Popularization and personalization: a historical and cultural analysis of 50 years of Dutch political television journalism

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Chapter 1

Introducing the historical and cultural analysis of 50 years of Dutch political television journalism
GENERAL INTRODUCTION

An alleged negative influence of television journalism on the quality of public debate and political trust is a well-known concern, voiced regularly in the Netherlands and abroad by politicians, journalists and academics; yet the factual role of popularization and personalization in political television journalism is contentious, just as their historical roots and cultural circumstances. Systematic and longitudinal research of a popularization of political journalism and personalization of politics is lacking, especially within the context of a mainland-European country. The aim of this dissertation therefore is to define, map and explain the occurrence of popularization and personalization in the Dutch democracy since the beginning of Dutch television journalism in 1956. Within the research project on Popularization and Personalization in the Dutch Democracy this study, or rather collection of studies, provides a historical and cultural analysis of changes in political television journalism in the Netherlands, questions in particular what forms of popularization and personalization of politics can be identified since Dutch television journalism’s inception in 1956 and to what features of political and media culture they can be attributed. The qualitative and quantitative studies presented in this dissertation offer content analyses of the occurrences of popularization and personalization, as well as an extensive literature review, a longitudinal analysis of TV programming and elite and expert interviews.

This introductory chapter will end with a chapter outline, preceded by an overview of the main research questions, an explanation of the chosen research methods and a discussion of the contribution of this study to the field of political communication. But first of all, some words on ‘wording’. The title of this dissertation reads Popularization and Personalization. A Historical and Cultural Analysis of 50 years of Dutch Political Television Journalism, quite a long phrase. The words ‘Dutch’ and ‘television’ are indicators of the specific context the study focuses on and is consequently limited by. So what is actually under study here is ‘political journalism’, which might seem rather double. Is journalism not always political? No, just think of cultural or sports journalism, although these forms of journalism of course could be of political nature in the sense that in these areas too questions on
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power and responsibility might be discussed. But this dissertation deals with ‘political journalism’ – journalism about politics – with which I mean all forms of political information on television. Information about the common sense understanding of institutional politics that can be communicated on TV through news and current affairs programs, but also through more entertaining genres such as talk shows, celebrity programs, quizzes, etc. This is purposely a broad understanding of ‘political journalism’ that refrains from excluding certain TV genres beforehand. Imposing selection criteria would mean to exclude certain programs or genres based on vague and undefined ideas, or even judgments about the kind of TV programs that should not engage with politics. But to obtain a better understanding of the popularization and personalization of political journalism and their significance for public debate and democracy, an open mind, wide focus and broad understanding of what political journalism is, or could be, is necessary. In this dissertation phrases such as ‘political television journalism’, ‘television political journalism’, ‘television journalism’, ‘political television’, ‘information on television’, etc., thus always refer to the general understanding of ‘all political information on television’.

DEMOCRACY AND THE ROLE OF TELEVISION

But why study the political information on Dutch television? And why from a historical and cultural perspective? And why focus on popularization and personalization? Isn’t that a “rather trampled down subject”, as one of the interviewees responded to my first invitation for an interview? I ignored this question when replying to the interviewee, not wanting to get into this discussion at that point and ‘contaminate’ the future interview to which he had agreed. But of course the question is valid.

Continuous criticism on the functioning and influence of media on the quality of public debate and democracy induced the research project and this particular study. Government, politicians, academics and journalists themselves discuss or even condemn the media, and mostly television, for not providing the necessary relevant information and the opportunities for people to form an opinion (e.g. Dittrich,
In 1976 Robinson was the first, American, author to coin the term video malaise to argue that television as a medium, causes political malaise such as social distrust, political cynicism and political inefficacy. Although counterarguments have also been made both in public debate as well as in academic discussions (e.g. Beunders, 2007; Newton, 2006), the negative evaluation of television as a ‘dumbing down’ medium remains dominant.

But is it really that bad? Has 50 years of television impoverished public debate and led to an obliteration of politically relevant information? And what about cultural differences? Are various countries with different political (e.g. multiparty vs. two-party systems, majoritarian vs. consensus democracies), media (e.g. commercial vs. public service media) and social (e.g. individualistic vs. collective) virtues, systems, and practices equally susceptible to television influences? Is the same true for America, the United Kingdom and mainland European countries? Answering these questions is challenging. Debate about an alleged ‘Americanization’, the influence of an American political communication style on European politics, versus a European resistance (Blumler, 1999; Brants, 1998, 1999) continues but is obscured by the dominance of Anglo-Saxon research. Systematic longitudinal research covering the whole television-era hardly exists, and finally neither criticism on media and television, nor the video malaise thesis itself are univocal in their argumentations. In sum, various aspects are criticized, which are only rarely subject of systematic and longitudinal research, and these criticisms often do not take into account the cultural differences between countries. These shortcomings in the existing literature and knowledge about the role of television are addressed in this dissertation, and further discussed in chapter 2.

DESIGN

The contribution of this dissertation lies in the combination of a theoretical conceptualization of the discussion on the quality of television journalism and empirical longitudinal data on both TV
programming and content, with consideration of the cultural history of a European country, The Netherlands. These studies are further strengthened by discussing the outcomes with practitioners from the fields of politics and television journalism.

The Netherlands is a country in which the role of the media and in particular television in the functioning of its democracy is and always has been subject of debate and research (De Beus, Brants, & Van Praag, 2011). It is also a country whose political and media system has been recognized as resembling other national systems, for instance those of Northern European countries such as Austria, Belgium and Denmark (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), and that is typical of a general movement from a democratic corporatist model to a liberal model (Brants & Van Praag, 2006). As such the country is an excellent case for a historical analysis of television journalism from a European perspective, which is strengthened by the availability of longitudinal data.

MULTI-METHOD DESIGN
The study is approached with a multi-method design: qualitative and quantitative sub-studies are conducted that are relatively complete in themselves, but form essential components of one overarching research study (Morse, 2003). Through a triangulation of the results of five studies, in the final chapter a comprehensive answer is formulated to the main research question what forms of popularization and personalization of politics can be identified since Dutch television journalism’s inception in 1956 and to what features of political and media culture can they be attributed? As a characteristic of the multi-method design, the study consists of several sub-studies, each conducted to answer a particular sub-question (Morse, 2003). Although one of these studies has a deductive approach, the main theoretical drive of the project is inductive, “for discovery”, as a result of which most conducted sub-studies are of qualitative nature (Morse, 2003, p. 196).

Some ongoing fierce ontological and epistemological discussions exist about the social world and the knowledge that can be acquired about it through certain research methods (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007; Snape & Spencer, 2003). Traditionally, two paradigms are identified: a positivist quantitative paradigm versus an
interpretivist qualitative paradigm. Johnson et al. (2007, p. 117) more recently argued that “in reaction to the polarization between quantitative and qualitative research, another intellectual movement (focusing on synthesis) occurred and it has come to be called mixed method research.” Manifold definitions exist of ‘mixed method research’, as of multi-method research for that matter. A clear-cut, dominant definition however is lacking, and is it is not my intention nor wish to formulate one and become further engaged in this discussion. I contend that it is both necessary and sufficient to state that I adhere to the pragmatic view that quantitative and qualitative research methods can and should be seen as part of the researcher’s ‘toolkit’. They should be viewed as complementary strategies appropriate to answer different types of research questions, thereby placing the underlying philosophical debates into the background (Snape & Spencer, 2003, pp. 15-16). In this dissertation for instance the quantitative study presented in chapter 3 offers a longitudinal overview of the opportunities for popularization and personalization to arise, whereas the qualitative content analyses presented in chapter 4 and 5 complement this data with in-debt knowledge and understanding of why and particularly how popularization and personalization occurred at certain moments in time, in specific programs.

Taking this stance allowed me to conduct a multi-method study (as defined by Morse, 2003), applying different methods in the various sub-studies to answer the different sub-questions. First, a literature review was conducted to answer the first sub-question, *which processes of popularization and personalization can be identified?*, and to develop coherent theoretical concepts that could be used as instruments in the following empirical studies. Next, a quantitative study with a deductive drive was started to map and categorize Dutch political television journalism from its inception in 1956, and to test *whether increasingly less informative programs are being aired on TV*. This study was followed by more qualitative, inductive studies to identify and explain occurrences of popularization and personalization through qualitative content analysis and to answer the sub-question *how these processes are related to developments in the media and political landscape*. Finally, to understand the practical implications of these developments and to answer the sub-question
how political and journalistic actors have adapted to these processes of personalization and popularization and how their adjustment has altered their communication with audiences in their role as political citizens semi-structured interviews were held. This way, both a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of Dutch political television journalism could be gained covering the entire TV-era, from the mid-50s, when the first TV news aired, till 2006.

DATA
The availability of (digital) archives of television programs for research is the last issue that needs to be addressed in this introduction. The Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision looks after 70% of the Dutch audio-visual heritage and is one of the largest audio-visual archives in Europe (http://www.beeldengeluid.nl). The readily available TV content that is preserved at the institute is a rich source of research material that was gratefully used for this study. Unfortunately however, the institute’s collection lacks programs of commercial channels (with a few exceptions). The TV collection thus mainly exists of material from the public channels, although these programs were sometimes damaged, incomplete or unavailable. And although the lack of commercial television content was disappointing upon first discovery, in a dual broadcasting system such as in the Netherlands, most video malaise criticisms are particularly germane to public broadcasting. Since televisions’ introduction, public broadcasting has been ‘designed’ as a safeguard of TV’s role and functioning as watchdog of democracy and to serve the public interest (Bardoel & Brants, 2003; McQuail, 2003). A decrease of serious programs, of informative content and consequently of political knowledge, interest and trust among citizens, would thus be particularly reproachable if it occurred at public broadcasting channels since they are traditionally meant to foster the opposite. This justifies the study of public broadcasting content for processes of popularization and personalization, and because the inventory of TV programming and the interviews did take commercial television into account, the study as a whole provides a complete overview.
CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER OUTLINE

To answer the previously outlined research questions five studies have been conducted that are presented in the next five chapters. One theoretical and four empirical studies gain our insight into the contribution of televised forms of communication to political and democratic processes. In chapter 2 a comprehensive review of the literature on the articulation of politics and television is presented. Distinguishing between processes of popularization and personalization, publications from various academic fields are analyzed to arrive at two clear and neutral conceptualizations to be used in further analyses.

But before continuing with the analysis of specific occurrences of popularization and personalization, an analysis of the political information environment is presented in chapter 3 through a historically grounded inventory of television broadcast time in the Netherlands. Using archived print television guides and digital broadcasting data, information about all broadcasted programs on all national public and commercial channels was collected, focusing on the three months preceding national elections and the two midterm months between elections. The individual programs were used as units of analysis and coded for channel, broadcast organization and duration (a/o). Based on a classification scheme, the programs were categorized belonging to information, infotainment or entertainment, and analyses of the total number of programs and the amount of broadcast time spent in each category were done. One important result is, that there is no decreasing quantity of potential broadcast time for political information on television. Over time both public and commercial broadcasters have dedicated more time to information programming. Traditionally the category of information is where one would expect to find most political information (e.g. in news and current affairs programs), but the content of these types of programs might have become more entertaining. Additionally, we also need a better understanding of the infotainment genre, to see what kind and how much political information might be communicated through these programs. This is the objective of the studies presented in chapter 4 and 5.
In chapter 4 a situated analysis of popularization is presented, which means that occurring aspects of popularization are analyzed within and taking into account the original context constituted by the program, through an analysis of a serious, informative program: the long lasting Dutch current affairs program Brandpunt. First, the topic of each separate item of every broadcasted episode was coded and a descriptive quantitative analysis of these data was done. Next, items concerning the two main topics ‘justice & crime’ and ‘governmental affairs’ were selected for further qualitative content analysis, to study the narrative, vox populi and audiovisual means employed in these items. Brandpunt was aired from 1960 to 1996, and the research found no linear trends that indicate that political television journalism has become more popularized over time. A similar outcome concerning personalization is presented in chapter 5. Selected from the broad category of infotainment, a selection of televised portraits of Dutch politicians is analyzed, broadcasted on public television channels in the Netherlands between 1961 and 2006. In the selected portraits both the guest-politician and the interviewer or host are present. All guests are (or were) politicians at the national political level or higher, belonged to various political parties, and were interviewed by a wide range of journalists in a diversity of programs, broadcast by different networks. The portraits were analyzed through qualitative content analysis, whereby topics, themes and technical characteristics of the broadcast were coded and interpreted, linking the codes to the theoretical concept of personalization. Among other things, I observed that personal narratives are always primarily articulated with the political ideas, activities and goals of the politicians that are being interviewed, and embedded in the political and societal affiliations of the politician. Personalization thus seems not to have become dominant over the attention for political issues in this type of programs.

In chapter 6, the last empirical study is presented, offering an analysis of the visions and opinions of practitioners in the field of political communication. Politicians, journalists and experts were interviewed about their experiences with and ideas on political television journalism in the Netherlands throughout the years, and particularly about processes of popularization and personalization. The 21 semi-structured interviews lasted on average 72 minutes and
were fully transcribed. Using an inductive approach, the transcripts were analyzed coding remarks about definitions, evaluations, historical developments and the quality of journalism, and the statements of the different groups of respondents were compared to each other, and to my own previously gained results. Comparing their views with previous research outcomes shows among other things that the distinction between the two concepts is intuitively very difficult but nonetheless useful. Also, according to the practitioners, political television on the whole is of good quality in the Netherlands; its content is of a higher standard than it used to be.

Concluding this collection of studies in chapter 7, it seems that there is no evidence for a video malaise in the Netherlands: the space for informative programs has increased through the decades, a trend of increasing popularization is not found, nor is there evidence of an increasing personalization. Furthermore, politicians and journalists themselves feel at ease with the quality of political television journalism. No reason, it seems, to worry about public debate, to scold at our journalists, or politicians. But does this conclusion do right to the ongoing complaints on political journalism? Is there really no truth in those criticisms? This issue is addressed in the final chapter of this dissertation.
NOTES

1 The research project Popularization and Personalization in the Dutch Democracy is headed by prof. dr. D. Houtman, and funded by The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) within the Disputed Democracy research programme. The aim of this project is, first, to map and explain the occurrence of popularization and personalization in the Dutch democracy since the beginning of Dutch television journalism in 1956 and, second, to study whether and how these processes affect citizens’ political trust and opinions. This latter, effect study is currently being done at the Erasmus University Rotterdam; this dissertation is the outcome of the first study.