Episode Book

EPISODE #6117

Earmuffs, Earplugs, and the Café Speech Problem

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SYNOPSIS

A busy café sits around 70–80 decibels, but volume isn't what wrecks your focus — intelligible speech is. This episode digs into the irrelevant speech effect, why active noise cancelling only handles the low rumble below 1 kHz, and what actually works when you want the room to turn to mush. Then it gets into the social side: headphones read as "working," ear defenders read as medical, and invisible earplugs read as approachable — which is exactly the problem if you don't want to be approached. Plus a look at Loop Switch's dial, filtered custom plugs, and why Sony's Speak to Chat and Apple's Conversation Awareness all wait for *you* to talk first.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

The grinder at least stops. Twelve seconds of violence and then it's over.



Herman

The grinder is louder, I'll give you that. It's still not the problem. The couple at the next table planning a wedding is the problem, because you can follow every word of it.



Corn

I know the colour scheme of a wedding I was never invited to.



Herman

Sage and gold, I'd bet.



Corn

Sage and gold. And that is more or less where Daniel is this week, minus the wedding. He was setting up a new repository for a work project, drilling started somewhere in the building, and he gave up and went and fetched his shooting range earmuffs. The serious ones, rated thirty four, about as far as passive earmuffs go. His first reaction when they went on was, whoa, that's too much, it went eerily quiet. But the part he really wants to get to is life outside the flat. He likes working in coffee shops and coworking spaces, he doesn't want to be at home all the time, and he does not want to be the man at the corner table in range gear. In his words, he doesn't want to be a laughing stock or make this a big deal. He wants something that suits each situation, and some way of handling a person walking over without the whole ceremony of taking everything off.



Herman

The shooting muffs make a good starting point, because in a café they're solving the wrong problem. A busy café sits somewhere around seventy to eighty decibels. A rating of thirty four is built for gunfire.



Corn

Ballistic protection for a flat white.



Herman

Pretty much. And the volume in a café isn't really what wrecks your concentration anyway. Speech is. There's a long line of work on what psychologists call the irrelevant speech effect. Background talk you can understand drags down reading, memory, mental arithmetic, even when you are actively trying to ignore it. One of the classic office studies played office noise with and without speech in it. Without speech, only the arithmetic suffered. With speech, prose memory went too.



Corn

I assume it doesn't matter whether the wedding is interesting.



Herman

Doesn't matter at all. Meaning isn't what does the damage. Intelligibility is. If your brain can parse the words, it parses them, whether you asked it to or not. The Finnish acoustics people have spent years on this, and the pattern is that performance climbs as nearby speech gets less intelligible. So the goal in a café is not silence. It's mush.



Corn

I don't need the room to vanish. I need the wedding to become mumbling.



Herman

Mumbling, ideally in a language you don't speak. So, Corn, guess. How much quieter do you think Daniel actually needs to get there?



Corn

Half? I'd have said cut it in half and call it a day.



Herman

Not bad, actually, if you mean half as loud to the ear. Every ten decibels is roughly a halving of how loud something sounds. Somewhere around fifteen to twenty five decibels of real reduction takes a seventy five decibel café down into the fifties, which is about a quiet office. That's the target. Not thirty four on a label.



Corn

Then the obvious answer is the one half the café is already wearing. Noise cancelling headphones.



Herman

Here's the catch nobody puts on the box. Active noise cancelling is brilliant at low frequencies. Below about a thousand hertz, so the fridge compressor, the air conditioning, traffic, the hum of the place. Speech mostly lives higher, roughly half a kilohertz up to four. Up there the electronics aren't doing much. What's doing the work is the seal of the cushion or the ear tip, plain passive blocking.



Corn

So the expensive headphones delete the coffee machine and keep the wedding.



Herman

That's my suspicion of how it feels, yes. I'm guessing a bit here, but when you strip the rumble out, the voices are left standing on their own with nothing underneath them. People buy premium noise cancelling, sit down in a café, and are baffled that they can still hear the table next to them.



Corn

Four hundred dollars to hear the seating plan in higher fidelity.



Herman

The fix is cheap, though. Add a masking layer. Play something steady and dull underneath, brown noise, rain, running water, at a low level. You're not trying to drown the room, you're blurring the edges of the consonants so the words stop resolving. The Finnish group found a plain water sound improved people's performance in an office full of speech. And there's a recent adult study that's relevant to Daniel specifically. People with ADHD traits were thrown more by brief gaps of silence in continuous noise than by the noise itself. Steady sound beat patchy quiet.



Corn

Strange thing to learn. The silence was the interruption.



Herman

For that group, yes. Steady is the word that matters.

L

Larry

Hi, Larry here, with a true story from a real customer. Brenda had a problem. Every morning at her local café, the irrelevant speech effect was happening right at her table. So Brenda tried Mumble Mist, the luxury aerosol you spray directly at the next table. One gentle cloud and their intelligibility drops by up to ninety percent, guaranteed, or your intelligibility back. Within a week, Brenda, or Doug as he prefers, was masking whole weddings from across the room. Doug says, and I'm quoting Doug, or Brenda, Mumble Mist turned my café into a library, and then into a field. Mumble Mist. Not for use on baristas.



Corn

Their... intelligibility... drops... by up to... ninety percent.



Herman

Please never do that again. Anyway, steady masking under the headphones. That's the café answer for heads down work.



Corn

Fine. Now the bit Daniel actually worries about, which is how he looks. Herman, what do you think people see when a man walks into a café and puts on shooting muffs?



Herman

You tell me. You've watched people more than I have.



Corn

They see a man expecting an explosion. And they quietly start working out where the exits are.



Herman

Sadly fair. Headphones and earmuffs do completely different social jobs, even when they block the same amount. Headphones read as working. They're the most normal object in any café or office. Ear defenders read as medical, or industrial, or as something a child wears at a fireworks display. The kid styled ones especially. Alpine's Muffy line, the bright soft looking earmuffs, is a children's product, and it looks like care equipment because it is.



Corn

Which is a shame, because Daniel liked the Alpine stuff. He said it felt made for him rather than borrowed from someone else's job.



Herman

That matters. It's a good feeling to buy something that was designed with you in mind. It's just that the design language for neurodivergent kit has mostly been borrowed from childhood, and in a coworking space that reads differently than at home.



Corn

The headphone also comes pre loaded with a message, though. Everyone knows what it means.



Herman

It does, and that's half the point. Surveys keep finding it. In one, about four in ten workers said they wear headphones specifically as a do not disturb signal. In another, nearly half admitted they'd used headphones to avoid talking to coworkers.



Corn

Nearly half. So the other half are lying.



Herman

Or listening to music, which is allowed. But it means the headphones are already doing social work for Daniel. Nobody needs to know why they're on. The downside is the same as the upside. If he wants to be approachable, a big pair of over ears tells the room he isn't.



Corn

Over ears is a generous description for what happens when you put them on.



Herman

They sit on top. Like a tiara. Donkey ears weren't in anyone's test fit. We're not talking about me.



Corn

We're never talking about you, and yet here we are.



Herman

The other direction is to go invisible. Loop is the obvious example. The Belgian company with the ring shaped earplugs. They pitch them as an accessory, like sunglasses, and it's worked. The V and A museum has one in its collection, and there's a Swarovski edition with crystals on it.



Corn

Crystal earplugs. For the man who wants silence and to be noticed.



Herman

There's a contradiction in that one, yes. The plain black ones just look like a small earring. And Flare's Calmer is even smaller, nearly invisible, though Flare is upfront that it doesn't reduce volume at all. It's meant to take the harsh edge off sound, and their own wording is that the effect can be subtle at first.



Corn

An earplug that, by its own account, is not an earplug.



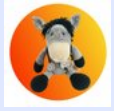
Herman

It's for a different problem. For Daniel in a café, he needs real reduction. So that's the trade. Invisible earplugs make you look approachable, and people will approach. Headphones make you look busy, and people mostly won't.



Corn

Which one do I want? That's the decision underneath all of this. Not how much it blocks. Whether I want to be talked to.



Herman

Well, which would you pick?



Corn

Depends on the room. In a café I don't know anyone. I want the do not disturb sign. In a coworking space with people I see every day, I'd want to look like a person, not a bank vault.



Herman

That's the right split, I think. And the coworking case is where the adjustable stuff earns its keep. Loop Switch has a little dial on the earplug itself, turned while it's in your ear. Three modes. By Loop's own figures it goes from about twenty decibels in its conversation mode up to about twenty six in its quiet mode. Those are lab ratings, and a plug that doesn't seal well will do noticeably less. But the point is you can be heads down on quiet, and when someone sits down across from you, you turn it to engage and you can actually hold a conversation.



Corn

Without taking anything out.



Herman

Without taking anything out. Filtered custom plugs do something similar, because a good flat filter turns everything down evenly instead of muffling the high end. Voices are quieter, but they stay voices. You can follow someone across a table.



Corn

Now the tech companies have their own answer to the walking over problem, don't they. The headphones that notice you're talking.



Herman

Three versions of it, more or less. Sony has Speak to Chat. You start speaking, it pauses your audio and lets the outside in through the microphones, then switches back after you've been quiet for a while. Apple has Conversation Awareness, which lowers your media when you start talking, and Conversation Boost, which turns up the person in front of you. And everyone has a transparency or ambient mode that you can toggle by hand.



Corn

You keep saying when you start talking.



Herman

Because that's the flaw. Every one of these is triggered by your voice, not theirs. Somebody walks up and says, sorry, is this seat taken, and the headphones wait politely for you to reply. Sony's own manual also says it may not trigger in loud places, and that coughing or humming can set it off.



Corn

So the technology's answer to being interrupted is to wait until you've interrupted yourself.



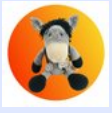
Herman

That's... yes. That is what it does. Speak to Chat is also off by default, so a lot of people have never switched it on.



Corn

Then here's my view, and you can tell me I'm wrong. The reliable move isn't a feature. It's a hand. One earbud out. Or slide one cup back behind the ear. That's it. It's quick, it's normal, nobody reads anything into it. People do it in offices a hundred times a day for people who aren't sound sensitive at all.



Herman

I'm not going to tell you you're wrong. I spent years in clinic with parents who were terrified their child was about to be examined with some alarming instrument. The thing that calmed the room was never an explanation of the instrument. It was doing something small and ordinary with it, quickly, and moving on.



Corn

And I think the line Daniel wants is about that short. Sorry, one sec. Earbud out. Go ahead. If they look curious, noise thing, I focus better with them in. Five words. No history.



Herman

Should he explain more, though? I go back and forth on this.



Corn

The explanation is what turns it into a big deal. Not the earbud. The longer the speech about it, the more it sounds like a condition. Five words sounds like a preference.



Herman

There's an argument the other way, which is that some people find a visible signal helps, so they don't have to say anything. The Sunflower lanyard is the famous one. Started at Gatwick airport, now recognised in a lot of countries, and it tells staff you may need a bit of time or help. But it isn't established in Israel. I couldn't tell you of a single Jerusalem café where the staff would know what it meant.



Corn

In Jerusalem a sunflower lanyard just says you like sunflowers.



Herman

Possibly that you're lost. So no, it's not a tool he can lean on there.



Corn

Put it together then. Three rooms, three answers?



Herman

Roughly. Café, heads down, nobody he knows: noise cancelling earbuds or over ears, with that steady masking sound underneath. That's the socially invisible option because it's the most normal object in the building. Coworking, where he wants to be part of the place: Loop Switch or a good filtered plug, sitting on the quiet setting and flipping to the conversation one when someone's around. And the drilling at home is where the thirty four rated muffs belong. They're not wrong, they're in the wrong building. On construction noise they're doing exactly the job they were made for.



Corn

The muffs aren't too much. The café is too little.



Corn

One more thing for the coworking case. With people he'll see every day, I'd say it once, lightly, early. Sound gets to me, so if I've got these in, just wave. Then it never needs saying again.



Herman

That's the version I'd want from a colleague. One sentence, a permission to wave, and nobody tiptoeing around him for the next six months.



Corn

The wave is doing a lot of work there.



Herman

The wave is the whole system. The practical bits matter too. Over ears will last the day. Sony quotes around thirty hours with cancelling on. Earbuds are more like eight, so they go back in the case at lunch. If he wears earbuds or plugs all day, ear canals need a break and a dry tip, because a sealed, warm, damp canal is how people end up with irritation. And some people get that odd sucking pressure feeling from noise cancelling. It seems to be mostly perceptual, the brain reading missing low end as pressure, and a little bit of audio playing or switching to transparency usually settles it.



Corn

The thing I keep being stuck on is the staring, though. All this design work is about not being looked at. And I suspect most people aren't looking.



Herman

There's that classic study with the embarrassing T shirt. Students wore it into a room and guessed about half the people noticed. It was closer to a quarter. People hugely overestimate how much strangers pay attention to them.



Hilbert

How long does somebody have to look at you before it counts as a stare?



Corn

Longer than a glance. I'd say you know it when you feel it.



Hilbert

Two seconds. That was the rule. Victor Amsel set it, and Victor had a hi fi shop on Wellesley Road for as long as I've been buying batteries, which is too long. In the mid eighties he wanted to prove you could walk down a high street in headphones and nobody would care. He had a whole wall of the little foam ones and they weren't moving. People thought they'd be looked at.



Hilbert

He borrowed me from the council. I was doing pedestrian counts at the time, clicker in each hand, one for people going north, one for people going south. Victor wanted a third clicker, for stares. Two seconds or more, eyes on him. I did eleven days on that corner. He walked up and down in the headphones from opening to close. They were plugged into a reel to reel deck in a pram, because his cassette machine was in for repair at his own shop and he wouldn't jump the queue.



Hilbert

The deck needed a car battery. That went in the pram as well. And on the fourth day he brought his landlord's goose, because the landlord was away and the goose didn't like being on its own. The goose was called Margaret. She walked beside the pram. On a lead, mostly. Day seven he added a sandwich board. Front said headphones are normal. Back said the price. I kept a fourth clicker for people who read the board. Three. One of them was Victor's brother, and he was only checking the spelling.



Hilbert

Four thousand one hundred and six people went past in eleven days. Stares, nineteen. I'm not counting the man who stopped to ask directions, because he was looking at the street sign behind Victor, not at Victor. So, nineteen. Eleven of those were at Margaret.



Herman

So eight people in four thousand looked at a man in headphones pushing a car battery in a pram.



Hilbert

Eight. You've got the mechanism right, Herman, people do look. You've got the size of it wrong by a mile. You said a quarter of the room. On Wellesley Road it was a rounding error. And you said intelligibility nine times this episode. I'll be cutting four.



Corn

Then the number Victor needed wasn't the stares at all. It was the ones who came over. Because that's what Daniel is actually dreading. Not the look. The conversation that starts while the headphones are still on.



Hilbert

That's fair. We never counted the ones who spoke to him. He'd have sold every one of them a pair of headphones.



Herman

That's the real skill, then. Not being invisible. Being quick when somebody does turn up.



Corn

One earbud out, five words, and back in when they're gone. The look takes care of itself.



Herman

Can I name the misconception that trips up most people here? That the more you spend on noise cancelling, the more it blocks voices.



Corn

It doesn't, because the cancelling is busy with the rumble. Voices are down to the seal and the fit, which is why the right ear tip and a bit of masking sound do more for café chatter than the next price tier.



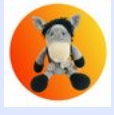
Herman

Proper fit first. The upgrade last.



Corn

So the thing to watch is whether these conversation features ever learn to notice the other person arriving, rather than waiting for you to speak. If the headphones could catch someone walking up and drop the cancelling before they've said a word, the whole earbud out ritual just goes away.



Herman

On Wellesley Road numbers, that's about eight people a fortnight who'd benefit.



Corn

Thanks as always to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop, for keeping all of this in order.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you've got a moment, leave us a review on Spotify, it helps other people find the show.



Corn

We'll be back soon.