

“Every space and place sounds and resounds, every living body and being vibrates, and every kind of material, object and surface has acoustic properties” (Gallagher et al, p.620)

Sounding Coastal Change – A Review

The Sounding Coastal Change project is a research and art-engagement project focussed on social and environmental change in North Norfolk, UK. It employs a suite of digital techniques and technologies in sound, listening and presentation that enables us “to listen to Climate Change” and “explore the ways in which the coast is changing and how people's lives are changing with it” (Revill, 2018).

The project is conceived according to Schafer’s (1977) soundscape in which all sounds of the physical landscape reflect at a certain time and place. In these soundscapes, ‘moral geographies’ emerge through judgements that ascribe meanings and values to the sounds of place (Matless, 2005), and when making these sonic judgements it is suggested “that which has become classified as ‘nature’ might find a ‘voice’” (Revill, 2021, p.2). In doing so, the variety of perspectives, human and more than human, that co-exist in place may be better recognised.

Project Overview

The Sounding Coastal Change (SCC) project used digital methods developed in disciplines such as acoustic ecology, sound studies and musicology to explore and interrogate how sound prioritises and contributes to a sense of place (Thulin, 2018). By using an array of sound types (music, sonic compositions; naturalistic/environmental recordings), SCC aims to develop new ways of understanding by situating the listener in the Norfolk landscape and by (re)producing soundscapes of the Blakeney coast. These new understandings are formed through listening and as such moves beyond the pictorial and representational and instead focus on spatial and experiential dimensions of Blakeney.

The project used several different techniques in sound production and social engagement (*e.g.*, original musical composition, filmmaking, naturalistic recordings, audio interviews, participatory workshops) to produce a variety of outputs including printed publications, meeting and workshop notes, photograph and film footage, sound recording and musical performances. A selection of these outputs is hosted on the SCC website which acts as both a repository for project materials and as an experiential sample of the project, available to listeners (users) of the website.

To ascertain whether the project has achieved its aims, the following review will consider how SCC’s use of digital techniques contributes to the uncovering of human and non-human voices in environmental research. As such, the review will provide a short synopsis of the project structure and will highlight some pertinent features and observations of the SCC’s website and its Sonic Map as key project outputs.

It must be noted that written descriptions of multimedia and audio-visual content do not adequately convey artefacts intended to be experienced via other modalities (which demonstrates an inherently valuable dimension of ‘the digital’). So, whilst some screenshots are provided as illustrations, the reader is invited to explore the original material to experience it as intended.

Project Structure

SCC is a large-scale, AHRC funded project that took place over two years. It involved several large partners such as The National Trust, Dundee University and Norfolk Wildlife Trust. Its methodology comprised a programme of engagement events (workshops, performances, audio and visual recordings and interactive exhibitions) that sought input and participation from a large variety of participator and stakeholder groups (residents, school children and young people, local interest and institutional groups, and visitors) to produce “sound works, music recordings photography and films” (See Appendix 1 for Project Structure Summary).

Project Outputs and Evaluation

As noted above, the nature of this project has resulted in many outputs, digital and otherwise. The outputs can broadly be grouped as:

- **The SCC Website:** a repository and representation of the project from where the user can access information on the project and its outputs.
- **Documentation:** engagement notes; workshop invitations; meetings transcripts; publications.
- **Sonic Map:** a spatial representation of a selection of the compositions, recordings etc. These are experienced as ‘postcards’ from specific locations on the map.

Certainly, any of the outputs could be evaluated e.g., each of the engagements / workshops could be evaluated for their social and pedagogical impacts, the musical and film compositions could be assessed for ‘artistic merit.’ Here, we will focus on two specific digital outputs of the project:

- a) the SCC website as a key project output
- b) the Sonic Map described above

These two outputs are chosen as they serve as useful illustrations examples of how humanities are moving towards the digital, namely the use of internet technology to publish research widely and the use of digital technologies to work in modalities other than visual.

The SCC Website

The SCC website's home page is focussed on a series of changing background seascape and project-related images, a navigation bar at the top of the page and a control panel to manage playing of the site's background soundscape "the spit waves on shingle" (see Figure 1).

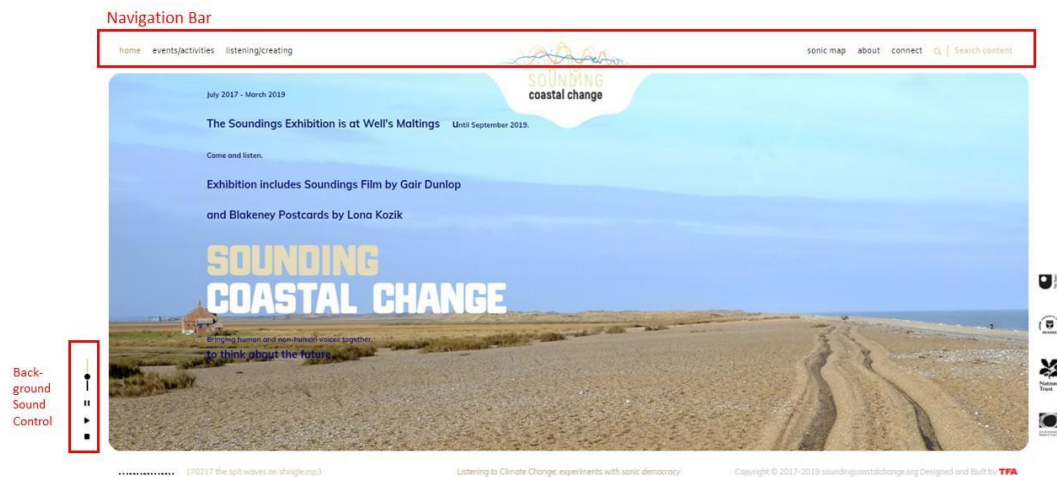


Figure 1 Sounding Coastal Change Landing Page with Navigation and Sound Controls Highlighted

Some initial observations on the landing page are useful to illustrate standard 'good practice' features which should be considered in the development of any website:

1. **Home page messaging:** The text on the home page refers to past events and is without any guidance/directions to the user as to how to proceed through the site. It can reasonably be assumed that the site has served different purposes throughout the life of the project. In its 'active' phase, the site was clearly used as a communication channel to advise participants of upcoming engagements or share outputs of recent productions, and so users are directed to the 'events/activities' or 'listening/creating' pages. However, at the time of writing (c. two years since the core project finished), the site's predominant use is as a repository from where project outputs can be accessed. Reflection of this on the home page messaging would improve the currency and relevance of the information/project. This lack of currency of the website is perhaps further illustrated by the fact that the same research team has initiated a related project (Sounding Wells) in a different Norfolk location, but no reference is made on the SCC website.
2. **Navigation:** In the absence of any instructions, the user can choose to engage with the site's content in any order. While this may be useful to users already familiar with the project -as they can access the required material directly for the uninitiated, the absence of instructions results in additional effort to navigate the site.

3. **User Experience:** The site is content rich in that it has images and functionality on every page. In addition, the page design includes a frame with the prominent positioning of the project logo central to the top of the page. While this presents an aesthetically pleasing ‘look and feel’ to the site, the logo feature can obscure some page content and moving through pages is disrupted such that scrolling through more content-rich pages freezes. Further, there are several broken links on the site, further increasing the sites redundancy.
4. **Background Sound:** Embedded within the frame on each page is the option to play ‘sounds of the sea’ (see Figure 1). ‘Website etiquette’ suggests that sites that play sound automatically on opening are considered rude (Sterne, 2006) and so the default setting is for the background sound to be switched off until the user actively switches it on each time they navigate to a new page.

Overall, the SCC website, was initially conceived as a dynamic and aesthetically pleasing output, does not function wholly satisfactorily from an end user perspective today. The outdated home page messaging, a disrupted user experience and lack of clear instruction or intuitive navigation could reasonably lead users to conclude the site is redundant and its contents no longer relevant. As a project largely utilising public engagement, this seems remiss. Further, for a project on sound (in its most general sense), the website design appears to prioritise ‘website etiquette’ and visuals. By silencing the background sound, the site conflicts somewhat with the project’s aims of prioritising sound.

The Sonic Map

Accessed via the navigation bar, the Sonic Map is a spatial representation of the project's output. It uses Google Maps to enable an interactive web-map on which 'postcards' (project outputs) are geotagged and uploaded (See Figure 2). By navigating around the map and clicking on a marker, users select a postcard.



Figure 2 Sonic Map from where Individual 'Postcards' can be accessed by clicking on a marker.

The postcards provide an impression of the soundscapes and landscape in the specific marker locations or provide access to a specific film, sound recording, or musical composition 'located' in the spatial map (see Figure 3).

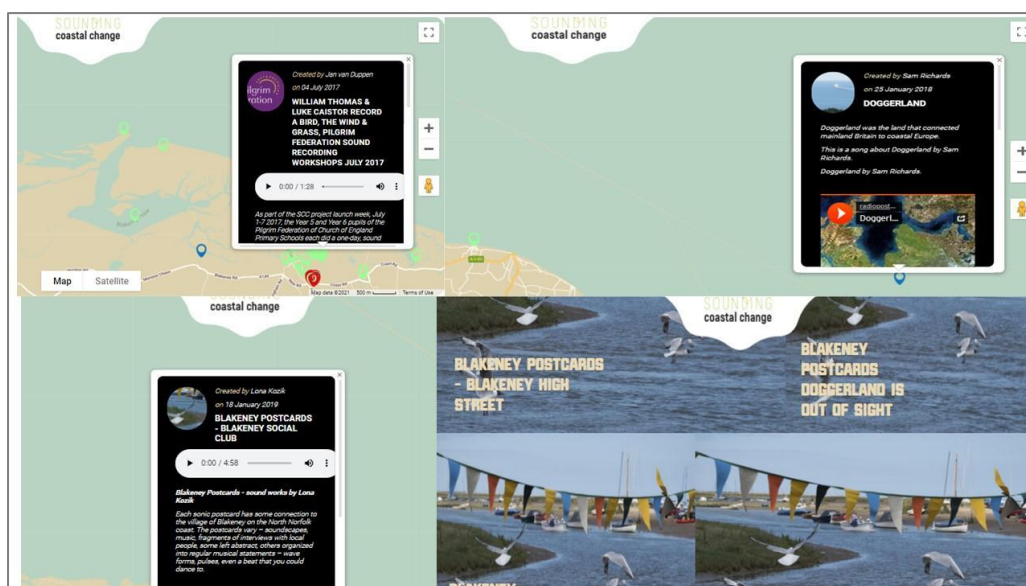


Figure 3 Sample of Postcards accessed from the Sonic Map.

Each postcard has a connection with the village or coast and varies in terms of content and composition, for example: pieces of music/musical performance, archival radio and television footage, ‘naturalistic’ images and sound recordings and interviews (see Table 1). As with the usage of Google maps, the visual and audio elements of the postcards are hosted on free-to-access popular software (i.e., Vimeo and Soundcloud). The use of software which is largely known to users means focus can be directed at the ‘postcard’ content. Conceptually, digitising ‘postcards from the seaside’ presents a familiar and accessible means for users to engage with the project such that they can decide on their own route around the Blakeney coast. Practically, the postcard markers have a set display size, which reduces the user experience as the content displayed does not always fit in the frame.

Table 1 A snapshot of Postcards

Postcard Name	Postcard Type	Content Summary
Matters Arising	Audio Recording	A live performance for residents/visitors
Blakeney is Beautiful	A ‘sonic slideshow’ in which naturalistic and interview recordings made by primary school pupils are played to accompany photos	Pupils and Pupils recorded sounds of wind, birds, grass, and bushes and interviewed local people.
More Water in the Sea	Film using archival TV and radio footage; interviews with residents; naturalistic audio and visual recordings	TV and Radio news footage from early 19 th c floods combined with residents’ stories recalling first-hand accounts of same and imagery alluding to changes in coastal environment

Overall, the sonic map and the postcard concept enables a productive means of engaging with the project. Users can determine how they engage with the pieces, affording the opportunity for multiple experiences. It situates the listener in a multitude of contexts temporally and spatially: the inaugural naturalistic recording of the ‘dawn chorus’ serves as an aural birdlife survey at a place and time; the archive film and radio coverage brings into the present the lives and happenings of Blakeney past; interviews of subjective observations and recordings of grass, trees and bushes are now available for the future.

Conclusion

Some initial observations on the SCC project as whole. Availing of advances in technology, digital techniques used by SCC have made possible explorations in modes of sound and listening that are now more feasible, and vital, than ever before. (Thulin, 2018). There are certainly some improvements that could be made to the project's website, some minor updates would instantly render the site relevant and engaging. However, the more important contribution SCC makes to digital humanities is its use of sound and its aim to recognise multiple dimensions and perspectives. In this way it exemplifies Svensson's (2016) liminal placing of the digital humanities as a meeting place of sorts. By using sound, the SCC project demonstrates how it is possible to move beyond humanities' preoccupation and privileging of the visual and encourages us to engage with modes of production, consumption and dissemination that have so far been neglected. And, in moving beyond textual and literary studies, the digital enables us to consider research questions and study designs that were not possible previously (Sterne, 2006).

In this regard, SCC provides an important and productive example by which the humanities are moving beyond academic papers. The extent to which this is possible is a direct result of technical advancements in sound practices and the interdisciplinary approach that is fundamental to digital humanities (Klein, 2015). In the case of SCC, this has enabled the use of sound and listening as especially significant for people of Blakeney and it has afforded them the opportunity to considered both the human and the more than human perspectives the construct the environment.

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Appendix 1 – Sounding Coastal Change Project Structure.

Project Element	Description
Title	The project has two names: 1. Academic/Funding Name: Listening to Climate Change: experiments in sonic democracy. 2. Public Name: Sounding Coastal Change
Duration	• The project was funded from 2016 – 2019 and public engagement took place between May 2017 – March 2019
Location	• Focusses on Blakeney village and Blakeney National Nature Reserve, North Norfolk coast, South East England
Organisation	• Budget totalled £498k funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (ARHC) • Led by an academic team headed by a cultural geographer from the Open University and involving the University of Dundee and other researchers and artists including musician/composers, sound artists, and an art/documentary filmmaker. • The project participants include a wide range of partners, supporters and stakeholder groups such as The National Trust, The Pilgrim Federation of Church of England Schools, St. Nicholas' Church, Blakeney Parish Council, the Norfolk Wildlife Trust, Future Radio (Norwich) and the British Library Sound Archive. • Website design and technical support was provided by a commercial, specialist creative agency TVA
Objectives	Various project objectives are stated at different site locations: 1. From the 'Home' page: "Bring human and non-human voices together to think about the future" (http://www.soundingcoastalchange.org/) 2. From the 'About' page "to use sound, music and different kinds of listening, to explore the ways in which the coast is changing and how people's lives are changing with it" (http://www.soundingcoastalchange.org/about#purpose)

	3. From various 'Events' pages "To inform the development of a sonic coastal plan for the Blakeney area." (http://www.soundingcoastalchange.org/events)
Method	• The project comprised a programme of engagement events (workshops, performances, audio and visual recordings and interactive exhibitions) that sought input and participation from a large variety of participator and stakeholder groups (residents, school children and young people, local interest and institutional groups, and visitors) to produce "sound works, music recordings photography and films" • The schedule incorporated external events as 'milestones', for example, it launched with "a live broadcast as part of International Dawn Chorus Day (7 May 2017)"; public performance and exhibitions scheduled in various locations throughout duration of the project such as the ; "Matters Arising ... in Blakeney" "a live installation of sound, music, words, and visual imagery" and series of recording workshops with primary school children served as foundation for their further participation in 'World Listening Day'