

Help me spend \$ on microphones, or: how does a deaf ethnographer record 8 people in a noisy room?

<http://blog.melchua.com/2013/02/03/help-me-spend-on-microphones-or-how-does-a-deaf-ethnographer-record-8-people-in-a-noisy-room/>

May 8, 2013

February 3, 2013 – 12:01 am

Okay, internet.

1. For part of this summer's fieldwork, I'll need to record conversations between up to 8 people in a noisy room — and they need to be clear enough (for someone else) to transcribe later. In all probability, this means 8 microphones.
2. I'm deaf, so being able to listen to all 8 microphones at once via my hearing aids (which have a standard 1/8" audio jack/cable) would be *awesome* — I can lipread, but good amplified audio makes it so much less exhausting. (My fantastic teammate [Emily Dringenberg](#) will be in the field with me, and she is hearing — but I would still like to be able to listen more easily to the conversations we're observing!)
3. I plan to use this rig for a long time and truck it across the world, so durability and portability is key.
4. I am a grad student of limited budget. Therefore, I like less-expensive things. That having been said, I'd rather have to work harder to get a good setup that will last a long time.

What should I get? Here's what I've thought of so far...

The Non-Accessible But Cheapass Solution: individual digital recorders (~\$45 each, plus ~\$15 memory each) and wired lapel mics (~\$20 each) and put one on each participant. Mix all 8 tracks together in post-production (Audacity) to make the final conversational recording. Pros: cheap (~\$640 total), durable, portable, participants can move around a lot. Cons: a lot of post-production, not sure how well 8 tracks will mix together, does not help me hear the conversation better as it's happening.

The Accessible But Needs-A-Grant solution: 8-channel portable wireless mic system like [this beautiful setup](#) from Revolabs. Pros: durable, portable, participants can move around a lot; top-notch audio quality, accessibility, and high reuse flexibility value — in other words, I could use the same equipment for teleconferencing, documentary filmmaking, live-transcribing (with CART) classes I teach or attend, and so forth. Heck, I could use the setup to stream the 8 mics to a transcriptionist in realtime, and *that conversation* could get live-transcribed. Cons: expensive expensive (\$9-10k, which is way more than half of what I earn per year these days). I would basically need a grant for this within the next 4 months.

I really, really like the idea of the Revolabs setup. I see that as the not-just-for-deaf-people (and therefore way more flexible/extensible) [Companion Mic](#) system — hearing aids often have individual microphone accessories you can give to a speaker that'll stream their mic straight to your aids, but they're severely limited. There's usually only one microphone, meaning one speaker at a time, good luck hearing anyone else. (One system has 4 mics, but that's as high as it goes.) More importantly, they only stream to your hearing aids; you can't get the audio out anywhere else for recording, teleconferencing, or so forth.

So imagine being able to use this for, say... being a postdoc doing an ethnographic study and documentary film of hackerspaces – clipping wireless mics on makers as they wind and talk their way through a machine shop, clamber up robots, spin fire... following along with a camera in my hand and the base system (and a power supply) in a sturdy pack on my back, using my hearing aids (and/or cochlear implant) as audio monitors, being able to *hear* things, simultaneously streaming that hi-fi audio and a lower-res video out to a live audience... I mean, that's a rough strawman subject to change, especially as I learn more about ethnography/documentary filmmaking/what I'll do after graduation in May 2015, but that's the sort of thing that *could* be done with such a setup, if money were to be had. I think.

Anyway, I'm spinning out a lot of dreams here, but the reality is that I have next to no budget and know very little about audio setups and microphones. So... yeah. Ideas for other setups? Thoughts on these? Ideas in general! (And thank you!)