

## Research in brief

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# Vox pops in the news: The journalists' perspective

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**Abstract:** Vox pops are a frequent and growing practice in the news. However, there seems to be a general tendency in journalistic practice to be quite critical about these interviews with the ordinary (wo)man on the street. Yet, hardly any research exists about journalists' evaluation of vox pops or that has gone further than speculating about why they are used. This study tackles these research gaps using a survey involving 253 Belgian journalists. We conclude that vox pops are used mostly by audiovisual journalists, and that journalists seem to use them mostly because vox pops increase audience involvement with a news item. Generally, the journalists are quite negative about vox pops, but journalists who perceive them as involving and good public opinion tools are more positive. Against our expectations, the experience of journalists does not influence the evaluation nor the use of vox pops.

**Keywords:** journalists, professional opinions, survey, vox pops

## 1 Introduction

When consuming news, it is almost impossible not to come into contact with interviews with the ordinary man or woman on the street. These interviews, called vox pop interviews, are omnipresent in the news. Previous studies make assumptions about why these vox pops are so popular (e.g., Brookes, Lewis, and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004; Hudson and Rowlands, 2007; Pantti and Husslage, 2009). However, no systematic research exists analyzing why journalists use vox pops so frequently in the news and what they think about them.

Research into the occurrence of vox pops has found their use to be rising. In a study of Dutch television news, the share of vox pops increased from 4 % of all sources in 1993 to 9 % in 2006 (Pantti and Husslage, 2009). A similar

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increase was found in ten other countries with different media systems in the period 2003–2007, namely Belgium, France, Norway, Turkey, the UK, Canada, USA, Germany, Ireland and Italy (De Swert, Walgrave, Hooghe, Uce, and Hardy, 2008). A more recent Belgian study concluded that while in 2003 only half of the news broadcasts contained one or more vox pops, in 2013 this had risen to almost 80 % (Beckers et al., 2016). Vox pops are most frequent in audiovisual media (radio and television): While vox pops were found to make up on average four out of ten references to public opinion in US and UK television news in the period 2001–2002, they only comprised 15 % of the references in the newspaper *The New York Times* (US) and 3.4 % in *The Times* (UK) (Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005, p. 93). Also in radio broadcasting, vox pops have a long tradition of being a commonly used public opinion tool (p. 71).

Despite several speculations, previous research was never able to give a conclusive explanation as to why vox pops are ubiquitous in the news. Some studies assume they are used to make news items more recognizable for viewers since they have close proximity to the viewer (Pantti and Husslage, 2009). Thus, they are expected to create involvement of the audience with a news item, as audience members can identify with these ordinary persons (Lewis et al., 2005; Pantti and Husslage, 2009). Newsrooms nowadays are faced with increasing competition for audience share, and this is often assumed to be one of the main reasons why they bring more of ‘what the audience wants’, that is, personalized, human-interest news (Brants and De Haan, 2010; Bromley, 2014; Lewis et al., 2005, p. 9). Vox pops are an easy way to add this human angle to a news story, whether or not for commercial reasons.

However, next to committing audiences and attracting attention, the inclusion of vox pops in the news can serve a whole different purpose. Vox pops can also be seen as a form of democratization of the news, where citizens and their – political – views are represented (Gans, 2003; Lewis et al., 2005). Several authors state that vox pops are included in the news because they represent the general public in the news and are a display of public opinion (Brookes et al., 2004; Lewis et al., 2005). Hudson and Rowlands (2007, p. 111) even refer to vox pops as a “great way” to represent public opinion. Previous studies also found vox pops to be used regularly as a public opinion tool (Beckers, Walgrave, & Van den Bulck, 2016; Lewis et al., 2005). However, none of these previous studies focused specifically on vox pops from the journalists’ perspective and on the characteristics of those journalists. Instead, most studies merely made assumptions about why vox pops are used. Pantti and Husslage (2009) did conduct in-depth interviews with journalists focusing on the emotional role of vox pops and found that journalists do use them to add emotions to a news item. However, they did not study other motivations journalists have for using them. The

current paper studies journalists' motivations to use vox pops more systematically and is the first to include journalistic characteristics in the model.

Despite being used frequently in the news, journalists seem to have a general aversion to using vox pops as news sources, connected to a tendency to dismiss vox pops, and to treat them with indifference and sometimes resentment (Gans, 1979; Williams, Wardle, and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011). Journalistic handbooks also seem to suggest this rather negative attitude. Hudson and Rowlands (2007, p. 113) claim that many seasoned reporters do not like to conduct vox pops, and provide examples of experienced journalists calling vox pops “useless” and “humiliating” in a TV-show. It is assumed that vox pops are therefore outsourced regularly to inexperienced journalists and interns to spare more experienced journalists the trouble (Hudson and Rowlands, 2007). Several blog posts by journalists can be found mentioning similarly negative feelings regarding vox pops, for instance:

“Most reporters I know have a problem with vox pops: They hate doing them.” (Higgerson, 2013)

“Vox pops. Every journalist hates doing them.” (Cable, 2008)

“Vox pops have to be one of the most frustrating aspects of modern media.” (Maguire, 2006)

Despite several examples of journalists' apparent negative attitude towards vox pops, their share in the news is rising. This further warrants the aim of the current study to fill a research gap by moving beyond the assumptions or examples of individual journalists to contribute to the understanding of journalists' attitudes towards vox pops.

Using a large-scale survey comprising 253 Belgian journalists, this study tackles several of the above-mentioned issues. First, we study *which* journalists use vox pops. Second, we analyze possible *motivations* of journalists to include vox pops in the news. Third, we try to gain some understanding about journalists' *evaluation* of vox pops. This should allow us to come to some preliminary insights into journalists' motivations behind the use of vox pops and their attitudes towards them as a base to discuss a future research agenda on the topic.

## 2 Method

To obtain insight into journalists' views on vox pops, this study employed an online quantitative survey involving 253 Belgian journalists who, among other things, cover political news. This way, we were able to gain a more systematic

**Table 1:** Share of journalists per medium ( $N = 253$  journalists).

| Medium                  | <i>N</i> | Share  |
|-------------------------|----------|--------|
| Audiovisual (radio/TV)  | 115      | 45.6 % |
| Print                   | 102      | 40.5 % |
| Online                  | 17       | 6.7 %  |
| Press agency            | 12       | 4.8 %  |
| Undefined/several media | 6        | 2.4 %  |

understanding of journalists' perspectives and of characteristics of journalists that (do not) use vox pops. A list of 600 journalists was composed based on the databases of professional journalistic organizations ("*Vlaamse Vereniging voor Journalisten*" in Flanders and "*Association des Journalistes Professionnels*" in Wallonia), supplemented with author names found in different news media. The survey ran from November 13, 2015 until January 4, 2016. The journalists were contacted through e-mail and filled in the survey online. In a later phase, journalists who had not yet responded to the e-mail received a telephone reminder. The response rate was 42 %. In total, 168 Flemish and 85 Walloon journalists completed the survey. Half (51 %) of the journalists stated that 5 or fewer of their latest 10 news items covered politics.

The survey was conducted using *Qualtrics*. Several socio-demographic variables such as age, gender and region were inquired. Next, specific questions about the journalist's profession were asked: the type of medium they work for and their years of experience as a journalist. The majority of journalists were male (73.9 %), and they were on average 42 years old ( $M = 41.99$ ,  $SD = 11.42$ ), ranging from 24 to 79. In Table 1, the medium the journalists work for most is shown.<sup>1</sup> On average, the journalists had 17.05 years of experience as a journalist ( $SD = 10.73$ ), with a minimum of one year and a maximum of 55.

The survey also asked questions focusing specifically on vox pops. First, journalists had to indicate whether they had used one or more vox pops (specified as "interviews with the ordinary man or woman on the street") in the past month (0 or 1). Second, all journalists were presented with two motivation statements about vox pops ("vox pops increase the involvement of the audience with a news item", "vox pops give the public an idea about public opin-

<sup>1</sup> Radio and television journalists were combined in the category "audiovisual journalist", as for many journalists it was not possible to ascertain whether they worked exclusively for radio or television based on the medium mentioned and because little differences between these journalists were expected. A separate analysis for radio and television journalists did indeed not influence the results and supports our decision to combine them into one category.

ion”) about which they had to indicate how much they agree with these statements on a five-point scale (from totally disagree to totally agree). Third, a vox pop evaluation statement was given (“vox pops are used too often in the news”). Fourth, journalists who had used vox pops were also presented with the statement: “I add vox pops to a news item when no other sources are available”.

3 Results

3.1 Who uses vox pops and why?

89 of the 253 (35 %) journalists state they have used one or more vox pops in at least one of their news items in the past month. Looking at the share of journalists per medium who have used vox pops, it can be seen that journalists working for radio and/or television used vox pops most frequently: More than half of these journalists used one or more vox pops in their news items in the past month (Table 2). Journalists working for (online) print media used vox pops less often. This is probably because in print and online media, vox pops need more context and introduction than when visible and audible cues are present. Vox pops thus require more space in a written news item, making them less attractive.

Besides looking at the characteristics of the journalists using vox pops, we also looked at possible motivations for using them. The reasons mentioned most often in the literature include that vox pops increase audience involvement and are a way to represent public opinion. Almost half of the journalists think vox pops increase the involvement of the public with a news item (Table 3). Next, we inquired about the public opinion role of vox pops. When asking the journalist whether they think vox pops give an idea of what the population thinks about a news story, the majority of journalists disagrees (54.7 %). Journalists

**Table 2:** Share of journalists per medium who used vox pops in the past month (*N* = 253 journalists).

| Medium       | Share using vox pops |
|--------------|----------------------|
| Audiovisual  | 51.3 %               |
| Print        | 25.5 %               |
| Online       | 5.9 %                |
| Press agency | 16.7 %               |

**Table 3:** Motivation statements ( $N = 253$ ).

| Statement  | disagree | neutral | agree  |
|--|----------|---------|--------|
| Vox pops increase the involvement of the audience with a news item | 28.6 %   | 27.0 %  | 44.5 % |
| Vox pops give the public an idea about public opinion              | 54.7 %   | 16.7 %  | 28.6 % |

**Table 4:** Logistic regression analysis with vox pop usage as dependent variable ( $N = 253$ ).

|                            | Vox pop usage |       |
|----------------------------|---------------|-------|
|                            | B             | Odds  |
| Age                        | .044          | 1.045 |
| Gender                     | .004          | 1.004 |
| Region                     | −1.025*       | .359  |
| Audiovisual journalist     | −1.214**      | .297  |
| Experience journalist      | −.072         | .930  |
| Motivation: public opinion | .245          | 1.278 |
| Motivation: involvement    | .976***       | 2.654 |
| <b>Pseudo R-square</b>     |               |       |
| Cox and Snell              | .260          |       |
| Nagelkerke                 | .357          |       |

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

generally think vox pops are not an appropriate representation of general public opinion.

We conducted a logistic regression analysis with vox pop use as dependent variable. As independent variables, we inserted the experience of the journalist (in years) and a dummy “audiovisual journalist” (radio/television = 1). Next, the two motivation statements mentioned in Table 3 were added to the model to explain the use of vox pops in the news. The age, gender and region (Wallonia or Flanders) of the journalists were inserted as control variables in the model. Results of the regression model are discussed in Table 4.

As Table 2 already indicated, journalists working for audiovisual media used vox pops significantly more often in the past month than journalists working for other media. However, journalists with fewer years of experience do not use vox pops more frequently than more experienced journalists. It is thus not the case that inexperienced journalists are charged with conducting vox pops as is sometimes assumed. Age and gender are not significant predictors of vox pop use. Journalists from the Flemish region tend to use vox pops more often than their colleagues from the Walloon region.

With regard to journalists' motives to use vox pops, we find that journalists seem to use vox pops mostly because they increase audience commitment to a news item. The statement that vox pops might also be a public opinion tool is not a significant predictor of vox pop use. Thus it seems that journalists add vox pops to their news items as a way to enliven a news item and increase involvement with the audience. As we already saw in Table 3, journalists do not perceive vox pops as a decent public opinion tool and accordingly do not seem to deliberately use them as a form of citizen participation. However, while vox pops serve as an enlivening feature, they do also always remain a representation of the public in the news.

### 3.2 What do journalists think about vox pops?

We also asked journalists about their evaluation of vox pops (Table 5). What is immediately noticeable is that journalists generally are quite negative towards vox pops, with 63% of the journalists thinking vox pops are overused in the news.

Next, we also conducted an ordinal logistic regression analysis with the vox pop evaluation statement as dependent variable. As independent variables, we inserted the experience of the journalist, the dummy “audiovisual journalist” and the dummy “usage”. Additionally, the journalistic motivations to use vox pops were added in the model, as these might be predictors of a more positive or negative evaluation of vox pops. Results of the regression model are discussed below (Table 6).

We find the vox pop motivation variables to be the best predictors of a positive evaluation of vox pops. Journalists who think vox pops are a good representation of public opinion and increase news item involvement are more positive about them than journalists who do not have these incentives to use vox pops. This seems logical, as journalists who perceive vox pops as a good representation of public opinion and as a means to increase commitment will perceive them as more useful in the news and will probably support their usage. We did not find that the medium for which journalists work had any influence on whether they think vox pops are overused. This is surprising, as vox pops are much more prevalent in television and radio news than in other news media. Against expectations, we also did not find an effect of vox pop use.

Lastly, we also asked journalists who have used vox pops in the past month about the merit of vox pops compared to other news sources. Of the journalists who have used vox pops in the past month ( $N = 89$ ), 25.9% say that they add vox pops to a news item when no other sources are available. A larger group of journalists (41.6%) does not agree with this statement and thus seems to

**Table 5:** Vox pop evaluation statement ( $N = 253$ ).

| Statement                         | disagree | neutral | agree   |
|-----------------------------------|----------|---------|---------|
| Vox pops are overused in the news | 14.20 %  | 22.50 % | 63.30 % |

**Table 6:** Logistic regression analysis: vox pop evaluation ( $N = 253$ ).

|                            | Vox pops are overused in the news |       |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------|
|                            | B                                 | odds  |
| Age                        | .004                              | 1.004 |
| Gender                     | -.008                             | .992  |
| Region                     | -.210                             | .811  |
| Audiovisual journalist     | .052                              | 1.053 |
| Experience journalist      | .039                              | 1.040 |
| Vox pop usage              | -.127                             | .880  |
| Motivation: public opinion | -.605***                          | .546  |
| Motivation: involvement    | -.532***                          | .587  |
| <b>Pseudo R-square</b>     |                                   |       |
| Cox and Snell              | .287                              |       |
| Nagelkerke                 | .306                              |       |

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

deliberately add vox pops to a news item. 32.6 % of the journalists have no opinion. Almost 26 % of the journalists who use vox pops thus see vox pops as sources that are more or less inferior to other news sources.

## 4 Conclusion and discussion

To our knowledge, our project is the first academic study focusing specifically on gaining an understanding of journalistic characteristics and motivations linked to vox pop use and, additionally, of journalists' evaluation of this widespread and growing practice (Lewis et al., 2005; Pantti and Husslage, 2009). As expected from earlier studies regarding occurrences of vox pops, we found that journalists working for radio and television use vox pops most frequently: More than half of these journalists have used one or more vox pops in the past month. Journalists were found to include vox pops in their news items mostly because they increase the involvement with a news item and not because they

perceive them as way to represent public opinion. Hence, it seems that journalists do not deliberately use vox pops as a tool for democratic inclusion of citizens as some previous studies implied (Brookes et al., 2004; Hudson and Rowlands, 2007; Lewis et al., 2005). The inclusion of vox pops in the news seems to be instigated more by the – probably commercial – incentive of attracting attention and personalizing the news to appeal to audiences.

Next, as expected, we found the majority of journalists to be quite negative about vox pops, with 63 % of the journalists thinking vox pops are used too often in the news. The journalistic motivation variables were significant predictors of vox pop evaluation. Journalists who perceive vox pops as a good public opinion tool and consider vox pops as increasing audience involvement are more positive about them. Surprisingly, journalists who use vox pops are not per se more positive about them. What is also remarkable is that the years of experience of the journalist did not influence vox pop use nor their evaluation. This contradicts the general image that inexperienced journalists have to conduct vox pops because experienced journalists do not like to do them.

A few limitations of this study deserve mention. First, this study only focused on journalists who, among other things, write about political news. Although our dataset was diverse in terms of the coverage of political news in combination with a very diverse distribution of socio-demographic and professional variables, future research might focus on a more general sample of journalists to analyze whether the news subject (e.g., soft or hard news) influences journalists' motives for using vox pops and how they evaluate them. Second, our measurement of vox pop use was rather limited. We were not able to make a distinction between journalists who use vox pops on an almost daily basis and those who used them rather exceptionally in the month before the study.

The results of this research pose several interesting questions and challenges for academic research as well as for journalistic practice. First, while there exists an extensive academic research field on the journalistic production process, previous research has mostly neglected analyzing vox pops, instead focusing on elite sources and other journalistic practices. Consequently, many questions related to this common journalistic practice remain unanswered. Vox pops construct an idea of representativeness in the heads of the public and are known to have an influence on several audience judgments such as perceived media credibility, perceived public opinion and even individual opinions (e.g., Arpan, 2009; Daschmann, 2000; Lefevere, De Swert, and Walgrave, 2012). The lack of insight into a journalistic practice used on a daily basis, which has been proven to be more influential than elite sources and base-rate information in a news item (Daschmann, 2000; Lefevere et al., 2012), raises concerns and stresses the importance of academic research on this matter. This study provides

some preliminary understanding of journalists' motivations for using vox pops and their attitudes towards them. Future studies might focus on a more in-depth qualitative study into the motivations and evaluation of journalists and news editors regarding vox pops. Do the journalists themselves decide to include vox pops in their news items? Or is the decision made by news editors, which would explain the deviance between journalistic attitudes and vox pop occurrence in practice?

Second, this research also raises some challenges for journalistic practice. Journalists do not seem satisfied with the ubiquity of vox pops in the news. Nevertheless, vox pops are a common and growing practice, they appear in the news almost every day, and their number keeps growing (Beckers et al., 2016). This is quite remarkable a contradiction which deserves future research.

A profound understanding of this discrepancy between journalists' evaluations and practice is necessary. If journalists do not like the way vox pop interviews are used in their newsroom, an in-depth debate in newsrooms might be necessary, finding out why this discrepancy exists. This way, changes in the newsrooms on how and when ordinary citizens are included in the news might be implemented to improve the overall news quality and the satisfaction of the journalists. Also, if vox pops are included in the news because of an audience-centered approach, and thus to attract audiences, it might be interesting to study whether the audience indeed appreciates the growing inclusion of vox pops in the news.

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