**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Prior to the pandemic the Mass-Observation Project maintained a national panel of self-selecting, regular volunteer writers, often known as ‘correspondents’ or ‘observers’. Since 1981 the project has generated contemporary narrative material on everyday life in Britain, people’s thoughts, opinions, and experiences.

In March 2020, the Mass-Observation Archive launched an appeal for diaries and writing created during the pandemic by people living in the UK. This was open to everyone, not just those associated with the Mass-Observation Archive or signed up to be a Mass-Observation Project correspondent.

**Please be aware that narratives were submitted in an unprecedented situation and writers did not always observe the usual guidelines around anonymity provided by the Mass-Observation Project.**

**What is in the COVID-19 collection?**

Narrative material in the form of diaries and responses to open questionnaires (known as directives). It also includes visual material such as photographs and artwork.

* **Directive responses**

A directive is an open questionnaire sent to our regular panel of correspondents. It is made up of 2-3 topics such as COVID-19 and time or Black Lives Matter. Directives are produced in Spring, Summer and Autumn and sent to our panel by e-mail or post. Topics are generated in collaboration with non-commercial researchers or developed in-house.

The correspondents respond with narratives written reflectively in their own space and time, sharing as little or as much as they wish. The length and format of the responses therefore vary. As volunteers it is optional for them to respond.

* **Diaries**

Mass Observation instigated an open call for diaries. This included submissions from those not registered on our panel.

The diaries are catalogued by month and range from a few pages to 800+.

* **12th May day-diaries**

Since 2010 Mass-Observation has issued an annual open-call for day diaries. The 12th May is an important date for Mass-Observation as in 1937 it was their first full-scale study to document the Coronation of King George. It resulted in the publication *May the Twelfth*.

12th May 2020 took place at the height of lockdown and therefore ‘struck-a-chord' with people. It appealed as a chance to document history, an activity for some, a distraction for many and a home-schooling task for a lot of children and young people.

* **Biographical information**

Mass-Observation collects basic biographical information from writers on the national panel and has an optional form to capture data on disability, religion, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

For those who contributed 12th May diaries and those who responded to the Open Call for submissions during the pandemic (not correspondents with an MO number) there is basic biographical information available.

**Who contributes to Mass-Observation?**

Correspondents contribute for various reasons. For many, it is the appeal of writing for history (a compelling reason for those who joined during the pandemic), for others it’s a writing hobby, to contribute to research and to be a voice that’s one of many.

“*It is calming, makes you use your brain and gives a sense of purpose*.”

(H1771, Why I Write, 2020)

People often come across Mass-Observation through a range of routes. This includes the edited wartime diaries, radio programmes, their own study or community engagement activities.

**Anonymity and Trust**

Like early Mass-Observation the writers remain anonymous aside from key biographical data. There is a relationship of trust which has been nurtured between Mass-Observation and its regular correspondents. The narratives are therefore candid and intimate in their nature, unlike those generated from other research methods such as survey or interview.

**How was the data catalogued?**

Contributors to the Mass-Observation Project (material with a reference that starts SxMOA2) are requested to provide extended biographical information. This has been included in the database. This level of information is not required for participation in the 12th May 2020 (SxMOA33) project, however, where provided this data has been captured. This is also the case for those who responded to Mass-Observation's Open Call for submissions during the pandemic (SxMOA59).

The 12th May 2020 collection was catalogued in 2020 before the metadata schema for this project was created. The original catalogue has been retro-converted into this scheme and it has not been possible to record information for every field. Therefore, some fields remain blank.

**Date received**

When possible, the catalogue includes the date the narrative was received, either by post or by email, at the Archive. As with many places of work in the UK, Mass-Observation staff were instructed to work from home during the national lockdowns, and when certain restrictions were in place. During these times it was not always possible for us to record the date a postal response arrived at the Archive. In these instances, we have recorded the date we processed the response.

**Keywords**

The material in the COVID-19 collection has been catalogued using a list of keywords created as part of the project following research into different thesauri, controlled vocabularies and material related to COVID-19.

These keywords have been selected to reflect terms and concepts that had arisen over the course of the pandemic, and also to capture other subjects covered in Directive and 12 May Diary responses. They are a combination of terms taken from: HASSET (the Humanities and Social Science Electronic Thesaurus); FAST (Faceted Application of Subject Terminology) derived from the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH); bespoke terms, including those related to COVID-19.

Bespoke terms were developed where necessary, as HASSET and other thesauri offered no granularity at the time for COVID-19.

Advice and guidance were provided by Dr Kathryn Lester and Dr Justyna Robinson (Project Team).

Responses will have been assigned a particular keyword if the writer has made a substantive reference to the topic.

**Redactions**

To protect the identity of those contributing to Mass-Observation we have used the redaction tool in Adobe to redact the following information:

* The name of the author
* Full date of birth
* Full address. Further redactions may be made if the place provided is particularly identifiable
* Place of work
* Full names of other people mentioned in the diary

Other redactions may have been made on a case-by-case basis. Information about redactions made is included in the catalogue (excluding 12th May collection). The Mass-Observation Archive can be contacted for more details [link to email: [moa@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:moa@sussex.ac.uk)]

**Please be aware that narratives were submitted in an unprecedented situation and writers did not always observe the usual guidelines around anonymity provided by the Mass-Observation Project.**

Visit ‘Using the Narrative Material’ to find out more about how we protect the identity of the Mass Observation writers.