

Audio methods for geographical research

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Figure 1: Recording the dawn chorus, Edinburgh

Introduction: Why audio methods?

Stop for a moment to think about the various tools geographers use to explore the world around them. What comes to mind? Geographers draw maps, diagrams and tables, undertake surveys or questionnaires, take photographs, and then write reports, articles, and books. When they do, they tend constantly to reaffirm geography as a predominantly visual discipline, and with this a particular way of understanding the world. This is a problem for a number of reasons – most obviously because how we actually experience the world, and our place in it, comes about through using a range of senses other than our sense of sight. As a result, there seems to be a mismatch between our experience of things like place and landscape, and the tools that we use to investigate these concepts.

This case study, then, is to get you to think about research methods that can help to account for one other sense: our sense of hearing. Such audio methods may, for instance, help with investigating:

- 1. Noise pollution & other environmental issues:** Noise pollution can have significant effects on human and other species' lives. For humans, an excess of noise can be very detrimental to both physical and mental health. We can use audio methods to measure, monitor, and capture the volume of noise pollution, as well as help us to differentiate and represent their sources (roads, airports, industry). We can also use these methods to investigate other environmental issues, such as changes in biodiversity; can we, for instance, listen to species decline? One useful resource on this is Bernie Krause's *The Great Animal Orchestra*, or his online TED talk: https://www.ted.com/talks/bernie_krause_the_voice_of_the_natural_world/
- 2. Listening to place and culture:** What makes us feel attached to certain places, or produces in us a 'sense of place'? Might the sounds of a city, town, or village be a part of this? Are there any specific soundmarks – the audio equivalent of landmarks – that are associated with a specific nation state, region, or settlement? What are your favourite sounds of a place? The Favourite Sounds project

is a useful starting point for the latter question: <http://www.crisap.org/research/projects/favourite-sounds/> Is it possible to listen to culture? How might the sounds of culture (music, clubs, sporting events, protests, festivals, shopping centres & markets) help to define an area, shape how we think about particular places, or govern how people use them?

- 3. Urban design:** urban design is often undertaken with the idea of improving the visual quality of streets, buildings, parks, and other private and public spaces. What about the sounds of these places? Are there any design interventions or planning laws that control what can be heard and when?

Audio methods

The following are a few audio methods that can be endlessly adapted (as most methods can be) depending on what topic it is that you wish to study.

1. Audio recording

The ability to record and edit sounds has become easier, more lightweight, and cheaper, since the advent of digital audio recorders. Additionally, most smartphones, tablets and laptops also have the capacity to record good quality audio.

The following is a useful guide to different types of audio recording technologies: <http://www.jiscdigitalmedia.ac.uk/guide/portable-digital-audio-recorders>

Audio recorders can also be used to carry out interviews for research purposes, produce podcasts, or other online teaching materials.

Audacity (<http://audacityteam.org/>) is a free piece of software that can be used to edit audio recordings on any computer or laptop. You can also record audio directly to Audacity using your computer's internal microphone, or an external one.

2. Listening walks

A listening walk is simply a walking activity in which listening to the sounds of spaces is the focus. They are an excellent method for getting students out of the classroom, and require no special equipment, technical facilities, budget, or venue. The procedure is simple: lead a group of students on a walk through a range of different sound environments (roads, parks, market squares, indoor public spaces), and get them to focus on what they can hear. Listening walks work best when efforts are made to avoid distractions during the walk, and most are conducted with no talking allowed. It seems to work best when walking spaced apart in single file, so that walkers do not only hear the footsteps of other students. Try to walk at a relatively slow but steady pace, so that walkers can focus on their listening, rather than trying to keep up with the person in front of them. You can also integrate other activities along the walk; you may, for instance, want to stop and discuss what can be heard at particular locations.

Afterwards, get students to discuss what they have heard:

were there any surprising sounds along the route? Were there any sounds that could be considered as 'soundmarks'? How did the built environment shape what was heard (think about the types of materials used, the shape and size of streets, and so on)? What activities can be heard at different times of the day, or during different seasons?

3. Online sound maps

Sound mapping is a method of representing sonic (i.e. sound) information on a mapped territory. There are a huge amount of online sound maps that can form the basis of interesting discussions about sound and geography.

Examples include:

- The London Sound Survey (<http://www.soundsurvey.org.uk/>) includes various sound maps of all of London's boroughs. It also includes a useful compendium of historical London sounds, which will help to get students to think about how cities change and develop over time.
- Radio Aporee (<http://aporee.org/maps/>) is a global sound map that anyone can contribute to. If you do get your students to record audio, this is a great place for them to upload it to.
- The British Library (<http://sounds.bl.uk/sound-maps/>) hosts a range of online sound maps, including an interesting one that charts different global accents.
- Wales Noise Mapping (<http://data.wales.gov.uk/apps/noise/>) is an online map produced by the Welsh Government that shows the noise levels in Wales' main urban areas.