

**Using Mass-Observation Sources for Rethinking the Study of Appeasement and the Munich Crisis**

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**Introduction to M-O and Context**

Nineteen thirty seven was a significant year in the development of political technology, with a number of developments in the social sciences. These were a response to the real and perceived public hunger for ways and means to express its opinion. British Gallup, also known as BIPO, was launched in 1937. At almost the exact same time, another bold experiment in social science surveying, Mass-Observation, was launched. While they were both trying to do much the same thing-- empower the public and public opinion outside election time-- BIPO and Mass-Observation quickly developed a rivalry based on their different methodologies. Indeed, Mass-Observation’s “deployment of statistic to illustrate fluctuations of opinion before and during the Munich Crisis would not have satisfied expert pollsters then and does not bear close examination now…Its organisers later realised that M-O’s real strength lay in other techniques, ‘qualitative’ rather than ‘quantitative’, and began to proclaim high-minded scorn of polls.” (Calder, intro., 1986, pp. ix-x)

There were, of course, precedents for both. Already in the late 19th century there had been major surveys of the poor, such as Rowntree’s study of York etc. In the 1930s too there were various projects that sought to record and give voice to the poor, the downtrodden, the working class, and the voiceless. These included George Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1936), John Grierson’s documentary film movement, the Left Book Club, and the Penguin Specials. “Mass-Observation was part of a broad movement, typified by Orwell, of conscience-stricken middle-class intellectuals trying, in days of wide unemployment, to meet and understand the working class.”[[1]](#footnote-1) What all of these endeavours shared was widespread public concern with the threat to liberal and democratic values, with the belief that the best way to meet these threats was by enhancing public consciousness. “While it is easy now to look askance at the brash empiricism and breezy optimism of these kinds of statements, the basic undertaking has to be seen as healthy in an era of reactionary press barons and the BBC’s redoubtable first Director-General [Sir John Reith].”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Mass-Observation was a research movement with the aim of conducting an ‘anthropology of ourselves’, which meant a documentary study of the everyday life of the British people. It was founded to document popular life and belief and contribute to the democratisation of sociological knowledge. The intention therefore was to turn the anthropological gaze onto the home and the self, and away from the exotic and the faraway, such as studies of the South Seas or the African interior. The Mass-Observation project worked on the assumption that different social classes generally lived in ignorance of each other and that those above them in the class structure knew virtually nothing of the life and culture of the British working class. M-O worked to challenge prejudice, fear, and hostility that this mutual ignorance seemed to foster.

Mass Observation was founded by three men from different disciplinary backgrounds: Charles Madge (1912-1996) who was a surrealist poet and journalist; Tom Harrisson (1911-76) who was an ornithologist turned anthropologist; and Humphrey Jennings (1907-1950) who was a surrealist painter and filmmaker. Both Harrison and Madge were Cambridge drop-outs. This might at first seem like a strange partnership, especially with the blurring of the disciplinary boundaries between the arts and the social sciences, but these men had a shared vision. What they shared was a critical concern with the prevalence of rumour, superstition, gossip, and what they called “mass wish-situations” in popular life, particularly with regard to the responses people made to national and international events.

They were particularly concerned with the influence of the press (the media) and its role in manipulating rather than reflecting or leading public opinion. Both government and the press were seen as colluding in a conspiracy of silence and disinformation with regards to national and international crises. Rather than educate the public, the founders of Mass Observation discerned that the government and the press reinforced ignorance, fear and fed hunger for myth-fulfilment among large sections of the population. The press in particular was regarded as having blatantly failed in two of its main functions within the democratic process: (1) first, the press neglected to represent a broad spectrum of public opinion in any reasonably accurate way. (2) the press failed to provide the populace with factual knowledge of affairs of state sufficient to produce a well-informed electorate. Furthermore, the impetus behind this sort of social investigation was fundamentally anti-fascist.

Mass-Observation’s aspirations to inform the public and provide a voice for the people was highlighted by one of its most significant publications, *Britain by Mass-Observation*, published as a Penguin Special in January 1939. The first part of this book is an extended analysis of public opinion in Britain in the late 1930s. What the authors stressed was

* The need for factual information about national and international affairs
* The voicelessness of the bulk of the population in these affairs
* The contrast in this regard between those with privileged access to the means of mass communication, a communications power elite, and the mass of the population
* The desire among the voiceless for social and political knowledge: “Fact is urgent… we are cogs in a vast and complicated machine which may turn out to be an infernal machine that is going to blow us all to smithereens.”(p.8)
* The intention of their surveys was “to give both ear and voice to what the millions are feeling and doing under the shadow of these terrific events” (p.9) of international politics and the danger of war.

M-O did not necessarily believe that the people were not ready for war, but they saw how the agents of social and political control, namely the government and the press, were engendering a sense of hopelessness, apathy, and despair: “as the danger of war comes nearer, so are people less able to admit it, partly through their own wish-thinking, partly through the increasing scarcity of facts.” (p. 57) So what we can see here is that not only did M-O have aspirations to document, to collect and collate social scientific data which was of use for the present and for posterity, but they saw their work as a necessary component of the democratic process itself.

How did Mass-Observation work? What methods did it develop? From the outset you will notice how different its method was from opinion polling on the other hand, and even from the work of ethnographers and anthropologists who had also sought to survey the poor since the latter part of the 19th century. With M-O, their first step was to recruit a body of volunteers, Mass-Observers, from all walks of life who would send in regularly produced personal observations and accounts. These observers would also respond to focused surveys of specific topics or events. The main idea was that these studies would be of the people and by the people. “

“From the outset Mass-Observation collected more material than it could analyse. By the end of the first year the monthly day surveys had amassed over two million words from nearly 600 individuals, most of them recruited via the *New Statesman*, and Madge, lacking the staff to analyse this torrent of material, ran down the day surveys in favour of ‘directives’ designed to probe particular issues. During the Munich crisis Harrisson joined Madge in London, deploying a team of volunteers to monitor public reactions and exposing the gulf, comparable to that which had triggered the formation of Mass-Observation in the abdication crisis two years earlier, between press representations of public opinion (supportive of Chamberlain) and the more critical ‘private opinion’ of ordinary people. Their findings were published in January 1939 in the best-selling Penguin Special, Britain by Mass-Observation, alongside essays on popular leisure derived from the work in Bolton and London.” (James Hinton, DNB entry on M-O)

Mass-Observation was a brave and energetic endeavour, and it was relevant at the time in providing the wider public with new outlets and new means of expression, even if what M-O surveys often tended to reveal was the degree of public ignorance and the depth of prejudices-- racial, gender, political, and class. As important as the impact of their work at the time is the long-term importance of M-O material. Indeed, what is revealed by M-O records could not be more spot-on for what we are trying to do, namely reconstruct a people’s history of the Munich Crisis and the coming of the Second World War.

Mass-Observation has become an indispensable archive for anyone interested in the pre-war and war years. The archive was established at the University of Sussex in 1970, and it is also available in digitized form <http://www.massobs.org.uk/the-archive>. However, before we become too idealistic about M-O as a project and its archival potential, it is worth tracing the organisation’s history a little further. During the war itself, and under pressure, Tom Harrisson placed M-O at the disposal of the government—the Ministry of Information-- and the resulting study of civilian morale and public response to the Blitz represented a narrowing of documentary concern and purpose. Not least this shift of purpose led Charles Madge to leave M-O in 1940, seeing the organisation’s wartime subservience to the state as “a sort of home-front espionage.” He was uncomfortable with that, and we can see the paradox of such a turn given M-O’s founding principles. After the war itself, Tom Harrisson too dropped out, and M-O was transformed again into a commercial enterprise, a market research organisation.

It would regenerate again as an academic project in the 1980s, and it is still an active social research organisation and registered charity in the care of the University of Sussex. There are over 600 Mass Observers writing for Mass Observation across the country recording their daily lives and responding to directives. Annually, on 12th May, Mass Observation also holds a national diary day, which attracts lots of diaries from schools and the wider community. To enquire about becoming a Mass Observer, or about taking part in 12th May, visit: <http://www.massobs.org.uk/write-for-us/become-a-mass-observer>

<http://www.massobs.org.uk/write-for-us/12th-may>

Back to the 1930s, M-O came in for a fair bit of criticism. It is worth looking at some reviews of their work, and especially reviews of their radio inquiry “They Speak for Themselves” which was aired in June, 1939. The *Manchester Guardian’s* radio critic made the following assessment:

“Furthermore, and at the root of the whole business, does mass observation in any case find out anything at all? If so the broadcast on Thursday is not revealing. A typical question asked of many people was: ‘What have you on your mantelpiece?; well, what have you? And when you have answered, then what? Again, Mr Harrisson and Mr Madge seem to have decided that during the anxious days of last September the ‘Lambeth Walk’ was ‘the safety-valve of the crisis time.’ With all respect this, as a general conclusion, is just fiddlesticks. It is at this point that the whole thing becomes rather impertinent, One remembers the fathers, mothers, husbands and wives probably wracked with anxiety putting a brave face upon it, but finding release in the Lambeth Walk, no. There was nothing in the broadcast that one could not in any case have told Mr Harrisson and Mr Madge without ever having ‘observed’ before. And when this method has done its utmost, the answer is still ‘So what?’.” (“Review of Broadcasting: ‘They Speak for Themselves’—Mass Observations,” *Manchester Guardian*, 3 June, 1939.)

But before we allow our cynicism to set in, for the period we are looking at M-O was an important experiment and one with radical motivations. Mass-Observation aimed to be radically innovative, both in terms of method and content. Both Madge and Jennings felt that it would create “a new kind of literature, arising out of the combined involvement of trained and lay observers, artists, and scientists, poets and sociologists. Mass Observation was an experiment in an all-embracing popular form of sociological enquiry, ‘the anthropology of ourselves’…The ‘observation of everyone by everyone, including themselves’ was a new and genuinely democratic tendency in social research.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Furthermore, one of the unintended consequences of the Mass-Observation method was to empower women.[[4]](#footnote-4) Madge had claimed that the one of M-O’s aims was to give a voice to those people in Britain who had been deprived of effective forms of expression and communication. He was, of course, thinking primarily in class terms, and at the outset there was no special effort made to attract women, another ‘silent’ category of the population.

M-O certainly offers a great deal of texture and unparalleled insight into how people were thinking and feeling: an INSIDE history, and insider’s history, of the Munich Crisis, if you like. Now to turn to examples of how Mass-Observers have left us with a brilliant ‘affective’ archive of the Munich Crisis, a People’s History of the coming of war. [[5]](#footnote-5)

1. *Britain by Mass-Observation*, New Introduction by Angus Calder (Edinburgh, 1986), intro., p.xiii. Originally published as Tome Harrison and Charles Madge, *Britain by Mass-Observation* (Penguin, 1939) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Michael Pickering, David Chaney, Democracy and Communication: Mass Observation 1937–1943, Journal of Communication, Volume 36, Issue 1, March 1986, Pages 41–56, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1986.tb03038.x [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Pickering and Chaney, p. 54 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Julie V. Gottlieb, *‘Guilty Women’, Foreign Policy and Appeasement in Inter-war Britain* (London, 2015) and (ed.) Dorothy Sheridan, *Wartime Women: A Mass-Observation Anthology, 1937-45* (London: 2000) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. We could also cite new ‘Listener Research’ conducted by the BBC from September 1937, using a panel of 2,000 licence holders chosen by random sample. While BBC listeners were being surveyed for their listening habits and consumption of musical entertainment, the use of this kind of surveying method is significant, and the way market research was being applied to this national monopoly corporation. The BBC launched an “inquiry… for the purpose of discovering the views of the listening public on certain controversial points concerned with programmes… Out of about 50,000 listeners who expressed willingness to keep logs of their listening the BBC chose 2,000, to whom log sheets were forwarded to be filled in and returned weekly.” (“Listening Time,” *Manchester Guardian*, 25 Jan., 1938)

What the BBC did do at the end of 1938 was broadcast unnamed men and women reflecting on the recent crisis. I don’t have the broadcasts themselves to share with you, but what I do have is a report on the radio programme from the Listener, the popular radio magazine. The report tells us that 15 ‘regular’ people gave their views and reflections on the September crisis:

“Their statements taken together made up a series which must have been to many, as it was to me, a memorable thing. The mere fact that people of such varied outlook were able and willing to declare their convictions on such a subject may prove to be a significant thing in the history of Public Opinion: a significant thing, and surely a good thing. The Munich Conference, and all that led up to it, is going to be reckoned, somebody said, as a great good or a great evil, not so much on its own merits as upon what our Government, and all of us, do now. What we, the ordinary men and women of England, felt about the Crisis then, makes a difference to what we do and say now; and that may make the gravest of all differences, the difference between peace and war. By listening, each man was led to ask himself where he stood. It must have helped everyone to stop drifting in the wake of his favourite newspaper without a single view that he could honestly call his own. And it was good also that these broadcast views should have been at first hearing so different: different not so much toward the immediate issue of Czechoslovakia, but towards the great questions of Peace and War and our Duty. One or two speakers welcomed the thought of War as a tonic: one admitted he had a moment of blind fury and a desire to vent his spleen on an enemy: one was an out-and-out Pacifist. Many wanted peace at any price—‘almost any price’, they added… There was something impressive in this variety. Would a foreign observer have taken it as a sign of weakness or disunion? Possibly: and some people here might, I suppose, tend to think the same. How ominous that on the brink of war men were so divided in their attitude. What should we fight for? And should we fight at all? Anyhow what ought I to do? As one speaker put it: ‘Had England gone soft?’ No! That would be a mistaken conclusion. Consider the alternative. Suppose every one of these fifteen speakers had said very much the same thing: if they had all said ‘Thank God for Peace; thank God for Mr Chamberlain.’ And left it at that: or, if they had all said, ‘We should have gone to war; we ought to be fighting now. Honour comes first.’ There are many countries where that kind of unanimity is the only thin allowed in public…Variety of views shows also something else: it shows sincerity, It is not easy to be sincere in public on a great theme like this…But from these fifteen testimonies I had the impression that every speaker had tried with all his might to say the truth as he saw it, to let no veil of convention, or sentiment about ‘what one was expected to say,’ stand between him and his real convictions.” (“Everyman and the Crisis: An Observer Sums Up,” The Listener, 8 December, 1938.)

What we see here then are a number of different ways in which public opinion was being surveyed and mined, and how it was being broadcast and disseminated. Much was also made of the fact that the willingness on the part of government agencies, as was the BBC as a state monopoly, did represent a plurality of opinion, and the strength and depth of anti-war or anti-militarist feeling. This kind of broadcast seemed to be strong evidence that Britain was democratic, and certainly more so than the dictatorships. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)