



Season 1 Episode 6: The Listeners

They're everywhere. Sitting in their gardens, on the street, in forests. Listening to the plants and weeping. Or sabotaging felling equipment and terrorizing farmers. Since The Listening began, the world has started to collapse. An emergency government meeting is summoned. Part 2 of the Plantalk trilogy

Content warning: Mental health

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

Transcript

They called themselves the listeners. And many of them did just that. They listened. They listened without interruption, sat as if in a trance, perhaps on the pavement outside a garden, or on a concrete path through a park, or on the beach by the ocean. They listened in bedrooms, in the street, in forests and by rivers. They listened on their own mostly, but sometimes in large groups. They listened day and night. They listened and listened, cocking their heads occasionally this way or that, but mostly immobile, as if frozen in place.

They would sit down almost anywhere to listen. Roads would have to be closed after a flashmob of listeners suddenly descended on a location, only to sit gently in the middle of the tarmac, cross-legged and eyes shut, some nodding intently, others weeping silently. Many would forget to eat or sleep. In fact, both sleeping and eating became problematic for listeners, due in no small part to what they listened to.

Not all listeners were passive though. Mass protests had broken out in many major cities, with protestors gluing themselves to roads, releasing farm animals, attacking laboratories, and even burning shops. Hearing what animals were thinking seemed to provoke a wide range of reactions. But almost everyone was at least partly sympathetic. After all, most people had pets. So governments worldwide moved to address the concerns of the first wave of Listeners. But then came a second wave.

It had begun in tech circles and quickly reached campuses. At first, it spread primarily among students, so the authorities had misunderstood the phenomenon as some kind of youth protest. Parents would find their teenage children sitting on the floor crying, cradling a pot plant in a tight embrace, deep in another world and almost unreachable. For many, this was highly disturbing. They barely slept, wouldn't speak and refused to eat anything except water, maybe with added vitamins or sugar. There were reports that some people had already starved themselves to death.

It was beginning to look like an existential crisis. There appeared to be no cure for the condition. Once someone started listening, they rarely stopped, even for a moment. And it was so easy to start – just put the little pod in your ear. Only for a second. Where's the harm in that? Listen to this. Just listen...

There were some who managed to tear their attention away from listening long enough to explain what they were doing, but these explanations scarcely seemed credible. So tests were quickly designed to see whether what the

listeners were hearing was genuine. And every test proved incontrovertibly that it was, which made the other things that they said all the more disturbing, of course.

And then the demands began. Meat, dairy and eggs had been taboo since the first wave of listening, but this was a whole new scenario. Even while farmers protested and authorities scrambled to enforce immediate veganism globally, new demands kept coming. The insistence that humans eat only from plants that were already dead was the hardest to implement. It simply wasn't possible to feed even a small fraction of the planet on windfall fruit alone. But the listeners didn't care, and soon groups labeled as eco-terrorist began to spring up like mushrooms.

The prime minister convened the cabinet meeting as soon as this latest 'order' had been received from the listeners. She was three ministers down and was struggling to replace them. Her back benches had been decimated by listening. Almost a third of parliament were now permanently absent, off in the countryside or in their own gardens, or sitting by the river somewhere, just listening.

"What about algae?" asked the Minister for Transport, "Do they object to us eating algae? And when are they going to give us our people back?"

"They say that no one's attention is being held against their will," the prime minister said slowly. "They say that they listen voluntarily. To the point of starvation and complete self-neglect. But voluntarily. It's like that old movie, Invasion of the Body Snatchers. They're taking over people's minds and there's nothing we can do about it!"

"Has anyone recovered from listening yet?" asked the Minister for Education, concerned for her two teenage children who had recently begun listening. "Do any of them come back?"

"Only those designated to speak to us or protest against us, it seems," sighed the prime minister. "I don't think we can fight this. We're in a war and they're winning. They're claiming our children. They're driving us to the brink of extinction."

"Nothing we haven't done to them, of course," argued the Minister for Defense, a gruff older man who had once served as a soldier. "I agree, we can't fight this. The battlefield is our own heads. It certainly is like an alien invasion. We spent so many years sending messages to the stars, hoping we weren't alone in the universe. Then it turned out that there were actually alien species all around us all along."

"But surely there must be something we can do?" the Education Minister pleaded.

"Well, we've tried deprogramming techniques, aversion therapies and so on," said the Defense Minister. "We've tried threats and even some enhanced interrogation techniques. Nothing's been remotely effective so far."

The Education Minister gasped. "Torture? Torturing our own people?"

"They're already starving themselves to death," the Prime Minister said firmly. "They're destroying society. They're already being tortured, and they're torturing us." She had signed the authorization document herself.

"It's not a Pavlovian response," explained the Minister for Housing, who took an interest in the research. "They're not being brainwashed. They're being persuaded."

"Persuaded of what, though?" the Prime Minister asked. "The only way to be sure would be to listen ourselves, and I don't think that's a wise course of action, given the likely consequences."

"We'll have to take them at their word," said the Defense Minister.

“But their terms! It's intolerable! Millions of us are going to die if we agree. Billions!” The Minister for the Environment had a public reputation for being melodramatic.

“It may be that billions are going to die anyway,” the Prime Minister reasoned quietly. “It's five weeks since the first listeners emerged. Five weeks. And what's the death toll to date? Over eight million deaths due to starvation, neglect or accidents directly linked to listening. And we don't even have figures for those who've died as an indirect result, the farmers, the food factory workers, and so on. That's more than Covid-19 managed in its first three years. And we're only five weeks in. All these people refusing food, sipping water. How much longer do you think they'll last? A lot of them will be dead today, tomorrow, next week.”

“And why should they care?” asked the Housing Minister. “From their point of view, it's nothing compared to the endless genocide inflicted on their friends. It's a drop in the ocean.”

“Can we at least hold someone to account for this?” demanded the Environment Minister. “That company, Plantalk? The university that imported the technology here, who was it?”

“What exactly do you propose?” asked the Prime Minister, “that we prosecute some academics for peer-reviewing research? For wanting to secure a patent that broke no law?”

“You understand that whatever we decide here, they'll already know?” The Defense Minister nodded in the direction of two pot plants standing forlornly by a window. “We've established that they primarily communicate via electrical signals, usually transmitted through their root systems. They have other means of communication too, pollen and so forth, but this is the only one we've managed to access so far. We don't know, for example, if these plants here can communicate with others outside, the ones that listeners are listening to. But we have to assume they can.”

“Great,” said the Prime Minister sarcastically. “Well then. What shall we do?”

“Umm, let's ask them if algae are okay?” the Transport Minister suggested again.

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. In this story, Plantalk's app spread rapidly, and quickly became a global phenomenon. Have you ever been a part of a viral trend? What makes some things successful trends and others not?
2. If you had found out your friends were using Plantalk, would you try it as well?
3. Many of the "listeners" became politically active, trying to protect and save animals and plants. Have you ever been politically active for a certain cause?
4. Some of the "listeners" turned to violent protests. What is your opinion on such matters? Can violence be justified in some cases?
5. The cabinet members in this story seem powerless and ineffective. Do you trust your political representatives to know how to deal with difficult situations?
6. Was there ever a time when you felt you could do better than politicians?
7. One option to stop people from listening that the cabinet members suggest, is torture. Do you think torture should be allowed in certain scenarios? If so, when?