

The Round Table Discussion

1. Introduction

Any group of friends, colleagues or family members is bound to have animated discussions now and again. During such a discussion, everybody wants to have a say and convince the others of his or her opinion. The discussion gets louder and louder, tempers heat up and what began as a civilised conversation turns into a shouting match. Before you know it, angry words and insults fly.

This kind of chaos can develop whenever there is nobody leading and steering a discussion properly.

In radio, such a chaotic discussion would be pointless for the listeners. They would not understand what the individual people are saying and switch off. That's why round table discussions or panel discussions on the radio should be lively but structured.

The host of a round table discussion has to be in control of the debate. He or she has to safeguard that all participants can express their opinions and explain their points of view. And they should be able to do so without being interrupted by any of the other participants in the discussion.

The host also has to make sure that the listeners understand the subject and know who represents which opinion. And the host has to guide the discussion so that all relevant aspects of the topic will be covered in the designated time.

2. Definition

A round table discussion is a debate about a controversial topic between two or more people with contrasting views. A neutral host chooses the participants and then leads a structured, yet lively debate. At the end of the discussion, the host briefly summarizes the different points of view and the key arguments that were brought forth.

A round table discussion can be broadcast live or it can be pre-recorded, with or without an audience and with or without audience participation.

Length: between 15 minutes and 1 hour – depending on the programme.

3. When and why do we use this journalistic format?

Strengths and weaknesses of the format

There are numerous elements that make a round-table discussion an attractive journalistic format for radio listeners. They will hear an exchange of different opinions on a controversial topic. Complicated contexts will become transparent through the direct exchange of views and arguments.

The arguments and counter-arguments will provide the listeners with new insights. The discussion may help them find new arguments which support their own point of view or which are an inspiration to think differently about the topic.

Round table discussions are usually very lively parts of your programme because of the different voices and personalities of the participants. Round table discussions can be surprising, revealing, entertaining or enlightening. And that's what makes them interesting for the listeners.

Round table discussions can take place at different venues:

- In the studio – the participants in the discussion are alone with the host and discuss a clearly defined topic
- In the studio or on a public stage in front of an audience
- In the studio or on a public stage with members of the audience or listeners contributing questions and comments, which the panel will respond to.

Pros and cons of a round table discussion

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Authentic, credible	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Risk of confusing the listener, if the host does not structure the discussion logically
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• First-hand information and opinions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can be boring if the wrong participants are selected
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stimulates the listeners and helps them form their own opinions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Experts sometimes use incomprehensible jargon. In this case, the host has to intervene and ask the experts to repeat what they said in simpler words
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Includes spontaneous elements that cannot be planned and are surprising and attractive for the listeners	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Not every subject is suited for a round-table discussion
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Makes the programme lively through different personalities and voices	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Round table discussions usually take time. Therefore, this longer journalistic format may not fit into the programme of some radio stations, which only run very short pieces.

4. How is it done?

4.1 Selection of topics

The topics of round table discussions can be from the world of to politics, business, culture, social issues, religion, ecology, sports, etc. Almost any topic is conceivable – as long as it meets certain criteria:

- The topic should be interesting and relevant for as many listeners as possible
- The topic should be controversial
- The representatives of the different opinions must be able to express their conflicting opinions publicly.

If the participants do not hold diverse or even opposing views on a topic, the result will be mutual agreement, but not a fruitful debate.

Example:

The international pharmaceutical company PILLCO plans to build a new plant in a poor neighbourhood of BIGTOWN. Houses in this neighbourhood will have to be torn down and residents “reoused” to make room for the factory. The company and the regional government have already negotiated a contract, which will be signed today. This will be followed by a reception and a press conference. At the same time, opponents of the project are demonstrating against it in the streets of the city.

Not good:

Suggested discussion topic:

*“Are demonstrations against the building of this plant **permitted**?”*

The right to organize and take part in public demonstrations is enshrined in the constitution of the country, where BIGTOWN lies. Therefore, any discussion about the legality of this demonstration is pointless.

Better:

Suggested discussion topic:

*“Are demonstrations against the building of this plant **justified**?”*

There are different opinions on this question, ranging from: “Yes, demonstrations are legitimate because many residents will have to lose their old homes” to “No, because the factory will create new jobs and many residents who have to move away will get new and better apartments”.

4.2 Selecting the participants

The most important factor for the success of a round-table discussion is that you find good participants. It is essential that your participants are well-informed about the topic of the discussion. They have to have opposing opinions and must be able to

explain their point of view. The more the participants are convinced of their own point of view and enjoy debating, the livelier your round table discussion will be.

The participants can be decision-makers (politicians, business people), experts (scientists) or people affected by the issue.

Example:

For a round table discussing the question “Are demonstrations against the building of the new pharmaceutical factory justified?” you could invite

- A high ranking representative of the pharmaceutical company PILLCO
- The mayor of BIGTOWN
- The organizer of the demonstrations
- A representative of the citizens’ group “Initiative Against Rehousing”

It depends on the length of the discussion and the size of your studio, how many participants you can invite.

Length of the round table discussion	Suggested number of participants
15 minutes	2 – 3 participants + host
20 minutes	3 Participants + host
30 minutes	4 Participants + host
60 minutes	6 Participants + host

These suggestions should guarantee that every participant has enough time to present his or her opinion and to discuss with the other participants.

If you invite more than five or six participants, it will get difficult for your listeners to identify their voices and keep track of what the individuals stand for.

4.3 Briefing the participants

As the host, you should brief your participants about some things before the discussion starts or goes on the air. The main purpose of this briefing is to agree on a set of rules and a structure for the round table discussion.

In the briefing before going on the air, you should introduce your guests to each other to create a good atmosphere for the round table.

You should also tell the participants what exactly the discussion will be about. Explain what aspects of the topic you want the debate to focus on. And tell your guests how long the discussion will be. All this will help prevent them from digressing later on.

The briefing should not turn into a meaningful discussion before you actually go on the air. If the participants want to begin debating before you start recording or broadcasting, you should politely stop them. An off-air debate about your topic at this point would certainly deprive the round table discussion of its spontaneity.

During the programme, the participants and the host usually sit in a circle around a studio desk. Everybody should see everybody else and be able to make eye contact. This applies especially to the host who has special responsibilities in a round-table discussion.

4.4 Responsibilities of the host

You have to prepare extremely well if you want to host a round table discussion. You will need very good knowledge of the subject of the discussion. In addition, you have to know the points of view and the lines of argumentation of all your guests. And you should know in advance, which of them tend to talk a lot and which are a little shy.

As host, you should be self-confident and tolerant. Your most important task is to steer the discussion. Make sure that your listeners get a clear idea of all your guests' views and arguments.

It goes without saying that you should remain impartial and unbiased. In a round table, you as the host of the debate should never present your own opinion or comment on what your guests are saying.

At the beginning of every round table discussion, you as the host will introduce all the participants: title, first name, last name, function. If necessary, briefly say what position this guest has with regard to your topic or explain the reasons for inviting this guest.

Give each participant a chance to say a few words during the introductory round, so that the listeners not only learn their names, but also get to know their voices. Keep addressing your guests by name throughout the programme to ensure that the listeners always know who is speaking.

At the beginning of the discussion, you should give your listeners a short introduction into the topic of the discussion. If necessary you could also add some background information. Then, open the discussion with an interesting question to one of the participants.

Example:

Question to the CEO of PILLCO, David Miller:

“Mr. Miller, there are demonstrations against your company's plans to build a new pharmaceutical factory in BIGTOWN. Have you ever thought about dropping this whole project?”

Answer:

“Well, we don’t see any reason to go that far. We cannot understand why these demonstrations are taking place in the first place. The people should be happy that we are investing in this neighbourhood”.

Question to the speaker of the citizens’ group “Initiative Against Rehousing”, George Green:

“Mr. Green, I imagine you are not very happy about what Mr. Miller just said. What is your opinion on PILLCO’s standpoint?”

Answer:

“PILLCO’s plans are inhumane. But I am not in the least surprised..., etc.

Interruption by the Mayor:

“Inhumane, don’t get me started ...”

Host:

“Mr. Mayor, one moment please, it will be your turn shortly and you will be given sufficient time to explain your standpoint. Please let Mr. Green finish first.”

Tips for the host

Do not allow any of the participants to take control of the discussion. You are the host – you are the one who should be in control. Point out politely but persistently that every guest will get an equal chance to have their say (see example above and chapter 5. **Caution – stumbling blocks – “What to do if...”**).

- Dig deeper, if one of your guests does not make his or her standpoint clear or tries to be evasive.
- If one of your guests uses technical terms or jargon that some listeners might not understand, ask that guest to explain it again using simpler words.
- Make sure that all aspects of the discussion topic which you consider relevant for your listeners are addressed.
- Briefly summarise the state of the discussion a couple of times during the debate. This will work well as a structural element whenever you have finished discussing one aspect and would like to move on to another. It is also a service to your listeners: not every one of them has been following the discussion from the beginning. Through brief summaries, you can bring all listeners up to date and you can remind them, which participant represents what standpoint.
- Keep an eye on the time. Breaking off the discussion because you have run out of time is both embarrassing and unprofessional. If you do not have a clock in the studio or at the venue of the discussion, place your watch in front of you and check the time out of the corner of your eye every now and then.

- At the end of the debate, give your listeners a final brief summary of your guests' position on the topic and possibly the main arguments they presented during the discussion.

It is vital to stay neutral and objective in your summary. Your own opinion and the conclusions you personally draw from the discussion are of no interest to your listeners.

Summarizing all standpoints in just a few sentences is difficult – especially in controversial discussions. If you are not absolutely objective and fair to every guest, you could be opening a can of worms with your summary. Some guests may feel like you are misinterpreting what they said. They will want to correct you and before you know it, the discussion will start all over again.

But a neutral and objective final summary is nevertheless important. It is a service for your listeners – especially for those who may not have followed the whole discussion from the beginning.

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

What to do if...

one of the participants tries to dominate the discussion and talks too long?

As the host, you have to make it clear that you set the rules for the discussion. In the interest of the other guests and your listeners, interrupt the monologue of the participant who tries to dominate the discussion. Address one of the other participants by name and ask him or her the next question.

Example:

PILLCO representative:

“... that's why there can be no doubt whatsoever that we respect the rights of every resident of BIGTOWN. Those, whose houses will be torn down, will get new homes and financial compensation... <takes a breath>”

This is where you as host can intervene:

“Mr. Green, do you as the spokesperson for the “Initiative Against Rehousing” agree?”

You have stopped the PILLCO representative's endless monologue and given another guest the opportunity to explain his position.

What to do if...

the discussion gets so heated that several participants talk at the same time?

You have to intervene immediately whenever the situation gets out of control. The participants in the studio can always see who is talking. They can read what the other guests are saying from their lips, their gestures and facial expressions. The listeners,

however, cannot see any of this. They only have their ears to try to identify who is saying what. To your listeners, the scene will sound chaotic. As soon as two or more participants talk simultaneously, your listeners will not understand anything.

What to do if...

one of the participants complains about being ignored?

Do not let the participant who is complaining have his or her say immediately. This would give other participants the idea that such interventions are always successful and an easy way to “grab the microphone”.

Example:

Mayor of BIGTOWN:

“Listen, this is not working! All the others have been talking for hours and I cannot even get a word in. I want to say something now...”

Host:

“One moment please, Mr. Mayor. I am paying close attention to ensure that everyone gets their say. You will have a chance to express your opinion shortly. But please, let Mr. Green finish first.”

What to do if...

one participant insults another?

Personal insults are unfair and have no place in a civilised discussion. Make that clear to participants insulting each other. Stay polite, but be persistent. Steer the discussion in another direction – if need be, by turning to another aspect of the topic and addressing a participant who is not involved in the clash.