

**MICHAEL BRIGUGLIO**

You leave home in Sliema just after 6am to catch the bus. You decide to pay more attention to the sounds around you.

So, the first thing you do is not wear your headphones, which you might otherwise use to listen to music, an audiobook, a podcast, or the radio.

To your amazement, the first thing you hear is birds chirping. In a highly urbanised setting, within one of the most densely populated countries in Europe, you are reminded that nature is always with us.

The interaction between nature and society becomes immediately apparent when you hear cars along the seafront. There are relatively few at this time of day, unlike later in the morning and into the evening, when traffic congestion becomes the order of the day.

You assume that many of these early car journeys are related to work. Humming is the most common sound, as if the cars them-

selves have yet to wake up. In some cases, technology results in much lower sound emissions, as with electric vehicles, including many cabs.

But then comes the odd car revving or accelerating, producing enough noise to evoke a Starsky and Hutch car chase. This type of driver seems particularly fond of certain cars, exhaust pipes, colours, and other modifications. Sometimes music powered by a subwoofer provides the accompaniment. The motivations behind such behaviour merit a study in themselves. Is the driver seeking recognition from pedestrians and commuters, some of whom couldn't be bothered while others might simply think: show-off?

Some motorbikes pass too. Most hum along in somewhat rhythmic harmony with the roadscape, although the occasional rider appears equally fond of noise. Some smaller bikes manage to be remarkably loud regardless of how they are driven. The Chihuahua comes to mind.

Other vehicles are directly connected to economic activity: construction trucks, delivery vans and commercial vehicles. Their sounds vary considerably, often depending on the engine and technology being used. Malta still has an ageing vehicle fleet, meaning that cleaner, quieter vehicles

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share the same roads with considerably noisier and more polluting ones. At least our public bus fleet has been modernised.

While waiting for the bus, you notice that although relatively few people are commuting at this hour, some appear to be travelling for work. But there are also walkers and joggers, alone, in pairs or occasionally in small

groups. You see elderly people and parents with children, some waiting for transport to summer school. To me, their presence suggests a degree of trust in public space, notwithstanding the terrible stories – and sometimes moral panics – we encounter, particularly on social media. What feels less safe is the infrastructure itself, especially for pedestrians.

Meanwhile, the sea splashes against boats, yachts, natural rock and human-made concrete. Like the birds, it reminds us of nature's presence and agency as it constantly interacts with society and infrastructure.

You board the bus and enter another soundscape. People speak Maltese, English and various other languages. Smartphones ring and ping. Automated announcements tell us the next stop in Maltese and English. In the background are the engine and air-conditioning – a far cry from the much noisier and sweatier buses of Malta's past.

The driver is often a third-country national who, apart from driving, performs considerable invisible work: asking passengers to move further inside, communicating with queues eager to board, responding to questions and navigating traffic, often while remaining remarkably calm and polite.

What you hear as a passenger

depends partly on where you sit or stand and how crowded the bus is. Someone's phone rings with a familiar Android tune or a more personalised choice. If the ensuing conversation is loud enough, whether you like it or not, you become part of it. Blah, blah, blah. The same applies when somebody's TikTok feed becomes other people's soundscape.

Eventually, you reach your destination having passed through a changing world of sounds and interactions: personal and social, natural and technological. This apparently disorganised rhythm somehow falls into place, only to be accompanied, crowded out or displaced by new sounds as the day progresses.

Unless, of course, you put your headphones back on, perhaps activate noise cancellation, and construct your own private soundscape amid the crowd.

Which raises another sociological question: who gets to decide what counts as sound and what counts as noise? Along the day, the same bells, music, traffic, conversations or festa petards can represent culture and belonging to some, disturbance and exclusion to others.

Michael Briguglio is Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Malta