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# Will you please pay attention?

Kate Murphy shines a light on a culture that places too much value on talking and oratory, and not enough on listening and comprehending

**Tanya Sweeney**

**You're Not Listening: What You're Missing and Why It Matters**  
By **Kate Murphy**

Harvil Secker, 288pp, £16.99

**O**n the face of it you might think that listening is so natural and commonplace a part of the human experience that we need barely acknowledge it. And yet it transpires that in this particular arena most of us are very much found lacking.

Whether we are inured from narratives and experiences outside our own on social media's echo chamber, or we've perfected the art of dinner party banter, journalist **Kate Murphy** reveals an uncomfortable truism. We are constantly in contact with each other; often to the point of excess. And yet the art of listening – not just hearing, but truly, authentically listening – is a lost one. We're too busy thinking of what we will say next rather than listening with true intent.

Murphy, a New York Times contributor, pinpoints the "dialogue of the deaf" where we talk over or at each other in a ceaseless exercise of self-curation. Or worse, as appeared to be the case on Mark Zuckerberg's much-derided "listening tour" of 2017, we listen in a contrived, possibly self-serving way.

Much of what Murphy discusses is

not new. Anyone with even a passing engagement with modern culture will be aware of the myriad distractions that interfere with meaningful social interactions. Most people will uncomfortably relate to the idea of directing attention towards ourselves in a conversation. We know full well that in a divided world we are getting worse at listening to opposing viewpoints. And yet Murphy delivers all of these observations in a clear-eyed and readable way.

The journalist spent two years investigating the biomechanical and neurobiological processes of listening, as well as talking to the world's "professional" listeners: priests, barmen, hairdressers, air traffic controllers, hostage negotiators.

As a journalist Murphy has been privileged enough to talk with some of the greatest minds, entertainers and personalities in the world.

The first chapter of *You're Not Listening* opens with a fateful interview with the late neurologist/author Oliver Sacks. Both

parties were busy and preoccupied on the afternoon of that particular phone conversation, but their interview was memorable, with flashes of "insight, recognition, creativity, humour and empathy".

Profoundly personal disclosures are nothing uncommon in her line of work, and Murphy asserts that many of her interview subjects are "unaccustomed to having someone listen to them". As such a 278-page book on this very subject is more



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fascinating than it has any right to be. Part pop psychology tome, part practical manual, Murphy shines a light on a culture that places a premium on performance, talking and oration: "Giving a TED Talk or commencement speech is living the dream," she observes.

There is certainly no shortage of investigative muscle in *You're Not Listening*, and it's clear that Murphy has done her homework, drip-feeding her myriad findings so as not to clout the reader over the head with reams of scientific jargon.

Yet while Murphy's glut of scientific reporting certainly lends weight and credence to her thesis, this deep dive into the science behind listening tends to hold up the pace of the book's delivery. Likewise, a meandering chapter on "the voluble inner voice" cuts through the cleanness of Murphy's otherwise succinct writing.

Rather it's when Murphy is revealing her own personal interactions with others, or recounting the experiences of people like Gary Noesner, who spent 30 years as the FBI's lead hostage negotiator, that gives the book its true heft.

Noesner, for instance, offers a scenario of a man holding his ex-girlfriend at gunpoint. "I say, 'tell me what happened'. And I listen, and then I respond to what he's telling me like, 'sounds to me like what she said really hurt you'. I'm taking time to listen to what he has to say, which he probably wasn't getting from his friends and family."

Effective and authentic listening, Noesner asserts, really is as simple as that.

The book's jacket makes a lofty and bold claim: "This book will transform your conversations, your relationships and your life." It's perhaps more accurate to say that Murphy offers plenty for her readers to think about.

Ultimately, *You're Not Listening* ends up in a curious spot on the publishing terrain: somewhere between a very extended (albeit engaging), newspaper article and an enlightening snapshot on the human condition. Wouldn't you know it: we're missing more than you might think.

