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What the public think of the ‘Big Society’: Mass Observers’ views on individual and community capacity for civic engagement

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Abstract

The Coalition government's policies envisage that more social need can be met through community initiative, relying on voluntary effort. The Government's 'Big Society' policies give expression to this idea and can be thought of as a framework of initiatives and legislation, such as the 2011 Localism Act, giving neighbourhood groups new rights and powers to act on behalf of their community. The assumption is that individuals have the capacities and willingness to volunteer on behalf of their communities to address community needs.

Based on 100 written responses to a Mass Observation Archive directive commissioned by the Third Sector Research Centre, this paper explores individuals' awareness of, and feelings around, the concept of 'Big Society'. People writing for Mass Observation can be thought of as a sample of engaged individuals from different geographic and socio-economic backgrounds. We report on these individuals' volunteering behaviours, as well as their perceptions of their own, and their community's capacity for civic engagement. The project's substantive focus is relevant to Coalition policy and its implications in the context of cut backs in public expenditure.

Keywords

Big Society, Volunteering, Mass Observation Archive, capacity for civic engagement, Coalition government, Localism Act.

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Introduction

Although much has been written on the Big Society, the main focus of this work has been on examining what it tells us about Conservative party policy relating to the role of the state and how it shapes the Coalition's social policies (see for example Ware, 2012; Bochel, 2011 and Alcock 2010), and how it impacts on the voluntary sector (see Macmillan, 2013). This paper looks at the Big Society from a different angle by presenting interim findings from the analysis of 100 out of 200 Mass Observers' writings on the Big Society agenda, a qualitative source focusing on the narratives and views of 'ordinary' citizens. This approach builds on quantitative work undertaken by Defty (2011a, 2011b) in the year following the 2010 general election, allowing us to examine the extent to which the Big Society agenda has permeated the consciousness of engaged citizens, and to examine the links between this agenda and engaged citizen's accounts of community capacity.

This paper begins by providing information about the Mass Observation data. It touches on the profile of the 100 writers who contributed their thoughts on the Big Society, drawing out some preliminary themes emerging from the data. The paper then focuses on writers' views on how they relate the Big Society agenda to their engagement in voluntary action, and on individual and community capacity to act on behalf of geographic communities.

Data

The Mass Observation Archive (MOA), a Charitable Trust at the University of Sussex, holds a body of qualitative data generated by a national panel of volunteer writers. The Archive gathers responses from a self-selected group of UK residents who are sent 3-4 'directives' a year. Directives cover a wide range of subjects and writers contribute pieces of varying lengths, although typically the pieces are between 1 and 4 pages of written material. The directives provide questions to guide writers' thoughts, yet contributors are free to write about the topics however they choose.

The data analysed here stem from a directive commissioned by the Third Sector Research Centre in the spring of 2012. The aim of the directive was to gather observers' awareness and attitudes to the Big Society agenda, their volunteering practices, their descriptions of their local area and their communities' capacity to respond to the Big Society agenda. Additionally, it explored the writers' views on responsibility for public service provision and the balance between the state, the voluntary sector, private sector, local communities and individuals within this. Awareness of the Localism Act was also gauged since the Act can be seen as a key component of the Big Society agenda. The Act has implications for the delivery of public services since it gives neighbourhood groups new rights and powers to act on behalf of their community to initiate or oppose local development and service delivery. In so doing, the Act arguably shifts some of the state's responsibility for planning and service delivery onto local communities. The directive received almost 200 responses. Work on analysis is still in progress. This paper is based on 100 of these responses. Further analysis will examine the full sample.

Analysis

Forty-five out of the 100 responses analysed for this paper were handwritten. The remainder (55) were typed. Of those that were typed, 21 were sent to the archive electronically.¹ Transcribed responses were analysed in the computer assisted qualitative data analysis package, MAXQDA.

Analysis adopted both a deductive and inductive approach (Layder, 1998). The afore-mentioned aims behind fielding the directive gave rise to deductively created codes. Some of these were designed to function as attributes or categorical variables. Examples of such categorical variables included sex, age, region of residence, partnership status, whether they reported having children, whether or not the observer reported having heard of the Big Society agenda prior to the directive, and whether they were aware of the Localism Act. Other deductive codes were designed to be more thematic. They covered topics such as views on the Big Society agenda, volunteering practices, descriptions of areas in which observers live, levels of community spirit, their thoughts on their own, and their communities' capacity to address local need, and their views on responsibility for service provision.

Familiarisation with the data highlighted the need for additional, inductively created, codes; for example, the place of paid work in observers' lives emerged as an important issue. Other themes that arose were the public spending cuts, the role of reciprocity in writer's voluntary work, the issue of forced volunteering, and the relevance of general political leanings in shaping views. Codes were created to capture these themes.

The first part of the findings, below, are based on the deductively created codes that function as categorical variables. Analysis presented in subsequent sections is based on the more thematic coding.

Attributes of the sample

MOA observers are not a representative sample of the population and therefore, nor are the 100 responses analysed here. This section of the paper provides an overview of the sample in this study. It begins with basic demographic variables and then touches on the geographical distribution of the writers. Lastly, it provides an indication of individual's awareness of the Big Society and the Localism Act.

Demographic profile of the sample

Table 1 provides a demographic profile of the sample taken directly from the writings of the observers. Numerous writers did not provide information on their given demographics, and these are represented by the 'no info' categories. Since the analysis is on 100 individuals, the number of writers in each category is the same as the percentage of writers in the category.

¹ The theorising of a possible correlation between method of writing, and tone and spontaneity of expression of viewpoints, was discussed in the *Mass Observation 75th Anniversary Conference* '5B Panel: Why I write for MO: Round table discussion with current Mass Observers'.

Table 1: Demographics for 100 Mass Observer writers analysed

Attribute		% of writers
Gender	Female	67
	Male	33
Age	under 25	6
	26 to 35	5
	36 to 45	14
	46 to 55	12
	56 to 65	11
	66 to 75	22
	76 to 85	20
	over 85	7
	no info	3
Partnership Status	Single	14
	Cohabiting	6
	Civil Partnership	1
	Married	46
	Widowed	14
	Divorced	6
	No info	13
Children	No	6
	Yes	32
	No info	62

Table 1 shows that two thirds of the writers were female. It also shows a skewed age distribution, with more people in middle to late age. Just over half of the sample is over retirement age. The writers were also most likely to be married (46%), widowed (14%) or single (14%). A third of the sample mentioned their children in their writings. A further 6% mentioned that they did not have any children. The remaining 62 writers did not mention whether or not they had children. This may have been due to the high average age of the sample (individuals may no longer be actively engaged in daily caring for younger children). It may also have been due to the fact that the directive did not specifically ask about their family life.

Additionally, and not depicted in Table 1, about three quarters of observers did not mention any religious affiliation they might have held. The remaining writers were, as far as it was possible to tell from accounts, of a Christian denomination.

Few observers were explicit in their support for a particular political Party, yet many writers made statements that suggested their political leanings, or more often, indicated policies or political parties that they disagreed with. It is not possible to classify the observers on the basis of these statements since they express multi-faceted views and any classification would be a subjective judgement on the part of the researcher. Political ideology frequently emerges as a contested topic within an individual. For example,

I like David Cameron and voted for his party in the 2010 election, the first time I have ever done so. I loathed Margaret Thatcher and think she did a great deal of harm to this country with her ideas, and her 'me, me' principles. I think my loathing is

shared by many, and I don't think I am being over-cynical when I suggest that David Cameron is probably well-aware that for his party to be electable he had to distance himself as far as possible from Thatcherite ideas, although I don't doubt his sincerity in putting forward the idea. F3409 (female aged 65)²

Geographical distribution of the sample

The 100 observers whose accounts were examined were distributed across England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland and the Channel Islands, although, as Table 2 indicates, the majority were living in England, which mirrors the distribution of the population in the UK. The highest proportions of observers were living in the South East of England, closely followed by the West Midlands, North West England and the East of England. Three observers were also coded as 'peripatetic', meaning that these individuals were mobile in terms of their region of residence. Comparing the distribution of observers to estimates from the 2011 Census, we find that the proportion of observers living in the South East, North West and the East of England roughly matches the true distribution whilst the West Midlands is slightly over-represented among the MOA respondents.

Table 2: Geographical distribution of observers and types of area

		% of observers	
Type of area	Mixed	37	
	Middle class	30	
	Poor	8	
	No Info	25	
Country and region	England	South East England	15
		West Midlands	13
		North West England	11
		East of England	11
		Greater London	9
		East Midlands	9
		Yorkshire and the Humber	6
		North East England	5
		South West England	4
		Channel Islands	1
	Wales	6	
	Northern Ireland	3	
	Scotland	2	
	Peripatetic	3	
No info	4		

We asked observers whether they could describe the area they live in and whether they think of it as a poor area, a rich area or a mixture of both. Again, we see that some observers did not provide

² All Mass Observer's quotes are in italics. Quotes from other sources are not.

sufficient information to be able to classify them according to this typology. A mixed local area was the most common environment for observers to be living in, followed by a middle class area. However, in this piece of writing, observers were not asked to describe their own levels of wealth, poverty, class, or education.

Awareness of the Big Society and the Localism Act

Evaluating the extent to which the Big Society agenda has permeated the public's consciousness has been a subject of interest since its inception. In May of 2010, immediately after the General Election, Ipsos MORI ran a poll aimed to gauge the population's awareness. A year later, YouGov ran a similar poll. The 2010 poll found that 57% of the population did not remember hearing anything about the Big Society. Of those individuals who had heard of the agenda, 36% said that they knew little about it, and 33% said that they knew nothing about it (Defty, 2011a: 73, drawn from Ipsos MORI 2010³). By 2011, the picture was not much different (Defty, 2011b). In his analysis of the poll answers, Defty concludes that 'despite a strong commitment and significant publicity including four high profile speeches by the Prime Minister there is little evidence of widespread public recognition of 'the big society' or of any increase in recognition since the general election' (2011b: 13).

The Mass Observation directive was fielded two years after the Ipsos MORI polls, and one year after a set of YouGov polls. We anticipated that some observers would research these two topics. We therefore asked writers to record whether they had heard of the Big Society *prior to* reading the directive. In contrast to the findings from the Ipsos MORI polls in 2010, and to the YouGov polls in 2011, almost three quarters of observers said that they had indeed heard of the Big Society agenda before the directive.⁴ It is possible that this higher estimate in the Mass Observation data is due to awareness having increased between the Ipsos MORI and YouGov polls and the fielding of the directive. However, as previously mentioned, the sample can be thought of as an engaged group of individuals by virtue of their writing for the Archive. Volunteering research has demonstrated that engaged individuals tend to be more highly educated which in turn is correlated with political efficacy and interest (Musick and Wilson, 2008; Rochester et al., 2010).⁵ It is therefore not surprising that the estimate of awareness of the Big Society agenda is higher in the Mass Observation data than we would find in a random sample from the population. Therefore, the discrepancy between the 2010 data and the 2012 data is unlikely to be entirely due to heightened awareness. Interestingly, only 36% of the Mass Observers were aware of the Localism Act. The difference between this and the Big Society awareness estimate potentially illustrates the discrepancy between individuals' awareness of policy rhetoric and the resulting legislative changes.

³ Ipsos MORI 2010 'Is the Coalition Government Bringing the Public with it?' Available at <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oltemId=2616>

⁴ Having heard of the Big Society agenda does not equate to having an in depth understanding of the agenda. Whilst it is outside of the remit of this paper, subsequent analysis of the directive responses will examine the nature of individuals' understanding of the agenda.

⁵ Analysis of the full two hundred scripts will also look for correlations between age, gender and awareness of the Big Society amongst the MOA writers.

Table 3: Awareness of Big Society agenda and the Localism Act

	% of observers
Awareness of Big Society agenda prior to directive	
Yes	72
No	16
No info	12
Awareness of the Localism Act	
No	36
Yes	15
Yes but not sure what it means	2
no info	46

Attitudes towards the Big Society

Of the 100 observers analysed, 71 expressed views on the Big Society. Eight writers were ambivalent about the Big Society, eight were positive about the Big Society as a policy initiative, and 55 observers were negative. In comparison to the attitudes surveyed during the YouGov poll in May 2011, the MOA writers, as a group, are more critical of the Big Society.⁶

The primary ground on which the Big Society agenda is criticised is that it is a political stunt (24 observers). Some of these observers speculated that the aim of the Big Society agenda was to gain popularity in order to secure an election win, and maintain support for the administration in place after the general election. Many of the individuals who criticised the agenda for being a political stunt argued that the agenda is meaningless and lacking in clarity (20 observers).

Obviously I think it's nonsense! And, apart from being rightly lampooned for its vagueness, it feels exactly like the kind of thin and un-thought through idea that would come out of a Party obsessed with PR. Cameron's personal championing of it as a 'new way of thinking' is interesting in that, even after winning the election, it's obvious he can't even get his own Party to support the idea... W4812 (male aged 45)

Some writers who criticised the Big Society agenda for being a political stunt also thought that it was a guise for shifting responsibilities away from government to other parties, such as local government, communities and individuals (20 observers). Seven out of the 20 individuals who felt that the agenda is a political stunt and a way of shifting responsibilities away from government specifically stated that they felt that the Big Society agenda was a guise for the current public spending cuts. A quotation from the same observer (W4812) indicates that individuals see the Big Society as something that is at once meaningless and a front for the shifting of responsibilities.

Behind such a weak concept, I think there's also a more sinister side to the 'Big Society'; the idea that we should cut back and replace state run and taxpayer-financed institutions with voluntary work. W4812 (male aged 45)

Forty-nine observers wrote that they feel like the agenda is nothing new – that the community engagement it calls for is already taking place. These accounts show frustration at a perceived lack of

⁶ The poll found that 45% of the population felt that the Big Society was, in principle, a good idea; 34% felt it was a bad idea, and 22% did not know (YouGov, 2011).

government recognition of the work that is already going on, both formally and informally.

Cameron's 'big idea' of launching the 'Big Society' was small minded in failing to acknowledge (and support financially) the enormous amount of voluntary work already being provided in, by and for communities right across the country. C3603 (male aged 68).

Two observers wrote that they felt *aspects* of the Big Society agenda are new. Both of these individuals highlighted that the newness came from the combined call for more voluntary action and government spending cuts.

I think the idea in itself isn't new – but the notion that it's the answer to reducing the public sector wage bill is new. J4505 (female aged 30)

Three observers felt that the Big Society agenda is a new idea. Three said that they were not sure.

Not all the views on the Big Society were negative. Twelve observers demonstrated positive attitudes. For three people this was on the grounds that the agenda would reduce bureaucracy and the inefficiencies associated with government being involved in local affairs. Ten people were positive about the prospect that the Big Society agenda might bring people together to help each other and strengthen communities. Three people agreed with the Big Society agenda's focus on individuals taking more responsibility for their own needs.⁷

Several observers expressed both positive and negative views about the Big Society. Further analysis on this data will examine this ambivalence in more detail.

It is clear that attitudes to the Big Society may be affected by observers' political ideology. Forty observers expressed strong political opinions, whilst sixty did not. Of the forty, more than half (n.25) expressed feelings against the Conservative Party. Six individuals expressed feelings against political ideologies other than the Conservative Party. These ranged from expressions of disillusionment with the previous Labour Government, with left-leaning policies, and liberal politics. Nine observers showed disillusionment with government in general, rather than with a specific political party.

Linking these political views to attitudes to the Big Society, of the 55 individuals who expressed negative views on the Big Society, 19 also expressed strong views against the Coalition Government. Three of the 55 criticised the Big Society agenda but expressed pro-conservative views.

Engagement behaviours

The directive asked individuals about their civic engagement behaviours:

Do you do any voluntary work? Or perhaps you help someone out in an informal way? Please describe the work that you do. How did you find out about this opportunity? How long have you been doing it? How is the voluntary work you do arranged (e.g. is it through a formal organisation, or is it done informally through groups of friends and neighbours?) Why do you do it? How does volunteering make you feel?

⁷ Whilst the current paper does not analyse writer's views on the provision of state benefits and recipients of such benefits, subsequent work will address these issues.

Over three quarters of observers provided information about their volunteering behaviours, as the directive prompted them to do. In response to broad prompts to encourage writers to record a wide range of engagement activities, some individuals reported not doing any volunteering whilst others reported a range of different activities. We did not apply a strict classification of what constitutes volunteering. The rationale behind this was threefold. Firstly, previous research by the Third Sector Research Centre (Staetsky and Mohan, 2011) showed that people have different understandings about what it means to volunteer. As a result, the directive left it open to the interpretation of the observer and the writings provide some idea of what observers consider 'counts' as volunteering. Secondly, the Big Society agenda, whilst calling for individuals to become more engaged in their communities, is itself silent on what 'counts' as engagement. Research that seeks to respond to the Big Society agenda, therefore, ought to be aware of what types of engagement it is referring to. In this work we chose to mirror the government's conspicuous lack of a definition of what constitutes volunteering, and let observers interpret these terms themselves. Thirdly, the directive allowed individuals to write about their current and past volunteering activities. Volunteering has been shown to be something that people transition in and out of over time (Kamerade, 2012 forthcoming; Brodie et al., 2011) and so to classify an individual as a volunteer at a particular point in time does not allow for the dynamic nature of engagement practices. Our approach allowed observers to tell their volunteering stories, past, present and future.

This section reviews the types of activities that writers were or are engaged in, providing a sense of what they feel 'counts' as volunteering. It touches on a number of themes that emerge from the data, including the relationship between formal and informal volunteering, the moral imperative of volunteering and the difference between monetary and time-based support.

Writers are engaged in a variety of voluntary activities, ranging from unpaid help to family members to unpaid overtime for what is otherwise paid work in the third sector or public sector. Some of them also cite examples that involve the skills they use in their day jobs and applying them to services for formalised voluntary initiatives, whilst others expressly write about avoiding doing similar things in their paid and voluntary work. In more formal capacities, observers mention helping in local services (including schools, hospitals, and voluntary organisations) and attending public meetings on local issues.

Self-identification as a volunteer emerges as a potentially complex issue, with eight individuals writing about not being sure what 'counts' as volunteering. Additionally, in a few cases individuals start off their writing by saying that they do not volunteer but, on reflection, they realise that they in fact do. Five out of the 100 observers specifically recognised their writing for the Mass Observation Archive as a form of volunteering.

The majority of writers responded to the directive with accounts focusing on the giving of time, rather than money. 'Volunteering', therefore, seems, in the main, to be interpreted as time gifts rather than monetary ones. However, where writers do mention the giving of money, this is often done in the context of an explanation – either to explain lower levels of time-giving or as part of a transition story (changing from giving time to giving money in older age due to a reduction in physical capacity).

The directive specifically asks individuals about whether they provide informal help. As such it is not surprising that many observers wrote about the multitude of ways in which they support others and initiatives outside of formally organised environments. A small number (7) of observers expressly discounted informal contributions as constituting voluntary work. Survey data, such as the Lifestyle Survey and the former Citizenship Survey, have asked questions about formal and informal volunteering. However, the Mass Observation writings add substantially to this evidence base by providing insight into how individuals negotiate *between* formal and informal contributions. The writings suggest that volunteers often have personal relationships with the beneficiaries of their informal contributions, as we would expect from Granovetter's theory of weak social ties (1973, 1983). Causally, the engagement is a result of the relationship. In contrast, in formal settings any relationship that is built is the result of the engagement. Possibly as a result of the strength of their strong social ties, individuals more frequently write about having to curtail formal volunteering activity in favour of informal activity, as opposed to the other way around. Further analysis into how observers come to be involved in the volunteering that they do will provide additional insight into the importance of personal relationships in the context of voluntary engagement.

In the narratives around informal volunteering, several writers touch on the difficulty of asking for and accepting help from others. Writers note this about themselves, but also about those they are involved in helping. Forging reciprocal informal help relationships is one strategy by which individuals overcome the challenge of accepting, or convincing others to accept, help. One 47-year old male writer describes an alternative strategy. He explains how he and an older woman he helps have taken a step towards formalising their relationship in order to negotiate a way for her to be able to ask him when she needs help:

I do go and help a friend's Mum out from time to time and do some Hoovering, cleaning for her and things like that. She was struggling, recovering from chemotherapy for cancer treatment and I offered to do some domestic stuff for her – a few years ago and, now she's recovered I go round infrequently and do some stuff for her.

I'm happy to do it, happy to help. It doesn't take much time or effort on my part but, I think, makes a difference for her and makes her more independent. She pays me a nominal amount which makes it easier for her to ask me to go round and do things. It also means she's not dependent on her family saying they'll come and do things and then not turning up. S4278 (male aged 47)

A small number of observers distinguish between volunteering for mutual benefit (referred to by one writer as 'luxury' volunteering) and volunteering to address the social needs of others. Tying this back to the Big Society agenda and the cuts in welfare provision, it is possible that a call for more local engagement, even if heeded, would not translate into more meeting of need specifically, but rather into strengthening the very varied, and not necessarily needs-focussed, causes of already engaged individuals.

Voluntary action is not a morally neutral issue in Western society. Volunteering is socially constructed to be a good thing. The writings analysed here show this very clearly. Many of the observers explain why their engagement in voluntary action is currently at a particular level, providing reasons for why they do not do more. In many cases writers provide a transition story that tells of their previous volunteering contribution, contextualising their current level of engagement. The issue of

capacity will be explored further below. Several observers clearly highlight the moral imperative they feel they are under to volunteer.

No. Sometimes I wish I did – as an experience, as something I don't do for gain or experience. Just to give. It seems a noble thing. It's a source of shame I don't. W4467 (male aged 37)

[He] asked me whether I had ever worked with volunteers. Then: had I ever volunteered myself? I said that I hadn't. I felt a flicker of guilty annoyance at having been asked, and thought I detected a flicker of judgement on his face in return. B3227 (male aged 45)

Capacity to take part in the Big Society

Writing shortly after the 2010 General Election, Defty (2011a) examined public opinion of the Big Society agenda. Drawing on data from an Ipsos MORI poll fielded in mid-May 2010, he discussed the poll results.

While most people supported the principle of greater involvement in the delivery of services and more local control, many fewer said that they were personally interested in getting involved in their local community. (Defty, 2011a: 74)⁸

Looking at a slightly later poll, The Hansard Society's annual audit of political engagement, which surveyed individuals in December 2010 and January 2011, Defty (2011b) observes that:

a relatively large proportion of individuals (51%) [...] felt that they could make a difference by getting involved in their local community [...]. However, the number of people who wanted to get involved in decision-making in their local area had fallen by five points to 43% since the previous audit, and only one in ten people said they would definitely undertake some form of voluntary work in the next two years. (Defty, 2011b: 10)

At this point in time, as well as little public understanding of the Big Society agenda, there did not appear to be much enthusiasm for taking part in the Big Society.

As already mentioned we expect that the Mass Observation writers are less likely to reflect the low levels of interest evidenced in population polls. They already volunteer for a writing project and thus can be thought of as 'engaged citizens'. In spring 2012 the Mass Observation writers were asked about their individual capacity and their communities' capacity to be involved in the Big Society. Observers' writings on their current levels of engagement and their views on capacity are discussed below.

Personal capacity

The directive asked individuals about their engagement behaviours. The wording of the directive was as follows:

'Do you feel you could do more voluntary work? Or do you think that you are doing the maximum that you can?'

⁸ Representative sample of 1002 adults, aged 16+ polled by Ipsos MORI by telephone in mid-May 2010.

4% said that they were already involved in local services, 5% wanted to be more actively involved, 24% wanted a say in local service provision, and 47% were interested in obtaining more information about services.

Of those that commented directly (n.58) on this issue, the majority (n.50) indicated that they do not have the capacity to do more. A little over a half of these (n.27) indicated that they were already engaged but could not take anything further on; whilst a smaller proportion (n.23) indicated that they are currently not engaged in voluntary work.

Reasons for these attitudes and practices varied. Of those observers currently volunteering, but stating they have no capacity for additional work, some identified being too stretched by their informal caring commitments, such as looking after partners with ill-health or baby-sitting for family members. This informal voluntary work, undertaken because of strong social ties, was prioritised above formal volunteering.⁹ Other observers indicated that current commitments to volunteering for voluntary organisations means they do not have time to take on anything further. Older observers discussed the impact of age on their capacity to volunteer, with some elderly observers discussing how they are struggling with existing commitments, and are in the process of reducing their formal and informal volunteering. As mentioned earlier, some in this state of transition are replacing donations of their time, with monetary donations to causes that they support.

Those observers that stated that they do not currently volunteer and do not have the capacity to do so in the near future, did not identify what they perceived voluntary work to consist of. As discussed in our section on engagement practices, there are contradictions in a small number of narratives where observers state they are not engaged in volunteering work, but appear to be undertaking informal activity by providing help to friends and family. Nevertheless, a small proportion of observers were very categorical about their motivations for not engaging in formal voluntary work. These reasons included what Brodie et al. (2011) describe as a lack of 'practical resources' (p.40), being exhausted by paid work, or by looking after homes and children; being ill; being too old; and being disabled. Yet a small number had made a conscious decision not to take on formal volunteering roles. One retired headmaster remarked:

I was a teacher and head-teacher for thirty-four years. I've stood on the touchline during countless football matches; many of them in the rain. I've seen more netball matches, cross-country runs, athletic meetings and swimming galas than most sports commentators. Christmas Fairs, Nativity Plays, Summer Fairs, Car Boot Sales by the dozen etc., etc., etc. Many of these I have organised. My days of volunteering for anything are over. B4318 (male aged 69)

It is interesting that B4318 perceives his unpaid work as a teacher to be voluntary work. This sentiment of having already contributed through paid employment was echoed in a small number of

⁹ This prioritisation of strong social ties and informal volunteering needs further analysis, both of the MOA scripts and of larger survey data, to identify how this fits with the practices of a more representative sample of the British population. Although it is interesting to note that Hardill and Baines (2011) case-study of volunteering undertaken in a deprived area, also identifies this as an issue (p.51).

Of relevance here, is that several writers made connections between Thatcher's concept of society (1987) and Cameron's utilisation of the word society. When discussing entitlement to benefits, Thatcher made her renowned statement that there is 'no such thing as society', arguing that there are only individuals and families. Her view that 'It is our duty to look after ourselves and then also to help look after our neighbour and life is a reciprocal business' privileges strong social ties. Cameron's Big Society, invokes a broader set of responsibilities to community (without really defining the concept). An outstanding question for the project is: are the MOA writers representative of the British population when prioritising their families? If so, then a sea-change in attitudes will be needed for the Big Society to take effect.

other scripts, where observers mentioned having to give unpaid overtime to their jobs and feeling unable or willing to volunteer in their so-called 'spare-time'.

Working for the public sector, I am also doing more work than I am supposed to and do lots of overtime to get things done. As there is no hope that I will ever be financially recompensed for this, it is a kind of voluntary work (admittedly with a very, very small v). But this is the situation that lots of people find themselves in – public and private sector, which is why it is so ridiculous to demand that people do more. S4002 (female)

Some observers stated that they are not 'the joining type'; others have been put off volunteering by bureaucracy, (such as CRB checks, or age-limits) or by hearsay or experience of power struggles in formal organisations. Some had volunteered in the past but now felt that they should get paid for such work and a small number of observers confessed to not wanting to volunteer, raising the issue of choice and personal selfishness:

Anyway, all this is becoming a bit of a smokescreen of my own. I don't do voluntary work because I don't want to. I'm selfish, perhaps, and lack the impulse to give back to the community. Or am I like the majority of people who can't be bothered or who have many other things with which to occupy their limited free time? B3227 (male aged 45)

In summary, amongst this engaged sample, there is little capacity or desire to take on more unpaid work. Only a small proportion, 8%, of the writers felt that they could do more. However, this raises an outstanding question: how does the capacity of this sample of engaged individuals compare with the capacity of a more representative sample of individuals? We are currently working on this question, in the form of an ESRC funded mixed-methods longitudinal project exploring 'Continuity and Change in Volunteering 1983-2012'. The project will use large data-sets alongside Mass Observation writing to address this question.

Community capacity

'Do you think that your local area has got the resources – in terms of people, skills, or finances – to meet its own needs?'

The observers were asked whether the communities in which they live have the capacity to meet their own needs. Of the 100 written scripts analysed, 56 writers responded directly to this question.¹⁰ Most framed their responses in the light of what they know of their communities, the individuals that make up these communities, and the type of activities that their communities had engaged in previously. Although only 13 observers were very positive about the capacity of their communities to provide for some of their needs, only thirteen writers were very negative. None were fully confident about their communities being able to provide for all of their needs, for example, writer R4256 wrote:

I think that communities can affect useful changes when individuals act together with a sense of specific purpose with a concrete objective in mind; but this is usually very dependent on a few key people doing most of the organising and the rest as 'moral support'. I don't think that many communities could successfully sustain more than a few initiatives for more than a relatively short time. R4256 (male aged 52)

¹⁰ Seven of the eight writers that stated that they live in poor areas responded to this question. However only three made a connection between the poverty of the area and its capacity to act for itself.

The ambivalence of writers as to whether their communities could provide for their own needs reflected some complex thinking relating to the socio-economic circumstances of different communities. Some writers from more affluent areas commented on the level of wealth and skills of people in their community, a concept that Keohane et al. (2011) describe as 'community wealth':

The area that I live in is relatively very wealthy and has a high proportion of retired people who, by and large, are pensioners with good health and a high disposable income. They are of independent means and no longer need to work. Consequently there is a large reserve of these people who are both capable and committed to voluntary work within the community, with a keen commitment to local causes. W4812 (male aged 45)

As discussed above, some of the writers living in more affluent areas indicated that currently their skills are being used for mutual benefit or 'luxury volunteering', as opposed to responding to acute social need. Indeed, there is less likely to be acute social need in more affluent areas (see Lindsey, 2013). Writers from more deprived areas indicated that 'community wealth' is lacking, as in the description of W3994's ex-mining town.

So there is a community, definitely, but unfortunately not one that would pull together to make things happen. There's a kind of fatigue that's come with being economically downtrodden, a fatalism. People don't seem to have much confidence and rely on others to make a stand. W3994 (female aged 40)

The point made by W3994 is evidenced in a recent mixed-methods comparative case-study undertaken by Lindsey (2013), which found that the skills, energy, confidence and connections to take up the Big Society agenda that were in evidence in an area of affluence, were singularly lacking in a nearby area of deprivation.

A few writers from more affluent areas thought that their communities were affluent enough to raise funds for some of their needs, but most were not specific about what these needs might be. A small number wrote about physical services, such as provision of litter bins and grass-mowing, rather than social needs. An interest and focus on providing for the physical, or territorial needs of communities rather than their social needs, might be seen to stem from a different type of motivation to volunteer, founded more on mutual benefit than philanthropy.¹¹ This touches on a distinction to be made between the Big Society as an initiative for the community provision of a range of local services, and the Big Society as an initiative for community-led control of local landscapes and local development, with the 'NIMBYist' overtones attached to this particular aspect of the Big Society and localism agenda. A few observers indicated that they are already involved in development control, with one writer sitting on planning committees for her parish council, and others describing active campaigning in their communities against particular building developments:

Many years ago, the threat of more housing to be built on local farmland raised such a furore that the local community successfully extirpated the builder's plans. W3176 (male aged 71)

This suggests that within some of the more affluent communities inhabited by the MOA writers, there is capacity to deal with planning and development control.

¹¹ This interest in space is not necessarily restricted to more affluent communities

Some writers discussing geographies described living in dormitory towns which lack a sense of community and have low levels of people available to act on behalf of their communities. Various writers discussed the differences between rural and urban communities and the difficulties that urban living might present. In particular there were discussions from individuals living in large urban spaces experiencing a lack of a defined geographical community. It was acknowledged by both rural and urban writers that urban areas present a challenge with regards to dealing with service provision and governance. This issue of community governance was raised explicitly by several writers who described how their parish councils' work to provide for their communities' needs. One writer raised the view that the government could devolve more power to parish councils which already have infrastructures in place to deal with governance, limited provision of services, and decision-making. H1543 was more forthright on the need for local government:

Do communities have enough power to manage their own needs? Not without the support of their local authority. Who should be responsible for the needs of communities? It is what we have local authorities and elections for. H1543 (male aged 82)

Although other writers weren't as explicit as this, some raised the question of how the financial costs of Big Society voluntarism might be met. Apart from the small number of writers mentioned earlier, who indicated that their communities might bear this cost, there seemed to be an expectation that the state should cover them. Again, H1543, had strong views on the issue of cost and local governance:

Do I think my local area will need to raise money to buy in a service to meet its needs? We do. It is called council tax. The trouble is too much of it gets spent on pie in the sky. Pandering to the demands of pressure group activity. As a local government employee I was involved in many governments' efforts to make municipal services less costly. From the time of Harold Wilson to that of John Major. They all failed and all for the same reason. The inability of the politician to control the empire building bureaucrat. All their initiatives, productivity agreements, restructuring, competitive tendering produced the same response at county halls and civic centres. A resolute determination to make sure cuts were made at the sharp end, the point of delivery. Which was where I worked. Where the recipients of municipal services feel the effect most, and where of course they produce the most protest. It is apparent to me the process still goes on. The council has to make cuts. So the C.E. [Chief Executive] talks in terms of closing the libraries, removing school crossing patrols etc. The police authority has to make savings so chief constables talk in terms of fewer bobbies on the beat. No amount of voluntary effort will address such issues. It is a form of political blackmail and politicians, for all their talk, cannot see through it. H1543 (male aged 82)

H1543's writing also raises issues as to whether, and if so how, local governments are already influenced by pressure groups into making or reversing decisions, particularly around what gets funded. Although protest is seen as a democratic right and a way of giving voice to disagreement, the voices of protestors can disenfranchise less able, less skilled, or less vocal members of the community. Bochel's (2011) discussion of the Localism Bill's¹² intention to give residents the power to instigate local referendums, echoes the concerns of H1543, when she argues that such a measure might provide 'significant potential for populist and possibly transient ideas impacting on local policy'. Would a Big Society, where power is devolved to neighbourhoods and small communities, with an

¹² At the time Bochel was writing the Localism Act had not been passed.

active minority representing the needs of the inactive majority, be less of a democracy than current forms of local government?

H1423's view that local government infrastructure is already in place to meet the needs of local communities, and W2107's (female aged 72) view that her parish council meets most of her needs, raises an additional issue relating to how devolution of power to communities might be delivered. However, within the 100 scripts analysed, there was surprisingly little mention by the observers of any current engagement with established infrastructures such as Voluntary and Community Sector organisations or community centres. But there was considerable reference to voluntary work delivered through religious infrastructures. The delivery of community needs through a faith-based, non-secular infrastructure, as recently suggested by Holman (2013), might have its advantages, but the faith-based delivery of services raises potential issues of particularism (Salamon, 1987: 40) and challenges relating to equality of provision.

Conclusion

This paper represents an analysis of 100 of 200 Mass Observation scripts on the Big Society. As we have identified at the beginning of this paper, the writers of the Mass Observation Archive are not a representative sample of the British public, but rather, represent an engaged section of the population, willing to write about their views and understandings of subjects like the Big Society.

The majority of writers had heard of the Big Society, and many of the writers were able to discuss a range of issues pertaining to the Big Society agenda. We have touched on a few of these issues in this paper, including discussions of voluntary work undertaken by the writers, perceptions of their capacity for more voluntary work, and their views of the capacity of their communities to work together to meet local needs. This paper represents work in progress. Further research will examine writers' understandings of the Big Society, their views on the responsibilities of the state for public service provision, the rolling back of the state, the devolution of power to small communities, and attitudes towards those in receipt of welfare benefits from the state.

A key finding of this analysis is that the majority of observers who voiced an opinion on the matter held negative attitudes towards the Big Society agenda. Writings also suggest a potential tension between formal and informal types of volunteering, with observers prioritising their responsibilities resulting from strong ties over those resulting from weaker ties. One of the potential implications of this finding might be that if social need increases as a result of government spending cuts, individuals may be more likely to prioritise helping those they know, over becoming engaged in wider community initiatives. Although writers thought that some of their communities had the capacity to take on some additional responsibilities, the majority of writers do not believe that their communities have the capacity to take on sustained responsibility – none were fully confident about their communities being able to provide for all of their needs.

Only 7% of the Mass Observation writers made explicit connections between the Big Society agenda and current public spending cuts, seeing the Big Society as a foil for cuts. However a large proportion of the writers did write about the economic crisis, the public spending cuts, and the impact of cuts on their local services. These descriptions contain a guarded sense of a Britain in crisis.

Coalition rhetoric relating to the economic crisis and public spending cuts, such as ‘broad shoulders’, ‘we’re all in this together’ easily meld with the military metaphors employed by Cameron in his ‘Call to Arms’ (2010) to join the Big Society. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this rhetoric is echoed in the writing of the observers, with a small number writing that their first thoughts relating to the Big Society were ‘the Second World War’ or ‘the spirit of the Blitz’, a notional time of national solidarity and pulling together.

...In a way it seems to be a throwback to the way things were (or were said to be) during the war, the ‘we’re all in this together’ mentality, the idea that everyone will pull together for the common good. I think that in a real crisis this is still so, in fact when I was talking to my husband just now about what the concept means, he remarked “you’d need an absolute disaster these days, for the idea to work”. I think that is so. This country does have problems, especially financial, but the fact is that there is no one problem that faces everybody in the way that a war or a natural disaster would. F3409 (female aged 64)

It is striking that although the writers evidenced that they had taken on the rhetoric of economic crisis and of the Big Society, very few of the observers had heard of the 2011 Localism Act. This highlights a worrying discrepancy between individuals’ awareness of policy rhetoric and their awareness of resulting legislative changes (even within an engaged and aware sample like the Mass Observers). Yet, this lack of awareness of the legislative shifting of responsibilities from the state to the neighbourhood also suggests little engagement with these responsibilities. Although, as Bochel argued in 2011 ‘... there is, as yet, little in the Coalition’s proposal to suggest a real redistribution of power, particularly to those who currently have least’ (p.268), there also seems little enthusiasm amongst affluent and deprived communities to take up these new powers.

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