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# SCIENCE AND THE TABLOID PRESS

by Sheldon Cohen

In early fall 1977, I received a phone call from a *National Enquirer* reporter who asked if I had just received a grant from the National Science Foundation to study the effects of aircraft noise on children. I said that I had and answered a number of his questions concerning the study. This interview lasted about 40 minutes and included a very thorough description of the various measures in the study and the reasons we were interested in each.

Several months later a professor of communications at Rutgers who studies the popular press' version of science sent me a copy of the *Enquirer* article (Jones, 1977). The article was entitled "Government wastes your tax \$\$ to find out if jet noise disturbs students." It continued: "The National Science Foundation is blowing away \$59,600 of your hard-earned tax dollars to find out if jets taking off from Los Angeles International Airport are distracting to school children." This was followed by quotes from William Bonner, executive director of the National Taxpayers Union and Max Rafferty, dean of the School of Education at Troy State College. The essence of the quotes was that they were

astounded that the government was throwing money away on such a worthless project, since we all know that loud noise will distract children. Finally, the article suggests that I attempted to defend the study but wasn't sure that there were any practical implications.

My study of the impact of noise on children is being done with the collaboration of David Krantz at the University of Southern California, and Gary Evans and Dan Stokols at the University of California at Irvine. In contrast to the *Enquirer's* description of the study, we are not examining the impact of noise on distraction. The measures in the study include attentional strategies, feelings of

personal control, development of verbal abilities (including reading), hearing losses and health. Moreover, the focus of the study is on effects that *persist* following noise exposure. All of this was explained in detail to the reporter from the *Enquirer*. He apparently felt that much of this information was not important so he ignored it. Also, contrary to the reporter's statement that I was defending my study, I was not aware that it was under attack. My naive impression was that I was providing information for a news article.

There are two points that I would like to make about my experience. Both have to do with what kinds of information one should provide to "journalists" with the tabloid press. The most

annoying aspect of the article was that I had spent over a half hour on the phone describing the work and answering questions, only to have that information completely ignored. But what are the alternatives? Could I have refused to provide the reporter with information about the work? Such a refusal would result in a sentence or two on how the scientist refused to talk to the reporter. Thus, in retrospect, I feel that an honest and open reaction to the reporter was the only possible response.

The second point has to do with the roles of Bonner and Rafferty. What do you do if a reporter asks you to comment on someone else's research? From my point of view, both acted irresponsibly by apparently criticizing the worth of a piece of research on the basis of a reporter's description of that work. I assume that the description provided was as inaccurate as the portrayal of the study in the article. Giving these gentlemen the benefit of the doubt, it is likely that their quotes were taken out of context, as one of my own had been, and similarly distorted by the author. Their mistake then was commenting at all.

These reflections might seem trivial. After all, who reads the *National Enquirer* anyway? This triviality might be tempered by two facts. First, the *National Enquirer* (according to their advertisements) is read by 17 million Americans weekly. Second, I have just received a letter from the National Science Foundation informing me that Senator Proxmire has requested information concerning my grant.

*Sheldon Cohen is an environmental and social psychologist at the University of Oregon.*

