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OPINION BALANCE IN VOX POP TELEVISION NEWS

Kathleen Beckers, Stefaan Walgrave, and Hilde Van den Bulck

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 2000 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

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 and Bathelt 1994; Perry and Gonzenbach 1997; Daschmann 2000; Lefevere, De Swert, and Walgrave 2012).

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 Lefevere, De Swert, and Walgrave 2012; Bosch 2013; De Swert 2013). 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 Huslage (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, Lewis, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2004; Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005). Their popularity is further explained by the fact that they make the news recognizable and accessible for viewers (Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005; Pantti and Huslage 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 and Bathelt 1994; Perry and 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, and 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, Schaap, and Hermans (2015, 157) refer to vox pops as news sources “whose only function is to enliven or illustrate a news story”, playing no substantive role (Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005; De Swert et al. 2008). Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen (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 Huslage (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, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen (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 (Perry and Gonzenbach 1997; Daschmann 2000; Lefevere, De Swert, and Walgrave 2012).

Mass media portrayals of public opinion provide individuals’ primary information source about what the population thinks about an issue (Moy and 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 (Bandura 2002; Andsager et al. 2006). 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 (Perry and Gonzenbach 1997; Lefevere, De Swert, and Walgrave 2012).

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, Lewis, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2004). Vox pops are attractive since they are cheaper and easier to gather than most of the aforementioned public opinion measures (Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 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 and Bathelt 1994; Gibson and 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, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen (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 and 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 and Thomas 2002; Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 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, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005, 72). For example, according to McNair, Hibberd, and Schlesinger (2003, 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, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen (2005, 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, 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 and 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, 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 and Bathelt 1994; Perry and 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 (Van Aelst 2007; Hopmann, Van Aelst, and Legnante 2011). 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.

Methods

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 and Zillmann 1996; Lefevere, De Swert, and Walgrave 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, 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 (7844 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, 2000 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 ($N = 2000$). 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.

TABLE 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

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 1](#) contains the exact figures for the three variables of interest in this study.

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 and Husslage 2009), we briefly look at it based on the population dataset we drew our sample from (7844 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 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 ($F(10) = 35.50, p < 0.05$).

Results

Vox pops can be used as a means to display personal experiences or as a representation of opinions. Almost half of the 2000 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

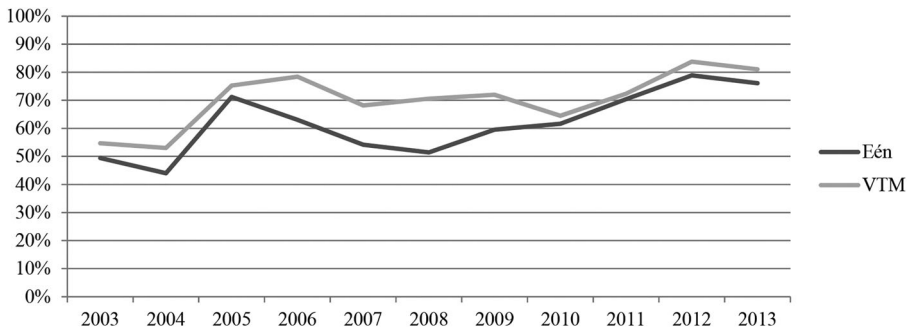


FIGURE 1 Share of news broadcasts containing at least one vox pop at commercial broadcaster VTM and public service channel Eén ($N = 7844$ news broadcasts)

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 2000 vox pop statements. Figure 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.

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

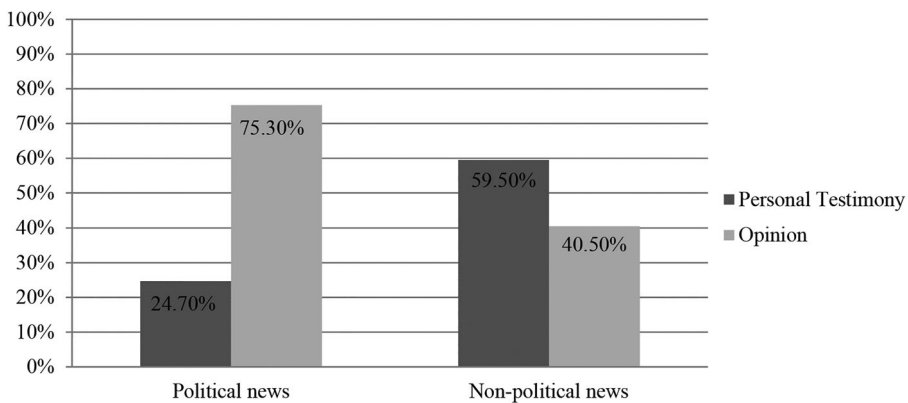


FIGURE 2 Share of opinions versus personal testimonies in political and non-political news ($N = 2000$ vox pops)

TABLE 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

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](#) 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.

How dominant is the dominant vox pop opinion then 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 VTМ. 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., Lefevre, De Swert, and Walgrave 2012). Furthermore,

we looked specifically at political news items, as we expected expressions of public opinion to be most consequential here (e.g., influencing voting behavior).

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 (e.g., De Swert et al. 2008; Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2015). 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 and Bathelt 1994; Gibson and Zillmann 1994; Daschmann 2000; Lefevere, De Swert, and Walgrave 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 (Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005; De Swert 2013). 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.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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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.

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