

Multimedia Walking Tours: Social Barriers and Spatial Embeddedness of User Experience

Alisa Maximova

Research Fellow at the Sociological Institute of the
Federal Center of Theoretical and Applied Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences
Research Assistant at Poletayev Institute for Theoretical and Historical
Studies in the Humanities, Higher School of Economics (Russia)
E-mail: alice.mcximove@gmail.com

Research Questions

- Guided tours are an inherently collective activity, and multimedia tours, while able to create personal meaningful experiences, are perceived as designed primarily for individual use. The experience may be personally exciting and moving, but socially isolating.
- Instead of specially designed spaces of informal learning, tour unfolds in a space of everyday life – the city. People have to fill the “gaps” between stops in the tour with walking, navigation, street crossing, and other mundane activities.

What expectations do users have? How do they navigate the city? How they engage in a social situation of walking together while wearing headphones?

Methodology

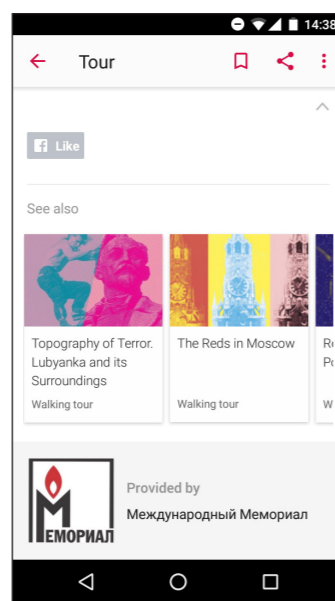
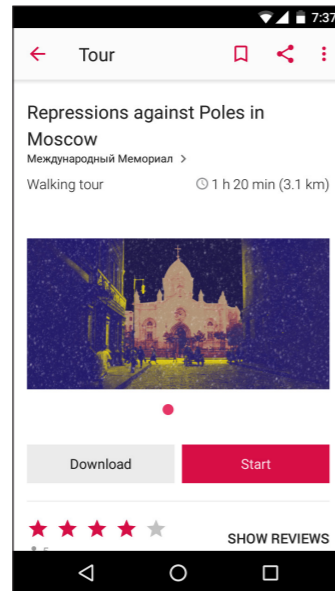
Social interactionist perspective – emphasizes embodied, sociomaterial, multimodal aspects of social practice. The approach has recently become more widespread in museum studies, regarding both individual visitors (Heath, vom Lehn; Meisner et al.; Laursen; Christidou, Diamantopoulou) and guided tours (Best).

- Focus group with non-users
- Testing short fragments of tours
- Two interviews with users
- Observation of 4 walks with an audio guide

Acknowledgements

The research is supported by the Russian Science Foundation grant (RSF No 17-78-20164) “Sociotechnical Barriers of the Implementation and Use of Information Technologies in Russia: Sociological Analysis”.

I also want to thank Natalia Baryshnikova and other members of Memorial for initiating evaluation project.



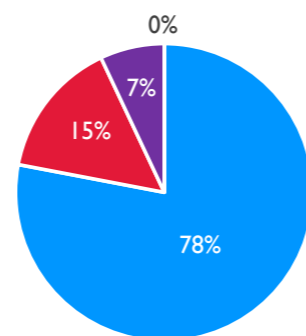
izi.TRAVEL

- A platform for creating and using audio/multimedia tours
- Free for users and creators
- Anyone can create and upload tours
- Users have to download the app on their device
- Users can explore tours online or download them
- Audio + texts + pictures
- Each tour connects a number of objects
- Mobile devices can track user's movement and switch to the next track automatically

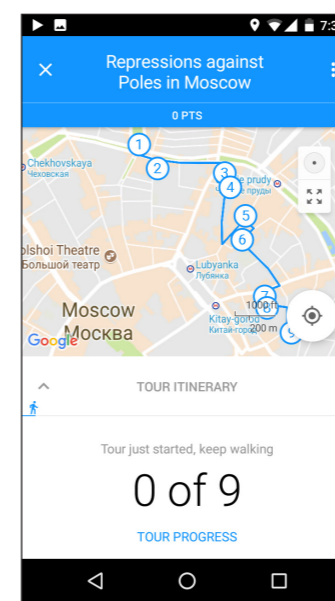
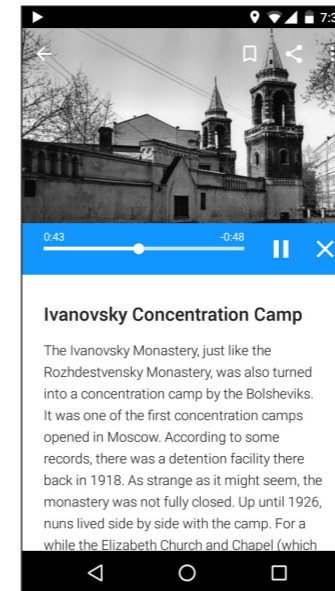
Topography of Terror

- A project of International Memorial in Moscow
- Sees its mission in exploring relations of the man and Soviet state in the city space by researching and mapping sites associated with the system of state repression
- Organizes free guided tours which are quite popular
- Has turned some tours into multimedia tours available through izi.TRAVEL app (e.g., ones on the history Stalin's purges, political protest, and Revolution of 1917)

Participants of Moscow Memorial guided tours:



- Have not heard anything about audio tours
- Have heard something about audio tours
- Have looked through tours in a website or in an app
- Used an audio tour in the city

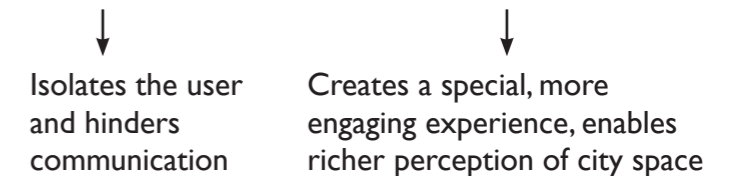


Findings

People are ready to discover the tragic past of the city they live in and to be moved by stories of the people who suffered in soviet times. However, participants were surprised to find that there is little “local historical”, art- or architecture-related narrative.

While non-users were sure that they do not need descriptions of objects in the beginning of each track, observation proved that these are an important feature. It helps locate the objects and it serves as an experiential device of transition from walking and talking to focused listening.

Headphones create a sort of sound “bubble” which:



Modes of using audio guide:

1. Separate mode

People control their own device as they want. This mode presupposes the largest degree of freedom. Users are able to physically move to another place near the object, stop or interrupt the track if it feels too long or boring.

2. Synchronous mode

Participants listen to the tour on their own devices, but try to synchronize the moment of pressing “play” with each other. It roughly synchronizes the length of time of listening to each track, and renders shared understanding possible. However, one does not experience “listening together”. Discussion of the content often requires clarification of what exactly is being referred to.

3. Joint mode

App is used on the same device and a headphone splitter is employed, which creates a shared auditory space. Although talking while listening is not convenient, participants smile, make sad or concerned faces, exchange glances, point at objects, etc. A detailed discussion of the content is facilitated: after audio track ends, users continue dwelling on the reactions that emerged during listening. There are more opportunities for learning, emotional reactions, and remembering.