

LISTEN OUT FOR THE VOICE OF THE VOICELESS

Better-off people can be very loud when complaining about noise.

It can give the impression that noise is not really a concern for people who are less well-off.

Yet, the evidence suggests otherwise. The danger is that the loud voices of the better-off over-influence decision-makers and so tilt policy decisions in their favour.

But before looking at some of the evidence, it is worth making this distinction. People, communities, areas and places can be *impacted* by noise but not necessarily *disturbed* by it. To get a true picture, both issues need to be addressed.

1. What is very clear is that in Britain and across the world poorer communities are the most *impacted* by noise.

I suspect aircraft noise may be the partial exception to this. It obviously depends on where an airport is sited but many flight paths fly over rich and poor communities alike. At Heathrow, for example, some of the wealthiest communities in the land – places like Richmond and Teddington – are overflown alongside some of the most densely-populated and deprived wards in Europe. Incidentally, the loudest complaints tend to come from Richmond and Teddington.

Even in aviation, though, there may be some bias against poorer communities. Would a developer have dared to build London City Airport on fashionable Hampstead Heath instead of run-down North Woolwich? I know I'm being a bit unfair because there was no reason to build an airport on Hampstead Heath while the justification for it in East London was to regenerate an area devastated by the closure of the Docks.

Hampstead, though, might have a market for private jets. After all, close by, is The Bishops Avenue, home to monarchs, business magnates, and celebrities; in the words of an estate agent: "Among the wealthiest circles in the world, The Bishops Avenue is better known than Buckingham Palace. It's a significant demonstration of status. If you live there, you don't need to explain to people that you're rich." Houses go on the market for up to £65 million. But to build a new airport, even one just for business jets, nearby is just inconceivable.

Traffic noise is worst on main roads. Over the past decade it is 'residential' roads which have seen the biggest increase in traffic as sat-nav guided cars on to these roads and deliveries increased. While recognizing that the underlying cause of traffic noise is the continuing overall growth in the number of cars, vans and lorries in circulation, for much of the last 40 years the increase in main road traffic has been partly, and ironically, the result of the 'progressive' traffic policies being pursued: traffic-calming on, and closures of, 'residential' roads funnelled traffic on to the main roads which for many low-income people (and others) are their 'residential' roads. And, despite the increase in traffic on 'residential' roads over the last ten years, main roads remain, by some distance, the busiest roads.

Plans to reduce or tame traffic on 'residential' roads can only have all-round benefits if they include proposals to cut traffic on the adjacent main roads at the same time. It can be done by reallocating road space on the main roads away from cars to other modes of transport through, for example, installing bus and cycle lanes. But it is hit and miss. The impact of the current generation of low traffic neighbourhoods has been to add to traffic on main roads, rather than reduce it. What is needed are policies to cut cars on all roads, but will wealthier communities back what they may see as their freedom to drive?

Anybody can have noisy neighbours but we are a lot more likely to do so if we are less well-off. A MORI survey revealed that almost 20% of people with a household income of less than £17,500 (2003 prices) regularly heard noise from neighbours, including 93% of social housing tenants. In contrast only 12% of people with an income of over £30,000 could hear their neighbours.

It is a similar picture with wind turbine noise. When I wrote a short report called '*Location, Location, Location*' in 2006 on wind turbine noise, it became clear to me that those most affected by wind farm noise were poorer communities in rural areas.

OK, so it is fairly clear that noise disproportionately *impacts* low-income communities. But are they also the people most *disturbed* by it?

There is some truth that people can adapt to noisy surroundings, particularly if it is the only world they have known. There is also evidence that some people like noise; that it is silence which disturbs them. But is a very big jump from there to argue that because people in low-income communities complain less about noise they are not disturbed by it.

There is evidence of very real disturbance. When I did work on surface level transport matters 25 years ago, I spent a lot of time talking with local communities (mainly about the provision of public transport).

In the poorer areas of Inner London there were some complaints about buses and trains, but, invariably, the conversation turned to traffic. That was the big concern: the air pollution and noise it caused; the danger it posed and the way it divided communities. Yet rarely did the communities have the time or resources to set up an action group.

Today, in many of our towns and cities people from BAME communities often predominate in these areas. There is evidence that they are taking the lead in fighting back against the downsides of excessive traffic.

Perhaps the most dramatic evidence comes from the emerging economies of the 'developing' world. I covered it extensively in my book *Why Noise Matters*, published by Earthscan in 2011. This from Dr Yeswant Oke, a medical consultant and anti-noise campaigner in Mumbai (where noise levels are extraordinarily high): 'People and patients are silently suffering as they feel helpless. People feel agitated and angry, impotent to some extent. Indians are very docile. They would rather suffer than have enmity with the neighbours. But lately patience is wearing thin, and more and more people are complaining to get relief.'

A survey in Vietnam found that over a fifth of residents in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City are highly annoyed by the typical daily noise levels in the cities. And this is just the tip of the iceberg. The concern about noise is there. It is just that it is not been voiced publicly.

The obvious danger is that, if the concerned voices of poorer communities are not being raised or not being heard, the louder, more confident voices of those who are better-off will drive policy much more than it should. They will get their peace and quiet....but perhaps at the expense of the voiceless.

This is what has happened on the roads. For decades confident voices pushed the traffic away from their streets on to the main roads. And, in a double whammy against those living on main roads, the 'confident voices' drive regularly along these roads past the homes of people many of whom were less likely to have a car.

I've seen the same thing happen in aviation. Communities with confident voices can get special treatment. And those communities less well-resourced can be more or less sidelined. I think the only explanation why communities in Glasgow – one of the most heavily overflowed cities in Britain – have been ignored by the airport for so long is that the flight paths are over some of the most deprived areas in the country.

My conclusion is not that well-heeled communities should shut up. It is that local authorities and national governments don their headphones and turn up their volume in order to try and hear – and then act on – the complaints, often whispered, from poorer and less well-resourced communities.

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