

Innovatory Methods in Policymaking: Introducing the Use of Verbatim Theatre



Photo by: Kristen Landon Smith - One Book One Pen (Performed at The Dukes Theatre, 12th April 2018)

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Andrew Knight.

11 Things Policymakers Need to Improve Outcomes for Citizens - Public Policy Design, 2021.

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Contents

The Challenge	02
The Method: Headphone Verbatim Theatre and Key Benefits	03
Investigating Citizen Civic Pride in Coventry's Year as UK City of Culture 2021	04
Summary, Operational Requirements and Contact Details	06

Report Summary

This report introduces Headphone Verbatim Theatre (HVT), a method of data gathering that involves a performance created solely from the words spoken by interview participants. HVT responds to the challenges faced by policymakers around incorporating citizen experiences in policy design and evaluation. After identifying the problem policymakers currently face in capturing the voices of citizens, the report outlines the method of HVT and summarises its key benefits. Through embedded video clips, the report gives examples of where the method has been used and further, how dissemination in a live performance offers an effective and emotive connection between citizens and policy makers. In the final section it details the method's operational requirements.

The Challenge

Recent developments such as the global pandemic, gender violence, Black Lives Matter, and not least the climate crisis, have accelerated recognition by policymakers that the policy cycle is failing to capture the needs of all citizens, and especially failing to respond to the lived experience of those marginalised in society.

A policy reform report published by the UK Civil Service in 2021 recognises that ‘most policymakers do not consistently have the skills, incentives, or infrastructure to find new evidence about citizens’¹. Rather than overcoming market failures and thereby delivering equity and efficiency, it is argued that policy solutions are too often based on stakeholder opinion, and rarely are the voices and experiences of citizens used to evidence policymaking². Therefore, policy engagement methodologies as the basis of evidence gathering are themselves generating ‘marginalised groups’, ‘the seldom heard’, and creating barriers to access for citizens. The report goes on to argue that this is due to policymakers not being ‘confident or effective at talking to diverse groups of people, whose background and culture differs from their own’³ because it is ‘easier for officials to turn to groups which represent these people than it is to contact them individually’ because this can ‘whip up emotions, making it harder to actually do their job’⁴.

Further, evaluations of any given policy may not take place until up to five years after its introduction, whereby ‘policymakers rarely find out whether their ideas have delivered meaningful change for citizens’⁵ until a significant amount of time has passed.

In summary:

- **Policymakers are not effective in speaking with diverse groups of people.**
- **Capturing evidence of the citizen experience is difficult for policymakers.**
- **Opinions of citizens are not satisfactorily being heard in current policy solutions.**

Given these concerns there has been a recent burgeoning of interest in new forms of data gathering for project evaluations. Examples might include citizen science, citizen summits, the use of computer simulations and VR, vox-pop booths, social media sentiment analysis and other channels such as ‘walk and talk interviewing’. In this document, we put forward HVT as a new form of data gathering to be considered by policymakers.

Photo by: Kristen Landon Smith - Headphone Verbatim Training for Guild of Psychotherapists

¹ Knight, A. (2021) *11 Things Policymakers Need to Improve Outcomes for Citizens - Public Policy Design* [online] available from <<https://publicpolicydesign.blog.gov.uk/2021/07/01/11-things-policymakers-need-to-improve-outcomes-for-citizens/>> [Feb 27, 2022]

² UK Civil Service (2020) *Policymaker Perspectives on Reform*. Online: UK Civil Service. p.63

³ Ibid, p.65

⁴ Ibid, p.65

⁵ Ibid, p.53

The Method:

Headphone Verbatim Theatre (HVT)

HVT is a theatre performance art form. It is described as a performance created solely from the words spoken by interview participants. Interview data is collected by the researcher and then edited into a performance based around a theme, subject matter or event. In the context of policy evaluation, the research data collected can be framed around the policy aims and objectives of an intervention with questions being asked of the beneficiary and/or participant – such as a citizen. The performance offers an effective and compelling alternative to a written report, quotes, figures or tables.

The process of conducting this method is as follows:

1. Participant selection and question schedule creation.
2. Interview process.
3. Edit of collected audio into short clips or soundbites through content analysis.
4. Allow participant to have final 'sign off' on their personal edit.
5. Arrange clips alongside other participants' voices to build narrative and create an 'audio-script'.
6. Rehearse audio script with actors.
7. Perform to (and record for) project evaluators, stakeholders and/or the general public (where appropriate).
8. Potential for a roundtable/Q&A following the performance.

Key Benefits

Hearing Citizen Voices:

- Places the voice of participants at the forefront of the evaluative product.
- Transmits the lived experience of service users and project beneficiaries in a highly nuanced, engaging, and insightful manner.
- Clearly communicates the research data (via an embodiment of participant voice through actors).
- Provides access to knowledge that can add and contribute further to existing policymaking practices that would otherwise have gone unnoticed.
- Provides alternative reporting structures that connect with personal stories regarding citizen engagement, while preserving anonymity.

Engaging All Stakeholders:

- Engages and embeds participants' personal experiences in the evaluation practice.
- Encourages debate from audience members that can give further nuance when investigating research questions.
- Through the liveness of the theatre experience, audiences gain a deep and emotive connection with the research findings, and so are more invested in the evaluation process.⁶

Policy Research Infrastructure:

- Extends the policy infrastructure to support accessing citizen/participant/beneficiary evidence and viewpoints
- Employs a HVT artist-researcher, in line with aims of policy agendas regarding strengthening the cultural sector and its contribution.
- Is scalable, whereby the number of participants, geographical area, number of projects, and project timeline can be tailored to the needs and budgets of evaluators.

⁶ Reason, M. (2004) 'Theatre Audiences and Perceptions of 'Liveness' in Performance'. *Particip@tions* 1 (2)
Photo Credit: Kristen Landon Smith - I Walk in Your Words

Investigating citizen civic pride in Coventry's year as UK City of Culture 2021

Charlie Ingram used HVT as part of his PhD at the Centre for Dance Research (C-DaRE, Coventry University) to investigate the impact of Coventry UK City of Culture 2021 (CoC21) on citizens and their level of civic pride towards their hometown. An increase in civic pride is a key expected impact of CoC21, and this work sits alongside other activity – such as household and sentiment surveys – to assess civic pride as an impact. This research project – and its use of HVT – was designed deliberately to give value to the voices of residents of Coventry and place them at the forefront with regards to evidence and evaluation. In the following pages, video clips of the performance are embedded to illustrate the output generated by the method.

Throughout 2021, 10 citizens who had taken part in the CoC21 programme were interviewed. After collecting a total of 8.3 hours of audio, an audio-script was created based on the exact words of the participants. Audio clips were placed together within the same structure as the interview topic guide schedule. Then in performance, the actors repeated the audio-script as exactly as possible to how they heard it.

The performance was presented live in the Centre for Dance Research at Coventry University on 26th November 2021 to a live audience of evaluation professionals, academics and those who worked with the CoC21 delivery team.

The performance was followed by a Q&A session which highlighted a positive and engaged audience response regarding their introduction to HVT as an evaluation practice. Comments received were such as:

“ 'This needs to be seen by the DCMS'⁸

'It's effective in providing access to knowledge and personal stories that would otherwise have gone unheard'

'This has given permissions to people who have knowledge who would not otherwise feel able to reveal'

'It brought the personality, the human story... bringing the person into the room... what is so often lost in research'

”

Through this method, the citizen's voice is communicated through the directness that can be found in the specificity of a live performance via actors. By presenting research data in this way (rather than through written word, film, or other creative medium), HVT creates a much more direct – and in this case empathetic – connection between the audience and the contents of the citizen interviews. By focussing on the human story behind the research data, this method provides a greater understanding of the citizen experience than that which is accessible by the usual roster of methods used.

⁷ Civic pride has been identified as a Key Performance Indicator of the UK Government's Levelling Up Agenda. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2022) *Levelling Up the United Kingdom* [online] available from <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom>> [Feb 24, 2022]

⁸ UK Government Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport

Examples of the method in practice can be seen here:



In this example, the method is introduced, and we hear views from the audience. Through performance, citizen experience is placed at the forefront of the evaluative product. The citizen experience is communicated clearly via their voices, embodied through actors imitating words as they hear them, while preserving the participants' anonymity. This example also includes reflections made by audience members in a post-show discussion.



This example shows how the method captures and communicates where attribution for social change could or should be given, in the opinion of the citizens in these clips. It also shows how the method gives space for dissenting voices. Similar and contrasting experiences are placed alongside one another to provide a compelling overview of citizen opinion towards a cultural project that is seeking to support civic pride.

Summary

This report has introduced an innovative method of data collection and dissemination: Headphone Verbatim Theatre (HVT). HVT is used to capture and articulate the voices and experiences of citizens through the medium of a theatre performance. This method has been created in response to the challenges associated with current policy making and associated evaluation practice, namely a lack of citizen voices in policy solutions, and difficulties for policymakers to speak with diverse groups of people.

Through a worked example based on the evaluation of UK CoC21, the evidence is clear that this method can be utilised alongside other quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection to further articulate and evidence the citizen experience in places where policymaking is currently seen to be falling short.

HVT provides a further engaging and powerful form of data gathering for evaluations, especially in the many policy domains of citizen and lived experience.

Operational requirements

The operational requirements and costs to undertake this method are directly comparable to other conventional methods such as semi-structured interviewing and surveying:

- An experienced artist-researcher to undertake the evaluation method process.
- Time and resources dedicated to actors to perform the voices of citizens.
- Access to a rehearsal and performance space (this can be a large conference room, studio space or other larger room).
- Wireless headphone broadcast system and a device to play the audio-script.

If the aim is to produce a professional theatre experience, further operational requirements are:

- Access to a Lighting Rig (fixed or temporary).
- Access to a PA System.
- Access to a Projector.



Contact Us

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