The 2020 historical research lecture: writing histories of 2020: first responses and early perspectives

Article  (Accepted Version)


This version is available from Sussex Research Online: http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/95058/

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher’s version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:
Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.
In May 2020 the Mass-Observation Archive asked members of the public to record a day in their life for posterity. The ‘May the twelfth’ diary was inaugurated back in 1937 when Mass-Observation recruited a group of what it called ‘ordinary hard-working folk’, to record the details of their lives on the 12th of every month. This was to lead up to a record of everyday life on a particular day: 12th May 1937 – the date set for King George VI’s coronation. An anthology containing over two hundred of these accounts was published later that year and offered an account of coronation day that was markedly more complex than those offered by the national press. It was out of these day surveys that Mass-Observation’s more widely known wartime diaries and directives emerged; indeed these had replaced the May the twelfth diaries by the time the Second World War had started. It was not until 2010 that the ‘new’ Mass-Observation Project revived the 12th May Diary idea and it has since made the call on a yearly basis. 12th May 2020 marked the tenth anniversary of the re-animated Project.

The 12th May 2020 was a Tuesday and it should have been an ordinary working day for most of us. Yet this particular May the twelfth was, as one of the diarists explained, ‘anything but ordinary’. ‘As we post this call the UK is in lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic’ the Archive staff had explained the previous month, ‘We don’t know how life will be on the 12th May, but we would like your help to document it. Please tell your family and friends. It will be valuable to have a collection from people of all ages across the UK.’

Potential contributors were asked to send electronic copies, if at all possible, because the Archive itself was closed. Schoolchildren and community groups were specifically encouraged to get involved. In an acknowledgement of the difficulties many parents faced over these months it was suggested that ‘This may be an activity for children and families during this time of home working and home schooling. Diaries can be written in any style and can include drawings.’

The 12th May Diary Project was not the only method through which Mass-Observation hoped to collate reflections on, and experiences of, Covid-19. Its regular panel of volunteer writers - who respond to thrice-yearly open-ended questionnaires called directives - were

---

1 Mass-Observation material is used by permission of the Mass-Observation Trustees. I would particularly like to thank Jessica Scantlebury, the Mass-Observation supervisor, for making these materials available to me.
4 MOA, 12th May Diary 2020, no. 221.
5 http://www.massobs.org.uk/write-for-us/12th-may
6 Ibid.
also asked to contribute. A week before a UK-wide lockdown was announced in March 2020, the Archive team wrote to its panel: ‘It is an unprecedented time and as with previous events in Mass-Observation’s history, we would like you to capture this in your writing.’ A few gentle prompts about what might be covered were offered. It was suggested that the writers might report on their experiences of the virus, on any protective measures they were taking, on whether their shopping habits had changed, on what their favoured news sources were and on how they viewed the government response. In a reflection of Mass Observation’s status as an emotional community, as well as a research project, the team added, ‘We are aware that for many of you the isolation will be very hard and will be thinking of you all.’ More detailed questions followed. The Spring 2020 Directive included a ‘Covid19 (update)’ with questions on health, the government, news, home and work life, technology, shopping and food, entertainment and leisure, personal hygiene and sleep. ‘Have you had any interesting dreams?’ the panellists were asked, reflecting a line of questioning also evident in Mass-Observation’s mid-century manifestation. The Summer 2020 Directive framed questions around both Black Lives Matter and ‘Covid-19 and Time’. The latter questions focused on the rhythm and routine of the day, homelife, media and technology and the concept and experience of ‘waiting’; the former asked about the killing of George Floyd, the BLM movement and the toppling of the Edward Colston statue in Bristol.

Panel responses to these open-ended questionnaires offer scholars a way of examining the rapidly changing circumstances of 2020 as experienced in real time and across social groups. The contributors range in age from primary school children to the quite elderly; each offering distinctive perspectives on a crisis that has drawn particular attention to generational difference. A 9-year-old boy wrote:

I live with my mummy and daddy and I love music. I am half happy with the lockdown and half not because I’m enjoying missing school but it is also very awkward to do social distancing. My toy monkey sometimes keeps me from going mad, which is helpful because of this crazy lockdown! I’m interested in saving the environment.

A retired GP in her 70s was helping to coordinate shopping deliveries and relief measures for her village neighbours: ‘My next task is working with a local befriending service to train more volunteers to provide a telephone counselling service.’ Some of those who wrote were furloughed, some had lost their jobs; many were working at home, others had no choice but to continue going out to work. Their reports will provide future historians with a source that combines experience and attitude, reportage and feeling, often with a self-

---

8 Ibid.
10 There are frequent references to dreams in the day diaries of 1937, a request for dream diaries in August 1939, a further request for accounts of war dreams in August 1940, and for a one-month war dream diary in July 1942. Dream-questions were also posed in the January 1949 directive. The Keep, East Sussex, Sx MOA 1/3/1-13, day surveys 1937; SxMOA1/3/34, directive August 1939; SxMOA1/3/43, directive August 1940; SxMOA1/3/58, directive July 1942; SxMOA1/5/117 directive January 1949.
12 MOA, 12th May Diary 2020, no. 391.
13 MOA, 12th May Diary 2020, no. 108.
consciously historicised framing. The diaries will help historians understand the meanings and significance of the events of 2020 for those who lived through it.

Mass-Observation was not, and is not, the only organisation collecting experiential accounts of the pandemic of course. Perhaps more than any moment in the last fifty years, the present crisis has driven a commitment to, and plethora of, everyday record-keeping and creative record-making that transcends national borders. This is perhaps surprising given the difficulties of organising such practices during lockdown, but collection practices have been fuelled by a sense of living through one of the folds in history, and facilitated by the shift to online living. UKRI research funding for Covid-19-related projects reflects this sense of urgency; universities, community groups, archives and museums have thrown themselves into creative online data gathering practices, with life writing a popular mode of response.

Hannah Flint of The Centre for Narrative Research at the University of East London has compiled a list of those pandemic-related projects that are focused on generating and collating records of feeling, observation and experience. Some of these represent a repurposing or extension of existing activities; some are new projects that have developed in direct response to current events; some foreground particular expertise or are targeted at specific groups whilst others are open to all-comers.

Universities have provided one focus for the collation of Covid-19 stories. Sociologists at Edinburgh quickly established the ‘Edinburgh Decameron: Lockdown Sociology at Work Project’: ‘It is important to acknowledge and record these terrible times, to engage – both as human beings and as sociologists – with the effect of the coronavirus pandemic’. The reference here to academic identity (‘as sociologists’) and a wider identity (‘as human beings’) is interesting, speaking, perhaps, to the ways in which the crisis has exacerbated the blurring of work and non-work - conceptually, as well as temporally and spatially. The ‘Coronavirus Lost and Found Archive’ provides more evidence of this complexity. As its founder, Rebecca Adelman of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County explains, ‘I didn’t start this archive as a researcher. I created it simply because I wanted a place for people’s stories of losing and finding to live, somewhere they could be shared, housed, and publicly acknowledged.’ The Archive provides a digital home for the sadness and kindness of pandemic life; allowing losses and gains of all shapes and sizes to be shared and acknowledged, grieved and celebrated.

Creativity permeates many Covid-19 projects. The Oxford Centre for Life Writing sent monthly prompts to those participating in its ‘Life-writing of Immeasurable Events’ project. These were designed to ‘open up possibilities to the imagination by encouraging people to share what they are doing, feeling, experiencing, in these strange times.’ In April, for example, people were asked to ‘notice things’: ‘Little things, ordinary things, the familiar things you see and use every day. Or unexpected things…Or the absence of things…New

14 https://centrefornarrativeresearch.wordpress.com/2020/07/07/narrative-projects-relating-to-covid-19/?fbclid=IwAR1eQu2TBuYOxMrfhEeqU9EV3dfIb4Vjc5wyb7pib-MN1ATLcMrBpu1-QYyA
15 https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/ed-decameron
16 https://pandemicarchive.com/about/
17 https://pandemicarchive.com/
18 https://oclw.web.ox.ac.uk/immeasurable-events#:~:text=Life%2DWriting%20of%20Immeasurable%20Events%20(LIVE%20for%20short)%20is,of%20the%20visible%20and%20measurable.
things: vegetable boxes hastily assembled, books delivered by a neighbour and placed in quarantine beside the front door.' \(^{19}\) Some museums have mobilised life history for other forms of creativity. The ‘Letters of Constraint’ project at the National Justice Museum in Nottingham, has put individual accounts of isolation to work in the creation of an audio art work. \(^{20}\) There are also projects that have set about archiving everyday visual creativity. ‘Word on the Street’ – established by a team of design historians – has been crowd-sourcing photographs of ‘posters, illustrations and graffiti in situ.’ \(^{21}\) These include, of course, the home-made rainbows and Black Lives Matter posters that adorned very many windows during lockdown. An interactive map places these ‘in-situ’ photographs in their geographical location. Others have focused on what might come next: the ‘Post-Corona Letters’ project at the University of Twente in the Netherlands asked its participants to offer their own hopes and expectations of the future. \(^{22}\)

The very different ways in which the pandemic has been experienced by individuals and groups has also inspired projects that have sought out the stories of particular communities. Examples include the International Disability Alliance’s ‘Voices of People with Disabilities During the COVID19 Outbreak’ project and UNESCOs ‘My Covid-19 Story’ youth project. \(^{23}\) And different groups, and particularly different generations, have used different formats to articulate their specific experiences, sometimes re-purposing existing forums to respond to the present. TikTok has offered a particularly rich, and often acutely funny, insight into the everyday experiences of young people during the crisis; other forms of online connection – zoom for example – have been adapted for new purposes such as family quizzes, pub nights with friends and remote tarot readings.

The history of everyday life during Covid-19 will be a history of other objects, sounds and practices too. It will be a history of masks and PPE, of supermarket delivery vans, and of birdsong and it will reflect on the events that gave rise to the global anti-racist marches, as well as examining the anti-lockdown protests. Historians will attend to new traditions such as, in the UK, the Thursday evening clap for carers; and new global communities such as the surprisingly successful ‘PE with Joe Wicks’ phenomenon. They will also explore the impact of collective anxiety on individual practices – whether in the stockpiling of toilet roll, or the quest for flour and yeast. All of these will find their way into archives of Covid-19 life; a sense of loss for the apparent normality of a very recent everyday driving a desire to record an unstable present that bears little resemblance to that which we might have anticipated. As one diarist puts it: ‘I never imagined that masks, gloves and an empty high street would be the new normal in 2020, and not the hover cars of our childhood expectations.’ \(^{24}\)

In the final part of this short paper I want to explore what an initial reading of some of the 12\(^{th}\) May diaries suggests about writing histories of 2020. In particular I want to explore how the diarists themselves conceive of history and temporality in these times. My reflections

\(^{19}\) https://oclw.web.ox.ac.uk/article/five-things

\(^{20}\) https://www.nationaljusticemuseum.org.uk/lettersofconstraint/

\(^{21}\) https://www.wordonthestreetcollection.uk/


\(^{24}\) MOA, 12\(^{th}\) May Diary 2020, no. 106.
are necessarily partial and UK focused: the question of critical distance is an important one and raises the question of when we might write the history of these times. The Mass-Observation material also raises other questions: about how we weigh macro and micro sources; about how the individual, ‘community’, the local and the national intersect; and about the role of transnational ideas, and transnational feelings, in framing global responses.

The day diaries were written as the United Kingdom entered its seventh week of lockdown. If a sense of historical significance had spurred Mass-Observation’s curation of everyday experience in the 1930s and 40s, the 2020 context seemed to make recording the minutiae of everyday life just as vital. As one contributor explained: ‘I am writing this under very unusual and exceptional circumstances. It may be limited in experience, but I am sure you will understand, whether you lived through it yourself, or are reading it at a later date.’ In 2019, Mass-Observation had received 224 replies to its 12th May appeal. In 2020 it received over 5,000.

Many diarists were convinced that what was happening would have long-term historical significance. Not infrequently, there was a self-conscious assertion of the importance of writing about the present for an imagined audience of future historians. To a historical profession under concerted attack this does, perhaps, offer reassurance that what we do has a future. As a Glasgow woman put it: ‘I want this diary to matter to future historians of our times. I feel I speak as a mother and a world citizen. There’s so much else to say but I need to stop and work.’ In this respect some of the material has a similar feel to Mass-Observation’s Second World War diaries, perhaps because those earlier diaries offer a model for life writing in difficult times.

When looking at the 12th May diaries, the sense of living through History is palpable but also elusive. A 26-year-old Londoner confided that ‘It’s odd, you always feel like you’d feel the difference when something historical is happening around you, but instead normal life goes on.’ The double use of ‘feel’ here is suggestive of the multiple and ambiguous meanings of the term. For a university researcher in Leeds, ‘the thing that bothers me most is a sense of living through a time of such rapid change and disruption, and feeling that I have so little of use to contribute.’ And of course ‘history’ did a lot of work in 2020, whether in the harnessing of VE Day, the valorisation of the NHS or in responses to the removal of the statues of slave owners. Nonetheless ‘history’ can also be forgetful where medical catastrophes are concerned. As Nancy Bristow reminds us, individual memories of the 1918-1920 influenza pandemic rapidly faded from the public sphere even if private trauma persisted.

This is why archives of the everyday will matter when we come to write histories of 2020. Such archives are messy and capacious. They resist overarching narratives whilst offering a sense of collective documentary. They will help us explore the questions we need to ask - did the pandemic slow or quicken existing trends, what was the long-term impact on social

25 MOA, 12th May Diary 2020, no. 244.
26 MOA, 12th May Diary 2020, no. 255.
27 MOA, 12th May Diary 2020, no. 144.
28 MOA, 12th May Diary 2020, no 250.
and economic inequality, what did it do to intimacy, to work, to politics, the economy and to culture – but they will also suggest new research questions about the meanings and significance of this moment. Whilst future historians will certainly want to pose the so-called ‘big questions’ about this period in time, they may find the answers to these questions in the minutiae and texture of everyday life.

What the Mass-Observation accounts do particularly well – partly because the diary form encourages it – is to ventilate understandings of temporality. The apparently distinctive experiences of time and space brought about by the pandemic underpin the urge to document the present, even as inequalities in access to both of these have been exacerbated by the crisis. ‘Only a few months ago I regarded my job as tedious and unimportant’, writes an Asda till-operator, ‘but I am now regarded as a keyworker’; ‘my life has probably remained much closer to normal than most’, explains a nurse; ‘I shower and get dressed for another day as a key worker’ records a civil servant, adding ‘today as with every other day in this previous eight weeks I worry. I worry I may get corona, I worry I may be a silent carrier. I worry.’  

Those who were not in key worker roles and who did not have caring responsibilities found themselves experiencing time differently to those who were and did. For many, temporality had a new texture: time seemed to move both slowly and quickly providing opportunities for the kind of contemplation that was well suited to self-writing. This change in tempo was widely felt – and yet the diaries show it was unevenly experienced and framed by gender, class, age, race, and health, as well as financial, family and employment status.

Mass-Observation’s explicitly historical identity also encouraged those who wrote to reflect on the speed of change and locate themselves within a past, present and future trajectory. As one man put it:

> What a time to be alive! It feels like we are living in a movie ... The country has been in lockdown for seven weeks now and it is starting to get difficult. There were so many things we took for granted before. Popping down to the shops, being able to see elderly grandparents, going to see my friends. The thing I miss the most is working. Although we are working virtually, setting work for students online, I miss being in the classroom and seeing the children. It is my first year as a teacher and it is one I will never forget!

In this short response we move through different layers of response: the reference to living in a movie reflects an other-worldly dimension but acknowledges the cultural resources that provide narratives of understanding. The everyday detail, once taken for granted, becomes the focus of feelings of loss, as do interactions with family and friends. There is also, already, a sense of the long-term significance of this moment - ‘it is one I will never forget’.

For others thinking about the future is more obviously freighted:

> Will things ever be the same? Will some world leaders kill the rest of us? Does our own have a clue? This anxiety makes it hard to relax into enjoying the next few weeks. Going forward I’d like to find a more satisfactory sense of self outside work and build on enjoying the slowness and beauty of the world around me. I like to

---

30 MOA, 12th May Diary 2020, no. 132; MOA, 12th May Diary 2020, no. 407; MOA, 12th May Diary 2020, no. 33.
31 MOA, 12th May Diary 2020, no. 376.
think that some positive things will come out of this. For me and the world. Don’t know though. I really don’t.32

***

The snapshot of an ordinary day collected by Mass-Observation in 2020 presents a patchwork of individual feelings, perspectives and experiences, out of which future historians might construct stories of life in difficult times. They tell us what a fracturing of the rhythms of everyday life felt like, as well as what its consequences were for individuals, for families and for communities. Approached as diary entries they reveal the events of a single day; examined as slices of autobiography they tantalisingly provide much more. In this way they simultaneously offer us a heavily contextualised ‘mass-observation’ and a series of life histories, each of which shows how personal history, material structures and cultures of feeling frame subjectivities. This complexity – and the purposes that diary-writing can serve in times of turmoil - is acutely clear in the final extract that I want to present here, sent to the Archive by a 33-year-old Londoner:

Today makes it 58 days since I've seen the face I love in front of me. I never counted the days before; It was just a given I'd see him on the weekend and we'd have a nice weekend in our bubble away from reality.

He doesn't even know I love him; well I think he does. But we've never said it out loud. But we have our ways. I actually now daydream about telling him in person, because I think after all this, we should allow each other that. So if that doesn't happen for a long time yet, I love you so much E.

I've had a rough few years; heartache, stress, loss and last year I even ended up in hospital. This year was meant to be the most uneventful year I ever had. I remember shouting at the sky to please grant me a year where nothing dramatic would occur. Let me get a year to just find my footing again and heal.

But it's 2020 and this is a year where COVID-19 took root across the world.33

---

32 MOA, 12th May Diary 2020, no. 58.
33 MOA, 12th May Diary 2020, no. 200.