

## Noise Pollution Propaganda Makes You Sick – Noise Propaganda Makes Noise

The popular concept of 'noise pollution' is a dangerously misleading one. In reality, dangers to hearing do exist in prolonged, excessively loud sound levels. However, the residue of the idea that has ended up in the mind of the public because of misleading publicity is that sound in general is harmful to people.

A brief examination of a pamphlet *Noise Makes You Sick* published by the Department of Air Resources of the city's Environmental Protection Agency is typical of the literature and clearly illustrates the problem.

The first sentence, 'Sound is instantly transmitted from your ears to your brain and then to your nerves, glands and organs', is of course literally true. Actually the reaction doesn't normally go as far as the glands and internal organs.

However, we are left with the impression that we have absolutely no defense against unwanted sound. This is untrue. The body has automatic reflex barriers, both physical and psychological, to deal with sounds it does not wish to react to.

The pamphlet goes on, 'Any loud or unexpected sounds put your body on alert'. This is true with a newborn child or in primitive societies, both of which need this reaction to survive. But certainly the modern urban dweller is not put into a state of fright (except of course when there is actual danger) very often by the sounds around him.

A human being conditions himself fairly quickly to what is 'loud or unexpected' in his particular environment.

Once having 'established' the impression that we are constantly in a state of 'fright', though, the brochure goes on to extrapolate in august pseudo-medical terms: 'Adrenalin, an energy-producing hormone, is released into your blood stream. Your heart beats faster, your muscles tense, and your blood pressure rises. Sudden spasms occur in your stomach and intestines'. This finally gives the impression that every honking horn brings us a little bit closer to death.

The law defines noise as 'any unwanted sound'. Surely several hundred years of musical history can be of value. At the very least they can show us that our response to sound is subjective, that no sound is intrinsically bad. How we hear it depends a great deal on how we have been conditioned to hear it.

Through extreme exaggeration of the effects of sound on the human mind and body, this propaganda has so frightened people that it has created 'noise' in many places where there was none before and in effect robbed us of the ability to listen to our environment.

Admittedly it may be necessary to oversimplify an idea to bring enough public pressure to bear on the producers of ear-damaging sounds in our environment to stop this victimization of the public. This degree of misrepresentation is not only unnecessary, but irresponsible and ultimately negative.

This present concept of noise pollution condemns all sounds by leaving, in the public mind, the impression that sound itself is physiologically and psychologically harmful.

It is this exaggerated and oversimplified concept that is doing most of the damage, not sound, damage that can and should be rectified by curtailing misleading propaganda and showing people other ways to listen to their surroundings.

Obviously we need to be able to rest from sound just as we do from visual stimulation; we need aural as well as visual privacy. But silencing our public environment is the acoustic equivalent of painting it black. Certainly just as our eyes are for seeing, our ears are for hearing.

First published in the OpEd section of the *New York Times*,  
6 December 1974