

Headline	In a world of sound bites, listening is still crucial		
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# In a world of sound bites, listening is still crucial

**ADVICE:** Teach the young words, numbers but, above all, teach them to listen



ONE day, while out on the footpaths leading to the hilltop in the FRIM nature reserve in Kepong, I met a man coming down. He loved nature by the way he looked, but nature with a soundtrack.

Out there in the wild with insects chirping and birds flying between the tree tops, he was carrying a lightweight radio that was blaring out loud music.

Down below was what looked like an office weekend outing. A lot of fun and games and good-natured banter and food and drinks waiting to be served.

In the middle of it all was a man with a megaphone. He made a nature reserve sound like a market day in Jalan Chow Kit.

A friend once invited me — by email — to listen to his family being interviewed by a radio chat show host. He had two children who were unusually bright — the boy with his own blog at a one figure age, a daughter who was a bit older and also a bright spark. They were both home educated.

Came the day I tuned in to the station on the web, but I could not help it, I kept hearing something else. Annoyingly, distractingly, continuously there as they spoke was this I-will-keep-you-company-in-case-you're-bored soundtrack. I wanted to hear what they were talking about but I was kept away from it by distracting noises. So I switched off.

Malaysian documentaries do not go by the sounds that are simultaneously recorded as the visual images, but the images ride on a track of dubbed instrumental work.

Even news footage are sometimes presented with this palliative, perhaps, to keep the viewers awake in a rhythmic thumping of their arms on their cosy chairs at home.

Outside it is, of course, de rigeur that public space must have its accompanying music. Waiting rooms

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must have a television on a prop, playing music or showing pictures of people talking to the accompaniment of music. Which do we listen to: words or the soundtrack?

What does that say about the way we receive signals beamed at us? What does it say about the chat show host if they feel it necessary to play background music as he interviews his guests?

Is this why one of the criticisms levelled at us by people who come from abroad is that we are a nation of poor listeners?

If interviews on radio have to be set to music to pull the listening crowd, then what are they listening

to when they arrive at the gate. Are people in factories and in offices listening enough to what their colleagues are trying to put across?

That, perhaps, is the forgotten piece in our repertoire of works. Teach them numbers, teach them words. Teach them to read and speak out loud. But have we taught them to listen when other people speak? One day, give them just one day in the week, to just listen and not talk.

The world has become so cluttered with things and words with wings that politicians now seek to speak mostly in soundbites, information has to be accompanied with the palliative of music, entertainment has become so overarching that we have reversed the old adage about information as entertainment. The greatest triumph for manipulators of our age is that we are all so distracted.

The world is now placid, featureless and culturally dead, wrote Arthur C. Clarke in *Childhood's End*, a sci-fi novel that is now largely forgotten.

The circumstances that led to that are allegorical but “the reason's obvious”, one of his characters said. “There's nothing left to struggle for, and there are too many distractions and entertainments.”

And then he goes on to observe that everyday there was something like five hundred hours of radio and TV pour out over the various chan-

nels that soon people won't be living their own lives any more. It will be a full-time job keeping up with the various family serials on TV!” It was 1954 when he wrote that.

So we become conditioned to things that have no depth. Everyday conversations become just jumbles of words, the television is switched on as soon as guests enter our house, and, of course, radio chat show listeners have to be soothed by some balm underneath the surface.

But there's some signal still coming out from the noise. There are workplaces now that teach their negotiating, teaching, communicating staff to just listen and not talk.

To make yourselves heard it is sometimes better to keep quiet. Peo-

ple who are so keen to own the conversation think only of themselves and what is their best retort as others are talking.

You see what the outcome is when people merely link up the conversation by ignoring what the other person has just said. Or continue to interrupt as others talk.

Why is that? Because we have lost our childhood and are now so into ourselves and yet we have lost our gravitas.

The world has become a vast place of entertainment where celebrities get lost in jungles of their own making just to entertain us.

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***The splendour of the forest, from the chirping of birds to the flow of rivers and cascading waterfalls, can be heard if we just listen.***