Reviewing Mass-Observation: The Archive and its Researchers Thirty Years on

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Abstract

The papers resulting from the 1930s social research organisation, "Mass-Observation" were established as a public archive at the University of Sussex in the early 1970s. Since then they have attracted a steadily increasing number of researchers not only from within the academic community (from art history, social history, anthropology, psychology, sociology, media and cultural studies and literature) but also from the wider community (film, TV and radio programme makers, journalists, community workers, oral and local historians, novelists, playwrights and artists, photographers and documentarists, teachers and school students). This more recent use of materials which were originally collected for other purposes at other times has been substantial. As a result, the Mass-Observation Archive can be seen as a prime example of the ways in which social research data can be re-evaluated within new research frameworks, in response to new formulations of research questions, and even within entirely new methodological paradigms. This paper briefly describes the Archive and the history of its (secondary) exploitation.

URN: urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0003266

Keywords

mass-observation; secondary use; social history; archive

Full Text:

HTML, PDF

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-1.3.1043

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Mass-Observation was a United Kingdom social research organisation founded in 1937. Their work ended in the mid-1960s but was revived in 1981. The Archive is housed at the University of Sussex. Mass-Observation aimed to record everyday life in Britain through a panel of around 500 untrained volunteer observers who either maintained diaries or replied to open-ended questionnaires (known as directives). They also paid investigators to anonymously record people's conversation and behaviour at work, on