

Contrived Observation

A group of researchers wanted to measure the popularity of exhibits at a museum. They didn't want to survey or interview the audience directly; they didn't want their physical presence or the inflection in their voices to coerce their subjects. It is well known in social research that an interviewee will often attempt to answer questions with the desire to get it 'right' rather than tell the truth - what has been termed 'the guinea pig effect'ⁱ. To circumnavigate this, the researchers measured the floor tiles around the museum. Indexed by their replacement rate, the erosion of a floor tile would allow relative measurement of the popularity of the nearby exhibit. As each visitor shuffles through the museum, they would become unwitting collaborators in the research project.

It describes, in a nicely exhibition-based context, the potential application and resulting affect of an unobtrusive measure.

I found this story in a copy of '*Unobtrusive Measures: Nonreactive Research in the Social Sciences*'ⁱⁱ. Despite its formal sounding title, it is full of wry, lateral and creative examples of data collection. Each offered solution eliminates the body of the researcher from its investigative context in order to minimise bias. Other examples include the length of a psychologist's hair as determinate of their methodological disposition and a child's interest in Christmas demonstrated by relative distortions in the size of Santa Claus drawings. Also, in the USA, a car dealer asked its mechanics to note the pre-set radio station in cars arriving for a service, allowing the optimisation of their advertising strategy. Many are seemingly abstract relations formed through the covert, distanced observation of physical traces.

First published in 1966, its age is evidenced in its final chapter '*Contrived observation: hidden hardware and control*' which centres much of its discussion on the use of audiotape. It is undisputed that the power of contemporary technology, in particular networked systems such as the Internet, has dramatically revolutionised data collection beyond the microphone and tape recorder. With either scientific or capitalistic prerogative, our telematic apparatus are both research tools and a means through which our own practices can be measured. We have moved beyond the need to measure floor tiles. Popularity can be found through a quick look at the trending topics on Twitter.

"Computer-mediated communication (CMC) leaves trails. Thus, how the Internet is used, what material appears on it, how in social terms users are networked together, and the processes of communication they engage in, are all capable of being logged directly and accurately, and free of reactivity bias."ⁱⁱⁱ

In 2000, Raymond Lee from Royal Holloway, University of London re-examined the aforementioned text with important revisions upon this technological shift. He highlighted some of the well-established issues of technology in research and practice, including the ethics of voyeurism, its use to control and its affects upon communication. Hidden behind a technological screen, there is the possibility to manipulate and fictionalise our aesthetic presentation, also raising the same questions we often level at the authenticity of photographic or filmic images.

In *Unobtrusive Measures*, we assume the CCTV technology is allowing us to observe in real time. But, how do we know that the exhibition we are viewing lies behind the walls in front of us? The audio we hear spilling out from the interior being no more than a smoke screen or deceptive relic. There may be something more sinister at work here.

While the monitors may or may not emit such an echo, the only way to ascertain any transparency is to open up and reveal, reach in and see. It is this tension that the exhibition aims to explore. As a contrived observational scenario, set out as part of a curatorial ploy, there is the placing of an experience via a monitor screen alongside an imagined physical encounter. Both are valid, and both are methods through which we interweave experiences and undertake communicative acts (with objects or with each other).

During the development of the exhibition, it became clear that none of the artists assumed a philosophical position that advocated an archaic existence or return to some nostalgic, pre-technological community. There was an intrinsic desire to instead understand how these objects are being incorporated into our phenomenology; as tools for communication, aesthetic representations, religious or ceremonial icons, a means for covert observation or research.

Our shifting modes of experience are not unilaterally moving from the physical to virtual, but we are negotiating a balance of measures and the varying implications (or miss-directions) of their use. In the same way we look into the monitors sited around the central cube in the gallery, emanating their images of a distanced exhibition, we are attempting to make sense, orientate and piece together varying forms of experience.

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ⁱ Selltitz, C., Jahoda, M., Deutsch, M., Cook, S.W. *Research Methods in Social Relations*, New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1959.

ⁱⁱ Webb, E., Campbell, D., Schwartz, R., Sechrest, L. *Unobtrusive Measures: Nonreactive Research in the Social Sciences*, Chicago: Rand, McNally & Company, 1969.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lee, R. *Unobtrusive Measures in Social Research*, UK: Open University Press, 2000. p.116