
THE VOX POP

How to produce one of the most attractive radio formats.

Vox pop is the term normally used by radio professionals for a street interview. It is a shortened version of the Latin words "vox populi", meaning "voice of the people". This technique is used as a means of sampling public opinion. It enables the broadcaster to place together random comments on any issue in order to get a cross-section of views.

ADVANTAGES

The Vox Pop can add **variety** to a programme. It provides a different form of presentation, one which has a lively spontaneous feel. It is also a way in which new voices can be introduced, giving a variety of texture. One of the most important forms of variety is that of introducing several different opinions on a subject, either to give balance, or to lead into another point of view in the programme. It also takes the programme out of the studio and gives variety in the form of another location.

The vox pop is **strong on human interest**. It gets ordinary people involved, the sort of people that the listener will easily identify with themselves. It also shows that the programme cares about the person on the street. You could say that human interest, interests humans, or to put it another way: people are interested in people.

The vox pop is **versatile**. On one occasion it might be used to highlight a serious issue in politics or government. At another time it might be finding out what people feel about a serious moral issue. Yet it can also be used to lighten a programme, to introduce humour. In fact the vox pop can often provide an acceptable way of introducing humour to the most serious of subjects.

DISADVANTAGES

The vox pop **cannot stand alone**. A good vox pop item may only last about 45 seconds, so it has to be part of another programme format. Vox pops can sound patchy and disjointed if they are not skilfully put together.

The vox pop is **wasteful** in some ways. At least 50% of what you record will be thrown away before the finished item is complete.

It is a very **time consuming** technique. A lot of work has to go into recording and especially into editing a vox pop which may end up only a few seconds long.

Many people are unable to talk naturally into a microphone, and a vox pop which has been rehearsed does not sound right. Finding the right people to interview can take time and patience.

PREPARATION

A vox pop should always be spontaneous, therefore it has to be unscripted. You want to gather opinions on specific subjects, so you need to know why you are doing it, and what you want it to contribute to the programme. Then you need to know what questions you are going to ask. (These should be in your mind, not on paper.) Go prepared with no more than three or four questions which you will ask everyone. Make the first one very easy, so they can relax into it. (This could be a throwaway question which you know you will not use.)

Your questions must be fairly simple and unambiguous. You don't want "yes/no" answers, so the questions must be carefully constructed. "What do you think of...?" is a useful form of question. This will generally give you an answer which you can follow up by asking "Why?" if you feel that more could be said. (The "Why?" should be edited out afterwards.) It is important too that your main question contains the point to which you want the person to react. The same question(s) must be put to each person, otherwise it will be impossible to edit all the answers together which will give you a true reflection of the subject.

You also need to know what type of people you are looking for, and where to find them. Depending on your subject you may want a specific group of people, or a wide representation of backgrounds, accents, age groups etc..

BEWARE of "Yes/No" answers which you follow up by asking Why? Sometimes this will leave you with answers to two separate questions - why? and why not? It is very difficult to edit these together into a vox pop. Although it can be creative, and can show how many people are for or against the issue in your programme.

RECORDING

Go where people stand. Don't stand where people go, as background noises are more likely to vary there and people may not be willing to stop and talk to you. Look for places where the variety of people is about the right balance for your needs. If you stand outside a school you may get lots of young people, but very few older people.

You will need to keep aware of background noises at all times, as sudden noises or variations in noise level will make editing almost impossible. Watch out for things like chiming clocks and banging doors. Avoid shop doors and places like railway stations where noise levels are naturally higher. You can actually use your body to shield the microphone from the worst noise, by standing with your back to it.

Do a test recording before you go out to make sure that your machine is working properly. You will also need to get a good level on your first interviewee before you start recording. (If you stay in the same place it should not be necessary to get a level again.)

You need not record your questions every time as they only have to be edited out, but do allow two or three seconds of background atmosphere between answers. This makes editing easier. Also record about 30 seconds of extra background to use when editing. Be in control of the situation - don't be shy. Be positive in your questioning. On the other hand don't press people into taking part. You need to be polite at all times.

Select people carefully. If a vox pop is to be truly representative then a wide variety of people must be recorded. It may be that one type of person is eager to be recorded while others are not.

Always ask the same questions of each person you approach. There is nothing more annoying when you are editing than to have a superb comment which you are unable to use because it does not fit the question.

EDITING

Editing of vox pops is a time consuming, yet rewarding task. Start this process by listening through the unedited recording several times and making notes about it. Each person's contribution should be marked with information such as their sex, approximate age, anything distinctive about them. You should also note how good each piece is. You might rate them good/indifferent/bad, or give them marks out of ten.

Once you have notes on paper, it is often best to make most of the editing decisions on paper, before cutting the tape. If the original recording is on cassette, you then only need to dub the sections that you will use.

The first thing to do is discard anything you are not likely to use. Do this the first time round, before you get used to the sound of it. If you do not understand the answer the first time, the listener will not understand it either. "If in doubt, throw it out!" Also discard any repeated questions you may have recorded. Divide the remainder into two categories - definite and possible.

The shape of a vox pop is important. It needs a good opening comment. The question will appear in the introductory cue material, and the first comment should be a straightforward, clearly understood response to it.

A contrast of opinion and experience should follow. If possible put comments together in such a way that they create an element of tension and conflict. Contrast in every way you can - voices, sex, point of view... Vary the pace too by mixing short and long answers, also serious and humorous.

The vox pop needs to come to a climax. This will probably be the final comment, so it finishes with a punch. Alternatively you can end it after the climax, perhaps with something really funny if someone has given you a really humorous answer.

The spare background noise you recorded is used as required to separate the replies and make the pacing sound natural. You will need to leave a few seconds of noise at the beginning and end of your vox pop too, so that it can be faded up and down under the items before and after it.

As you edit **WATCH OUT** for changes in level and changes in background noise. It may not always be possible to put things together in the order you want to because the backgrounds or levels do not fit together. If this happens try rearranging the sequence.

Spontaneity, variety, insight and humour are the hallmarks of the good vox pop.