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A novel form of biography?: analysing appointment diaries through quantitative network analysis

Appointment diaries have existed as historical sources since the mid-nineteenth century but became much more commonly used after the Second World War. Unsurprisingly, therefore, such records regularly appear in the private papers of individuals – politicians, civil servants, business people, academics and other members of the post-war elite. Yet, to date, historians have been reluctant or unable to exploit this source material in any systematic way.

The project makes a first attempt to open up this unexploited source through three linked case studies: the appointment diaries of Margaret Thatcher (1962-90), of Harold Wilson (1958-60 and 1966-88) and of the ministers and permanent secretaries of the Department of Trade and Industry (1986-93). In this paper we set out our methodology and some initial findings using the Thatcher appointment diaries.

We use a relational event model to analyse patterns of events within the diaries to investigate this data through a quantitative method in order to highlight the key networks of actors with which Margaret Thatcher interacted. Using such a model allows us to explore a range of factors relating to such interactions which goes beyond simple frequency and regularity to illuminate more relational aspects like sequencing of meetings, transitivity and the impact of common attributes. Such an approach offers the possibility of creating a new biography of the individuals involved by highlighting their key networks and relationships and how these changed over time.
