

Making history: why archiving social research matters

By Phyllis Macfarlane, chair of contents committee, Archive of Market and Social Research

There's a 1982 Charles Addams cartoon that shows a large Viking-like figure with a clipboard asking a poor householder, 'Would you say Attila is doing an excellent job, a good job, a fair job or a poor job?'. It makes me smile every time I see it – but then I always think: if only someone had archived the data!



I, for one, certainly didn't realise the interest that modern historians would have in market and social research. And particularly in qualitative projects that show how people – clients and respondents – thought at the time. Every report is a gem of social history: from the housewives talking about their 'housekeeping' money, to children describing how they decide which sweets to buy.

What is AMSR?

The Archive of Market and Social Research (AMSR) was established in 2016 by a group of the UK's senior researchers. The charity's volunteers preserve the documents, papers and other research materials of the industry's achievements over the past 70+ years, making them available in digital format on the [AMSR website](#).

Until now we have focused mainly on the collection of paper-based material since this was at the greatest danger of being lost, and we have built up a collection of some 6,000 documents. We are not just building a library. Education is AMSR's key purpose as a charity: the education of the public in the fields of the history and significance of market and social research.

Who are our users?

When we started, we had only the vaguest idea of who our users might be, but once we had a critical mass of documents, we turned our minds to thinking about who might find them helpful.

Firstly, we talked to modern British historians – and found that they were interested in post-war culture, consumerism, changing gender roles, youth, politics... – in short all the things we had in our collection. And we've subsequently had great fun helping them with their teaching materials, PhD theses and coursework. Reports from the 70s and 80s on 'changing eating habits' monitor the decline of the great 'British breakfast', and the move away from set meal times and 'set' tables. Changing attitudes to immigration and race relations can be tracked from opinion polls. All are all invaluable to modern social historians – particularly as they are scientific studies. They demonstrate not only what people thought at the time, but also the attitudes of government to their citizens and businesses to their customers. They are 'gold', as one professor put it.

We're now looking at what we could do for schools – starting with the A-level history curriculum. We can help with coursework on questions such as 'How far did Britain become a 'permissive society' in the 1960s?' or 'Assess the reasons for Margaret Thatcher's downfall in 1990'. We have many relevant surveys. Students have to show that they have accessed a range of sources, and being free-to-access and digital makes us a helpful resource for them. We are also thinking of developing online lessons for GCSE-level to help teach,

not only maths and analysis skills, but also interviewing and data interpretation skills – perhaps encouraging the researchers of the future.

The future?

We are now moving on – to safeguard the future sustainability of the archive – by establishing 'modern' collections. We are starting with three new specialist collections covering all the research done into some current issues: Covid-19; diversity, inclusivity and equality; and Brexit. There is a growth area in histories of the 80s, 90s and 2000s – that is, very contemporary history – so collecting recent material is particularly important.

Could SRA members help?

Yes, if you have reports in your personal 'archive' please do think of contributing them. Remember that the UK Data Archive preserves a lot of data, but not the qualitative context in which the questions were asked, nor always the interpretative reports. As archivists we help shape history – by preserving the materials which will be used by future generations. We should let our work as researchers contribute to an accurate view of social history in the future. Please contact me at info@amsr.org.uk to discuss.