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Science

Obnoxiously loud car? A traffic camera might be listening



Sound meters identify souped-up cars and motorbikes emitting illegal noise in New York City

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Cars drive through Times Square on Tuesday, Jan. 17, 2023, in New York. The city has installed traffic cameras equipped with sound meters capable of identifying souped-up cars and motorbikes emitting an illegal amount of street noise, but won't say where they are. (Andres Kudacki/The Associated Press)

After the relative quiet of the pandemic, New York City has come roaring back. Just listen: Jackhammers. Honking cars and trucks. Rumbling subway trains. Sirens. Shouting.

Over the years, there have been numerous efforts to quiet the cacophony. One of the latest: traffic cameras equipped with sound meters capable of identifying souped-up cars and motorbikes emitting an illegal amount of street noise.

At least 71 drivers have gotten tickets so far for violating noise rules during a yearlong pilot program of the system. The city's Department of Environmental Protection now has plans to expand the use of the roadside sound meters.

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"Vehicles with illegally modified mufflers and tailpipes that emit extremely loud noise have been a growing problem in recent years," said City Council member Erik Bottcher, who heralded the arrival of the radars to his district to help reduce "obnoxious" noise.

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New York City already has one of the most extensive noise ordinances in the U.S., setting allowable levels for a host of noisemakers, such as jackhammers and vehicles.

A state law known as the Stop Loud and Excessive Exhaust Pollution Act, or the SLEEP Act, that went into effect last spring raised fines for illegal modifications of mufflers and exhaust systems.

Fines of up to \$2,625 US

Because police officers often have other priorities, offenders have gone their merry, noisy way. The new devices record the license plates of offenders, much like how speedsters are nabbed by roadside cameras. Vehicle owners face fines of \$800 US (\$1,069) for a first noise offence and a penalty of \$2,625 US (\$3,509) if they ignore a third-offence hearing.

City officials declined to reveal where the radars are currently perched.

A year ago, Paris, one of Europe's noisier cities, installed similar equipment along some streets.

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