Listening with Technology: An Everyday Ethnography

by

Milena Droumeva

M.A., Simon Fraser University, 2007

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Abstract

The question addressed in this dissertation is situated at the intersection of sound studies, media and technology research, and sensory ethnography of everyday practice: namely, how does attending to sound using a portable smart device allow people access to understanding and experiencing everyday life. Leveraging the history of recording and mediated listening, this work updates traditional models of communication technology by exploring the dynamics of mediated sensory experience in the context of a specific technological practice: using mobile smart devices. Adopting listening with technology as a unique perspective from which to problematize everyday experience, the study investigates the way in which technology mediates and frames understandings of urban everyday life. Based on a small case study involving two groups of four participants the dissertation presents the results and discussion of eight sonic auto-ethnographies of listening with technology. The methodological approach for the study borrows from ethnographies of everyday practice, as well as from past sonic ethnography projects that involve listening, soundwalking and audio recording. A multimodal analysis is applied to the interpretation of participant-produced media artefacts, serving as a foundation for identifying points of convergence among representations of urban sound, approaches to listening with technology and narratives about everyday life. The analysis discusses three outcomes: the relationship between participants’ existing media use and the types of media artefacts created as part of the study; a typology of documentary approaches to the mediated representation of everyday experience; and a set of specific perceptual practices discussed in relation to listening as a form of mediated soundscape competence. Albeit preliminary work, this research suggests that there is a definite relationship between habitual media and technology use and approaches to documentation of everyday experience using smart devices; further, as perceptual processes such as listening become augmented by technological capabilities, including recording, photography and decibel measurements, mediation can be seen as a cultural process inseparable from perception. In sum, this work suggests that the sensory documenting or mediated curating of everyday life using mobile smart technology is a cultural practice nascent within the paradigm of new media participation.

Keywords: everyday ethnography; multimodal analysis; sound studies; media and technology, new media, sensory ethnography, curation, mobile technology, acoustic ecology, participatory culture, smartphones, listening, sonic ethnography