

watt more

Back in 1942, at the height of wartime endeavours, the UK Government appointed a committee on Sound Insulation and Acoustics of Building. In the Report, published in 1944, the committee noted that noise sources had increased by the expanding use of mechanical equipment in offices and by the wireless in homes, whilst the trend was for lightness in building constructions. "How many unfortunate flat dwellers, for instance, find themselves disturbed by the noise of their neighbours' wireless....?", the Committee asked in their Report.

Nearly 60 years on not a lot has changed, except for "wireless" read "50-100 watts or more of power amplification, with much of this power directed into the bass". The result of a mismatch between neighbours' choices of soundscapes leads to enormous distress. In 1996, the UK Noise Act, aimed primarily at limiting night-time neighbour noise from hi-fi and similar equipment, tried to find a means of control.

More can be done. Why are audio manufacturers permitted to keep on selling equipment which is clearly over-powered for its purpose?

"No lawful industry is safe. If some deviant person misuses your lawful product, this administration will sue you, rather than hold the criminal responsible". No, this is not a statement from the hi-fi companies, but from the US National Rifle Association. The firearms industry in the USA is currently being sued by a wide range of larger cities, in order to force gun makers to change the way in which they design and sell weapons.

This is an attempt to reduce the 10,000 gun crimes a year in the hundred largest public housing authorities alone, which the cities have to clean up, and repair the resulting physical and social suffering. The Federal Administration has now added its weight in support of this pressure.

Add to this the legal cases against tobacco companies for compensation for the harm done by their products, including a recent judgment in France against Seita, makers of Gauloises, and one can see the development of an international opinion which holds manufacturers responsible for what they produce.

It is not good enough for manufacturers to hide behind their users and say that their hi-fi is a problem only because of misuse. The potential for misuse, to the extent of becoming an infliction on others, is built into the products. The full wattage is inappropriate and unacceptable for the domestic setting, so why do the manufacturers provide it, and describe it so graphically in the audio magazines, except as an inducement to use it?

Of course, education is part of the solution and we recommend a two pronged approach:

Further education of the public on the problems of noise from hi-fi.

Education of the manufacturers on their responsibilities to society.

Both of the must be coupled with the threat of sanctions, which at present applies only to the user.

don't blow your own horn

In Bayside, Milwaukee, the Village Board has voted to prohibit trains from sounding their horns at two railroad crossings. The move was made despite federal law that requires the sounding of train horns at all street-grade crossings.

train whistles

Based on statistics compiled by the Federal Rail Administration, the train/vehicle collision rate increases 62 percent when whistles are silenced at crossings, regardless of lights and gates.