

## Sound Mapping as a Tool for Sharing Sonic Cultures: Citizen Archivists and the Question of Accessibility of Materials Versus Archival Standards

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### Abstract

The Islamic call to prayer, the adhan, azaan, or athan, is recited five times daily as a way of signifying prayer times to Muslims. Over the past 8 years I have been involved in a research project of collecting field recordings of the call to prayer from mosques around the world and using a web-based sound map to geo-locate, share these recordings, and reach contributors outside of my own network. In this paper, I will offer a perspective of how the sound map as tool can participate in a discourse on the accessibility of archival materials to broader audiences, as well as the collection of archival materials from broader audiences. The paper will also consider that there may be an inverse relationship between accessibility of materials and archival standards and will look at how this impacts the breadth of accessibility versus the temporality of accessibility. What are the benefits and pitfalls of sharing compressed formats of archival recording through sound maps and widely accessible streaming services, that allow for broader dissemination, searchability, and access, and does this impact our understanding of the role of the archive? What can a sound map offer in connecting users, materials, and communities and how can we leverage such a form of digital media toward archival ends? And finally, in a time when there are communities and people who are disappearing across the globe due to conflicts, how can tools like the sound map help us to archive and document these places.

### Paper

As a sound studies scholar and an audio engineer I am very interested in using recorded sound as a way of exploring culture and community. This is from the perspective of the aurality of place and environment, as it is heard through recordings in a given context as well as of the subject matter of the source sounds that are the focus of the recording. This is to say that when we record a sound, we are in actuality recording many sounds. Sometimes we record sounds we don't intend or want to hear like cars passing by on a main road, and other times we record sympathetic sounds of the environment, culture, and community of the place where we are recording. Depending on the methodological techniques we employ in our recording practice, these sympathetic sounds may or may not be decipherable or even considered valuable by some. However, these sounds and the way we understand them can play an important role in the broader value of these recordings. The types of sympathetic sounds we find ourselves recording, and the contexts in which we have access and choose to record have an impact on the types of 'hidden' sonic material that make their way into recordings, what and who gets represented in these recordings, and ultimately which histories and cultures we are preserving. The people who make these recordings play a large role in what gets captured and preserved.

In this paper, I will focus on a world sound map project of the Islamic call to prayer. I will consider how the sound map, as a tool of collection and possibly archiving, can participate in a discourse on the accessibility of archival materials to broader audiences, as well as the collection of archival materials from broader audiences. The paper will also consider and problematize the inverse relationship between accessibility and archival standards of recorded audio material and will look at how this impacts the breadth of accessibility versus the temporality of accessibility, and ultimately how these issues of access impact the types of recordings that are included in a sound map, and that are 'archived.'

In her keynote speech at IASA's 49<sup>th</sup> annual conference in Accra, Ghana, Esi Sutherland-Addy talked about the need for Citizen Archivists, people in communities who become the documenters of their own culture. And this call for citizen archivists raises some very important questions around how our definitions of archival audio-visual materials, and our requirements for what constitutes such material, invites or excludes contributions from citizen archivists. I am interested in how people, without technical or archival skills, but equipped with basic tools like mobile phones, can play a role in sharing aspects of their culture and community heritage. In this paper I will talk about my own process grappling with these questions as I moved through several stages of thought and implementation around what archival means and to what extent the recordings of the call to prayer documented on the sound map, need to be "archival." I will also look at the benefits of 'citizen archivist' contributions and whether or not these contributions necessitate a reduction of standards in the types of materials that can be collected.

"[T]he question of the archive is not, we repeat, a question of the past. It is not the question of a concept dealing with the past that might *already* be at our disposal or not at our disposal, *an archivable concept of the archive*. It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come."

—Jacques Derrida (1995, p. 36)

To begin, let us look at the passage above, taken from Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995), in which he considers the question of the archive. Derrida argues that the question of the archive is a question of the future, rather than one of the present, and also a question about the meaning of the archive, which he argues can only be ascertained in the future, when people look back on that which has been archived with an eye that can see what the archive came to mean. I interpret Derrida's (1995) statement to mean that what we choose to archive, the very question of what the archive includes, also has an impact on how we see today and tomorrow. This is to say that the objects and stories we deem important to represent us in the future, shape how we identify our community and ourselves today. How will we see 100 years ago in 300 years? Derrida is arguing that the very decision of what the archive is, what it contains, what it aims to do, and how it is woven into the fabric of society, carries the responsibility for what tomorrow understands of today. If we apply this interpretation to how citizen archivists can contribute sounds of their own communities, differently than an outsider of a community can, then we must balance or weigh the importance of materials collection by citizen archivists to the means used for this collection. This is of course not to say that citizen archivists cannot document their communities with equipment that support archival quality standards, but more that these standards and the equipment necessary to achieve them can be an obstacle to who can capture what and what gets captured.

When I began the sound mapping project of the Islamic call to prayer, I traveled to different mosques with a Sound Devices recorder and a stereo capsule microphone. I recorded everything at archival standards, producing huge WAV files which I compressed down so that they could ultimately be streamed online, and therefore more easily accessible to people in places with lower bandwidth, and so that I could leverage common web-based audio streaming tools. The large uncompressed WAV files get stored on local hard drives and redundantly in secure cloud storage environments and wait to be revisited, or more properly archived at some later point in time when the impetus and resources

to do so become available. The purpose of the sound map is to share the nuance of the recorded azaans with as many people as will listen, making them easily available so that people from anywhere can access them. On a practical level, this means that the website needs to load quickly and easily, and the user interface needs to be streamlined for phones and computers alike.

The sound map project has been in development for eight years. A few years in it became clear that in order to accomplish the intended scope of the project, which was to have field recordings from mosques all over the world, a goal that I am still working toward, no one person would have the time or resources to properly accomplish this task in as far reaching a way as I would want the map to reflect. I began to ask friends who were sound people or technology folks, if they would help me to record the Azaan where they lived, when they travelled, and or if they knew others with access to high quality audio recording equipment who could make recordings. The result was a few recordings here or there over a year, many of which did not successfully capture the entire azaan, which is the main requirement for recordings posted to the map. The challenge was that those who had audio recording equipment available and the skills to use it, were not often in the physical locations to make recordings.

Due to the low number of contributions, the call for contributors grew to include friends and family of sound folks who were able to make recordings in their local communities but who lacked the technical tools and expertise to do. This second batch of folks who sent in recordings were often doing so from the mosque in their local community where they went for prayers. These were arguably a disparate group of citizen archivists, recording the azaan in their own communities. I began receiving recordings in .mp3 and mpeg4 format which were made primarily on cell phones. The recordings were generally well recorded and very clean, capturing the entire azaan and also an intimate snapshot, often of the interior prayer space of the mosque. One of my former colleagues from when I lived in Abu Dhabi, asked his brother in Khartoum if he would make a recording at mosque for the sound map. A few weeks later he sent me a recording of the azaan his brother made inside the stone and concrete central courtyard of the mosque.<sup>1</sup> I could hear in this azaan, the acoustic resonance of the architecture, and the dull hum of people walking in for prayer. The recording struck me as it was in such stark contrast to my recordings, which had been largely taken outside of mosques boasting sounds of the local environs including the wind blowing the trees or a noisy intersection, at times these environs were sonically foregrounded in my recordings, reflecting the distance I had from the communities where I was recording.

The contributions made by these ‘citizen archivists’ like my colleague’s brother, were low quality, mostly made on mobile phones and sometimes passed along as video files taken on cameras, compressed into low quality formats. As a result these recordings were in stark contrast to the archival standard recordings I had made on my Sound Devices recorder. However, because I was compressing all of the recordings in order to upload them to Soundcloud, the audio streaming server I used to fuel the sound map, the difference in quality was less apparent and arguably less important, than the fact that these recordings of the azaan were now represented on the sound map.

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<sup>1</sup> Recording of Azaan made by Waeil Idris on November 2014 at Masjid Al Adarsa in Khartoum, Sudan.  
<https://soundcloud.com/diana-chester-1/masjid-al-adarsa-khartoum-sudan>

I made the decision to prioritize access to the call to prayer from the broadest possible communities - the initial aim of the project - over the fidelity of the recordings. There were a few reasons that drove this decision the first being that I was actually getting contributions that I could put on the map from places that otherwise had no representation. An additional reason was that when I sat back and listened to the recordings the 'citizen archivists' had made, I found myself listening with a differently critical ear to their recordings than to my own. I was hearing the environment, the ambient sounds, and the sense of place that had been recorded. This process of including recordings others had made opened my ears to new ways of listening to and hearing the sonic materials included in the sound map.

John Cage added a new dimension to the exploration of composition by using sound in composition as a means of defining sonic culture. John Cage's compositional style offered a new approach to making music in the second half of the twentieth century, which considered the relationship between sound and music, and that utilized the found environment as a space for "renewed listening within a musical framework" (LaBelle, 2015, p. 3) I want to now look at the example of John Cage's *Composition 4'33"* to explore the value of having citizen archivists or contributors to projects like the sound map. Cage's *4'33"* is a three-movement composition for piano, which instructs the pianist to close the piano lid and time each movement while sitting at the piano in silence. Cage's composition is a prime example of the role that the acoustics of space and noise of place can play in constructing a composition. *4'33"* becomes a composition made up primarily of the sonic qualities contributed by the audience in the space at the moment of the performance. Because the sounds brought into each performance of *4'33"* reflect the unique nature of the cultures of each, not only did performances sound different in each performance hall, but the audiences of each performance created a micro community within a particular cultural context, and the performance became a conduit through which to hear the sonic attributes of that community, inclusive of sonic qualities like language, affect, ambiance, and demographic makeup of the audience.

Like *4'33"* the recordings of the azaan are also always different, from place to place and day-to-day. Even a recording of the Maghrib, sunset azaan, from the same mosque on two different days will be sonically diverse from one another. I began the sound map of the call to prayer to capture the sonic nuance of the call to prayer, and to create a sonic representation of the diversity of Islam geographically, but also culturally, linguistically, and with regard to the cultural contexts in which Islam exists, as revealed through sound. What I have found simply put is that while those qualities still emerge in the recordings I have made and posted to the map, the aim of the project has been greatly furthered by having 'citizen archivists' make contributions from within their own communities. The decision to expand the breadth and scope of geographies that could be included on the map was also a decision to deprioritize the quality, longevity, and sonic fidelity of the recordings. Herein lies an inverse relationship between accessibility of materials and archival standards of those materials. While these are not mutually exclusive things necessarily, my findings with the sound mapping project were that in order to have access to more recordings, and to make the recordings and the map most broadly accessible, I needed to include and share compressed formats of the recordings, as they are simply easier to access, can be streamed, and most importantly are accessible more quickly than larger file types, which are typically at least ten times the size. I found there to be a direct relationship between the breadth of accessibility, how much information can be made accessible to how many people, and the temporality of that accessibility, or how quickly people had access to materials, and how relevant those materials were by the time they had access.

Due to the success of these initial contributions, I decided to expand the call for submissions through social media and networking. This entailed posting calls on Facebook, reaching out to individuals in a targeted fashion, and putting a call for contributions on the sound map website. I created a brief description for potential collaborators with specifications about recording, which detailed that the recordings should be audio only, they must be complete and not cut off any part of the azaan, and finally to include a photograph from where the recording was made. I explicitly omitted requirements around format, recording devices, or quality. The decision to not focus on quality control for the submitted recordings, was a decision to get more people involved, and to better meet the bigger goal of the sound map which is broad visibility of the azaan around the globe.

While it would be ideal to have a repository of archival quality recordings of each azaan, I feel it is nicer to have the breadth of recordings that are currently on the map. I also hope to continue to flesh out the map to be inclusive of as many Muslim communities around the world as possible. Thus far I have found that most contributors are not often sound engineers or audiophiles, they are members of the Muslim communities where they are making these recordings. They are brothers, sisters, parents, and friends of people I have met, or friends of theirs. The contributors are largely people who are interested in sharing the sounds of their community with others, but who do not have fancy equipment or training to do so at archival standards.

I will leave off by saying that this experience has left me ruminating on the following questions. Is it better to have the contributions and not have them be archival, or not have the contributions at all? And what are the benefits and pitfalls of sharing compressed formats of archival recording through sound maps and widely accessible streaming services, that allow for broader dissemination, searchability, and access—and does this impact our understanding of the role of the archive? Sound mapping as a tool offers a means of viewing, searching, and accessing materials contextualized within a frame that positions a thing in direct geographic relation to another thing. The web-based nature of the map makes it more easily shareable and accessible. Because the recordings are compressed they are easier to stream and to share, and not placing specific quality requirements on contributions allows for a greater number of contributors to help grow the body of work. This arguably creates a scenario that jeopardizes the sustainability of the material and its longevity and raising into question whether a collection of sounds such as the sound map discussed here constitutes an archival collection.

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