

Complaints management at Lyon-Saint Exupéry Airport, France

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ABSTRACT

Lyon-Saint Exupéry International Airport (6 Mpax/year and 130000 movements in 2001) is located in a rural area. Two runways are operated. In 1998 the airport authority employed a mediator whose task was to deal with local residents' complaints. In January 2001, the airport implemented a permanent noise and track monitoring system in order to assess noise pollution from aircraft in 7 measurement points around the airport. These enhanced the communication between the airport and its neighbours, and consequently made the number of complaints decrease significantly.

The results of noise monitoring show two main features: firstly, between 1998 and 2000, noise levels kept steady despite the increased traffic. This is due to the changes in airline fleets. Secondly, noise complaints originate not only from noise-affected areas, but also and mainly from areas that are located in the vicinity of future runways. This confirms the importance of non acoustic factors in the disturbance perceived by local residents.

Introduction

Lyon - Saint Exupéry Airport, fourth French airport for its passenger traffic, is located in an low populated environment. However it is subjected to problems of nuisances which cause every year a high number of complaints from the local residents. These do not result exclusively from a noise pollution. Other factors bring the inhabitants of the communities surrounding the airport to complain.

In a first part we shall see which are the various types of motives for the plaintiffs to complain. Then, we shall tackle the non acoustic factors which have an influence on the number of recorded complaints. Finally, we shall try to explain the variations of the number of complaints at Lyon-Saint Exupéry airport during the last ten years.

Typology Of The Complaints

One often speaks, when dealing with airport pollution, about noise-related complaints. Noise emissions from planes could then be considered as the unique cause for it. However, when one looks at the motives of the complaints from the local residents of the airport, it can be noticed that noise is seldom mentioned as the main source of the disturbance.

Noise is moreover often presented to the second plan. For example, most of the plaintiffs assert that "the plane flew outside its trajectory, that it was so in malpractice, what should be punished. Furthermore, it made an terrible noise." This reaction is mainly observed in the sectors which are not flown over by the major streams of traffic. The inhabitants of these zones are more disturbed by the unusual presence of planes over their homes than by the noise which they cause.

However, in order to legitimise their complaint, they use the noise pollution argument, because it is it what can disturb their tranquillity, even damage their health. To complain about a not noisy plane appears as inequitable, hence the expression of a disturbance due to the noise.

Two categories of plaintiffs can then be observed, which differ by the motives which they use when complaining. Those that live under the major streams of traffic, who are then used to be flown over by planes, complain either about the noise, or about the height of passage of the aircraft. The others, less used to seeing planes over their heads, rather complain about a non compliance with trajectories.

Psycho-acoustic Factors Of The Disturbance Due To Air Traffic

It is undeniably true that the noise emissions from aircraft are a significant source of complaints from local residents. The maps of noise exposure and location of the plaintiffs confirm this tendency when they are overlaid. However, an analysis of the card of location of the plaintiffs shows obviously the influence of non-acoustic factors (figure 1).

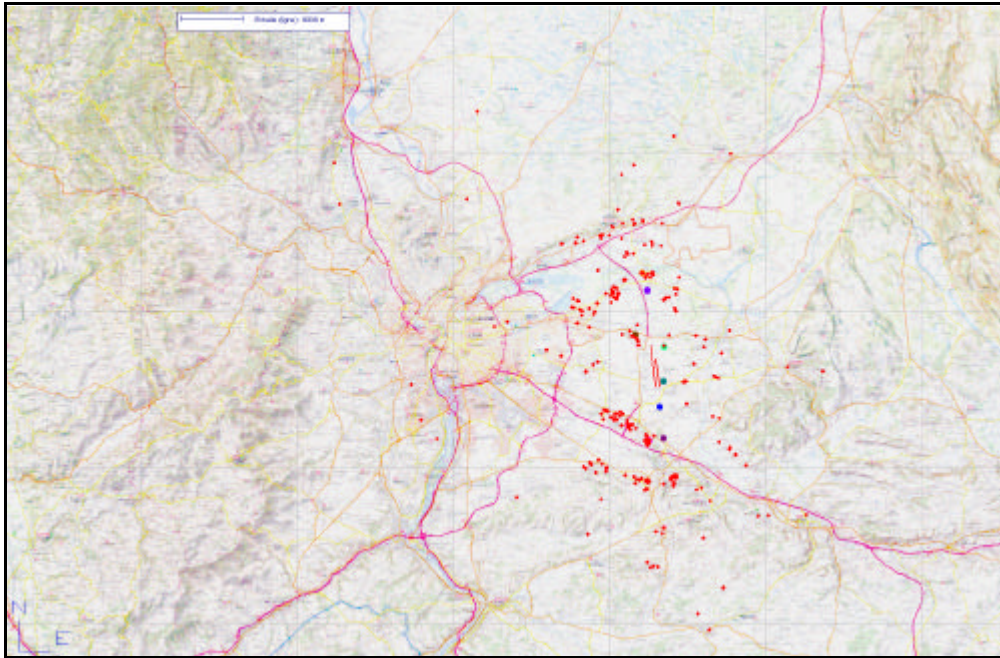


Figure 1. Localisation of plaintiffs at Lyon-Saint Exupéry Airport in 2001

When one looks at the position of the future runways of the airport, significant foyers of contesting can be observed in their axes. These areas are nevertheless little flown over at the moment. Furthermore, when they are, planes are still (or already) at a high altitude.

Therefore noise emissions can not be considered as responsible for the majority of the complaints from the inhabitants of these areas. One can then think that the reason for which these people complain is that they see in it a way of expressing their refusal of the project of development of the airport, even to postpone the term in which they will be subjected to real noise pollution.

The influence of the localisation of the bastions of local residents associations can be seen. There where these militate most there is a stronger concentration of plaintiffs.

Several times the concordance between certain events and periods of rapid increase in the number of complaints was noticed. For example, on the occasion of the presentation in 1996 of the future master plan of the airport to the public, the number of local residents complaining about pollution from the airport increased in an exponential way. It had also come along with the creation of the association which today is the most active: the ACENAS.

With a more reduced amplitude, the public inquiry on the project of revision of the noise exposure contours at the beginning of 2002, which define the applicable servitudes around the airport in terms of land use planning, was an opportunity for many local residents, biased by local residents' associations, to complain about the disturbance caused by the airport.

It is the same when a crash happens, as it was the case in 2000 at Lyon - Saint Exupéry or in Gonesse with the Concorde, or more recently on September 11, 2001 in New York. These events, generally highly mediatised, arouse a fear among the local residents, which brings them to complain about planes for a reason other than a noise pollution.

A high number of complaints plays in the favour of associations, because this number is generally communicated by the airport authority, what avoids that it is perceived as overestimated. It also dissuades the airport authority to value the fact that the number of complaints lowers, because it could turn around against them.

Another factor that makes local residents complain is the impression of impunity of airlines, non-consideration, even manipulation of the neighbouring communities. One can without big risk assert that one of the main causes for the continuous decrease in the number of complaints since 1999 is the improvement of the dialogue between the airport and its neighbours. The meetings of the Environment Advisory Committee, the commitments taken by the airport for the environmental protection, the State and the airline companies, the recruitment of an mediator for the local residents, the implementation of a noise monitoring system, the opening of an information office for the local residents, are measures which enabled to objectivise the dialogue and to improve the transparency towards the local residents.

Evolution Of The Number Of Complaints At Lyon - Saint Exupéry Airport

Statistics on the complaints from the local residents of Lyon - Saint Exupéry airport have been made since 1992. These show that Lyon - Saint Exupéry, in spite of its rural character, is one of the European airports the traffic of which arouses most complaints when also comparing the number of movements (figure 2).

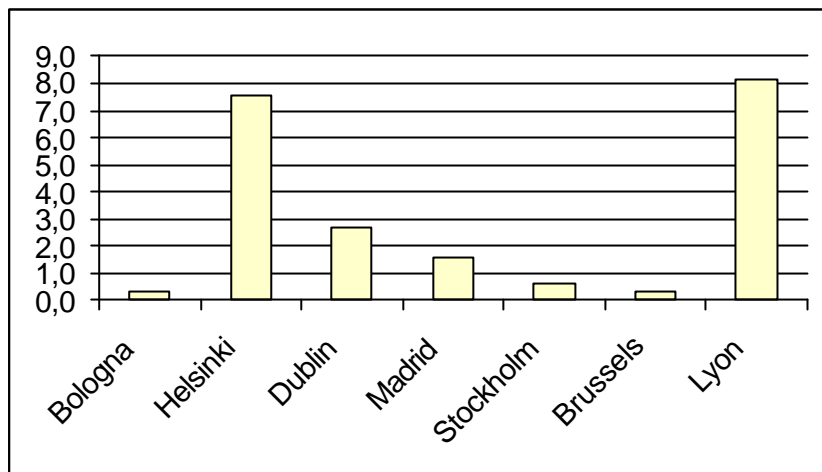


Figure 2. Number of complaints per 1000 passengers at European airports in 2001. Source: ACI Europe, 2002

The differences between the environments of the European airports, the cultures, the activity of the associative lobbying or other numerous factors do not enable to explain with reliability what this tendency results from.

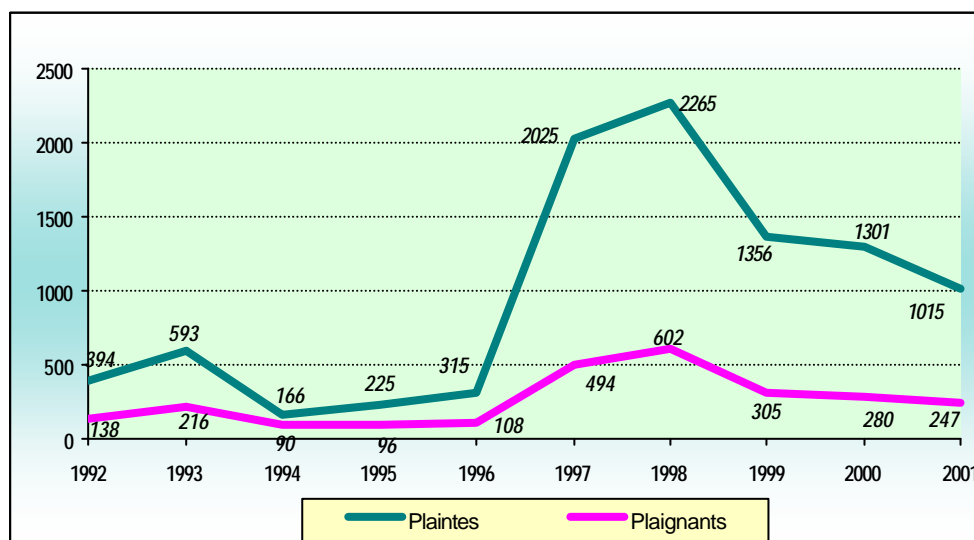


Figure 3. Evolution of the number of complaints and plaintiffs from year 1992

It can be observed on figure 3 that until 1996, the number of complaints and plaintiffs remained relatively stable. From 1996, there was a sharp increase in the number of complaints and plaintiffs until 1998, before a decrease until 2001. Several facts can explain this evolution. Firstly, in 1996, the airport communicated on its project of development. There was a public inquiry on the future Master Plan within 42 surrounding municipalities. It was the occasion for numerous local residents to realise that 2 additional runways were planned to develop the airport,

within an indetermined period. Many people believed that the airport was going to continue to be run only with the existing runways, while the current noise exposure contours, dating 1977, already took into account a third runway. There was a sharp increase in the number of complaints, associated to the creation of the ACENAS, whose action was strong and very mediatized. When Minister of Transport had not yet validated the APPM, the protest appeared to the local residents as a means to make the project of development of the airport fail.

The decrease in the number of complaints from 1999 can be explained in various ways. First, the night-flights restriction of so-called chapter 2 aircraft, implemented in July, 1999, was a significant step towards the reduction of the noise pollution. At the same time, the APPM was approved by Minister of Transport on June 30, 1999, what gave to the local residents the impression that it was too late. One can here establish a parallel with the situation of Manchester airport at the time when its second runway was built. From the moment it was built, the number of complaints decreased again, because anyway, "the damage was done". Besides, the recruitment by the airport Lyon - Saint Exupéry of an mediator for the local residents at the end of 1998, a former air-traffic controller having a robust experience of the aviation, enabled the local residents to have an unique and reliable interlocutor to answer the questions related to noise pollution from the airport. The airport was no longer considered as a hermetic and demagogic institution; it had a human face. This enhanced the reconquest of the confidence of the local residents, seriously damaged in 1996. Finally, a comparison between a study made by the INRETS (Vallet & Bruyère, 1999) and the results from the noise monitoring system CONSTAS at Lyon-Saint Exupéry Airport in 2001 showed that noise levels at night had decreased between 1998 and 2001, due to the decreased night traffic and night flight restriction for chapter 2 aircraft. Since it is a key issue for the quality of life in local residents' point of view, this may have contributed to lower the number of complaints.

The recent implementation in 2001 of an information office for the local residents stressed this tendency. Besides an interlocutor, local residents have now a tool today which provides objective data on the trajectories of planes and the noise perceived on the ground.

Conclusion

The importance of the non acoustic factors in the disturbance felt by the local residents of the Lyon - Saint Exupéry airport brought the airport authority to look for other solutions than the reduction of the noise pollution to solve this problem.

The first working axis is the pedagogy which is indispensable in order to make local residents understand the technical constraints to which the pilots are subjected, as well as the regulatory rules which apply to aviation.

Besides, the development of a certain number of compensatory measures, like the access to the employment on the airport, the support for the local initiatives, also enables to lower the influence of these non acoustic factors.

Most progress can be achieved in this field that, in order to counterbalance the detrimental effect of the constant increase of the air traffic on the noise climate in the surrounding communities.

References

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