

(I wrote a short essay on 'noise' for El Pais, here the URL of the Spanish translation and below the original text in English: El ruido es la nueva banda sonora de tu vida

<https://elpais.com/ideas/2022-05-15/el-ruido-es-la-nueva-banda-sonora-de-tu-vida.html>)

Noise is the Message

By Geert Lovink

Information overload turns relevant information into distressing noise. When there are too many signals, a breakdown is looming. Noise is often associated with unsolicited spam, annoying trolls and the never-ending barrage of comments and likes. However, too often, also important emails remain unread. In this manic digital age, the classic engineering distinction between signal and noise is becoming arbitrary. Its borders are fluid in the same way as our so-called real life is experienced as a disruption of the 24/7 social media flow. Parents, colleagues and friends are now both signal and noise. The dialectics of attraction and distraction remains unresolved and becomes a vicious circle.

“According to communication theory, noise is creates a distortion in a message, obfuscating its clarity,” says Amsterdam-based noise theorist Martina Raponi. “However, this understanding of noise confuses the fundamental idea that noise is in itself a carrier of information, and that it is co-constitutive to the signal to which our attention is directed. Therefore, noise is a necessary ‘distraction’ in the process of extracting information.” On a sensual level, Raponi observes that we cannot avoid fixating on it; “no matter how feeble or loud. An extension of this is the earworm, a tune that gets stuck in our heads and continues to haunt us after having been exposed to it. The emotional and affective valence of the noise/earworm is crucial in occupying the attention of the listener.”

A decade ago, Howard Rheingold proposed ‘crap detection’ as a technique to deal with ‘filter failure’, but only few gathered its significance. According to the liberal market version, it’s just brands competing for our attention, but we know better now. It is exhaustion and indifference that turns screen signs into white noise. As your finger keeps scrolling, the info bits start to blur. But then you look up, and put the phone aside.

In the post-Covid-Ukraine period, the social media question is no longer a

central issue. Fake news is no longer news – it's simply there. Noise is the message. Subliminal techniques alter the mental state of the billions. After a good decade of fringe research and even more marginal 'internet criticism', the diagnosis is suddenly clear to everyone. The multitudes finally understand how platform capitalism operates yet fail to do something about it. Waiting for Brussels is the new waiting for Godot. As anti-trust laws that will dismantle tech monopolies will not be put in place, political censorship (a la Russia and China) seems the easier option. With centralized platforms the only option left, self-improvement seems the only way out. The individual user will have to sort the noise issue out themselves, as Dutch philosopher Miriam Rasch investigates in her latest essay *Autonomy, a Self-help Guide*. Rasch points at a paradox: tech companies undermine one's autonomy, freedom of choice and possibilities to act while praising these values at the same time.

We know what happens when platform giants are asked to provide us with technological solutions for the 'addiction' problems they willingly designed. The techno-social noise is in your head, your fingers, steering your eyes, firing up your nerves. Noise cancellation is seen as a personal issue, where the moral responsibility lies with the individual, the user, that can be either solved with meditation (Harari), digital detox apps, switching off notifications or introducing telephone free days.

The original cybernetics idea, formulated by Oswald Wiener in the early 1940s, states that one could predict the future better by removing noise. In Western 'friction free' ideology this is playing out in the optimization ideal, a cult for life extension and compression of time to accommodate a maximum amount of experiences. In this context the Other ultimately becomes noise, an obstacle that needs to be removed after its consumption.

Apart from a rapidly aging group of electronic sound artists, who enjoying noise? This is deceptive. Noise is everywhere and is even used as a resource. Distraction is not the enemy. To lose focus is widely felt as a temporary relief, protective gesture and justified escape. Fake information still demands our attention—if only for a split second. Noise is no longer a cultural subgenre that is provoking our senses. It is a general condition. Take the Indian investor Vibhu Vats for whom noise is the norm: "Human nature doesn't like quiet. It's meant for ascetics, saints and hermits. Noise is the spice of life. Remove it and life would be healthy but boring. Let's not despise noise. Better is to embrace it as a necessary evil and regulate its

consumption.”

With Rasch we conclude that embracing noise means forgetting identity and authenticity, putting on inconsequential masks. Break with the docile ‘follow’ mentality of the online herd yet live the high standards of your idols. This is what Mieke Gerritzen writes about in *Help Your Self—The Rise of Design*, another Dutch writer, in her case designer that carves out a personal space in the ocean of social media influences. Remember that only collective action can claim—and defend—personal autonomy, Rasch concludes. And embrace the unacceptable, for once—a Dutch message, indeed.

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