

Vox Pops

The content, selection and influence of
vox pops in news coverage

Proefschrift voorgelegd tot het behalen van de graad van doctor in de sociale wetenschappen:
communicatiewetenschappen aan de Universiteit Antwerpen te verdedigen door

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Voorwoord

Met het afronden van dit doctoraat kijk ik terug op vier fijne, interessante jaren vol leuke collega's, leerzame momenten en exotische tripjes. Een doctoraat schrijven is een proces met ups en downs. Gelukkig kende ik in dit schrijfproces voornamelijk ups, en daarvoor ben ik dank verschuldigd aan een aantal mensen.

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Introduction

On June 24, 2016, the major Flemish commercial broadcaster VTM aired a news item about Brexit. The day before, the British government held a referendum and a majority of the British electorate voted to leave the European Union. In this news item, four Flemish citizens were interviewed on the street about the consequences of Brexit for Belgium.

News anchor: "What does this mean for our wallet?"

Middle-aged woman: "Are we going to feel it as a tourist? But most importantly, it is going to cause economic problems."

Middle-aged woman: "I think everything will become harder, traveling there, the import. I'm afraid of it."

Young man: "Probably the fact that you cannot travel there in a normal way. Will you need a visa or something?"

Young man: "Great Britain also contributes to the European budget, so our taxes will go up."¹

News items like these that contain ordinary citizens expressing their point of view on an issue are probably recognizable for anyone who has ever consumed news. Interviews with the ordinary man or woman on the street have a long history. They became a particularly popular news feature in the nineteenth century and have not lost that popularity ever since (Stephenson, 1998, p. 34). These interviews, also known as vox pop interviews, are often seen as trivial additions to the news and as a sign of the growing tabloidization of the media, where entertainment and personalization are starting to play a bigger role in the news-making process (Blumler, 2001, p. 204; Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, & Beentjes, 2005). They are regularly perceived as representative of the decline of news quality, typifying the economic choice of media to personalize the news and to focus on a human-interest approach (Bennett, 2017; Heins, 2016; Kleemans, Schaap, & Hermans, 2015a). This means that media increasingly present news using people who are easy for audiences to identify with, rather than presenting the message using sources with more authority, such as experts. Because of their apparent triviality and perceived lack of serious contribution to the news, vox pops have received limited

attention in academic research and journalism practice to the advantage of other news sources and practices.

Existing research has mostly assumed that vox pops are used by journalists because they add vividness and color to a news item and because they make the news more recognizable (Brosius, 2003; Kleemans et al., 2015a; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). However, vox pops can be more than enlivening elements in the news, as they are also a means for newsmakers to represent public opinion. In this way, they become more than just an attribute of media tabloidization. Vox pops can also be an interesting instrument for journalists to gain power over news content, as they provide journalists with much freedom to select opinions that fit into their news story (De Swert, 2013). This allows the journalists to frame the news story in a certain way.

Studying this is important, as depictions of the public in the media can contribute to what audiences perceive as the majority opinion (Gunther, 1998; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Moreover, it generates an understanding of the news production process and journalistic practices. While it may not always be the intention of journalists to present public opinion, these casual representations of the public are able to frame news items in a specific way. The following example shows how vox pops were used to convey an impression of public displeasure with the government and the work of then prime minister Elio Di Rupo. This example highlights how these seemingly innocent representations of public sentiment are able to shape a news story in a certain way and create the idea that most people are frustrated:

Voice-over: "The Flemings cannot appreciate his [Elio Di Rupo's] work."

Unidentified man: "Elio Di Rupo? Well, I am not satisfied with him."

Unidentified woman: "I'm not a fan of him."

Unidentified woman: "What I think about it? In the first place, he should speak better Dutch. Because there is still a lot of work to do." (VTM, 24/11/2012)²

When taking a closer look at previous work on vox pops, it becomes clear that the research is divided into two research fields. On the one hand, vox pops are studied within the field of *journalism studies* with a focus on news sources (communication sciences) and, on the other hand, they are studied within the field of *public opinion research* and political participation (political sciences). Studies covering vox pops in these two disciplines have seldom been linked to each other. However, when exploring vox pops in detail, it becomes clear that it is impossible to disentangle the insights of the two research domains from each other. Vox pops

can be seen as a news source growing in popularity because of changes in the journalistic landscape. However, vox pops are also always a representation of the public in the news and thus have to be treated as a means to represent public opinion. In this PhD research, vox pops are approached by always keeping in mind this thin line between the two research domains and combining them to provide a profound understanding of vox pop practice.

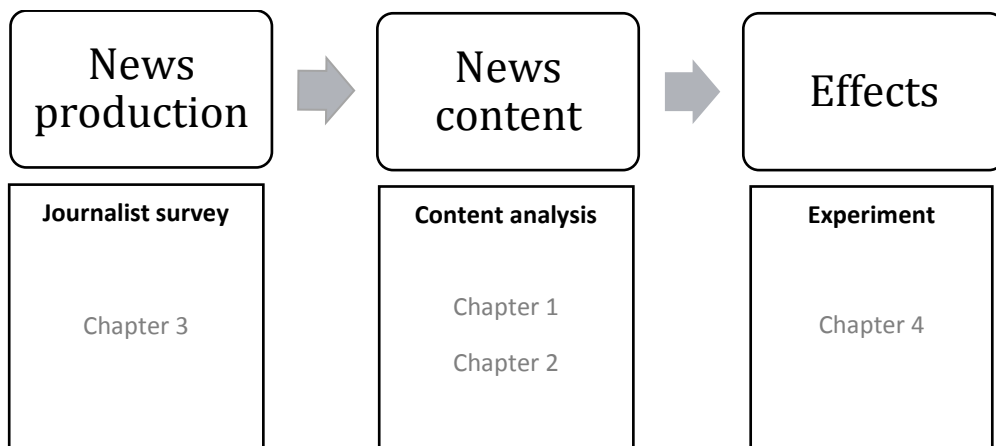
There exists little research about vox pops, and the little there is has several weaknesses. In the first place, existing studies use different definitions and conceptualizations of vox pops, making it difficult to compare them. This PhD dissertation provides a uniform definition and applies it using several methods. Moreover, the studies that focus on vox pops remain very much on the surface: there exist *content analyses* studying vox pops, but most of them do not go any further than merely counting instances. This study will analyze the content and characteristics of vox pop interviews in more depth. When looking at the *production* side, no research focusing on vox pops could be identified. Vox pops are a specific type of non-elite, citizen source. Citizen sources in general are sometimes part of a subquestion in larger journalist surveys (e.g., Van Leuven & Joye, 2014), but there exists no in-depth knowledge about vox pops from a production perspective. That is why I conducted a large-scale survey of journalists focused specifically on vox pops. Furthermore, previous studies looking at the *effects* of vox pops in the news have often investigated the direct effects of vox pops on several audience judgments, such as perceived public opinion and media credibility, comparing vox pops with other actors or base-rate information in the news (Arpan, 2009; Daschmann, 2000; Gibson & Zillmann, 1994; Lefevere, De Swert, & Walgrave, 2012; Zillmann, Perkins, & Sundar, 1992). These studies found strong effects of vox pops on several audience judgments. However, none of these studies looked at which characteristics of vox pops are found to be influential, and this is exactly what this study will examine. Therefore, this study will combine several methods, which will be discussed later, in order to address the existing limitations regarding the topic.

Additionally, this study focuses mainly on television news because vox pops are most prevalent there (Lewis, Inthorn, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005) and because vox pops can be expected to be more influential when used in television news (Aust & Zillmann, 1996; Lefevere et al., 2012; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997). In contrast, previous research has mostly focused on print news (Arpan, 2009; Gibson & Zillmann, 1993, 1994; Zillmann et al., 1992).

Research on vox pops has found them to be popular news sources and has found their share in the news to be rising (De Swert, Walgrave, Hooghe, Uce, & Hardy, 2008; Pantti & Husslage, 2009). However, the general tendency in the media as well as in academic research is to be quite negative about vox pops. There exists a traditional aversion among mainstream journalists toward counting on ordinary people as news sources, concomitant with a tendency to dismiss vox pops and to treat them with indifference and even hostility (Gans, 1979; Williams, Wardle, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011). These attitudes stand in stark contrast with their omnipresence in the news. This apparent paradox is one of the issues this study will tackle by using a bottom-up approach. Instead of departing solely from theoretical perspectives, this study approaches the topic from the perspective of journalists to gain a more in-depth understanding into the practice of vox pops in the news.

This dissertation will thus consider several aspects of vox pop interviews and thereby focuses on three main research questions: what are the characteristics and roles of vox pops in the news, what are the motivations of journalists to use them and how do vox pop characteristics influence audience judgments? As such, this project follows the “start-to-finish” paradigm as formulated by Braman and Cohen (1990), since it examines all phases of the news: news production, content and audiences. This PhD dissertation takes a broad focus and explores different aspects of vox pop practice. The project is based on a mixed-method design to answer all three questions. In Figure 0.1, an overview of the project’s design is given.

Figure 0.1. Project design



In sum, there are several gaps in the research on journalism and public opinion concerning the topic of vox pops in the news. This PhD dissertation will address several shortcomings on this topic by looking at vox pops from different angles and by applying robust tests of existing assumptions. This leads to five main contributions. Specifically, this study (1) introduces vox pops as a topic worthy of study and integrates vox pop literature from the academic fields of journalism and public opinion research; (2) uses a uniform definition to study vox pops from different angles; (3) adopts a variety of methods, making it possible to gain a full understanding of vox pop practice; (4) focuses mainly on television news; and (5) is practically relevant for the journalistic field. The goal of this PhD study is thus to shed light on the role of vox pops in the news media from an integrative perspective and to gain greater insight into the content, selection and influence of vox pops in news coverage.

1. Studying vox pops and integrating the literature

One of the main contributions of this PhD study is that it pays attention to a journalistic practice that is ubiquitous in the news but is hardly ever studied in academic research. While news source research in general is widespread, little literature exists on the topic of vox pops in particular. In the same way, research about public opinion is extensive, but vox pops make up just a tiny subsection of the research field. As mentioned in the introduction, more research is required focusing specifically on vox pops, since the studies that exist are divided into two research domains that are not always connected to each other, journalism studies and public opinion research. This PhD project brings together the fields and combines insights from the two, acknowledging the different roles vox pops can play in the news. This research is predominantly situated within journalism studies, as it focuses on journalistic processes and behaviors. However, research about vox pops is always intertwined with public opinion research. Vox pops can be used to display the public sentiment and are one of the most direct forms of citizen representation in the news. Below, an overview of the existing literature from the domain of journalism studies and public opinion research is given, followed by a discussion on how they are intertwined with and related to vox pops in the news.

Journalism Studies

Much of the research on news and journalists has focused on the relationship between news sources and news organizations (e.g., Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1989; Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1979; Manning, 2001; Soley, 1992). Gans (1979) described the relationship between journalists and sources as a dance in which either sources or journalists can lead the tango. However, Gans added that “more often than not, these sources lead the tango” (p. 114). Because journalists are under increasing time pressure, they typically approach routine sources that are available and suitable—i.e., elites—and are quite reluctant to approach new sources (Reich, 2009). Government officials, scientific experts and corporate spokespersons obtain much more attention than alternative sources in the news (Berkowitz, 2009; Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 1999). Research focusing on news values also concludes that actions of the elite have more chance to make it into the news, as what they do is often newsworthy by definition, and their actions are often more consequential than the actions of other people (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). It is thus not surprising that studies in the field of journalism generally focus on the activities of the elites, the famous and the powerful. Studies spanning several decades all came to more or less the same conclusion: non-elite sources are mostly deprived of attention in academic research as well as in journalism practice because they neither make nor shape the news (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 2013; Hopmann, 2014, p. 391; Manning, 2001; Soley, 1992).

Elite sources can be seen as the “primary definers” of the news, as they usually have the first opportunity to frame news events (Carlson, 2009). In recent years, however, some voices have claimed that journalism should be more citizen-centered to reduce gaps between news organizations and their audiences (Haas, 2007; Lewis, 2012, p. 852). If citizens were taken more seriously as news sources, this would gradually diminish the monopoly position of elite sources in the news, enabling a more diverse chorus of voices in the public debate. However, even when citizen (non-elite) sources do appear in the news, their possibilities to shape the news are still different from those of elite sources. Whereas Gans (1979) stated that sources usually lead the tango, citizen sources hardly ever do.

A growing body of research has started to pay attention to the roles these citizen sources can play and focused mainly on the more active roles citizens can perform in the news, such as audience participation and citizen journalism (e.g., Paulussen, Heinonen, Domingo, & Quandt, 2007; Paulussen & Ugille, 2008; Thorsen & Allan, 2014; Wall, 2012). This study has a different

focus. Instead of focusing on the ideal of more active and engaged citizen sources, I will focus on a particular type of citizen source that is already abundant in the news media but requires more academic attention: vox pops. Although vox pops are often perceived as rather passive news sources, this is exactly what makes them an interesting subject of study. They provide journalists with a huge amount of freedom and power to select the individuals they want to appear in their news items, as in theory, any individual from the population the news item covers can be interviewed as a vox pop (De Swert, 2013).

In journalism studies there exists an ongoing debate whether the purpose of journalism should be to merely inform the public or to present what is of interest to and thus attracts audiences, as well as how these two principles should be balanced (e.g., Lewis et al., 2005, p. 9; Rønning, 1999, p. 9; Skovsgaard & Bro, 2017). It is often argued that, in an ideal situation, the main goal of journalism would be to inform audiences (McNair, 2009b) and in this case, ordinary citizens would only become news when they were directly involved with a news item (e.g., as a victim). However, newsrooms are faced with an increasing competition for audience share and continuous deadlines (Bromley, 2014; Paulussen & Ugille, 2008; Saltzis & Dickinson, 2008; Witschge & Nygren, 2009). Because of these processes and economic insecurity, a situation is created in which all newsrooms are trying to attract the attention of audiences, by making the news more personal among other strategies. For this reason, the news is often criticized for focusing more and more on “what is of interest” instead of on “what matters” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 277; Lewis et al., 2005, p. 9). Brants and Van Praag (2006) stated that the increasing competition between broadcasters in many western European countries leads to a “demand market” whereby the assumed desires of the public have become decisive for what the media select and provide (p. 30).

When attention is paid to citizen sources in general in the news, it is thus often with the criticism or concern that modern-day journalism is facing a trend of growing tabloidization and personalization (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 277; McManus, 1994; McQuail, 1992, p. 216; Skovsgaard, 2014; Zelizer et al., 2000). There is a concern that this process will cause the human interest aspect of news to become dominant over the actual content of the news. Skovsgaard and van Dalen (2013) found that commercial pressures have led to an increasing inclusion of citizens in the news. Pantti and Husslage (2009) studied this phenomenon using a content analysis of Dutch television news (1993–2007) and interviews with television journalists focusing on ordinary citizens in the news. They concluded that citizens indeed gained a more

prominent role in the news in the studied period. The journalists indicated in the interviews that the rise of ordinary citizens in television news was connected to changes within the media industry, i.e., increased competition and commercialization. Some people perceive vox pops in particular as one of the major signs of this declining quality of news, as news outlets are presenting the news using people who have the closest proximity to the audience as a representation of the general public in the news (Brosius, 2003; D'Alessio, 2003; Kleemans et al., 2015a; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). Hendriks Vettehen et al. (2005) even perceived vox pops as one of the indicators of sensationalism in the news.

Kleemans et al. (2015b) conducted a large-scale content analysis of 1,425 Dutch television news items from the period 1990–2014 and studied the presence of citizen sources in the news compared to elite sources. They found that citizen sources became more prominent at the cost of elite sources, although elite sources remained the primary definers of the news. However, they concluded that the presence of citizens did not mean they got a more substantive, relevant role, as they were primarily used as vox pops. This conclusion may have been a bit too blunt, as none of the previously mentioned studies looked closer at the specific role of vox pops in the news. While vox pops may be intended as an eye-catching feature in the news without any substantive value, they can certainly be more than that. This is one of the main research gaps this PhD project will tackle: are vox pops indeed trivial attention-grabbing news features as most studies assume, or do they play a more important role in the democratic process, serving as a potentially powerful public opinion tool?

From a normative perspective, informed choice is one of the key elements in a democracy, and journalism plays an important role in this process. Mass media are people's primary source of information about the world around them. The stories that define people's identities no longer come from their direct environment, such as families, teachers and churches, but from the media (Gerbner, 1999, p. 11). In an ideal situation, journalists should be objective reporters of political reality, striving to be as neutral and detached as possible, even though they will hold their own political views (McNair, 2009a). In this regard, news media are often seen as the "fourth estate" in democratic societies, and it is claimed that they should inform audiences objectively on matters of public policy by presenting and debating alternatives (Rønning, 1999, p. 16; Schultz, 1998).

Objectivity is one of the fundamental tenets of the journalistic production process (Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978). Patterson (1998, p. 27) referred to it as the "defining norm of modern

journalism.” This is also put up front by almost all news media in their editorial policies (see, for instance, BBC, 2016; VRT, 2016; RAI, 2016). Surveys all over the world have found that journalists themselves refer to objectivity as a very important criterion for quality journalism (e.g., Raeymaeckers et al., 2013; Skovsgaard, Albæk, Bro, & de Vreese, 2012; Weaver & Willnat, 2012). However, journalism is often criticized to be far from this ideal of neutrality and objectivity. The trend of growing tabloidization, discussed in the former section, is often mentioned in this regard. The increasing personalization of news, increasing competition between media outlets and ever-faster reporting have led to accusations of a declining quality of news and public affairs (McManus, 2009; Patterson, 2000, p. 6; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009, p. 227).

However, the increasing personalization of the news can also be seen as a way to make the news more accessible for a broader audience. Involving the public in the news is an important way to do this. In the first place, citizen sources make media information more accessible and cultivate emotional investment with a news item and thus may increase information recall (Hinnant, Len-Ríos, & Young, 2013; Hopmann, Elmelundpræstekær, Albæk, & De Vreese, 2009; Lefevere et al., 2012; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Taylor & Thompson, 1982). Moreover, the way citizens are represented in the news may help to shape the meaning of citizenry in a democracy (Lewis et al., 2005). Focusing on citizens would help journalists to reconnect with their viewers, listeners and readers (Brants & Van Praag, 2006). Especially in political news, the media can contribute to key societal principles such as deliberation, participation and diversification by adding citizen sources to the news (Reich, 2015). However, Skovsgaard and Van Dalen (2013) conducted a survey with 1,548 Danish journalists and found that while 84% of the general journalists found it important to give ordinary people a chance to give their views on public affairs, this percentage was much lower among political journalists (34%). While citizen depictions may be most important in political news, journalists do not seem to attach much importance to a bottom-up perspective and to the use of vox pops in this regard.

Although representations of citizens may not always be meant by journalists to convey a certain (political) message or might not be seen as important, they can play an important role in shaping perceptions of public opinion. Vox pops in particular may be an important public opinion tool, as they allow citizens to express their opinions in their own words.

Public Opinion Research

Mass media and public opinion are two concepts that have always been closely intertwined. With the emergence of mass media, it became easier than ever before for audiences to be informed about sentiments among others in their population (Martin & Hewstone, 2009). Despite being one of the most controversial and ambiguous concepts in the social sciences, the concept of public opinion has been used consistently since the eighteenth century (Splichal, 1999, p. 1). It is very hard—if not impossible—to grasp “the” public opinion. As Key noticed in 1961, speaking with precision about public opinion “is a task not unlike coming to grips with the Holy Ghost” (Key, 1961, p. 8).

One of the most cited works regarding public opinion is Walter Lipmann’s “Public Opinion,” published in 1922. He took a rather negative stance and stated that the audience is never able to fully process media information regarding public opinion. He believed that the well-informed (e.g., experts) play an important role in “manufacturing consent” and informing audiences about the common interests. Another seminal work on public opinion is John Dewey’s “The Public and its Problems” (1927), in which the author was more positive about the possibility of informing audiences about issues. He had a more positive view about public opinion and audience participation and acknowledged the growing importance of the mass media in this process. However, he also believed that the audience could not take intelligent political action without guidance and the use of reasoning.

Traditionally, public opinion research has departed from the study of media effects on public opinion. Spanning several decades, research evolved from the perception of the mass media as powerful influencers of public opinion (e.g., research about propaganda, see Lasswell, 1926) to a belief in minimal media influence (Katz, 1957; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), which over time swayed again into a belief in the power of the media under some circumstances and for some people. This is the main stance in social sciences to date, with central theories linked to public opinion such as framing and agenda-setting. Agenda-setting theory studies the ability of the news media to influence the salience of issues on the public agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), whereas framing theory suggests that how something is presented influences the audience’s perception of that issue (Goffman, 1974). Here, the characteristics of the media and news content occupy the central position in discussions of public opinion.

So, whereas public opinion research traditionally focused on the direct influence of public opinion displays in the mass media, the focus of this project is mostly on another aspect:

the way in which public opinion is represented in the news media. The way in which public opinion is portrayed in the mass media provides individuals' primary information source about what the population thinks about an issue (Gunther, 1998; Moy & Scheufele, 2000). That is why I will focus explicitly on characteristics of media content and on how the public and public opinion are presented in the news through vox pops. Moreover, this research looks not only at characteristics of media content. It also studies the consequences of those characteristics by analyzing not just whether vox pops have an influence, but also which of their characteristics matter in this process.

So, how the mass media frame and portray public opinion in the news can contribute to what audiences perceive to be the majority opinion. These perceptions of public opinion—although not always correct—can be very consequential. It may be as Splichal stated in 1999: *“perceptions of agreement actually affect individual behavior, rather than agreement itself”* (p. 40). Several theories exist describing the same process of an influence of “the others” on people's perceptions of public opinion. As early as 1931, Katz and Allport reported on what they called “pluralistic ignorance.” This paradox is a situation in which a majority of group members privately reject a norm but incorrectly assume that most others accept it and therefore go along with it. This theory states that even if nobody agrees with an opinion, but people believe that everybody from the population they belong to agrees, they still go along with it. This way, a minority opinion can be just as effective as an opinion held by the large majority of a population and can influence behaviors such as voting. Opinions displayed in the media are particularly important because they become widely visible and thus create the perception that some opinions are much more widely accepted than they are in reality.

In 1974, Noelle-Neumann introduced the theory of the “Spiral of Silence,” which is now counted among the most cited and replicated theories in social sciences (Donsbach, Salmon, & Tsfati, 2014, p. 2). According to this theory, people constantly observe other people's behavior in order to find out which opinions and behaviors are met with approval or rejection in the public sphere. People are afraid of isolation and feel constrained to express their opinion if they perceive their opinion to be different from what others think. If people have the idea that there is public support for their own views, their willingness to speak out increases, while people who perceive themselves as belonging to the minority will fall silent (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Therefore, people look at other people to get an idea of what public opinion is in society. Moreover, this perceived public opinion is consequential. It affects people's willingness to

speak out and in turn may even influence the opinions and behaviors of individuals. Therefore, it becomes interesting and relevant to analyze how portrayals of public opinion in the media influence audiences.

Journalists have several means at their disposal to display public opinion in the news. It is often assumed that public opinion polls are the most popular way to represent the general population in the news. Among other factors, this may be caused by the fact that there exists an enormous amount of academic research about opinion polls, while other forms of public opinion representations are often neglected (e.g., Asher, 2016; Marsh, 1985; Moy & Rinke, 2012; Strömbäck, 2012, p. 20). However, Lewis et al. (2005) conducted one of the few broad studies of the ways in which citizenship is represented in the news media by conducting a large-scale content analysis of 5,658 television news items in the UK (BBC & ITV) and the US (CBS Evening News, ABC world News Tonight, NBC Nightly News) focusing on public opinion features in the news. They found that polls and surveys are not used very often as a reference to public opinion in television news (3.60% of references in US television news; 1.80% in UK television news). Instead, vox pops were found to be one of the most important public opinion tools in US (41.40%) and UK (38.7%) television news, making up four out of ten references to public opinion. Another popular way to represent public opinion in the news is through inferences about public opinion, where the journalist makes broad claims about public opinion without supporting evidence such as polling data. These inferences are rather vague and rely on the judgment of the journalist. In practice, they are mostly used as a contextualizing introduction providing an interpretative lens for other public opinion indicators such as vox pops (p. 91).

Vox pops are one of the most straightforward representations of public opinion in the news, as they allow citizens themselves to express their own points of view on a news topic. As a public opinion tool, vox pops are attractive for journalists because they are cheaper and easier to gather than other measures, such as opinion polls. Moreover, vox pops provide journalists with a considerable amount of control to select opinions that fit into their news story. Furthermore, vox pops are more effective in conveying a sense of public opinion to the audience than other public opinion tools, although they possess less validity than polls (Daschmann, 2000). Brosius and Bathelt (1994), for instance, conducted five consecutive experiments to test the influence of vox pops on perceptions of social issues. They found that participants relied on the statements of the vox pops in a news item, regardless of other (statistical) information about public opinion in the news item, the number of vox pops in a

news item and the quality of their arguments. What is more, the effects were found to last over time. Several other studies have analyzed the influence of vox pops in the news and consistently found them to be more influential than other public opinion tools and news sources (Lefevere et al., 2012; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000).

Combining the literature

The fields of journalism studies and public opinion research both cover the topic of vox pops from a different angle, which leads to several blind spots in the literature and empirical research. On the one hand, **journalism studies** typically starts from journalists and their professional values. The news-making process and journalistic routines are the main focus. The presence of vox pops in the news is often perceived as a consequence of the commercial logic of news media, by which newsrooms face increasing pressure to make their news more appealing to attract larger audiences (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 277; McManus, 1994; McQuail, 1992, p. 216; Skovsgaard, 2014; Zelizer et al., 2000). Journalism studies thus approaches vox pops from a rather negative point of view. On the other hand, **public opinion research** focuses mostly on the influence of the mass media on perceptions of public opinion and approaches vox pops from a more neutral perspective. The mass media are perceived as a source of people's perception of what others in the population think. Here, vox pops are often compared to other public opinion tools and perceived as a tool of political participation and democratic representation (e.g., Daschmann, 2000; Lewis et al., 2005). The media representation of public opinion is central here, often neglecting motivations of journalists to use them.

Both research fields thus study vox pops from a different starting point, and both are valuable. When looking back at the project design in Figure 0.1, we now notice that both bodies of research depart from opposite ends of the model. On the one hand, journalism research focuses more on the production process on the left side of the model, with studies using for instance surveys of journalists (e.g., Skovsgaard & Van Dalen, 2013) or in-depth interviews (e.g., Pantti & Husslage, 2009). Public opinion research, on the other hand, departs mostly from the right side of the model, namely media effects (e.g., Daschmann, 2000; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). Both domains focus on news content, but from a different angle. While journalism studies emphasizes vox pops as a news source and counts the presence of vox pops in comparison to other news sources (e.g., Kleemans et al., 2016; Pantti & Husslage, 2009), content analyses in public opinion studies mainly compare the presence of vox pops with other

public opinion tools, such as inferences about public opinion and polls (e.g., Brookes, Lewis and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004; Lewis et al., 2005).

We already know from public opinion research that representations of the public influence audience perceptions of public opinion. This project will focus on the role that journalists play in this process by studying how journalists use and contextualize vox pops in the news and by looking at their motivation(s) to use vox pops. Presenting public opinion might not always be the goal of journalists when they decide to include vox pops in their news item, for such inclusion may be explained by other processes—such as journalistic routines or commercial pressures. Moreover, this research will use an experiment to study, among other aspects, the influence of journalistic choices on perceptions of public opinion and people's personal opinion to analyze the role of journalists in this process.

To conclude, while journalism research and broadcasters mostly do not take vox pops very seriously, public opinion research provides reasons why vox pops can be important, especially in news about public affairs. In journalism studies, the public opinion function of vox pops is rarely studied, while in public opinion research, little attention is paid to journalistic choices regarding vox pops and motivations for their use. Both disciplines thus have divergent starting points when covering the issue of vox pops. This PhD study will focus on the different roles vox pops can serve in different situations. One of the main contributions of this thesis is that it aims at a much-needed and fuller integration of both disciplines to obtain profound knowledge of the function of vox pops in the news.

2. A uniform conceptualization and operationalization of vox pops

As mentioned in the introduction, studies focusing specifically on vox pops in the news are quite scarce. The studies that do exist have relied on similar though slightly different conceptualizations. This makes it difficult to compare these studies, for some include certain non-elite actors (e.g., protesters, victims) as vox pops, while others exclude them. Consequently, it is very important to establish a clear conceptualization of vox pops to make systematic research possible across different countries and methods. One of the major contributions of this PhD dissertation is that it studies vox pops across methods based on a uniform definition and operationalization, which makes the studies comparable and

complementary. What follows is an overview of descriptions of vox pops from different studies dealing with vox pops, sometimes referred to as “popular exemplars” (Lefevere et al., 2012) or “citizen sources” (e.g., Kleemans, Schaap, & Hermans, 2015b), followed by a new definition that will be applied in this PhD project.

First, one of the main recurrent defining characteristics of vox pops is the **lack of expertise** or representative function of the person involved, which distinguishes such sources from elite ones (Bosch, 2014; De Swert, 2013; Lefevere et al., 2012; Ytreberg, 2004). Ordinary people in the news are often defined by their contrast with other news sources, such as celebrities and experts (Turner, 2010). Whereas elite sources have expertise in the traditional sense in that they speak from a particular function, vox pops draw their right to speak in a news broadcast from their “common sense” insights and their authentic experiences and reactions (Carpentier, 2011; Lewis et al., 2005, p. 85). Citizen sources in general can also be distinguished from elite sources by the fact that they make a spontaneous personal statement about the news item in question (Carpentier, 2011; De Swert, 2013). Thus, all vox pop statements are people’s **personal opinions or experiences**. While these experiences may be connected to broader social issues or political policies, the connection and primary definition of the news item is primarily made by other actors, such as experts, journalists, or politicians (Lewis et al., 2005).

Second, vox pops are defined by their **apparently random selection** (Bosch, 2014; De Swert, 2013; Lefevere et al., 2012). Bosch (2014) stated that the apparent randomness of vox pop interviews and the absence of professional credentials and expertise probably contributes to the perception that these interviews represent the thoughts of everyday citizens. Important—and left out in some vox pop conceptualizations (e.g., Kleemans et al., 2015a)—is the fact that they are *apparently* randomly selected. That is, the randomness might be questioned, for journalists may seek out specific types of individuals. Moreover, interviews are generally conducted in a single location at a single time, so one should ask how “random” these interviews really are given that the place and time determine what kind of people are around to be interviewed (McLeish & Link, 2015, p. 102). This is one of the issues that this PhD project answers in the first empirical chapter. The apparent randomness has consequences because of what is called the ‘law of small numbers’ (Tversky & Kahneman, 1971): small samples are perceived as representing the corresponding population to the same extent as large samples. People do not take different sample sizes in consideration when making a judgment (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). A small sample of vox pops that seems randomly distributed would reinforce

the belief that the whole population is randomly represented and that the opinions voiced are a rendering of public opinion.

Third, some descriptions emphasize the fact that vox pops are “**interviewed by media**” or “selected by journalists” (De Swert, 2013; Lefevere et al., 2012). This may sound logical at first, but there is an important distinction relative to other news sources. The initiation of vox pops in the news is always made by the journalist. Journalists hold a position of ‘power’ in that they select who is interviewed and which individuals eventually have their say in the news (De Swert, 2013). This stands in contrast with other news sources, such as politicians, who are much harder to replace and possess unique information about news issues. These—mostly elite—sources can and do actively initiate contact with journalists (Reich, 2006; Soley, 1992), which is *never* the case with vox pops.

Fourth, some conceptualizations of vox pops include their use as a **representation of the public** in the news (Lewis et al., 2005; Myers, 2004). Brookes et al. (2004) added that vox pops are “an important means of representing public opinion because the views of members of the public seem to be directly and transparently communicated to the viewer” (p. 66). Other authors also perceive vox pops as “examples of public opinion” (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2005). In journalistic handbooks, several practical guidelines are given regarding the vox pop characteristics to look for, emphasizing that vox pops should be the best possible representation of the public (e.g., Boyd, 2001; Hudson & Rowlands, 2007). The question is whether a small sample of vox pops can really offer a true reflection of the public. This question is tackled in the first empirical chapter of this PhD study. Moreover, it might be that representing the public is not what journalists aim for when adding vox pops to a news item, and vox pops’ presence in the news may stem from other journalistic processes. Therefore, I did not include this segment in my definition of vox pops.

In this PhD project, I used a strict conceptualization of vox pops according to which other citizen sources, such as eyewitnesses and protesters, are excluded. This stands in contrast to other studies focusing on ordinary people in the news, which take together all “ordinary citizens” (including eyewitnesses, victims, protesters, etc.) involved in the news (e.g., De Smedt, Hooghe, & Walgrave, 2011; Hackett, 1985; Van Leuven, Deprez, & Raeymaeckers, 2014). Some studies have drawn a more specific distinction between vox pops and other non-elite sources, although they still consider a large group of actors “vox pops” (e.g., Pantti & Husslage, 2009). This may be caused by the fact that in most studies, vox pops represent a “residual category,”

while the main focus is on other news sources or practices. This PhD project used the same concept and operationalization of vox pops using a combination of methods, which made it possible to link the results of separate studies and to shed light on the subject in a unique way. Integrating all components of the abovementioned conceptualizations, a vox pop is defined in this PhD project as:

“an apparently randomly chosen ordinary individual without organizational affiliation who is interviewed by journalists for a news outlet and conveys a personal statement in a news item”

3. Combining a variety of methods

This PhD study used a variety of methods to gain a profound understanding of the practice of vox pops by adopting different angles. In this section, I will discuss what the different methods add to the research field and how they are intertwined and cumulative. Detailed descriptions of the different methods can be found in the separate empirical chapters.

First, one of the main goals of this project was to understand what exactly vox pops are and how they are used in the news. Since little is known about vox pops in the news, this PhD project started with an **extensive content analysis** of television news to gain a profound understanding of this common journalistic practice, which also served as a base for the following studies. For this quantitative analysis, 568 news items containing at least one vox pop from the main Flemish commercial broadcaster VTM and public service broadcaster Eén were coded for the period 2003–2013. In these news items, 2,000 individual vox pops were present. These were coded in depth as a base for the first two empirical chapters in this PhD dissertation. The content-analysis data made it possible to gain an understanding of the journalistic selection process and to focus on vox pop characteristics (Chapter 1) and statements (Chapter 2). This project moved beyond previous content analyses, which merely counted vox pops, and used a more in-depth approach. Many of the earlier studies focused on the (changing) balance of elite and non-elite sources in the news by counting the prevalence of vox pops compared to other news sources (e.g., De Smedt et al., 2011; De Swert et al., 2008; Kleemans et al., 2015b). Other studies have looked at the news subjects for which journalists turn to vox pops, concluding that they are used often for more serious topics, such as economics or politics (Lewis et al., 2005, p. 77; Pantti & Husslage, 2009). No previous research has been on the characteristics of the vox

pops that actually make it into the news. Many studies have made claims regarding vox pops as a representation of the general population in the news, but no study has looked at whether they are indeed a good representation of the population. The first empirical chapter of this PhD study focused on this research gap. Furthermore, some studies have briefly touched on vox pop statements (Lewis et al., 2005, p. 77; Pantti & Husslage, 2009), but these studies have been rather superficial and have not analyzed the actual statements or points of view in depth. The content analysis in Chapter 2 was applied to vox pop statements, and the viewpoints were displayed in detail to obtain a full understanding of the role of vox pops in the news.

Next, to gain a more elaborate insight into the production side of vox pops, a large-scale **journalist survey** of 253 Belgian (political) journalists was conducted (Chapter 3). This study was the first to systematically study journalists' perspective concerning vox pops and to study which journalists use vox pops in the news. Existing studies focusing on journalist surveys questioned journalists only about their use of vox pops as a subquestion of general source use, for instance, by asking journalists about the importance of different news sources (e.g., Raeymaeckers et al., 2013; Van Leuven & Joye, 2014). Other research has focused on a specific topic, such as emotions in the news (Pantti & Husslage, 2009). Using a large-scale quantitative survey makes it possible to gain a more systematic understanding of the production side of vox pops in the news, granting insight into journalists' motivations to include vox pops in their news items.

In addition to studying the content and production side, this project focused on the audience side, namely media effects (Chapter 4). The findings of the analyses of earlier stages of this project serve as a base for the **experimental research**. This ensures that the experiment—in addition to being theoretically relevant—remains very close to the news reality. The majority of research looking at ordinary people in the news can be categorized as media-effects research. However, scholars have mainly measured the direct effects of the presence of vox pops on different audience judgments (Arpan, 2009; Gibson & Zillmann, 1993; Lefevere et al., 2012; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). These studies have not studied the characteristics of vox pops that determine their effectiveness. Instead of comparing vox pops to other news sources (e.g., Lefevere et al., 2012) or with base-rate information in a news item (e.g., Arpan, 2009), this PhD study will compare *across* vox pops. To do this, a large-scale television news experiment focusing on characteristics of vox pop interviews found in the content analysis was conducted.

Combining these complementary and interrelated methods is highly beneficial, for doing so helps to resolve the lack of systematic studies on the subject of vox pops and sheds light on the different aspects and consequences related to the use of vox pops in journalistic practice and academic research.

4. Focusing on television news

This PhD project mainly focused on television news for several reasons. First, television news is still the main source of information for most people, making a better understanding hereof essential (Curran, Iyengar, Lund, & Salovaara-Moring, 2009; Deweppe, Picone, & Pauwels, 2015; Morone, 2013). In 2015, the Eurobarometer results based on interviews with 27,681 Europeans from 34 countries found that a large majority—81%—of the European population indicated that television is still their main source of information on national politics (Eurobarometer, 2015). Against general expectations, the internet (and social network sites) scores only fourth place. It is thus still highly relevant to study traditional media such as television. In Flanders in particular, focusing on television news is relevant, for it is very popular, and the 7 pm news broadcasts from the two main broadcasters have an 80% market share during prime time (Centrum voor Informatie over de Media [CIM], 2017).

Second, looking at the audience side of vox pops (effect studies), very little is known about vox pops in television news because most research has focused on print news (e.g., Arpan, 2009; Daschmann, 2000). However, it can be expected that the visual and audible cues of vox pops, which are absent in print news, are key aspects of their influence. Hence, the effects of vox pops are expected to be especially large for television news given that people recall visuals better, especially when these visuals are personalized through human examples such as vox pops (Graber, 1990). The few television studies carried out have found particularly strong effects (Lefevere et al., 2012; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997).

Third, vox pops have been found to be more prevalent in television news than in other news media. Four out of ten references to public opinion in US and UK television news in the period 2001–2002 were vox pops (Lewis et al., 2005, p. 93), while studies focusing on newspapers found much lower numbers. Cushion, Franklin and Court (2006) found that vox pops comprised 23.7% of all citizen representations in a sample of ten (local) newspapers. In Chapter 3, journalists from all media were surveyed to investigate differences between

journalists from different media outlets to see if there indeed are differences between television journalists and journalists working for other media platforms.

With the advent of new, interactive (social) media and online news, the question arises as to whether this has changed the way in which vox pops are presented in the news and whether “traditional” on-the-street vox pops will disappear. Broersma and Graham (2013) conducted a quantitative content analysis of tweets as news sources in UK and Dutch newspapers and found that tweets still compose only a small amount of all news sources. If tweets were used as sources, they came mostly from well-known or newsworthy people (i.e., elites) instead of being used as a way to include ordinary citizens in the news. This is why it was chosen not to include social media in this PhD project. Moreover, Beckers and Harder (2016) proved that major differences still exist between the “vox twitterati” and traditional vox pops. Contrary to traditional vox pops, which are used extensively in politics and other hard news topics, Twitter vox pops were found to be used mostly in soft news items, such as celebrity and sports news. The Twitter vox pops were also almost never used in reaction to existing news topics, as is the case with traditional vox pops. Therefore, it seems that social media vox pops will not immediately replace traditional vox pops; rather, the two coexist and are used in different ways.

5. Practically relevant for the journalistic field

The last major contribution and strength of this PhD project is that it is not just an academic contribution filling gaps in the research domain. When writing a PhD dissertation about a journalistic practice, it is relevant to use a bottom-up approach. This PhD project is an inductive exploration that always departs from the environment of journalists, which is also evident in the succession of the different chapters. This project started by looking at the news using content analysis as a solid base for the PhD study. Since so little was known about vox pops, this is essential. This way, the experiment in a later phase of this project could be based on problems and practices of vox pops in the news instead of focusing solely on theoretical perspectives. The goal of this PhD study was not only to contribute to the academic fields of journalism and public opinion research but also to study the possible implications of the use of vox pops for the journalistic field.

During this PhD study, journalists were consulted several times, and their input was greatly valued. Three in-depth interviews with television journalists were conducted at the

beginning of the project to gain contextualizing information on the subject. For instance, the definition of vox pops was discussed with the journalists to learn if they agreed with this definition. Given that this PhD dissertation is all about a pure journalistic practice, using a definition that journalists do not truly agree with would be useless. During the different phases of this dissertation, the interview data provided an interesting context. For example, one of the topics broached was how journalists deal with journalistic guidelines on a personal level as well as on the level of the newsroom, which recurs in Chapters 1, 2 and 4. For the experimental research, journalists were also asked for feedback to make the experimental stimuli as realistic as possible. Finally, not only were journalists consulted during the entire trajectory of this PhD study but also they were informed about the results of the research using reports and press releases. In the final chapter of this PhD dissertation, the practical implications of the findings from the different studies will be discussed.

Goals and research questions

As mentioned in the introduction, this PhD study focused on three main research questions: what are the characteristics and roles of vox pops in the news; what are the motivations of journalists to use them; and how do vox pop characteristics influence audience judgments? In Figure 0.1 in the introduction, an overview of the project's design was presented. The order of the empirical chapters discussed below does not follow the arrows in the model from left to right. Since little was known about vox pops before the start of this PhD dissertation, news content was the ideal starting point. The studies of the production and the effect sides are based on the findings of the main content analysis, making the order of the studies intuitive and cumulative. The main focus of this project was on news content and its effects on the audience; the goal was to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the content, selection and influence of vox pops in news coverage.

The main research questions of this PhD study were addressed in four empirical chapters that consist of studies that are (to be) published in peer-reviewed academic journals. The first two chapters focused on the role and characteristics of vox pops in television news. Chapter 3 analyzed the motivations of journalists to use vox pops. Moreover, the survey covered how journalists perceive vox pops, for they are omnipresent in the news despite seeming to have a rather negative image. Chapter 4 focused on the influence of some vox pop characteristics I found in the content analyses on perceived public opinion and personal opinion.

The **first empirical chapter** is titled: “How Ordinary is the Ordinary (Wo)man on the Street? An Analysis of Vox Pop Characteristics in Television News” and includes a large-scale content analysis of Flemish television news items containing vox pops. This study explored which characteristics ensure that certain people are selected by journalists and make it into the news as vox pops. It analyzes the source selection process, starting from journalistic guidelines. The goal of this research was to identify whether vox pops provide a good representation of the general public, focusing on their visual and contextual characteristics. Moreover, this study looked at how vox pops are presented in news items. In this study, it was shown that journalistic reality is different from editorial guidelines and that vox pops are not always a good representation of the general public.

Whereas Chapter 1 focused on the characteristics of vox pop interviews, **Chapter 2**, titled “Opinion Balance in Vox Pop Television News” focuses on the role of vox pops in the news. Using a content analysis of 2,000 vox pop quotes from Flemish television news items, the different functions of vox pops were analyzed. This research proves that vox pops play a more serious role than is often assumed in previous studies as a portrayal of public opinion in a large share of the news items. Also, vox pops were revealed to play a particularly important role in political news. Furthermore, we found that the opinions expressed in vox pops are unbalanced both for non-political and political news. A large majority of vox pop news items contain vox pop voices that present only one point of view.

Chapter 3 explored the news production process. This chapter, titled “Vox Pops in the News: The Journalists’ Perspective” is based on an online quantitative survey with 253 Belgian journalists. Despite the growing number of vox pops in the news, there seems to be a general tendency in journalistic practice to be quite critical of these vox pops. This article addressed this apparent paradox and explores the attitudes of journalists concerning vox pops. Furthermore, possible motives for including vox pops in the news were discussed. This study concluded that journalists seem to use vox pops mostly because they increase audience involvement with a news item rather than to portray public opinion. Moreover, this study proves that journalists indeed have quite a negative opinion with respect to vox pops, even when they use them in their news items.

Building on the previous chapters, **Chapter 4** looks at the effects of vox pop characteristics on perceived public opinion and audience members’ personal opinions. This chapter examined whether the role of vox pops (opinion or personal testimony) has a hand in

their influence. Moreover, it looked at journalists' role in this process given that the influence of the introduction of vox pop interviews is also studied. An experimental design with twelve artificial television news items was used. The results showed that the viewpoint given by the vox pops influences people's perceptions of public opinion and their personal opinions to a great extent. How vox pops say something is also of influence: vox pops that convey explicit opinion statements are more influential than vox pops giving personal testimonies. Lastly, I did not identify an effect of the way vox pops are introduced on perceptions of public opinion or on people's personal opinion. The conclusion of this experiment is that vox pops are powerful influencers, notably more so when they are used as an explicit public opinion tool. Providing an introduction stressing their non-representativeness does not reduce their effect.

Together, these four empirical chapters offer a valuable contribution to the academic field. They discuss and scrutinize the topic of vox pops from different angles and present systematic tests of prevailing assumptions. In the final concluding chapter, the main findings of the different chapters will be discussed in an integrative way, and the implications for journalistic practice will be debated.

Notes

1. Translated into English by the author. Dutch transcript: *Journalist*: "Wat betekent dit nu voor onze portemonnee?"; *Vrouw van middelbare leeftijd*: "Gaan we dat ondervinden als toerist? Maar vooral, dat gaat economisch een probleem geven."; *Vrouw van middelbare leeftijd*: "Ik denk, alles wordt minder gemakkelijk, het reizen naar daar, de invoer. Ik vrees daar toch wel voor."; *Jonge man*: "Waarschijnlijk het feit dat je daar niet normaal naartoe gaat kunnen reizen. Ga je daar een visum nodig voor hebben ofzo?"; *Jonge man*: "Groot-Brittannië draagt ook een stuk bij aan de Europese begroting en al de rest, dus onze belastingen gaan dan ook omhoog gaan."
2. Translated into English by the author. Dutch transcript: *voice-over*: De Vlamingen kunnen zijn werk niet meer waarderen. *Anonieme man*: "Elio Di Rupo? Awel, ik ben daarvan niet zeer tevreden"; *Anonieme vrouw*: "Fan ben ik niet van hem"; *Anonieme vrouw*: "Wat vind ik ervan? Dat hij eerst eens veel beter Nederlands mag spreken. Want daar is nog altijd heel veel werk aan de winkel."

Chapter 1

How Ordinary is the Ordinary (Wo)man on the Street?

An Analysis of Vox Pop Characteristics in Television News

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

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Introduction

On November 7, 2013, the Flemish public service broadcaster (Eén) broadcast 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 reduction 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 et al., 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 percent of all sources, by 2006 this had increased to 9 percent. De Swert et al. (2008) also found the use of vox pops in television news to be on the rise in 11 countries with different media systems (Belgium, France, Norway, Turkey, United Kingdom, Canada, United States, Germany, Ireland, Italy, The Netherlands). Additionally, several studies (e.g., Arpan, 2009; Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Daschmann, 2000; Gibson & Zillmann, 1994; Lefevere et al., 2012) 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 et al., 2012).

However, research so far has not provided insights 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 & 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 mean 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 et al. (2012, p. 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 Bosch, 2014, p. 3; De Swert, 2013, p. 1). Bosch (2014) states that the apparent randomness of these vox pop interviews and the absence of professional credentials and expertise likely contribute to the perception that these interviews represent the thoughts of everyday citizens. De Swert (2013, p. 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 witnessed the incident 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 source: vox pops. Random people on a shopping street are approached giving their views on the news issue (e.g., “I think the police are too violent, they should be controlled more severely” or “It is a good thing that the police act 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 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 above-mentioned 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 & 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 & Brosius, 2000). Beyond that, they serve a more substantive goal of representing the general public in the news (Lewis et al., 2005; Myers, 2004). Journalists can use vox pops to balance elite sources in the news and represent regular, non-elite individuals (Lewis et al., 2005, p. 72).

As a consequence, in key journalistic handbooks such as *Introduction to Journalism* (Fleming, Hemmingway, Moore, & Welford, 2005) and *The Broadcast Journalism Handbook* (Hudson & 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, p. 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, p.

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. (Hudson & Rowlands, 2007, p. 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 through the use of a mix of age and gender groups (Myers, 2004). 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., 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, Bemker, Choi, and Torwel (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 arises of 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 (Berger, 2013, p. 11; Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2013, p. 190) and the influence of the message (Andsager et al., 2006; Bosch, 2014). 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 & Rowlands, 2007, p. 111). So, while there are journalistic handbooks urging journalists to display as representative a sample as possible, journalists are also required 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 et al., 2013, p. 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 on average 4 out of 10 references to public opinion in US and UK television news, while this is lower than 15 percent in print news (Lewis et al., 2005, p. 93). Third, for most people, television news is their main source of information, making a better understanding thereof 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 19:00 (7 pm) news broadcasts from the two main broadcasters (public service broadcaster Eén and main commercial channel VTM) are among the most watched programmes, together reaching around 2 million viewers every day, over 30 percent 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 9527 news items comprising one or more vox pops (6.1 percent). Vox pops were most prevalent in news items about politics (25 percent of all news items containing vox pops), social affairs (14.4 percent) and mobility (12.3 percent). 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, for a period of 11 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 1 to 15 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 percent), while the other half are presented as representing the entire Flemish population (49.1 percent). 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, & 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 off 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 0.75 in this phase). Lastly, at the end of the research, intercoder reliability was calculated on a random sample of 122 vox pops (6.1 percent). Table 1.1 contains the exact values for all variables of interest in this study.

Table 1.1. Krippendorff's alpha for key variables

Variable	Alpha
Population/subpopulation	0.76
Gender	0.98
Age group	0.87
Ethnicity	0.85
Clothing (formal/informal)	0.85
Background (public/private)	1
Caption/function description	1

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 with 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 percent 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). The other 88.6 percent 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”, $N = 1168$), only 3.3 percent of the vox pops were identified by a function description (e.g., random passerby). In 7 percent 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 percent). This absence of identification emphasizes the replaceability and ordinariness of the vox pops and their lack of expertise.

Visual Characteristics

Gender and age. The distribution of gender of the interviewed vox pops was balanced: 48.9 percent female and 51.1 percent male. In 2015, the Flemish population consisted of 50.6 percent females and 49.4 percent 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 1.2), although people between 19 and 64 were over-represented in the vox pop sample. However, 19–64-year-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, as are 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.

Table 1.2. Distribution of age groups in the vox pop sample ($N = 977$) 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%	
Elderly (81+)	0.4%	19.4%
Total	100%	

Ethnicity. The large majority of vox pops interviewed were identified as “white” (97.6 percent) and this number is far removed from the actual composition of the Flemish population of which it is estimated that around 15–20 percent are ethnic-cultural minorities, either with a foreign nationality or born in a country other 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 they 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 percent) of the vox pops were interviewed in a public place. The remainder were interviewed in their 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, Samoy, and van Geel (2005), 10–15 percent of the Flemish population between 15 and 64 have severe or mild mental or physical disabilities. Of course, not all of these disabilities are visible, but if vox pops were a realistic representation of the population, we would expect individuals with disabilities in our sample.

In terms of clothing, 88.3 percent of the persons displayed were dressed casually and 11.7 percent 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 interviews with journalists, we asked more general questions about journalistic practice and the selection of vox pops. First, specific questions about the conduct of vox pops were posed. The journalists indicated that they interview several people and that they select the best vox pops afterwards. However, sometimes journalists know 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, 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 and 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 & 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 the public making 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 & Brosius, 2000). Vox pops are almost always a biased representation of public opinion, as it is very hard to grasp “the” public opinion (Lewis et al., 2005). They might therefore influence the public to make wrongful generalizations. Several previous studies have already established that vox pop statements influence the 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 vox pops, a perception of these excluded groups as being “atypical” might be constructed in the heads of the audiences (Campbell, 1995, p. 12). What is more, when some population

groups have fewer chances to have their say in the news, certain points of view might be excluded or underrepresented. 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 (Soley, 1992; Vandenberghe, d'Haenens, & Van Gorp, 2015). 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, p. 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., Beckers & Harder, 2016; Paulussen & Harder, 2014). 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; Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Daschmann, 2000; Gibson & Zillmann, 1994; Lefevere et al., 2012). 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.

Note

1. For more information on the Electronic News Archive and the coding procedure, see www.nieuwsarchief.be.

Appendix A. Interview Guide

Key questions	Sub-questions
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?	
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?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Clothing- Tattoos- Piercings- Disabilities

Chapter 2

Opinion Balance in Vox Pop Television News

Opinions expressed by the common (wo)man on the street influence audience judgments about perceived public opinion and even people's own opinion. While we know from experimental research that the distribution of opinions expressed in vox pop interviews—the balance between pro and contra quotes, for example—influences audiences, little research has actually looked at the distribution of opinions expressed in vox pops in the real world. Are the vox pops shown in news items balanced or not? We address this research gap by analyzing the opinion balance of vox pop statements with a specific focus on political news. We conducted an in-depth content analysis on a random sample of 2,000 vox pop interviews in Belgian (Flanders) main evening television news drawn from a total population of vox pop interviews in the period 2003–2013. Results show that in half of the news items in which they are used, vox pops present opinions and that vox pops play an important role in political news. We find that, contrary to our expectations, the opinions expressed in vox pops are unbalanced both in non-political and political news. A large majority of vox pop news items contains vox pop voices that present only one point of view.

KEYWORDS: content analysis, opinion balance, political news, public opinion, television news, vox pops

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Introduction

The ordinary man or woman on the street is shown almost daily on the television news (De Swert, 2013). These, usually short, interviews with ordinary people are called “vox pop” interviews or simply “vox pops”. Innocently looking, vox pops can exert considerable influence on the views of the public as they provide people with a cue about what other members of the public think about a news story or issue. Vox pops may affect audience members’ perceived public opinion (of others) and even their own opinion (e.g., Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Daschmann, 2000; Lefevere et al., 2012; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997)

A vox pop can be defined as an apparently randomly chosen, ordinary individual with no affiliation, expert knowledge or exclusive information, who is interviewed by journalists and gives a personal statement in a news item (see Bosch, 2014; De Swert, 2013; Lefevere et al., 2012). The substitutability of vox pops is important to mark the distinction between vox pops and other citizen sources such as event participants or eye witnesses. It is not important in a vox pop interview who is speaking, any other person can easily replace the interviewee since (s)he does not possess any exclusive information (De Swert, 2013). As a replaceable source, vox pops are not particularly involved in the issue covered in the news item. For instance, in a report on a violent store robbery, an eye witness talking about what he/she saw (e.g., “I saw the robbers run away with a large bag”) is irreplaceable since this eye witness possesses exclusive information and the journalist is bound to his/her statement. However, a news item about the same robbery might contain a different type of non-elite source; a random person on a shopping street can be approached to give his/her opinion about the news issue (e.g., “I think the crime rate in society is rising”). This interviewee is replaceable, the journalist is free to select any other person in a public place to provide an opinion or personal statement. This last interview is a vox pop interview.

Previous research on the occurrence of vox pops in television news found the use of vox pops to be on the rise. Analyzing Dutch television news, Pantti and Husslage (2009) found that vox pops accounted for only 4 percent of all speaking sources in 1993, while this had more than doubled to 9 percent in 2006. De Swert et al. (2008) found that vox pops’ share in all speaking sources in Flemish newscasts grew from 27 to 37 percent between 2003 and 2007. The same authors compared the occurrence of vox pops in 11 countries with different media systems (Belgium, France, Norway, Turkey, The Netherlands, United Kingdom, Canada, United States, Germany, Ireland and Italy) and found a similar prevalence and increase in vox pops. Some

studies state that this increase in the occurrence of vox pops can be explained by the fact that vox pops are an easy way to represent public opinion in the news and create the impression that views of members of the public are directly and transparently communicated to the public (Brookes et al., 2004; Lewis et al., 2005). Their popularity is further explained by the fact that they make the news recognizable and accessible for viewers (Lewis et al., 2005; Pantti & Husslage, 2009). Increasing competition and market pressures have made representing public opinion and providing accessible news a more important asset. None of these studies, though, looked into the actual vox pop statements by studying the content of the statements made. The statement a vox pop makes can take one of two forms: a personal experience (e.g., “I ride my bicycle every day”) or an opinion (e.g., “I think bike riding should be encouraged”). It most likely is the opinion component of vox pops that accounts for the well-studied effect of vox pops on television viewers’ beliefs. Especially the potentially unbalanced representation of points of view may influence audiences and push them to adopt the dominant opinion they are exposed to (e.g., Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997). However, to our knowledge, hardly any work has examined the content and, especially, the distribution of the opinions included in vox pop news items. There is some research about the political leaning (right wing or left wing) of vox pops (Lewis, Wahl-Jorgensen, & Inthorn, 2004), though, indicating that more than 92 percent of vox pops took no clear political stance. When citizens did express a political point of view, it tended to be right rather than left of center. However, the fact that 92 percent expressed no explicit political viewpoint does not mean they did not voice an opinion. Therefore, rather than focusing solely on overtly expressed political leanings, this study analyzes how prevalent vox pops expressing opinions are in general and whether vox pops in news items are balanced or not. We pay particular attention to political news as compared to non-political news as we expect that expressions of public opinion are potentially most consequential for political news. We perform a large-scale content analysis of vox pop statements in the main 7 pm news broadcasts of the two main television stations in Belgium (Flanders), the public and main commercial broadcaster.

We find that vox pops in Belgium play an important role in political news, being the second most quoted source. Vox pops are used to present opinions even more often in political news than in other news topics. Most importantly, and going against our expectations, we find that vox pops are not used more to represent a variety of points of view in political news

compared to other news topics. The opinions shown by vox pops are remarkably unbalanced in all television news items.

Vox Pops, Public Opinion and Balance

Vox pops are a means to represent public opinion. Yet, some researchers consider vox pops as little more than tools to provide spicy illustrations through personal testimonies about individual experiences. For instance, Kleemans et al. (2015b, p. 157) refer to vox pops as news sources “whose only function is to enliven or illustrate a news story”, playing no substantive role (De Swert et al., 2008; Lewis et al., 2005). Lewis et al. (2005) refer to vox pops as tools to provide mood, background, emotions and light commentary, without adding to the central narrative of a news story. According to Pantti and Husslage (2009) as well, vox pops are used to add emotions and vividness and to make news items more recognizable for viewers.

Other authors, though, consider vox pops to be more than just an enlivenment of the news item by giving it a human-interest touch. They hold that vox pops can play a more substantial role as a representation of public opinion. Lewis et al. (2005), for example, also note that vox pop interviews bring discussions of politics and public affairs into everyday life. These authors state that citizenship is most clearly expressed and defined through vox pops. The vox pop effects literature too has focused mainly on vox pops that express an opinion and do not just deliver a personal testimony (Daschmann, 2000; Lefevere et al., 2012; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997).

Mass media portrayals of public opinion provide individuals’ primary information source about what the population thinks about an issue (Moy & Scheufele, 2000). Therefore, mass media portrayals can contribute to what audiences perceive as the majority opinion. This can be consequential, since people do not like to express their point of view when they think it is a minority opinion (cf. spiral of silence theory; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). As early as the 1950s, Festinger (1954) argued that individuals take into account the opinions of others when determining their own points of view through what he called “consensual validation”. Once people perceive their own opinion to be shared by “the others”, it obtains the status of objective reality. When they perceive their own opinion as a minority opinion, though, they are likely to adapt their own opinion. This is even stronger when individuals identify with the source expressing the opinion (Andsager et al., 2006; Bandura, 2002). This means vox pop opinions

may affect individuals' image of public opinion and, in turn, these perceptions of public opinion may potentially affect people's own opinion (Lefevere et al., 2012; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997).

Television journalists have several means at their disposal to display public opinion in the news. These include, amongst others, opinion polls, statistics, demonstrations or mere references to public opinion without giving further evidence. Vox pops are one such tool to represent aspects of public opinion (Brookes et al., 2004). Vox pops are attractive since they are cheaper and easier to gather than most of the aforementioned public opinion measures (Lewis et al., 2005). Moreover, vox pops provide journalists much freedom to select opinions that fit into their news story. Furthermore, vox pops are more effective in conveying a sense of public opinion to the audience. For example, Daschmann (2000) found that vox pop statements affected voter judgments more than election poll results. He concluded that although vox pops possess less validity than poll data, when it comes to judging the issue portrayed, their influence on perceived public opinion was larger. Vox pops have also proved to be more influential than base-rate information (inferences) about public opinion given in a news item, even when the given information is very specific (e.g., statistical information) (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Gibson & Zillmann, 1994). Being cheaper, easier, more flexible and more effective makes vox pops a far more prevalent public opinion indicator in the news than, for instance, opinion polls. According to Lewis et al. (2005), vox pops make up 4 in 10 references to public opinion in the news, while public opinion polls or images of demonstrations only comprise 3 per cent.

Especially in the political domain, public opinion and its representation is important. What people perceive to be the public opinion about a movie, a company closure, a crime case or a sports game has no real consequences beyond that specific event. This is different for political news, here defined as news where political actors, institutions or actions are mentioned. Opinions about political issues—topics that are already on the political agenda and are debated amongst politicians—may have broader implications for people's ideological stance, their party preference and, ultimately, their vote. Additionally, there is extensive proof of the fact that actual policy-making is impacted by public opinion (see, e.g., Page & Shapiro, 1983). So, if the representation of public opinion in political news has an effect on people's political opinions, then the consequences of providing the audience with a sample of political opinions through vox pops potentially are considerable.

At the same time, there are reasons to expect that opinionating vox pops will be used more often in political news compared to news on other topics. To start with, more than

anything else, politics is about (clashing) opinions about how to organize society. In the political game public opinion is a relevant factor and argument much more than in any other sector of society. Also, following concerns in recent years about citizens' disenchantment with politics and politicians (e.g., Hargreaves & Thomas, 2002; Lewis et al., 2005), vox pops may be a means that news makers use to balance the traditional elite sources such as politicians and allow regular, non-elite people into the public sphere (Lewis et al., 2005, p. 72). For example, according to McNair, Hibberd, and Schlesinger (2003, p. 109), in Great Britain the movement from elite to mass representation in broadcasting has contributed to the development of a culture of mediated public access to political debate. Previous work has indeed found that in political news, more than in other news, vox pops are used to display the opinion among the population. De Swert (2013), for instance, found vox pops to feature less often in event-related topics such as crime, accidents, disasters and sports compared to political news. Lewis et al. (2005, p. 76) found that the most frequent subjects of vox pops were "explicitly political", such as elections, politicians and political decisions. So, our first hypothesis goes as follows:

H1: Opinionating vox pops are used more often in political news than in other news.

Objectivity is one of the corner stones of the journalistic production process. Patterson (1998, p. 27) called objectivity the "defining norm of modern journalism". Surveys all over the world found that journalists refer to objectivity as a very important criterion for quality journalism (e.g., Skovsgaard et al., 2012; Weaver & Willnat, 2012). Journalistic standards further prescribe the presentation of a rational debate where a diversity of points of view is included in the news (Ward, 2015, p. 299), turning balance into one of the important dimensions of objectivity. Even if, from an academic point of view, objectivity and balance may not always be the same thing, journalistic standards expect journalists to balance conflicting views and leave judgment to the receiver (McNair, 1998; McQuail, 2010). Research about vox pop effects has indeed found that unbalanced vox pops with a skewed distribution of expressed opinions exert most influence on the public (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997). Yet, contrary to most elite sources, vox pops provide journalists with an easy opportunity to present a diversity of opinions; journalists can choose any individual from the population to appear in the news (De Swert, 2013). When conducting vox pop interviews, the journalist has almost full control over the statements that are shown in the news. As a consequence, we expect that vox pops in news items would be balanced and that, if an item contains several vox

pops, different opinions about an issue or news fact would be conveyed through the vox pop interviews.

H2: News items contain opinionating vox pops that are balanced.

Particularly with regard to political news, balancing points of view is crucial to obtain objectivity. Political actors themselves are very sensitive to balance in the news and in many countries there is political debate about the alleged absence of balanced news (Hopmann, Van Aelst, & Legnante, 2011; Van Aelst, 2007). The Flemish public service broadcaster VRT has a specific guideline about impartiality regarding vox pops (VRT, 2015): “Vox pops are not representative of the whole population. Find different opinions and never present them as being ‘the’ opinion”. In the BBC’s editorial guidelines there is even a specific section about vox pops in “Politics & Public Policy” news, emphasizing the importance of the representation of different points of view in these news items:

Vox pops on politics or matters of public policy must be edited to ensure that both sides of the issue are covered and/or that they truly represent those whose opinions have been solicited and include an appropriate range of views. (BBC, 2015)

So, journalists can be expected to be aware of the importance of presenting a diversity of opinions in the news they make, especially in political news. In Belgium (Flanders), the main commercial and public service broadcasters have been seen to implement self-regulation with regards to their neutrality concerning political views, and they are expected to treat all parties proportionately (Vlaamse Regulator Voor de Media, 2014). All this makes us expect that there is more balance in vox pop opinions in political compared to non-political news.

H3: In political news items opinionating vox pops are more balanced than in non-political news items.

Method

This study focuses on vox pops in television news. The effect of vox pops in television news is probably stronger than in print media because of the additional visual and audible cues. Graber (1990) found that people are influenced most by visual stimuli. The few television studies that were carried out found particularly strong effects of televised vox pops (Aust & Zillmann, 1996;

Lefevere et al., 2012). Additionally, for most people, television news still is their main source of information, turning television news into a relevant object of research (Morone, 2013). Finally, and maybe most importantly, more than for other news media, objectivity and balance are considered key in television news, especially in public service broadcasting that traditionally followed strict objectivity rules, also in Belgium. Commercial broadcasters may have more leeway and are less bound to follow legal requirements of impartiality (Cushion, 2012, p. 35). So, we expect there to be more balance in television news, in general, and in vox pops, in particular.

We conducted a quantitative content analysis of television news items containing vox pops from the period 2003–2013 in Flanders, the largest Dutch-speaking northern part of Belgium. News items were selected from a complete dataset from the Media Policy Research Centre (Electronic News Archive) containing all 7 pm broadcasts from the two main Flemish television stations (the public broadcast channel Eén and the commercial channel VTM) between 2003 and 2013¹ (7,844 news broadcasts). The population dataset identified 9527 news items containing one or more vox pops.² Next, from this dataset with all vox pop items, we drew a random sample of 568 news items containing at least one vox pop. In these 568 news items, 2,000 individual vox pops were present. These were coded in depth.

Vox pops were coded at two levels: at the level of the news item ($N = 568$) and at the level of individual vox pops ($N = 2,000$). The topic of the news items was coded based on an elaborate issue code book. Some news reports were assigned more than one issue code because they dealt with several topics. This study differentiated between political and non-political news. Political news was operationalized as news covering the political organization in general (e.g., political parties, state reforms), elections (e.g., debates, candidates), and European and international politics. Vox pops could voice a personal experience or rather an opinion. A vox pop statement was coded as stating a personal experience when the vox pop only talked about things (s)he did or experienced (e.g., “I cycle to work every day”). A statement was coded as an opinion when the person expressed his/ her views about something (e.g., “I think the government needs to invest in better cycle paths”). When an opinion was combined with a personal experience, this was also coded as an opinion because the direction of the opinion of the interviewee could be measured. Fourteen percent of the vox pop statements were coded as a combination of a personal experience and an opinion.

Next, we analyzed the opinions expressed and looked at the actual content of the statements. This allowed us to calculate, for every news item, how many different opinions were shown as well as the share (as a percentage) of every opinion. For instance, if a news item contained four vox pops, three supporting a certain point of view and one opposing it, the percentage of the majority opinion is 75 percent. An example of an unbalanced news item can be found on Eén (September 9, 2008). The news item reports that 8 out of 10 Flemings are happy with their job. The item shows three vox pops who are being asked about what they think about their jobs: “I am very happy with my job”, “Yes, very happy with my job” and “Yes, very happy, it offers a lot of variety”. These people all share the same opinion and the news item is thus unbalanced as the majority opinion has a share of 100 percent. In another news item, people’s opinion about the new king is being asked (VTM, March 2, 2012). Here, four vox pops are shown: “I think he is capable and he’s going to do well”, “If he is not ready now, he will never be ready”, “Prince Filip, I think he is all right”. These three people all think Prince Filip will do a good job. The fourth vox pop has a different opinion: “I think if we proceed to the succession to the throne of Prince Filip, that we are actually heading for a disaster”. In this news item, the majority opinion has a share of 75 percent. This news item is labeled as more balanced as different points of view are shown.

The codebook was pretested on 130 vox pops by four coders that followed an intensive training. After the training, 20 vox pops were coded by each coder and inter-coder reliability was calculated (all variables reached Krippendorff’s alpha values higher than 0.75). Then coding started. At the end, inter-coder reliability was calculated again on a random sample of 122 vox pops (6 percent). For all variables, inter-coder reliability reached a Krippendorff’s alpha higher than 0.70. Table 2.1 contains the exact figures for the three variables of interest in this study.

Table 2.1. Inter-coder reliability of key variables

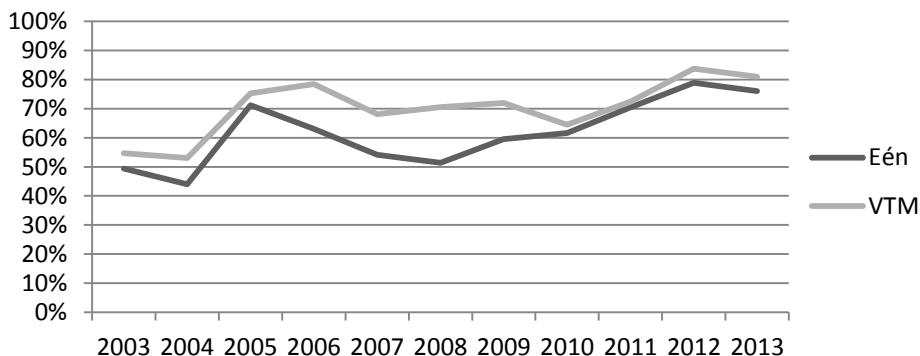
Variable	Krippendorff’s alpha
Opinionating vox pop	0.704
Balance in opinions	0.842
Subject is politics	0.771

On average, in the 568 coded news items containing at least one vox pop, there are 3.51 vox pops ($SD = 1.92$) shown. There was one news item in our sample with no less than 15 vox pops. Regarding the opinions expressed in vox pops, on average 1.44 ($SD = 0.62$) different

opinions were recorded per news item. In none of the coded news items were more than three different opinions expressed by vox pops.

While the evolution over time of vox pop occurrence is not our focus here, by way of putting our data into perspective and comparing our results with previous research (De Swert et al., 2008; Pantti & Husslage, 2009), we briefly look at it based on the population dataset we drew our sample from (7,844 news broadcasts). Results show that, on average, 62.0 percent of all newscasts on public service television channel Eén contained at least one vox pop in the period 2003–2013. With, on average, 70.5 percent, this number was even higher for the commercial broadcaster VTM. Figure 2.1 shows that the share of broadcasts with vox pops was clearly on the rise. In 2003, only 49.5 percent of all news broadcasts on Eén and 55.0 percent on VTM included vox pops. By 2013 this has risen to 75.9 and 81.0 percent, respectively. The rise is statistically significant ($F(10) = 35.50, p < 0.05$).

Figure 2.1. Share of news broadcasts containing at least one vox pop at commercial broadcaster VTM and public service channel Eén ($N = 7,844$ news broadcasts)



Results

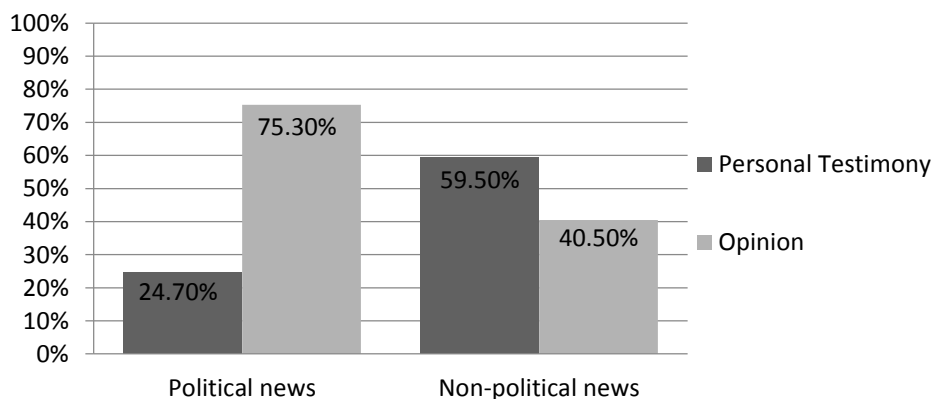
Vox pops can be used as a means to display personal experiences or as a representation of opinions. Almost half of the 2,000 coded individual vox pops (46.7 percent) express an opinion about the issue the news item deals with. The other half (53.3 percent) provide a personal testimony with people talking about experiences from their own lives or from people they know. There is not any difference between the prevalence of vox pops expressing opinions on public service television channel Eén (45.7 percent) compared to commercial broadcaster VTM

(48.9 percent) ($t(1330.8) = -1.4, p > 0.05$). So, vox pops are often used to express opinions; they are not only used to add personal experiences to a news item.

How prevalent are vox pops in political news? We use the full dataset of all news items from 2003 to 2013 ($N = 126,948$ news items). In political news, vox pops are the second most prevalent news source. Not surprisingly, politicians are the most quoted sources in political news; almost half of the sources in political news are politicians (45.1 percent). Vox pops take second place, at a large distance from politicians, with 4.1 percent of all quotes. They are more prevalent than other actors such as civil society spokespersons (2.4 percent) and experts (1.5 percent). Moreover, when vox pops are included in political news they are more numerous than in non-political news. In political news, when there are vox pops included, there are on average more than four vox pops in a news item (mean = 4.38, $SD = 2.23$), while in non-political news items there are on average only three vox pops (mean = 3.36, $SD = 1.82$); the difference is significant ($t(99,87) = -3.89, p < 0.001$). In sum, vox pops play a relatively important role in political news.

H1 stated that vox pops are used more often to display opinions in political news compared to other news topics. We test it based on our in-depth coding of 2,000 vox pop statements. Figure 2.2 shows that, in political news items, 75.3 percent of all vox pops voice an opinion, while in other news items this is only 40.5 percent. The difference is significant ($\chi^2 = 143.07, df = 1, p < 0.001$). H1 can thus be accepted, there are more opinionating vox pops in political news.

Figure 2.2. Share of opinions versus personal testimonies in political and non-political news ($N = 2,000$ vox pops)



H2 and H3 formulated claims about the balance of news items with vox pops giving opinions. We therefore focus only on the news items containing vox pops expressing opinions ($N = 327$). For every news item we measure how many different points of view are displayed using vox pops and whether they are similar or different from each other. In Table 2.2 it can be seen that the large majority of vox pop news items are unbalanced. No less than 73.0 percent of the news items containing vox pops expressing opinions are unbalanced, displaying only one point of view; only 27.0 percent of the news items displaying vox pop opinions showed more than one point of view.

Table 2.2. Share of balanced versus unbalanced news items based on vox pop opinions ($N = 327$ news items)

Number of points of view	Share of news items (%)
One	73.0
More than one	27.0

How dominant is the dominant vox pop opinion than exactly? On average, the dominant opinion has a 90 percent share of all opinions displayed (mean = 89.94, $SD = 17.40$). Remarkably, the degree of balance in a news item with vox pops is not dependent on the number of vox pop quotes. It is not the case that only items with a few vox pop quotes are unbalanced. The correlation coefficient is not significant ($r = -0.05$, $p > 0.05$). All these findings directly contradict H2. It is not the case that vox pops are used in a balanced way by journalists. On the contrary, vox pops basically convey only one point of view.

H3 held that there would be more vox pop opinion balance in political news compared to non-political news. We calculate the difference in balance in opinion between political and non-political news. Political news items turn out to be somewhat more balanced (mean = 86.46, $SD = 17.15$) than non-political news items (mean = 90.79, $SD = 18.07$) but this difference is not significant ($t(92.69) = 1.74$; $p = 0.09$). When running the analysis separately for the public and the commercial broadcaster with the public broadcaster having more rigorous rules for objectivity in place, we do not find any difference either. It is not the case that political items with vox pops are more balanced than non-political items both on Eén and on VTM. In sum, H3 is rejected. Despite various self-regulating measures in this regard, journalists do not pay more attention to presenting a diversity of points of view through vox pops in political news.

Conclusion and Discussion

In the context of a general trend towards an increasing vox pop presence in the news—a trend that we confirmed here for Belgium—and of the fact that ordinary people in the news are becoming one of the most dominant voices in television news, this study investigated the prevalence and balance of opinion statements by vox pops in political news items compared to non-political news items in Belgian television news. As far as we can tell, our study was one of the first to focus on the content of vox pop quotes and the distribution of vox pop opinions. We argued that vox pops may provide more than a mere illustration by means of personal testimonies but may also be used as an expression of opinions. It is probably precisely the presentation of opinions in vox pops that explains why experiments testing the influence of vox pops found them to have effects on audiences' attitudes and judgments (e.g., Lefevere et al., 2012). Furthermore, we looked specifically at political news items, as we expected expressions of public opinion to be most consequential here (e.g., influencing voter turnout and vote choice).

The people in about half of the large sample of vox pops we analyzed in Belgium (Flanders) from the period 2003–2013 are shown talking about personal experiences and the other half are shown expressing opinions. Vox pops are thus not only or even predominantly used to fulfill the need for personalization in news, nor can they be considered as merely part of news commercialization trends, by adding personal experiences to a news report, as implied by previous research (De Swert et al., 2008; Kleemans et al., 2015b). We find that vox pops play a particularly important role in political news, being the second most quoted news source. We find that vox pops are used significantly more often to include opinions in political news than in non-political news. In general, and directly going against our expectation based on news balance practices and theory, when vox pops are used to voice opinions circulating among the general public, three out of four of these news items cover only one point of view through vox pops. Even more remarkably, the same applies to political news. So, despite more attention being paid to political balance in editorial guidelines and self-regulation of public service and commercial broadcasters, and although the influence is expected to be more consequential in political news, we do not find more balanced political news.

These findings pose several interesting challenges for both research and journalistic practice. While objectivity and balance have been considered by academics as a relevant issue for study, the neglect of analyzing the content of vox pops, at the advantage of focusing on elite

sources and static information presented by newsreaders or in news articles, has left us with many questions unanswered. The considerable imbalance in the opinions voiced in vox pops in one item shows the need to make the analysis of vox pops part of studies regarding balance and objectivity in news content, especially because vox pops seem to cancel out the effects of other public opinion tools such as inferences about public opinion and opinion polls (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Daschmann, 2000; Gibson & Zillmann, 1994; Lefevere et al., 2012). Even if the base-rate information in a news item is balanced or nuanced, the given vox pop opinions might outweigh this balance, making vox pops a powerful public opinion tool. Our research focused solely on vox pops and did not study these other references to public opinion in news items. Future research might analyze these other references to public opinion to study the consequences for the overall balance across a news item.

This is particularly relevant with regards to political news. More than in other news categories, academics have analyzed balance and impartiality in reporting, as mass media are considered key places for the articulation of public opinion and therefore are considered to take up a key position in democracy. As our results suggest, vox pops feature more in this type of news than a decade ago and, moreover, do not seem to follow the traditional assumptions about news balance (De Swert, 2013). Strangely, the normal practice of political journalists to balance their news does not seem to apply to vox pops. While the vox pop format gives them much more chance to balance—they have a considerable amount of freedom to select vox pops and can thus deliberately search for a balance in points of view—they do not seem to make use of this opportunity to do so. There is a need for more research into selection criteria that journalists use and other news production-related criteria and routines that influence the selection of vox pops. Do journalists only select vox pops that present what they perceive as the majority opinion, as our results suggest, or are other elements of journalistic production at play?

From a journalism practice perspective as well, our results invoke interesting questions. Despite strict legal and self-imposed rules regarding objectivity and impartiality applicable to the news service of public service institution VRT, we could not find any differences between the use and type of vox pops in the 7 pm news program of public service television station Eén and of commercial broadcaster VTM. Views expressed in vox pop interviews in public service news items did not differ significantly from the commercial news program. This raises questions regarding the effectiveness of explicit rules and regulations in this regard, if not accompanied

by a more explicit understanding of and instructions for the use and role of vox pops in news. If anything, our results underline the need to include a critical reflection on the use of vox pops in the socialization of journalists and the implementation of rules on impartiality in the newsroom.

Our study focused on Belgian (Flemish) television news items. We cannot be certain that the findings are generalizable to other media systems. More research in other countries and media contexts is required. Previous studies analyzing vox pops in television news and comparing between countries did not find large differences, though (De Swert, 2013; Lewis et al., 2005). We expect our data to be generalizable to some extent to countries with a similar media system with a strong public service broadcaster (e.g., United Kingdom, Germany, The Netherlands, Sweden). At the very least, we hope this study will open up a new avenue to examine the increasing presence of vox pops in the news. Not just the prevalence and the effects of vox pops is worth studying, but their actual content is at least as relevant.

Notes

1. For more information on the coding procedure and the Electronic News Archive, see www.nieuwsarchief.be.
2. The news broadcasts were coded based on raw video material. Krippendorff's alpha for the actor function "(wo)man on the street" was 0.70 and thus satisfactory for further analysis.

Chapter 3

Vox Pops in the News

The Journalists' Perspective

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 man or woman on the street. Yet, hardly any research exists about journalists' evaluation of vox pops or went further than speculating about why they are used. This study tackles these research gaps using a survey with 253 Belgian journalists. We conclude that vox pops are used most by audiovisual journalists and that journalists seem to use them mainly 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 use of vox pops.

KEYWORDS: journalists; professional opinions; survey; vox pops

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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 et al., 2004; Hudson & Rowlands, 2007; Pantti & Husslage, 2009). However, no systematic research exists analyzing why journalists use vox pops this frequently in the news and what they think about them.

Research into the occurrence of vox pops 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 & Husslage, 2009). A similar increase was found in ten other countries with different media systems in the period 2003-2007, namely Belgium, France, Norway, Turkey, UK, Canada, USA, Germany, Ireland and Italy (De Swert et al., 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, Walgrave, & Van den Bulck, 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 newspaper *The New York Times* (US) and 3.4% in *The Times* (UK) (Lewis et al., 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 & Husslage, 2009). They thus 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 & Husslage, 2009). Newsrooms nowadays are faced with an increasing competition for audience share and this is often assumed as being one of the main reasons why they bring more of 'what the audience wants', i.e., personalized, human-interest news (Brants & 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. It 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 et al., 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 citizen sources and found that journalists do use them to add emotions to a news item. However, the authors did not study other motivations of journalists to use 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, there seems to exist a general aversion of journalists to use 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 et al., 2011). Journalistic handbooks also seem to suggest this rather negative attitude. Hudson and Rowlands (2007, p. 113) suggest that many seasoned reporters do not like to conduct vox pops, with examples of experienced journalists calling vox pops “useless” and “humiliating” in a TV-show. Vox pops are therefore assumed to be outsourced regularly to unexperienced journalists and interns to spare more experienced journalists the trouble (Hudson & Rowlands, 2007). Several blog posts of journalists can be found mentioning similarly negative feelings regarding vox pops: e.g., “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 assumptions or examples of individual journalists to contribute to the understanding of journalists’ attitudes towards vox pops.

Using a large-scale survey with 253 Belgian journalists, this study tackles several of the abovementioned 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.

Method

To obtain insight into journalists' views on vox pops, this study employed an online quantitative survey with 253 Belgian journalists who, among other things, cover political news. This way, we were able to gain a more systematic understanding of journalists' perspective 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 email and filled in the survey online. In a later phase, journalists who did not yet responded to the email 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 till 79. In Table 3.1, the medium the journalists work for most is shown¹. 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.

Table 3.1. 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%

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 opinion”) on 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”.

Results

Who uses vox pops and why?

89 of the 253 (35%) journalists state to 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 3.2). Journalists working for (online) print media used vox pops less frequently. 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.

Table 3.2. 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%

Next to looking at the characteristics of the journalists using vox pops, we also looked at possible motivations to use them. The reasons mentioned most 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 3.3). 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 generally thus think vox pops are not an appropriate representation of the opinion of the general public.

Table 3.3. Motivation statements (*N* = 253)

Statement	disagree	neutral	agree
Vox pops increase the involvement of the audience with a news item	28.6%	27%	44.5%
Vox pops give the public an idea about public opinion	54.7%	16.7%	28.6%

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 3.3 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 3.4.

Table 3.4. Logistic regression analysis with vox pops 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
Pseudo R-square		
Cox and Snell	.260	
Nagelkerke	.357	

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

As Table 3.2 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 did not use vox pops more frequently than more experienced journalists. It is thus not the case that unexperienced 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 the motivations of journalists to use vox pops, we find that journalists seem to use vox pops mainly because they increase audience commitment with a news item. The statement that vox pops might also be a public opinion tool is not a significant predictor of vox pop use. It thus seems that journalists add vox pops to their news item as a way to enliven the item and increase involvement with the audience. As we already saw in Table 3.3, 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.

What do journalists think about vox pops?

We also asked journalists about their evaluation of vox pops (Table 3.5). 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.

Table 3.5. Vox pop evaluation statement ($N = 253$)

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

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 3.6).

Table 3.6. 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
Pseudo R-square		
Cox and Snell	.287	
Nagelkerke	.306	

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

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 any influence of the medium journalists work for 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% says 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 seem to deliberately add vox pops to a news item. 32.6% of the journalists has no opinion. Almost 26% of the journalists who uses vox pops thus sees vox pops as sources that are more or less inferior to other news sources.

Conclusion & 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 & 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 used one or more vox pops in the past month. Journalists were found to include vox pops in their news items mainly 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 & 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 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 of beginning journalists having 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' motivations and evaluations to use vox pops. 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 base 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, at the advantage of 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 proven to have an influence on several audience judgments such as perceived media credibility, perceived public opinion and even personal opinions (e.g., Arpan, 2009; Daschmann, 2000; Lefevere et al., 2012). The lack of insight into a journalistic practice used on a daily basis and 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 journalistic motivations to use 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 in the news, they appear in the news almost every day and their number keeps growing (Beckers et al., 2016). This is a quite remarkable contradiction which deserves future research. A profound understanding of this discrepancy between journalistic 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.

Notes

1. 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. Separate analysis for radio and television journalists indeed did not influence the results and supports our decision to combine them into one category.

Chapter 4

Effects of Vox Pop Characteristics in Television News

Interviews with the ordinary man or woman on the street (or “vox pops”) are rising in everyday news coverage. These seemingly innocent-looking vox pops are found to be very influential. Whereas previous research mostly attributed their influence to their vividness, vox pops can play different roles in the news by stating explicit (political) opinions or personal testimonies. This research goes beyond existing assumptions and tests whether statement format (opinion or personal testimony) moderates the influence of vox pop viewpoints. Next, we analyze whether the introduction of vox pops in the news matters, as several editorial guidelines exist about the way vox pops should be introduced. This study draws on a Web-based experiment with 2,175 participants using 12 artificial television news items. The experiment focuses on changes in participants’ perceived public opinion and personal opinions. The results show that vox pop viewpoints influence people’s perceptions of public opinion and their personal opinion to a large degree, regardless of the other vox pop characteristics. However, what vox pops say is also of influence: vox pops stating explicit opinions are more influential than vox pops giving personal testimonies. We did not find an effect of the introduction. The conclusion of this experiment is that vox pops are powerful influencers, even more so when they are used as an explicit public opinion tool. Making changes in their introduction does not reduce their influence on perceived public opinion or personal opinions.

KEYWORDS: experiment; man on the street; media effects; personal opinion; public opinion; vox pops

Introduction

Interviews with the ordinary man or woman on the street about the news of the day are rising in everyday news coverage (Beckers et al., 2016; De Swert et al., 2008; Kleemans et al., 2015a). These brief interviews are called “vox pops” or “popular exemplars” and are used to represent the general population in the news. Most of the time, vox pops are not taken very seriously by academics and journalists as they are often perceived as an indicator of news tabloidization and sensationalism (e.g., Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2005; Kleemans et al., 2015b). However, studies do exist in which authors conclude that vox pop statements can have considerable influence on people’s perceptions of public opinion and even on their personal opinions, as people tend to generalize these statements to the entire population (Lefevere et al., 2012; Perry and Gonzenbach, 1997; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000).

Earlier research studying vox pops’ influence often departed from exemplification theory and found effects of vox pop statements on several audience judgments (e.g., Arpan, 2009; Daschmann, 2000; Gibson & Zillmann, 1994; Lefevere et al., 2012). Nearly all of the effects research is consequently based on the assumption that vox pops are influential because they increase a news item’s vividness and make it more personal. Previous research therefore treated all vox pops the same. However, vox pop statements can take two forms: whereas some vox pops only give a personal testimony (e.g., “I go to work by bike every day”), others give explicit opinions (e.g., “I think the government should invest in bicycle infrastructure”; Beckers et al., 2016). In the latter case, they become an explicit representation of public opinion in the news and in these instances they are expected to do more than just add vividness.

Media portrayals of public opinion mainly provide individuals’ primary information sources about what the population thinks about an issue (Gunther, 1998; Moy & Scheufele, 2000). Therefore, the media can contribute to what audiences perceive as the majority opinion. This is consequential, since people do not like to express an opinion they think is a minority opinion and this might over time even influence their personal viewpoints on an issue (cf. spiral of silence theory; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Journalists have several means at their disposal to represent public opinion in the news. These include, amongst others, opinion polls, vox pops, demonstrations, or mere inferences to public opinion without providing further evidence (Lewis et al., 2005). Vox pops are one of the most prevalent representations of public opinion as they are cheaper and easier to gather than most of these other public opinion expressions. Vox pops

have consistently been found to be more influential than other displays of public opinion, such as inferences and polls (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Daschmann, 2000; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000).

The media seem to be aware of the possible influence of vox pops. Several broadcasters have formulated guidelines about them, emphasizing that generalizing language regarding vox pops should be avoided, especially in political news (BBC, 2014; VRT, 2015). However, previous research has found that vox pops are mostly presented with little to no introductory or contextualizing information, and if they are introduced in the news, it is often done in a very generalizing way, such as: “all Belgians agree with...” (Beckers, 2016). Using an experimental design, this research will thus provide a new understanding of the effects these vox pops have in television news on people’s perceived public opinion and personal opinions.

This study goes beyond previous experiments that mostly compared vox pops with other sources or representations of public opinion and only looked at the mere presence of vox pops. We already know that vox pop statements are influential. However, no research has studied whether the introduction of the vox pops is able to moderate their influence, as would be expected based on editorial guidelines put forward by broadcasters. Moreover, this study goes beyond vox pops’ viewpoints and will analyze whether the format of the vox statements (opinion or personal testimony) is important in explaining their influence.

Vox pop influence

Vox pops are one of the most prevalent subtypes of exemplars. Exemplars are used to illustrate an event or issue that is the subject of a news story and are used to add personal stories to a news item (e.g., a testimony from a victim; Arpan, 2009; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). Zillmann et al. (1992) were probably the first to conduct an experiment testing the effect of exemplars. They presented participants with a print story with base-rate information stating that one-third of all people participating in a certain diet regained weight. Three different versions of the article were created: one where all the participants were said to have regained weight, one where one-third of participants were said to have regained weight, and one where half of the participants were said to have regained weight. It was concluded that people forgot the base-rate information and relied their judgment more on the statements of the exemplars, in this case the participants of the diet. Many similar subsequent experiments confirmed these results, consolidating the effects on audiences of exemplars in general and vox pops in

particular (Gibson & Zillmann, 1993), even over time (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Gibson & Zillmann, 1994).

Vox pops consistently have been found to influence perceptions of issues, even when accurate statistical information about an issue—sometimes going explicitly against the vox pop viewpoints—is provided in the same story (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). Solid vox pop effects were established on several audience judgments such as perceived media credibility (Arpan, 2009), perceived severity of an issue (Gibson & Zillmann, 1994), perceived public opinion (Arpan, 2009; Daschmann, 2000; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997), and even on people's personal opinions (Daschmann, 2000; Lefevere et al., 2012).

This research focuses on the latter two audience effects: a person's perception of public opinion and his/her personal opinion. These are potentially the two most important and consequential effects a vox pop can have. Perceived public opinion is an important concept in the literature. According to the theory of the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), many people feel constrained to express their opinions if they perceive their opinions to be different from what others in their population think. So, perceived public opinion affects the willingness of people to speak out. Although over time perceptions of public opinion might alter people's personal opinions, some studies also analyzed the direct effect of vox pops on personal opinions and found a—sometimes small—effect (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Daschmann, 2000; Lefevere et al., 2012; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997). The direct persuasive effect of vox pops on opinions is even more important, as people may act accordingly and change their intentions and behaviors. Certainly regarding political topics, changes in opinions might potentially be consequential. Several studies have already found effects of people's attitudes on, for instance, party preference, voting intention, and even voting behavior (Arcuri, Castelli, Galdi, Zogmaister, & Amadori, 2008; Friese, Smith, Plischke, Bluemke, & Nosek, 2012; Glasman & Albarracín, 2006).

Most of the aforementioned studies focused on print news. This study focuses on vox pops in television news as they are much more prevalent here (Lewis et al., 2005) and because visual stimuli are expected to be more influential than print stimuli (Graber, 1996; Paivio, 2013). To date, only two studies exist that focused specifically on the influence of vox pops in television news, and they found particularly strong effects (i.e., Lefevere et al., 2012; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997). Perry and Gonzenbach (1997) constructed a television news item with three vox pop viewpoint conditions (for, against, and mixed), and they concluded that audience perceptions of public opinion and personal opinions were influenced in the direction of the vox pop

statements. In the control condition, they concluded people to be influenced in the direction of the statements that received the most airtime. The viewpoint that received the most attention was the most influential. Lefevere et al. (2012) conducted a Web-based television news experiment and were one of the first to compare the influence of vox pops with other news sources; namely, experts and politicians. They found vox pops to be more influential than the elite sources, but only studied people's personal opinions.

Almost all empirical studies have shown that vox pops have an influence on perceptions of public opinion and sometimes found an effect on people's personal opinions. Consequently, to start this study, we want to replicate previous studies and consolidate the effect of vox pop viewpoints on perceived public opinion and personal opinions, leading to hypotheses 1a and 1b.

H1a: Participants' perceived public opinion is influenced in the direction of the vox pop viewpoints

H1b: Participants' personal opinions are influenced in the direction of the vox pop viewpoints

Previous research studying vox pop effects treated all vox pops the same. However, not all vox pops that appear in the news have a similar function. Beckers et al.'s (2016) research of Flemish television news found that vox pops were used as an explicit public opinion tool (e.g., "I think investing in regional roads is top priority") in half of the news items (46.7%), whereas in the other half of the news items the vox pops only related to personal stories without stating an explicit opinion (e.g., "I fell off my bike last week due to a hole in the bicycle path"). Moreover, in political news, vox pops were used as a public opinion tool in a large majority of the cases (75.3%).

Most vox pop effects literature departed from the assumption that vox pops are influential because of their vividness (e.g., Arpan, 2009; Lefevere et al., 2012). This is often explained by the "availability heuristic," which states that the more vivid and proximate information is, the more influential its role is in decision making (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000, p. 43). Vox pops would be easy to identify with as a result of their close proximity to the audience and because of their recognizability (De Swert, 2013; Kleemans et al., 2015a; Pantti & Husslage, 2009). However, vox pops can also represent public opinion in the news. This raises the question of whether the format of the vox pop statement matters in their influence. If vox pops are used as a means to explicitly represent public opinion in the news, they are expected to do

more than just add vividness. This research will study whether the format (opinion or personal testimony) of vox pop quotes matters in their influence on perceived public opinion and personal opinions. We expect that vox pops stating explicit opinions will be more influential than vox pops giving a personal testimony.

H2a: When vox pops express explicit opinions, participants' perceived public opinion is influenced more in the direction of the vox pop viewpoints than when vox pops give a personal testimony

H2b: When vox pops express explicit opinions, participants' personal opinions are influenced more in the direction of the vox pop viewpoints than when vox pops give a personal testimony

When vox pops are shown in the news, the small sample of citizens becomes a representation of the public in the news (Lewis et al., 2005; Myers, 2004). Because of the large amount of information shown in the news, people are not able to carefully process all information (Brosius, 2003). People probably do not process the vox pops in a critical way and do not pay much attention to them. Consequently, evaluations and judgments of issues are often made without apparent elaboration (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000, p. 39). Another heuristic used to explain vox pop influence is the "representativeness heuristic," which causes people to make generalizations about the whole population when presented with a typical sample of a population (Hamill, Wilson, & Nisbett, 1980; Tversky & Kahneman, 1971). The question arises whether the way in which vox pops are introduced in the news is able to break this illusion of representation.

Several newsrooms stress in their guidelines that vox pops can never really be an actual representative sample of the public and that journalists should therefore always contextualize vox pop interviews. BBC (2014), for instance, discourages journalists from using generalizing terminology when introducing vox pops in their news items: "Avoid terminology such as: 'We've been out on the streets to find out what the people of Manchester think about this...'. Better would be: 'Here's what some passing Mancunians thought about this....'" Other broadcasters also stress the fact that vox pops are not a good representation of the public or public opinion and that journalists consequently should not present them as being so (Deutsche Welle, 2013; VRT, 2015).

This research will be the first to study whether providing context accompanying the vox pop interviews—and thus following the aforementioned guidelines—is able to make people process the vox pop interviews in a more critical manner. The effect of vox pop viewpoints is predicted to become smaller when information about their non-representativeness is given, as this actively counteracts the representativeness heuristic. We expect that when vox pops are accompanied with an introduction stressing that the vox pops are not a good representation of the population, people will be influenced less by the vox pops. In this case, we hypothesize that people will tend to generalize the vox pop statements to a lesser extent. When they are introduced in a generalizing manner, as is often the case in reality, we expect that people will be influenced more in the direction of the vox pop viewpoints.

H3a: When vox pops are introduced in a generalizing manner, participants' perceived public opinion is influenced more in the direction of the vox pop viewpoints than when vox pops are introduced in a nuanced manner

H3b: When vox pops are introduced in a generalizing manner, participants' personal opinions are influenced more in the direction of the vox pop viewpoints than when vox pops are introduced in a nuanced manner

Method

To study these hypotheses, we use a large-scale, Web-based, posttest-only experimental design consisting of 12 conditions. The experimental stimuli are 12 artificial news items apparently from the Flemish public service broadcaster Eén, but constructed especially for this experiment. The news items contain the real news anchor, journalists, and layout from the Eén newscast, making the items very realistic. It is almost impossible to distinguish the stimulus news items from routine news items. All stimulus news clips can be accessed by using this hyperlink: <http://bit.do/ExperimentVoxPops>.

The constructed news story has the investment in traffic infrastructure as a topic as this is a regular subject of political debate in Flanders. The news anchor introduces the news item stating that the Flemish government has to choose between investing in highways (regional roads) or bicycle highways due to budget cuts and that there is discussion in Parliament on the topic. The voice-over further introduces the news item and footage of bicycle highways and highways are shown. The vox pop interviews are introduced by the voice-over in three different

ways, depending on the condition: nuanced (“*We conducted a non-representative survey and approached a few random Flemings to ask for their preference*”), generalizing (“*For the Flemings it is really clear*”), or without introduction. Next, the news item proceeds to the four vox pop interviews, whose viewpoints (pro-bicycle highway/pro-bike or pro-highway/pro-car) are manipulated. Also, the four vox pops give either explicit opinions (e.g., “I think the government should invest in the highways first”) or personal testimonies (e.g., “I recently fell off my bike due to a hole in the bike path”). Note that both the opinions and personal testimonies are in accordance with one of the viewpoints (pro-car or pro-bike), but only the opinion statements contain an explicit opinion. We choose to look only at pro-bike or pro-car viewpoints, and not to include a balanced condition. Several authors have already investigated the influence of different viewpoint distributions (e.g., Aust & Zillmann, 1996; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997). As previous research already covered this topic and because it was found that 73% of the news items containing vox pops only presented one viewpoint (Beckers et al., 2016), it was feasible to only include opposing viewpoint conditions.

Table 4.1. Experimental conditions

Condition	Introduction	Points of view of 4 vox pops	Statement format	N
1	Nuanced	Pro- Bike	Opinion	181
2	Nuanced	Pro- Car	Opinion	183
3	Nuanced	Pro- Bike	Personal testimony	176
4	Nuanced	Pro- Car	Personal testimony	178
5	Generalizing	Pro- Bike	Opinion	176
6	Generalizing	Pro- Car	Opinion	185
7	Generalizing	Pro- Bike	Personal testimony	179
8	Generalizing	Pro- Car	Personal testimony	182
9	None	Pro- Bike	Opinion	179
10	None	Pro- Car	Opinion	182
11	None	Pro- Bike	Personal testimony	189
12	None	Pro- Car	Personal testimony	185
Total				2,175

The experiment thus has a 3 (nuanced introduction; generalizing introduction; no introduction) × 2 (pro-bike viewpoint; pro-car viewpoint) × 2 (opinion format; personal testimony format) design. Table 4.1 shows the design of the experimental conditions as well as the number of subjects in each condition. All news clips lasted between 57 and 72 seconds,

with an average of 64 seconds. The news items were shot by a professional camera team and the real microphone tip of the broadcaster was used, enhancing the overall realism of the news item. The vox pops in the news clips were chosen to represent a diverse sample of the population for age and gender and consisted of two male and two female interviewees. Moreover, all vox pops came from different age groups.

The experiment used an Internet panel (UAWEP, University of Antwerp Web-based Electoral Panel) comprising 7,468 Flemish respondents. The panel is not representative of the Flemish population, but it contains a diverse group of people in terms of sex, age, and education. The respondents were recruited by email and data were collected from January 10–31, 2017. The total response rate after the experiment was 43.1% (N = 3,222). Of these 3,222 respondents, 2,175 people gave valid answers to the main variables and completed the survey (29.1% response rate), resulting in about 180 participants per condition, as can be seen in Table 4.1.

After an introductory text requesting people to participate in the experiment, participants were randomly assigned to one out of 12 news clips. Actual exposure to the stimulus news items was controlled for by several tools. First, the time (in seconds) spent on the page displaying the stimulus news item was measured. Second, it was impossible to play back or skip forward in the news item, as the playback control buttons were disabled. Only respondents who watched the full news clip were included for further analysis.

Following the exposure to the stimulus news item, we measured participants' personal opinions using the question: *"We are interested in your personal opinion. What do you prefer: investing in bicycle highways or investing in highways?"* followed by a 7-point scale (going from strongly in favor of investing in bicycle highways to strongly in favor of investing in highways). After this question about participants' personal opinions, participants' perceived public opinion was measured by asking: *"Next, when you think of the Flemish population, what do you think is the preference of the majority of the Flemings, investing in bicycle highways or investing in highways?"* using the same 7-point scale. These variables are the dependent variables. Three control variables were added to the models: participants' ages, genders, and levels of education. Car and bicycle use were also measured using a 6-point scale (*"Indicate how often you use the car [bicycle] as a means of transport,"* see Table 4.2). At the end of the survey, all respondents were debriefed about the fact that the news fragment they saw was fabricated for the experiment and the real goal of the research was explained.

Table 4.2. Descriptive statistics ($N = 2,175$)

Variable	Frequency (%)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Sex			
Male	70.6		
Female	29.4		
Age (17–88)		53.80	14.31
Level of education			
Primary education	0.5		
Secondary, unfinished	4.2		
Secondary, finished	19.0		
Higher education, non-university	31.1		
Higher education, university	42.7		
Other	2.4		
Car use			
Never	2.6		
A few times a year	4.2		
Monthly	5.6		
Weekly	17.9		
Several times a week	30.3		
Daily	39.4		
Bike use			
Never	11.7		
A few times a year	17.0		
Monthly	11.1		
Weekly	15.5		
Several times a week	22.6		
Daily	22.0		
Perceived public opinion poststimulus (1–7)		4.51	1.53
Personal opinion poststimulus (1–7)		3.06	1.86

Table 4.2 provides descriptive statistics of the sociodemographic variables as well as the variables that will be used in the analyses. Regarding the first dependent variable, the distribution of the perceived public opinion in favor of bicycle highways (pro-bike) or highways (pro-car), we found that respondents, across conditions, think that the majority of Flemings prefer investing in highways over investing in bicycle highways after exposure to the experimental stimuli. Of all respondents, 59.7% think the majority of Flemings prefer investing in highways. Only 30.6% perceived public opinion as being more or less in favor of the investment

of bicycle highways. With regards to personal opinions, a different—and even reversed—pattern becomes apparent. After exposure to the experimental stimuli, in general, the sample is mainly in favor of the investment in bicycle highways: 66.5% of the respondents indicated that they prefer investing in bicycle highways, 48.8% even indicated having a strong to very strong pro-bike preference, and 7.9% marked having no preference. A minority of 25.5% indicated they favor investment in highways. The participants' perceived public opinion on the topic thus runs counter their personal opinions across conditions after exposure to the stimulus news items.

Manipulation check

Before starting with the actual data collection, a manipulation check was carried out on a different sample of respondents to test whether the experimental manipulations succeeded and whether the news items were perceived as being realistic. Two hundred and fifty-nine respondents were exposed to one of the 12 stimulus news items and had to answer several questions related to the specific experimental manipulations. All the manipulations succeeded and came out in the expected directions. Firstly, respondents had to indicate the number of sources that were interviewed in the news item. Of the respondents, 92.4% correctly identified the number of sources interviewed as four, and 7.6% indicated the number as three (probably because of recall problems or because they did not watch the entire news clip). We also asked respondents to rate the realism of the news items on a 0–10 scale (0 = totally unrealistic; 10 = totally realistic). Respondents rated the video clips as sufficiently realistic news items ($M = 7.16$, $SD = 1.92$). No significant differences in realism ratings were found across conditions.

In the pro-car conditions, 93.4% of the respondents correctly indicated that the vox pop statements were pro-car. In the pro-bike conditions, 97.9% of the respondents gave a correct answer. Regarding statement format, 95.7% of the participants indicated correctly when the respondents gave an opinion, and 95.6% were able to identify the personal statements. Lastly, the respondents had to answer whether the voice over indicated that the interviewed persons were a good representation of the population or not. Of the respondents from the conditions with the nuanced introduction, 75.8% indicated that the reporter said that the interviewees were not a good representation of the general population. To conclude, these results suggest that the experimental manipulations are sufficiently strong and that the clips are perceived as realistic.

Results

To test the hypotheses of this study, two 2-way independent ANOVA's are conducted (Annex A & Annex B). The viewpoint, statement format, and introduction of the vox pops are included as independent variables. By looking at the interaction between the viewpoint and the two other factors in the model, we can assess whether statement format and introduction matter for the influence of the viewpoint that was portrayed by the vox pops. The respondents' ages, genders, levels of education, and bike and car use are added as covariates in the model. Two dummy variables were constructed for the nuanced and generalizing introductions, with "no introduction" as a reference category. First, the results of the variables on participants' perceived public opinion are discussed, followed by a discussion of the results of participant's personal opinions.

Perceived public opinion

The ANOVA table in Annex A shows that there is a significant effect of the level of education of the participants: the higher the level of education, the more they perceive the majority of Flemings to be in favor of investing in highways (pro-car). Moreover, younger people perceive public opinion to be significantly more pro-car compared to older participants. We also find a significant effect of car use. The more frequently people use their car, the more they perceive public opinion to be pro-bike. Regarding the variables manipulated in the experimental stimuli, it first stands out that the viewpoints of the vox pops have the strongest influence on people's perceived public opinion. We find that the viewpoints presented through the vox pops significantly alter perceptions of public opinion (Figure 4.1), replicating previous research. If participants are presented with pro-bike vox pop statements, their perceived public opinion is more pro-bike ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 0.05$) than when people are exposed to pro-car statements ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 0.05$), $F(1,1) = 151.06$, $p < .001$, supporting Hypothesis 1a.

Second, as expected, we do not find a main effect of statement format. Of interest to our study is the interaction between statement format (opinion or personal testimony) and vox pop viewpoint. Indeed, we find a significant effect of this interaction, $F(1,1) = 12.16$, $p < .001$. When participants are exposed to the pro-car vox pops, they are influenced more by vox pops giving explicit opinions ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 0.07$) than by vox pops giving a personal testimony ($M=4.90$, $SD=.07$). The same is true for participants exposed to the pro-bike statements, they

Figure 4.1. Main effect of vox pop viewpoint on perceived public opinion (1 = strongly pro-bike; 7 = strongly pro-car)

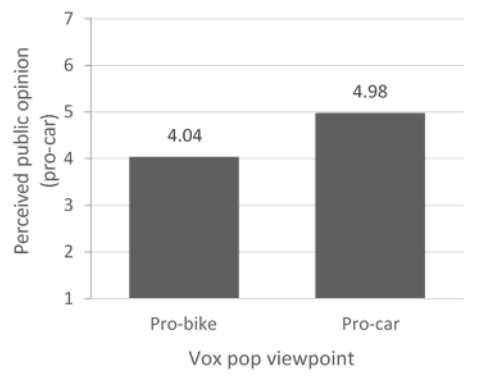


Figure 4.4. Main effect of vox pop viewpoint on people's personal opinion (1 = strongly pro-bike; 7 = strongly pro-car)

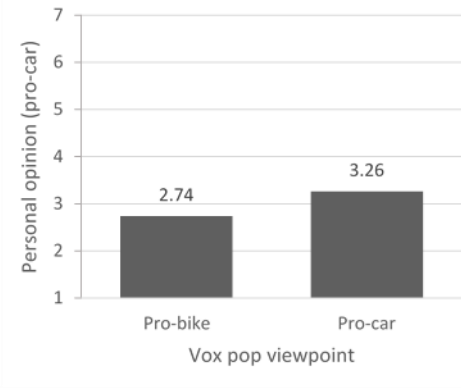


Figure 4.2. Interaction effect of statement format and vox pop viewpoint on perceived public opinion (1 = strongly pro-bike; 7 = strongly pro-car)

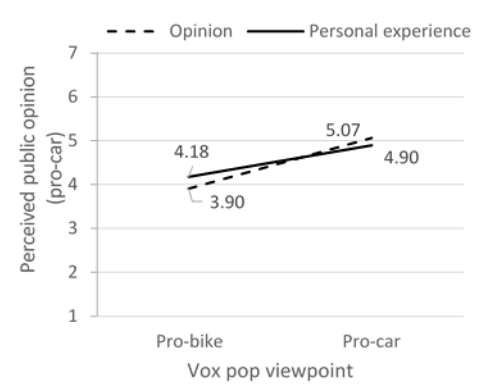


Figure 4.5. Interaction effect of statement format and vox pop viewpoint on people's personal opinion (1 = strongly pro-bike; 7 = strongly pro-car)

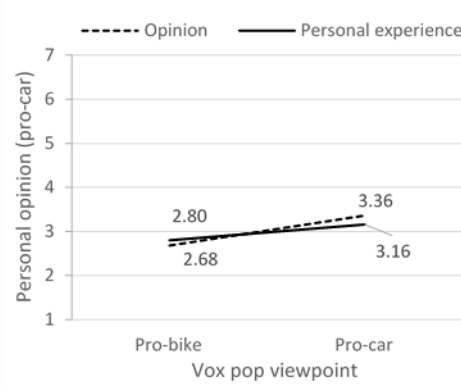


Figure 4.3. Interaction effect of introduction and vox pop viewpoint on perceived public opinion (1 = strongly pro-bike; 7 = strongly pro-car)

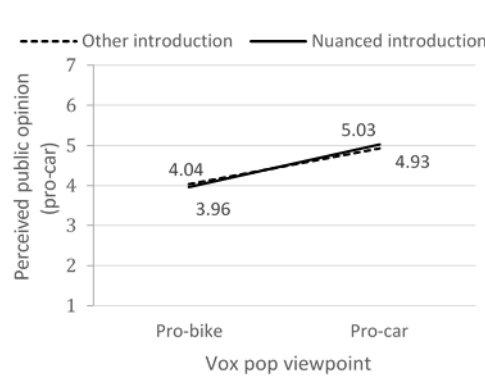
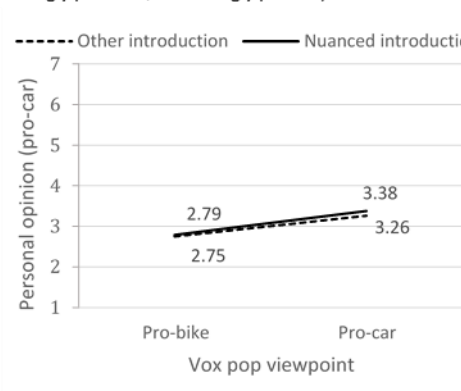


Figure 4.6. Interaction effect of introduction and vox pop viewpoint on people's personal opinion (1 = strongly pro-bike; 7 = strongly pro-car)



are influenced more by the opinion statements ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.07$) than by the personal testimonies ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.06$). To present this graphically, we plotted the interaction between these two variables in Figure 4.2 and the effect is visualized by the higher steepness of the slope representing the opinion statements compared to the slope representing the personal testimonies. These results prove that it is not merely the vox pop viewpoint that matters in influencing people's perceived public opinion, but how a vox pop says it matters as well. Consequently, hypothesis 2a is accepted.

Third, we do not find the expected interaction effects of introduction and vox pop viewpoint. Both the interaction between viewpoint and the nuanced introduction dummy ($F(1,1) = 1.20$, $p > .05$) and between viewpoint and the generalizing introduction dummy ($F(1,1) = 0.40$, $p > .05$) were not significant. It thus seems that the effect of vox pops on people's perceptions of public opinion is not influenced by the way vox pops are introduced, which can also be seen in the graph in Figure 4.3, as both slopes almost fall together and have a comparable steepness. Hypothesis 3a is therefore rejected. When vox pops are introduced in a nuanced manner, participants' perceived public opinion is not influenced less in the direction of the vox pop viewpoints than when vox pops are introduced in a generalizing manner.

Personal opinions

In Annex B, ANOVA results for participants' personal opinions are displayed. People's preferences for investing in bicycle highways (pro-bike) or highways (pro-car) is influenced significantly by their gender, with females having a higher personal preference for investing in bicycle highways. As expected, car and bicycle use explain variations in people's personal opinions strongly and significantly. The more frequently people use their bicycles, the more pro-bike they are. Conversely, the more frequently people use their cars, the more pro-car their opinions are. Next, we discuss the influence of the variables manipulated in our study. The viewpoint given by the vox pops again is influential, as can be seen in Figure 4.4. If participants are presented with pro-bike statements, their personal opinions are significantly more pro-bike ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 0.06$) than when participants are exposed to pro-car statements ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 0.06$), $F(1,1) = 34.69$, $p < .001$, supporting hypothesis 1b.

The interaction effect of vox pop viewpoint and statement format is also significant, $F(1,1) = 5.37$, $p < .05$. Vox pops giving explicit opinions have a bigger influence on people's

personal opinions than vox pop interviews in which interviewees speak about their own experiences. This can be seen in Figure 4.5, as the slope representing opinion statements is steeper than the slope representing personal testimonies. When participants are exposed to the pro-car vox pops, they are influenced significantly more by vox pops giving explicit opinions ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.08$) than by vox pops giving a personal testimony ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 0.08$). The same is true for participants exposed to the pro-bike statements; they are influenced significantly more by the opinion statements ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 0.08$) than by the personal testimonies ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 0.08$). These results confirm hypothesis 2b.

Lastly, we do not find the expected interaction effects of the introductions and vox pop viewpoints, rejecting hypothesis 3b. The interaction between viewpoint and the nuanced introduction dummy ($F(1,1) = 0.19$, $p > .05$) and between viewpoint and the generalizing introduction dummy ($F(1,1) = 0.13$, $p > .05$) were found to have no effect. The introduction of the vox pops thus does not alter the influence vox pop viewpoints have on participants' personal opinions, which can also be seen in the almost equally steep slopes in Figure 4.6. Although editorial guidelines urge journalists to provide a nuanced introduction accompanying the vox pops, doing so does not seem to be able to moderate the influence of vox pop statements. The effect of vox pops does not become smaller when information about the non-representativeness is given.

Conclusion & Discussion

The aim of this paper was to study whether the format and introduction of vox pops in television news play a role in the effect vox pop statements have on audiences' perceived public opinion and personal opinions. Next to studying the influence of what vox pops say, this experiment looked at whether how they say it is important in explaining their influence. Also, this research studied whether a contextualizing introduction about the vox pops is able to moderate their influence.

The first main finding is that the viewpoints given by the vox pops are influential, regardless of the other vox pop characteristics. Vox pops' distribution in terms of pro-bike and pro-car viewpoints exerted a clear influence on participants' perceived public opinion and personal opinions, confirming both hypotheses 1a and 1b. So, the direction of the vox pop viewpoint not only influences perceptions of public opinion, but also has a direct effect on people's personal opinions. Second, if the vox pops gave an explicit opinion, they influenced

participants' perceived public opinion and personal opinions more in the direction of the vox pop viewpoints than when they gave a personal testimony, supporting hypotheses 2a and 2b. Third, we could not find the expected interaction effects of the introduction of the vox pops and the viewpoint given. Participants exposed to a nuanced introduction were not influenced to a lesser degree by the vox pop viewpoints as was indicated in hypotheses 3a and 3b. A nuanced introduction was not able to counteract nor even moderate the influence of the vox pop viewpoint on participants' perceived public opinion or on their personal opinions.

In line with previous research, the findings provide strong support for vox pop influence on perceptions of opinion and opinions themselves (e.g., Arpan, 2009; Lefevere et al., 2012; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997). These effects exist regardless of the introduction and format of those vox pop statements. All attempts to break the effects of these ordinary people in the news in previous studies have failed thus far (Brosius, 2003), vox pop statements were already proven to be influential irrespective of (statistical) base-rate information, other information about public opinion, or the strength of the vox pop arguments (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Daschmann, 2000). The effect of the viewpoints given by the vox pops appears to be a very stable effect. Providing context, explicitly emphasizing that vox pops are not a good representation of the population, also does not seem to be able to reduce their influence. A nuanced introduction does not help people avoid making generalizations about the whole population when presented with a typical sample of a population using vox pops (Hamill et al., 1980; Tversky & Kahneman, 1971).

However, contrary to what is often assumed in previous studies, we find that it is not only the mere presence of vox pops and the viewpoints they give that explains their influence. How vox pops say it is also of influence. This study went further than existing assumptions about the fact that vox pops are influential because they are vivid (Brosius, 2003; Kleemans et al., 2015a; Nisbett & Ross, 1980) and finds that explicit opinion statements are more influential than personal testimonies. This is particularly relevant regarding political news, since it has been found that vox pops are used as an explicit public opinion tool most often here (Beckers et al., 2016). Moreover, opinions about political issues may have broader implications (e.g., party preference or voting behavior) than opinions about more soft news topics (e.g., a movie or the weather).

A few limitations of this study deserve to be mentioned. One of the main limitations of all experimental studies is their external validity. However, in this experiment, we believe that

there are few problems with the generalizability of our findings. In the first place, the experimental manipulations were very realistic, using the real layout and journalists of the broadcaster. Secondly, the content of the news item and the quotes were presented to several journalists to verify their realism. Thirdly, in the manipulation check, we asked respondents about the realism of the news items, and the news items were found to be realistic. Another limitation of experimental studies is that people are exposed to the stimuli in an “unnatural” context. Participants probably paid more attention to a news item than they otherwise would have when watching a full television newscast at home. However, this only strengthens our findings, as people probably looked at the news item in a more attentive and critical manner and thus paid more attention to, for instance, the nuanced introduction. Even in this situation we find the strong effect of vox pop viewpoints.

Moreover, we only measured perceived public opinion and personal opinions at one point in time, so we cannot know whether the effect of the vox pops stands over time. However, previous studies did find vox pops’ effects to persist over time (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Gibson & Zillmann, 1994). Another possible limitation of this study is the manipulation of the introduction. The lack of results for the introductions under study might be caused by the specific manipulation in this experiment. However, it does seem that there is some effect of the introduction of vox pops in the news as we found a small main effect on perceived public opinion, so future researchers might study this using different manipulations.

The findings of this experimental study also have practical implications for the field of journalism. Although vox pops are added to news items by journalists as a way to enliven a news item, what the vox pops say matters. Because they are presented as a random sample of people, the illusion of representation is held up. Vox pops are, whether unconsciously or not, taken seriously by the audience. Journalists should be aware that the presented viewpoints influence audiences to a great degree and that subsequent swings in (perceptions of) opinion are substantial. Additionally, when vox pops are used as a public opinion tool, they are most influential. Knowing that the perception of public opinion is an important determinant of peoples’ willingness to speak out—if they think they are in the minority people tend to stay quiet—these findings raise concern on how public opinion is portrayed by journalists. And not only do we find vox pop viewpoints to have an influence on perceptions of public opinion, they also directly influence people’s own opinions. Journalists should thus always try to represent a variety of viewpoints on an issue through vox pops. Several editorial guidelines already are in

place urging journalists to include nuancing context with the vox pops, emphasizing their non-representativeness. However, this study found that even a really strong introduction emphasizing explicitly that vox pops are not a representative sample of the population is not able to reduce their effect. Journalists should thus be aware that following the existing guidelines is not enough as they do not have the anticipated effect.

When looking at the findings of this study, it would be better to think over the use of vox pops in the news altogether, certainly for news topics where displays of public opinion potentially have the biggest societal consequences (i.e., political news). In general, newsrooms should be aware that their choices regarding vox pops matter and that they are not just innocent, enlivening features. Journalists' selection of vox pops in the news has a strong influence on perceptions of social issues and opinions audiences have about them.

Annex A. Analysis of variance with perceived public opinion as dependent variable (1 = strongly pro-bike; 7 = strongly pro-car)

Variable	Model I				Model II			
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F
Gender (male)	0.998	1	0.998	0.486	0.831	1	0.831	0.407
Level of education (high)	25.176	1	25.176	12.264**	25.098	1	25.098	12.292***
Age (old)	17.360	1	17.360	8.457**	18.473	1	18.473	9.047**
Car use (high)	11.769	1	11.769	5.733*	12.134	1	12.134	5.943*
Bicycle use (high)	0.026	1	0.026	0.013	0.011	1	0.011	0.005
Viewpoint	423.747	1	423.747	206.423***	308.452	1	308.452	151.063***
Statement format	0.953	1	0.953	0.464	0.885	1	0.885	0.434
Dummy nuanced introduction (=1)	0.037	1	0.037	0.018	0.047	1	0.047	0.023
Dummy generalizing introduction (=1)	9.721	1	9.721	4.736*	9.413	1	9.413	4.610*
Viewpoint * statement format					24.837	1	24.837	12.164***
Viewpoint* nuanced dummy					2.440	1	2.440	1.195
Viewpoint * generalizing dummy					0.810	1	0.810	0.397

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

Adjusted R Squared Model I = 0.110

Adjusted R Squared Model II = 0.114

Annex B. analysis of variance with personal opinion as dependent variable (1 = strongly pro-bike; 7 = strongly pro-car)

Variable	Model I				Model II			
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F
Gender (male)	23.810	1	23.810	8.479**	24.548	1	24.548	8.753**
Level of education (high)	0.035	1	0.035	0.012	0.029	1	0.029	0.010
Age (old)	1.315	1	1.315	0.468	1.102	1	1.102	0.393
Car use (high)	153.343	1	153.343	54.607***	152.295	1	152.295	54.307***
Bicycle use (high)	421.211	1	421.211	149.998***	422.785	1	422.785	150.760***
Viewpoint	134.001	1	134.001	47.719***	97.274	1	97.274	34.687***
Statement format	0.004	1	0.004	0.002	0.001	1	0.001	0.001
Dummy nuanced introduction (=1)	1.845	1	1.845	0.657	1.884	1	1.884	0.412
Dummy generalizing introduction (=1)	8.101	1	8.101	2.885	8.294	1	8.294	2.958
Viewpoint * statement format					15.046	1	15.046	5.365*
Viewpoint * nuanced dummy					0.530	1	0.530	0.189
Viewpoint * generalizing dummy					0.362	1	0.362	0.129

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$
Adjusted R Squared Model I = 0.161
Adjusted R Squared Model II = 0.162

Conclusion & Discussion

This PhD project was all about vox pops. The goal of the project was to shed light on the role of vox pops in the media from an integrative perspective and to gain greater insight into the content, selection and influence of vox pops in news coverage. Based on a study of the state of the art that revealed several gaps in the existing research, this dissertation started from the idea that vox pops deserve to be approached in a more systematic way. Whereas previous research was often based on assumptions, this PhD project provided robust tests of existing premises. To study vox pops from different angles, several methods were used focusing on the content, production and audience sides of this journalistic practice. In this concluding chapter, I will first provide an overview of the main results of the four separate studies. Next, I integrate the key findings into an overarching conclusion in which the implications of these findings and the accompanying guidelines for newsrooms are presented. A discussion of the limitations of this thesis and avenues for future research are listed at the end of this concluding chapter.

Discussion of key findings

Whereas existing research focused mainly on the mere presence of vox pops in the news, the study highlighted in **Chapter 1** was the first one to look at vox pop characteristics beyond what the interviewees are actually saying, using a content analysis of Flemish television news. The goal of this research was to identify the visual and contextual characteristics of vox pop interviews. Who are those who appear in the news as vox pops, and how are they presented? In academic research, vox pops are often described as a representation of the public. Journalism handbooks emphasize that journalists should strive to show a diverse cross-section of people through vox pops. Editorial guidelines stress that vox pops should always be accompanied with contextualizing information highlighting their non-representativeness. However, up to now, it has not been known whether vox pops are really a good representation of the population and how they are contextualized in the news. This study was the first to address these issues.

The results showed that vox pops are hardly ever accompanied with an explanatory introduction or with a caption or function description. Regarding socio-demographic characteristics, it appeared that the vox pops were indeed a good representation of the population for age and gender. However, vox pops were a poor representation of people from minority groups (e.g., ethnic-cultural minorities, people with disabilities), which were largely underrepresented. The vox pops in this study were primarily interviewed in crowded public places and were generally dressed informally, without any outstanding features, such as tattoos and piercings.

In general, it seems that the vox pop interviews present a rather one-sided image of the average “stereotypical” citizen—for instance, the ethnic-cultural majority. This goes against several journalistic guidelines urging journalists to always accompany vox pops with context to avoid wrongful generalizations. Moreover, it is emphasized that journalists should try to represent the population as correctly as possible when using vox pops. This chapter concludes that while for some characteristics journalists succeed in doing so, for others they do not.

Not only might vox pops create an idea about typical members of the population as studied in Chapter 1 but also they can influence what people perceive as being the public opinion. This was the main focus of **Chapter 2**. The goal of this chapter’s study was to analyze the prevalence of opinion-expressing vox pops in television news and to examine whether the vox pops’ viewpoints were balanced. Particular attention was paid to political news compared to non-political news, as expressions of public opinion are potentially most consequential here (e.g., influence party preference).

The first finding of this content analysis of vox pop statements in Flemish television news was that half of these statements were explicit opinion statements and not just personal testimonies. Moreover, vox pops were found to play an important role in political news, being the second-most quoted source, preceded only by politicians. When vox pops were included in political news, they were used as a public opinion tool in three-fourths of the cases, much more often than in non-political news (41%). The views shown through vox pops were remarkably unbalanced across news items, with 73% of the news items displaying only one point of view. Against expectations and various self-regulating measures from the broadcasters, we found that political news was not more balanced than non-political news regarding vox pop opinions.

Chapter 3 built further on the previous chapters and studied the motivations of (political) journalists to use vox pops. Do journalists use them deliberately because they are a public

opinion tool, and/or are vox pops included in the news because they are vivid and attract attention? Also, several assumptions exist about the negative attitude of journalists regarding vox pops, which stands in contrast with the rising number of vox pops in the news. Based on a survey of 253 Belgian journalists, these assumptions were tested. This study was the first to focus explicitly on gaining an understanding of the journalistic characteristics and motivations linked to vox pop use and, additionally, of journalists' evaluation of this widespread and growing practice.

First, it was found that, in line with previous research, journalists working for radio and television used vox pops most frequently. Against expectations, the years of experience of the journalist did not predict the use of vox pops. Consequently, it was not the case that younger, unexperienced journalists were charged with conducting vox pops as is often assumed. Furthermore, it seemed that journalists added vox pops to a news item as a way of enlivening it and of increasing involvement with the audience, instead of purposely as a public opinion tool. The majority (63%) of journalists felt negatively about vox pops, indicating they are used too often in the news. Journalists who used vox pops did not feel more positively about them, signifying that it might not always be a journalist's own choice but rather that of the news editor to include vox pops in a news item.

Chapter 4 brought together insights from the previous chapters by focusing on the influence of vox pop characteristics on audiences' perceptions of public opinion and their personal opinion. Using a Web-based experiment consisting of 12 artificial news items, this research was the first to analyze the conditions under which vox pops are influential. Does the way in which vox pops are introduced in the news matter? Moreover, next to what the vox pops say, is how they say it important in explaining their influence?

It was found that people's perceptions of public opinion and their personal opinion were influenced significantly and strongly in the direction of the vox pop viewpoints. Second, how vox pops say something was found to be influential. When vox pops were used as an explicit public opinion tool, they had a bigger influence on peoples' perceptions of public opinion and their personal opinions than when mere testimonies were shown. The way in which vox pops were introduced did not alter their influence. Participants exposed to a nuanced introduction, in line with what editorial guidelines prescribe, were not influenced less by vox pops. Thus, to conclude, vox pops are very influential and this even more when they are used as an explicit public opinion tool. Making changes in their context does not reduce their influence.

Implications & guidelines

This PhD dissertation started with a seemingly trivial news item about the consequences of Brexit for the Belgian population. It does not seem so trivial anymore. It looks like a harmless routine news item, and the journalist who made it probably approached it in this way. The viewer almost certainly also did not pay much attention to or process the news item in a critical manner. However, all four vox pops interviewed shared an identical perspective on the issue and came from the ethnic-cultural majority. Moreover, no contextualizing information was given about the vox pops. The different studies of this project have proved that news items such as this, presenting only one point of view, can have a strong influence on audience perceptions of what “the Belgians” think. It might create the idea in the minds of audience members that the entire population is worried about Brexit and thinks that the consequences will be severe. It might even influence people’s personal perceptions of the issue and cause people to think differently about Brexit.

In this PhD project, a bottom-up approach was used, and the studies always departed from journalism practice. One of the goals of this PhD dissertation was to study whether it is important for journalists to stop treating vox pops lightly and start taking them more seriously. The survey of journalists in Chapter 3 of this PhD has shown that it might be that journalists are not fully aware of how their selection and presentation of vox pops can create misperceptions among the audience. The different findings of this dissertation underscore the need for a critical reflection of the use of vox pops in the newsroom. In the following section, an integrated discussion of these findings and some of the practical implications related to the use of vox pops in the news are mentioned.

First, vox pops are often said to break the monopoly of elite sources in the news, as they have the ability to provide a wider range of voices in the news. The inclusion of citizen sources would democratize the public sphere, as ordinary people get the opportunity to voice their—political—opinions. However, although vox pops are often described as representations of the public in the news, this PhD study showed that they do not represent the *entire* public. Despite the fact that vox pops are one of the most direct forms of citizen representation in the news, in Chapter 1, we found that not all groups in society were represented proportionally. Rather, the vox pops seemed to represent “average” stereotypical population members. Whereas journalists do a good job of presenting different gender and age groups, (ethnic-cultural)

minorities are almost entirely excluded in vox pop interviews. If whole groups of the population are excluded from the public sphere, they cannot voice their interpretations of an event or issue. Journalists should be aware of this underrepresentation and attempt to **include a wider, more diverse range of people in the news** through vox pops, not just present the average, stereotypical members of the public.

Second, presumably, one of the most important guidelines for journalists stemming from this PhD study is that they should **actively seek to present a diversity of viewpoints** through vox pops. The second chapter of this PhD project found that vox pop news items were very unbalanced and that only one perspective was heard most of the time. Moreover, the fourth empirical chapter found that irrespective of the introduction or statement format, what the vox pops said influenced participants' perceptions of public opinion and their personal opinions. This was quite a remarkable finding, as the expectation was that providing context about their non-representativeness would at least reduce the impact of vox pops. Journalists can present all of the contextualizing and nuancing information they want, if vox pops do not represent a variety of points of view, they are very powerful in influencing audience members' perceptions of public opinion and their personal opinions.

As mentioned in the introduction, a balanced representation of viewpoints is also important because public opinion is a complex matter and talking about it always entails a simplification of reality (Lewis & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005). It is often claimed that it is impossible to gain a full understanding of public opinion (Key, 1961). Lewis et al. (2005) concluded that 95% of references to public opinion are presented without supporting evidence. The first empirical chapter of this dissertation provided related examples from in-depth interviews of journalists who stated that they know beforehand what the stories are that they want to bring and what opinions they want to show. They represent the point of view *they* think is the sentiment among the majority of the population. A journalist's or newsroom's interpretation of an issue thus plays a big role in shaping the news item. Previous studies on the topic also found that journalists indeed rely on their own assumptions and interpretations (and consequently biases) when they cover public opinion in the news (King & Schudson, 1995; Lewis, 2001).

Thus, erroneous projections of what is going on in the world occur whether or not journalists intend this to happen. When most news items cover only one perspective through vox pops, this might lead to misperceptions about reality among the public. The consequences of these misrepresentations are severe, as people tend to generalize the given information about

public opinion to the entire population (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974) and might even alter their own perceptions, which was also found in this dissertation. A balanced representation of viewpoints is expected to be particularly important in political news, because we found vox pops to play a significant (and different) role here in Chapter 2, despite the fact that political journalists indicate not to select them because they are a public opinion feature as discussed in Chapter 3.

Consequently, **extra attention should be paid to vox pops in political news**. First, despite the fact that vox pops are often perceived as one of the signs of news tabloidization, in Chapter 1, they were found to appear most frequently in hard news topics, such as politics, social affairs and mobility, which is in line with previous research (Lewis et al., 2005).

Second, Chapter 2 concluded that vox pops regularly give explicit opinions and this even more concerning political topics. This is consequential, as the experiment in this PhD dissertation proved not only that vox pop viewpoints in general are very influential but also that they are even more influential when they take the shape of explicit opinion statements. Thus, vox pops in political news require specific attention because they can shape the (perceptions of) political opinions and are also used in a way that is more influential compared to non-political news. We already knew representations of public opinion in the media to have societal influence—for instance, on the trust that people have in politics and society (Moy & Rinke, 2012; Shapiro & Jacobs, 2011). The consequences of providing the audience with a sample of political opinions through vox pops can be expected to be substantial. Daschmann (2000) found vox pops to be of influence on people's perceptions of public opinion and their personal opinions in election time, regardless of pre-existing party preferences or voting intentions. When presented in combination with opinion polls, which are extensively used in election time, a small sample of vox pops is even able to sway or invert the effect of poll data.

Third, vox pops can serve a role in the democratic process, as they can create the idea that ordinary people have a stake in politics and public policy (Lewis et al., 2005, p. 143; Skovsgaard, 2014). As mentioned in the introduction of this PhD dissertation, the role of the media as the “fourth estate” (Rønning, 1999, p. 16; Schultz, 1998) and the idea that the media feature as objective reporters in society (Gans, 1979; Patterson, 1998; Tuchman, 1978) surface when talking about journalism and democracy. However, although citizen representations in the news through vox pops seem to be an important part of the democratic process and play a role in it as a display of public opinion, the question arises as to how democratic these vox pops really are. In Chapter 1, we found vox pops to be a poor representation of people from minority

groups. Furthermore, journalists indicate that they think highly of the value of objectivity and thus of presenting a variety of viewpoints. In Flanders, self-regulatory principles exist with regard to the neutrality of news media concerning political views, and they are expected to treat all parties proportionately (Vlaamse Regulator Voor de Media, 2014). Several other international broadcasters have similar guidelines (e.g., ABC, 2014; Almirón, Capurro, & Santcovsky, 2010; BBC, 2015). Although news media indeed pay much attention to elite sources and their balanced and proportional representation in political news, these principles do not seem to apply to vox pops.

Fourth, despite several editorial guidelines encouraging it, vox pops are hardly ever accompanied by contextualizing information. Not giving any introduction or talking about the public in very generalizing terms might strengthen the idea that the small sample of people in vox pop interviews embodies a much larger group. Journalists thus should **never present vox pops as being representative of the entire population**. This is the only guideline that public service broadcasters around the world have already formulated, such as VRT (Flanders) and BBC (UK). Even if journalists actively seek to represent a diverse group of people, vox pops are nothing more than a *sample* of the population. However, the experimental study in this PhD dissertation found that even a strong introduction emphasizing explicitly that vox pops are not a representative sample of the population is not able to reduce their influence. Journalists thus should not hide behind following the existing guideline, as this guideline alone is not sufficient. Despite the finding that an introduction could not reduce the effects of the vox pop statements, we did find a small main effect of the introduction on perceptions of public opinion. It thus seems that there might be *some* influence of the context of vox pops in the news on their effect. Thus, if journalists decide to include vox pops in a news item, it is best to contextualize them.

The last and overarching advice for journalists is to **take vox pops more seriously**. Chapter 3 concluded that the inclusion of vox pops rather fits into media's need to attract the audience in a climate of increased commercialization and competition (Bromley, 2014; Paulussen & Ugille, 2008; Saltzis & Dickinson, 2008; Skovsgaard & van Dalen, 2013; Witschge & Nygren, 2009), rather than deliberately including them because they are a representation of public opinion. These results possibly explain why journalists do not pay much attention to presenting a good and diverse sample of the population and do not provide contextualizing information (Chapter 1). Moreover, it might also explain why journalists do a good job of representing a

variety of points of view in the news in general, but not regarding vox pops (Chapter 2), as journalists might not deem them to be of substantial importance. However, when vox pops are used as a public opinion tool, they should be treated seriously.

Limitations and future research

In this section, I want to recognize and reflect on some of the limitations of this dissertation. During the writing process, choices had to be made about the method and execution of the different chapters. All methods were chosen to answer the research questions as effectively as possible. However, by making certain choices, certain other options were left out. Below, several limitations of the choices made are listed, followed by a number of interesting suggestions for future research.

One of the main limitations of this PhD dissertation is that it used a predominantly quantitative approach. Despite the fact that all studies used different methods, they were all based on quantifiable data. The choice of methods was the result of a thoughtful process, and I believe that the chosen methods were the right ones, as they were a good fit for answering the research questions and hypotheses of the individual studies. However, the use of qualitative data might have enriched the findings of the studies, as they would have complemented and refined the results of this dissertation.

A need exists, for instance, for more research into journalistic selection criteria and newsroom routines that influence the inclusion of vox pops. A quantitative survey was conducted covering this topic in this dissertation. Although this survey provided interesting insights, a quantitative survey is limited in that the answer options are closed and thus predetermined. Consequently, one obtains only the answers one specifically asks for and therefore might miss some nuancing information or interesting considerations from the participants. I did conduct three qualitative in-depth interviews with television journalists in this project. These interviews provided several interesting insights—for instance, mainly the editor-in-chief decides if vox pops are to be included in a news item. It would be interesting to conduct interviews with journalists and editors on a larger scale to gain a more profound understanding of why vox pops are included in the news. Additionally, having a greater insight into why journalists do not like to conduct vox pops would be interesting.

Closely related to the first limitation of this dissertation is the rather limited emphasis on the production side of vox pops. The main focus was on news content and its effects on audiences. Although this dissertation did include a large-scale survey with Belgian journalists that provided interesting and unique information, the nature of this study was explorative. Future research into the production side of vox pops is needed. The findings of this dissertation can serve as a basis for further research in this respect, whether qualitative or not. This would provide a more specific understanding of several of the outcomes of this PhD dissertation—for instance, how journalists perceive the imbalance in vox pop opinions and how people are selected to appear in the news as vox pops.

Next to survey research and interviews with journalists, an observational study of journalists during the news production process could be relevant, as not all journalistic choices might be the result of a deliberate process, and as interviews can be influenced by social desirability. Journalists are perhaps not eager to admit that they make stereotypical choices or search deliberately for specific opinions. Observing journalists while being out on the streets could provide some interesting information—for instance, how vox pops are conducted, which people a journalist approaches, how many people are interviewed and when a journalist decides that he/she has collected enough vox pops.

A third limitation is the fact that this PhD dissertation focuses mainly on Belgium. Most studies even study only Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium. However, studying vox pops in the Flemish context is interesting. The media situation in Flanders is very advantageous for the quality of the news. Next to the public service broadcaster, only one commercial broadcaster with a primetime news bulletin exists. Both news bulletins are popular and compete for audiences, which has led to a convergence between the public and commercial news provider in terms of focus and quality (De Bens & Paulussen, 2005). In this dissertation, few differences were found between the two broadcasters regarding the use of vox pops, both in their content and in the perceptions of their journalists. However, even in a favorable media context such as the Flemish one, we found that vox pops are used in the news almost daily and that their share in the news is rising.

Also, despite the fact that the broadcasters in Flanders score well in terms of objectivity and impartiality, in Chapter 2 it was concluded that 73% of the news items in Flemish television news provided very one-sided vox pops, displaying only one perspective of an issue. It thus might be expected that these findings will be even more extreme in other media contexts. It

would be interesting to study the prevalence and use of vox pops in other media systems containing media outlets with, for instance, a partisan bias (e.g., Fox News in the US; RAI in Italy) or media systems with a pure market media model (e.g., US).

Thought must also be given to the generalizability of the other findings of this project. Although differences might exist across countries in terms of the content and impartiality of the newscasts and in journalistic practice, the findings of the experiment can be generalized across countries and media cultures. We expect that the specific characteristics of vox pops are country and culture specific, but the effects of the apparent representativeness of the vox pops can be expected to be universal and have been proven to exist across countries (Brosius, 2003; Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Gibson & Zillmann, 1993; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000).

Another avenue for future research concerns audience perceptions. This dissertation mainly focused on journalistic practice and concluded that journalists do not seem to include vox pops deliberately because they are a powerful public opinion tool. It appears that journalists mainly use vox pops because they enliven a news item and attract attention. As mentioned before, this might be caused by the increasing time pressure that journalists sense and due to the growing commercial pressure to attract audiences. However, it is not known whether vox pops indeed attract audiences and if audiences are even positive about them. It would be interesting to study what the attitudes of audiences are regarding vox pops and whether they prefer some vox pops over others. Moreover, it would be interesting to study how vox pops score regarding audience perceptions compared to other news sources, such as experts.

Epilogue

When looking at the list of risks related to the use of vox pops and the accompanying recommendations in this PhD dissertation, one can wonder whether it is even a good idea to include any vox pops at all in the news. This dissertation has shown that vox pops do matter. Almost all findings are bad news for vox pops. Vox pops are frequently used as a public opinion tool and even more in political news, where the opinions displayed matter the most. What is more, vox pops are a stereotypical representation of the population and are very unbalanced, as most news items show only one viewpoint through vox pops. Regardless of the context given in a news item, the statements of vox pops have a powerful influence on the perceptions and

opinions of audiences. On top of all of this, journalists do not seem to be fully aware of the power that vox pops have and simply include them in their news items for rather commercial reasons.

Journalists are mostly unaware of actual public opinion distributions and thus should be especially careful in their selection and general use of vox pops, as they can create misperceptions about what is going on in the world. The inclusion of vox pops in the news should therefore be the result of thoughtful deliberation instead of being a mere daily routine. Journalists should make sure that vox pops reflect the diversity of people and opinions in society. Certainly in political news, where the opinions shown possibly have the largest consequences, vox pops should be taken more seriously.

However, although the findings of this dissertation seem to imply that it would be better to abandon the use of vox pops altogether, they might also offer journalists a number of opportunities. In news items with less-sensitive topics, the results of this PhD dissertation can be expected to be less consequential. Here, vox pops can help journalists to tell a news story and enliven the item by adding personal experiences. An example would be a news item about the first snow. To make the item more personal, a few vox pops can be interviewed to give the audience an idea about how other people experienced the snowy day. Probably few of the problems related to vox pops discussed before will apply to this example, and it can be seen immediately that the use of vox pops is less problematic here. Moreover, it creates an opportunity for journalists to include a more diverse group of people as voices in the news.

Furthermore, vox pops might be useful in the role of the media as the “fourth estate.” Vox pops offer a chance to present and debate alternatives to elite voices in the news. As Gans (1979) stated, most of the time, sources take the lead in the relationship with journalists. Vox pops, however, can effectuate some sort of empowerment for journalists, as they can be used as a means to break the autonomy of elites. Vox pops create the possibility of adding critical expressions in the news and represent diverse voices in society. They offer journalists the chance to address people as citizens that participate in public affairs, rather than as victims or spectators. Instead of searching for vox pop statements that “fit” a news story, journalists could use them to add other, diverging voices regarding an issue.

However, this is not how vox pops are used at the moment and journalists seem to approach them rather casually. Even when following all the recommendations, careful consideration should always be paid by journalists to the possible misperceptions linked to the

use of vox pops, and they should be approached in a more critical manner in the news than is currently the case. Certainly in news about politics and current affairs, the question always has to be asked whether the inclusion of vox pops is necessary and adds value to the quality of the given news item.

To conclude, vox pops should be taken more seriously in academic research and in journalism practice. If anything, I hope this PhD dissertation plays a role in creating awareness about the potential impact and power of vox pops in the news among journalists as well as audiences.

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Nederlandstalige samenvatting

Vox pops. De inhoud, selectie en invloed van vox pops in nieuwsberichtgeving

De gewone man/vrouw in de straat komt zo goed als dagelijks aan het woord in het nieuws. Zulke interviews waarin een burger een opinie of persoonlijke ervaring geeft zijn waarschijnlijk bekend bij iedereen die ooit nieuws consumeerde en worden 'vox pops' genoemd. Vox pops worden vaak gezien als het bewijs van de toenemende commercialisering van het nieuws, waar entertainment en persoonlijke verhalen zonder echte inhoudelijke bijdrage centraal komen te staan. Omwille van het feit dat ze vaak worden geclassificeerd als 'triviale' nieuwsbronnen kregen vox pops tot nu toe weinig aandacht in academisch onderzoek en de journalistieke praktijk. Vox pops kunnen echter ook worden gebruikt door nieuwsmakers om de publieke opinie weer te geven. In dit geval worden ze meer dan een inhoudsloze toevoeging aan het nieuws. Hoe de publieke opinie wordt weergegeven in het nieuws heeft namelijk gevolgen voor wat het publiek ziet als de opinie van de meerderheid van de bevolking. Omdat er weinig onderzoek bestaat over vox pops en omdat het bestaande onderzoek vaak uitgaat van onbewezen assumpties, centreert deze doctoraatsthesis zich rond drie onderzoeksvragen: (1) wat zijn de rol en karakteristieken van vox pops in het nieuws; (2) waarom gebruiken journalisten vox pops in hun nieuwsberichtgeving en hoe percipiëren ze deze vox pops; (3) wat is de invloed van de gevonden karakteristieken van vox pops op de gepercipieerde publieke opinie en persoonlijke opinie van het publiek? Om deze drie vragen te beantwoorden worden verscheidene methodes gebruikt om vox pops vanuit verschillende hoeken te benaderen.

De eerste studie onderzoekt de eigenschappen van vox pops in televisienieuws. Wie zijn de mensen die getoond worden als vox pops en hoe worden ze gepresenteerd in het nieuws? Deze vragen worden beantwoord door middel van een inhoudsanalyse van visuele en contextuele eigenschappen van 2000 vox pops afkomstig uit het Vlaamse televisienieuws. Journalistieke handboeken benadrukken dat journalisten altijd moeten trachten een dwarsdoorsnede van de bevolking te tonen via vox pops. Journalistieke richtlijnen beklemtonen

echter wel dat de vox pops altijd vergezeld moeten worden van informatie over het feit dat ze niet representatief zijn voor de gehele bevolking. De bevindingen van dit onderzoek zijn dat vox pops nauwelijks worden vergezeld met informatie over hun niet-representativiteit. Meer nog, de vox pops worden zelden geïntroduceerd, vaak wordt overgegaan naar de vox pops zonder verdere introductie. Met betrekking tot socio-demografische variabelen blijkt dat de vox pops een goede vertegenwoordiging zijn van de bevolking voor geslacht en leeftijd. Minderheidsgroepen (bijv. etnisch-culturele minderheden of mensen met een beperking) zijn echter zwaar ondervertegenwoordigd in de vox pop steekproeven. Het lijkt dus dat de vox pops eerder een eenzijdig beeld tonen van de 'stereotype Vlaming' van bijvoorbeeld de etnisch-culturele meerderheid. Deze bevindingen druisen in tegen verschillende journalistieke richtlijnen die journalisten aanmanen om de vox pops van context te voorzien. Daarnaast zouden journalisten volgens de richtlijnen moeten trachten de bevolking zo goed mogelijk te vertegenwoordigen. Voor sommige eigenschappen slagen journalisten hierin, voor andere echter niet.

Het tweede hoofdstuk focust op de rol van vox pops in het nieuws. Zijn ze onschuldige, triviale nieuwsbronnen die louter dienen ter entertainment, of zijn ze potentieel meer invloedrijk als weergave van de publieke opinie? Aan de hand van een inhoudsanalyse van Vlaamse televisienieuwsitems wordt nagegaan hoe vaak vox pops als publieke opiniemiddel gebruikt worden en of de standpunten die getoond worden via vox pops gebalanceerd zijn of niet. Speciale aandacht wordt besteed aan politiek nieuws, omdat weergaven van politieke opinie hier potentieel de meeste gevolgen hebben (bijv. partijvoorkeur beïnvloeden). Dit onderzoek toont aan dat vox pops in een groot deel van de nieuwsberichten inderdaad een meer serieuze rol spelen als weergave van de publieke opinie. Vox pops spelen in het bijzonder een belangrijke rol in politiek nieuws, waar ze de tweede meest geciteerde bron zijn (na politici) en in een grote meerderheid van de nieuwsberichten (75%) gebruikt worden om opinies te tonen. Tot slot zijn de standpunten die getoond worden via vox pops opvallend ongebalanceerd, 73% van de nieuwsberichten toont vox pops die slechts één standpunt geven. Ondanks verschillende zelfreguleringen en journalistieke richtlijnen is politiek nieuws niet meer gebalanceerd dan niet-politiek nieuws.

Waar de eerste twee empirische hoofdstukken focussen op de nieuwsinhoud, richt hoofdstuk 3 zich op de productiezijde van het nieuws. Hoofdstuk 2 vond dat vox pops vaak worden gebruikt als een weergave van publieke opinie. Hoofdstuk 3 bestudeert motivaties van

journalisten om vox pops te gebruiken. Gebruiken ze vox pops bewust als een publieke opiniemiddel of eerder omdat ze een manier zijn om het nieuws meer kleur te geven en te personaliseren? Daarnaast wordt gekeken naar de attitude van journalisten tegenover vox pops, aangezien er vaak vanuit wordt gegaan dat journalisten negatief staan tegenover deze nieuwsbronnen. Op basis van een vragenlijst bij 253 Belgische journalisten werden deze vragen onderzocht. Het resultaat van deze studie is dat journalisten vox pops toevoegen aan het nieuws omdat ze de betrokkenheid van het publiek vergroten en de aandacht trekken, en niet omdat ze een manier zijn om de publieke opinie weer te geven. Daarnaast blijkt dat 63 procent van de journalisten aangeeft zelf negatief te staan tegenover vox pops. Journalisten die vox pops gebruiken in hun nieuwsberichten zijn niet positiever over vox pops, wat erop kan wijzen dat niet de journalisten zelf, maar redacteurs bepalen of vox pops in een nieuwsbericht worden opgenomen.

Tot slot brengt hoofdstuk 4 de inzichten uit de voorgaande studies samen door te focussen op de invloed van de eigenschappen van vox pops op de percepties van publieke opinie en de eigen opinie van het publiek. Aan de hand van een online experiment wordt nagegaan welke eigenschappen van vox pops bepalen of ze invloedrijk zijn. Speelt de manier waarop vox pops worden geïntroduceerd in het nieuws een rol in hun effect? Is, naast wat de vox pops zeggen, hoe ze het zeggen ook belangrijk? In de eerste plaats wordt mensen hun gepercipieerde publieke opinie en eigen opinie in sterke mate beïnvloed in de richting van de opinie van de vox pops. Ten tweede is hoe de vox pops iets zeggen ook belangrijk. Vox pops die een expliciete opinie geven hebben een grotere invloed op de gepercipieerde publieke opinie en eigen opinie van de respondenten. Ondanks journalistieke richtlijnen die benadrukken dat journalisten vox pops moeten voorzien van een nuancerende inleiding, blijkt de inleiding van de vox pops echter geen effect te hebben.

Dit doctoraat heeft aangetoond dat vox pops in het nieuws aandacht verdienen. Bijna alle bevindingen zijn negatief nieuws voor de inclusie van vox pops in het nieuws. Hoewel vox pops een representatie van het publiek in het nieuws zijn, zijn ze niet representatief en eerder stereotiep. Bovendien worden ze vaak ongenueanceerd ingeleid in het nieuws. Vox pops worden frequent gebruikt om de publieke opinie weer te geven, en dit nog meer waar deze meningen het meest relevant zijn, namelijk in politiek nieuws. De opinies die getoond worden zijn echter erg ongebalanceerd. Bovenop dit alles lijken journalisten zich niet bewust te zijn van de invloed die vox pops kunnen hebben als weergave van de publieke opinie. Dit doctoraat wilt bewustzijn

creëren bij journalisten, academici en het publiek dat vox pops serieus genomen dienen te worden. Deze schijnbaar triviale nieuwsbronnen kunnen namelijk een grote invloed hebben op percepties en opinies van het publiek, ongeacht hun vorm en introductie. Journalisten spelen een grote rol in dit proces, aangezien zij bepalen wie het nieuws haalt en wie niet.