Earwitness Accounts: Secondary Orality and Street Radio

Ieuan Franklin (Bournemouth University)

Abstract

This paper concerns two recent experiments in promoting oral communication through modern technology, namely 'Hidden Histories' (2008), which has involved 'narrowcasting' oral history through a wireless network in Southampton city centre, and 'Telephone Trottoire' (2006-), which has adapted a particular model of African oral tradition for use in mobile telephony in London and across the UK. Both these 'secondarily oral' projects divert from the unidirectional, space-biased media model, and seek to create what might be termed 'micro-public interfaces'. Such experiments demonstrate that interpersonal communication and electronic media should be removed from their polarisation in a linear historiography, and instead placed in a dialectic or syncretic framework.

Towards a Communication Dialectic

In an essay called *The Storyteller* originally published in 1936, the German cultural critic Walter Benjamin declared that, "the art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly…It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences…Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn."

(Benjamin 1973) Many scholars, in presenting what is often referred to as the 'modernisation thesis', have traced this decline in oral communication back to the impact of the industrial revolution on traditional communities. According to this thesis, the industrial revolution ruptured the social fabric of these communities. Artistic and economic production and other social functions began to take place on a scale and level of abstraction far beyond the lived experience of the individual:

> Social processes were fragmented, workers prevented from involvement in work processes, and home and community became primarily sites of consumption." (Lippert 2000: 282).

This meant that these sites were then governed by the dictates of outside forces rather than the intentional structures of the people who lived within them and invested them with their own meanings.

> Under these conditions, the down-to-earth concreteness of oral forms of expression are ill-suited to empowering people whose lives are no longer grounded by direct participation in a local, organic culture. And not only has the production of narrative been taken out of people's hands and industrialized itself; like another rust-belt industry, it seems to be withering away. (Lippert, ibid.)

Scholars have recently argued, however, that everyday lives are now instead grounded by direct participation in a 'glocal', digital culture, and that the production of narrative has been revived and democratized with the advent of the digital 'gift economy' of blogs, podcasts, wikis, fan fiction and digital storytelling. According to

this argument, new forms of community are emerging, despite the loosening of communal, familial and geographical bonds or roots. Henry Jenkins notes,

> If, as some have argued, the emergence of modern mass media spelled the doom for the vital folk culture traditions that thrived in nineteenth-century America, the current movement of media change is reaffirming the right of everyday people to actively contribute to their culture. Like the older folk culture of quilting bees and barn dances, this new vernacular culture encourages broad participation, grassroots creativity, and a bartering or gift economy….as everyday people take advantage of new technologies that enable them to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate media content. (Jenkins 2006: 132, 136)

That oral cultural values have been devalued, neglected, exploited or endangered by literate or media cultures can be legitimately and justly argued. However, we should be careful not to neglect productive instances of the interface between oral communication and electronic or digital media that belie the tendency within communications literature to segregate expressive culture into two major forms: mass media and interpersonal interaction. Mass media are generally conceptualised as unidirectional communications originating from a central source to a dispersed and powerless audience. Interpersonal communication, on the other hand, is conventionally characterized by two-way, face-to-face interaction between co-present actors (Purcell 1997: 101).

As Purcell observes, these ‘ideal types’ are unquestionably useful as heuristic tools, yet their use typically entails their placement at adjacent or polarized positions on a linear, historical transformation, in which mass media displace interpersonal communication and the physical context in which it occurs. Interpersonal

communication becomes synonymous with homogenous, integrated and traditional patterns of social organization that are 'always-disappearing', and mass media becomes synonymous with the heterogeneity, anonymity and atomism of post-modernity. Thus they correspond to the so-called 'great divide' between oral and literate culture - between communion and introspection - which has also dominated communications literature, and which has obscured the interface between the oral and the written, as well as the possibility of 'secondary orality' (Ong 1988). Secondary orality is a term coined by Walter Ong, used here to refer to the emergence and cultural impact of technologies that facilitate oral modes of communication and behaviour in cultures or contexts that are otherwise literate (for example, radio, telephone and computer).

Building on the theories of Innis, James W. Carey posited two complementary modes of, or metaphors for, communication - communication as *transmission* and as *ritual*. The transmission metaphor, which is the more common mode, conceives of communication as the distribution of messages in a spatial dimension for the purposes of control (over distance and people). It has the aim of influencing the thoughts and actions of others, which means that it involves a disproportionate relationship of power between sender and receivers, and an uneven distribution of communicative entitlement. Communication as ritual, by contrast, is concerned not with the exertion of influence, but the construction and maintenance of a shared and meaningful cultural realm across the dimension of time. This definition exploits the ancient identity and roots of the terms 'commonness', 'communion', 'community', and 'communication' (Carey 1988: 18).

If Carey's equivalent model of communication as transmission and ritual (Carey 1988), or Innis' model of the space- and time-biases of communications media (Innis 1951/2003) on which it was based, can be regarded as useful dialectic or syncretic binary frameworks for understanding communication, then there is no reason why a model of mass media and interpersonal interaction should not also monitor the competition or interaction between the two expressive forms, in similar fashion. It is not frequently acknowledged that this existence of this dialectic is discernible in the radical critique of space-biased and unidirectional media structures and ownership as articulated by the German Marxist theorists Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin and Hans Magnus Enzensberger.

Benjamin and Brecht shared a profound understanding that the institutional deployment of communications media reduce or eliminate *reciprocity*; the genuine and bi-lateral communication among interacting parties which characterises face-to-face communication (Franklin 1999: 42). This is due to the status of communications media as 'prescriptive technologies', which are the materialization of the rationality of a culture, and which represent *designs for compliance* (Franklin 1999: 16), in so far as they involve a specialization and division of labour which normalizes external control and internal compliance, and reproduce a global model of the organization of power (Martin-Barbero 1993: 185). Benjamin's critique, however, signalled the potential role of new technology in abolishing separation and privilege (Martin-Barbero 1993: 49) in favour of communal experience. Benjamin introduced the Brecht-influenced idea of the author as producer (Benjamin 1934/2002), transcending specialization in the process of production, and converting consumers into other producers:

> The apparatus will be the better the more consumers it brings in contact with the production process – in short, the more readers or spectators it turns into collaborators. (Benjamin 1934/2002: 78)

Benjamin held a fundamental belief that it was impossible to understand the masses without listening to their experiences, and understood that the emergent electronic media were eroding or bypassing the specialised and segregated information-systems of the print medium (Meyrowitz 1986), and enabling the widespread sharing of information. Drawing on the ideas of both Brecht and Benjamin about radio and film, Enzensberger subsequently (1976) argued for a decentralized structure of communications in which each receiver is a potential transmitter, facilitating *multi-flow*, rather than unidirectional communication. This structure would become possible if ordinary people were to collaborate in the collective production and self-management of communications media.

The formulation of a socialist strategy for the democratization of communication by these German theorists can be described as *utopian*, according to Mannheim's (1976) classic sociology of knowledge, which places emphasis on the 'concreteness' of utopian thinking, if considered as an active social force affecting the transformation of societies in space and time. Thus utopian thinking affects history not as an abstract set of ideas but by the interpretation and implementation of those ideas by their 'bearers', whether individuals, social classes, political or 'new social' movements, or other units of civil society (see Hujanen 1996: 181). According to Mannheim, utopian thinking directly conflicts with ideology, as the representatives of a given order will label as utopian all conceptions of existence which, from their point of view, can in principle never be realized (1976: 176-177):

> Only those orientations transcending reality will be referred to by us as utopian which, when they pass over into conduct, tend to shatter, either partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at the time. (Mannheim 1976: 173)

> If you should think this is utopian, then I would ask you to consider why it is utopian. (Brecht 1932/1964: 51)

These 'utopian' theories of communication can be mapped onto Innis' model of space- and time bias, and Carey's model of communication as transmission and ritual, to support the proposition that the socialization of media (and *narrative*) production in this capitalist, space-biased era would involve realignments toward the trajectory of *time* or temporal sustainability and *ritual*. As Blondheim has argued, Innis maintained that societies are capable of balancing time and space through the appropriation - or even invention - of communication technologies "that would counter the monopolizing tendencies of entrenched media" (Blondheim 2004) and challenge the supremacy of what Innis termed 'monopolies of knowledge'. As Martin-Brobero has observed,

> [F]aced with an elite which inhabits an atemporal space of global networks and flows, the majority in our countries still inhabit the local space-time of their cultures, and faced by the logic of global power, they themselves take refuge in the logic of communal power…the contradictory movement of globalization and the fragmentation of culture simultaneously involves the revitalization and worldwide extension of the local. (2002: 236)

Community and locative media, for example, exemplify the values of 'local power' and 'knowable community', partly as a critical response to the corporate delocalizing forces of global corporate and media power (Myles 2000; Coyer 2006), but partly as an awareness that, to use a contemporary truism, that the local is now global. So, for example, the community radio station North East Access Radio (NEAR) which serves a disadvantaged area of Dublin (Ireland), states in its volunteer handbook that "NEAR try to make local connections for global occurrences and vice versa but also [to] encourage their broadcasters and their community to challenge hegemonic thought and reportage." (quoted in Day 2003: 165)

. The disavowal of the distinction between producer and consumer (speaker and listener) that constitutes an integral element of the utopian thinking of Brecht, Benjamin and Enzensberger is also intrinsic to the principles of volunteer participation and self-management which underpin the organizational philosophy of community media. It is also intrinsic to convergence culture, and the model of the Internet as a digital gift economy. It is also, crucially, a defining characteristic of the *vernacular* and of oral tradition, which Innis firmly believed created a fertile climate for democracy. For Innis the importance of an oral tradition was not so much its aural nature *per se* but its radical dimension; the fact that it emphasises reciprocal dialogue and inhibits the emergence of monopolies of knowledge.

Telephone Trottoire

In order to illustrate this point, and to explore the notions of secondary orality (Ong 1988) and multi-flow communication (Enzensberger 1976), we can turn to the first of two case studies of secondarily oral communication networks, an innovative project called *Telephone Trottoire*, created by the British 'digital arts collective' *Mongrel*. The *Telephone Trottoire* [**http://www.mongrel.org.uk/trottoire**] pilot project took place for six weeks (March 27th – May 8th 2006), and was designed to engage the Congolese communities in London and across the UK in dialogue about issues affecting their day-to-day lives by using a new form of 'contagious' telephony.

The core of the *Telephone Trottoire* system is an automated, Linux-based telephony server that contacts mobile phone users at random from a database of phone numbers and play them pre-recorded audio content. The initial basis for the database was a list of 50 subscribers to *Nostalgie Ya Mboka* and *Londres Na Biso*, two Congolese regular programmes on London's *Resonance FM*, an experimental arts-based community radio station founded by the London Musician's Collective (LMC). Twenty short monologues were recorded by the project team (including the presenters of these programmes) for delivery to these Congolese people - the monologues were intended to pose questions, impart information, provoke the listener into making a comment, and to raise issues affecting the community within the UK or to highlight current events in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) with which the listener might be unaware.

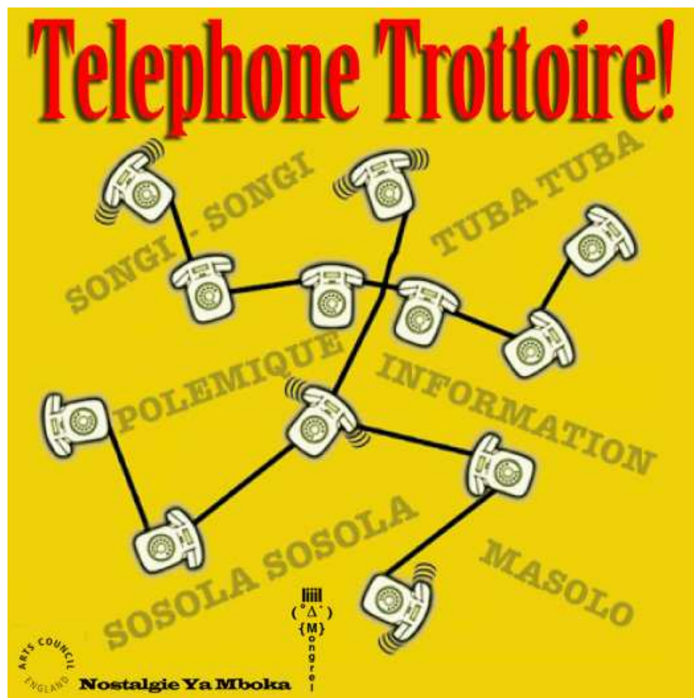


Image 1: Project flier [http://mediashed.org/files/mshed/trottoire.jpg]:

All the messages were recorded in the native language of Lingala, which induced respondents to accept the calls and participate in the project. The themes of the messages were of the broadest range possible, involving, for example, the upbringing of children, welfare provision in the UK, and the part religion and traditional beliefs play in day-to-day life. After being played a story, topical item or a joke, the listener can get involved by recording a reaction to the clip they have just heard. They then pass the story and their reaction on to a friend by phoning them, and then that friend's telephone number is automatically entered onto the database. There builds up a viral chain of users and of dialogue, which is a realization of Enzensberger's utopian model of media in which every receiver is a potential transmitter, especially as all calls within the bounds of the project are free. From that day on, the new user will automatically start receiving fresh content on their phone, equivalent to a radio podcast, for as long as the exchange lasts. Many of these exchanges are then broadcast as alternative 'town hall' forums on the aforementioned Congolese community radio programmes.

The Congolese community, largely constituted of refugees and asylum-seekers, is both socially and linguistically isolated from interaction with mainstream policy-makers and social service providers, and therefore lacks voice and advocacy. With this concern foremost, the project was named in reference to 'radio trottoire' ('pavement radio'), the African (and distinctly Congolese) practice of sharing information and gossip through oral transmission on street corners, markets, and other places where people gather and converse (the nickname itself can be seen to be emblematic of secondary orality). Pavement radio has been termed the modern or street version of oral tradition. It came into being as a result of the culture of oppression and denial of free speech in African states such as the DRC in which news and rumour circulate on topics ignored or prohibited by the highly censored broadcast and print news media.

> At a time when oral history is weakened by the politicising of the powerful, popular 'oral discourse', with its continual commenting on those in power, continues to grow in the cities of the continent. Pavement radio should be seen in the light of oral tradition and treated as a descendant of the more formal oral histories and genealogies associated with ruling dynasties and national rituals. Just as those older oral histories enshrined national constitutions, with king-makers, priests or others able to pronounce upon the legitimacy of royal claims or actions, so does pavement radio, the modern equivalent, represent a populist restraint on government…For the poor and the powerless, pavement radio is a means of self-defence. (Ellis 1989: 329-330)

Although these 'texts' first circulated within the 'closed circles' of orality, over time the rumours, voices, gossip and street talk came to represent a symbolic challenge to the existing order (Triulzi 1996: 84). With *Telephone Trottoire*, communication has

taken place immediately in an open and horizontal communications platform, breaking the boundaries of the closed circles of orality. We can gain an understanding of how this radical aspect of radio trottoire emerged in *Telephone Trottoire* by looking at the following edited example of one debate amongst twenty initiated by topics or "polemiques" recorded for *Telephone Trottoire*:

> Here, Esther invites comments about Priests abusing their position in society when they separate and divide families:

The family have a problem – this problem is caused by a priest. The priests are destroying families. For example – when two sisters attend the same church and one decides to leave that church for whatever reason, the priest then convinces the remaining sister that the other is a witch. The role of the priest is to bring people together and not to separate people. Is it normal for a priest to behave this way? Also we as the followers – many of us attend particular churches because we heard that the priest is good, we listen to the advice of friends and relatives, but don't we have a judgement to make ourselves? Isn't it up to us to decide whether a priest is good or bad? Shouldn't we decide whether a priest is fit to hold his position? Should we blindly follow what we are told without realizing the implications of manipulation and used by some people who call themselves priests yet use their power purely as a means of self-profit?

Do you have some comment to make upon my statement?

> 1. I got your message and I really thank God for this, because if us Congolese, we start to spread messages like this – we can return the glory to God. But if we pass bad and stupid messages – it's really, really sad. My comment on what you say in couples, in families - concerning pastors – I am convinced that the problem is not

with the pastors but within us, the followers. If we the congregations know exactly the person who we serve, we will not be manipulated. Us London Congolese – we don't know whom we are serving, we follow blindly and we neither understand nor work with the word of God…

3. Yes sister, I agree completely with everything you have said. Some people back home were not even pastors, they just came here and learnt some scripts from the Bible and became pastors, They do this because they know if they start a church they can get money and that can help them for their personal gain. That is why they are not doing the work of God properly, because obviously they are fake pastors. Some of them here in Birmingham – for example – we have one pastor who has made three women pregnant. Is this the work of God? It's very sad - those pastors are not pastors. They should be part of the congregation within churches. They need to [be] learning God's way, and not to be abusing their positions, corrupting his morality. If we have a problem we must go direct to God ourselves instead of going through these people…

8. Really we follow your statement. It's very, very good. For the problem of the pastor, what we must do is to ignore the advice addressed specifically to us as women. Don't follow what they say. But we should follow the teachings of the Lord. Do not allow the pastor to speak his words, but listen to the words of the Lord. The fault is our own especially as women. It is our weakness. If today you hear something from the pastor, you should always check it out. As a woman you have the power to speak to god yourself in prayer. Whatever you want, your prayer could be answered by God. We don't always have to bend our knees before the pastor, because he is a pastor. If the pastor tells me something I will look at it to see if he is right. If I disagree it, does not mean that I will quit the church, but it means that I will show reserve. I will show caution…

> 13. I thank you for this project because you are tackling the everyday problems that affect us. Concerning pastors – we always criticise pastors, but we have to look [at] the bigger picture. The real problem is to do with our culture - we follow because we believe we need to follow. We expect to follow. I don't think that the pastors impose upon us to attend a particular church, whether good or bad. It is our families or our relatives who expect us to attend this or that church. It is our families that leave us open as individuals to the weakness through which we may be exploited – like in the story you relate. We must stop considering that when we have a problem we must seek the advice of the pastor for every small thing. The Bible is our guide. It is the word of God. Personally I have never had a problem with the church – but I attend a good church – and I tread carefully in life. (submitted by Wright 2007)

Telephone Trottoire demonstrates that, in many societies characterised by residual orality, the truth of a statement is determined not according to the legitimacy, authority and objectivity derived from the fact of its publication or broadcast, but instead according to social and cultural factors, such as the power, motivation and rhetorical skill of the speaker, and whether the statements are expressed in culturally acceptable or persuasive forms (Mollison 1997: 30). Oral texts spread as they are repeated, expanded and aggregated along a growing chain of transmission, and this is precisely the model of communication that the project sustains. As with oral traditions and community, the traditional distance and boundary between producer and consumer, announcer and listener are banished and renounced:

> …Everyone involved is a necessary relay point in mouth-to-ear communication; everyone is at the same moment repeating, communicating and transforming. Indeed, it is in the very transformation of the message that its cathartic power lies. At every

> stage of the communication, every repeater, consciously or unconsciously, loads the message with his [sic] own anxieties, expectations or disappointments. Pavement radio…propagates the judgements of the community it serves on the events it considers important. And so these pavement rumours, as they are spread, assume new meanings, reflecting the expectations, fears and protests of the man in the street. It is the 'pipe-dream rumour' of the unfulfilled dreams of the ordinary citizen. (Triulzi, ibid.)

The project is as an excellent example of secondary orality, through the fostering of a 'group sense' of communication, and the way in which it incorporates residual orality (vestigial primary orality in the context of an otherwise literate culture). It is a unique example of a bespoke form of 'small media' (Spitulnik 2002) which has been interiorized, assimilated and brought into contact with the immediate, familiar interactions of lived experience and the human life-world that characterized primary orality (see Ong 1988: 42). The project engages the Congolese community on their own terms by drawing on their own culture, beliefs and folklore. Unlike many development projects that pursue similar aims within diasporic communities, the *technological medium* (mobile phones), as well as the *pattern of communication* (radio trottoire), are already familiar in the Congolese community (mobile phones are ubiquitous amongst the Congolese due to the notoriously unreliable national telephone system in the DRC). Also unlike many development projects, the impulse behind the initiated project, and the pattern of communication, was provided by the Congolese community themselves.

Telephone Trottoire is difficult to categorize as an example of locative media, although much of the project's 'content' refers to specific locations. It is not

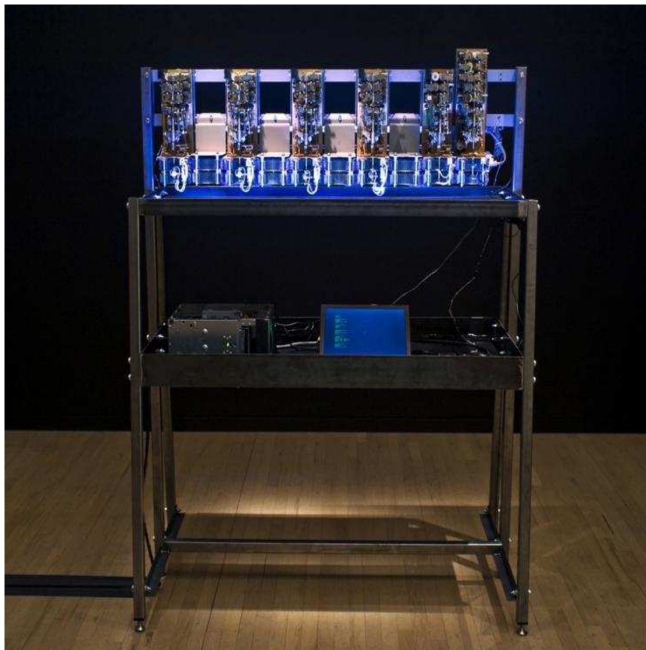
localizable in a conventional sense, since the process of circulation is multi-sited and the authors are multiple – a ‘floating community’ is created, which is analogous with the concept of the diaspora itself. During the six weeks in which the pilot project took place, the database grew from 30 telephone numbers to 500, and the network grew across African and back to London and Birmingham. Now there are approximately 1,800 subscribers. As Harold Innis maintained, the strength of the oral tradition was/is that it cannot be monopolized: “once the habits of discourse were widespread, the public could take on an autonomous existence and not be subject to the easy control of the state or commerce.” (see Carey 1988: 166)

The success of the project originally suggested the possibility of the project’s role in the development of community links and consultation between digital artists, community media, cultural agencies, social services, and the community ‘at large’, but *Mongrel* were unsuccessful in finding funds to sustain the project outside of the arts scene (Harwood and Connor 2009). Graham Harwood, Richard Wright and Matsuo Yokokoji from *Mongrel* (now they are working as part of *Mediashed*) therefore decided to raise awareness of the project and its aims by creating a series of art installations that were, in fact, telephony-based *memorials*. *Tantalum Memorial – Reconstruction* was the first in this series, memorialising the people who have died as a result of the ‘coltan wars’ in the Congo. The coltan wars started in the late 1990s as a result of competition to control the supply of coltan, which is the colloquial African name for *col*umbite-*tan*talite, a metallic ore from which are extracted the elements niobium and tantalum. 90% of coltan originates in the Eastern DRC, and over 3 million people have been killed as a result of these wars, which sustain the continuing

civil war in the area. The tantalum extracted from coltan is used in the production of consumer electronics including computers, DVD players and mobile phones.

The installation was constructed from a number of electromagnetic Strowger switches, which were the basis of the first automatic telephone exchange invented in 1888 to enable people to route calls directly. The use of this redundant technology creates a certain kind of pathos, as this very technology was made redundant by the ascendant popularity of cellular phones. The installation is kinetic, as the movements and sounds of the switches are, via a computer system, triggered by the phone calls of London's Congolese community as they participate in *Telephone Trottoire* (see image 2).

Image 2: Image: Graham Harwood, Richard Wright and Matsuko Yokokoji, *Tantalum Memorial – Reconstruction*, 2008 (Installation at the 2008 01SJ Biennial)



The idea behind the installation was to draw attention to the tragic irony that the Congolese use mobile phones to keep in touch with themselves and their homeland, but that it is this very consumer product that is responsible for their dispersal from their homeland, for the fracturing of their ethnic community. This is the double bind of the colonized, as to participate in electronically mediated communities the Congolese must deploy the

communication technologies that make these communities possible whilst destroying their native communities.

The installation also conveys a profound statement about the linkages between community and technology. During the late Victorian era in which the Strowger exchange was invented, the community uses of telephony were rife, especially due to the fact that telephone switchboards were manned by operators and linked to telegraph stations. Telephone subscribers could phone in for recent sports results, make a conference call, enjoy a 'Party Line' and listen to a half hour of The Paris Opera (Franklin 1999: 106-107). Once the development and social integration of the technology had been accomplished to the satisfaction of its promoters, however, the technology began to remove the human links in the system, and the community uses of the telephone began to disappear (Franklin, ibid.). Perhaps it can be said that the installation, by mirroring the *Telephone Trottoire* system through the reactivation of the electromagnetic switches makes the positive declaration that such community uses are still achievable and recoverable, but of course the installation is predominantly about death – the death of technology (by a bizarre irony, Strowger invented these switches to benefit his own business as an *undertaker*); the death of community; and the death of human beings caught up what Innis termed the "storm centres" of the modern international economy (quoted in Barnes 2005: 111). As Barnes has noted, Innis' economic theory of 'staples' functions as a cyclonic metaphor, in which the whirlwind ferocity of capitalist accumulation causes ferocious decline and destruction through the reaping of resources (Barnes, ibid.).

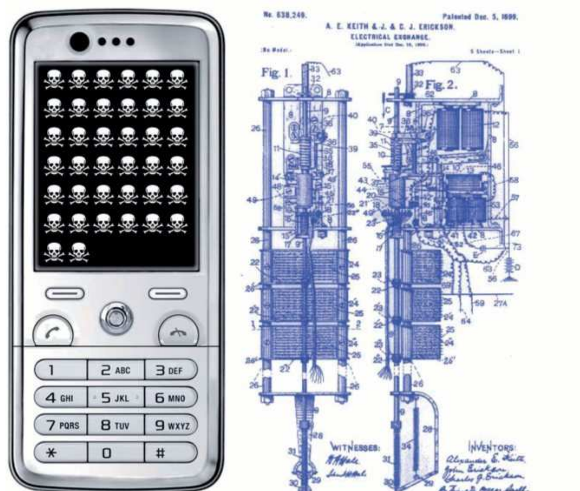


Image 3: Phone Wars flyer

Recently (2008) *Tantalum Memorial - Reconstruction* won the coveted first prize at Berlin's *Transmediale*. The version of the memorial displayed at the Science Museum in London in October 2008 also managed to restore the concepts of interactivity and community networking which are at the heart of *Telephone Trottoire* by using as a trigger for the memorial's electromagnetic 'synapses' phone calls from a new *Phone Wars* (see image 3) telephony project created from workshops conducted in John Roan school in Greenwich, London. As part of these workshops, students recorded a series of messages that initiated a discussion with Congolese asylum seekers about the social, cultural and political issues surrounding mobile telephony in the DRC. The *Tantalum Memorials* exhibited so far have already won great acclaim, and there should be many further opportunities to pursue the artistic and social implications and possibilities of this kind of work. They have helped to highlight the desperate plight of many Congolese caught up in a resource war that receives scant attention in the mainstream media, and they have achieved this by revealing that, for the Congolese community, the mobile phone is an agent of both the devastation and preservation of communal ties.

Hidden Histories

Our second and final case study, *Hidden Histories*, also makes use of mobile telephony (at least in their facility for receiving FM radio and Bluetooth communications) and a unique model of narrowcasting, and also concerns memorials, as we will see. *Hidden Histories*, however, represents a different kind of '*Street Radio*', in which a pattern of communication forms an altogether different kind of artistic installation. *Hidden Histories/Street Radio* [http://www.hiddenhistories.org.uk] is a project created by artist, writer and curator Armin Medosch, in collaboration with *Hivenetworks* [www.hivenetworks.net], and was implemented in Southampton in Spring 2008. To initiate the project, ten lampposts in Southampton city centre were mounted with small weatherproof boxes, containing cheap, commercially available (WiFi) hardware rewired and repurposed as *Hivenetwork* 'nodes'.

Image 4: Hivenetworks node on lamppost in front of former Tyrell and Green building

These ten USB-powered transmitter nodes continuously broadcast audio excerpts from Southampton's Oral History Archive (composed into short radio art features with music and ambience by Armin Medosch) on an FM frequency within the heart of the City Centre. The ten *Hivenetwork* nodes are located to form a nexus saturated with wireless signals that carry stories from the city's maritime past. During the lifetime of the project (which officially ended in November 2008), pedestrians were invited, via the Internet and

brochures at the tourist information office, to equip themselves with a mobile phone with FM reception or a small radio receiver and headphones and follow the 'local history trail' formed by these nodes (see image 5, below).

Image 5: Trail map [available from http://www.hiddenhistories.org.uk]

The locations of the nodes were selected according to two criteria. Firstly each node was situated next to either a monument or memorial or another historically or culturally significant spot. Secondly all nodes had to be proximate in order to be within reach of the wireless 'mesh network' data cloud. This wireless mesh network is necessary mainly for maintenance reasons, so that the nodes can be accessed remotely via a gateway to the Internet, using Secure Shell protocol (Medosch 2009).

Communications networks in cities have tended to be largely invisible and silent, or at least hard to discern. Over a number of years some researchers and activists have approached the problem of the lack of physical presence of mobile and wireless technologies by looking at ways of visualizing and conceptualising these networks (Willis 2009). Rather than studying existing patterns, other projects have created networks that they can then observe (*Mediashed*'s *Tantalum Memorial* can perhaps be described as an artefact or product of this process). *Hidden Histories*, like *Telephone Trottoire*, is essentially a wireless network designed to inspire and facilitate new types of behaviour in public settings to create a particular culture of communication (Medosch 2009). By utilizing a variant of micro-FM radio transmission, *Hidden Histories* makes the network *audible* and legible, countering the predominant visual and spatial bias that has tended to characterise locative media, geo-mapping and attempts to make 'invisible' wireless networks 'tangible'.

So is *Hidden Histories* a micro-FM station, a sound installation, an audio tour, or a local history trail? Perhaps it is none of the above, or perhaps all four. The existence of such a project in some ways exposes the lack of a critical sound-based vocabulary, especially when attempting to portray particular instances of the convergence of oral history and electronic media in their distinctiveness and social context. The project instead employs as audio content what Barry Truax of the World Soundscape Project has termed "earwitness accounts" (Truax 2001); vernacular testimony of experiences in the city. For example, there are stories of seafaring, working in the docks, the Titanic disaster, the experiences of immigrants from the West Indies and Asia after the Second World War, going to music hall shows or the cinema, supporting the war effort on the home front, and many others. Through the

narrowcasting of these experiences, “little squares and corners of the city are enriched with a civil society version of history profoundly different from the official versions of history taught at school or being propagated by the mainstream media.” (Medosch 2009) In this way *Hidden Histories* addresses a crucial problem long identified by official reports on children’s reading, which has particular relevance to Southampton as a multi-cultural port city:

> Consider the role of print in shaping children’s attitudes towards the world and relate it to the multicultural society in which they are growing up. The population of Britain has changed radically in the past forty years but books have changed little…Many children see cultural diversity all around them but find little confirmation of it in what they read. (Whitehead, Capey et al. 1977)

Whilst reading matter is always seen as essential ‘nourishment’, ‘cutting oneself off’ from the acoustic environment through portable headphone listening, or the deliberate use of radio (or computer games or television) to create one’s *own* environment, tends to be seen as symptomatic of a general trend away from environmental awareness and community involvement (Truax 2001), and toward technologically induced human isolation. As a freely accessible sound resource and micro-radio innovation, *Hidden Histories* belies this essentially deterministic value judgement, but does also represent a small but significant reversal of an identified trend towards the ‘mobile privatisation’ (Williams 1990) of the electro-acoustic environment.

Image 6: Using a radio at Southampton's Guildhall

The *Hidden Histories* trail can be poignantly experienced through an essentially private mode of listening (headphones), or a group of people can experience their tour using at least one battery-powered radio. The latter mode of listening is not ideal for large groups, due to the limitations of reception and audible range (the very weak radio transmitters have a range of about 10 metres). However, for small to medium sized groups, this mode of listening may prove attractive, as group radio listening promotes discourse as well as consensus about exactly what has been heard.

It is also arguable that participation in the project actively *promotes* environmental awareness and community involvement, through access to a unique perspective on the collective memory and current day urban topology of the city (Medosch 2009). The participant becomes sensitised to the contrast between the harmonious intimacy of the earwitness accounts and the often discordant noise pollution of the city streets, and engages with collective memory by listening to a cross-section of vernacular voices recalling and summoning a shared past. The participant is able to use her radio or mobile phone not as a 'conversational avoidance device' but instead as a means to reconnect with the grounds of her personal identity. To collect experiences from the audio tour via the radio dial is to find "recourse to subjective constructions of memory, and what it means to be a participant…the work of memory is in fact radiophonic" (Labelle 2006). To be confronted by 'difference' or otherness in the form of these 'migrant' voices necessitates that we apply what Arjun Apparudai terms 'the work of the imagination', in negotiating difference whilst

realising a relation to others, and remodelling the present (Apparudai 1998) in the light of this experience.

The time-binding properties (Innis 1951/2003) of this media form allow participants to receive communications from, and about, the past, creating cultural continuity. The participant is able to explore streets and parks whilst filtering the "sediments of a reactivated past" (Medosch 2009). The project therefore represents a re-inscription of real time, but also real space. Taking the audio tour, I was struck by the coupling of content (the oral history) and physical context or place, to achieve site-specific localisation. The primary examples are recollections of the Titanic and shipwrecks around the Titanic memorials, and of 'home front' life during World War 2 near the (WW2) Cenotaph. At Node 1, as I listened to an interviewee recalling her father, a seaman and Titanic survivor, setting off on his bicycle on each anniversary of the disaster to the Titanic memorial in East Park, I gazed across at the memorial, from my standpoint at the corner of Bedford Place (see the trail map, image 5). The poignant testimony was followed by a short burst of what sounded like a present-day recording of the soundscape at the present-day Titanic memorial, a hubbub of traffic noise drowning out voices, an echo of the ambient background noise an ordinary pedestrian would ordinarily hear in this location. This ambient sound might have actually been a recording of ships at the docks, and this would have been equally appropriate; the important aspect here is that the transmission of oral history from the nodes *begins to work on the listener's imagination*. Such 'locational' experiences and imaginative speculations are perhaps evidence of the rooted and expressive culture of oral history as embodied witness inseparable from its place of origin. 'Listening in' is a licence to lived encounters with, and within, the city. As someone with only a very

cursory knowledge of the history of Southampton, I wonder if residents of the city might find that the audio-tour resonates “the background of meaning which a landscape suggests to those familiar with it” (Berger 1991).

When creating the audio pieces, Armin Medosch was careful not to be too ‘heavy-handed’ in editing the oral history to match spaces heavily influenced and imbued with the presence of commemorative memorials (Medosch 2008). The participant is quite naturally drawn to the synthesis between past and present and between the invisible sonic memorial and the physical, tactile memorial. Both the node and the memorial are “apparatus that configure distance in an intensive rather than extensive way” (Chandler and Neumark 2005). The aesthetic and emotional resonance of physical memorials is not in doubt, but we can also attest to the ideological dominance and institutional silences of such “contemporary organs of remembrance” (Haskins 2007). Medosch recently explained some of his design motivations in ‘allocating’ the oral history to specific locations:

> The composite aim was to avoid pathos and to avoid calling into service the notion of the sublime. Rather, I employed irony, contradictions and the “wit of the people” to work against the sometimes dominant architecture of places. For instance, one node was placed next to a former luxury department store, Tyrell and Greens [see image 4]. In the past this shop had doormen who would not let poor people in. On this node a selection of stories about the food of the poor is being played. The food that poor people in the past had to eat truly sounds horrible, but I selected people who were not moaning about that but told those stories with verve and humour. Overcoming poverty and hunger can be read as defiance of and resistance to the implications of food shopping and present day consumerism. (Medosch 2009)

Considering the 'ideological dominance' of memorials and architecture as a form of 'dominant memory' alerts us to the power and persuasiveness of historical representations, their connections with institutions and the part they play in manufacturing consent (see Johnson, McLennon et al. 1982: 207). *Telephone Trottoire* and *Hidden Histories* are examples of DIY culture that mirror the aims of the oral history movement itself by opposing dominant memory in favour of vernacular memory, by democratizing the practice of authorship, and by lessening or removing entirely the distance between 'journalist' or 'historian' and what Ken Worpole has termed 'the originating constituency' (Johnson, McLennon et al. 1982: 215).

Although *Hidden Histories* is not 'interactive' in any sense of technical interactivity, it is a form of participatory radio art, of "receptive participation" (Bishop 2006; Medosch 2009). *Hidden Histories* is, like *Telephone Trottoire* a horizontal and open grassroots system, which has participants rather than an audience as such. *Hidden Histories*, like a mini-FM station, has the potential to be magnetic, despite being essentially 'radio without an audience' (Tetsuo Kogawa, quoted in Chandler and Neumark 2005), transmitting across distances easily traversed by foot. Unlike mini-FM stations, however, *Hidden Histories* is not a 'manned' or mobile radio station, and has no need of studio premises or conventional broadcasting equipment.

This project model represents an opportunity to promote the study of communities through oral history and new media. Crucially, it also hints at the prospect of situated and sustainable (environmentally friendly) media forms, as the functioning of the project involves affordable technology and a minimal degree of

remote management. *Hidden Histories* exploits the increasing convergence of technology, short-circuiting the route between the (oral historian's) tape recorder and ultra-local FM transmission. Bluetooth technology also enables new or potential participants to find out about the project, as each node scans the environment for phones with the Bluetooth function on. Once permission has been granted from the mobile user to allow further information to be sent, the node sends a text message, announcing the node, the FM frequency and information about the type of content that can be heard. It has been proposed that at a later stage the audio clips may be augmented with images and even film clips.

The innovative use of Bluetooth technology points to the possibility of increasing the potential communicative reciprocity of the project, along similar lines to *Telephone Trottoire*. This potential has already been partly realized – as part of the *Waves* exhibition in Dortmund in May 2008, a similar model of *Street Radio* was extended into interactivity, reaching out and connecting with people via their mobile phones (Medosch 2009). If access point services were created for *Hidden Histories* and the technology and software augmented, potentially the wireless network could broadcast responses to the oral histories uploaded by participants from their mobile phones. Through this process, a variant of *Hidden Histories* could emerge as a community effort in which participants effectively 'tag' the environment with invisible sonic content (Rueb 2002), embedding social knowledge in the wireless network of the city, and deepening the relationship between content and physical context. This would also deepen the subversive possibilities of the project, in facilitating the rejection of 'dominant memory' by a cultural group already in possession of a sufficient and valid version of their own history (Layton 1994: 14).

In designing the nodes according to Armin Medosch' idea of an oral history trail, *Hivenetworks* have created an interesting paradigm of radio communication. As we noted earlier, conventional media technologies, when interposed, allow or enforce a physical distance between the parties, which tends to distort, reduce or eliminate communicative potential (Enzensberger 1976; Franklin 1999). *Hidden Histories* diverts from this unidirectional, space-biased model, and represents an example of local and dialogic 'small media' (Spitulnik 2002), which can be seen a means of exploring the secondarily oral (Ong 1980) bias of electronic communications.

There is something distinctly appealing and exciting about the idea of a modern wireless network 'giving voice to the voiceless' through the use of oral history. A real synergy can be created when 'custodians of lore' such as archivists and oral historians are able to collaborate with those involved in broadcasting or wireless networks, due to a common interest in provoking access to and extending the artistic possibilities of vernacular speech and soundscapes. This has the function of subverting common misperceptions of the oral history movement as exclusively focused on recovering and recording vanishing traditions in static archival forms. *Hidden Histories* itself has already been interpreted within the free software movement as further proof of the "short-sighted forecast stating that oral tradition would have been wiped out by the computer society" (Campanelli 2008). Perhaps projects such as *Hidden Histories* thus pave the way for future collaboration between archivists, oral historians, wireless network collectives and new media activists, academic groups, community radio volunteers, cultural agencies and, of course, interested citizen-participants. This would have the immediate effect of [oral] history being widely recognized as a vital and accessible "open source" (Medosch 2009).

Telephone Trottoire and *Hidden Histories* demonstrate the potential of such an approach, through the utilization of emergent and creative 'cultural technologies' to incorporate patterns of contemporary or pre-existing social life and oral tradition, bridging the individual and the community through an emergent, vernacular hybrid of narrowcasting and interpersonal interaction. This brings us back to the earlier discussion of the communication dialectic:

> The dialectic framework may shed new light on the "humanization" or "personalization" of mass media through the incorporation of interpersonal characteristics. Rather than be viewed as the last resistance against an imminent progression of technology, these arguments may be reframed in terms of a synthesis between old and new, mechanical and organic, individual and community. (Purcell 1997: 110)

In analysing projects such as *Telephone Trottoire* and *Hidden Histories*, it is useful to remember, following Jody Berland, that the question of whether this convention of replicating 'real space' in sound has arisen in praise of technology (culture) or of human presence (nature) misses the point: in this technologically mediated landscape the two are inseparable (1988: 348), as are concepts and practices of public and private. The histories are hidden, but they are easy to find – and share - if you know where to *listen*.

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