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Eleni Kallimopoulou, Panagiotis C. Poulos, Kostis Kornetis, and Spyros Tsipidis.
SonorCities. Learning Culture through City Soundscapes—An Educational Tool < sound-cities.turkmas.uoa.gr/ >.

Review by Anna-Maria Sichani



Anna-Maria Sichani is working towards a Ph.D. in Modern Greek Philology at the University of Ioannina. She holds a BA and an M.Phil. in Modern Greek Philology from the University of Athens and an MA in Digital Humanities from University College London. Anna-Maria is currently a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow (EsR) affiliated with the European Commission's Digital Scholarly Editions Initial Training Network (DiXiT) at Huygens ING-KNAW. She has been collaborating in numerous international Digital Humanities and infrastructure projects (e.g. Transcribe Bentham, DARIAH). Her research interests include Modern Greek studies, Digital Humanities, digital scholarly editing and publishing, cultural and social aspects of transitional media(l) changes in literary studies and scholarship, scholarly communication, as well as research infrastructures and digital pedagogy.

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SonorCities is a multi-faceted digital educational resource currently accessible via a Wordpress website based on the University of Athens' server and is the product of a one-year research project (2012) funded by the John S. Latsis Public Benefit Foundation. The project's website describes it as "a comprehensive educational tool for understanding cultural practices and cultural heritage through the ethnographic documentation of the soundscapes of the city," and it comprises a teacher handbook as well as a pilot interactive application. In addition to the handbook and the pilot application, the user can find additional information, such as a brief description of the project, information about the members of the team, dissemination activities (including the curricula of entities currently participating in the project), credits, and a number of useful links. The research team of *SonorCities* is a key partner of a project titled *Histories, Spaces and Heritages at the Transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Greek State* that will be hosted by the École Française d'Athènes, starting in 2017. The project, under the scientific coordination of Elias Kolovos (Department of History and Archeology, University of Crete) and Panagiotis C. Poulos (Department of Turkish and Modern Asian Studies, University of Athens), aims to further develop and enlarge research on the sensory history of the Ottoman heritage of Greece, following the trajectories of particular urban centers and buildings during the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the modern Greek state.

But *SonorCities* succeeds in becoming much more than its educational components. Through a creative combination of theoretical discussion, guided fieldwork, and dynamic digital representations of the urban soundscapes, *SonorCities* asserts itself as an alternative methodological route to an interdisciplinary study of the sound culture of the past as well as a research-driven and community-oriented Digital Humanities project.

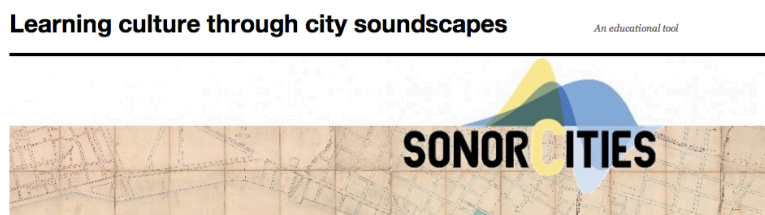


Figure 1. Logo and entry page of the project. *Source:* sound-cities.turkmas.uoa.gr/

Ethnography of city soundscapes: Into the archive of sound

The *Teacher Handbook*, an open-access digital publication (available for download in pdf format and under a Creative Commons license), aims to contain all supportive material (theoretical, methodological, and technical) necessary for setting up and

carrying out the project both in the classroom and in the field, with a number of example materials, such as tables, tasks, and activities, that can be equally useful to students and instructors.

A well-structured presentation of the long and interdisciplinary literature on soundscapes, alongside the existing research methods of the sound ethno-/topography of the city, is also included in the handbook and familiarizes the user to the multilayered research field of the project: soundscape history and ethnography of sound, sensory history, ethnomusicology, reflexive anthropology of the senses, cultural geography. While the theoretical presentation brings together a number of traditional Humanities and Social Sciences disciplines, it also sets out to demonstrate the multi-sensorial nature of the project, the orality/literacy divide, and the urban/spatial dimensions of memory and history.

Thus, the project also investigates how we could reveal sound traces in a variety of cultural and historical primary material, from administrative document inscriptions, travelogues, and memoirs, to audio or music recordings, still or moving images, and site plans. Furthermore, it examines how we could locate those in the cultural time-map of the city through a multi-sensorial approach.

From field research to the digital divide: The moment of Digital Humanities

How do we deal with the heterogeneous collected archival material in a way that transcends the existing taxonomic typologies and invigorates the linear historical narrative mode? In the era of new media and digital technologies, what are the alternate routes to historicize and represent the sound archive by pointing out and showing the connections between moments and places? How can a field-based scholar become a digital-oriented scholar?

In the second part of the *Teacher Handbook*, the concern and aporia of how to represent, disseminate, discuss, and extend the research procedures and their findings, together with the collected primary material of the sound archive through digital media, becomes even more evident. Could a web-based visualization and cartographic technology offer a satisfactory answer? Is a database structure of the archival material, with a static interface and a simple search function, enough for researchers' aspirations and needs? The project team seems to be somehow hesitant to discern and formulate clearly that this is the moment of the Digital Humanities.

Digital Humanities is an interdisciplinary, vibrant, and rapidly growing field of endeavor, and far from being simply a self-reproducing technicist discipline it actually offers and utilizes innovative emerging technologies, as well as a new robust repertoire

of research methods, publication, and preservation, in order to assist traditional Humanities scholarship.. What the emergence of Digital Humanities suggests is a conceptual and substantial shift of established research perspectives in the Humanities towards issues of modeling and representation of the primary sources, alongside new collaborative, interdisciplinary, project-based models of scholarship. The work of Digital Humanities carries the promise to bring together productive rigor, instrumental usability, rhetorical openness, and clarity.

Modeling, creating and navigating the digital resource

The *Pilot Application* of *SonorCities* serves as a case study and utilizes *VisualEyes* as a tool that becomes a dynamic digital representation of the sound history of the Old Archeological Museum (Yeni Cami) of Thessaloniki throughout the twentieth century.

The *Teacher Handbook* does not describe *VisualEyes* (the digital tool used) and the ways in which its technical features enable the representation of the sound archival material in meaningful and creative ways. I find this to be a serious lack, as it goes to the heart of what should be a strategic scholarly behavior of computationally engaged Humanities scholars—such projects should also be a platform from where they will disseminate information to the public regarding the use of information technologies for creating digital outputs about how these technologies work, how they are built, and what features they offer, including procedures, necessary workflow, best practices, and existing protocols.

VisualEyes (<http://www.viseyes.org/>) is an open, web-based authoring scholarly tool written in Adobe Flash and developed at the Sciences, Humanities & Arts Network of Technological Initiatives of the University of Virginia, intended “to weave images, maps, charts, video and data into highly interactive and compelling dynamic visualizations. . . . *Visual Eyes* enables scholars to present selected primary source materials and research findings while encouraging active inquiry and hands-on learning among general and targeted audiences. It communicates through the use of dynamic displays—or visualization—that organize and present meaningful information in both traditional and multimedia formats The effective use of visualizations can reveal and illuminate relationships between multiple kinds of information across time and space far more effectively than words alone.”¹

¹ <http://www.viseyes.org/viseyes.htm> (last accessed 23 July 2016).

2007), space is not conceived in static Cartesian terms but is produced through networks of social interactions and practices. It is through a web of flexible and extensible interconnections among and between soundscapes located in distinct space and time—what in *SonorCities* is termed “word clouds”—that the “structure of sense” (to echo Raymond Williams’ “structure of feeling”) of each monument's phase is reconstructed. A number of displays offered by *Visual Eyes* are used to present data information (text and image displays, paths, concepts), and a number of controls are offered that allow users to interact with the information (animation players, zoomers [zoom tool], and so on). *Visual Eyes* uses a scripting language called GLUE (the General Language to Unite Events) for the rendering of resources and for connecting user on-screen actions with them, while the project’s formal representation is based in well-structured XML (eXtensible Markup Language) scripts. For instance, while the user chooses to explore the soundscapes of Yeni Cami’s refugee shelter phase, the word clouds “minaret,” “orality,” “sensescape,” and “symbiosis” in the navigation control panel generate a number of text displays of different colors, one for each world cloud. Users can create their own trajectory through the displays: in each display, a unique control option is allocated, through which the user can access a separate asset of the archive.

Digital scholarship ethos and new pedagogy

The *SonorCities Educational Tool* stands as one of the rare examples in (Late Ottoman and) Modern Greek Studies scholarship that engages digital technologies not as assistive components but as the epicenter of its very own conceptualization and research, reducing its dearth of technical documentation and metadata problems.

In my view, the project team succeeds in encapsulating in this educational tool what Alan Liu has termed the “ethos of the unknown” (2004) within the emergence of digital technologies and their profound influence on the forms and practices of knowledge. If, in the digital era, the aura of print is indeed passing, what about the material trace and the chronotope of the senses? The *SonorCities* project encapsulates this very question: the image, the sound, the textual asset, and even touch and smell are all sensorial experiences that cannot be adequately transmitted but only represented through digital media. What is possible and at the same time what we must address through the use of digital technology in a sound-ethnography project but also in other future projects in fields such as literary, cultural and social history, is to experiment with the storing, indexing, processing, visualizing, displaying, and navigating options of assets and data, to renew and enrich our existing modes of perceiving and narrating the past as well as the present, and, finally, to challenge the limits of knowledge as a conceptual category and an educational goal.

Without a doubt, the pedagogical framework of *SonorCities* includes much more than the classroom and fieldwork. Affirming its identity as a multi-layered ethnography of sound as well as a Digital Humanities project, it enhances the use of open data and existing open scholarly tools, such as *Visual Eyes*, and it fosters collaboration in the silence of archives, in the bustle of fields, and in labs in front of code snippets and visualization software. In addition, the project team proudly embraces the new pedagogical model of "building as knowing": redefining teaching and learning by making students (co)producers, evaluating and experimenting with new tools and cutting-edge technologies while developing key transferrable skills, engaging and reaching more diverse communities of contributors and users, and, finally, remapping the borders between academic and public scholarship.

In this direction and by challenging their pilot prototype, the *SonorCities* team members participated at the 1st Athens Science Festival in 2014,² with a public engagement event on documenting and then digitally representing soundscapes from the Gazi neighbourhood in Athens. "Building" in the digital scholarship era, as Stephen Ramsay points out, coexists with "theorizing . . . as a new kind of hermeneutic—one that is quite a bit more radical than taking the traditional methods of humanistic inquiry and applying them to digital objects" (2011). *SonorCities*, with its overall argument and structure, is compellingly suggestive of such a position. The combination of scholarly conscientiousness, creative critical insight, and commitment to experimentation with digital technologies in the Humanities make this project a valuable starting point for anyone venturing into the history of sound as well as into digital scholarship in the area of Modern Greek Studies.

Anna-Maria Sichani
University of Ioannina

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² http://www.athens-science-festival.gr/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/ASF2014_PROGRAMME.pdf (last accessed 23 July 2016).

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