consequence of writing, they had decided to stop eating meat. The strength of the method is thus that people were grappling with ethical issues 'on the page', a process which is missed by opinion polls or can be less obvious in standard research interviews. As summarised by Anne-Marie Kramer, this reveals 'thinking as process, not outcome'. The group then discussed the way in which writing provides a space for thought, or at times, a useful distancing.

The workshop also discussed the ethical and affective issues that this methodological point raises. Examples were cited of Observers expressing 'gratitude' to the MOP for raising particular issues, and for providing an opportunity to reflect on a challenging issue. This was phrased by Anne-Marie as the 'citizenship function' of the MOP. However, as was discussed, Mass Observers at times expressed their hostility towards particular topics, reflecting the range of emotion captured in MOP writing. The workshop also considered the issue of how each Directive is structured: Nickie reflected on the way in which having a question about eating animals after questions on pets highlighted potential tensions between emotional connection with one category of animals and killing and eating another category. As Rebekah Fox noted, this can create discomfort given that some may prefer to keep these categories distinct.

Given that most Directives cover two topics, Pru Hobson-West raised the question of whether one topic influences responses to the other. In reply, Mass Observation Projects Officer, Kirsty Patrick also stressed the role of the Archive in working to ensure that some more emotionally 'heavy' topics are paired with 'less heavy' topics, revealing the work of archivists in caring for their correspondents.

However, it is not always easy to predict which topics will be seen as more 'emotional'. Furthermore, Kirsty also reminded us of the way in which contemporary events or media discussion can impact on the topics raised by Observers themselves. For example, Anne-Marie Kramer queried whether responses to a Directive on 'Animals and Humans' sent out today, would be so silent on issues to do with climate change, species extinctions, and wider global environmental issues.

## 4. Relations

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The second theme of the workshop considered the question of relationality in terms of the kind of 'registers' used by Observers. For example, Observers may shift from a focus on the self, to acting as reporters on wider society. Renelle McGlacken gave a presentation reflecting on her early PhD analysis of the 2016 Directive 'Using animals in research'. In contrast to opinion polling which dominates the way publics are currently 'engaged' in the animal research debate in the UK (McGlacken 2019a), the MOP allows Observers to engage with the issue in more depth. However, the method also enables Observers to employ multiple registers. Mass Observers have been characterised as taking the role of 'citizen journalists' (Mass Observation, 2019), through which they report on the self and wider society, thus being both the observer the observed (Kramer, 2014). In thinking about how Observers' identities are shaped by each Directive, Renelle explored how the method allows multiple performances of the self, including patient, consumer, pet owner and citizen.

### *Observers as extraordinary*

Previous research on everyday life shows that people tend not to view their own lives as warranting research attention (Brownlie, 2019). However, by drawing on the work of Pollen (2014), Renelle reflected on the way in which Mass Observers can sometimes present themselves as non-ordinary or extra-ordinary. In this way, Observers separate or distance themselves from the image of the 'general public'. So, for example, in the 'Using animals for research' Directive, some Observers presented themselves as more thoughtful, reflexive or literate than their notion of the general public. Sometimes, this public was imagined as ignorant, emotional, or even dangerous, within the contentious landscape of animal research. This finds resonance in de Saille's idea of the unruly public (de Saille, 2014). By showing themselves as reflexive on this issue and therefore distinguished from the wider general public, Observers are arguably performing their own model of techno-political citizenship through their writings. Anne-Marie Kramer suggested that this may also be an example of Observers trying to articulate what is at stake in the animal research debate. Nickie Charles raised the question of whether, on this particular topic, some Observers may find it easier to perform this role as Observer of society, rather than providing a more personal account of their own relation to animal research. Taking up this idea, Rachel Hurdley reminded the workshop that, given Observers are a self-selecting cohort, they have already taken on the identity of being more thoughtful or rational than 'the general public' before they even 'set foot' in each Directive.

If this kind of analysis is correct, and Observers are performing multiple roles and registers, this can potentially present a challenge in how we explain our analysis to colleagues, who may hope or expect

that we ‘report public views’ from the MOP. Renelle also pointed to the further methodological challenge raised by academic norms around using data quotations during presentations (including during the workshop!). Given the multiplicity of accounts, identities, and relations performed throughout MO responses, choosing isolated quotes is arguably particularly problematic for MOP material.

### *Writing for whom?*

Prompted by a question from Julie Brownlie, the workshop discussion then moved on to discuss the broader question of Observer imaginaries of the Archive, and whether and how this impacts on relationality in the writing. Kirsty Pattrick discussed how Observers have multiple and different motivations for participating – for some it could be acting as reporters; for others it is the act of writing that appeals. Pru Hobson-West raised the possibility that this motivation could even differ between Directives; for example, an individual may adopt a very personal life-course style narrative when responding to a Directive on animals and humans; the same Observer, could then shift gears to act as social observer when discussing Brexit or animal research.

We then discussed that whilst Observers are writing for an archive, those who commission Directives come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and this has shifted over time, with an increase in social scientists more recently. Some of these commissioners have a desire to analyse responses to Directives in relation to the demographics of the correspondents as a group. Mass Observation requests limited information on identity and does not, for example, capture ethnicity or sexual orientation. Anne-Marie argued that this relative lack of identifying data can actually be extremely positive, in encouraging the analyst to ‘think differently’, and avoid reducing individuals to their ‘characteristics’. Indeed, Rachel Hurdley picked up on these points, and highlighted the significant ways in which the MOP challenges fundamental ideas about social science research, and what it means to ‘write up data’. She contrasted a sometimes reductive tendency with the original hopes for Mass Observation, including the notion of writing ‘by historians of the present for an imagined future’. This links closely to the final broad theme of temporality, as we now discuss.

## 5. Temporality

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Whilst the notion of history is essential to the concept of an archive, here we wished to explore how Observers themselves deal with the temporal, for example in using narrative to reflect back on memories of their own childhoods, and how this may be implicitly or explicitly entangled with societal memory of particular events. Anne-Marie gave her reflections on this topic as a presentation, including her experience of commissioning and analysing the 2008 Directive on ‘Family History’. She made the point that whilst analyses of MO can provide useful insights into experiences on a specific topic (such as human-animal relations), the data can also tell us something broader about what it is like to ‘live in the world’ at a particular moment, and how people view the relationship between past and current worlds.

### *What is an Archive?*

Anne-Marie encouraged the workshop to think about the materiality of the Mass Observation Archive; it is a physical place (The Keep), with a particular arrangement of artefacts. She also discussed the significant shift, from a time period in which submissions were handwritten, to today, when most (but definitely not all) of Observers send in their reflections on word processed documents and via email. In this shift, Anne-Marie argued that 'we have lost something', in terms of individuality of pen use, handwriting and so on, and thus that the analyst doesn't get to see 'how things are crafted' and recrafted.

Whilst it may be tempting to see archives as orientating to the past, Anne-Marie also reminded us of their future orientation: In short, Mass Observation as an archive is unfinished, and could therefore be seen as embodying a kind of utopian commitment to the future. This writing 'for the future' may be unconscious or unacknowledged by the Observers, but sometimes it is made explicit.

### *History, memory and Archive*

As noted previously, several of the workshop participants gave examples of the way in which contemporary events or news stories can impact on the content and tone of Observer writing; for example in the 'Using animals in research' Directive, topics of President Trump, Brexit, and democracy are raised. As Rachel Hurdley pointed out, the time in which the reading is happening is also crucial.

For example, she discussed the way in which contemporary reference to categories such as 'the interwar years' is insufficient to capture what it was actually like to live in that period, when Observers responding to a 1937 Directive did not have the benefit of hindsight about the dramatic events that were to come. As discussed under theme 1, the accounts of those who did not know what was coming next, can, for the contemporary reader, be an emotional experience (McGlacken blog, 2019b). As wonderfully summarised by Rachel Hurdley, the MOA is 'history with a pulse'.

Harris (2012) has discussed the tension between history as durable, evidenced and rational, versus history as memory, implying fluidity, narrative and partiality. According to Anne-Marie, Mass Observation writing does both of these simultaneously. Crucially, things are even more complex, in that Observers are also reflecting on the partiality or particularity of their own memories. For example, in the 2008 'Family History' Directive, Observers made reference to that fact that other Observers' accounts may be different to their own submissions. As well as recounting their memories, however, some also talk about the process of memory itself, and how this relates to the more formal version of history. In the 2014 'World War I' Directive, for example, Anne-Marie Kramer cited one Observer as asking 'whose history is it?' This hints at the wider, very topical debate in public history (Tosh 2008) about the extent to which 'ordinary people' are historians themselves, and thus are part of the so-called democratisation of history.

The workshop also discussed history in terms of issues of life-course, and how Observers across the Directives can be seen to reflect on their age, or, for example, on how their 'views' may have shifted over time. For example, Renelle McGlacken and Pru Hobson-West talked about the 'Using animals in research' Directive, and how some Observers reflect on their own life experiences, including

childhood, or their need for medicines, as impacting on their relationship with the topic. Nickie Charles likened this to the 'Animals and Humans' Directive, and differences between older people's accounts of how animals were treated and killed, versus younger Observers. Finally, following Vanessa May (2017), Julie Brownlie suggested it would be useful for analysts to be sensitive to whether older Observers express the feeling that they somehow have less right to engage, or are seen to have less stake in, the future.

## 6. Conclusions

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Once the workshop had concluded, participants reflected again on the value of the MOP, and the importance of the Archive for social scientists and other scholars. In particular, we discussed the need to respect the particularity of the MOP format, and the data generated, in all its richness. The primary aim of this workshop was to focus on what analysis can illuminate about the complexity and contingency of relationships between humans and animals. Indeed, the workshop proved to be a useful space for this, in bringing together several themes of our research. However, as anticipated, our discussions also tackled much broader conceptual questions about the nature of data, the complexity of categories like 'public', the role and responsibility of the analyst, the role and experiences of those who contribute to archives, and even the nature of history itself. We hope that this report serves as the starting point for these debates to continue, and as the catalyst for future conversations with other colleagues and wider stakeholders.

## 7. Acknowledgements

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