

WalkieTalk — a method for live-logging *en dérive*

WalkieTalk is an informal project, currently a series of experiments by **Conrad Taylor** and **Danny Budzak**. We are recreational walkers, with interests in urban and intellectual history, media and culture, and knowledge management, amongst other things. We walk London at weekends.

During a WalkieTalk, an audio recording is made of the conversations that occur while we explore a territory with our eyes and ears open, collating our fresh experiences and impressions with what we already know and can recall.

WalkieTalk is inspired partly by Guy Debord's concept of the 'dérive', to which our attention was drawn by Clive Holtham; also by the role ascribed to conversation in contemporary Knowledge Management (KM); also by some BBC radio programmes – in particular the witty series 'Freedom Pass', recorded in 2003 by Alan Coren and Christopher Matthew on journeys around London and to Southend-on-Sea.

Here is the basic idea: two friends go for a walk, stopping to look at and maybe photograph things, and they have a conversation about what they notice along the way. Each wears a lapel mic, they are linked together by a UHF radio signal, and the conversation is continuously recorded to a digital audio recorder (*see box for technical details*).

Although we are not that well read up on the Situationist practice which Debord advocated, we feel our walks are similarly inspired by a rejection of what he called 'the Spectacle' – artificial experiences devised by hegemonic commercial, media and political influences. We look for an authentic, enjoyable and mind-expanding experience for ourselves, firstly by exploring the fabric of the city, and secondly by digging into and sharing personal memories, historical literature and other resources to build an account of things: one that we own, and makes sense to us.

Conversation is essential to such walks: discussing the things you notice, what they bring to mind, what you know and what related stories you can tell, with your fellow explorers. Reading between the lines of Debord's essay in *Internationale Situationniste* #2 on 'Theory of the Dérive', it looks like he thought so too:

One can dérive alone, but all indications are that the most fruitful numerical arrangement consists of several small groups of two or three people who have reached the same level of awareness, since cross-checking these different groups' impressions make it possible to arrive at more objective conclusions... With more than four or five participants, the specifically dérive character rapidly diminishes, and in any case it is impossible for there to be more than ten or twelve people without the dérive fragmenting into several simultaneous dérives...

Note: a 'group impression' cannot crystallise without conversation. Sharing impressions between groups also requires communication. The means could be a post-dérive chat around a pub table, a joint journaling exercise, an online annotated photo-album, or a wiki; we have opted for a live audio capture, edit and subsequent sharing of our live conversation. Which does not preclude combining that product with others in a multimedia/multi-contributor matrix afterwards.

Double Helix, KM, diversity and what's practical

A conversation is itself a kind of journey: thus we record a kind of Double Dérive, a physical one and a conversational one, which spiral round each other. **There are dialectics in multiple dimensions.** There's Danny and Conrad; there's us and the environment; there's what we notice and the knowledge we carry within (visible & invisible worlds); there's history and the present day; probably other dimensions too.

Through conversation, each person enriches the knowledge of the other. Danny knows more about architecture, I know more about wild-life; he knows more about the 19th century; I know more about the Middle Ages. This links us to KM practices which focus on conversation, amongst practitioners such as David Gurteen or Dave Snowden.

Motiroti, one of the organisations behind MultipliCities, advocates 'interculturalism', an appreciation of how inwardly-migrating commu-

nities contribute to the life of cities. On our first test WalkieTalk on 14th April 2013, Danny and I remarked that had we been accompanied *en dérive* by someone from, let's say, the Turkish community, we'd be party to insights to which we wouldn't otherwise have access. Thus it would be good to find ways of expanding dérives to draw in diversity.

Can WalkieTalks engage more than two participants? There are (at a steep price) solid-state ten-track audio recorders; if one had more pairs of UHF transmitters, receivers & UHF frequencies to play with, it is just about possible to imagine a small herd of wired-for-sound dérivistas. But it would be expensive and cumbersome and the conversation would break down as Debord predicted. With two it is do-able; even so, we are fielding £1,300-worth of kit: unrealistic were not audio recording part of Conrad's work.

Next weekend we take part in a group walk from Shoreditch to near King's Cross via Clerkenwell. One option is to use a wireless handheld mic which could be handed around like a relay-race baton, weather permitting. But it would not be as invisible to onlookers, and we'd lose a lot of the WalkieTalk spontaneity. However, a hand-around microphone or desktop stereo pair could be used in the indoors workshop session being planned for the end of that walk.

The WalkieTalk kit: Each of us wears a discreet omnidirectional Lavalier microphone mounted on shirt or jacket, about 20cm from the mouth. One of us, Danny, has his lapel mic plugged into a belt-worn UHF radio transmitter, the same kind of equipment used by speakers at a conference (Sennheiser G3). Conrad is in charge of the technics; he carries beneath his jacket a digital audio field recorder (Marantz PMD-661) with two distinct XLR input sockets for Left and Right channels, the kind of thing a radio journalist might use on assignment. His own lapel mic is plugged into one socket; the other receives input from a Sennheiser G3 belt-pack UHF receiver. With fresh batteries, we can record for up to three hours continuously, and we carry spares.

The placement of the microphones lets us capture clearly what each of us is saying, also the ambient sound, including conversations with people we meet along the way. Conrad keeps a crafty eye on the gain level meters, and also wears a lightweight set of closed-back monitoring headphones, of the sort which fold down so they are comfortable sitting around the neck. They need checking only occasionally.

The technique works best in reasonably quiet street environments. Wind-noise on the mics is a challenge in more open landscapes and we must experiment further with windshielding. The WalkieTalk recording methodology should also work brilliantly in museums, galleries etc.

The 'raw product' is a bunch of stereo WAV uncompressed audio files. These are roughly logged to make editing decisions; unwanted passages are removed using Audacity editing software. The continuous track may also be chopped up at this point into 'chapters', and some introductory narrative may be recorded for insertion. Adobe Audition software lets us bounce the Left and Right channels into independent tracks in a multitrack editing session, so the extreme stereo split between left-speaker and right-speaker can be softened into a passable stereo mix. The edited result is exported to a mixed-down stereo file which is then converted to MP3 format for distribution.

Going forward, we want to pay better attention to the need of the audience to 'see' what we are seeing — experienced BBC reporters (e.g. on Farming Today) are good at doing that. As an alternative, we might look at how to integrate the audio product with photos we take, map imagery and other visuals into a multimedia presentation.

More information, photographs, and our first sample WalkieTalk, are available at <http://www.conradiator.com/walkietalk>