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MATTHEW BARRETT

## You need your ears, bud, so take off those freaking headphones



ELIZABETH  
VAIL

“The visual symbol of earbuds has become the silent equivalent of ‘la la la, I can’t hear you,’ because so many people now use them to willingly and publicly disengage from the world around them. Frankly, it’s akin to walking around with your fingers in your ears.”

It seems that every time someone invents something useful, somebody else comes up with a way to use it rudely. With the invention of cars, we got road rage. Email made nerds accessible outside of the school-grounds, and now teachers have to deal with Internet bullying. And the convenience of cell phones means that a 187 people can’t watch a movie because some ass in the front row is giving his bedridden grandma an up-to-the-minute play-by-play.

Headphones are hardly a recent invention, but with the proliferation of iPods, Creative Zens, and MP3-capable phones, headphones—along with their red-headed bastard step-child, the earbuds—have become another infuriating social pacifier that gives people the anonymity (or at least distance) of technology that they need to forgo putting up with other people.

Anyone who’s worked in retail recently has experienced the overwhelming frustration of dealing with customers who walk into their store with buds nestled in their ears like brain-leeching alien larva, their faces locked in blank, zombie-like stares, immune to any form of customer service.

And whenever you approach pedestrians with your car, you now need to check for the telltale wires

coming out of their ears that indicate that they are snugly ensconced in their own personal bubble and may therefore not be too interested with the proper use of crosswalks and traffic lights.

MP3 players are wonderful conveniences for passing the time, and there’s nothing wrong with jamming out to your favorite tunes at home, on the bus to drown out the ramblings of the crazies, or in the studious silence of a library where communication is already discouraged to promote an ideal reading atmosphere. In public spaces, however, it becomes a problem.

When you’re in a place where human interaction is everywhere (and often necessary) and all the senses are engaged, it’s time to unplug from whatever *Rent Original Motion Picture Soundtrack* fantasy you’re immersed in and instead tune in to the world around you.

It’s not very smart to be walking around the outside world willingly deafened. Footsteps, shouts, honking horns, car alarms, chattering squirrels, screams, and sirens all communicate necessary information that music junkies have started to take for granted.

Some cities have actually considered fining people who cross the street while wearing headphones

because folks strung out on Britney Spears’ “Gimme More” have proven to be hazards to drivers as well as to themselves—and to music taste in general. You wouldn’t walk out onto a busy street blindfolded, would you?

But it’s not just a matter of staying alert—I’m talking about etiquette, too. You know, dealing with people. *Real* people, with faces and bodies to go with their screen names. The visual symbol of earbuds has become the silent equivalent of “la la la, I can’t hear you,” because so many people now use them to willingly and publicly disengage from the world around them. Frankly, it’s akin to walking around with your fingers in your ears.

Buying an iPod doesn’t make you exempt from the world around you. It doesn’t entitle you to shut down your communication skills. It doesn’t require other people to be responsible for you because you refuse to pay attention to reality. Besides, you never know what experiences you could be missing while you’re wrapped up in that comforting Snow Patrol haze.

Unplug the buds, engage with the world, and try a few conversations with people without having it soundtracked like an episode of *Grey’s Anatomy*.

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