

Are we losing the art of listening? (And how journalism can help get it back)

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In a world where everyone has a voice what happens to the art of listening?

We now 'hear' more than ever before. But how does the advent of ubiquitous, contiguous, continuous media effect our capacity to listen and understand? What happens to the quality of our engagement?

Media producers—and that is just about all of us now—think a lot about getting attention. We now have the data to understand that as a process. We can see where people click and how long they read. But shouldn't we all—as 'consumers' as well as producers—be thinking more about *why* we listen?

This is about *paying* attention but also about an exchange. That word 'paying' takes on much more meaning in a world where attention is the currency of the digital economy. But giving your time and your interest to someone in mediation is an action with all sorts of associated significances, not simply a statistic.

It is also a feeling, so emotion is critical [see [this article I wrote about the role of emotion in journalism](#)]. From the producer or speaker's point of view it is also about design, about creating messages that attract a listener and, ideally, keeps them listening. That design can be functional, for example based on audience data management systems. Or it can be more imaginative, even ludic. [[ludic' networks](#)]



(Leon Kroll, 1940)

But what about the listener themselves? How should we think as listeners?

This is partly about literacy. We are not just traffic, we are digital citizens. Yes, there are people who grew up with the Internet, but there is no such thing as natives 'wired' for the digital. We all respond to the online world in ways that are related to our offline, material, social selves. How we listen is about who we are and our personal resources.

So in the face of the practical limits on our powers of listening what do we do?

There is a danger that we do forget how to concentrate, how to empathise, how to be still. Every media innovation since printing poses the same challenge.

Listening As Pleasure

One key to unlocking literacy may be to think about it like literature. Think about a literacy that is about the pleasure as well as the utility of listening.

I say all this as someone who loves the sound of his own voice (or his own silence). But also as someone who has learnt, partly through journalism, to listen well, in a technical sense. More important is when I have discovered through various passages of life how I had to listen in a *different* way to understand what goes wrong and what might be right.

Our culture tells us to pay attention to who is speaking. Remember school? Or your last team meeting? Even when physically close or brought near by media, there is a gulf between us: in a sitting room or a chat room.



In the first act of Caryl Churchill's challenging new play, [Here We Go](#), guests at a wake attempt to join up each other's half-sentences, responding automatically to the other archetypal characters' remarks. They aren't listening despite the ritual momentousness of the occasion. That sounds digitally familiar.

Humans have always had this existential conflict between our social lives and our individual existences. Always trying to connect, always separated—ultimately, as Churchill's play shows, by our mortality. Meanwhile, social media exemplifies and amplifies this condition. Giving ever greater opportunities to connect, and yet emphasising

our personal, selfied lives.

Listening Must Adapt

So listening is intuitive but also learnt. When the voices change, the mediation changes, so the listening must adapt. We are all having to cope with this as real people, not solely as part of Facebook's algorithm or *The Guardian's* metrics.

Listening is consumption but it's also about meditation as well as mediation. It's about agency. How might you respond to what you listen to? Again, new media technologies allow us power to act, but is a click or a retweet evidence of listening or simply reaction?

This is a practical, political, cognitive challenge. But let's dream a little first:

Think of yourself as a child listening to bedtime stories.

Think of yourself as a lover listening to someone explain their joy.

Think of yourself as.....

Listening will almost always be practical, routine and regular: a request for payment in a shop, a chance remark about the weather. Yet it always has that possibility of something more. Are we losing that sense of listening as beyond the usual?

Reaching Out?

We know that listening at its best is a profound state where your self is suspended, open, reaching out to someone else's voice and another human being.

Are we losing the ability to focus, to care, to reflect? Is the blizzard of digital distraction, the blooming of a million networked blossoms, stopping us from listening in a way that empowers, ennobles and excites us?

It could be the task of journalism to create not just the content and the voice but also the relationship, the space, that allows us to listen better. Not just so we pay attention but to listen with all the wonderful creativity, vulnerability and perplexity that our digital human condition allows.

[This article is based on an idea from @MatildeGiglio]

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