

VLV Audibility of Speech on Television Project

Research Summary

The Objectives of this Investigation

The first phase of the VLV enterprise was to carry out research to establish:

- How many people have problems in hearing the spoken word on television
- To what extent such difficulties are related to age – and therefore to increasingly impaired quality of hearing
- To identify particular TV programmes that had posed audibility problems to their audiences – for subsequent audio analysis by the project’s engineering specialists
- To establish the detail of the audibility difficulties that people experienced with these particular programmes – in their own words

The insights revealed from this investigation were to be the starting point for the subsequent audio analysis phase of the project.

Summary of Research Findings

1. Medical Research Council statistics demonstrate that quality of hearing is very much a function of age:

<u>Adults aged</u>	<u>% with mild, moderate, severe or profound hearing loss</u>
16 – 60	6%
61 – 80	47%
81 & over	93%

Source: MRC

It was therefore important to ensure good research coverage of the elderly for this investigation.

2. From the VLV sample of people aged 65 & over, a strong relationship was established between how they described the quality of their hearing and whether or not they had any difficulty in hearing the spoken word:

<u>Self-assessed quality of hearing:</u>	<u>% of viewing for which they reported difficulty in hearing the spoken word</u>
	%
Very good	2
Good	3
Moderately good	12
Poor	18
Very poor	27

Those who said their hearing was “very poor” reported difficulties in hearing speech for over a quarter of the programmes they viewed. By contrast, audio difficulties were only reported for 2% of programmes viewed by people who said their hearing was “very good”.

3. Across the VLV sample of 65+s as a whole, 29% of programmes posed speech audibility problems to at least 10% of their viewers.

4. The research project went on to identify 22 particular programmes that had posed significant audibility problems to their respective audiences. The combination of two separate parallel research projects (the BBC's online panel and VLV's supplementary diary enterprise - see Technical Note below) shows the age profile of those who had difficulty in hearing the spoken word on these programmes – and how this differs markedly from the profile of the population as a whole:

	<u>UK Adult Population</u>	<u>Those having difficulty in hearing speech in these programmes</u>
	%	%
16 – 49	57	13
50 – 65	33	23
65 & over	<u>20</u>	<u>53</u>
	100	100

Pensioners (aged 65+) comprise 20% of the population, but account for more than half of the viewers who had difficulty in hearing speech in these programmes. Very few of the problems in hearing the spoken word on television arose from people under the age of 50.

5. For each programme for which the BBC and VLV respondents reported speech audibility problems, they were invited to describe these in their own words. In aggregate across the 22 principal problematical programmes:

- **Foreign Accents and Dialects @ 19%** were the explanations most often cited.

- **Background Noise & Background Music @13% & 11%** respectively accounted for a quarter of the problems encountered.

- Then **Mumbling & Poor Diction @14%**

- and **Talking too Fast @11%**

These difficulties between them accounted for two thirds of the problems that viewers cited in their own words when they were faced with difficulties “in hearing what people were saying in this programme”.

6. The elderly, about 40% of whom described their hearing as less than good, have a particular problem with **Background Music - @20%**. It is also interesting to see how they cited **Shouting & Screaming** and **Audience Laughter & Applause** as creating difficulties for them in hearing the spoken word.

7. This research set out primarily to investigate the difficulties that people have in hearing the spoken word. Beyond these sound mixing challenges for the programme maker, there is the separate issue of how background audio effects contribute to or detract from a programme's appeal to its audience. In this context it was interesting how respondents from time to time resorted to the emotive use of CAPITALS when complaining about background music in a programme.

8. 18% of the VLV diarists acknowledged that background music to programmes usually ‘adds to their enjoyment’ of TV programmes. The majority of them (52%), however, said that background music usually ‘reduces their enjoyment’ of TV

programmes. To these people, background music can be 'too loud' and 'distracting' and 'unnecessary', 'creating problems in hearing what people are saying'.

9. There is clearly some resistance to the use of subtitles. Amongst those VLV diarists who described their hearing as (only) 'moderately good' or 'poor', two thirds never use subtitles. Amongst those who said their hearing as 'very poor', as many as a third never use subtitles.

Technical Note

The VLV speech audibility questions were carried on both the BBC's *Adult Pulse* online panel with an average reporting sample per day of c.8,000, and in a supplementary paper diary commissioned by VLV for a sample of the elderly who cannot be reached online: obtaining 506 effective diaries from people aged 65 & over who do not use the internet. The data reported above relate to programmes viewed over the week ending 20 August 2010 on BBC 1/2/4, Channel 4, Five and ITV.

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The research project was initiated and directed by Dick Bates, Peter Menneer and David Walker, all three former BBC senior executives who volunteered their services for this VLV project.

GfK NOP was the research company for both the BBC *Pulse* online panel and the VLV supplementary paper diary project amongst people aged 65 & over who do not use the internet.

Peter Menneer

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