

Comment

We can't go back to our old noisy world

Lockdown has made us appreciate how much damage is caused by the drumbeat of modern life



@JENNIRSL

One of the great compensations of lockdown is hearing less noise, at least of the external, ungovernable kind. One's own children at home, quarrelling or competing, is another matter. At least one can shout back at them. Everywhere people are marvelling at hearing the complexity of birdsong, the peacefulness of streets with so little traffic, the pleasure of walking in parks without aircraft rumbling overhead.

The drop in noise is so marked that it has been picked up by the British Geological Survey as a dramatic fall in ground vibrations. The planet itself is quieter because we are. At the end of last month they reported that the noise generated by our daily lives at 100 measuring stations had dropped by between 20 and 50 per cent.

The falls were greatest near railway stations, airports, big roads and construction sites. A seismometer near King's Cross station in London recorded a 30 per cent fall; even Twickenham is down 25 per cent. The same pattern is being seen across the world. Brussels's noise has fallen by a third, and Germany's car traffic is down by 50 per cent.

This is a remarkable, temporary

liberation from one of the greatest and least considered sources of stress in our lives. Most of us are battered by noise every day but it is worst for those who live in towns and cities, or who travel to them.

The imposition of noise and the level of it has risen sharply over the past 40 years. It is not just more planes, more cars, and more construction, but the rise of amplified sound in almost every private and public space, from the piped music in shops, bars and restaurants to the interminable, ear-splitting, repetitive announcements on buses and trains, the thudding from car radios, boom boxes or a passenger's headphones, the inflicting of a neighbour's party music at midnight on everyone a few hundred metres away.

We feel impotent in the face of this onslaught. Rising noise feels like an unavoidable fact of life, one that we

Let's campaign for more bicycles, lower speeds, fewer planes

care deeply about but cannot influence. More than a third of people dislike piped music; fewer than a third like it. This year the organisation Action on Hearing Loss found that 80 per cent had cut short their visits to a pub or restaurant because of noise.

A 2014 survey found that in a typical year more residents complain to their local councils about noise than about any other issue. They are right to care. Noise is not something we should shrug off as an intrusion

we must learn to live with or be more tolerant of. It is destructive both for our bodies and for our minds.

Our understanding of the damage it causes is accumulating with every new piece of research. In February Joshua Dean from the University of Chicago found that noise is an undetected performance killer, undermining the brain's ability to focus. When the same task was given to 128 workmen to perform against different noise levels, a slight increase in noise, of just 10db — the equivalent of a vacuum cleaner rather than a dishwasher — reduced productivity by 5 per cent. The workers were quite unaware of this, as noise affected their cognition rather than their effort.

As Dean points out, there are several significant aspects to this. Companies are always desperate to push up productivity, which in Britain has scarcely risen in a decade. A 5 per cent difference in performance is dramatic. Just for context, British productivity has increased by a miserly 0.3 per cent a year for the past ten years, down from 2 per cent annually in the decade before.

The findings have implications for every job performed against high noise. Anyone who must take in multiple sources of information and focus, from a factory foreman to a traffic policeman, will function less well than they should.

Our minds may try to accept noise; physiologically, our bodies cannot. It affects our hearts, blood pressure, our chances of stroke. Last autumn the *European Heart Journal* showed how long-term exposure to traffic and aircraft noise increases heart

disease. A five-year study of 500 adults found that for every 5db increase in average noise over 24 hours, there was a 34 per cent increase in heart attacks and strokes.

Brain imaging exposed the mechanism. Higher noise levels triggered activity in the amygdala, which processes stress and fear, and increased arterial inflammation. Other studies have shown that even noise we are unaware of, heard during sleep, raises adrenaline and cortisol and disturbs our rest.

In America, a 2018 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found higher rates of hypertension and high cholesterol in those exposed to loud noise at work. In a German study, people vexed by noise had a higher risk of having their hearts thrown out of rhythm by atrial fibrillation.

As a killer and a pollutant, noise has never grabbed public attention in the way climate change and environmental pollution have. Perhaps that's because its effects are, paradoxically, silent and hard to see, except individually, in our racing hearts. The government officially considers noise "an inevitable consequence of a mature and vibrant society". We all want jobs and prosperity but now that we have glimpsed the effects of greater peace this shouldn't happen just as before.

Let's campaign for more bicycles, quieter road surfaces, lower speeds, fewer planes, minimal announcements, restrictions on the construction hours the government has just, mistakenly, extended. It's what our hearts and minds not only want but cannot flourish without.



Britain has a duty to bring genocide accused to justice

Andrew Mitchell

Last weekend the French authorities arrested one of the alleged leaders of the Rwandan genocide, wanted for crimes against humanity. Félicien Kabuga had been living under a false identity outside Paris. The authorities there received worldwide praise for their actions in apprehending him.

No such praise awaits the British legal authorities. No fewer than five alleged Rwandan genocide perpetrators live in the UK, not in hiding but in plain sight. For more than 11 years the British legal system has gone backwards and forwards debating the legal niceties.

The British taxpayer has spent more than £3 million as the legal process has meandered along — four of the accused are living on British benefits. After a request from the Rwandan government to try these five in Britain, the Metropolitan Police indicated that it could take another ten years to process the evidence, although almost all of it is available from previous legal intervention.

Does anyone seriously believe that the authorities would take the same laid-back approach if these allegations were made against Holocaust perpetrators? Is it any wonder that senior Africans accuse Britain of hypocrisy? To them, it looks suspiciously as if crimes against white Europeans are taken more seriously than those perpetrated against black Africans. When the Rwandan prosecutor-general came to Britain to argue his case, the director of public prosecutions at the time did not even bother to find the time to see him.

On a hilltop at Murambi in Rwanda stands a monument to 50,000 Tutsis who were slaughtered there. In schoolrooms the remains of some of those murdered there are on display, their tattered rags and bones prevented by lime wash from decaying further. They are a finger of accusation pointed at the international community, which stood idly by as nearly a million innocent Rwandans perished. One of the five Rwandans living in Britain now was a local government leader in Murambi and is accused of exhorting the killing squads onwards with their work.

The US, Canada, France, Belgium, Sweden and other countries have extradited those accused of taking part in the Rwandan genocide back to face justice. Hundreds of thousands have been through the Rwandan justice system. The death penalty was abolished more than ten years ago. In Britain, meanwhile, justice delayed is justice denied.

The souls of the slaughtered Tutsis cry out for justice but Britain has turned a deaf ear. We should all be ashamed.

Andrew Mitchell MP is a former secretary of state for international development

Janice Turner Notebook

Hurricane scrubber is all spin and no torque

In the first days of lockdown, I armed myself against the great unknown with household gadgets. Cleaning is very soothing in a crisis: the world may be in chaos but at least I'd get that weird gunk (what is it, limescale, soap, compacted human skin?) off my bathroom tiles.

I'd watched the little video for the Hurricane Spin Scrubber, "#1 best seller, the easy way to scrub, no bending, no hard work", which played incessantly on Instagram. Its 300 rotations per minute and "amazing torque" sure turned that grubby grout dazzling white!

Well, this week it finally arrived. I opened the dented box with its ambiguous overseas postmark and "Made in China" label, fired up my Hurricane Spin Scrubber and rushed to the shower. Oh dear... The trouble is if you apply enough pressure to address a stain, the engine whines and the brush comes to a halt. A

wet dishcloth has more torque.

I'm told I'm a victim of "drop-shipping", an arcane form of global capitalism whereby western online entrepreneurs, based apparently in Indonesia, take a punt on a particular gadget they may never have held in their hands. Their main outlay is on Facebook or Instagram data. So if, say, you are a parent who goes to the gym, you will be bombarded with ads for a device to turn your toddler into a handy kettle bell. "Shift your baby weight with the BabeEWeight™!" And in lockdown you'll be so bored you might buy it.

Oh for a party

Asked if he had any regrets, Sir John Betjeman famously replied, "Not enough sex". My regret right now is not going to enough parties.

Digging out my summer dresses from under the spare-room bed, I found my party frocks. A pink Ghost sparkly number bought for the Serpentine summer party, a floral thing I wore to an awards lunch, the blue Diane von Furstenberg from my

last big birthday bash... All these trivial, pretty and now entirely redundant garments.

How I kick myself for missing that British Museum private view, a friend's book launch I was too tired to attend. Why didn't I grab every chance to drink and gossip, to kiss acquaintances and renew grudges, to chat awkwardly with someone whose name escaped me. Summer parties are the best parties: bare arms on a breezy terrace, warm grass, pink wine. I'd crawl across London on my knees to drink Pimm's with strangers now.

It is our silver wedding anniversary in July. Only a number. Nothing in the scheme of things. Not even a true marital marker, since we'd been together nine years by our wedding day. Yet loving someone so long seemed reason enough to celebrate. But when will anyone dare to hold a proper party — a drunken, loud, sweaty, dancing, messy, uproarious party — ever again?



Virus waivers

A friend with a small design agency says his furloughed twentysomething employees are so bored and so eager to return to the office they suggest signing waivers saying they do so at their own (extremely slight) risk. Already those attending the annual company jamboree to Spain sign a waiver saying they are grown-ups and if they get pregnant, take too many drugs or have a drunken fall they will not sue. We sign waivers if we rent jet-skis or go hang-gliding. Parents sign letters for every school trip. Even if infection fizzles out, until a vaccine is found we need ways to live with risk.

Smooth hands

A consultant friend who has toiled in a London hospital throughout the pandemic was explaining the benefits of medics from other disciplines with specialist knowledge being drafted in during the crisis. A colleague from sexual health was deployed to train medical students, who all complained that anti-bacterial gel was making their hands sore and dry. "I have just the thing," she said, and produced the best hand lotion in all medicine: vaginal lubricant.

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