



Season 1 Episode 5: The Voice

In a world gone mad, Trevor Banks just wants everyone to act normal again. As head of the mixed-reality regulation bureau, he tends to be conservative. So, when a new tech patent makes people understand their plants, he knows he can't let this go public. Part 1 of the Plantalk trilogy

Link to the episode: <https://lab.sapienship.co/the-voice/>

Transcript

Trevor could not believe what he was reading.

It was the morning after a long meeting that had run on until midnight. General elections were coming up, and Trevor - or Dr. Banks as he was referred to in these meetings - had had some key policy issues to address. His superiors were skeptical about his handling of things, especially when he went against the former head of regulation's ideology. He wasn't sure he'd done that great last night. And now this.

His eyes were still stinging from lack of sleep, but he gestured at the headlines projected in front of him by his smart glasses and enlarged the news section, ignoring the missed calls and messages. Beneath the headline about the ongoing war in Europe, a smaller headline had caught his eye: "Missing CEO found dead. Cause of death uncertain, say police". This was too weird, and would undoubtedly draw unwanted attention. But he could figure it out later. First - coffee.

As he went to the kitchen and flicked the switch on the espresso machine, a call from an unknown number flashed in the top left-hand corner of his field of vision. It was a busy time and plenty of people wanted something from him, but this particular number kept coming up. Not that he ever answered unknown numbers - there was enough mess with the ones he knew.

From the kitchen table he looked approvingly at his apartment: it was very slick and lean, almost bare. And so clean. Just the way he liked it. Silvery and shiny. He was lucky to have Mia, his housekeeper who came in twice a week, and did all the cleaning, shopping and cooking. He would have been lost without her. At 42, he had no wife, no kids, no social life worth mentioning - he worked 24/7. Jamal, his assistant for the past 10 years who had been with him through everything, said he shouldn't trust anyone, especially these days, but he knew he could trust Mia.

He took milk from the fridge. Real milk. Cow's milk. The carton looked exactly like the non-dairy ones. No one could possibly know. He wasn't alone in doing this, even among people of his standing. But he still kept quiet about it. It was taboo, and was considered highly unethical. He didn't even let Mia buy his milk for him. He bought it himself, had a guy at the grocery store who traded in the stuff. The carton was full. "Odd," he thought. "I clearly remember it being almost empty. I was planning to buy more today". But he didn't make too much of it.

He settled himself on the couch, took a sip of coffee, and started reading the news. It turned out the CEO of Plantalk had been found dead in a hotel room in some godforsaken town in Malaysia. The room had been filled from floor to ceiling with strange plants in all shapes and sizes.

So it's come to this, he thought. First there were the animal chat toys, which people took way too seriously - they even caused protests and riots. And then there was the breakthrough in plant translation technology, with endless rumors about beta testers going nuts after talking to the trees in their gardens. Last week the international media had been full of paparazzi shots of Plantalk's employees running around naked in the Amazon rainforest. And now this.

He knew the Bureau should never have given the green light to plant translation tests. But that had happened before his time. If it had been up to him, he would never have allowed even the animal translation apps to go public. People are mad, he thought, talking to their dogs, setting farm animals free, gluing themselves to roads and food production factories. It's not like those poor animals stood a chance of surviving in the wild anyway, but people didn't care. They never do. Once they'd listened to what the animals supposedly had to say, nothing went back to normal. And he didn't want to hear any of it. He even had to get his cow's milk on the sly now, and there were fewer and fewer people offering that service. No way he would let it happen again, and with plants! Nope, not on his watch.

After all, there was a good reason for having a single regulator for all the mixed reality apps on the market. And he'd worked hard to get this job, had to suck up to some people he really didn't like. He was not about to let everyone go crazy again. With elections coming up, he would be fired without a second thought if things went down.

But it wasn't that simple. There was a lot of lobbying in favor of plant translation technologies, particularly from farmers claiming they could use it to know exactly what their crops needed at any given moment. On the other hand, some people thought everyone would stop eating plants if they could hear what they had to say, and that could cause a global food crisis. Another faction was concerned about over-regulating people's cognitive liberty. He was walking on a tightrope here. But his mind was set.

Just as he was getting up from the couch a call from Jamal came through his earbuds: "Hi, are you coming in soon?"

"I have some arrangements to make first, why?", Trevor asked.

"There's a guy from Plantalk here to meet you."

"That's definitely not on my schedule," he said, trying to stay calm, even though this made him feel uneasy.

"Exactly," was Jamal's reply.

The reception area at the Regulation Bureau was like a scene from a B-rated comedy show. Jamal was cowering at his desk, trying to avoid catching the eye of the man walking in frantic circles around the room, whispering to himself and occasionally staring out the long window that overlooked a small garden where the Bureau's employees used to spend their cigarette breaks. The visitor was wearing a half-open button-down shirt, huge over-ear headphones and state-of-the-art smart glasses. And he smelled. Boy did he smell.

Trevor recognized him immediately. He was the co-founder of Plantalk, the dead CEO's partner.

"This is Mr. Lee," Jamal said.

"Yes, Mr. Lee, how can I help you?" Trevor asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

Lee looked at Trevor as if only just noticing that he was there, and said in an eerily calm voice, "Oh, Dr. Banks, I have

something you'll want to see." He pointed toward Trevor's office.

Trevor put on his smoothest smile and said politely, "Jamal here would be very happy to schedule a meeting for you, perhaps next month, when we..."

Lee wasn't listening. He walked straight into Trevor's office, his expression a combination of wonder and dread.

Trevor followed him, and gesticulated to Jamal to keep one ear on their conversation.

The office was minimalist with very little furniture: a narrow desk with a couple of drawers, an executive chair, two sleek lounge chairs and a glass topped coffee table. The only window looked out at the neighboring building, and on the windowsill there was a small pot with a plant in it. Some kind of Begonia. Trevor didn't really like it, but it had been a present from his mother so he couldn't throw it away. Lee was mesmerized by it.

"I see you like my Begonia," Trevor said.

"She doesn't like you," Lee retorted with a strange smile.

"Oh, I'm sure it likes me just fine," said Trevor.

Lee started giggling as if he was being told salacious secrets or dirty jokes. "Don't you want to know what she's saying?" he asked. "She has the most amazing things to say".

Trevor was starting to lose his cool. "Look, I don't have time for you people, I'm gonna have to ask you to leave".

Lee turned his gaze toward Trevor.

"Oh, I'm afraid that's not possible," he said. "What you're 'gonna' do is listen to her. And then you're 'gonna' approve Plantalk."

"Now you listen to me", Trevor fumed, striding toward Lee who said coolly, "I know about the milk".

"What... milk...?" Trevor tried to keep a grip on himself. He was bewildered.

"The milk that's in your fridge at home right now. Don't worry, no one has to know. All you have to do is listen. Just listen."

Lee removed his headphones and put them over Trevor's ears. Trevor took a step back, stumbled into one of the chairs and slumped down into it. The sound from the headphones made the whole office shimmer. Trevor's jaw gaped open as the air seemed to thicken and he felt he was swimming in a sound as old as the earth itself. He felt paralyzed, pinned to his seat. When he turned to look at the Begonia on the windowsill, something spiraled inside him. And that was when he heard it. The Voice.

Questions for reflection and discussion

The following questions can be used for a group activity (in a classroom or otherwise) or for personal reflection after listening to the episode.

1. Trevor is the head of the Mixed Reality regulation bureau, meaning he is in charge of deciding which VR and AR technologies can go public. Do you think such a body should exist?
2. Augmented Reality glasses project layers of digital information onto the real world, which we can't necessarily distinguish from actual physical objects. What could be the implications of having unregulated AR apps being available in the future?
3. Why do you think Trevor is so opposed to plant translation technology being on the market?
4. With which character do you sympathize more - Trevor or Lee? Why?
5. Have you ever wondered what it would be like to communicate with plants? If you had the ability to talk to plants, what would you tell them? What do you think they would tell you?
6. Plants are known to communicate with each other by various methods such as chemical and electrical signals. They can also sense their environment and they have a form of memory. Do you think they should have rights? Should we treat them as people?
7. If there was an app like Plantalk in the real world, in your opinion, how would people react? Would you use it?
8. If people could communicate with animals, do you think something would change in the relationship between humans and animals? If so, what?
9. Do you have a pet? If so, what do you think they would tell you if they had the chance?