

The Mini Feature

1. Introduction

The name says it all: the mini feature is a short radio feature. Sounds good. But what exactly is a feature? What does this word really mean? In an encyclopaedia or dictionary, you will find various definitions of the word depending on the context. Definitions include *facial expression*, *appearance*, and *characteristics* as well as *attraction*, *highlight* or *form of presentation*.

And what does all this mean in terms of radio? For one thing, it means that there is no single definition of the term “feature”. There are various potential definitions, nearly all of which are inadequate and do not really describe the characteristics of this journalistic form.

The most important characteristic of a radio feature is that journalists use this format to give abstract or complex situations a face. In a radio feature, the journalists tell stories of people whom the listeners can relate to in order to illustrate a complicated issue.

For instance, if parliament has passed a new law about pensions, a radio feature would introduce the listener to one pensioner and describe the effects the new law has on him or her. And it would do so primarily by using sound – voice clips, ambience sound, music etc.

By breaking a complex issue down to the level of ordinary people, the abstract topic would come alive. A normal radio report, in contrast, would concentrate more on the debate in parliament or on describing the details of new law.

One has to have listened to and/or produced a feature – or, in our case, a mini feature – to fully understand what this journalistic form is. It requires creativity in the planning phase, considerable patience in the execution and extensive work during the time-consuming production phase. But the listeners will appreciate this. It is not without reason that many radio journalists still consider features – or mini features – one of the most outstanding genres of radio journalism.

2. Definition

The mini feature is a report that largely consists of sound clips of the most varied nature. You could say it is a picture painted with sound, an acoustic film.

In radio journalism, the feature is something between a current affairs report and a radio play. It tells an interesting story – not simply as a collection of informative data, but so lively that abstract issues become clear and understandable. Among the listeners, the mini feature evokes what is called the “theatre of the mind”.

To achieve this, the radio journalists leading through the feature have a wide range of possibilities at their disposal: sound bites, ambience sounds, historical clips, music, vox pop and, last but certainly not least, their own words.

Journalists can – and indeed must – let their imagination run free. Only this will provide the desired result: a “theatre of the mind”.

Length: between three and five minutes.

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

A mini feature brings the listener up to date with a complex issue. We achieve this by linking the topic to characteristic personalities, with whom the listener can identify. In this way, we lend the topic a personal face – or “feature”.

We produce mini features when we want to use creative stylistic means that would not be suitable for other forms of broadcasting: News and reports, for instance, mainly consist of spoken words, at the most enriched by the odd sound bite or two. Nothing but the pure word is allowed in commentaries. And interviews come to life only through questions and answers; additional sounds or music have no place in an interview and would only seem disturbing.

But in a mini feature, things are different. All the sound elements that are banned for other formats are a *must* in a mini feature.

Our objective – as in the case of other journalistic formats – is to inform the listeners in the best possible way. We want to grab their attention and attract their interest with the goal of “keeping them glued to the radio”.

Of course we could pass on information simply through language - our own words. We could paint a picture of a situation by using descriptive words.

But in the case of a mini feature, which is primarily made up of sound clips of all kinds, we have numerous additional means to present information and make complex issues clear.

A mini feature is much livelier than a report that is only made up of spoken words. The alternation between different stylistic means, voices and sounds prevents listeners’ concentration from fading. It stimulates their imagination and creates images for their inner eye – it creates a “theatre of the mind”.

Example:

In BIGTOWN, bulldozers have started to tear down the first buildings to make way for the planned new pharmaceutical plant. Protesting residents are trying to stop the demolition work. Your aim is, to inform your listeners about these events.

You could do this in the form of a report with two or three sound bites. You would say in your own words what is happening in BIGTOWN and have sound bites of two residents and a city representative. The listener would be well informed.

But can you really convey **all** the information regarding what is happening on location? Hardly.

You could paint a better picture by producing a mini feature: sound bites of the residents, statements from the responsible parties, demolition sounds, music appropriate for the subject, etc. These acoustic aids make it easier for the listener to really imagine what is happening in BIGTOWN.

Pros and cons of a mini feature

| Pros | Cons |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Makes complex topics understandable | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Risk of confusing the listener if there is no logical structure |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is often more interesting than a report with or without sound clips | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Time-consuming production |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Makes the programme lively, as various stylistic means are used | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is technically challenging for editor and technician |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stimulates the listener's imagination and creates a "theatre of the mind" | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Does not stand-alone. It is linked to other parts of the programme, e.g. part of a magazine programme |

4. How is it done?

4.1 Topic selection

Before you decide to produce a mini feature, you should consider whether your topic is suitable for this format. A mini feature always concentrates on one topic – although you will have room to present various aspects and standpoints regarding this topic within your mini feature. The spectrum of possible topics ranges from politics and business to sports and religion, social issues and every-day problems.

The best topics for mini features are those that move people and which allow you to make use of the various radiophonic means. Of course, it is important that the "story" is of general interest to ensure that the mini feature attracts the attention of the highest number of listeners. The "story" should be good, topical and – if possible – exceptional.

4.2 Script

Since a mini feature consists of many individual parts, it is never broadcast live, but always pre-produced. As with other pre-produced pieces, a manuscript is required.

The script for a mini feature almost resembles a movie-script. Right from the outset, you need to have an exact idea of the sequence of your feature. First, you should outline the logical structure, the so-called “red thread” running through your story.

Then you should consider which sound elements you would like to use. As mentioned before, you can make use of ambience sounds, music pieces, short interviews, voice clips, sounds, vox pop, archive material and, last but not least, your own link texts.

Be creative! Don't be afraid to try out something unusual. It is important that the finished mini feature is interesting and entertaining and that it paints an understandable and logical picture of the chosen topic. Throughout your mini feature, the “lights” in the “theatre of the mind” should never go out and your listeners should never be left in the dark.

Try to find a “strong” beginning that draws your listeners into the story, one that gets them interested and makes them want to hear more. A “strong” beginning can mean a whole variety of things when it comes to a mini feature: an excerpt from a musical piece, a clip containing a strong statement, an interesting and easily recognizable ambience sound or a sound that evokes a certain mood or atmosphere.

You can make use of any of these sound options to begin your mini feature. But you will be wasting your chance of making a “dramatic entrance” if you just start out with your own narration.

A mini feature should not only have a “strong” introduction, but also a “strong” ending. This ensures dramatic tension from the introduction all the way through to the end and the listeners' attention will be maintained throughout the entire feature. At the end, the listener will feel that it was worth his while.

If your mini-feature does not have a strong ending, if it just peters out, your listeners will be confused, expecting something else – something more. They will be disappointed because their expectations will not have been met. And a disappointed listener can become an ex-listener only too easily.

Example:

You have decided to produce a mini feature dealing with the repercussions that building the pharmaceutical company will have on BIGTOWN. To make space for the new plant, the buildings in the area have to be demolished. Some people are in favour of the project, as they anticipate new jobs. Others are against it, because they will have to move from their homes and their neighbourhood.

Today, there will be demonstrations in BIGTOWN both for, and against, the construction of the new plant. You start your mini feature with ambience sound from one of the demonstrations: chanting, drums, whistles etc.

These kinds of sound bites paint a picture of the scene. They almost take the listener to where it is all happening – as if they were really there. They catch people’s attention and create tension and suspense.

You could then use the same kind of ambience sound to end your piece.

How you continue the mini feature after the opening depends on the topic and on your creativity. There are infinite possibilities.

Your “strong” introduction could be followed by a link text (narration) spoken by you, a voice clip from one of the protagonists, or a short vox pop with voices from the demonstrators. Or you underlay your narration with some ambience sound.

Depending on the kind and number of sound clips it might even be possible to avoid intermittent texts altogether. When it comes to a mini feature there are no limits to your imagination.

4.3 Collecting and choosing the right sound clips

Sound clips are the fundamental elements of a mini feature. That’s why choosing the right kind is particularly important. Try to figure out what your sound clips are supposed to achieve. The following list may be helpful:

| Type of sound bite | Effect |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">Voice clips – by themselves or edited in the form of a short vox pop | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Authentic, informative, credible, emotional. Option for conveying various points of view |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">Musical elements | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Can act as a bridge between the voice clips and other sound elements, create a mood, emphasise the message or statement. <p>Caution: music can be very suggestive. This may create the impression of manipulation.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">Ambience sounds | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Appeal to the listeners’ imagination, take them to a certain location, emphasise the reality |

| | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Link texts (narration) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensure a smooth and logical flow of the feature• Journalist provides facts and explains.• Journalist always stays neutral and objective, must not – under any circumstance – take sides or provide commentary |
|--|--|

Accurately research where and when you can best record the sound bites you need. If you plan to include voice clips, make appointments for your interviews and explain what the interviews are for.

If it is impossible to record sound clips or ambience elements on location and you have to fall back on your station's the sound archive, make sure that the sounds and music you want to use in your mini feature are available.

Only use sound bites that are easily recognizable and characteristic. The sound bites should instantly create an image in your listeners' minds – and not leave them guessing as to what it is they are hearing. If you are not entirely sure that your sounds will be immediately recognized by everyone, you should explain them to your listeners in a few words.

Example:

Sound bite: sound of demolition equipment
(sound bite is characteristic, but not all listeners may recognize it immediately)

Speaker:

Not good: "This was the demolition crew that has been operating in BIGTOWN since this morning."

Better: "The time has come for the demolition crew..."

After this short explanatory statement, every listener should understand that the sound was produced by the demolition equipment.

4.4 Production of the mini feature

After you have collected all sound clips – at least as raw material – the most difficult and time-consuming stage of the project begins: the production. Before you enter the studio with your material or get to work on the tape machine or editing computer, you should know all your sound clips well.

If you were not able to record all the sound bites or sound effects you need, you may be forced to make changes to your script. Ambience sounds, sounds effects and music are always faded-in and faded-out. Make notes as to where these fade-ins and fade-outs should begin and end, how long these sound elements should be heard.

Before you start editing, you should know which parts of your interviews you would like to use as voice clips. Sometimes, it helps to jot down the wording of your raw material and to mark which passages you plan to use. This may be a lot of work, but it is helpful during the editing process.

You will save a lot of time if you begin production with a clear concept and do not start thinking about the order of things only after you've gone into the studio to produce your mini feature.

Example:

Structure:

- Ambience sound of demonstration (fade out after a few seconds, but leave it audible underneath the following narration)
- narration (over ambience sound of demonstration)
- short music element (fade-in and fade-out at the end)
- narration
- Sound of demolition equipment (fade-in and fade-out at the end, but leave it audible underneath the following narration)
- narration (over ambience sounds of demolition equipment)
- short Vox pop
- Statement from the mayor (possibly over ambience sound of demolition equipment)
- Music (fade-in and fade-out at the end)
- Statement from environmentalist.... "this is why we are against this project." (last words of the statement over the following ambience sound)
- ambience sound of demonstration (find a striking ending (e.g. the end of a chanted slogan), otherwise fade-out)

Always remember: your finished mini feature should feel and sound like a complete entity. This means that there has to be a logical sequence to your sound elements. The transitions have to flow. Listeners should not get lost on the way, trying to figure out who is speaking, what is meant or what the sounds are.

The technical aspects of the production must also be excellent. The sound quality of the clips has to be very good and the volume has to be uniform throughout the entire feature.

All this requires a lot of care and attention and is very time-consuming. Therefore, make sure that you will have sufficient production time.

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

Logical structure

Although the mini feature is like a small work of art in radio journalism, it must not – unlike paintings – leave room for interpretation. Therefore, listeners should never have to ask themselves the question: “what is the artist (in this case the journalist) trying to tell me?”

They must immediately know what the message is. They can only hear the mini feature once and they have to understand everything immediately, otherwise the whole production is lost on them.

The mini feature – which comprises so many individual parts – must have a clear and logical structure. Artistic licence is welcome, but should never lead to confusion.

Keep your link texts (narration) short

A mini feature has its very own identity. It is an acoustic film and not just a report with lots of sound bites. Ensure that your link texts are as concise as possible and never more than a bridge between texts. Your narration should contain the basic facts – the sound clips, on the other hand, should convey the emotions and opinions of the parties involved.

Collect enough sound bites

As shown in the example above, you will need a good number of ambience sounds and voice clips for your mini feature. Make sure that this material is ready when you start your studio production.

If you suddenly realise during production that you do not have enough sound of the demolition equipment, for instance, your whole mini feature could be in jeopardy. At this point of the production, it would be too time-consuming to go back to the site to record additional sound material. And using material from your sound library may create inconsistencies and break up logical transitions.

The right mix

Your sound bites, ambience sounds and voice clips can be as striking and as powerful as you want – if the mix is wrong, the mini feature will not be good. Ambience sound elements and sounds should fit the text – and vice-versa. If you use sounds of demolition equipment, you should be talking about this equipment and not about the demonstrations.

Too many voice clips in succession – especially when they are without ambience sound – are boring and make it difficult for the audience to follow. A short music bridge can “relax” the story and help you achieve your objective: to produce a feature that makes the “theatre of the mind” come alive.