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**ATMOSPHERIC METHODS GUIDE:**

# **SOUNDWALK**

**Loretta Lipworth & Dr Chloe Steadman**

## BACKGROUND

Soundwalks are becoming a more commonly used method as part of the 'sensory turn' and move towards unsettling the dominance of the visual in qualitative research, as well as the growth in more mobile forms of inquiry. Soundwalks involve actively attuning to sounds whilst moving through a place, either as an individual or as part of a group, and recording observational notes about sonic experiences, the intensities of sounds and their impact on how the place feels. Instead of– or in addition to– making written notes using a paper or digital soundwalk form, digital recordings can also be made of the sounds themselves.

Description of sound 	Duration of sound Is it lingering in the background or short-term?	Where are you on the high street? Where is the sound located on the high street?	Where does the sound come from? From a shop, person, music playing etc?	Intensity of sound Circle the intensity of the sound from 1 very weak to 5 very strong.	How does the sound make you feel? Positive/negative? How does it contribute to the high street's atmosphere?
Chatter	Constant in background	Market	People sat outside bars + market	Weak 1 2 <b>3</b> 4 5 Strong	Positive -friendly -socialising
Cutlery clatter	Occasional	Market	Customers in bars, market	Weak 1 <b>2</b> 3 4 5 Strong	Positive -enjoy food
Dogs barking	Occasional	Market	Passing dogs as over dogs sat outside market	Weak 1 2 3 <b>4</b> 5 Strong	Indifferent -may be scary at some but also scintate

Helen's soundwalk form

*"...It makes you notice things that you wouldn't normally notice... Because we're all from [the town] we're used to it. So you almost don't notice it the same... It does open your eyes to it, doesn't it"*

(Helen, Interview participant)

## HOW TO GET STARTED

*Remember, this is a flexible method you can adapt to your particular research situation, but here are a few tips to get you started...*

- Create a paper or digital soundwalk form for use in the field, including information such as description of the sound, sound location, a sonic intensity rating out of 5 or 10, and how the sound makes the place feel.
- If using the method with participants, decide whether you will follow a set route or allow participants to lead the way. If using a set route, it is helpful to refer to online maps and make a preparatory visit to ascertain the duration of the planned soundwalk. Ensure the soundwalk lasts for around an hour maximum, as sensory attention can wane and participants can become fatigued.
- Decide whether you will also take sound recordings and acquire and prepare the appropriate equipment. You may need a bit of training if using sound recording equipment you are unfamiliar with. Also consider the ethical implications of recording in public spaces as applicable.

## WHY USE SOUNDWALKS?

Soundwalks help people to attune deeply to the sense of sound, foregrounding a sensory modality which may usually be overlooked in everyday experiences of a place. In doing so, the method helps to address the usual emphasis on the visual. The sounds of place can be brought to life through including clips of sound recordings in project outputs.

***“I used to do photography, so I thought that's just going to be too comfortable for me. So I chose away from it... I've not done anything with... sound before so I thought why not?”***

**(Ezio, Interview participant)**

## WHAT MIGHT BE CHALLENGING?

Wet and/or windy weather can affect soundwalks by making paper soundwalk forms difficult to use, or impacting the quality of sound recordings. Soundwalks may also stir up feelings of awkwardness on first try, and overwhelm in busy places where there may be many sounds overlaid even in a single area. It can sometimes be difficult to connect sounds to the atmospheric qualities of place and how they make the place feel.

*“Doing the soundwalk felt a bit overwhelming at times. There were so many sounds overlaid in just one place... Chatter, crying, sneezing, wheeling shopping trolleys and pushchairs, jangling keys, rustling shopping bags, cars, clattering cutlery, the fizz of cans being opened...”*

(Chloe’s research diary)

## PRACTICAL TIPS

- Digital devices and forms can be used to record soundwalk observations when wet weather causes difficulties using paper forms, as well as pairing written notes with digital sound recordings. If possible, the organiser(s) could schedule the soundwalk to take place during typically less windy/rainy times of the year.
- To lessen feeling of self-consciousness and overwhelm, soundwalks could be conducted with co-researchers, in small groups, and during typically less busy times.
- Make sure to reflect on how sounds make the place feel, as well as the qualities of the sounds encountered. Reminders could be included on soundwalk forms or notebooks to encourage links to be made between sounds and atmosphere.

## SOUNDWALKS IN ACTION

Chris Hurst and Michela Stinson used sonic methods to access people's experiences of tourist atmospheres. The researchers layered sound recordings with corresponding audio waveform images, observational fieldnotes, poetry, photography, and videos to creatively communicate the sounds of Niagara Falls and Agawa Bay in Ontario, Canada. In their project outputs, the authors include QR codes to video and sound recordings to engage audiences in different ways with the research and elicit care for the sounds of place. This experimental and multi-modal methodology enabled Hurst and Stinson to access the non-representational, embodied, affective, and atmospheric experiences of tourist destinations.

## TO LEARN MORE ABOUT SOUNDWALKS

Hurst, C and Stinson, M. (2024). Inviting engagement with atmospheres. In Rantala, O, Kinnunen, V, and Höckert, E. (eds). Researching with Proximity: Relational Methodologies for the Anthropocene. Cham: Springer. 165-187.

Steadman, C. (2024). Using multi-sensory methods to study atmospheres. In Steadman, C and Coffin, J. (eds). *Consuming Atmospheres*. Oxon: Routledge. 187-203.

### To reference this guide:

Lipworth, L and Steadman, C. (2025). Atmospheric Methods Guide: Soundwalk. Manchester: Manchester Metropolitan University.

To read about other atmospheric methods, search online for the full guide titled 'Atmospheric Methods Guide' by Dr Chloe Steadman and Loretta Lipworth