

## 37 SOUND RECORDING AND RADIO BROADCASTS FOR EXPEDITIONS

*Neil Walker*

Few people would ever go travelling without packing a camera. It would be unthinkable to travel to the most beautiful place in the world and not be able to capture images to remind yourself later in life. And yet, if you just take a camera, you get only half of the picture. Without a camera you are blind, but without an audio recorder you are deaf.



Figure 37.1 *Damian Welch, winner of the RGS–IBG Radio 4 Journey of a Lifetime Award carrying out an interview on Tokelau, a South Pacific atoll threatened by sea level rise (© Damian Welch)*

## EXPEDITION HANDBOOK

At this stage I hear you say that the answer must be to take a camcorder instead because that way you capture sound and images. Perhaps. But the art of capturing moving images is vastly different from stills photography. And, frankly, the sound recordings picked up by most camcorders are only a slight improvement on silent movies.

The aim of this chapter is not to persuade you to take an audio recorder in preference to a camera or camcorder, but to convince you that you can capture a huge chunk of your personal experience if you do take one.

For many years I have helped beginners to make programmes about their travels for the BBC. They received only a basic training about what to record but were astonished on their return by the high quality of their own recordings and how vividly they rebuilt memories of certain times and places. To quote a well-worn media cliché: “the pictures are better on radio.”

Before discussing the cost and what to buy, I would like to take you on a journey. This will be a fictional trip but my guess is that it will not be very different from what you are planning.

It starts before you even leave home when you confide to your audio recorder what problems you are having raising the finance, who is giving you grief, and what are the major things that you still have to sort out before you can leave. It's like a diary and the sort of things you record now are soon forgotten once the trip is under way. But these pre-trip problems and your thoughts at this time are just as important as what happens later and will no doubt produce a wry smile once the adventure is all over. These thoughts and emotions are easy to record on audio, but could you take a photograph or try to get them on videotape? I doubt it.

Once your expedition is under way, your audio recorder takes on a new role. Frequently, it becomes a friend and confidante, especially for those travelling alone. At any time in almost any place you can switch on your recorder and describe your mood and the people and places that you are encountering. It is so subtle that it fails to attract the attention caused by holding up a camera. And if your descriptions are good, the images conveyed to others when they hear your recordings later will be as vivid as any colour photograph, but with the added value of your opinions and emotions expressed at the same time. Not only that, but you will very often be able to hear the very thing you are describing.

As you proceed on your journey you will encounter other people. An audio recorder gives you an opportunity to record the voices of others. These may be fellow expedition members who are willing to share their thoughts and experiences, or they may be strangers whom you may wish to know more about. A microphone and recorder give you a golden opportunity to ask many questions that might seem prying or impertinent in other circumstances, and it does not matter a jot whether the sun is shining or you are in the pitch black.

So, below is a recap on what you should record on this journey.

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Figure 37.2  
*Expedition member doing a personal  
voice piece (© Neil Walker)*

**DIARY PIECES**

Quite simply, this is you talking to your machine as if it's a telephone, with your best friend on the other end. It should happen spontaneously and not only when you are happy. Nor should you record at the same time each day. Travelling is an emotional experience and you must record the lows as well as the highs.

**INTERVIEWS**

An interview is a conversation between two people – it is not two people giggling into a microphone pretending they are disc jockeys. Such things may seem funny at the time but invariably it sounds naff later. An interview is a fact-finding mission, so treat it as such. Ask questions, and then shut up long enough to get a full answer. Presenting yourself to others in a formal way and with serious intent gives you a great opportunity to be taken on guided tours of people's homes, factories, monuments, etc. because most people love to be interviewed. It makes them feel important. Out of politeness, make a point of listening very carefully to their answers. They often give clues to things that they want you to ask them about.

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Figure 37.3 *An interview situation with microphone slightly closer to interviewee, but standing close together. This is ideal (© Neil Walker)*



Figure 37.4 *Interview too far apart. The microphone is intimidating in the gun-like position. Not ideal (© Neil Walker)*

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**ACTUALITY**

Actuality is the sound of anything but without narration. By recording the sounds of the people and places you visit, you will paint a panoramic image more colourful than anything you could describe or photograph. Never hurry when doing this. Stand still (if you can) and simply let the sounds wash into the machine for several minutes. Check your watch to make sure that you have at least 3 minutes' worth of each of these stimulating sounds. These might be the clamour of a railway station, the crying of a woman beggar, geese honking as they fly overhead, the drone of prayers from a mosque, feet scrabbling on rocks, someone shrieking in panic – all these are essential for reconstructing your journey, and will be a useful soundtrack to a photographic slide show.

If you are now inspired enough to consider taking along audio-recording equipment, let's consider what to do next.

**WHAT TO BUY**

Technology is changing so fast that it is impossible to make firm recommendations. In the last 10 years the equipment used for collecting broadcast-quality material has moved from reel-to-reel quarter-inch tape, to tape cassette recorders, to digital cassette (DAT) recorders, and lately to minidisk or portable CD recorders. Even as I write, the BBC is experimenting with portable machines that record on to silicon chips. The chips are then inserted into a computer for editing. However, it seems likely that minidisk recorders will be with us for a few more years and these offer high-quality recordings at a modest cost. They are reasonably robust, simple to operate, smaller than the average Walkman and run on minimal power for long periods of time. The disks are also light, cheap, not easily damaged and store masses of material. You can also edit your recordings as you go, thus maximising the space available while minimising on weight. The downside of minidisks is that non-professional machines have tiny buttons and so are fiddly to use, especially if you are wearing gloves. High humidity and cold weather rapidly drain the batteries, and it is easy to record accidentally over your previous material.

If you decide to use cassette recorders (tape) you should be aware that they are prone to give you hissy recordings. Even professional machines will give high-quality recordings only if you are intimately familiar with how to set the recording levels. If funds are extremely limited you could choose the most basic machine of the lot: the dictaphone. For simplicity and cheapness it is hard to beat, although the sound reproduction will be poor. This can be improved by purchasing a decent microphone. With this machine you can easily make diary recordings and even do interviews, but actuality recordings will be severely limited. Whichever machine you choose, read the manual thoroughly and experiment as much as you can before setting off.

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Figure 37.5  
*Mono, lapel and stereo microphones*  
(© Neil Walker)



Figure 37.6  
*Lapel microphone on the end of a bamboo cane being used to record birds in a tree* (© Neil Walker)

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Many people make the mistake of buying cheap microphones or decide to use the microphone that is built into their recorder. This is not recommended. You can get reasonable recordings with a good microphone and a poor recorder, but not the other way round. Mono microphones are easiest to use but tend to be more expensive than stereo microphones because there is less demand for them. Stereo microphones suffer more from hand noise and wind blast. Even gentle breezes generate blast interference unless you protect the sensitive tip with a windsock. In very windy conditions you will need to add further layers of protection. Radio journalists tend to use mono microphones for speech recordings and stereo for actuality. Unless you are recording for broadcast, my recommendation would be to seek out a good quality mono microphone.

To find the best, take your audio recorder into a shop and make several recordings using different microphones, then listen back to them (preferably at home on a hi fi) before choosing. Most in-built microphones are useless because they also record the whirring of the motor. A handy tip is to buy a tie-clip microphone as a back-up. These are very cheap from any electrical store and their quality is surprisingly good. They are incredibly light, will run for ever on tiny batteries, and can be adapted to form a stick microphone. You do this by simply taping it on to the end of a stick which can be a few centimetres long for face-to-face interviewing, or 3 metres long if you need to get close to people in a group situation (or want to record a bird up a tree): see Figure 37.6.

### HOW TO GET THE BEST RECORDINGS

As with all things, time and experience can turn you from an amateur into a gifted recordist. How good you become at recording depends on how much effort you put into it. Just like a camera, you can whip it out when something obvious comes your way and click on to record. But as with photography, such snapshots are unlikely to impress anyone. Making good recordings is an attitude of mind. It is not that you need to be constantly doing it, but you do need to be aware and ready to pounce every time a recording moment comes along. That will happen only if you think about it a lot in the early days and train yourself to be aware of the sounds and events going on around you.

Having alerted yourself to a "recording moment", the next task is to decide how to capture it. No good cameraman would simply point and shoot. He would pick his subject, decide where to stand, which angle and what exposure, and then try several versions to get the best.

Sound is similar. Try recording a speech from the back of a crowded room and you will hear nothing worthwhile. You have to pluck up courage, march to the front and hold your microphone as close to the speaker as you can possibly get without offending him or her (it's not as hard as you think and few people object if you are

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courteous). Alternatively, be creative and, if the speaker is using a public address system, hold your microphone right next to a loudspeaker. This principle of getting close to your subject is the most vital, yet for many it is the hardest to overcome. Natural shyness prevents most people from entering into close proximity with others, but if you do not do this you will be wasting your time. The principle of close proximity must be adopted for virtually every situation. If recording live music, get right up close to the band. If recording in a market you need to make two recordings. One of the general background sounds, and a separate recording of individual stall-holders. Stand right next to them when they shout their wares. If you explain what you are doing they will happily comply, and often put on an extra show.

It is no good being half-hearted if you want good recordings. At the very worst your victim can only say no and ask you to go away. In my experience, they rarely do. When you do your diary pieces you should work close to the microphone, about 30–45 cm from your mouth. You need to be close to create that intimate sound associated with a diary piece. In interviews, manoeuvre yourself and your participant so that you are close together and the microphone is positioned equidistant between you, at about chest level, so that it is out of direct eyeline with your subject. His or her answers are more important to hear than your questions so be more concerned with getting the microphone close to him or her. Point the microphone straight up (as Figure 37.3) and not at your interviewee, unless you are forced to interview at full arm's length. A test recording followed by playback will tell you if you have got your positioning correct. Even with your friends you should be firm and direct. If you let people muck about, you have lost control and will only ever record rubbish. If you aren't going to try to make a good job of this, don't waste time and money taking an audio recorder on your travels.

### RECORDING FOR BROADCAST

This should not be your prime concern. Millions of people go travelling and very few of them have experiences worthy of crafting into a radio programme. It is true that many people have interesting or amusing experiences, but they rarely have enough of them in one trip to fill a 30-minute documentary. As a rough guide, it is normal to record approximately 100 minutes of material for every one minute that is used in the programme, so you can see how dedicated you have to be in order to meet the demanding requirements of broadcast organisations. It is therefore my heartfelt recommendation that you record your expedition for your benefit and no one else's. This should make it fun to do and fun to listen to.

If these dire warnings have not put you off wanting to make a radio programme, consider the following. Is your trip really going to be full of interesting happenings that will translate to radio? Is there a good story to be told – one that hasn't been heard before? Are you sure that you will have the time to devote to gathering the

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recordings, or will the radio work get in the way? Will the other members of the team be cooperative, especially when under severe stress? If you can satisfy yourself on all these points and you are convinced that there is a good story to be told, the next step is to approach a broadcast organisation with your idea. Let me say straight away that you should not regard this as any kind of money-making venture. If you are offered any money at all, it will not be a fortune. However, an involvement with media organisations can boost your fund-raising possibilities elsewhere.

Before approaching any broadcaster you should be aware of the kinds of programmes that they transmit. Commercial radio, which is heavily music based, is unlikely to want to carry large chunks of speech, but is likely to be interested in an expedition that involves lots of music. Scan through the schedules of each broadcaster, then approach directly the producers of those programmes most likely to be interested. Initially letters or emails are always preferred to phone calls, and remember to supply as many contact numbers and addresses as you can. You should make these approaches at least 6 months before departure and, in the case of some networks, 12 months ahead. Budget allocations and schedules can be determined as much as 18 months ahead by some BBC departments, so you do yourself no favours by leaving it until the last minute. You can also approach independent broadcasting companies. There are several hundred of these in Britain, each of which sell programmes to radio stations or networks. Most specialise in certain kinds of programmes. A telephone call enquiring whether a network buys from freelancers will give a yes or no. If the answer is "yes", ask for a list of the names and addresses of the companies with which they work. The system of commissioning programmes is different in each country, but the method of approach is broadly the same. If you are fortunate enough to get a commission, the organisation will either send their own crew or provide you with recording equipment. Good luck.

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### **Journey of a Lifetime Award**

The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers or IBG) and BBC Radio 4 award an annual travel bursary for an individual to undertake their "Journey of a Lifetime". This substantial award, worth up to £4000, is offered to someone who plans to undertake a journey that will inspire an interest in peoples and places, and who would like the opportunity to communicate their experiences through the medium of radio broadcasting. BBC Radio 4 is keen to discover new broadcasting talent among those with a genuine curiosity for the world around them. The closing date for applications is usually in October. Full criteria for this award and details of past winners can be found on the website: [www.rgs.org/grants](http://www.rgs.org/grants).

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