

# Capture, Share, and Experience: “Podwalk” as a Medium for Flâneurs

Fumitoshi Kato  
Keio University  
5322 Endo, Fujisawa  
Kanagawa 252-8520, Japan  
+81 466-49-3619  
fk@sfc.keio.ac.jp

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the possible use of podcasts to deliver and share images together with audio recordings. Referring to a field research conducted in *Kanazawa, Ishikawa*, Japan, this paper reports on our recent attempts to create “podwalk” programs that enable us to walk through the city in alternative ways. In the context of community development and urban design, a podwalk program can be understood as a medium for flâneurs, with which one can amble along the streets to encounter a series of surprises and discoveries. I suggest that becoming a flâneur may be an entry point to experience our practice of image capture and sharing.

## Keywords

Fieldwork, camera phones, community development, podcasting, qualitative research method.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A camera phone can be understood as a new “gear” for conducting field studies, for it enables us to record and compile diverse viewpoints as a set of photos. By capturing images of the community, and by sharing them, we may be able to (re)discover various “good places” [8] of the local community. Given this conception, I have been exploring the use of camera phones for qualitative research methods, with a particular focus on a participatory mode of community development [5]. Because of the convenience of taking, sending, and publishing photos, the use of camera phones may increase one’s opportunity to generate a series of “life documents” within a sequence of day-to-day activities.

In the context of community development, it is important to distribute and share the result of the research back to the community members. As a way to distribute the images and understandings of the community, I have been exploring the use of postcards. After the field study, we organize photos and texts into a set of postcards, suggesting that a postcard is a handy, useful medium for presenting one’s experiences in the field. It creates an opportunity to open up the storage of a camera phone and convert them into a stream of personal stories. A postcard enables us to browse multiple photos simultaneously, and to share images of the community with others. Through these postcards, we have been developing new relationships, as well as social networks, with the community members.

## 2. A NEW MODE OF IMAGE SHARING

### 2.1 A hype on podcasting

With a growing popularity of iPods or portable MP3 players, “podcasting” is becoming one of the most interesting ways to distribute and share data files via network. According to the survey conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project [9] in February to March, 2005, more than 22 million American adults own iPods or MP3 players, and 29% of them (i.e., more than 6 million people) have downloaded podcasts from the web. A more recent survey by Nielsen/NetRatings indicates that, 6.6% of the adult online population in the US (i.e., 9.2 million people) has downloaded audio podcasts [7]. Diffusion Group estimates that, by 2010, podcast audience in the US will reach 56 million [3]. These estimates may vary depending on the ways in which podcast audience is captured. However, over the past few years, a significant number of the users are now acknowledging the podcasting.

In the beginning phase, iPods or MP3 players were introduced as music players, together with services that allow users to download music onto portable devices. With an introduction of photo and video playing capability, the possible usages of these devices, as music players, have changed. It expanded the idea of carrying along favorite music tunes, and created a new practice of browsing visual images on the same portable devices. It is not simply a portable hard disc drive, as storage, but with a capacity to browse, present, and share images with others. Concurrently, authoring tools to organize and edit an “enhanced” podcast program is becoming handy and accessible, and thus one can create a program, in which a series of photos can be shown as a slide-show, along with an audio-recording.

In Japan, podcasts are still in the process of gaining attention and acceptance from the users of iPods or MP3 players, while industries are paying more attention to this technology, seeking for their new business opportunities. According to the latest edition of the “*Internet White Paper* [4],” 43.7% of the online population in Japan acknowledges the term “podcasting.” However, when it comes to the individuals who actually downloaded any of the podcast programs, it only amounts to 6% of the online population in Japan. While iPods and MP3 players are gaining their popularity, similar features have been added onto mobile phones. For example, *au* (KDDI) launched a new service called “LISMO (Listen Mobile)” in January, 2006, in that one can listen to music on a mobile phone by downloading music

tunes via PC connection [2]. With free designated software, one can organize and manage on a computer not only playlists, but also calendar, photos, and other files stored in a mobile phone. Further, in May, 2006, they opened “LISMO music store” which enables the users to buy music tunes online. It seems likely that we are becoming more familiar with the notion of downloading audio files onto mobile devices, iPods, MP3 players, or mobile phones, to be carried around in our day-to-day activities.

## 2.2 Communicating experiences of cities through podcasts

As mentioned, we are gradually acknowledging that podcasts are not limited for downloading music tunes. Recently, variations of podcast programs include news, lectures, language lessons, audio books, movie previews/reviews, and travel guides. Some of these programs are accompanied with photos or videos, so that one can browse images along audio recordings. Within the context of community development, podcasts can be utilized for distributing the result of the field research back to the community members. Just as I have been exploring the use of postcards, a researcher’s personal experiences in the field can be organized into a podcast program.

An interesting application relevant to the present study is provided by art museums. For example, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) has been distributing “artcasts” through the web since September, 2005 [11]. A visitor can download “artcasts” in advance, and with one’s iPod or MP3 player at hand, he/she can navigate him/herself within the museum. A series of audio recordings will provide with cues to walk, or to stop at a certain spot for an appreciation. This way, the museum can share photos and other visual materials to enhance the experience of an art exhibition. Whereas this “artcast” is designed for indoor use, we can similarly apply this idea for outdoor use, such as strolling and walking in the city. In fact, there are several explorations and business attempts called “podwalker” or “podwalk(ing)” [10].” Simply put, podwalking is an audible guide that navigates the user to walk around the city. Functionally, it is an audio navigation, or an audio “access map,” that provides with directions from one spot to a particular destination.

Kawai, one of the major forerunners in creating podwalk programs in Japan, illustrates the distinctiveness of a podwalker program as “a new entertainment to make a side trip, or to dawdle around [6].” In tune with the ideas proposed by Kawai and other community members, I started to explore the possibilities of podwalking as a mode of communicating our experiences in cities. As we tried to walk along with a podwalk program, it reconstructed the “soundscape” of the city within which we have been embedded.

## 3. CREATING “PODWALK” PROGRAMS IN KANAZAWA, ISHIKAWA

### 3.1 Background

Kanazawa is an old castle town, in Hokuriku area, Ishikawa, Japan. Facing the Sea of Japan, it is about 450 km northwest from Tokyo. As of 2004, population size of Kanazawa city is about 450,000, that is, the 37<sup>th</sup> largest population out of 780

cities in Japan. With an array of old Japanese houses and streets, beautiful gardens, and traditional crafts, Kanazawa attracts many tourists throughout the year. In line with an on-going research project in Shibamata, Tokyo [5], we conducted a fieldwork in Kanazawa in December, 2005. Approximately six months later, on May 20-21, 2006, we conducted a fieldwork again in Kanazawa area. As the second phase of the study, it was planned to create podwalk programs within Kanazawa city, and to explore the possibilities of podcasts for communicating personal experiences of the city. This time, 9 students (a mixed group of undergraduate and graduate students) participated as researchers.

### 3.2 Capturing the walk

On the second day of this research trip, researchers were asked to create podwalk programs. Researchers were split into four groups, each of them equipped with a digital voice recorder (SANYO ICR-S190M) and a handheld GPS terminal (GARMIN geko201). All the researchers had a camera phone for their own for image capturing. And a set of general guidelines was provided: (1) not to make rehearsals, or to use play scripts for voice recording, for from our experiences, “on-the-spot” recording is the best way to capture naturally occurring events in our walking experiences in the city, (2) try not to create a silence, that is to keep talking, as the user may be unable to tell whether or not he/she should continue on to walk or to halt, (3) try to be explicit about the location, and about the destination, by mentioning landmarks or noticeable features along the streets, (4) try to keep the length of the recording to be about 10 minutes, and (5) take at least five photos by their camera phones, as visual clues for the user, as they walk along the city. As long as they work within these guidelines, they were free to choose a route, to make side trips, or to talk to pedestrians.

### 3.3 Creating podwalks

After the fieldwork, we made ten podwalk programs, altogether. With the device we used, all the audio files were recorded in MP3 format, so that we could simply transfer the files to the server for downloading. Also, all the files were made audible on the web.



Figure 1. Visual clues for a podwalk program (photos).



Figure 2. Visual clues for a podwalk program (route).

We organized a sequence of photos taken during the walk as visual clues (for example, see Figure 1) for the audience. In addition to photos, we recorded the route taken by the researchers using a handheld GPS. As shown in Figure 2, the path of their walk was reproduced by GPS data. There, a star denotes the starting point, and the line illustrates the path toward the destination.

The example shown in the above figures is a set of images that accompany the program created by a group of research members. In the program, they attempt to provide with directions from *Katamachi*, a central part of the major shopping district, to *Shinise-Kinenkan*, one of the popular historic sites, in about 11 minute walk [1]. They describe the details about the streets and buildings for navigation, at the same time, they also talk about themselves. Further, there is a sequence of unscripted encounters, such as a decorative signboard, a fancy show-window, a dog lying down, and other tourists asking for a direction. Such happenings, as naturally occurring events, create lively “stage effects,” and thereby enhance the nature of the program.



**Figure 3. Sharing images through a podwalk program.**

MP3 files were edited in an “enhanced” version, so that when downloaded on players with photo/video playing features, one can be prompted by photos as he/she walks along with the audio recording (see Figure 3). By using podcasts, we can present a series of images, as a story, in order to recollect the experiences in the field. Together with photos, such experiences vividly revive as we listen to this program.

## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1 An audible photo stream

Though we are still in an exploratory stage, podwalk programs seem to offer new experiences in understanding about cities. It creates a mode of experiential learning, in that one can vicariously share what the researchers experienced in the city. It is a power of voice, or sound, which contributes to stimulate such mode of learning.

In our previous study done in *Shibamata*, we attempted to link audio recordings with postcards [5]. We printed a QR-code (2-dimensional barcode) which can be scanned (read) via camera phones. A greeting message from the master of the store was recorded, and embedded as a pointer (URL) to the website. By accessing the website, via QR-code, one can listen to the store masters’ voices (sound files) on his/her phone. Due to

technological capacity, we could only store two seconds of such greeting message, but still it enhanced the act of browsing photos on the postcard. It is in this vein that we can further explore the idea of an audible photo stream, the use of podcasts, to share and experience images.

### 4.2 Multiple versions of city experience

Originally, I started to explore the possible use of podwalks for navigating people from a starting point to the destination. However, as we created several programs, we discovered that it was a series of unscripted conversations among researchers that created the lively “soundscape” of the walk. It spontaneously unfolds as the researchers encounter various happenings in the city. And their spontaneous reactions will become important characteristics of the podwalk program. By listening to such “natural history” of strolling, we can begin to think about the situations in which one tends to take photos. In other words, the sound recording may suggest and direct our attention to the situation regarded as picture worthy.

In this conception, we can begin to expand our ideas on functions of podwalks. In addition to its navigation function, a podwalk program can be understood as a mode of story-telling. As mentioned in the beginning, a camera phone can be utilized as a useful “gear” in conducting a field research, as practices of photo-taking are changing. Particularly, it enables researchers to collect and compile images of the local community. Once selected and edited in a form of podwalk programs, visual images, and sharing of them, may enhance our awareness about the resources of the community. Multiple versions of photo streams can be examined in terms of understanding the characteristics of the local community, and more interestingly, they lead us to speculate upon multiple viewpoints of ourselves. We can create different versions of podwalks for the same starting point and destination. By inviting local historians, artists, shop masters, for example, we can walk along the same route, but with a different version of understanding the city. We can even start incorporating old photos of the local community into a stream of photos. By doing so, we can share images of the past, while attending and experiencing the walk in the present.

### 4.3 Podwalk as a medium for flâneurs

In the context of community development and urban design, one of the important tasks is to understand one’s closeness or attachment to the area. When a strolling in the neighborhood is filled with a series of unanticipated encounters, discoveries and surprises, the place may attract more people, while generating a feel of intimacy to the place. Further, it may contribute to cultivate frequent visitors, or “repeaters,” and to gradually (re)vitalize the area. If we are to start from scratch, it is relatively easy to incorporate physical features into the design of streets and buildings, in order to guide the pedestrians for distractions and side trips. However, many of the community development projects are on-going, start and end within a stream of our day-to-day experiences of the neighborhood. Thus, one way to cope with the situation is to design the ways in which we can easily detach ourselves from familiar experiences in the city.

As discussed, podwalk programs provide us with an alternative mode to experience the city. That is to walk in someone else’s speed and rhythm, along with a stream of photos. Also, since it

is recorded in advance, the sound he/she listens through iPod or MP3 player is, by default, somewhat different from the actual situation at hand. What people may see is an ordinary pedestrian, listening to music with an iPod, and a camera phone in hand. However, he/she is a specialized observer, a flâneur. A flâneur is an uninvolved but perceptive watcher of the city. A podwalk program can be understood as a medium for flâneurs, with which one can amble along the streets to generate a series of “life documents.” Becoming a flâneur may be an entry point to experience our practice of image capture and sharing.

## 5. A BIO SKETCH

Fumitoshi KATO (Ph.D., Communication) is currently working as an associate professor at the Faculty of Environmental Information, Keio University at Shonan Fujisawa Campus, Japan. His research interests include: communication theory, media studies, socio-cultural impacts of new technologies, qualitative research methods, and experiential learning theory and practice. He is a faculty member of “*Keitai* (a mobile phone in Japanese) Laboratory” at Keio University, where interdisciplinary studies and research programs on socio-cultural impacts of mobile phones are conducted. He is especially interested in the use of camera phones in the context of community development. Recently, he edited a book (with Rei Shiratori and Kiyoshi Arai), “*Gaming, simulations, and society: Research scope and perspective*” (Springer-Verlag, 2004).

## 6. REFERENCES

- [1] Amagasa, K. and Iijima, Y. (2006) A podwalk program for *Kanazawa*, Japan. Recorded on May 21, 2005. For details, see [http://vanotica.net/archives/cat\\_podwalk.html](http://vanotica.net/archives/cat_podwalk.html) (in Japanese).
- [2] au (KDDI) (2006) Listen Mobile Service (LISMO) <http://www.kddi.com/lismo/> (in Japanese)
- [3] Diffusion Group (2005) Cited in CNET, Gilbert, A. “Researcher sees huge growth in podcast audience.” July, 2005, [http://news.com.com/2100-1025\\_3-5777201.html](http://news.com.com/2100-1025_3-5777201.html)
- [4] Internet Association Japan (2006) *Internet White Paper 2006* (in Japanese).
- [5] Kato, F. (2006) Seeing the “seeing” of others: Environmental knowing through camera-phones. In Kristof Nyiri (ed). *Mobile Understanding: The Epistemology of Ubiquitous Communication* (pp. 183-195). Vienna: Passagen Verlag.
- [6] Kawai, T. (2005) <http://www.himanainu.jp/podwalker/AboutPodWalker.pdf> (in Japanese)
- [7] Nielsen/Netratings (2006) [http://www.nielsen-netratings.com/pr/pr\\_060712.pdf](http://www.nielsen-netratings.com/pr/pr_060712.pdf)
- [8] Oldenburg, R. (1989) *The great good place: Cafes, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of a community*. New York: Marlowe & Company.
- [9] Pew Internet & American Life Project (2005) [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_podcasting.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_podcasting.pdf)
- [10] Podwalk/podwalker; see <http://www.voiceblog.jp/podwalker/> (in Japanese). See also <http://www.podwalk.net/>, <http://www.podwalk.com/>, and <http://www.podwalker.jp/> (in Japanese).
- [11] San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) [http://www.sfmoma.org/education/edu\\_podcasts.html](http://www.sfmoma.org/education/edu_podcasts.html)