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978-0-521-29311-2 - Opening and Closing: Strategies of Information Adaptation in Society

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Excerpt

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1. Social noise

There has been a crisis of noise in modern society, of which the assault on our eardrums is but a small part. In the broadest sense, noise is the chaos from which we try to construct meaning, the continual challenge of existence. The sense of meaninglessness so prevalent today comes in part from the fact that modern society is generating more noise than it can handle. This book is concerned with how and why.

When the philosopher Schopenhauer wrote his famous essay on noise (which recommended that a driver who cracked his whip on the street should have to dismount and receive five good blows with a stick), he could hardly have realized he was contributing to what is now humorous literature. To him, noise was a threat to the life of the mind, to civilization itself. He could hardly envisage a civilization in which people would be surrounded not just by good minds but by gadgets that bark at them with strange tones and appeals, from whom and where, Lord knows. The noise we endure today is so vast compared with that of a German town in 1850 that the philosopher's complaint seems quaintly petulant. Almost anyone living in a modern city suffers more noise in a day than a tribal native or peasant does in a week or perhaps even a year. Scientists who search for the secret of long life in the Caucasus and the Andes should perhaps examine the noise a person absorbs, as well as the standard villains: saturated fats, alcohol, tobacco, and smog.

The estimate of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is that over half the American people live in areas where the noise level (over 55 decibels) is a hazard to health.

The commonplace nuisances of noise and sheer volume of sonic impact that our nervous systems sustain are but the tip of an iceberg, which is revealed if we take noise as a tag – synecdoche if you please – for the entire mass of extraneous, irrelevant, and useless stimuli from our environment that the mind must negotiate to find what it seeks. In broadest terms, noise is opposed to *signal*, which is everything we wish to receive or send to others by way of communication; and noise blurs

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feedback. Then noise becomes a generic name for all that impairs communication and confuses meaning in our troubled world. Then noise is no small opponent but seems like an indefatigable enemy agent working to sabotage meaning and resonance. To see all this, however, a broader conception and classification of sorts of social noise are needed.

A broader conception of noise

From a communication point of view, the world is a sea of signals in which we swim, looking for information useful to us. All sensory inputs make up this sea – the noise of traffic, sounds of a forest at night, waves on the beach, glances of strangers at one another, words in a book, the talk of friends. In modern biological theory every living thing is made of information, from heredity (DNA) or environment – a bacterium, for example, has been estimated to contain one thousand bits (Quastler, 1964:4). Information comes most reliably through channels, as when a man sits by a telephone or a trout waits at the top of the pool below a riffle because it is the most informative part of the stream for food opportunities. Society is a name for our richest and most reliable information channels. As John Dewey (1916:5) said: “Society not only continues to exist *by* transmission, *by* communication, but it may fairly be said to exist *in* transmission, *in* communication.”

If all social channels and signals were perfect, they would bear all and only the information we needed, as with auditoriums designed so that we should hear only music. But social channels give us much that we do not want or at times when we cannot use it, a rather poor mix of information with noise. When the mix is poor enough, a problem of social noise exists.

By definition, noise is anything coming in a channel that interferes with signals we are trying to send or receive. Its essence is interference, not the level of sound. For example, ordinary conversation may be noise to someone phoning nearby. Noise is always relative to strength of signal. Diffuse city lights can reduce the efficiency of a giant telescope. Noise impairs all functions that rest on communication of a signal or perception of what is real.

To broaden our conception, various sorts of social noise should be distinguished. Plain noise is nonsense with a loud voice: the blast of a jet takeoff, the bang of trash containers early in the morning. Much of

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the story of the impact of acoustical noise on our environment has already been told.¹

Decibels are not a very good measure, however, for auditory noise need not be loud. We all know that small sounds can be as irritating as loud ones: buzzing, whining, scratching of nails on a blackboard, rustling of candy wrappers in a theater. Certain symbolism, such as insult, can multiply the impact of small sounds many times. In other words, acoustical volume is but one dimension even of auditory noise, and by no means the most important.

There is more to noise than meets the ear. Anyone with half an eye can see that visual pollution — litter, junk, slag heaps, gravel pits, strip-mining scars, garish advertising, graffiti, and defacements of public objects — is as prominent as auditory noise in many places. If we become habituated to ugliness and bad taste, and accept visual pollution more readily than auditory or air pollution, this has little to do with how harmful they can be.

Noise can enter any part of the sensory spectrum. For example, odors can be a nuisance and spoil enjoyment of food, perfumes fool the nose, and deodorants block the sense of smell. In the realm of touch, a callus lessens sensitivity, an uncomfortable chair might be said to be noise to the spine.

Nonsensory channels of information are also subject to noise — for example, computer “garbage,” typographical errors, jammed radio broadcasts, fluctuations of current in a wire carrying signals, radio static, electronic distortion, television “snow.” Even endocrine imbalance might be said to make noise from wrong amounts of chemical messengers in the blood.

From this it should be plain that all noise is not recorded by decibel readings on street corners and assembly lines. One must catch stridencies for which there are no meters, as well as soundless and invisible kinds of noise that may be registered only in symptoms such as boredom or ill will.

Four sorts of noise deserve especially to be called social. They are at least as important as those already mentioned. The first is semantic, coming from ambiguity, confusion, carelessness, or duplicity in using meaningful signs, as when a person uses a word with the wrong connotation, or “cries wolf.” Deliberate misuse of symbols in advertising and propaganda is a huge source of semantic noise.

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Stylistic noise comes from incompatible values, fashions, and identities. We live in an era of clashing life-styles, in which more communication has made people more aware of differences. People thrust upon one another, and life for many has become inimical. One hardly needs to mention the style rebellion of the 1960s, which generated hippie, long hair, unisex, Gay Lib, and swinging styles. Rock gave major challenge to conventional music. Ethnic groups also emphasized differences. Such signals become noise when they threaten and confuse, rather than sharpen, the sense of identity of an individual or a group. Basically, stylistic noise is a matter of compatibility: People who like the same sounds can be loud together; those who have the same tastes can do as they please together. A pluralistic society with open boundaries, however, runs into painful problems. When media publicize all types of personalities, they generate what I call modeling noise, felt by some to have demoralizing impact.

The third sort of social noise consists of perfectly good information that is irrelevant, redundant, or in sheer overload. Then it may interfere with, more than it helps, decisions, consensus, and meanings. For example, redundancy, however useful it may be, say, in repeating points of a lecture, becomes noise when it tells us what we do not care to hear again while, at the same time, filling a channel that might otherwise tell us what we would like. The criterion of noise here is not the inherent value of information but its relevance to our needs. Any signals in the wrong amount, time, place, or company can become noise. Even material goods can act as noise when their clutter prevents our finding what we want. Noise is communicational clutter; clutter is tangible noise.

A fourth sort of noise may be called contagious. Negative feelings such as ill will, hysteria, suspicion, discontent, despair, lawlessness, and unrest² can spread unnoticed at first (much as smog and lead contaminated the air before people became alarmed by them). People may feel a need to preserve themselves from influences spreading by example or word-of-mouth, or creeping across borders or into homes via TV. Amplified by rumor, reverberated by feedback from more and more persons, contagious noise increases entropy of all parties. When there is too much, the environment becomes inimical: Things seem to be hindering more than helping; people have trouble finding what they seek, hearing what is said, saying what they mean, liking what they hear, attuning to strangers, relating to neighbors, trusting media, leaders, and institutions.

This book treats such noise under the heading of entropic communication.

Noise is here defined relative to receivers' needs, not senders' intentions. (To those seeking beauty, ugliness is noise; to those seeking harmony, discord is noise; to those who want neatness, clutter is noise; to those trying to make sense, irrelevance is noise; to those concerned about their souls, sin is noise.)³

All noise – sensory, nonsensory, semantic, stylistic, informational, and contagious – makes up a burden, which modern society bears. It stands in the way of information we require to fulfill our lives as humans, and in the way of perhaps esthetic form, education, meaning, wisdom, or the secret a guru might whisper in a seeker's ear. Once society is viewed in terms of communication, noise becomes a measure of what defeats us.

How, when, why, and to whom is noise a problem?

The epochal breakthroughs by Shannon and Weaver (1949), which identified noise in communication with entropy⁴ opposed to information in signals; by Wiener (1948), which determined that feedback is the essential lifelike process; and by molecular biologists, which revealed that information encoded in DNA is the basis of life, forever removed noise from its trivial status as an acoustical nuisance and gave it a central place in social analysis, both as indicator and problem. In that view, entropy is the foe of life at all levels from the cell to the communicated order of human society. Life's ability to encode information, use feedback, and organize itself temporarily defeats entropy by improbable patterns, in spite of the total increase of entropy in the universe. This tendency is represented by the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which says that confusion or shuffledness is more probable than order, and that, even if there is a decrease in entropy in some part of the universe, it is always more than compensated for by a larger increase somewhere else, this increase being, as Sir Arthur Eddington put it, time's arrow. According to this view, noise is communicational entropy. Its tendency to increase defeats signals and causes communication and information to degrade. So Wiener (1950:134) says that beauty occurs "as a local and temporary fight against the Niagara of increasing entropy." In that sense, noise is everybody's problem all the time.

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In theory, progress is supposed to defeat entropy, if only temporarily, by orderly and elegant institutions. To see how far from true this is, one need only look about at urban sprawl, traffic jams, economic crises, unemployment, civil disorder, rising crime, personal disorganization, environmental pollution, the demoralizing content of the media, and so on. Progress is *not* defeating entropy in any conclusive way – even in developing countries, where population explosion and civil disorder offset rapid economic gains. Business decisions, if anything, are aggravating entropy with little concern for social costs of development (Schumpeter’s “creative destructionism”). In the catalog of modern woes, noise remains a tangible and convenient indicator of entropy in progress, of how far the battle is from won.

It is an awkward fact of progress that noise is man-made. Except for events such as thunderstorms, nature is quiet. Modern noise is a product of industry, commerce, technology, mass communication, and the movement of strangers crowding one another. The fact seems to be that nothing in biological evolution has adapted us to noise levels encountered in the last fifty years.

Of course, societies, institutions, individuals, and occasions vary in their tolerance for noise. A healthy racket of work, the hubbub of a sports event, loud-spoken argument, and strange customs and styles can be stimulating. Some noise we count on, such as the warning sound of an approaching vehicle. A movie without a certain amount of audience noise is less entertaining. We have all heard of city-raised people who could not sleep in the country because it was so quiet. Total insulation, as shown by sensory deprivation experiments, is boring and unnerving. People who are ill or old suffer from noise that others regard as moderate, just as esthetes are sensitive to ugliness that others do not notice. One person’s titillation is another’s pornography.

Regardless of such individual and situational variations in tolerance, noise becomes socially critical when it reaches levels at which large numbers of people feel irritation and stress, threat from enemies or violation of their own identity and style by “barbarians,” alienation from their world, or general meaninglessness⁵ and confusion.

Crowding multiplies whatever effects noise may have, whether the pleasures of festivity or antagonism to incompatible styles. Psychologist Freedman (1975) sums up psychological evidence that crowding is not inherently bad but depends on conditions, such as whether one likes

the other people. Doubtless this would be acceded to by anyone who has tried bundling.

However, noise becomes critical between generations and within the family or any group in which members are expected to have similar tastes and values. This was what made the style rebellion of the “generation gap” of the 1960s – slovenliness versus middle-class neatness, hard rock versus softer, sweeter music – so hard to bear: that they had to be endured in what one had supposed was the haven of one’s home. Such crises emphasized the damage that noise can do to communication, feedback, resonance, and ultimately to the meaning of relationship, where communication and resonance are needed.

Other causes of crisis from social noise come, I think, from the fact that social status exposes some people more than others to communication, and also to an upbringing that makes them sensitive to noise. If one asks what sort of people are especially likely to be concerned about the problem of social noise as described in this book, the answer would be those who have a status in which they are exposed to communication, have developed high expectations, and at the same time don’t care much for their roles. Indeed, this throws light on what might be called the alienation of the overprivileged: the puzzling discontent of many people who have enjoyed affluence. The answer could be that they experience more social noise; that is, once a few jackhammers (symbolizing physical hardship) are eliminated, stress of noise plays no favorites among the economic classes. If anything, it strikes the well off harder.⁶ The first reason is exposure to communication. Not only are they likely to have leadership, which exposes them to communication, but they have more costly communication equipment, from wall-to-wall audiovisual and computerized retrieval systems to radiotelephone contact from yachts and airplanes, to bring noise to them. Not only are they better equipped but they are also more exposed by education, travel, purchasable expertise, and cosmopolitan interests and friendships. If they experience more communication, then they are more exposed to whatever comes through communication, not only the pleasure of good news, but also the stress of bad news, overload of information, boring involvement and entertainment, relative deprivation, status anxiety, envy and other bad vibes, disillusionment and loss of faith, all of which seem to reach the rich quite as much as the poor. Note that I am not arguing that the well off are on the whole worse off than the poor, only

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that alienating communication can strike the well off in spite of their favorable position. It was rather like that with the plagues – and we are speaking of contagious communication. I am saying that the affluent do not have it all their way, but are exposed to real causes of discontent from the communication to which they are exposed.

Second, well-off people are more sensitive to whatever noise reaches them. Their upbringing and tastes make them expect more and sensitize them to disharmonies that the poor ignore. This was conspicuous in the “sentimentality” of reformers during the Victorian and muckraking eras (Filler, 1961; Hofstadter, 1955). Romantics such as Byron, Shelley, and Hoffman came from the ranks of the well off. The historian Raymond Immerwahr (1974) finds the origin of romanticism in a middle class that could buy and read romances and began to judge life by that standard. Along with social Darwinians who view hardships of the poor with comfort, there are keenly sensitive rich people who trouble themselves far more about the world than they need to, even to the extent of radical action (contributing in no small numbers to the student rebellions of the 1960s). Such sensitivity might be symbolized by the fable of the princess who could not sleep while there was a pea beneath her ten mattresses. Deprivations are no less for being relative or vicarious.

A third reason for sensitivity to noise among upwardly aspiring people is low commitment to roles. Sociologists have amply explained why modern success-striving man gives up roots, looks forward to leaving the place he has, feels relative deprivation from comparing himself with others, so often finds himself in a job, career, place, family setting, or kind of service to which he is not durably committed. The happy professional in a career of his choice may pay no more attention to noise than does a mountain climber to struggle, cold, and gravel in his shoes. But it is another matter when commitment to roles is low. Then, so to speak, one finds ants in the picnic food. Perhaps one is in a job for which he has little heart because he has been educated for better things⁷ and brought up to expect that his work will fulfill him. Such a man will feel noise and boredom keenly. Suppose he works at the customer adjustment counter of a department store. All day he listens to complaints, soothes irate customers, attends to trivia, screens claims of people trying to put something over on him. Unless he is especially fitted for the role, loves engagement, and prides himself on his ability to handle people, he is likely to feel bored, with a sense of grievance that

might be expressed in a question such as: “Why should I put up with all this when I don’t care much about the job anyway?” He is in a dilemma involving a conflict between *stress* leading easily to distress (Selye, 1974) and *boredom* from monotony or an overload of irrelevant information not serving his personal significance. Such a double-bind of stress or boredom from work and communication, I say, is felt especially by people whose role commitment is low, because their inner steering signal (redundancy of personal identity within that role, as I shall call it in Chapter 6) is too weak to withstand the noise encountered. Stress and boredom make a sort of Scylla and Charybdis between which a modern Ulysses sails, with second thoughts such as “I didn’t want to go on this trip.”

In short, there seem to be good reasons why social noise is likely to strike well-off people harder, as they are highly exposed to communication, high in sensitivities and expectations, and low in commitment to roles. This may throw light on the romanticism of rebels of the 1960s who rejected affluence, advocated return to the simple life, and resurrected Thoreau as a patron of the environment.

Today, complaints about the modern environment and culture are wider in scope, including demands for less visual pollution, more truth in advertising, and some sort of communications policy to reduce pollution from media. They, too, seem romantic. But, however impractical and far from fulfillment such proposals may now seem, does not the romantic have an important role as social indicator, rather like that of the canary carried into a coal mine to detect fumes before humans can smell them? He faints in delicate anguish, and people are saved.

The romanticism of yesterday is often the reality of today. I believe that, as the crisis of social noise is more fully seen, it will change our understanding of progress. For example, it will explain how clutter in the environment, giving rise to noise in communication, in turn giving rise to confusion in the mind, is somehow a threat to the human spirit. A things-heaped, noise-filled, information-overloaded environment makes the receptive mind like a poorly organized photomontage. This has much to do with closing responses, such as alienation, joining cults, ethnic ingrouping, and hurrying into restrictively zoned suburbs. The overall perception here is that a high noise condition contributes to the meaning gap of modern society. An overload of noise is ultimately a crisis of meaning.

Second, the crisis of social noise challenges the modernistic assump-

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tion that opening is always good, that boundaries are better crossed and walls down, that every bit of information is welcome, that changes are better accepted than rejected.

Third, it challenges the homogenization (melting pot) ideal – as opposed to cultural pluralism – so long a part of American immigration (but not religious) policy. Even if one could reduce stylistic noise by assimilation, by eliminating differences, the question would remain: Who would want it? More today are coming to favor a pluralism that protects, revives, and enriches differences of culture, style, and identity – personal and collective. They are beginning to realize the threat of social noise and banalization to life-style preservation, to recognize that one cannot easily remake a collective style once lost, and, more slowly, that life-styles require collective support and boundaries – a point that it is the sociologist's job to emphasize. This leads to the (now seemingly impractical) proposal for a mosaic of life-styles and also for concern for human scale and communication network balance, which will be explained in Chapter 8.

Indeed, during the 1970s, movements such as environmentalism, “limits to growth,” recycling, planning, nostalgia, and concern for human scale (“small is beautiful”) heralded general awareness that the era of unrestricted, uncritical growth had come to an end. From then on, large developments would require impact statements, monitoring, program evaluations, and so forth, in which (hopefully) indicators of social noise would have a part.

Such movements showed what I would call closing to entropy, a natural and primitive response of living systems to excessive disorder, experienced within receptors and channels as noise, as part of a strategy to gain information. When social noise gets too high, it is felt to be a losing transaction and becomes a trigger for closing rather than a challenge and opportunity of new experience and cross-fertilization. Closing is tightening boundaries and withdrawing interest in external information and communication until better opportunity for transaction – that is, good opening – can be found. In a crisis of noise, the information environment deteriorates to the point at which resonance is lost and more and more persons and groups close for their own good.⁸

Closing is not merely against noise, but for advantages of information such as resonance and redundancy. Fortunately, offsetting noise, there is a comforting sort of signal – a homing beam if you please – that I call good redundancy. It is comforting to have repeated what we already