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Broken Devices and New Opportunities

Re-imagining the tools of Qualitative Research

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My device is broken. After over a decade of faithful service my Sony Walkman Professional is motionless. One of the quirks of this machine is that it has no speaker: it is a reception device, not a broadcasting one. Its dumb ear caught me out on more than one occasion when I first put it to work. Failing to remember to bring some headphones to an interview to listen to the level and play back, I managed to record two hours of absolutely nothing. Soon I learned I didn't need to listen to the play back in order to check that it was working. Rather keeping a knowing eye on the lights of its VU meter was enough to check the recording level. A few months ago I loaded it with four AA batteries and pushed the record button but it failed to click into life, no flicker of red light on the meter, the record button pushed back against my thumb. I pushed it again and again - each time more frantically than the last - attempting a mechanical version of CPR in a desperate attempt to revive the beloved device from its state of technological arrest. All to no avail: it was and has remained dead.

I am of course making more of this for effect given the neat way my broken device connects with the issues raised in this book. Contained in the nostalgic attachment to a broken machine and the comfortable feel of its weathered case is something telling about the taken-for-granted norms of sociological craft. Over the past 50 years the habitual nature of our research practice has obscured serious attention to the precise nature of the devices used by social scientists (Platt 2002, Lee 2004). For qualitative researchers the tape-recorder became the prime professional instrument intrinsically connected to capturing human voices on tape in the context of interviews. David Silverman argues that the reliance on these techniques has limited the sociological imagination: "Qualitative researchers' almost Pavlovian tendency to identify research design with interviews has blinkered them to the possible gains of other kinds of data" (Silverman 2007: 42). The strength of this impulse is widely evident from the methodological design of undergraduate dissertations to multi-million pound research grant applications. The result is a kind of inertia, as Roger Stack argues: "It would appear that after the invention of the tape-recorder, much of sociology took a deep sigh, sank back into the chair and decided to think very little about the potential of technology for the practical work of doing sociology" (Stack 1998: 1.10).

In this talk I want to assess the advantages and the limitations of the tape-recorder as a sociological device. It may be that - like my well-

travelled machine - it is a device that has had its day. In keeping with other chapters, I argue that it is timely to re-think the way we work because of the unprecedented opportunities available in a digital age to change the nature of the craft of research. Before discussing these new possibilities I want to give an account of the emergence of my device.

The Rise of the Tape-recorder

It is hard to imagine today how social research would have been before the tape-recorder was invented, such is the nature of its predominance. It became closely connected with the reliance on interviews as a way of knowing or inquiring into social life. As Ray Lee shows, the sociological interview came to prominence before there were sound devices able to record what research respondents said (Lee 2004). Lee argues that the interview in its modern form had emerged by the early 1920s. However, the documentation of verbatim accounts of what informants said was a far from straightforward matter. Through a fascinating discussion of the Chicago school, sociologists like Clifford Shaw Lee show that interviews were documented by a stenographer - a development that paralleled court room stenography - who was often hidden behind a screen (Lee 2004: 872). This meant that the interviewee would have to travel to the researcher's office where the stenographer could capture verbatim interview responses.

Thomas Edison invented phonographic recording in 1877 but these early devices were ill-suited to pick up individual human voices. Early sound recording equipment was bulky and cumbersome and it wasn't until the invention of magnetic recording and transistorisation that small useage tape recorders became widely available to social researchers. Ray Lee points out that citations of the use of tape-recorders in sociological journals begin around 1951 (Lee 2004: 877). Early recorders using open reel magnetic tape were large, including the deceptively named EMI 'Midget.' They were portable but cumbersome. Robert Perks has shown that oral historians favoured reel-to-reel recording because of its superior sound quality and the wonderfully named Uher Report Monitor became the standard recorder through the 1970s (Perks, 1999).

Amongst sociologists though there was some initial scepticism about the usefulness of the tape-recorder. Michael Young, driving force behind the Institute of Community Studies and co-author with Peter Willmott of the sociological classic *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957) preferred not to use a tape-recorder. In the interviews conducted for the book for Young and Willmott preferred instead to take notes: "We didn't think that tape-recorders added very much" (Young 2010: 1). Dennis Marsden, co-author of *Education and the Working class* (Jackson and Marsden 1966), and an early pioneer of community studies commented, "We almost prided ourselves in that

method [of interview note taking]" (Marsden 2010: 14). However, in Marsden's later work he favoured recording interviews. He told Paul Thompson: "And you do get something different, you do get something which is heightened and more vivid and less hesitant, and smoothed out, by using those little tape-recorders" (Marsden 2010: 14).

The invention of the audio cassette in the 1960s - initially introduced by Phillips - transformed the tape-recorder into an essential sociological device. Here there is a close association between information, technological development and the military. Ray Lee points out that tape-recorders were one of the first non-military devices to use transistors and in a sense they are the cusp of the adaption of transistorised military technologies for domestic use (Lee 2004: 878). The portable, unobtrusive tape-recording was now affordable and practical. The invention of the Sony Walkman in 1979 and then the Professional Walkman WM-D6C in 1984 made it possible to make high quality interview recordings with groups as well as individuals. However, the emergence of the tape-recorder, as Lee points out, is part of the development of a particular structure of knowledge production. Rob Perks argues - in a the context of oral history - a consensus emerged that favoured one-to-one interviews with a tape-recorder being discreetly placed and 'active listening' without too many interruptions from the interviewer to enable ease of transcription: "This mantra of fundamental techniques (which now

seem self-evident to many of us) actually emerged over 30 years” (Perks forthcoming).

In 1956 Everett Hughes wrote: “Sociology has become the science of the interview” (Hughes 1971: 507). The interview had become the favoured digging tool for mining into people’s lives and the tape-recorders in the sociologist’s bag evidence of a vocational disposition akin to the place of the stethoscope in the professional persona of a medical doctor (Rice 2010, 2008). The tape-recorder provided the means to “collect voices” then transcribe and re-circulate them. For example, in the aftermath of the Cuban revolution C Wright Mills wrote *Listen, Yankee* (1960) – a million-selling popular book – that was written in the voice of a young Cuban revolutionary. Dan Wakefield wrote that in August 1960 Mills went to Cuba: “equipped with his latest beloved gadget, a tape-recorder; on his return, working with furious energy, he wrote *Listen, Yankee* in six weeks’ time” (Wakefield 2000: 12-13).

Mills’ example is a cautionary tale. The desire to “give voice” is a lasting impetus for sociologists as they reach for the tape-recorder. Mills interviewed Che Guevara and Fidel Castro and the popularity of the book also brought public pressure - in many respects Mills’ tape-recorder was the source of his undoing. *Listen, Yankee* had the kind of public impact so much sought after today in the discussion of public sociology and research relevance (Burawoy 2005, Grant *et al*

2009). In Mills' case though that impact was fatal. Mills was scheduled in December 1960 to debate the Cuban Revolution with a major liberal figure, A. A. Berle Jr, on national television. The night before the debate Mills suffered a heart attack. In January 1961 a libel lawsuit was filed against Mills and the publisher of *Listen, Yankee* for \$25 million damages. The pressure was fatal and a little over a year later Mills died after his second heart attack. His friend Harvey Swados wrote after his death: "In his last months Mills was torn between defending *Listen, Yankee* as a good and honest book, and acknowledging publicly for the first time in his life that he had been terribly wrong" (Swados 1967: 207). The danger - a mortal one in Mills' case - is of reproducing the voices of respondents as if they simply correspond to a truth beyond the telling. As Atkinson and Silverman assert: "We take at face value the image of the self-revealing speaking subject at our peril" (Atkinson and Silverman 1997: 322).

There is also a sleight of hand in the claim that the authenticity of a person can be rendered through a faithful transcription of their voice on tape. It also confers on the person coming to the interview a self that is as much a historical product as it is an authentic biography to be disclosed in the telling. The tape-recorder can be interpreted as a surveillance device: "Caution - be careful what you say!" Loquacious people are silenced by the expectation that they are about to go on record as a single, individuated voice. For Atkinson and Silverman

the speaking self emerges within what they call the "interview society" - a stylised and particular mode of narrating life. It requires: "first, the emergence of the self as a proper object of narration. Second, the technology of the confessional - the friend not only of the policeman but of the priest, the teacher, and the 'psy' professional. Third, mass media technologies give a new twist to the perennial polarities of the private and the public, the routine and the sensational" (Atkinson and Silverman 1997: 315). They suggest that the well-intentioned desire to give voice to our subjects and pervasiveness of the tape-recorder and the interview amongst qualitative researchers draws us into the structure of the "interview society". The error is that we mistake the socially shaped account for the authentic voice of truth.

Roland Barthes in a wonderful collection of his interviews called *The Grain of the Voice* commented in his introduction on precisely what's at stake in the interview situation:

"We talk, a tape recording is made, diligent secretaries listen to our words to refine, transcribe, and punctuate them, producing a first draft that we can tidy up afresh before it goes on to publication, the book, eternity. Haven't we just gone through the 'toilette of the dead'? We have embalmed our speech like a mummy, to preserve it forever. Because we really must last a bit

longer than our voices; we must, through the comedy of writing, inscribe ourselves somewhere.

“This inscription, what does it cost us? What do we lose? What do we win?” Roland Barthes (1985: 3).

Barthes alerts us here to the issue of what the interview costs. Do we create society in our accounts of it rather than reflect it? (Osbourne and Rose 1999). If we lose, or let go of the idea, that we can access the intimate interior of a person through the interview perhaps we gain other ways of thinking about what might be precious and valuable in what interviews produce or contain (Rapley 2004). Silverman argues that even “manufactured” interview data can be useful if understood as an “*activity* awaiting analysis and not as a picture awaiting a commentary” (Silverman 2007: 56). In other words, we should see the interview as a place where social forms are staged rather than a resource to understand the nature of society beyond. For example, in Beverley Skeggs, Helen Wood and Nancy Thumim’s study of class and audience understandings of reality TV, interviews provided a “mode of articulation” infused with classed and racialised moral judgements rather than “observable realities”. In a sense, reality TV provided the object on and through which modes of class judgement, distinction and taste were rehearsed. They conclude: “Research practices do not simply ‘capture’ or reveal the world out there; they generate the conditions of possibility that frame the object of analysis” (Skeggs *et al* 2008: 20).

One consequence of the critique of the "interview society" might be to give up on the interview as a tool and consign the tape-recorder to the junkyard of outmoded devices. I don't think so. Interviews may well 'manufacture' data but the point that Skeggs and her colleagues point out is that we can identify the social resources, judgments and tools used to 'make society' as they attempt to make sense of their place within it.

As Howard Becker has commented, all representations - including those offered in an interview - are perfect... for something (Becker 2007). The first step in establishing what the account perfectly reveals is to think through the analytical status conferred on the account itself. These questions are settled not in terms of method but decided theoretically in the analytical framework conferred on what is caught on tape. A interviewer committed to Freudian psychoanalysis will be listening for hidden meanings, a phenomenologist inspired by Merleau-Ponty would be attentive to how the speaker's lifeworld was expressed, while a Foucauldian poststructuralist may not be interested in the specific interviewee as a subject at all but rather take note of the discourses and forms of power that shape the words articulated. Returning to Barthes' question, perhaps letting go of the idea that interviews capture a deep inner truth about the speaker can alert us to how modes of authority are staged and socially performed for the benefit of the interviewer and her/his tape-recorder. This

links to the second reason Everett Hughes refers to sociology as the "science of the interview".

Sociological Sociability and Stolen Devices

For Hughes the interview encounter is key because the subject matter of sociology is interaction:

"It is the art of sociological sociability, the game which we play for the pleasure of savouring its subtleties. It is our flirtation with life, our eternal affair, played hard to win, but played with detachment and amusement which gives us, win or lose, the spirit to rise up and interview again and again" (Hughes 1971: 508).

There is a lot that might be said about this passage. It contains a certain kind of portrait of sociologists as bemused and yet affected, connected to the social world through the interview encounter and at the same time remote and aloof. The tape-recorder here issues an invitation, a technological licence to go out in the world and talk to people. Kvale and Brinkmann argue that we can contrast the idea of the interviewer as 'mining' the secret truths of the people lives with the idea of the researcher as a 'traveller' recalling the original Latin definition of conversation as 'wandering together with' (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 48). This conception puts in the foreground the

exchange of views captured on tape and the socially produced nature of all data.

Returning to my lapsed tape-recorder, I realise that it has been my companion in sociological sociability. Perhaps that is why I was so sad about its demise. It kept me company in encounters with villains and heroines: from the leader of the British National Party to brave opponents to racism, it has provided a physical pretext for conversations with great musicians, athletes, writers, artists, poets and indeed sociologists (Back 1996, Back, Crabbe and Solomos, 2001, Ware and Back 2002, Duneier and Back 2006; Hall and Back 2009). It's been lots of other things as well. It has produced a record of sociological encounters within a shared time. These encounters are less eternal truths but one-off occasions where life itself is staged. I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter the occasion when my tape-recorder recorded two hours of absolutely nothing during an interview. It had been a rich and brilliant telling of a life and my companion had taken me on quite an odyssey. I immediately set up another interview date but the second version was different, more cautious, less free flowing and more inhibited. The lesson here is that while there may be consistencies in accounts there are also profound variations in the performances of self that should warn us against making simplistic truth claims. However, I do want to argue that the surface of sonic vitality recorded on our devices has a value that transcription alone cannot capture.

There is something deeply poignant about those cassette boxes full of auditory life. My office is full of hundreds and hundreds of them. There have been moments when I have been left in possession of recordings of interviewees whose lives have been cut short. I remember a young football fan I interviewed in the 1990s called Carl Prosser. We talked in a local pub for three hours about the triumphs and tribulations of being a devotee of Millwall Football Club. He died in his early 30s. I was holding a full three hours of his emphatic talking, jokes alongside reflections on serious political matters. I had unwittingly become the custodian of his trace in life and the auditory imprint of the person he was. Through a mutual friend I returned the tape and the copy of his voice to his family and his mother. Here the value of the interview might be different conceived as containing an inventory of traces of life passed in living.

I think my tape-recorder has also been my protector, a kind of sociological shield in situations when I felt at risk or under attack. There is something about having the tape-recorder in the midst of a room full of fascists or people who have histories of violent racism that feels like being in possession of a technological guardian. The device captures the soundscape of the zone of recording. There have been times when I have been threatened with legal action for libel. Having participants admitting or saying incriminating things on tape is protection here in a very direct sense.

While I want to defend the value of the humble tape-recorder, I want to argue that we need to break with our dependence on it. Our addiction to the tape-recorder has limited our attentiveness to the world. This in part is because there lingers the presumption that if it is not on tape it does not exist. In 1967 Ned Polsky in his classic collection *Hustlers, Beats and Other* anticipated these limitations:

“Successful field research depends on the investigator’s trained abilities to look at people, listen to them, think and feel with them, talk with them rather than at them. It does *not* depend fundamentally on some impersonal apparatus, such as a camera or tape-recorder...” (Polsky 1998 [1967]: 119).

We don’t have to share Polsky’s antipathy to gadgets to acknowledge that the reliance on sound recorders has confined our attentiveness to the mere transcription of voices from tape to text.

The tape recorder has been used outside the context of the interview. Anthropologist Jack Goody’s used recording devices to enhance field accounts of ritual and ceremonial events. During the 1950s the ethnographer had only pencil and paper available for recording myths in fieldnotes. The result was that the performance of myths had to either be translated in situ or recited to the ethnographer at a later point outside of the ceremonial context. The result was that anthropologists generally produced just one version of a myth for the ethnographic record. Goody in his short essay ‘The anthropologist

and the audio recorder' (Goody 2010) noted that taping changed all that. In the sixties with the advent of the portable recorder ethnographers could take them into the ritual context and myths could be captured in performance and translated at a later point. This made it possible to examine the variations and contradictions and also record the relationship between the audience and the performers. Ethnographers could analyse the significance of variation as well as common repeated patterns. In short, the tape recorder enabled the myth to be brought to life and rendered as a dynamic cultural form and not a fixed text.

If we start to think more imaginatively about the potential of devices to re-invent the nature of recording it is possible to think beyond the established arrangement where the tape-recorder is in the hands of the researcher and is merely directed at people who have to respond. Our devices can be borrowed or stolen. Anthropologist Tobias Hecht took his tape-recorder into the field in Brazil only to have it commandeered by the young people who make the streets their home (Hecht 1998). Hecht decided to let it go, allowing the young people to become observers of their own lives. The young people conducted 'officinas de radio' or radio workshops in which they intuitively asked all kind of questions that would have never occurred to the anthropologist.

The days of the tape-recorder might be over but I am not suggesting that we give up on interviews but rather see them as one technique amongst many. Digital recording has opened a whole new set of possibilities beyond simply doing away with the inconvenience of relying on tapes. Thinking of sociology as more than the 'science of the interview' offers the opportunity to widen the researcher's attentiveness to social life itself.

Sound and the Sociological Imagination

Mike Savage and Roger Burrows suggest that empirical sociology is facing a crisis (Savage and Burrows 2007). Academic research is increasingly overshadowed by the capacity of industry and commerce to know patterns of behaviour and taste in more sophisticated ways than sociologists and social researchers. Implicit in their argument is the charge that sociologists have been complacent. Once methodological innovators, we have been outpaced methodologically by "knowing capitalism" (Thrift 2005) and government agencies and the security services who have developed sophisticated digital measures of human behaviour and social relationships (Savage 2009). I want to suggest that part of the opportunity we have now is to enliven our methodological creativity but also to extend the scope of the "sociological imagination" (Mills 1959) in the 21st century.

If we stop listening only to 'voices' then we can reanimate the idea of description and attention. This also links to the appeal to place greater emphasis on "naturally occurring data" (Potter 2002, Silverman 2007) not produced or manufactured by the researcher. The example I want to develop in the final part of this chapter - thinking through sound - offers one such opportunity. This might be summarised as a shift from being concerned only with 'voice' to an attention to soundscape and sound image. A fundamental lesson in Murray Shafer's seminal book *Tuning the world* (1977) is the merit to be found in slowing down modes of analytic attention, to notice that which is looked past and take seriously the soundtrack of the social background. As Howard Becker has commented, this is a matter of noticing what is: "happening when nothing is happening" (Becker, 2007: 267). At the same time, it is also concerned with being attentive to the ways in which the keynote sounds of, say, urban life contribute to the felt environments of cities. These sounds like the sirens of the police cars have *affordances* and invite imaginative links between the policing of cities, everyday life and the impact of the war on terror (Back 2007: 117-124; see also, Goodman 2010).

In particular the work connected with CRESSON, Grenoble (Centre de Recherche sur l'Espace Sonore [Research For Sonic Space]) founded by sociologists together with musicologist Jean Francois Augoyard provides a rich methodological precedent. CRESSON has been active for over 30 years and it has provided a research base for

some of the most interesting figures in the field such as Pascal Amphoux, Olivier Balay, Grégoire Chelkoff, Jean-Paul Thibaud and Henry Torgue. Much of this work is directly relevant to the argument suggested here (Amphoux 1991a, 1991b; Thibaud & Grosjean 2001). For example, in 1989 Pascal Amphoux and Martine Leroux published an in-depth study entitled “Le bruit, la plainte et le voisin’ (Noise, complaint and neighbours) which developed innovative measures for the sonic environment. Augoyard & Torgue’s *Sonic Experience: A Guide to Everyday Sounds* (2005) outlines a sophisticated glossary of sonic effects that introduce ways of naming otherwise incommunicable aspects of listening experience that is “halfway between the universal and the singular” (Augoyard & Torgue 2005: 9). For example, *sharaawadji* is the unexpected perception of beauty or a “rapture of imagination” with “no discernible order or arrangement” (Augoyard & Torgue 2005: 117). The term was first encountered by European explorers in China but is transposed to the “worrisome yet beautiful strangeness” of the city where multiple and cacophonous sounds – containing rupture and dynamic tension – can produce or create a kind of sublime pleasure. Augoyard & Torgue offer a poetic and rich analytical language to communicate otherwise unnamed sensations and listening experiences.

Thinking with sound in this way invites a sociological sensibility close to George Perec’s wonderfully eccentric experiments with

cataloguing that which is all around us and yet unnoticed (Perec 1997). For Perec the task is:

“to describe what’s left: what isn’t usually noted down, what isn’t noticed, what has no importance: what happens when nothing is happening, just the weather, people, cars, clouds” (quoted in Becker 2007: 266).

The police siren, the children laughing in the street, the jet plane’s moan overhead along with the crowing birdsong, the sounds of movement of rubber on tarmac, of internal combustion are invitations to develop a different kind of sociological imagination attentive to the rhythm and aesthetics of life.

My 1910 edition of the Oxford Dictionary defines “device”:
“something devised contrived, sometimes with good, usually with evil intent.” Or as an “emblem intended to represent a family, person, action, or quality.” These kinds of antecedent meanings are interesting in that they predate the notion of technological devices that are current today. These meanings foreground the notion that devices are representations. They are not simply correspondences to the real. They are facsimiles, they are copies like the tapes themselves loaded in my beloved Sony Professional Walkman. In this sense I think James Clifford is right to warn that in order to return to realism you have to leave it in the first place (Clifford 1986: 25). The devices

create objects that are productive of the social and an appreciation of this productivity – more than this I want to suggest an embrace of this productive/creative dimension – might help enable an encounter with ‘the real’ without a naïve realism slipping in through the back door. The recordings made by the sound device provide the illusion of ‘being there’. If we leave behind the simple idea that they ‘capture’ the real but instead produce a realist imaginative object then they may provide a different kind of possibility for social understanding or revelation.

Working with sound artists Paul Halliday and John Drever I have been recording the soundscapes that surround the immediate urban landscape where I work at Goldsmiths, University of London. With Paul I have wandered through the multicultural agora of Deptford Market recording the sounds we found there. It is a strange sight watching Paul with headphones around his neck wandering through the crowded market waving his wand-like directional microphone at the ebb and flow of Saturday afternoon commerce. People pass him on the market and then turn sharply rubbernecking to check not only what he is up to but also if their eyes are deceiving them. The recordings often contain a dense proximity which is hard to narrate. In these ground-level sounds there is laughter, conviviality, as well as the coldness and the frustrations of people treading on each other’s toes. I am interested in proximity but I am not interested creating an illusion of being there, or claiming a simple correspondence between

the recordings and a stable unchanging social reality. Rather, what I am trying to do something else with these recordings - i.e., to displace, create a kind of amplification or heightened attention to sound images.

With John Drever I have recorded a very different sound of London. From the top of the 12-storey tower block, a formerly condemned hall of residence called Warmington Tower in which the Department of Sociology is located we have been recording a kind of sonic panorama producing a sonic effect close to Augoyard & Torgue's characterisation of the experience of *sharaawadji* (Augoyard & Torgue 2005: 117-123). There isn't space here to go into the detail of the projects but what they do highlight is the importance of vantage point - a time and place - in specifying the production of sound data. They are slices of time and not necessarily a sonic portrait that is generalisable or enduring. Tim Ingold has argued that the notion of soundscape is limited precisely because it reduced the appreciation of sound to emplacement or merely reflects a fixed location and its acoustic ecology. Rather, he foregrounds how: "We may, in practice, be anchored to the ground, but it is not sound that provides the anchor... the sweep of sound continually endeavours to tear the listener away, causing them to surrender to its movements" (Ingold 2007: 12).

The recordings we have made from the top of Warmington Tower contain 'sound marks' or 'keynote sounds' that are constantly being repeated but they can equally be very specific compositions of social life in sound. The dull moan of a jet plane passing overhead pulls the listener towards another place or global destination. Here the listening experience links to the cultivation of a sociological imagination. I love playing the recordings in lecture theatres or events in New Cross close to where they were made. They often produce a sense of dislocation, blurring what is inside the lecture theatre and what is outside. The background is turned up, sometimes as loud as is physically bearable, listeners are unsure whether the sounds they are hearing come out of the speakers or from the world outside. These experiments bring to sociological attention things we are surrounded by but seldom remark upon. As a consequence what might count as 'data' is extended to the noises and rhythm of life itself and shows the potential of using sound sociologically beyond simply recording human voices that are expected to tell the truth about society.

Conclusions: Re-vitalising the Craft of Research

I have a new device. Here it is. The Olympus Digital Voice Recorder WS-320M is with the capacity to record 277 hours of sound data. The emergence in the past ten years of devices like this one has made the tape-recorder as a collection device a thing of the past. Digital sound

recording also makes it possible to think about how we might also transform research texts. I am working on using sound recording accompanied by written accounts. This can easily be done in portable document formats (.pdf) as links to sound files or moving image can be embedded within the documents. As you pass through the document a sound file is triggered producing the interplay between word and sound. Silent reading is a modern product and in the early days of the written word in 15th century Europe silent reading and writing was prohibited. You had to speak as you wrote or read to show that you had taken in the authority of the religious word. It was called 'the voice of the page' and taken to be more truthful than writing (Morrison 2000). I've been playing with the interplay between word and sound in order to evoke the unspoken as well as to enliven sociological text itself as an imaginative object, turning the written page into a screen or speaker.

As Ray Lee has suggested it is worth imagining what kind of course qualitative sociological research might have taken had the tape-recorder not been invented (Lee 2004: 881). I have argued that the tape-recorder as a sociological device has been both enabling and limiting. Enabling in the sense that it allowed for the voices of people to be faithfully transcribed with accuracy. Paradoxically, the fact that the recorder captured the voice and the precise detail of what informants said meant that social researchers have become less attentive as observers. The tacit belief that the researcher needed

merely to attend to what was said has limited the forms of empirical documentation. As a result the technological capacity to record voices accurately meant that researchers became less observant, less involved and this minimised their attentiveness to the social world. As Harvey Sacks warned in a lecture give in the spring of 1965: “The tape-recorder is important, but a lot of this [observational study] can be done without a tape-recorder” (Sacks 1992: 28). In addition, the interview where the tape-recorder was deployed normalised a mode of telling the modern self and added to the emergence of the ‘interview society’ (Atkinson and Silverman 1997). The mode of telling is a historical product rather than merely a means to document human experience. I am not suggesting that sociologists should turn their backs on the interview but instead think carefully about the analytic status we give the accounts recorded in these quite specific forms of sociological sociability.

I am arguing for a re-vitalisation of our methodological imagination and to develop new kinds of device to both explore and produce the social. The 21st century offers unprecedented opportunities to re-think the nature of sociological craft. For 50 years sociologists have been dependent on their tape-recorders. Now we have to embrace the potential for re-thinking the social life of our methods and develop new devices. My own arc of interest has moved towards the possibility that found sounds or sound images have for recording and attending to the rhythm and texture of social life in motion. Here

sound is a repository for what often remains unsaid, a place of surprise, admitting what is often blocked out and offering an opportunity to turn up the background in order to hear what it contains sociologically. Sound flows, as Ingold suggests, and contains pathways and connections across place and time that invite an appreciation of how the 'here and now' connects to a global elsewhere as well as the past.

Unlike the other contributors I have given up on my device. Abandoning the 'dead tape-recorder' has allowed another practice to emerge that displaces the nostalgic attachment to my Sony Professional Walkman with other gadgets better suited to the task of 'turning up the background'. This is not to say - as I hope I have made clear - that there is no place for 'voice recording' and interviewing in social research. I am arguing we should not rely on these techniques exclusively or automatically without thinking carefully about the analytical status given to accounts produced in this way. The challenge is not only to find new methodological techniques for attending to life, it also raises the question of how to enliven and transform sociology itself and better communicate the results of our craft.

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