

The Vox Pop

1. Introduction

Radio programmes are not an end in themselves – journalists don't produce them for their own self-fulfilment, but to meet the needs of their target group, the radio listeners. Journalists write news bulletins and reports to meet the listeners' information needs. And they produce music programmes or radio plays to entertain their audience.

All of these journalistic formats have one thing in common: they are produced and presented by professionals. And the other voices that appear in the sound clips are most often those of politicians, experts or high-ranking people.

The average listener hardly ever appears on the air - unless the programme uses vox pop. This expression is short for the Latin term, "vox populi" and means "the voice of the people". When this "voice of the people" is heard, the listeners know that "normal people", very much like themselves, also have a place in radio broadcasting. They feel appreciated and taken seriously by the radio station. And this in turn strengthens the listener's "loyalty" to the station.

2. Definition

For a "vox pop", journalists ask a number of randomly selected people the same question, collect the answers and string them together. The different answers create an idea of the variety of opinions existing within the population.

Journalists usually conduct these "one-question interviews" in public places where you can find many different kinds of people.

A vox pop is never a representative opinion poll, but merely a random selection of responses. But as listeners love to hear what other ordinary people think, a vox pop will make any programme more lively, entertaining and credible.

Duration: 1 minute to 1 minute 30 seconds

3. When and why do we use this journalistic format? Strengths and weaknesses of the format

A vox pop never stands alone in a radio programme. It is always broadcast in combination with some other element, like an interview, a studio discussion or a report.

If, for example, you want to conduct a studio interview with a politician, you can precede this interview with a vox pop. That way, you can refer to some of the peoples' answers when asking the interviewee.

A short vox pop may also be used as part of a mini-feature or report.

Example 1:

After asking ordinary people on the streets of BIGTOWN how they feel about the building of the new pharmaceuticals factory, you use the answers to put together a vox pop.

Afterwards, when you conduct your studio interview with the mayor, you confront him with what the people said and refer to the vox pop in your first question: "Mr. Mayor, you have heard some of the residents' opinions. How do you feel about these?"

Or

Example 2:

You have a report in your programme about the press conference, in which the mayor and the pharmaceuticals plant PILLCO announced that the new factory would be built.

In this report, the listeners find out what the officials have to say on this topic. But they do not know what the residents of the affected neighbourhood BIGTOWN think about the plans. Do they all agree with the project? Are there also critical voices? Or are the people indifferent about what is happening?

Of course you could summarize in your own words that opinion about this project is divided, that there are both positive and negative views among the population. But this way of presenting that information would be rather boring and not at all "radiophonic".

It would be better to give the affected people a voice in your programme: let the listeners hear what the people say in a vox pop, which you can broadcast after the report.

That way, the listeners get all the information on the various parties' opinions – and it is been presented in a very authentic and lively manner.

Vox pops are an instrument to present public opinion on the radio, and help make your programmes sound more dynamic. As the people voice their opinions spontaneously, they are often emotional, angry, funny or provide unexpected insights.

The voices of average people lend your programmes more authenticity and credibility. Listeners can identify with the people they hear on the radio. After all, these are not politicians or experts who "talk down to them", but ordinary people – just like them.

Pros and cons of the vox pop:

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Makes programmes more lively	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The production is very time-consuming
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Spontaneous statements, authentic and credible	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The people being interviewed may be shy and apprehensive about talking into a microphone. They may be unable to express themselves.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Creates a close connection with the listener	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Vox pop can not stand alone – it always has to be connected to another part of the programme
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reflects public opinion	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is not representative

4. How is it done?

4.1. Selecting a topic

Before you decide to produce a vox pop, you should make sure that the topic lends itself to this format. The spectrum of possible topics ranges from politics, business, sports and religion to social issues and everyday problems.

The best topics for vox pops are controversial issues that move the people. With these kinds of issues, you can be fairly sure that the answers you get from the people will be varied, interesting and usable. But other topics, such as consumer behaviour, recreational activities, etc. are also possible.

What's important is that the issue must be topical and of general interest. If only a minority of your listeners is interested in the topic of the vox pop, you run the risk that the majority of your listeners will switch off. And it is very difficult to win back lost listeners.

As an example for a vox pop, we will choose an issue that is topical, of general interest and – in this case – even controversial: the construction of the new pharmaceuticals factory in BIGTOWN. In this vox pop, we want to document what residents of BIGTOWN think about having to leave their homes in order to make room for the new factory.

4.2. How to ask the right question

Whether a vox pop turns out well or not depends largely on the kind of question you ask. It is important that you **always** ask the **same question** and that it is **short and clear**. Don't change the wording from one person to the next - after all, you want the answers to fit together, but they will not fit if you keep changing your question.

Don't ask a "closed" question – a question to which people can only give "yes" or "no" answers. This would inevitably lead to further questions – and before you know it, you're caught up in a dialogue.

Play through your question and possible answers with colleagues or friends before you go out to record your vox pop. This will help you see whether or not your question is well-formulated and whether you can expect interesting answers.

Example

Not good (Closed question):

"Do you mind having to leave BIGTOWN because of the construction of the new pharmaceuticals plant?"

A possible response could be: "Yes", or "No, I don't mind". If you are lucky, the people may also give you an explanation. But it is also possible that the people you ask will turn around after the initial "yes" or "no", and simply walk away. You will have got an answer to your question, but not one that you can use.

Better (Open question):

"How do you feel about having to leave BIGTOWN because of the new pharmaceuticals plant?"

This question makes a "yes" or "no" answer impossible. Instead, you will now get answers that clearly express the speakers' critical or positive attitudes:

- "This whole issue makes me sick! They are treating us like dirt..."

or

- "I can't wait to get out of here. This way, I finally get a new apartment. And maybe I'll even find a job at the new factory!"

Make sure that you are always neutral when formulating your question, so as not to influence the answers.

Example

Not good:

"I suppose you feel sad about having to leave BIGTOWN because of the new factory?"

(Closed suggestive question that already more or less prescribes which direction the answer will take.)

Better:

"What are your feelings when you think about having to leave BIGTOWN because of the new pharmaceuticals plant?"

4.3. Where to record the vox pop

Choose a location for the vox pop where you will find many people and where you

can get a variety of opinions. For the topic we selected in our example, the ideal location could be the market place in BIGTOWN or a supermarket.

But make sure that there is not too much background noise at the location you choose. Although such background ambience sound can make your vox pop sound more authentic and lively, it can also drown out the answers if it gets too loud.

If there is background ambience, it should be consistent. That way, you can later edit and paste together the individual statements without any noticeable breaks in the ambience sound.

And that's why a market with its consistent buzz of activity is usually a good location for a vox pop – unlike a street with a lot of traffic. When you're recording answers for a vox pop in a street, the ambience sounds of passing cars could suddenly break off when you edit or rearrange your answers later on in the studio.

4.4. How to approach your interviewees

Stand in front of the supermarket and wait for customers who are entering or exiting the store. It's a good idea to have your radio station's logo printed on the foam wind shield of your microphone. That way, the people you interview immediately know that they are talking to a journalist of a certain radio station.

Do not try to "ambush" your interviewees – this hardly ever works. Instead, you run the risk that people feel overwhelmed, cornered and either give no answer at all, or give an answer that is completely unsatisfactory.

Approach your potential interviewees, address them in a friendly and polite manner, introduce yourself and explain what you are doing. Tell them that they will remain anonymous, i.e. that their name will not be mentioned.

Accept the fact that some people will not want to talk to you. People passing sometimes do not have the time, are not interested or are too nervous and therefore do not want to answer any questions.

4.5. Practical tips

Collect two or three times as many answers as you need for your vox pop. When listening to them, you will realize that some of them are repetitive, others may be unclear or boring, or that the technical quality may be rather poor in some cases.

While still on location, note down which answers you might be able to use for your vox pop. This makes the subsequent editing process easier for you and saves you a lot of time.

4.6. Editing your vox pop

Once you have collected a sufficient number of answers, the time-consuming work of editing can begin. Listen to all the answers you have recorded and select the ones you want to use for your vox pop. Then determine the order in which they sound best. To make the vox pop sound lively and interesting, you should have a good mix of voices and opinions: male, female, young, old, positive answers, negative answers.

Cut out the parts of the recording where you asked your question.

A vox pop is always introduced by the host of the programme who tells the listeners what the question of the vox pop was. This studio introduction is then followed by the sequence of answers, strung together without any intermediate text or music.

Example:

Host's introduction:

"Our reporter Mary Miller visited the marketplace in BIGTOWN. She asked people there, how they felt about having to leave their homes because the new pharmaceuticals plant will be built."

Followed by vox pop:

- "I am totally outraged. I can't even begin to say how angry I am." –
- "I am so glad that I can finally leave this run-down neighbourhood." –
- "The people responsible for this are nothing but crooks! I've lived here all my life and now they are forcing me to give up my home." –
- "I really don't mind leaving my old neighborhood if this means I'll find a new job!" –
- etc.

Start your vox pop with a very strong statement. A distinctive and convincing first answer will get the listeners interested in the topic and the rest of the vox pop. They will want to know more about what the people in BIGTOWN say about this controversial issue.

Vary the length of the individual sound bites. But no answer should be longer than 20 seconds – even if it seems interesting. The total length of a vox pop should not exceed 1 minute and 30 seconds. If your vox pop is too long, the listener will get bored and lose interest.

Example of a vox pop:

Total length: 1 minute and 30 seconds

Gender of	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
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speaker						
Voice	Young	Old	Young	Young	Deep voice	High voice
Opinion	Negative	Positive	Critical	Positive	Positive	Negative
Length of answer	20 sec	12 sec	8 sec	20 sec	12 sec	18 sec

End your vox pop with a strong answer. This creates the effect of a distinctive ending and leaves listeners with a feeling that it was worth listening to the whole vox pop. If you let your vox pop end on a wishy-washy statement, listeners will think that less talk would have been enough.

5. Caution – stumbling blocks – “What to do if...”

What to do if...

the answers are too short

You have the impression that the interviewee wants to say something that could be interesting but is a little hesitant or afraid of the microphone. Be polite but persistent and ask a follow-up question or Rephrase your original question and ask it again, but do not change the content of the initial question.

Example:

Question:

“What are your feelings when you think about having to leave BIGTOWN because of the new pharmaceuticals plant?”

Answer:

“I don’t know.”

Follow-up question:

“But surely you have given it some thought, haven’t you?”

Answer:

“Of course I have, but what can I say? **The whole thing scares me, of course, because I don’t know what the future will bring.**”

If you delete the first part of the answer, you will have achieved your goal: despite the interviewee’s initial hesitation, you have been able to record a strong statement.

Answers are too long

The interviewees keep talking and it is impossible to stop their flow of words. Let them talk for a while and when you know that there’s something in their long answer that you can use as a short excerpt, politely interrupt.

When editing the vox pop, make sure that the voices are not up at the end of the sound bites. The statements should sound like the interviewees have come to the

end of their sentence. Otherwise listeners will think you have cut an important part of the answer and are trying to manipulate what was actually said.

Question:

“What are your feelings when you think about having to leave BIGTOWN because of the new pharmaceuticals plant?”

Answer:

“Let me tell you something: this is not how this works. Just imagine it! Where would that lead us! **I’m shocked and will not let this matter rest. After all, there are courts and I will definitely appeal to them.** I have read in the newspaper that all this is not final yet. I heard there is a family that is in the same situation as I am now and they have gone to court...”

From this point on, you can politely try to interrupt your interviewee because he’s already given you a good and snappy statement that you can use. When you edit your vox pop later, you can delete the beginning and the end of the interviewee’s long-winded answer.

Caution: Get spontaneous answers

A vox pop only comes alive if the interviewees give their answers **spontaneously**. Therefore, you should only briefly tell your interviewees what the topic is, ask your question and record the spontaneous answer. Do not enter into a discussion with the interviewees before you start recording. Otherwise, they might think they’ve already said everything when you finally press the record-button. So the answers that you record then could be incomplete, sound boring or sound like they’ve been rehearsed.

Caution: Several answers at a time

Every now and then when you’re recording a vox pop in a public place, interested passers-by might stop, listen to what’s being said and want to have their say. Soon, everybody will be talking at the same time. If you are unable to quieten things down with a few polite words, you should stop recording. For a vox pop, you need clear answers from individuals and not a cacophony of voices.

Caution: Editing the answers

Edit the answers in the studio: delete long pauses if they break up the flow of the answer. Too many “uhm’s” or “ah’s” can also be quite disturbing. It might be better to cut them out.

Watch the levels on your recording equipment while you are recording the answers. If there are big gaps in the recording levels from one answer to the next, the finished vox pop will not sound smooth. If the levels jump from one answer to the next, you

should try to readjust the levels in the studio – either with audio-editing software or by re-recording the whole vox-pop and readjusting the levels manually.

Caution: Background noises

All statements for a vox pop should be recorded at the same location. If you need to change to a different location while recording the answers to your question, make sure that possible background sounds are approximately the same. Always remember: your finished vox pop should be one harmonious piece. If there are breaks in the background sounds, the vox pop will not flow along smoothly.

Caution: Time and effort

The vox pop is a time-consuming format. You will have to go out of the radio station, get a substantial number of answers to your question, return to the studio, select the best answers, put them in the right order and edit them. Post production in the studio is extremely time-consuming - especially when recording and editing with analogue equipment. Editing with digital technology is a lot faster and much simpler.

Caution: Danger of manipulation

It is easy to manipulate a vox pop. If you yourself have a certain opinion about the topic of the vox pop, it is possible – consciously or subconsciously – to give it a certain slant. This can be done by asking a suggestive question or by editing the answers in a particular manner. But this is unethical. Make sure you stay neutral and objective throughout the entire production process.