

Recording the environment: creating an archive of ambience

Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute, India

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This paper deals with archiving locative environmental sound; the intention is to propose the formation of a networked archive for environmental and natural sound by means of collecting locative audio media, particularly from developing countries like India where the audiovisual environment is under severe transformation.

Introduction

“In suggesting that ubiquitous Internet access would change our relationship with place by overlaying a second virtual world over the physical one, the Web movement was a seminal source for locative media’s ambitions.” (Mark Tutters and Kazys Varnelis, *Beyond Locative Media*, 2006).

We encounter our immediate environment in different ways; they are not only physical experiences, but become increasingly mediated in the contemporary context of pervasive digital media. A mobile phone user records sound and image from a place and sends it to another user out-of-place; one environment gets merged with another as we overhear a place on cell phones. We perceive place in YouTube videos, Google maps and closed-circuit surveillance television as we move, migrate and navigate from one environment to another, more virtually than we do physically. In the contemporary world of ubiquitous computing, locative environment requires to be perceived and understood in the context of digital media.

Perceiving a place and understanding its environment involves a number of factors; they are, however, fundamentally based on a dynamic interaction with the place. In view of communication theory, these interactions are medially locative and grounded in a contextual perspective; that’s how the perception can be studied through a mediatory approach to understand the place in terms of its locative media contents and their archival documentation.

According to theories of audio media, a place consists of an infinite number of sound events (Rick Altman, 1992). A listener focuses on certain events, and information extracted from a wide range of possibilities is essentially a partial image of the place. The cognitive process of selection and elimination is largely dependent on the sonic context of the recording strategy of the listener. The acoustic interaction with a place doesn’t limit itself in receiving aural information, but responds with an effort in archiving the audio media content prior to its mediation into an assortment of sonic events by recording methodologies.

Aural information of an environment is communicated on digital media by sound recording that transcends place to relocate it in the digital domain as recorded sound; subsequently formulated as a repository of sonic events collected from the place as sounds disembodied from the locative source; the repository is mediated in the digital domain as an archive of locative audio content which can be a mediated representation of the place as sonic construct. In this whole process the place is re-contextualized on sonic terms while getting relocated on the digital domain by means of archiving and curatorial dissemination of locative media content.

The questions arise: how an environment is translated in the digital domain or how an actual environment is mediated into a constructed sonic environment; and whether the methodology of recording can relocate vivid sonic characteristics and physical identity of the locative environment into the digital media environment. These questions should be answered within the theoretical perspective of locative media and sonic interaction, based on a methodology of gathering aural information by sound recording and subsequent archiving in the digital domain.

Sound connects us to the environment we belong to; this is the basic tenet of communication theory in terms of audio. Sound Media and Aural (Acoustic) Communication are relatively younger fields of study, although lately there has been a flux of academic activity in these areas. In the contemporary emergence of New Media, forms like soundscape and locative audio narrative are getting wider attention as sound media practices in the digital domain. Sound and listening are used as tools to narrate phenomena like place/space relationships, urban experience and urban environment incorporating media recording and design methods, while these phenomena are getting rephrased on the virtual space of digital media and ubiquitous computing. However, there is an evident gap between these practices, and theoretical pedagogies of communication and media studies. An interdisciplinary approach can bridge this gap between theory and practice in sound media.

The topic

Sounds are disappearing from our environment nearly every day. New sounds are replacing them – sounds that are monochromatic in texture and quality – initiating transfiguration within the sound world and turning it into a homogenized sound-space. However, the spectre of change has become all pervasive in the contemporary world severely reorganized by phenomena like globalization, urbanization, digitization and convergence. These phenomena are noticeably evident in developing countries such as India, where the places are rapidly transforming into industrial belts, special economic zones and landscapes of gross urbanization. The audiovisual world changes accordingly, creating lapses and lacunas within cultural memory.

Environmental sound or ambience of places is significantly affected by the processes of development: subtle and discreet sound objects stop producing sound under the pressure of a new hegemonic industrial soundscape. These sounds are gradually disappearing from the aural landscape as well as from collective tradition and associated sound culture. And this causes serious imbalance in the ecology of the places concerned. If we concentrate on a few chosen areas, these observations can be articulated with ease.

Case study 1. Tumbani

'Tumbani: a landscape in metamorphoses' – a locative media archiving project. Supported by the Prince Claus Fund, this is a project in progress to collect and archive locative media contents in terms of sound recording, video and photograph from a place called Tumbani, in eastern India, which is under severe change due to industrialization, hasty urbanization and development. The project started field recording from 2005 onwards to formulate an archive of environmental media to observe and study transformation within the audiovisual environment of the place. Tumbani is an area in the Bengal-Bihar border region of North-Eastern India, an area changing from a greener pasture into one of the busiest industrial belts of a resurgent India. The place is decaying as an intricate landscape and transforming into a homogenized surface, making the changes significant to grasp against the background of its traditionally rich history of audiovisual diversity. The narrative of Tumbani thus contributes to the overwhelming account of economic growth taking place in a developing India. But what remains unanswered is the effect these processes impose on the natural habitat and the ecological balance of the sound environment. As industrial growth accelerates, the acoustic space slowly changes from a rich environmental variety into a monolithic, static and oppressive industrial soundscape provided by machineries and technologies that intruded into the landscape initiating transfiguration of the texture, depth and tonal balance of an otherwise rich sound environment.

Case study 2. Kolkata

'Kolkata: a locative media study' is an observation through field recording and archival dissemination of locative media content into an audiovisual installation. The project has been commissioned by City One Minute Foundation and incorporates real-time recording of places to understand place-time-media relationships and the changing audiovisual

environment of an Indian city mediated by recording, archiving and curation. Recording has been done in the domains of video, still image and sound from four specific representative areas of the city during one hour of a twenty-four hour span. This includes digital recording with portable and handy recorders like mobile phones and flash-cards to map the places into a digital archive of locative media content, and subsequently curating into audiovisual pieces for installation.

These projects seek to address the larger issue of how the developing Indian landscape is undergoing hasty industrial growth and processes of sporadic urbanization, causing locative audiovisual content to disappear under a process of homogenization. If we listen to and analyze the recordings done in two successive years, 2006 and 2007, from the same area, we will find the volume of industrial noisescape on the rise in the overall soundtrack while sounds from the natural environments rapidly diminish. The list of disappearing sounds accumulates further as we conduct a thorough search of sound objects that stop producing sound. But the question is how the absence of a sound is influencing the cultural ecology. In the human habitat the effect of industrialization and urbanization is quite implicit, as the sounds of ancient rituals are replaced by the overwhelming sounds of television and radio; sounds of different indigenous, handmade and organic machineries are replaced by the electrical instrumentations introducing sounds of motors into many aspects of traditional life. The everyday ambience of a habitat is affected mostly in the following categories:

- Natural and environmental sound of everyday ambience
- Traditional objects and artefacts
- Insects, birds and other bio-diverse resources
- Household sounds
- Speech, dialects and oral resources.

Problem

The immediate question is how these sounds can be restored on recording media? How can an archive of endangered and extinct environmental sound be developed and maintained? How does an archive of environmental sound or locative ambience contribute to the ecological balance, and cultural integrity in the larger context?

We can consider the indigenous and personal archives created and maintained by the individual sound chroniclers, like field recordists, nature recordists and phonographers, who keep track of changing sounds. They are indeed forming a virtual repository, however discreetly, with their efforts in recording our environment with the help of digital recording gadgets and other digital media devices available with ease in the contemporary context of ubiquitous computing.

But these efforts are merely discreet, disorganized, personal, questionably amateurish, and haphazard. The recordings are mostly unprofessional, and prone to degenerate due to mismanagement. However, a sound that is yet to be recorded can fade away in this ever evaporating landscape of change, making it increasingly impossible to return to the sound source that eludes to be archived and kept for future reference.

Resolution

So the local and transient archives formed by these discreet sound recordings need to be networked as social hubs for exchange and access, and for raising awareness of archiving sounds from our surrounding environment and everyday atmosphere. This requires greater awareness of ambience as the repository of natural and ecological resources of the audiovisual heritage of places. The discreet efforts of individual media archiving need to be brought under one umbrella for organizational management. The organizational aim will be to further mediate the archive in terms of creating awareness in recording and archiving the immediate environment under change.

In today's world, when media is more flexible in its nature, we have immense possibilities to exploit its potential. With the advent of digital technology new media aesthetics have emerged. Inexpensive and easy-to-handle media recording devices have brought in fresh angles and varied forms in the field of media recording and archiving. It has spurred complex processes of convergence and hybrid expressions as well as methodologies of reinterpreting our own existence. At the same time existing and old media technologies and forms are being redefined and implemented towards understanding our contemporary realities in the new media domain.

Standing at this juncture it is very important to examine and understand the possibilities of media, especially its archival values. The archiving of everyday media allows us to reflect upon our social realities; criticize social injustices and discriminations prevailing in our society. It can also help us engage with and intervene in the continuous process of social transformation. Archiving everyday ambience and environmental media content can contribute to exploring the potential of media in collecting various elements, activities and candid moments of our daily lives. Such documentation and archival initiative not only keeps records of our contemporary transient audiovisual environment but it also creates an archive that is informal, dynamic and continuous. To address this issue, the organization of archival practice needs to be aimed at making the contributors aware of the archiving strategies – to practice how, as an activity, archiving can be used for keeping witness of our everyday actuality amid rapid change as mediated chronicles.

NaaD Media Collective is a cooperative endeavour to collect, archive and disseminate audiovisual media that are becoming extinct and endangered in a rapidly developing India. The indigenous and personal efforts to record and archive transient locative media content from the immediate environment are collectively represented by www.naadmedia.org. The archive is managed and maintained by individual audiovisual chroniclers, including amateur field recordists, hobby nature-recordists and local phonographers / photo-videographers, who keep track of changing sounds and images from this ever evaporating landscape. NaaD Media Collective intends to build a media repository by housing and organizing the contributions of volunteering media practitioners, ethnographers and students of media, to record the environment with indigenous efforts and to create spaces of archival dissemination of the found footage into media produce.

Methodology

As we approach recording audiovisual material from a place as locative media content, we might refer to “ubiquitous recording” as a methodology. The recording methodology incorporates handy digital devices capable of recording on the move. If we go through the development of media devices like mobile phones, we see rapid advances in terms of their recording capabilities. At the same time research funding on digital media storage systems and portability increases. Although the in-built microphones are still far from professional standards, ubiquitous recording, both video/still image and audio, in a mobile device will become a reality in the very near future.

In order to capture detailed aural information of a place based on comprehensive texture and depth, comprehensive audio fieldwork is necessary that includes field recording and digital archiving to retrieve locative AV content. Collected media content forms a digital repository (however discreet, in the sense of personal and disconnected archiving) for easy access of AV information to be used for locative media curation. A combination of recording techniques can achieve thorough collection and retrieval of locative audio content. For example, binaural microphones record the surrounding space, while a shotgun microphone chooses directional contexts of a sound environment; contact microphones or sensitive accelerometers capture minute vibrations emanating from a place. A combination of different microphones can capture inclusive aural information of a place in detail.

However, it's not only a technical or journalistic but also an aesthetic approach that's required to combine different recording techniques in order to mediate a particular place