

You Must Have Your Sounds Turned On

Shôn Ellerton, January 15, 2020

We, the manufacturers of mobile phone devices, streaming services and social media platforms insist that you have your sounds switched on.



My rant of the week concerns unnecessary electronic sounds we're forced to endure.

If you don't like rants or feel the need of reading it with the only thought of trolling me, please kindly refrain from reading any further and move along to the next post.

The Netflix 'Here I Am!' sound

It's been a long and tiring day, and a hot one at that as well. I fumble for the house keys to get into the house. I start preparing dinner before the rest of the family arrives. Dinner is ready to be served and my wife and son arrive just on time. Dinner's finished, plates and glasses washed, and then I start to do some evening gardening while my wife is doing some research on her work and my son is playing with his toys in his room. It's getting late and now the struggle of trying to get him into bed begins, after having spent the best part of half-an-hour to get him to have a shower and then to brush his teeth. I read him a few chapters out of his favourite book then dress and put him to bed. It's no mean feat especially during the summer months with daylight savings time (which I hate) when it's still light outside. He's asleep and then we relax and decide to watch something on Netflix. I switch it on, and the first thing that happens is

‘BA-BOOM!!!’

I sit there quietly listening to any sound from my son’s room. Did he wake up? Did I get away with it?

For those of you that Netflix, you know what I mean. An incredibly loud out-of-proportion ‘*here we are!*’ sound that you cannot disable as it’s built as part of Netflix’s software. This gets me nearly *every* time as I so often forget to mute the volume before switching it on.

What in the name of what’s holy or revered possesses someone to come up with such an idea to annoy the hell out of so many users? Particularly so when, from what I’ve read from other pissed-off users, that there is no way to disable it. Yet, despite so many readers’ requests to Netflix to disable it, it is fallen on deaf ears. Perhaps some marketing twerp in the business decided to force the feature so that when the *ta-da* sound is heard, others in the near vicinity such as in a hotel room might hear as well and think, ‘Hey, that’s a good idea! Let’s watch some Netflix!’. You know that sound of when someone pops the cork off a wine bottle or opens a can of soda? [Pavlov’s Dog!](#)

Seriously, Netflix. The software you have is better than most others but make it optional to disable that one little thing.

Facebook’s keyboard clicks

Let’s now move over to Facebook’s continual push to make sure that your notification and keyboard sounds are ON.

By default, when you run Facebook on your browser or through its app, notifications and sounds are turned on. On the app, keyboard sounds are turned on. Now let me digress here a little about keyboard sounds.

Anyone remember using a manual typewriter? They were really effing noisy. Anybody within earshot of someone typing away on one of those would hear a continuous barrage of clickety-clicks interspersed by the ‘*zzzzzzipping*’ sound of the carriage return. Often, this would be interrupted by little *ah*’s and *damn it*’s and other little expletives when the typist makes errors and has to backspace to correct them, perhaps followed by the rolling sound of the paper being pulled out, crumbled and then, unceremoniously, jettisoned into the waste paper basket.

Electric typewriters weren't quite as bad, particularly the more expensive 'golf-ball' ones which gave off more of a soft thud rather than a piercing clicking sound. Then came along computer keyboards, most of which tend to be reasonably quiet except for the more clicky tactile-type gaming keyboards which some users prefer the feel of, myself included. Not for the sound it makes, but the sensation it creates when you type on it. Thanks to my brother-in-law who got me a nice one last Christmas!

Why anyone would feel to have the need for a touchscreen keyboard to make fake electronic 'clicky' or 'poppy' sound is totally beyond me. If they want to do so when they're alone, fine, but why subject everyone around them, for example, on a train to work, to listen to them type away on their smartphones.

Back to Facebook. As default, you get these keyboard sounds on your smartphone. Disabling them takes a little understanding on how to navigate through your Facebook settings which, undoubtedly, most will never bother doing. This is how unintuitive it is:

- 1) Click on the lower right corner with the three horizontal lines;
- 2) Click on **Settings**;
- 3) Click on **Sounds**, which is nearly at the bottom of a very long page of options;
- 4) Switch off **In-app** sound, which may have been better worded to something like, say, **Keyboard Clicks?**

So, hooray! They're switched off! Finally!

However, something is rotten in the state of Denmark. (*I love that Shakespearean expression*). Lo and behold, after a Facebook update, the reviled keyboard clicks start again. Facebook switches **In-app sounds** back to ON at every update, so far, up to time of writing this. So, this means I need to change the settings on my Facebook app as well as my wife's.

Let me ask Facebook. Is this intentional? Because if it is, I'm certain it would be marketing strategy rather than that from a software developer. Perhaps, it could be a simple omission on a long list of bugs and fixes that need to be done, I don't know.

My mobile phone makes the sound of a real camera!

Everywhere you turn and look, there seems to be this *need* to make unnecessary electronic sounds. Let's look at another offender.

Mobile phone cameras!

Compact digital cameras are predominantly silent unless one wishes to switch the sound on. In any case, the sounds they make are generally innocuous and quite subdued. However, sales of compact digital cameras have very strong competition with mobile phone cameras, some of which, make surprisingly good photos. Not Apple, though!

In the world of older-style and SLR (manual or digital) cameras, we all know that they make a sound when taking a photo. With SLR cameras, it's the sound of the mirror component that moves up to let in light to the camera sensor. The sound is unavoidable; however, good SLR camera design is such that the sound is as minimal as possible. A professional photographer has absolutely no desire to have the camera make unnecessary sounds, particularly when filming wildlife or, for more nefarious reasons, candid photography.

'Nudge nudge, SAY no more!' (to quote Eric Idle in a Monty Python sketch).

Someone many years ago probably thought that it would be 'cool' to have mobile phone cameras emulate the sound of an SLR camera. Think about this. In a museum I went to recently with my son, there was a man with a high-end digital Canon 5D camera and a couple taking pictures of each other with a mobile phone. The unavoidable sound of the mechanism in the Canon camera was much quieter than the totally absolutely, unnecessary sound coming from the mobile phone. Regarding the sound, the very thing which the designers at Canon are trying to achieve is precisely the opposite to that, which has been designed in the mobile phone camera.

Switching off the sound of a mobile phone camera is not usually possible; however, at least I can disable mine if I put the whole phone on silent mode, which means I get *no* sounds, including the sound when a phone call comes in.

Surprise sounds on websites

We must, of course, near the end of this somewhat ranty discourse on websites that forcibly start audio and video when the user opens the page on a browser. It's a heinous practice at best and one that should be avoided by all web designers. There should *always* be the option of playing the sound or video at the user's request.

I am glad to say that this practice is becoming less popular than it once was. Even social media websites and apps have the option of disabling autoplaying of videos and sounds; a most commendable move. I remember the days in the late 90s, a time of little in the way of online security, when work colleagues, just for the sake of practical jokes, would send emails to each other with embedded sound files enabling the computer speaker and cranking up the volume to mutter something funny and, usually, profane. I think those days are past us now!

Hollywood bling-bling ultra-high-tech sound effects

Even the entertainment industry has piped down on the ersatz sound effects when glitzy hi-tech stuff happens on computers. Remember all those, usually American, hi-tech crime shows where words are being typed on a monitor whilst making all these bleeping sounds; the essence of trying to make it all futuristic and cool? Much less now. These days, it is common for someone to key in something into Google or some other search engine much like today when anyone does the same thing. Kind of boring, but a fact of life and realistic.

Conclusion

To finish off my little rant, let's give fake or ersatz sounds some credit.

By default, unnecessary sounds should be turned off, or, they should be, at least, be able to be turned off and REMAIN turned off until the user specifies otherwise. However, there are occasions where sounds are genuinely useful.

Those with physical impairments, particularly with eye problems might require a little more help to 'finalise' the action of, say, taking a picture of someone. The sound might help in confirming that the action *did* take place, although

whether the camera was pointed in the right direction might be more of an issue!

Are there reasons for manufacturers implementing and forcing ersatz camera sounds on phones? Probably, but for sometimes bizarre reasons. One reason that stands out is for the prevention of candid photography, which can be bypassed anyway as mentioned above. Whether it's true or not remains to be heard, but I heard a theory that fake camera shutter sounds discourages people taking pictures inside public conveniences, a practice which is much frowned upon, particularly in Australia where warning signs are often displayed in full view requesting that no pictures are taken inside. I guess that's kind of understandable, not that I envisage someone creeping over the wall, looking down at me while doing my business and taking a snapshot!

There is, possibly, one application I can think of where emulating a sound could be a safety issue, and that is in the world of electric cars. I remember taking an electric taxi in Singapore. It was a full-on powerful electric car, not one of those hybrid things when the petrol engine kicks in after 30 mph. It was amazingly quick to accelerate, and, my word, was it ever so quiet! However, there were people crossing the road at various points throughout our journey and, often at very short notice, quickly stumble back in stark surprise when we approached them. Perhaps this is the reasoning behind the famously loud 'potato-potato' sound of the Harley Davidson motorcycle!

It may seem that I'm ranting a little too much or having a little go at marketing. Well, yes, I am. Marketing is a very important part of any business and I've had my share of being involved with from time to time, but I would never implement an annoying feature that users cannot disable. Nor would I subject them to unnecessary noises that royally piss them off.

In the world of design, the move to be as quiet as possible or silent is one the goals for so many engineering designs whether it's car, elevator, locomotive, air-conditioning, airplane, passenger ferry, desktop computer, networking equipment, transformer, and so many others. So, why is that other industry sectors like software, mobile phone manufacturers and streaming services have the mindset that we need *more* noise?

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed reading this, if not, for a little mild amusement to your start of the day. If you didn't, well, that's fine as well. I'd love to hear your

comments, but if you want to criticise just for the sake of making you feel better, write something first, share it, and then troll away!