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Airplane Noise Complaints Are Skyrocketing: 'I Start Pushing That Button at 6:33 a.m.'

A new invention allows people to register their annoyance with an inexpensive gizmo, swamping airport systems

By Katy McLaughlin

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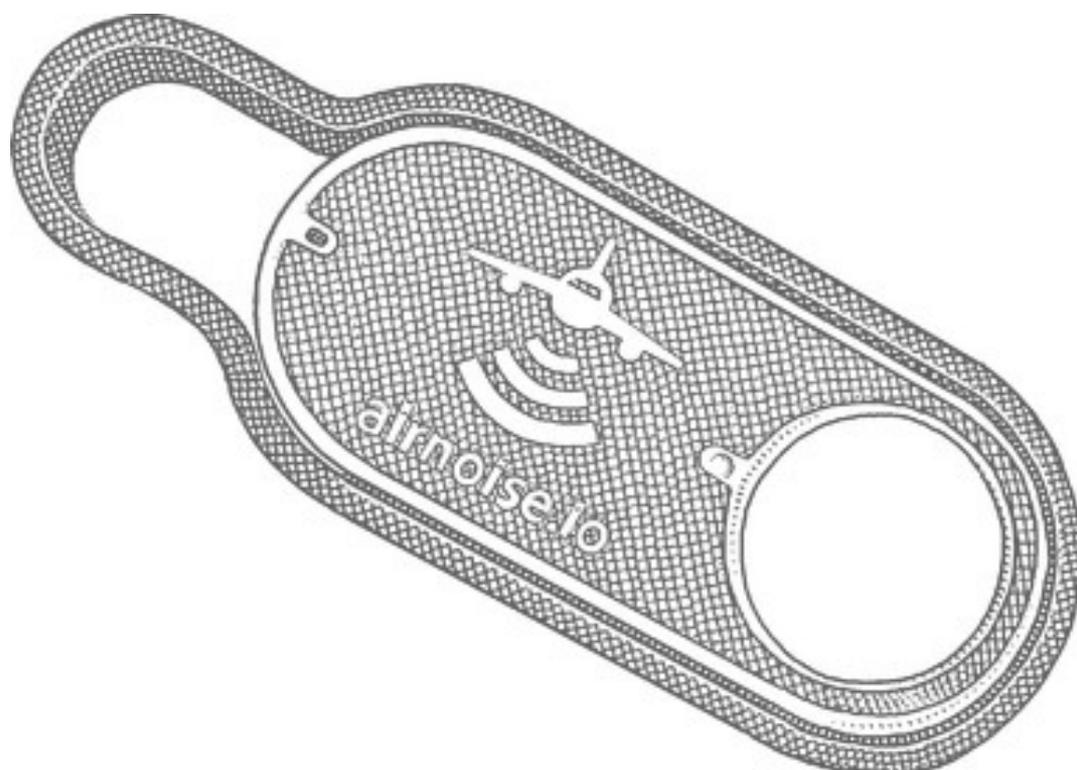
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A lot of people are annoyed by the sound of airplanes flying over their homes. Then there is Beatrice Pardo.

She has lodged 12,694 official complaints with the San Diego County Regional Airport Authority in the past 16 months.



Registering a detailed aircraft noise complaint online in San Diego requires filling in 10 fields and looking up the offending flight through the airport authority's mapping program. But Ms. Pardo, a 62-year-old industrial designer, has taken an easier route. She uses a new invention called the Airnoise Button that allows her to register a complaint simply by pressing it.

"I start pushing that button at 6:33 a.m. when the noise starts and I stop

at about 11:30 p.m.," she said.

Airports around the country are coping with a flood of complaints from irate, button-armed individuals. Airport authorities—the agencies tasked with receiving aircraft noise complaints from the public—have dealt with the onslaught by changing how they report complaint data, blocking complaints that come through Airnoise, and investing hundreds of thousands of dollars into their own, souped-up complaining systems.

The Airnoise Button was created last year by Chris McCann, a 51-year-old former U.S. Air Force test pilot and computer programmer in La Jolla, Calif. Mr. McCann developed software that he linked to an Amazon product called the AWS IoT Button (or Amazon Web Services Internet-of-Things Button), which is programmable for a variety of uses.

A click activates Mr. McCann’s software, which he says identifies the airplane causing the offending roar by pulling from a network of broadcast airplane satellite signals. His system then automatically fills in the appropriate complaint form with the correct regional airport authority.



Chris McCann demonstrates his Airnoise invention. PHOTO: NICHOLAS MCCANN

Today, 279 people possess Airnoise Buttons, which look roughly like small garage-door openers. Thus far, they have filed 226,366 noise objections in 10 cities. Mr. McCann also offers grumbling via his website and text messaging, bringing the tally to 399,924 complaints.

The gripes go to airport authorities, who share the data with elected officials, community groups and the Federal Aviation Administration. A spokesman for the FAA said the agency doesn’t keep a tally of noise complaints but “we are working on developing a system that would enable us to track noise

complaints nationwide.”

Ms. Pardo is among a handful of champion grouchers in the 10,000-and-up club. As of this week,

one man in Milton, Mass., has made his frustration known 14,008 times; another in La Jolla has clicked 13,877 times, said Mr. McCann.

Even less trigger-happy users make a big impact: Seattle's Sea-Tac airport was accustomed to roughly 2,000 annual noise complaints before the beginning of the year when Airnoise caught on in the area. Now it gets over 2,000 a week, said airport spokesman Perry Cooper. Credit goes to 102 Airnoise users, Mr. McCann said.

Mr. McCann launched the Airnoise Button in his home turf of San Diego last spring. Immediately thereafter, its airport authority ceased publishing the total number of noise complaints it received and instead noted 182 dissatisfied households.

After constituents expressed displeasure over the change, the authority reverted to publishing raw numbers—it got over 26,000 complaints the next quarter—while noting those came from 230 households.

Last week, as part of a \$536,000 upgrade to how it tracks noise and deals with complaints, San Diego rolled out a hotline, app, and flight-tracking system that aims to make complaining through formal channels easier, said Sjohnna Knack, the authority's program manager of planning and environmental affairs.



A plane flies over Hunter Ochs's home in April. PHOTO: HUNTER OCHS

Mr. McCann next customized his button for grouchers in Boston and Los Angeles. Complaints skyrocketed.

“About September, we started noticing an influx,” said Kathryn Pantoja, environmental affairs officer at Los Angeles World Airports, or LAWA.

After identifying where the complaints were coming from, the airports' system prevented them from being counted, said Robert Grotell, president of PlaneNoise, a

company that provides LAWA with its noise complaint management system.

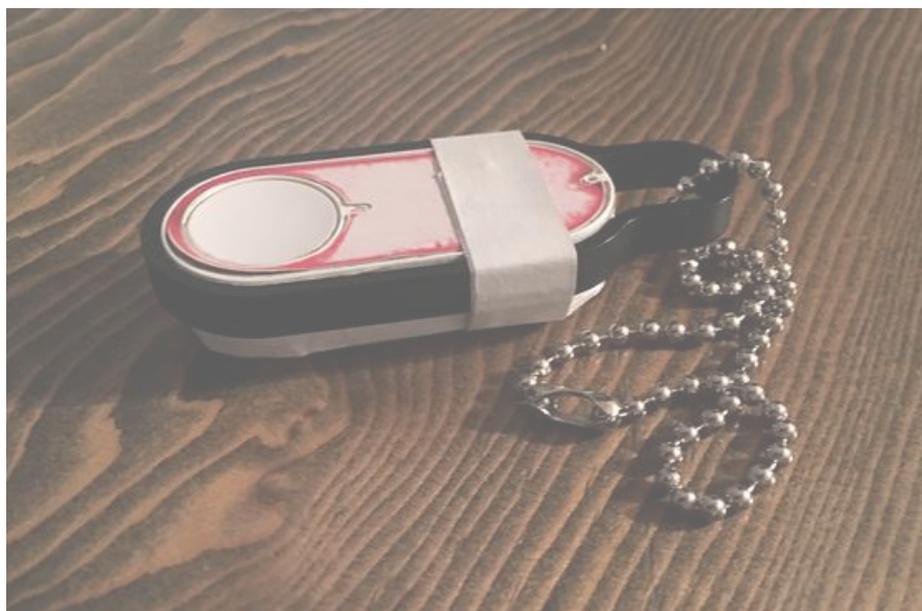
“We want people to submit the complaint and not bombard our system with tons of complaints that don't give us useful information,” said Ms. Pantoja.

Ms. Pantoja and Mr. Grotell said they disallowed Airnoise comments until mid-December, when

they started letting them through. Mr. McCann said he had trouble getting complaints into LAWA's system until January.

Hunter Ochs, a website experience designer in Los Angeles, has filed 11,683 complaints with his Airnoise Button. He said it helps relieve the tension he has felt since the fall of last year, when he noticed a new flight path over his once-quiet home in the West Adams neighborhood—about 10 miles from Los Angeles International Airport.

“When I come home from work, I put my Button on my left hip belt loop. On the weekend I keep it on all the time while at home. And I press it all day long,” said Mr. Ochs.



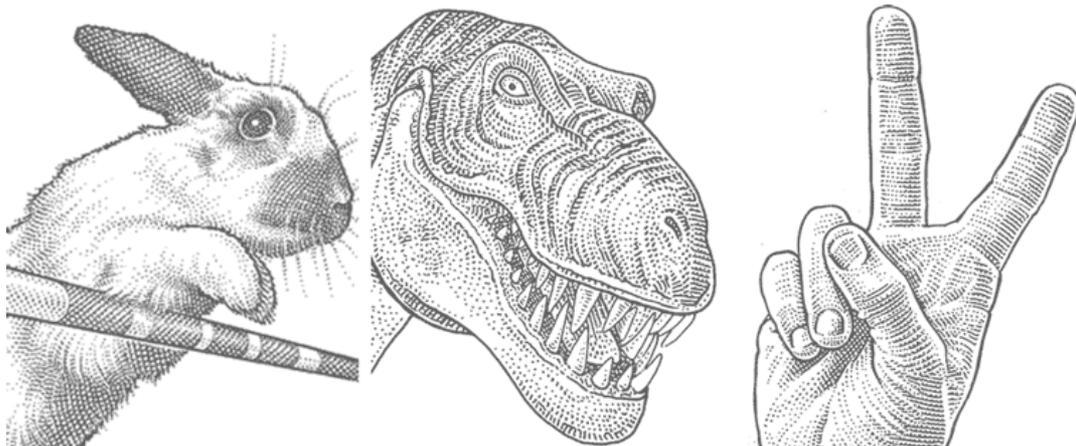
Hunter Ochs's well-used Airnoise button. PHOTO: HUNTER OCHS

After Airnoise complaints started hitting the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey in November, it decided to put them in a special statistical niche: It now reports data on how many complaints come through its own system and how many through “3rd party apps.” In July, Airnoise users filed an average of 132 complaints each, compared with about 5 complaints each from people using the Port Authority's system.

Mr. McCann charges \$24 to customize the Button for each customer and mail it to them, and \$5 a month to maintain service; he also offers a free, but more limited online system, sans Button. He said he is only trying to cover his costs, not make a profit. Instead, he said he started Airnoise as a public service that gives citizens a way of protesting the decisions made by “bureaucrats in a faceless agency,” also known as the FAA.

The FAA's \$35.6 billion aviation modernization undertaking, Next Generation Air Transportation System, began rolling out changes to the flight paths in 12 metropolitan areas in 2014. Because the new satellite-driven system concentrates flight paths that were previously more dispersed, some homes found themselves under the roar of new sky highways.

FAA modeling showed that noise would increase in some areas, decrease in others, and stay the same in some, said a spokesman. However, in a number of places where changes occurred, noise complaints exploded; Phoenix filed—and won—a lawsuit that resulted in a reversal of flight paths in May. An FAA spokesman said it is working with communities to find solutions to noise issues.



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damned.”

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Mr. McCann believes if enough people complain enough, things will have to change.

“The FAA rolled out its flawed NextGen program and created noise problems for people all over the country,” said Mr. McCann. “I aim to do what I can to fix it, whiny, self-serving airport authorities be