

Standardizing smoke: measuring and monitoring air pollution in British cities, 1912-1966

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By the turn of the twentieth century, high levels of atmospheric pollution from both industrial and domestic sources had enveloped major British cities such as Birmingham, Glasgow, London, and Manchester in a permanent smoke haze. Legislative and educational measures aimed at controlling urban air pollution had enjoyed little success, in no small part because of a lack of accurate information on which to ground decision-making and build consensus for meaningful action. In this paper I examine the origins and development of a nationwide monitoring network to systematically collect data on atmospheric pollution that could be used to support the work of city authorities in regulating smoke.

The Committee for the Investigation of Atmospheric Pollution, founded in 1912 with less than 20 participating bodies, had by the mid-1960s expanded its research activities to involve over 500 cooperating authorities and organisations in almost every major British town and city. This study of how a full-scale investigation of atmospheric pollution was designed and developed addresses two main themes. Firstly, it will explore how non-governmental organisations, central and local government, and representatives of industry worked together to establish an expert organisation that could speak with political authority. Secondly, it will draw historical attention to the importance (and difficulties) of technical standard setting in providing reliable and policy-relevant knowledge about environmental problems.