

This item is the archived peer-reviewed author-version of:

How ordinary is the ordinary (wo)man on the street? An analysis of vox pop characteristics in television news

Reference:

Beckers Kathleen.- How ordinary is the ordinary (wo)man on the street? An analysis of vox pop characteristics in television news
Journalism practice - ISSN 1751-2786 - 11:8(2017), p. 1026-1041
Full text (Publisher's DOI): <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2016.1223551>
To cite this reference: <http://hdl.handle.net/10067/1353610151162165141>

HOW ORDINARY IS THE ORDINARY (WO)MAN ON THE STREET?

An analysis of vox pop characteristics in television news.

Kathleen Beckers

Interviews with the ordinary man or woman on the street are omnipresent in television news. These vox pop interviews are used to represent the general public in the news. Several editorial and practical guidelines exist about the characteristics of a “good” vox pop. But what characteristics do journalists search for in vox pops in practice? This study answers this question by looking at visual and contextual characteristics of vox pop interviews as a means to gain a better understanding of which vox pops appear in the news as a representation of the entire population. We conducted a content analysis of 2,000 vox pop interviews in Flanders, Belgium’s Dutch speaking region, supplemented by interviews with television journalists. We find that, despite editorial guidelines to do so, journalists hardly ever contextualize vox pop interviews by clarifying that they are not necessarily a good representation of the entire population. The results show that journalists select vox pops which are representative of age and gender, but not of minority groups such as ethnic-cultural minorities and people with disabilities. In some regards, vox pops thus provide a biased representation of the population and might influence the public to make wrongful generalizations about public opinion.

KEYWORDS content analysis; interviews; journalists; representation; television news; vox pops

On November 7th, 2013, the Flemish public service broadcaster (*Eén*) broadcasted a news item on the impact of the European Central Bank's interest rate cut on people's savings. The item showed four people on a shopping street who were interviewed by a journalist about the impact of the measure. First, a classically dressed elderly woman was shown, saying that the interest rate on her savings account had recently dropped. Next, a balding middle-aged man with mustache was shown, saying he thought the drop was outrageous. Third, the item portrayed an elderly woman with glasses who declared she would rather use her money to buy things for her grandchildren. Lastly, a casually dressed adult male, wearing a cap and speaking with a strong regional accent, said that if he had money, he would prefer to spend rather than save it.

News items like this, with apparently randomly selected ordinary people quoted about the news of the day, are omnipresent in today's television news. These vox pops are an important and frequent practice in television news (e.g. Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005). Pantti and Husslage (2009) conducted a content analysis of Dutch television news and found that while in 1993 vox pops accounted for only 4% of all sources, by 2006 this had increased to 9%. De Swert et al. (2008) also found the use of vox pops in television news to be on the rise in eleven countries with different media systems (Belgium, France, Norway, Turkey, UK, Canada, USA, Germany, Ireland, Italy, The Netherlands). Additionally, several studies (e.g. Arpan 2009; Lefevere, De Swert, and Walgrave 2012; Daschmann 2000; Gibson and Zillmann 1994; Brosius and Bathelt 1994) found that such vox pop interviews influence audience judgments such as media credibility, perceived severity of an issue, perceived public opinion and even individual opinions. Moreover, vox pop statements were found to be more influential than statements of elite sources such as experts and politicians (Lefevere, De Swert, and Walgrave 2012).

However, research so far has not provided insight into vox pop characteristics *beyond* what the interviewees are actually saying. Who are the people that are shown in vox pop interviews? Without specific introduction, audiences nevertheless seem to understand that the opinion of the common man or woman on the street is shown in the above example, so visual cues are probably quite important here. In journalistic handbooks, several practical guidelines are given about vox pop characteristics, emphasizing that vox pops should be the best possible representation of the public (e.g. Boyd 2001; Hudson and Rowlands 2007). Journalists are also encouraged to represent people with diverse characteristics. Editorial guidelines, however, stress that journalists should always emphasize that vox pops are not a representation of the general public, as they are always a selection. Different from other news sources where journalists have less choice of who makes it into the news (De Swert 2013), vox pops provide journalists with much freedom to select the sources they prefer in television news. Little is known about which characteristics make that certain people are selected by journalists and make it into the news as vox pops. Who do journalists select as representative of "the public" and how are these vox pop interviews contextualized in the news? This is the question this research tackles by means of an in-depth content analysis of vox pop interviews in Flemish television news broadcasts in the period 2003-2013, supplemented by interviews with television journalists.

What is a Vox Pop?

In order to study vox pop characteristics, we need a conceptualization of what a vox pop interview is. Previous research used slightly varying definitions and descriptions. Some included actors such as event participants and eye witnesses as vox pops, while others excluded these actors. Lefevere, De Swert, and Walgrave (2012, 103) describe vox pops as "common people that are apparently randomly selected by journalists to illustrate a news story". This description

stresses the notion of a “random selection” but also the fact that they are “apparently” random or that suggesting their randomness is what journalists aim for (see also: De Swert 2013, 1; Bosch 2014, 3). Bosch (2014) states that the apparent randomness of these vox pop interviews and the absence of professional credentials and expertise likely contributes to the perception that these interviews represent the thoughts of everyday citizens. De Swert (2013, 2) introduces a description that combines these elements: according to him, a vox pop is “when an apparently randomly selected common person gets the opportunity to give a personal statement in the news” and adds that a vox pop statement is a statement that is not issued by an organization.

De Swert (2013) also refers to the concept of replaceability. He emphasizes that for vox pops it is not important who speaks, any other person can easily replace the interviewee since they do not own any exclusive information. A difference can be made between someone who is associated with the news fact and someone who is not directly involved. The first group can be seen as irreplaceable, the second group as replaceable. An example can clarify this difference. Imagine a case of police brutality, in which the police violently proceeded with arresting a shoplifter. A man who has seen the incident happen and is talking about what he saw (e.g. "I saw the police throw the person harshly on the ground") is irreplaceable. This person is an eye witness of the situation and becomes temporarily newsworthy (De Swert 2013). Other examples of these non-elite irreplaceable news sources are victims and their friends and family. When covering the police brutality item, journalists can interview another type of non-elite sources: vox pops. Random people on a shopping street are approached giving their views on the news issue (e.g. “I think police is too violent, they should be controlled more severely.” or “It is a good thing that the police acts effectively to violence.”). These people are replaceable, because the journalists can choose any person in the shopping street (or in any other place) to state his/her opinion since he/she has no direct connection to the incident.

What all these conceptualizations of vox pops have in common is that they emphasize that vox pops should give the impression they represent the public sentiment by highlighting their apparent randomness and ordinariness. We choose to use a strict conceptualization of vox pops, where other citizen sources such as eye witnesses are excluded. Integrating all components of the abovementioned descriptions, a vox pop is defined here as: “an apparently randomly chosen ordinary individual without any affiliation who is interviewed by journalists for a news outlet, conveying a personal statement in a news item”.

The Journalistic Selection Process

It is hard for journalists to cover mere factual information in the news and at the same time retain the attention of the audience (Daschmann and Brosius 1999). This is one of the reasons why, according to previous research, vox pops are such a common journalistic practice, evident in both print and broadcast news (Arpan 2009). Journalists include vox pops in news items because they add a human element and because they are vivid and attract attention (Arpan 2009; Zillmann and Brosius 2000). Beyond that, they serve a more substantive goal of representing the general public in the news (Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005; Myers 2004). Journalists can use vox pops to balance elite sources in the news and represent regular, non-elite individuals (Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005, 72).

As a consequence, in key journalistic handbooks such as “*Introduction to Journalism*” (Fleming et al. 2005) and “*The Broadcast Journalism Handbook*” (Hudson and Rowlands 2007), vox pops are prescribed as having to present different voices and having to be made up of a variety of people: “Alternate between male and female, young and old.” (Boyd 2001, 118), “In

most cases you need to try to get a variety of voices covering both men and women, different ages and different ethnic backgrounds” (Fleming et al. 2005 101). Hudson and Rowlands (2007) also emphasize that journalists should strive to show a diverse cross-section of people. Other visual characteristics such as the background might also play an important role in telling a story in television news using vox pops. The authors state that characteristics of the vox pops can underline the image that the general public is represented:

If your selection includes young and old, an ethnic mix, disabled people, and even a sample of well-dressed and scruffy individuals (for TV), you will give the audience the quite correct impression that you have tried to canvass a broad range of views. (111).

Academic research states that the public does not wonder whether vox pops are a representative sample of the population as long as the audience can imagine that ‘the public’ is represented (Myers 2004) through the use of a mix of age and gender groups. There exists some research on exemplar characteristics in general in the American context (e.g. Hubbard 2011), finding that exemplars are not a good representation of the population for characteristics such as gender. However, these studies focused on all exemplars in the news (e.g. also elite sources), while this research focuses specifically on vox pops. Bosch (2014) conducted an experiment where he asked respondents about the ‘perceived typicality’ of different news sources (protesters, interest groups and vox pops) and found vox pops to be perceived as most typical for the American population. Moreover, Andsager et al. (2006) found that when people perceive exemplars –in this case vox pops- as being similar to themselves, for instance based on demographic group, the effectiveness of a message increases. Brosius (1999), however, did not find an effect of perceived similarity on vox pop influence.

So, several guidelines exist about how vox pops should be conducted and what characteristics journalists should focus on when selecting vox pop interviewees. The question rises whether and how journalists apply these journalistic guidelines in practice. Non-verbal visual characteristics such as clothing, accessories and the background (e.g. a shopping bag or a clothing style) might convey messages about how to interpret the meaning of a situation (here the vox pop interview), the persons depicted (Knapp, Halland and Horgan 2013, 190; Berger 2013, 11) and the influence of the message (Bosch 2014; Andsager et al. 2006). This study focuses on how journalists construct the image that vox pops are representative of the general public using certain vox pop characteristics. Therefore, this study focuses on which visual characteristics of people journalists search for in vox pops and consequently find adequate to represent the whole population.

RQ1: What are the visual characteristics of vox pop interviews in Flemish television news?

In addition to these practical guidelines of vox pop selection from journalistic handbooks, several editorial guidelines published by broadcasters underline the importance of providing context about vox pop interviews. While handbooks provide guidelines to present vox pops as a representative sample, the editorial guidelines stress that vox pops can never really be an actual representative sample of the public and that journalists should thus always contextualize the vox pop interviews. The *BBC* guidelines state: “we must not imply the samples are representative and we should be explicit in describing their purpose and limitations” and warns not to use generalizing introductions (BBC 2014). The Flemish public service broadcaster also published a specific guideline concerning vox pops: “vox pops are not representative of the entire population

[...], never present them as being ‘the’ opinion” (VRT 2015). In some journalistic handbooks, the non-representativeness of the vox pops is also emphasized: “Don’t kid yourself that vox pops represent a true reflection of public opinion. Any sample taken in a shopping centre during the daytime, for example, cannot be representative of the population at large” (Hudson and Rowlands 2007, 111). So, while there are journalistic handbooks urging journalists to display an as representative sample as possible, journalists are also inquired by editorial guidelines and handbooks to pay attention to the context of the interviews and emphasize vox pops’ non-representativeness. This study analyzes how vox pops interviews are contextualized in television news, namely what information is given along with the interviews. Focus will lie on the introduction and description of vox pops in the news.

RQ2: How are vox pop interviews introduced and contextualized in Flemish television news?

Method

To answer these two research questions, this study focuses on vox pop characteristics in Flemish television news broadcasts. We specifically focus on vox pops in television news for three reasons. First, it can be expected that the visual characteristics of vox pops, which are absent in print news, are crucial aspects of influence and are defining for a vox pop. Visual characteristics might convey strong messages (Knapp, Halland and Horgan 2013, 190), in this case about the representativeness of the vox pops of the general public. Second, vox pops are much more prevalent in television news than in print media. Vox pops make out on average four out of ten references to public opinion in US and UK television news, while this is lower than 15% in print news (Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005, 93). Third, for most people, television news is their main source of information, making a better understanding hereof essential (Morone 2013). We further opted to study the Flemish case. Flanders is the largest, Dutch-speaking Northern region of Belgium. In Flanders, TV news is very popular and the 19h (7 pm.) news broadcasts from the two main broadcasters (public service broadcaster *Eén* and main commercial channel *VTM*) are among the most watched programs, together reaching around 2 million viewers every day, over 30% of all Flemings (CIM 2015). We expect that the specific characteristics of vox pops are country and culture specific, but it can be expected that the construction of representativeness will be similar across cultures, since similar journalistic definitions and guidelines concerning vox pops are used across countries.

We conducted a content analysis of Flemish newscasts of the two main broadcasters in Flanders (public service broadcaster *Eén* and commercial channel *VTM*) from 2003 to 2013. An in-depth coding was conducted based on a random sample of 568 news items containing vox pops. This random sample was drawn from a population dataset (Electronic News Archive¹) containing all television news items from *Eén* and *VTM* from the period 2003-2013 (7,844 news broadcasts comprising 155,707 news items). Overall, the population dataset contained 9,527 news items comprising one or more vox pops (6.1%). Vox pops were most prevalent in news items about politics (25% of all news items containing vox pops), social affairs (14.4%) and mobility (12.3%). Subsequently, we drew a random sample of 568 news items containing at least one vox pop from the larger dataset containing all vox pop items,. The units of analysis were the individual vox pops. Approximately 180 Flemish vox pops for every year were included and this for a period of eleven years (N=2,000). On average, there were 3.51 vox pops per news item (SD=1.92). The number of vox pops per news item ranged from one to fifteen vox pops. In order

to provide a more comprehensive picture of vox pops in television news, the content analysis data were supplemented with interviews with Flemish television journalists.

In-depth Codings

Contextual Characteristics

To gain an understanding of how vox pops are used in the news, coding started by identifying if and how the vox pops in the news item were introduced by providing a description of the introduction, if present. It was further indicated whether the name of the vox pop was mentioned (0 or 1) and a literal description of the function as shown in a caption on screen if present was given.

We also examined whether the vox pops could be considered as part of the entire population (in this case Flanders) or a subpopulation. A vox pop represents the entire population (“the Flemings”) if the person being interviewed can be replaced by any person from the population in any place (e.g. a person on a shopping street interviewed about politics can be replaced by a person in a train station). A vox pop belongs to a subpopulation when the person can only be replaced by any other person from a subgroup of the population (e.g. parents at the school gate, car drivers). A teenager who is interviewed about smoking among teenagers, for instance, cannot be replaced by an adult person on a shopping street, but can be replaced by any other teenager. Evidently, people belonging to a subpopulation also belong to the Flemish population, but are being interviewed based on having certain characteristics or functions they have at the moment of the interview and that make them somehow relevant. When looking at the population the interviewed vox pops represent, we find that half of the vox pops are selected from a subpopulation (50.9%), while the other half are presented as representing the entire Flemish population (49.1%). Since half of the interviewed persons are presented as being representative of the whole Flemish population, the vox pop interviews could have taken place anywhere in Flanders and the vox pops could have been replaced by any other common person, regardless of their characteristics. For this reason, the results in this paper focus on vox pops representing the entire Flemish population (N=977), making it possible to gain a better understanding of how the journalists try to reach representativeness using vox pops. So vox pops representing a subpopulation are omitted from the results.

Visual Characteristics

Furthermore, visual characteristics of every vox pop were coded. Gender (male, female, other), age group (child 0-12, teenager 13-18, young adult 19-29, adult 30-49, middle age 50-64, old age 65-80, elderly 81+) and ethnicity (white, mediterranean, black, asian or other, scale based on Koeman, Peeters, and d'Haenens 2007) were determined for every vox pop. The age group of the vox pops was estimated based on visible characteristics or cues given in the news item (e.g. a woman with a young child, a person referring to his/her retirement), as the specific age of the individuals was hardly ever mentioned explicitly. Since little information was given about the vox pops shown, coding ethnicity was difficult. It was impossible to ascertain where all the vox pops appearing on screen were born and we had to resort to a conceptualization based on visibility. Physical characteristics such as skin color and hair type were our cues here. Next, the clothing of every vox pop was coded by checking of clothing items from a list of garments (e.g. t-shirt, dressed shirt, tie). Headgear was coded in a similar way (e.g. casual cap, headscarf), next to

a description of accessories (e.g. shopping bag, umbrella). Moreover, the background of the vox pop was described, on top of a designation whether the vox pop was interviewed in a public (e.g. shopping street) or private place (e.g. private home). Furthermore, we coded whether the person interviewed had a (visible) disability (0 or 1 and description). Tattoos and piercings of the vox pops were also described.

We paid much attention to intercoder reliability. In the first stage of the research, the codebook was pretested on 130 vox pops. Next, four coders were selected and followed an extensive training. After the training, every coder coded the same 20 vox pops, and intercoder reliability was calculated to steer and prevent wrong codings early on in the study (all variables reached Krippendorff's alpha values higher than .75 in this phase). Lastly, at the end of the research, intercoder reliability was calculated on a random sample of 122 vox pops (6.1%). Table 1 contains the exact values for all variables of interest in this study.

Insert Table 1 around here

Interviews with Journalists

To supplement the data from the content analysis of vox pops in Flemish television news, we conducted three interviews with Flemish television journalists. These face-to-face interviews were semi-structured. The interviews were used to provide some context and were not the main focus of our study. Two journalists from public service broadcaster *Eén* and one from commercial broadcaster *VTM* were interviewed. In Flanders, the news broadcasts from the public service broadcaster reach a larger audience than news broadcasts from the commercial broadcaster (CIM 2015). The journalists were contacted using an email to the editors-in-chief of the two broadcasters, asking for contact information of journalists who work with vox pops regularly. First, we asked general questions concerning the function, use and practical conduct of vox pop interviews. Second, questions concerning the selection of vox pops and their representative function were asked. Third, the journalists were asked about specific vox pop characteristics (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity) and finally, the journalists were presented data from the content analysis to ask their point of view about the findings. This way, it was possible to gain an understanding of the process and selection of a vox pop interview, as well as an explanation for some of the findings of the content analysis. The interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and imported in NVivo 10 software and coded manually assigning categories to the data. The interview guide can be found in Appendix A.

Results

The presentation of the findings follows the structure of a vox pop interview, based on the 977 vox pops representing the entire Flemish population. The different outcomes will be discussed in terms of how journalists use the components of a vox pop interview to convey the perception that the selected vox pops are representative of the population as a whole. The results of the content analysis will be supplemented by the interview data and these findings will be added to every specific subsection of the results.

Contextual Characteristics

In 11.4% of the selected news items containing vox pops, an explicit introduction was given, providing some context and emphasizing the randomness and ordinariness of the vox pops. This was done by referring to the place of the interviews (e.g. “Our reporter gathered reactions in *Sluis* (village).” *VTM*, January 23, 2003) or by referring explicitly to the “man or woman on the street” or “common people”. Occasionally, the fact that the vox pops were selected randomly was highlighted (e.g. “All people we have approached randomly agreed” *Eén*, June 19, 2008). In some cases the news item specifically explained the method used to collect the vox pops (e.g. “A team of editors went to the railway station in Brussels and drew some reactions of citizens” *Eén*, December 1, 2004). 88.6% of the news items proceeded to the vox pops without further explanation or introduction. In the interviews, journalists confirmed that vox pops do not need an introduction, “As it is evident because you see it” (journalist 2, *Eén*) and “assuming that they [the viewers] understand the imagery” (journalist 1, *Eén*).

Moreover, contrary to all other actors shown in the news items, vox pops were rarely shown with a caption describing their occupation or function. While other actors were always introduced this way (e.g. “financial expert”; “CEO Fortis”; “teacher”, N=1,168), only 3.3% of the vox pops were identified by a function description (e.g. random passerby). In 7% of the vox pop interviews, the name (first and/or last name) of the interviewee was mentioned, the remainder of the vox pops in the sample remained anonymous. Again, this is in contrast to other actors in the news, whose name was almost always mentioned (88%). This absence of identification emphasizes the replaceability and ordinariness of the vox pops and their lack of expertise.

Visual Characteristics

Gender & Age

The distribution of gender of the vox pops was balanced: 48.9% of the vox pops interviewed was female, 51.1% male. In 2015, the Flemish population consisted of 50.6% females and 49.4% males (Bestat 2015). The vox pops were thus an almost perfect representation of the population regarding gender. The journalists all indicated that this representation of gender is a deliberate choice.

The journalist should not return with a one-sided sample [of vox pops], for instance only women. A sample must be a cross-section of the population. (journalist 3, *VTM*)

Imagine you have interviewed a man first, then it is not illogical that for those other quotes a woman will be interviewed. I am not saying this should be the case, but I try to find a balance so that the voices heard have a number of basic differences. (journalist 2, *Eén*)

You need to ensure that you have a good cross-section of the population, but of course you cannot be complete. [...]. So you should try to get hold of different kinds of people: men, women. In terms of age the selection also needs to be a bit mixed. (journalist 1, *Eén*)

The distribution of age groups was also close to reality (see Table 2), although people between 19 and 64 were over-represented in the vox pop sample. However, 19-64 years olds also compose the largest age group in the Flemish population. Minors under 18 are the second largest group, but are under-represented in the vox pop sample, just as persons above 65 (Bestat 2015).

The distribution of age and gender resembling their distribution in reality shows that journalists try to search for a balanced representation of different population groups for these characteristics.

Insert Table 2 around here

Ethnicity

The large majority of vox pops interviewed were identified as “white” (97.6%) and this number is far removed from the actual composition of the Flemish population of which it is estimated that around 15-20% are ethnic-cultural minorities, either with a foreign nationality or born in another country than Belgium (Bestat 2015). Of course, not all of these ethnic-cultural minorities can be identified based on visible characteristics. However, given the large difference we can assume that the representation of ethnicities in vox pop interviews is not in correspondence with their representation in the population.

In the interviews, the journalists all indicated that this is no conscious decision. This contrasts with the representation of age and gender, where the journalists stated to deliberately search for a balanced distribution. As journalist 3 (VTM) mentioned: “We really, honestly do not look at skin color. But we also do not count. When you count, you will probably find that they [ethnic-cultural minorities] are under-represented.”.

Background

The large majority (98.0%) of the vox pops were interviewed in a public place. The remainder were interviewed in their private homes or in semi-public places such as classrooms. The most prevalent backgrounds were crowded (shopping) streets, train stations, parking lots, gas stations and weekly markets and thus often display other people in the background. This strengthens the feeling that it could have been anyone in this public place who could have been addressed by the journalist, again emphasizing the randomness of the vox pops. The journalists also confirmed this: “You can see that they are randomly present somewhere. You can see this by the fact that they are filmed on the ‘Meir’ [shopping street], in front of a store.” (journalist 1, *Eén*).

Disabilities, Clothing and Visual Cues

Of the 977 vox pops investigated, none of the vox pops had a visible disability. According to Verbelen et al. (2005) ten to fifteen percent of the Flemish population between 15 and 64 has severe or mild mental or physical disabilities. Of course, not all of these disabilities are visible, but if vox pops would be a realistic representation of the population, we would expect individuals with disabilities in our sample.

88.3% of the persons displayed were dressed casually, 11.7% formally. A person was coded as dressed formally if (s)he was wearing one or more pieces of formal clothing. One person in the dataset had a visible piercing and also one person had a visible tattoo. The mainly informal clothing style of the vox pops emphasizes that they are ordinary people, without any expertise or representative function. Lastly, some vox pops were displayed with specific cues emphasizing that they are common, randomly approached persons. There were cases where the vox pops were interviewed while eating ice cream or drinking coffee. Other examples were people holding shopping bags. These cues again diversify vox pops from elite actors in the news.

The journalists all mentioned that they do not deliberately search for specific body types or clothing styles. However, one of the journalists indicated that the appearance of a vox pop should appeal to the public.

It is not that we search for someone with size 90-60-90 to talk in the news. Or that we search for a beautiful 25-year-old woman or a polished man of 40. But in all honesty, the people who make it into the news and have their say must be a bit desirable. (journalist 3, *VTM*)

Production Process of Vox Pop Interviews

In the interviews with the journalists, we also asked more general questions about journalistic practice and the selection of vox pops. First, specific questions about the conduct of vox pops were asked. The journalists indicated that they interview several people and that they select the best vox pops afterwards. However, sometimes journalists know on beforehand which story they want to tell and they stop interviewing when they have the point of view they want: “Once you know what things you need, once you have found them, you know. And when you manage to do so with the first [person interviewed], you are happy.” (Journalist 3, *VTM*). In general, the journalists mentioned that they search for points of view which they think represent the sentiment among the population, and that they “do not deliberately search for a vox pop against because all other vox pops were for” (Journalist 2, *Eén*). However, with controversial subjects, they state that they try to search for opinions for and against: “certainly with controversial topics you do search for arguments representing all stances, pro and contra.” (Journalist 1, *Eén*).

Next, we asked how journalists try to depict the representativeness of the selected vox pops of the general population. All journalists mentioned that vox pops are selected to represent a larger population and that it is a deliberate choice to show a variety of people, in line with existing journalistic guidelines: “Actually we follow our gut, it [selection] happens on sight. We try to have a good cross-section of the population.” (journalist 1, *Eén*). Journalist 1 also mentioned that they search for people who do not stand out too much, but are “rather ordinary”. So, we know journalists try to search for a cross-section and a representation of the population by showing different vox pops, which we also found in the content analysis. Moreover, the journalists select people who do not stand out. But they also indicated that they search for specific characteristics when selecting individual vox pops:

The opinion must come from someone, about whom the average viewer says: “I want to have a conversation with him/her at a bar, when he or she is sitting next to me at the table. And when that person starts a conversation with me about the matter, I want to have a conversation about it. Unfortunately, there are people you do not want this with. (journalist 3, *VTM*)

Conclusion & Discussion

The goal of this research was to identify the visual and contextual characteristics of vox pop interviews. How do journalists represent the general population in television news? To our knowledge, this study was the first to focus on vox pop characteristics. Several journalistic

handbooks underline that journalists should try to present a cross-section of the population in which more or less all population groups are represented (e.g. Fleming et al. 2005; Hudson and Rowlands 2007). For some characteristics this is the case, for others, journalists fail to do so in practice. Editorial guidelines stress the importance of providing context with the vox pop interviews. However, our study finds this is hardly ever done.

Vox pop interviews have a recurring context and characteristics, which seem unchanged over the years and across the Belgian broadcasters under study (public service broadcaster *Eén* and main commercial broadcaster *VTM*). Striking about the vox pop interviews is that only a small minority was preceded by an explicit introduction or further explanation of their function. Non-verbal cues are apparently considered enough to convey to the public that the ordinary man or woman on the street was selected randomly and interviewed. This is in contradiction with several editorial guidelines (e.g. BBC 2014, VRT 2015) advising journalists to always accompany vox pops with context clarifying that they are not representative of the entire population in order to avoid that the public will make wrongful generalizations. As the coverage of a seemingly heterogeneous group of everyday people creates the image that the points of view of the entire population are shown, these explicit or implicit generalizations related to vox pop interviews might be consequential (Zillmann and Brosius 2000). Vox pops are almost always a biased representation of public opinion, as it is very hard to grasp “the” public opinion (Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005). They might therefore influence the public to make wrongful generalizations. Several previous studies already established that vox pop statements influence perceived public opinion of the public in the direction of the vox pop bias (Arpan 2009; Daschmann 2000). Not only might this –sometimes subtle- biasing in the vox pop selection process affect how audiences think about the news issue, they might also create an idea about the “typical” member of the population (Bosch 2014). When certain groups are systematically excluded from the vox pop interviews, a perception of these excluded groups as being ‘atypical’ might be constructed in the heads of the audiences (Campbell 1995, 12). What is more, when some population groups have less chances to have their say in the news, certain points of view might be excluded or underrepresented in the news. This might be consequential, because when people perceive their own opinion as shared by few others, they are less likely to express their own point of view and might even adapt it (Festinger 1954; Noelle-Neumann 1974).

This research focused on several characteristics of vox pops in Flemish television news to analyze how journalists underline that the selected people represent the entire population. The vox pops in this study were primarily interviewed in public, crowded places and were in general dressed informally, without any outstanding features such as tattoos and piercings. This paper finds vox pops to be a good representation of the population for age and gender, implying their “random selection”. This is in contrast with other (elite) news sources, where male, middle-aged men are often over-represented (Vandenberghe, d’Haenens, and Van Gorp 2015, Soley 1992). However, vox pops are not a good representation of ethnic-cultural groups in society. This is again comparable with previous research into news sources, but while with other sources journalists are more dependent on the available sources, with vox pops the journalists are able to select the sources they prefer (De Swert 2013). They are thus able to actively try to represent ethnic-cultural minorities. Lastly, we could not find any vox pop with a (visible) disability in our sample, while, again, journalists probably had some opportunity to do so.

The findings pose some interesting challenges for journalistic practice. Vox pops are presented, or at least suggested, as randomly selected common individuals representing public opinion. Several authoritative journalistic handbooks emphasize the importance of presenting a cross-section of the population using vox pops. However, this study shows that vox pops in some

regards provide a biased representation of the population. They give a one-sided image of the white man or woman without any outstanding features and rather represent the average *stereotypical* Fleming - for instance the ethnic-cultural majority. What is more, the vox pops are not supplemented with contextualizing information stressing the non-representativeness of the selected vox pops. It is probably not always a conscious choice not to include certain people as vox pops. Interviews with journalists revealed that the under-representation of, for instance, ethnic-cultural minorities and persons with disabilities was not a deliberate choice and the journalists indicated that this is a concern. Under—or even not—representing several groups in society might imply some sort of “otherness” of the excluded population groups, whereby they are perceived as not belonging to the general population (Campbell 1995, 42). Journalists could try to include these “minorities” in their vox pop interviews as a representation of the entire population and not only when these individuals are linked to the subject (e.g. a news item about the accessibility of buildings where a person in a wheelchair is being interviewed) since these groups are evidently also part of the general population.

This study focused on broadcast news where vox pops are most prevalent. However, vox pops are also a popular source in several news media such as print and online media (e.g. Paulussen and Harder 2014; Beckers and Harder 2016). However, a large part of vox pop influence is expected to be ascribed to visual cues absent in print and online media. The visual characteristics of someone being interviewed are much more important for television than for print and online media, where other vox pop characteristics probably will play a role. Also, caution has to be paid to the interpretation of the interview data, as only three journalists were interviewed. The explorative interview data only served to provide some context and we hope it serves as a means to open the path to future qualitative research into vox pop practice.

This research focused on vox pop characteristics and provided some understanding of the journalistic production process of vox pops. Several previous studies found an influence of vox pop statements on audience judgments (e.g. Arpan 2009; Lefevere, De Swert, and Walgrave 2012; Daschmann 2000; Gibson and Zillmann 1994; Brosius and Bathelt 1994). Numerous editorial guidelines put forward that context about vox pops’ practical conduct should be given (BBC 2014; VRT 2015). In practice, we find that this is hardly ever the case. Our findings underscore the need for a critical reflection on the use of vox pops in the newsroom, as they might lead to audience members making wrongful generalizations about public opinion which over time might even influence individuals’ own points of view. The question arises whether providing context about the non-representativeness of vox pops can undermine these strong vox pop effects on audience judgments. Furthermore, future research might study whether the studied vox pop characteristics matter and whether they also influence audience judgments. In the current research, we only studied broadcasters in one country (Flanders, Belgium). Evidently, vox pops are always a representation of the population of a certain country/region. Although we do not expect large differences, future studies might address vox pop characteristics in other media systems. It can be expected, however, that the journalistic practice to present vox pops as random and ordinary as possible to construct representativeness will be similar in other countries.

NOTES

1. For more information on the ENA and the coding procedure, see www.nieuwsarchief.be.

REFERENCES

- Andsager, Julie L., Victoria Bemker, Hong-Lim Choi, and Vitalis Torwel. 2006. "Perceived Similarity of Exemplar Traits and Behavior Effects on Message Evaluation." *Communication Research* 33 (1): 3-18. doi: 10.1177/0093650205283099.
- Arpan, Laura M. 2009. "The Effects of Exemplification on Perceptions of News Credibility." *Mass Communication and Society* 12 (3): 249-270. doi: 10.1080/1520543080213672.
- BBC. 2014. "Opinion Polls, Surveys, Questionnaires, Votes and 'Straw Polls'." <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/advice/opinionpolls/voxpops.shtml>.
- Beckers, Kathleen, and Raymond A. Harder. 2016. "Twitter Just Exploded". Social Media as Alternative Vox Pop." *Digital Journalism*. Advance online publication: 1-11. doi: 10.1080/21670811.2016.1161493.
- Berger, Arthur A. 2013. *Media Analysis Techniques*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Bestat. 2015. "Bevolking naar woonplaats, nationaliteit, burgerlijke staat, leeftijd en geslacht." <http://bestat.economie.fgov.be/BeStat/BeStatMultidimensionalAnalysis?LoadDefaultId=290>.
- Bosch, Brandon. 2014. "Beyond Vox Pop: The Role of News Sourcing and Political Beliefs in Exemplification Effects." *Mass Communication and Society* 17 (2): 1-19. doi: 10.1080/15205436.2013.779718.
- Boyd, Andrew. 2001. *Broadcast Journalism: Techniques of Radio and Television News*. Oxford: Focal Press.
- Brosius, Hans-Bernd, and Anke Bathelt. 1994. "The Utility of Exemplars in Persuasive Communications." *Communication Research* 21 (1): 48-78. doi: 10.1177/009365094021001004.
- Campbell, Christopher P. 1995. *Race, Myth and the News*. Sage Publications.
- CIM. 2015. "Openbare resultaten trafiekstudie." <http://www.cim.be/media/Televisie/Openbareresultaten>.
- Daschmann, Gregor. 2000. "Vox Pop & Polls: The Impact of Poll Results and Voter Statements in the Media on the Perception of a Climate of Opinion." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 12 (2): 160-181. doi: 10.1093/ijpor/12.2.160.
- Daschmann, Gregor, and Hans-Bernd Brosius. 1999. "Can a Single Incident Create an Issue? Exemplars in German Television Magazine Shows." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 76 (1): 35-51. doi: 10.1177/107769909907600104.
- De Swert, Knut, Stefaan Walgrave, Marc Hooghe, Volkan Uce, and Anne Hardy. 2008. *Het Vlaamse televisienieuws onder de loep: Een vergelijkend onderzoek 2003-2008 [Focus on Flemish television news: A comparative analysis 2003-2008]*. Flanders, Belgium: ENA (Electronic News Archive) report for the Minister of Media.
- De Swert, Knut. 2013. "Explaining the Use of Vox Pops in Television News: An International Comparison." The annual meeting of the International Communication Association, London, England, June 17-21 2013.

- Fleming, Carole, Emma Hemmingway, Gillian Moore, and Dave Welford. 2005. *Introduction to Journalism*. London: Sage.
- Festinger, Leon. 1954. "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes." *Human Relations* 7 (2): 117-140. doi: 10.1177/001872675400700202.
- Gibson, Rhonda, and Dolf Zillmann. 1994. "Exaggerated Versus Representative Exemplification in News Reports Perception of Issues and Personal Consequences." *Communication Research* 21 (5): 603-624. doi: 10.1177/009365094021005003.
- Hubbard, Lincoln T. 2011. "A Content Analysis of Exemplars in Weekly US News Magazines." Dissertation., Brigham Young University.
- Hudson, Gary, and Sarah Rowlands. 2007. *The Broadcast Journalism Handbook*. Essex: Pearson Education.
- Knapp, Mark, Judith Hall, and Terrence Horgan. 2013. *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction*. Boston: Wadsworth.
- Koeman, Joyce, Allerd Peeters, and Leen d'Haenens. 2007. "Diversity Monitor 2005. Diversity as a Quality Aspect of Television in the Netherlands." *Communications* 32 (1): 97-121. doi: 10.1515/COMMUN.2007.005
- Lefevre, Jonas, Knut De Swert, and Stefaan Walgrave. 2012. "Effects of Popular Exemplars in Television News." *Communication Research* 39 (1): 103-119. doi: 10.1177/0093650210387124.
- Lewis, Justin, Sanna Inthorn, and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen. 2005. *Citizens or Consumers?: What the Media Tell Us About Political Participation*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Morone, James. 2013. "New Media, New Organizations, New Politics." In *New Technology, Organizational Change and Governance*, edited by Emmanuelle Avril and Christine Zumello, 133-150. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Myers, Greg. 2004. *Matters of Opinion: Talking about Public Issues*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Noelle-Neumann, Elisabeth. 1974. "The Spiral of Silence a Theory of Public Opinion." *Journal of Communication* 24 (2): 43-51. doi: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.1974.tb00367.x.
- Pantti, Mervi, and Karin Husslage. 2009. "Ordinary People and Emotional Expression in Dutch Public Service News." *Javnost- The Public* 16 (2): 77-94. doi: 10.1080/13183222.2009.11009005.
- Paulussen, Steve, and Raymond A. Harder. 2014. "Social Media References in Newspapers: Facebook, Twitter and YouTube as Sources in Newspaper Journalism." *Journalism Practice* 8 (5): 542-551. doi: 10.1080/17512786.2014.894327.
- Soley, Lawrence C. 1992. *The News Shapers: The Sources Who Explain the News*. New York: Praeger.
- Vandenberghe, Hanne, Leen d'Haenens, and Baldwin Van Gorp. 2015. "Demografische diversiteit in het Vlaamse perslandschap." *Tijdschrift voor Communicatiewetenschap* 43 (2): 169-185. doi: 10.5553/TCW/138469302015043002006.
- Verbelen, Jan, Erik Samoy, and Hendrik van Geel. 2005. "Vlamingen met een handicap of langdurige gezondheidsproblemen: een verkennende schets van hun sociale positie en hun situatiebeleving aan de hand van concrete onderzoekscijfers". *Stativaria* 34, Maart 2005.
- VRT. 2015. "10 richtlijnen over onpartijdigheid." http://www.vrt.be/sites/default/files/attachments/Richtlijnen-voor-onpartijdigheid_1.pdf.

Zillmann, Dolf, and Hans-Bernd Brosius. 2000. *Exemplification in Communication: The Influence of Case Reports on the Perception of Issues*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Table 1: Krippendorff’s alpha for key variables

Variable	KALPHA
Population/subpopulation	.76
Gender	.98
Age group	.87
Ethnicity	.85
Clothing (formal/informal)	.85
Background (public/private)	1
Caption/ function description	1

Table 2: Distribution of age groups in the vox pop sample (N=975) compared with the distribution in the Flemish population (N=6,444,127)

	Share in sample	Share in Flanders in 2015
Child (0-12)	1.9%	19.4%
Teenager (13-18)	3.6%	
Young adult (19-29)	21.2%	
Adult (30-49)	39.8%	61.2%
Middle aged (50-64)	21.8%	
Old age (65-80)	11.2%	19.4%
Elderly (81+)	0.4%	
Total	100%	100%

Appendix A

Interview guide

Key questions	Subquestions
What are, in your opinion, the functions of a vox pop interview in television news?	
Who decides if vox pops are included in a news item?	When is this decision taken?
Can you explain the process of the collection of vox pops?	
Are just as many vox pops included in the news item as there were interviewed?	And when and how does this selection happen?
Who decides which vox pops appear in the news item?	
Vox pop characteristics	
Do you seek for specific types of people?	Do you have a certain group in mind the vox pops should represent?
How is the selection of the place where the vox pops are being interviewed made?	Is there a certain logic behind this choice?
Are you looking for a certain distribution of gender?	
Are you looking for a certain distribution of age groups?	
Are you looking for a certain distribution of ethnic-cultural groups?	
Do you pay attention to other external characteristics of people when conducting vox pops?	- Clothing - Tattoos - Piercings - Disabilities