

## Voicing an Opinion

Do you prefer to talk on the phone or text? When at your computer would you rather speak to a tech-support person or send them a text? When you and your partner go out to dinner, do you speak to each other or text? Is there something missing in these exchanges? Social media has expanded communication among and across millions of people, but very little of it involves speaking. Is anything lost in this medium? Recently a group of researchers at Business Schools at the University of California- Berkeley and University of Chicago explored the importance of voice in communicating opposing opinions about political topics to see if hearing someone's voice changes our perceptions of the person expressing an opinion.

In a series of four experiments, persons volunteered to express views on highly polarizing topics either by speaking them or writing them down. These volunteers were designated the communicators. A second set of participants was divided into groups that either watched and listened to the speakers, only listened to the speakers, or merely read transcripts of the speakers' opinions. These participants were then asked to evaluate the speakers' human qualities, including how thoughtful, logical, sophisticated, and adult-like they appeared to be, and also how cold, closed-minded, or superficial they appeared to be. These participants were designated evaluators.

The first experiment involved opinions about abortion, the war in Afghanistan, and country music versus rap music. Both the communicators and the evaluators were selected to have strong opinions about each of these subjects. Evaluators who disagreed with the communicators' opinions but listened to them speak their minds rated them more highly as human beings than did those evaluators who merely read transcripts of what the communicators had to say.

The second experiment used the same paradigm but involved preferences for presidential candidates during the primary season of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. Again the evaluators who disagreed with the communicators about their preferences nevertheless attributed more thoughtful and human qualities to them when they heard the person's voice than when they read the transcript.

The third experiment involved the final Presidential Election of 2016. Evaluators listened to or read transcriptions of the communicators' preferences for President and their reasons for them. In general evaluators who disagreed with the communicators' preferences rated them lower on human qualities than did the evaluators in the previous two experiments. However, the evaluators were still more likely to find something thoughtful and human-like about the communicators if they heard them speak their preferences instead of merely reading them.

The final experiment involved a text-to-voice manipulation of the communicators' speeches in Experiment 2, which involved preferences in the Presidential Primaries. One group of evaluators

heard the actual voices of the communicators, one group heard a computer-generated text-to-voice version of the transcript, and one group read the transcript. The “mindless” text-to-voice versions did not improve the evaluators’ opinions of the communicators as human beings, and the evaluators who heard them rated the communicators less authentic than did evaluators who heard actual voices.

And what about the communicators and evaluators whose political opinions agreed? Interestingly, vocalized opinions compared to text-only opinions did not always lead to higher ratings of humanization of the communicators. In Experiment 4 the evaluators who agreed with the communicators’ presidential preferences rated them more highly on human qualities when they only read the text than did the evaluators who heard their voices. This has implications for those of us who choose our friends solely through social media without ever meeting them in person. Would our opinions of them change if we actually heard their voices later? Or could text-based opinions positively bias us toward persons with our views and negatively bias us against persons opposing our views? We do hear voices on public media such as radio and TV all the time. It was not uncommon during the recent presidential election to hear the comment, “I can’t stand that person’s voice!” Although the authors don’t address it, results of this study raise the interesting question, Which came first, detesting the voice or the person it represented?

The authors suggest that when people with strongly differing opinions interact, they are less likely to dehumanize each other if they hear their voices. They found that seeing the communicators did not add much to the humanizing effect of hearing their voices. This should come as no surprise. The intonation and cadence of the human voice itself conveys a lot about the mental and emotional status of the speaker. People with speech impairments can vocalize their feelings without using words. So can infants. It is also likely that early humans communicated with each other vocally long before they developed words.

Today however, words without voices are becoming increasingly popular, as people engage in texting, messaging, and emailing each other instead of speaking to them. How many relationships do you have with people you have never spoken to? Now consider the people you disagree with. How many have actually heard your voice? As the researchers suggest, “Individuals should choose the context of their interactions wisely. If mutual appreciation and understanding of the mind of another is the goal of social interaction, then it may be best for the person’s voice to be heard.”

Schroeder, J., Kardas, M. & Epley, N. The humanizing voice: Speech reveals, and text conceals, a more thoughtful mind in the midst of disagreement. 2017. *Psychological Science*, Vol. 28 Pp. 1745-1762.