

People are becoming more disturbed by noise because the noise climate has become worse; not because they are less tolerant of noise

Blog by John Stewart

The official National Noise Attitude Survey (1), recently published by the Government, showed that more people were disturbed by noise than ten years ago. Those disturbed by neighbour noise was up from 9% to 11%; aircraft noise up from 1 million to 2 million people; only road noise – at 8% of the population - remained constant.

A number of people have jumped to the conclusion that this is because we are becoming less tolerant of noise. I'm not sure there is evidence to back that up. The evidence we have points the other way: as a nation we are becoming more tolerant of noise; the fact the more people say they more disturbed is simply a reflection of how noisy the country has become.

When I was researching my book *Why Noise Matters* (Earthscan 2011) all the evidence I found suggested that we are able to live with levels of noise we simply would have not tolerated a generation or two ago.

Of course noise has always been with us. We only have to read accounts of the noise in ancient Rome or on the streets of medieval Europe to understand the problems it presented. But the type of noise was different to that so common in the modern world. It was described as 'the organic sounds created by humans and animals at work and at play.' (*The Soundscape of Modernity*, Thompson 2004)

Today we are faced with 'machine age' noises: cars, planes, trains, stereo systems, musak, iPods etc. I found evidence that in countries where the consumer society has become embedded 'a growing number of people not only accept noise but see it as something positive because it is associated with the consumer goods they value.'

But many have not just embraced the *constant* noise of consumerism, but also learnt to love the *loudness* of the noise. The noise in modern clubs, cinemas, restaurants and even our home stereo systems is of a level unimaginable 40 years ago. Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter argue that 'when a culture accepts loudness as being a legitimate right in recreational sound venues, that acceptance tends to legitimize all forms of noise pollution.'

They go on: 'As a culture with advancing sonic tools and amplification, there are increasing opportunities to be immersed in destructively loud sound fields. We believe that acceptance of loudness in entertainment then carries over to a tolerance of disruptive noise from airplanes, jackhammers, powered garden equipment, and so on. Loudness becomes the cultural norm.' (*The unexamined rewards for excessive loudness*, Blesser and Salter, 2008)

I would suggest that this is borne out by people's acceptance of loud noise in daily life: music in shops and restaurants; announcements on the Underground and at railway stations; iPods stuck to our ears.

Of course there are people for whom this cacophony of noise is well-nigh unbearable, but for much of the nation it is accepted - and perhaps even enjoyed – as part of life. And yet more people say they are disturbed by road, aircraft and neighbour noise than ever before. It can only mean that the noise from these sources is becoming worse.

(1). The Government aims to publish the National Noise Attitude Survey every ten years. Previous surveys were published in 1991 and 2001. This survey is dated December 2014 but has recently been released by DEFRA. The research for it was carried out in 2012:
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