



**Wales Institute of Social & Economic  
Research, Data & Methods**

Sefydliad Ymchwil Gymdeithasol ac  
Economaid, Data a Dulliau Cymru

# **WISERD METHODS BRIEFING SERIES**

## **Audio Walks: The Purpose, Practice and Politics of Production**

**WISERD/MBS/002**

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**June 2011**



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## **Abstract**

Audio walks have increasingly been adopted by the tourist and leisure sector as a way of introducing people to material and audio landscapes. By providing people with tracks that correspond to places set out on a map, people are taken on a journey around and through different worlds, listening to accounts, histories, stories and tales about the places they are walking through, allowing the encounter of the 'surprise of space' (Massey, 2005); those hidden, concealed, unobserved or forgotten aspects of the landscape. While there has been an explosion in recent years of walking and mobile methods (Anderson, 2004; Wylie, 2005; Moles, 2008), audio walks have yet to enter the methods toolbox in any great capacity. We argue in this short paper that audio walks can offer an interesting method for exploring the deep connections that exist between people and places and outline the practical ways in which they can be used in research, how they are used and why they might be used, informed by two different engagements with them as method and practice in work we have done.

### **What is an audio walk?**

Audio walks are closely related to the audio guide, which is often encountered at tourist sites in the form of headphones and audio devices. Audio guides take visitors on a personal tour of a site, wherein visitors listen to audio tracks that tell them interesting stories, facts and information about particular locations, objects or times. The audio guide is intended to offer alternative engagements with place by promoting more multisensory encounters with it. These encounters ask the participants to not only 'see' place, but to listen to its stories and sounds. In this way, the audio guide seeks to create a lived place, to which we can respond in more imaginative and emotional ways.

The audio walk develops these ideas, by inviting participants to follow a guided walk through place (Butler, 2007). Walks can be circular or linear and of varying length, but they are all composed of various 'stops', where participants listen to audio tracks that tell them something about their location. These audio tracks can be stories, memories, histories and facts, and they can be narrated by a guide or told through multiple voices. The aim, though, is to capture and articulate place in different ways, in ways that give voice to local knowledges and which reveal the deep and complex connections people have with place.

### **The Purpose of Audio Walks**

Audio walks are, perhaps, most popular as tools for promoting and consuming place ([www.ipodcitywalks.com](http://www.ipodcitywalks.com)). They are seen as enabling visitors to go 'off the beaten track' and explore the quirkier and more unusual aspects of a place, doing so at their own pace (<http://www.footnotesaudiowalks.co.uk/>). Yet, it is not only tourism that drives the creation of audio walks, they are also being developed as creative and artistic interventions in, and responses to, the landscape (Savage, 2009; Pinder, 2001), and as ways of creating multisensory and culturally rich experiences (Butler, 2006). What all these producers share, however, is a belief that audio walks can offer a somewhat different experience of place, an experience that is deeper, more unique and more affective.

Audio walks, then, have a certain power, a power that lies in their ability to reveal the rich alterity of place. They provide not only an opportunity to share alternative social knowledges and heighten spatial literacy, but they allow us to encounter the surprise of space (Massey, 2005); those hidden, concealed, unobserved or forgotten aspects of the urban landscape. Audio walking is an act of exploration; it enables us to access the secret, often marginalised, yet everyday textures of the city (Pinder, 2005, De Certeau, 1988). It is this that makes the audio walk so appealing, for it encourages us to see and engage with the world anew.

## **The Practice of Audio Walking**

While audio walks have grown in popularity there exist few examples of community involvement in the production, or ownership, of audio walks. Instead, it is an approach that has been the preserve of artists (Savage, 2009; Pinder, 2001), academics (Butler, 2007), private companies ([www.ipodcitywalks.com](http://www.ipodcitywalks.com)) and television programmes such as 'Coast' and 'Greatest Cities of the World'. A particular characteristic of many of these walks is their narration and production by those who are outsiders to the area, and this raises questions over the authenticity of a place's representation: who is speaking for these areas, how are they speaking for the area, how are they presenting it and to whom? There is also a sharp social geography to many of these audio walks, for they tend to centre on iconic and extraordinary urban landscapes: city centres, historic quarters, and aesthetically pleasing areas. The more everyday, less manicured spaces and the mundane and ordinary movements through them attract far less attention.

This short paper is informed by the authors' experiences in two projects, both of which had audio walks as the outcome, though the practise of their construction was quite diverse. In the first one, undertaken with BBC Wales and for the Welsh National Eisteddfod, the walks were to be consumed by visitors to the event, they were BBC badged (along with our affiliations) and had at their core the aim of drawing (positive) attention to aspects of Ebbw Vale that would not be captured through other media. The way these walks were constructed highlighted many of the stresses that working in partnership with a body such as the BBC brought; interview technique, editing allowances and the construction of the walks' narratives all diverged from the social science tradition we were embedded in. However the necessity to produce a 'product' that was polished enough for this particular audience and the ownership of the editing software and time to edit the walks (both resided with the BBC) meant that the power of production lay with the broadcasting corporation.

In the second project, we understood further what we wanted from the walks and we were eager to shift the power of editing and representation to the participants as much as we could – our aim with these walks was to afford the participants the chance to tell us about their places, with whatever theme interested them, and constructed in whatever way they wanted. Even within this open paradigm, the potential for these walks was constrained in certain ways: they could only be a certain length because the capacity of the participants to produce walks longer than about half an hour given the resources was questionable, as well as issues with uploading audio files that are very large to websites and servers. So, when we framed the project to our young people, we stressed that it was their agenda, their vision, but that we could supply some guidance as to the practice of the production of audio walks.

However, as advisors we influenced; the young participants didn't have the experience or the time to fully engage with the process, and as such we found ourselves making suggestions, telling them what we thought would work best, highlighting problems with particular courses of action while facilitating others. In essence, we came to shape the output. Given that it was us who had conceptualised the project, though in consultation with youth teams in the area but not with the young people who were participating, it was perhaps always going to be the case that our imagined outcomes would tally with those that did occur. In addition, restrictions such as time, on both our part and that of our participants, and money, meant that the project's shape was going to conform to a particular output. It was our programme of work and the young people were enrolled to help us complete it. The extent to which they could bring their programmes into this project was debatable, and indeed it is this question that makes us consider in the next section, the politics of participatory methods using our audio walks as a vehicle for discussing it.

### **The Politics of Audio Walks: empowerment and participation**

Audio walks can potentially be a tool for community empowerment as they can function as a way of articulating local or counter knowledges, of developing a sense of ownership over place, of exploring one's position in time and space and as a repository of, and for, the community. By taking audio walks into the community there is a real opportunity to open up the alternative spaces of a place: the spaces that are off the tourist trail, but through which people's daily lives are constituted and given meaning. Taking audio walking into the community, however, is not unproblematic. Here issues of representation and participation arise.

Involving communities in the research process as equal and active partners is a key component of participatory approaches (Sanderson and Kindon, 2004; Pain and Kindon, 2007), yet this is not always as empowering and participatory as it appears, and indeed, as discussed below, by attempting a project that professed to value these things, the very ideas underpinning them came under intense scrutiny for us (cf. Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). The term participation is straightaway somewhat loaded, for it suggests some kind of power relationship between a convenor and a participant. Can all people be participants or does someone need to take control? In working with the young people in the creation of audio walks it was our intention that the walks would be in and of the community. We had a vision that we would 'abdicate authority' in order to hear the authentic stories and voices of the area. While we didn't occupy a naïve position that presupposed engagement, empowerment and understanding, we did want to hand as much of the power and planning in the project over to the young participants. As we came to discover, the existence of a project and a

public does not translate into participation. Our young people, for instance, required some kind of justification for their programme of work; the programme of the 'public' and the programme of the project needed to be brought into line, or at least parallel foci needed to be agreed upon. Without this, the participants were not inspired to take part and the project researchers were battling to 'keep' participants. Participation, then, requires ongoing nurturing; it requires encouragement, persuasion and maintenance by those who are the author of the project, and as Jupp (2007) observes, this tends to be the academic.

Participation also requires some form of empowerment. Participatory approaches have come in for sustained critique over their claims to empower participants (Kothari, 2001; Mohan, 2001), and while empowerment is now seen as something situated rather than generic (Kesby, 2005) it continues to be understood as a project output. Yet, as we discovered, the will to participate seemingly depends upon empowerment. Working on the audio walk project in Ebbw Vale we found that those who were most willing to get involved with the project were those who already had some kind of visible and recognised role within the community. Whether they were local business owners, respected historians or community workers, most of those we spoke to had a strong local voice. Even where we spoke to those who did not, perhaps, fit this mould our conversations often resulted from the suggestions and invitations of local stakeholders. Our work with the young people was similarly situated, for we were working with a group of people who were already engaged, through a youth centre, with a community of young people.

To frame the projects in a language of empowerment, then, seems a little misguided and even somewhat conceited, for how are we seeking to empower our participants? Is it that we recognise certain forms of power as more valuable, more useful or more powerful than others? As Kothari (2001) and Mohan (2001) both argue, it tends to be western forms of power that are seen as central to empowerment, but there is also, in many participatory projects a certain educational and socio-economic inflection to notions of empowerment. Academics and professionals often see themselves, and their skills, knowledges and understandings, as empowered and seek to replicate and embed these norms and values among their participants (Kesby, 2005; Jupp, 2007).

This is, perhaps, most visible in our desire to give voice to those communities we regard as marginalised. Working both in Ebbw Vale and with our young people our projects were located in areas of socio-economic deprivation (WIMD, 2008) and part of the rationale for the audio walks was that they would give voice to these areas, for the local knowledges that exist within these places often go unrecognised and unheard. Yet, what and who constitutes

this knowledge? Knowledge is not an innate 'thing', it is created and defined as such, and within participatory projects it is often the academic who determines what it is, and what it is not (Pain and Francis, 2003; Jupp, 2007). In our work with young people we chose our study area and in the BBC project we identified our participants, and both practises made us complicit in the shaping of the knowledge produced.

Often the shaping of knowledge is not explicit or intentional; rather, it is driven by the need for certain skills, the requirements of the end-product or the processes of the project. Take the audio walk; it is not a simple creation. It requires research into the history, culture and society of place, it requires the identification of a route, the tying of stories to this route, the creation of an accompanying map and the interviewing or recording of local stories and histories. The structure of the audio walk process, therefore, determines to a certain extent the kind of knowledges it is capable of conveying. Knowledges that cannot be articulated, or which cannot be compartmentalised into this structure may not be afforded the status of knowledge or maybe transformed beyond all recognition (Jupp, 2007).

### **The Production of Audio Walks: representation and authenticity**

The above brings us to questions of representation, for who and what are the audio walk reflecting? Participatory approaches are often endorsed as ways of researching people's relations with and accounts of space, place and environment (McIntyre, 2003; Kindor, 2003; Often, 2003). One of the defining features of this set of approaches is its desire to include those who would previously be construed as research subjects as research participants. In so doing, participatory approaches are designed to be context-specific: they forefront local conditions and local knowledges in the production of situated, rich and layered social understandings. The intention is to create more inclusive, democratic and authentic understandings of place that are authored by those inside, rather than outside, place.

Although a laudable aim, participatory approaches are also problematic for whose voices come to speak for place? Participatory approaches often result in very 'thick' descriptions of place, where, in 'representing the voices of a neighbourhood, one also represents the neighbourhood itself (Mattingly, 2001: 452). Those who engage with a project become the voice of place; it is they who come to define it, determine it and speak for it, with the result that a few can come to represent or mis-represent place for the many. In identifying our public in Ebbw Vale, for instance, we tended to be directed towards those who were recognised stakeholders within the local community. Heritage Officers, local historians and business representatives were all individuals who were keen to press Ebbw Vale's public image. It was more difficult to access, identify or persuade less articulate, visible or reticent



members of the community to get involved. As a result, 'thick' descriptions of place can obscure diversity, subsume differences and mask subtleties.

While the knowledge created may not be representative it is recognised as being locally, rather than externally, authored, and this serves to recalibrate the relationship between academics and communities, creating a more equitable and inclusive knowledge economy. Academia places great stress on local knowledge, for it demonstrates its attunement and responsiveness to society. Yet, what is local knowledge? Many of the conversations we had in both Ebbw Vale and with our young people were quite routine. There was a sense in which our presence and status as academics was shaping the ideas and responses of our participants – were they telling us what they thought we wanted to hear, or were they speaking from the heart? For instance, in talking with an ex-steelworker in Ebbw Vale he was very conscious of presenting his old employment in very professional and 'objective' terms. It was only as we were leaving and had put away all our recording equipment that we began to hear more colourful and personal stories of his old job.

As an outsider, then, it is very easy to shape the nature of what is produced and what passes as local knowledge. At times it can feel frustrating because it may appear that we are not being 'given' what we think local knowledge is, but as Sanderson and Kindon warn, 'participatory processes produce knowledge specific to their process and participants rather than "uncover" "local knowledges"' (2004: 125; their emphasis). This suggests that knowledge is never waiting to be discovered, but is rather the result of the coming together of specific times, spaces and people. Consequently, to conflate participatory approaches with local knowledge is a little misguided. Instead, it is more helpful to think about the practise of knowledge creation, for this draws attention to the politics of participation.

### **The Purpose of Audio Walks**

In light of this it is useful to address the purpose of audio walks, for what drives their knowledge creation? Audio walks tend to be designed to be consumed. As such there is a certain expectation to present, sell and image the area in a particular ways (Ingamells, 2006). Thus, while we may stress 'local knowledge' we must recognise that this knowledge will often be driven by the end product, which in the case of Ebbw Vale was a series of audio walks that would be showcased to the nation at the National Eisteddfod. We were working in partnership with different groups and their affiliation to particular understandings or imaginings of the town had to be co-opted into the final product. Yet, in creating a product that would be presented under the BBC banner and which was designed to be consumed, there was the possibility that our end product might contravene or misconstrue the views

expressed by the participants. Thus, the ways in which the audio walk is positioned, understood, consumed and represented must be clarified before undertaking the work.

In this briefing paper we have raised some of the issues and challenges that have arisen in the practise of two, quite different, audio walk projects. These audio walks projects pivot upon public engagement and participation, yet these are two-way but rarely symmetrical encounters. As such, the politics of their practise demands our attention. In addressing issues of who participates, how and why and with what outcomes we have highlighted the persistent difficulties of framing such projects in a language of empowerment. Taking all these issues into account, issues that all methods must grapple with we believe, we are still convinced by the potentials of audio walks as a method, but we call for methodological considerations to accompany their choice of methods. The way this method is framed and what it purports to achieve must be critically examined and the outputs must be understood as knowledges produced in a particular way.

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