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

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Chapter 2

Popularization and personalization in political communication

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CHAPTER 2

What do all these good intentions of codes of conduct matter when people get bombarded every day with a diarrhea of news- and thrill-things? A quarter of a century ago the late Neil Postman set the tone with his somber bestseller *Amusing ourselves to death*. He saw amusement and entertainment getting the upper hand in a radio and television society. The funny thing is that Postman of course was right. We follow the process of Paris Hilton with her lap-dog in Los Angeles like zombies; zap to Idols, Big Brother, The Golden Cage and more of those things in which a small country can be big. Politicians on their turn show themselves in silly poses in foolish programs because they confuse being well-known with fame and authority. Or because the brake chutes of their internal compass appears to be damaged. [Translated: Knapen, 21-06-2008]

Ben Knapen, former chief editor of Dutch quality newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* and adjunct professor in Media & Quality at the Radboud University Nijmegen expresses with this account a more general concern about the influence of popular media and in particular television, on the quality of public debate. Academics, politicians and journalists in The Netherlands are remarkably united in their rejection of television as potential source of information and discussion. A publication by the national Council for Social Development (RMO, 2003), for instance, concludes that public debate has become subject to media and television logic, which have driven other ‘logics’ – of political parties, stable constituencies and public broadcasting – to the margins. According to the RMO the public debate has become a spectacle of short-term scandals and striking personalities, with little room for substantial thoughts or profound analyses. Flemish sociologist Elchardus argues in his book *De Dramademocratie* (2002) that press and broadcasting journalists increasingly frame (political) issues as isolated stories of individual, typical victims and perpetrators, heroes and villains. Lacking in these accounts, he writes, is an analysis of the structural forces and processes underlying specific events and an evaluation of lasting solutions and policies.
Considerations such as the ones from Knapen, the RMO and Elchardus are not isolated and have already in 1976 been coined as ‘video malaise’ by American author Robinson (1976). The term has gained wide usage since then, as a compact reference to various processes and phenomena in the articulation of politics and media. Video malaise authors start from the position that the media are the key sources of public information and opinion formation for citizens in modern democratic societies. Well functioning media, according to these authors, are a precondition for a well functioning democracy in which citizens are informed, involved and participating. They then identify television, generally accepted as the most important source of information, as the main provider of impoverished journalism that simplifies news, panders to the lowest common denominator of public taste and lowers the standards of public discourse. ‘Dumbing down’ is, like video malaise, another popular English term to identify this process. The decline of political knowledge, a decreasing voter turnout, the reduction of trust in government and the degeneration of public debate could all allegedly be attributed to a lack of quality of television (see Newton, 2006 for an overview).

But despite the popularity of the video malaise thesis, for scientific purpose it poses more problems than solutions. Firstly, the term is not very specific and is used to label different phenomena such as an increasing focus on emotions, people, appearance, ‘faits divers’, scandals and entertainment, arguably at the expense of attention for ‘true’ politics. Secondly, there is some dispute about whether video malaise applies similarly to different political cultures. The term ‘Americanization’ is often heard, expressing concern about the influence of an alleged American political communication style on European politics. On the contrary, some authors claim a particular European resistance to video malaise (Blumler, 1999; Brants, 1998, 1999). Thirdly, the – often sketchy – effects model underlying the video malaise thesis is simplistic and media centric in its assumption that media alone could procure an omnipresent change in political culture and quality.

In this chapter I will therefore, based on existing literature, develop new and more precise concepts to more accurately describe the articulation of politics and television, to be able eventually to answer the effects question more satisfactorily.² Van Zoonen (2005)
made a useful start by distinguishing between processes of popularization (with politics and political communication borrowing the codes and conventions from popular culture) and personalization (referring to a focus of media on political personalities rather than political issues). I will classify the different terms and concepts from the literature under either one of these processes, and further categorize and specify within them.

**METHOD**

The identification, selection and analysis of relevant literature followed the standard procedure for doing systematic literature reviews (see for instance Galvan, 2006; Hart, 1999).

**IDENTIFICATION OF LITERATURE**

The relevant publications were identified in four consecutive steps. First, three experts were consulted to draw up an initial reading list of works considered central or ‘classic’ to the field and to identify key words for searching databases (see appendix A). The most recent books were analyzed and reviewed directly, in order to provide the most up-to-date discussion of the video malaise debate (Van Santen, 2008). Second, using the key words, the reading list was extended by adding relevant titles from bibliographies of the earlier identified publications. Thirdly, the list was extended by an electronic search executed in the ISI Web of Knowledge database and in search engine Google Scholar, searching for the presence of the key words in the title, abstract or list of key words. Finally, all articles quoting Robinson’s original video malaise article were included, in compliance with the relevant key words.

**SELECTION OF LITERATURE**

The thus composed list was then screened to reduce the number of publications to a manageable amount. Two criteria were employed: because the conceptualizations are made for the purpose of studying Dutch processes of popularization and personalization to begin with (see note 2), first of all only those publications referring to the Dutch/European context were preserved on the list. Second, all
overview and review articles and publications that were explicit in their definition of the video malaise thesis or elements thereof were preserved.

After reading this literature it became clear that the original key words were not sufficient. In the literature other terms, such as tabloid or tabloidization, were also used. These and additional words were again searched for in the ISI Web of Knowledge database and in search engine Google Scholar (see again appendix A). The selection process as described above was then repeated.

**ANALYZING THE LITERATURE**

The selected literature was analyzed thematically, since chronological or methodological ordering was less relevant for the purpose to distinguish and operationalize the key concepts in these debates. Publications were grouped together under either the popularization or personalization denominator (or both, very occasionally), and based on a bottom-up, one-by-one comparison, common terms and approaches were identified. Under the heading of popularization, three sorts of studies were identified. First, studies about general phenomena in political journalism, using terms such as tabloidization, sensationalism, human interest and infotainment. Second, studies about a so called media logic that mainly focus on election coverage, with dominating terms such as horse race, hoopla, sound bite and interpretative journalism. Third, studies about the relationship between popular culture and politics in the broad sense of the word, in which we come across terms such as convergence and populism. The discussion of these three sorts of studies is summarized in tables and a conceptual visualization and specification of the concept popularization (figure 2.1).

In literature that was classified under the heading of personalization, seven forms of personalization were identified, four of which are directly linked to media attention. Based hereon, a conceptual visualization was constructed and a specification of personalization as a process of individualization, privatization and/or emotionalization (figure 2.2). The results of the literature analysis will be discussed following this classification.
POPULARIZATION

From the literature review three sorts of studies can be deducted that differ in the type of media content they discuss: the first sort are studies about general phenomena in political journalism, with tabloidization as most important catchword; the second sort concerns research of (mostly) election coverage supposedly subjected to a media logic; the third sort focuses on the whole constellation of popular culture, varying from pop music to reality television, and its political meaning.

POLITICAL JOURNALISM

The term ‘tabloidization’ refers to a change in the paper format of newspapers and more generally to changes in the content of journalism. Originally, the tabloid format newspaper was designed to make reading a newspaper on mass public transport easier, making the working-class and commuters a part of the reading public (Örnebring & Jönsson, 2004). Nowadays, since many newspapers have changed their paper format to tabloid size, the term is also increasingly used to characterize changes in the content of journalism aimed at attracting a wider audience. According to Harrington (Harrington, 2008), journalists, politicians and academics are critical about both types of tabloidization (Harrington, 2008), because they believe that the journalistic goal to provide facts, information and background is at odds with the goal to attract as wide an audience as possible.

Besides this general drift in the literature there seems to be little agreement between the authors. A main issue concerns the definition of what tabloidization of journalistic content exactly comprehends. Research in which other terms, such as sensationalism, human interest, vox pop and infotainment are used, often refer to similar processes as studies focused on tabloidization, as I will show. But even the term tabloidization itself is not used univocally. Sparks (2000), who is often referred to, argues that while it is impossible to give an exhaustive definition of tabloidization, three particular dimensions can be found. First, he writes, tabloid news devotes little attention to political, economical, or social processes and relatively much to sports, scandal, entertainment, and private lives of people.
Secondly, tabloidization means a shift away from news and information towards an emphasis on sensational entertainment, particularly in broadcasting. Thirdly, tabloidization puts ‘normal’ people at the forefront to act as ‘hands-on’ experts and pushes pundits with a more distant and broader perspective to the background. In his overview article on tabloidization Barnett (1998) also points at the problem of definition and, like Sparks, identifies various dimensions of tabloidization: first, there is a process of displacement in which more emphasis is placed on entertainment and scandal at the expense of serious journalistic issues (volume); what is left of serious news has, secondly, been debased through populist packaging and presentational strategies (nature); finally, serious stories are being given progressively less prominence. The attempt to maximize reader and viewer audiences, to augment advertisement sales, is at the root of these processes according to Barnett and he concludes that the resulting material is unlikely to have much value beyond pure entertainment. Machin and Papatheoderou (2002), too, renounce a systematic definition of the term ‘tabloid’, and present typical dimensions of tabloidization that are comparable to those identified by Sparks and Barnett. They do, however, acknowledge the possibility that tabloidization may contribute to meaningful journalism, by distinguishing between popular (good) and tabloid (bad) political styles. They claim that some forms of popular television journalism can, through stories based on personal experience, incite readers and viewers to reflect on their own existence, to critical thinking and to an enhanced understanding of the relation between public and personal problems. However, when such personalized stories are presented in a sensational entertainment style (‘tabloid’ according to the authors), the public perspective vanishes and a superficial, a-historical understanding of the world is encouraged. How to assess whether a particular style of political journalism is popular or tabloid remains, however, unclear.

While Sparks, Barnett and Machin and Papatheoderou claim that it is hard to define tabloidization, other scholars do define tabloidization more explicitly, but essentially provide the same sort of broad descriptions. Uribe and Gunter (2004) give a definition consisting of three aspects: range (meaning that less space is devoted to information, foreign affairs and hard news), form (more space
dedicated to visuals and headlines) and *style* (more stories with a personalized angle). They also associate tabloidization with a thirst for sensation and an increasing orientation towards emotional stories and angels in the news. Harrington (2008) defines any form of popular journalism as tabloid news with catchwords like soft, trash, personal, private, emotional, lay knowledge, celebrity, feminine, profit, and demands. This is set against quality journalism characterized by value, political, public, high culture, rational, expert knowledge, intellectual, masculine, service, needs, and supply. Örnebring and Jönsson (2004), finally, define tabloidization briefly as sensational, simplified and populist.5

Noticeably, in most descriptions of tabloidization ‘sensation’ or ‘sensationalism’ are regularly used notions. There are, however, also authors who, reversely, use the term ‘sensationalism’ as overarching concept of which tabloid ‘packaging’ is a characteristic. But none of these authors either come to a clear definition. Grabe, Zhou and Barnett (2001) are the only ones who express a need to explicate the term ‘sensational’ as a tabloid content and packaging style, “provoking emotional and sensory stimulation”. Crime, accidents, disasters, celebrity news, scandal and sex are examples of sensational *topics*; and video maneuvers, audio manipulations and (non-)transitional effects as sensational *forms*. Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, Beentjes and Peeters (2005, 2006; 2007) and Nuijten, Hendriks Vettehen, Peeters, and Beentjes (2005, 2006; 2007) use this particular concept of ‘sensationalism’ to analyze Dutch television news and current affairs programs. They add ‘vivid storytelling’6 (i.e. concreteness, personalization, lay person speaking and proximity) as a feature of sensationalism because it may also attract attention.

With this addition, the authors practically incorporate ‘human interest’ and ‘vox pop’-aspects in their definition, which are by other authors either treated separately or as part of tabloidization. This is what Buckingham (1997) does in his review of research and debate about news media. He echoes Sparks in saying that popular tabloids are often accused of giving priority to everyday/ordinary news that happens around the corner, most obviously in the form of ‘human-interest’ stories. Macdonald (1998) most explicitly equates the use of human interest stories with tabloidization in her article. The ‘tabloid human interest story’ is supposedly trivial, de-contextualized and
incapable of producing knowledge about social or political structures, but the author concludes that there is no self-evident correlation between the rise of the human interest story and the alleged deterioration of serious journalism.

Finally, the concept ‘infotainment’, is regularly exchanged for tabloidization (see for example Brants & Neijens, 1998; Deuze, 2005), generally causing more instead of less confusion. Various authors contend that infotainment not only involves the presence of politicians and political issues in entertainment programs, but also the influence of entertainment on traditionally informative programs (Deuze, 2005; Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005). To make matters even more complex, authors also use the expression ‘soft news’ to describe a content and style in which facts and emotions are mixed and news is ‘sauced’ with dramatic elements of conflict, scandal, and gossip. Brants and Neijens (1998) use this description, and constructed the informative-entertainment continuum, distinguishing, like other authors, three criteria: topics (information versus human interest), style (serious interview versus informal, empathetic conversation) and format (businesslike setting versus music and participating audience).

While this literature review of popularization in political journalism studies shows that the authors use widely different wordings and emphases, there are considerable overlaps and communalities as well, which are summarized table 2.1. I conclude first, that the discussed studies refer to a change with regard to type and amount of newsworthy topics, that is characterized by increased importance of sensation, human interest and popularity. Second, I conclude that this change affects the use of distinctive narrative and audiovisual means like personal experiences and audiovisual manipulations.
Table 2.1 Overview similarities in discussion on tabloidization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Narrative means</th>
<th>Audiovisual means</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sparks (2000)</td>
<td>Sensational topics</td>
<td>Personalized</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Machin &amp; Papatheoderou (2002)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Barnett (1998)</td>
<td>Shift in volume</td>
<td>Populist nature</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Uribe &amp; Gunter (2004)</td>
<td>Range</td>
<td>Personalized style</td>
<td>Form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harrington (2008)</td>
<td>Popular topics</td>
<td>Popular narratives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hendriks Vettehen et al. (2005)</td>
<td>Content: topics</td>
<td>Storytelling</td>
<td>Video/audio manipulations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buckingham (1997)</td>
<td>Human interest stories</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
MEDIA LOGIC

The second body of literature that contributes to a better understanding of popularization in political journalism is clustered around the concept of ‘media logic’. A ‘media logic’ occurs, according to the national Council for Social Development (RMO, 2003), as laid out in a specific report on this topic, when public debate is increasingly determined by the possibilities and limitations of the medium, especially television. Media logic is characterized again by eight symptoms, according to the RMO: speed, framing, personalization, mass hypes, repetition, news anchors and interpreters, visible citizens and dominating news values. This may at first seem like a precise description, but in fact it is a vague and biased list. Framing, personalization and news values are general news processes that existed both in journalistic practice from before the rise of a media logic, as in today’s media logic journalism. The use of anchor (wo)men started with the advent of television news itself, and a word like ‘hypes’ suggests a preset critical judgment.

Other publications about media logic also suffer from these shortcomings and indicate much concern about the alleged decreasing amount of substantial news and increasing sound-bite, horse race and hoopla coverage, wherein journalists interpret the facts rather than just report them. Although references to literature about tabloidization or sensationalism are seldom made explicitly, authors point at similar processes such as an increasing emphasis on private narratives and personal information of politicians at the expense of serious news about issues and policies. In this body of literature, however, these processes are brought together under the heading ‘media logic’, and contain a clear additional connection to the video-malaise thesis or ‘video style interpretation’ (Brants & Van Praag, 2005; Mazzoleni, 2003; Sigelman & Bullock, 1991). Due to this linkage of media logic and video malaise it is impossible to review various definitions of media logic in these works without discussing the effects that some authors perceive. Media logic is often equated with video malaise, resulting in definitions going hand in hand with evaluations. This becomes visible for instance in publications of European oriented authors, studying the possible existence of a video
Many of them argue that there is no video malaise. Stewart, Mazzoleni and Horsfield (2003) for instance, conclude that although some ‘elite’ media slip into ‘popular’ forms of news making, there is no evidence to support a general malaise, because only tabloid media themselves lean towards a negativist, sensationalist, superficial and populist kind of reporting. Norris (2000) too doubts the tenability of the video malaise thesis, but on different grounds. In her study on the influence of news on voters in fifteen European countries, she finds no evidence that citizens become less informed and lethargic because of television. On the contrary, those people most exposed to news media and election campaigns are more knowledgeable, more trusting towards government and more likely to participate.

While European authors question whether the term video malaise is warranted for the European situation, key American authors not only share a belief in the widespread presence of sound bite, hoopla and horse race reporting, but also agree on its detrimental effects. Iyengar, Norpoth and Hahn state that “horserace news sells, but leaves voters unsold on the campaign and the electoral process.” (2004, p. 174). Hallin (1992a, 1992b) too, in his influential work on sound bites argues that modern television news does not convey a sense of seriousness about campaign politics and its place in democracy, although there is no reason to be nostalgic about the political journalism of the 1960s and there never was a ‘golden age’ of television news. Patterson (1996) on the other hand, does observe a deterioration compared to the old days, because journalists have become more cynical and interpret and comment on the facts instead of merely report them. Patterson (1996, 2000) sees a growing amount of investigative, but more aptly called ‘attack’ journalism. Other features of this style of journalism are an increasing attention for sensational coverage of topics like scandal, crime and disaster, and the growing celebrity status of the TV journalist, and audio manipulations like seeing a politician while hearing a journalist’s commentary. “Election coverage allots six minutes to the journalist for every minute that a candidate speaks” (1996, p. 108) which means that the direct voice of politicians is lost in a video malaise, according to Patterson.

The list of American authors that make similar claims is endless (e.g. Capella and Jamieson, 1997; Hart, 1994; Scheuer, 2001; see
Van Zoonen, 2005 for a critical deconstruction of these arguments), but there are a few dissident voices that question the video malaise thesis in the US context. Bucy and Grabe (2007) are exceptional in their argument that more research should be done on visual aspects of news coverage, and show in their study on ‘image-bites’ that although politicians may be less present verbally, they visually dominate over journalists.

Like concepts such as tabloidization in political journalism studies, the media logic concept relates to changes in journalistic choices with regard to the type and amount of topics that are characterized by sensation, human interest and popularity. In addition, in the media logic literature, these changes relate to distinctive narrative and visual aspects, such as, for instance, simplified personal accounts and audiovisual manipulations. The difference mainly lies in the type of news on which the concepts focus; political journalism studies usually concerns general informative journalism (news), whereas media logic authors predominantly analyze political journalism in election time.

**POPULAR CULTURE**

Studies on politics and popular culture distinguish themselves for one thing because they are outnumbered by the amount publications from the two previously discussed scientific fields, but mostly because they have a wider perspective, looking at a range of television and other popular genres such as pop music, festivals, feature films, series, satire and comedy. The returning question in this literature is whether and how these genres can stimulate political interest and engagement and encourage participation. In the European context Street (1997) was the first author to explore this road by showing how politics and popular culture are intimately linked. According to Street popular culture and politics have the same agenda: to represent the lives and interests of ordinary people as best as they can. He offers two perspectives on this. The first looks at the political importance of popular culture; at ways in which the pleasures of popular culture become engaged with politics through the feelings it articulates, the identities it offers, the passions it elicits and the responses it prompts. The second perspective looks at the use of popular culture by politicians, and recognizes that popular culture represents a
‘mastery of popularity’. Film stars, media moguls, TV hosts and celebrities are experts in popular forms of communication and in representing the people. They establish a relation with their audience and generate popularity, which is why politicians, desperate to create a constituency, find themselves drawn ever closer to these communicative means of popular culture. However, to understand the relationship between politics and popular culture, from either perspective, Street argues that we need to think about the ideas and institutions that organize them both. From the ways in which political processes and ideologies shape the form and content of popular culture, both conflicts and strategic alliances between popular culture and politics can arise. But if and how this happens, depends on the conditions and the context, on the type of popular culture and the type of political system. Street offers no definitions or concepts; his work can be understood best as a journey along the many questions that can be asked about the relationship between popular culture and politics.

Van Zoonen (2000b) sets out to give a more specific description of the convergence of popular culture and politics and identifies three dimensions. First popular culture functions as the fictional representation of politics, such as in the many novels, films and TV-series in which the main character is a politician. The classical example is the Hollywood production *Mr. Smith goes to Washington* (1938); a Dutch example could be the film *De mannetjesmaker* (1983) or the TV-series *Mevrouw de minister* (2002). Secondly, popular culture genres can function as a stage for political information and discussion, for instance in magazine portraits of politicians, or when politicians appear in talk shows or entertainment programs. Bill Clinton playing the saxophone in Arsenio Hall’s talk show during the 1992 US election campaign is the prime example here. This was imitated by Hans Dijkstal in the Netherlands, who was at the time party leader of the liberal party (VVD) and evidently played the sax as well. There are countless other examples and they only accumulate according to worrying video malaise authors (RMO, 2003). Thirdly, popular culture can be seen as form of political practice, apparent in the long history of the political protest song (Boudewijn de Groot’s *Meneer de President* is a Dutch example) or concerts with political goals.
Both Street and Van Zoonen oppose the video malaise thesis and argue that popular culture can indeed contribute positively to political citizenship and democratic quality. However, both authors contend that the possible political benefits of popular culture can only be assigned through concrete and situated analyses of specific examples of this convergence. An analytical framework for this is offered by Van Zoonen in *Entertaining the Citizen* (2005), where she, following Bourdieu, approaches politics as a symbolic field in which key actors continuously have to redefine their relations with each other and the outside world. Because this notion of ‘field’ holds close resemblance with the terminology of semiotics, Van Zoonen proposes to use syntagmatic (narrative structures) and paradigmatic (ab-/presence of characters) analyses of concrete articulations of political and popular culture. Subsequently, she analyzes the political narratives and characters as they appear in a wide range of genres, such as soap operas, talk shows and campaign strategies. She concludes that political fiction and reality are very similar when looking at the underlying narrative structures and roles of political characters.

More of those situated analyses of instances where politics and popular culture converge have been done (e.g. Baym, 2005; Van Zoonen, Coleman, & Kuik, 2011). Coleman, for instance, conducted a study in 2003, *A tale of two houses*, where he compares the House of Commons with the Big Brother house. Both, he argues, are about the representation of ordinary people, which legitimizes the question which lessons the House of Commons can learn from Big Brother. Especially since the latter seems to be much better able than traditional politics to engage an audience and get it to vote. The fact that more British people vote in Big Brother than in European elections is a well-known complaint of politicians and journalists. In a 2006 study, Coleman asked both fans of Big Brother and political ‘junkies’ (people with an extremely high political interest) what politics could learn from Big Brother. While the political junkies were deeply indignant that the author dared to ask such a question, the Big Brother fans exhausted themselves in trying to come up with suggestions, and proposed to use the same transparent procedures and electronic participation options from Big Brother in politics. Fans, according to Coleman, thus feel better represented by the
participants of the Big Brother house, than by politicians. The ordinariness of the activities of Big Brother housemates (eating, sleeping, wanting to be liked, fancying someone, snoring, coping with hangovers, etc.) makes the housemates recognizable and offer fans the opportunity to reflect and discuss complex moral, psychological and political issues such as integrity and trust and cooperation.

‘POPULARIZATION’ DEFINED
The literature review shows that studies on political journalism, media logic and the political meaning of popular culture have different research questions and angles and focus on various media products, respectively news, election coverage, and popular genres. The first two groups of scholars share a concern about the popularization of political communication, whereas the last group of scholars is mainly interested in the question under which circumstances and conditions negative or positive mixtures of politics and entertainment occur. The similarities and differences in the literature are summarized in table 2.2.

Based on table 2.2 a precise definition of popularization can be given, building on Van Zoonen’s (2005) identification of syntagmatic and paradigmatic structures of the political field, referring respectively to popularization and personalization. The syntagmatic structure refers to the ongoing political story, the narrative, inhabited by certain characters (the paradigmatic dimension). However, three more variables of popularization emerged from the literature comparison: the attention for certain topics, the choice to use particular audiovisual means, and popular participation.

Popularization in political communication is thus characterized by certain combinations of two or more of the following aspects in particular TV programs:

- the presence of popular topics
- the use of popular narrative means;
- the use of popular audiovisual means;
- the presence of audience participation.

These four elements of popularization are visualized in figure 2.1.
Before discussing the second key concept of this chapter, personalization, one caveat must be made. Various authors refer to popularization processes with the term ‘populism’ or ‘media populism’ (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; Koole, 2006; Mazzoleni, 2003). Dutch professor of political science and former chairman of the social democratic party (PvdA) Koole (2006) identifies a number of the different processes that I have gathered under the heading of popularization, as ‘populism’ of the media, television in particular, which is guided, he argues, by popular demand and offer anti-establishment coverage.
Populism is, however, like other notions in this discussion, a badly defined term. In recent decades it has mainly been used to describe a particular ideology that assumes the wisdom of the ordinary man, ‘the people’, and it is currently in the European context claimed by the extreme right parties (Mazzoleni, 2003). Consequently, the term nowadays carries heavy connotations with anti-democratic and demagogue politics, although various authors have pointed to historical and current varieties of left wing or moderate populism (Canovan, 1999). Populism obviously has got little to do with what the neutral term popularization aims to define. If there is any analogy with populism, it is a particular style of communication which is typified by accessible language, emotional investment and the presence of the vox populi. Although Dutch authors like Pels (2003) and Van Zoonen (2005) argue that such populist styles are not necessarily anti-democratic, the term ‘populism’ is nevertheless so controversial and ambiguous that it would not serve the analytic purpose of identifying and assessing the meaning, relevance and value of popularized political communication.
PERSONALIZATION

As within the literature on popularization, there is also little agreement about personalization among the relevant authors. Personalization is often regarded as a negative development because it supposedly turns attention away from policies, parties and political programs, towards the personal features of politicians. Even before the Fortuyn elections of 2002 in the Netherlands political scientists Van Holsteyn and Irwin (1998) wrote that persons play an increasingly important role in election campaigns and presumably influence party choice. Yet they claim not to have a clear picture of the influence of those persons on voters yet. But preceding that matter, I conclude, based on the literature, that there is a plethora of conceptualizations of personalization and hardly any sharp definitions (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007; Sigelman & Bullock, 1991; Wattenberg, 1984). Through the comparison of selected studies on personalization I deducted seven different meanings of personalization which are summarized in table 2.3.

Table 2.3 Forms of personalization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Focus on (top) leaders</th>
<th>Institutional personalization</th>
<th>Giving parties a face</th>
<th>Individual political competence</th>
<th>Privatization</th>
<th>Personal narrative</th>
<th>Behavioral personalization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Increased media attention for politicians instead of parties</td>
<td>Institutional adaptation that puts more emphasis on individual politicians (‘presidentialization’)</td>
<td>Politicians and/or parties positioning the party-leader as the ‘face of the party’</td>
<td>Increased media attention for individual politicians’ political traits &amp; skills</td>
<td>Increased media attention for private life of politicians</td>
<td>Media focus on personal emotions/experiences of individuals</td>
<td>Increase in individual political behavior and a decline in party activity (private member bills)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
First, most prominent and least explanatory, there is an approach in which authors study the difference in media attention for political leaders compared to the attention for political parties. This approach profits from a clear and simple operationalization of the research question: one counts the number of times the name of a political party is mentioned in the media and compares this to the number of references to a party leader. When the latter prevails, personalization, defined as a *focus on (top) political leaders* (nr. 1 in table 2.3), is proved (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; Kaase, 1994; Morris & Clawson, 2005; Rens Vliegenthart, Boomgaarden, & Boumans, 2008; Rens Vliegenthart, Kleinnijenhuis, Van Hoof, & Oegema, 2007; Wattenberg, 1984). What that attention contains or what relation between party and party leader is presented (the party leader can, for instance, just be a spokesperson, or be presented as the embodiment or face of the party, or as an unguided missile, etc.) remains unknown in this kind of research.

In an analysis of the evolution of personalization in British politics and media Langer (2007) offers a more nuanced approach. She distinguishes between institutional personalization; an increased attention for the competence of individual politicians; and an increased attention for the private lives and characteristics of individual politicians. *Institutional personalization* (nr.2 in table 2.3) is proposed mainly by British scholars to label the so called presidentialization of politics (Bartle & Crewe, 2002). With this they mean a shift of political power away from parliament towards the prime minister who controls both the political agenda as the administration. This shift in the distribution of power also implies an increased visibility of political leaders, i.e. a ‘presidentialization of presentation’ (Langer, 2007). Related to this are studies that focus on communication in which party leaders present themselves as *the face of the party* (nr. 3 in table 2.3) (Stanyer, 2008; Van Holsteyn & Irwin, 1998). The *increased attention for the competence of individual politicians* (nr. 4 in table 2.3) is the second type of personalization identified by Langer which fits with the influential study of American political scientists Miller, Wattenberg and Malanchuck (1986) on ‘candidate schemata’. These authors define personalization based on the analysis of thirty years of survey answers of American voters on the question what they value in presidential candidates. It turned out
that from 1956 onwards voters prefer personality traits over political arguments. The authors deduced five aspects that voters appreciate in candidates: political competence, integrity, reliability, charisma and demographics (such as sex or skin color). The first three aspects were consistently the most important, which meant for Miller, Wattenberg and Malanchuck that such personal schemata’s indeed do contain substantial evaluations about the political success or failure of a candidate (competence), the integrity of his routines and the delivery of promises (reliability). Anker (1992) analyzed whether these 5 aspects of personality preferences also existed among Dutch voters, but concluded that they are similar to the consideration of voters whether they find a candidate sympathetic or not. His results thus suggest that seemingly superficial judgments about political leaders (sympathy) can hold a whole range of judgments about professional qualities.

This conclusion makes it possible that personalization as a focus on professional qualities can coincide with Langer’s third type of personalization: an increased attention for the private lives and characteristics of individual politicians (nr. 5 in table 2.3). Most authors are concerned especially with this type of personalization, because, they argue, it closely fits with the supposedly damaging developments of tabloidization and media logic. Personalization in their denotation leads to a model of political and public knowledge in which the experience and emotions of individual politicians and citizens are regarded as the most meaningful ways of making social reality understandable (nr. 6 in table 2.3) (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2005, 2006; Macdonald, 1998; Machin & Papatheoderou, 2002; Uribe & Gunter, 2004).

The categorization of Langer (2007) has also been identified by other authors, sometimes with alternative additions. Rahat and Sheafer (2007), for instance, differentiate between institutional personalization and media personalization, and within the latter further distinguish between a focus on political characteristics and activities (what they call media personalization), and a trend to focus on the personal life and characteristics of individual politicians (called media privatization). This media privatization is more or less what for instance German authors Brettschner and Gabriel (2002) labeled as ‘personalization’. In addition to institutional and media
personalization, Rahat and Sheafer identify behavioral personalization (nr. 7 in table 2.3), when individual politicians dissociate themselves from party activities and aspire to an individual profile. The authors argue that personalization is a process wherein institutional personalization leads to media personalization and privatization, leading in turn to behavioral personalization. Finally, the authors make a distinction between personalization that occurs in unpaid media as a consequence of free publicity, and personalization in their own political advertising and marketing strategies. This latter type strongly resembles the idea of “parties giving themselves ‘a face’ (Stanyer, 2008).

All these authors approach personalization as a more or less neutral concept that affects various politicians in the same way. Van Zoonen, however, contends that personalization has a different meaning for female and male politicians. Political qualities like competence and integrity have a substantively different meaning for men and women, both in their own campaigns and in the assessment of voters (2004b). Furthermore, the attention for private lives has different consequences for women. From an analysis of Dutch gossip magazines, talk shows and Dutch feminist magazine Opzij it emerged that such increasing attention for family life provides men with the favorable opportunity to show themselves as honest family members, whereas for woman this attention focuses on the negative consequences of their political career for their family life (Van Zoonen, 2000a). Finally, an increasing focus on the appearance and style of politicians creates new dilemmas for female politicians, as the campaigns of Angela Merkel (German head of government) and Tarja Halonen (Finnish head of state) show. Consequently, Van Zoonen (2006) argues, many female politicians have an utterly professional and substantial approach, devoid of personal information and outpourings.

From this literature overview, it is clear that various forms of personalization occur in various contexts. To develop a clear-cut definition of personalization, we need to take these various contexts into account. For that purpose, the theory propagated by Corner (2000) and Van Zoonen (2000b, 2004) that political leaders have to perform on different ‘stages’, is helpful. They distinguish between a political-institutional sphere, a mediated public and popular sphere,
and a private sphere, that each require particular communicative skills. The political-institutional sphere exists around the every day, invisible political activities in committees, councils and other representative institutions, with negotiation and compromise characterizing Dutch governance. In the public and popular sphere, performances in both serious and popular media are crucial, with energetic, straight and humorous communicative styles. The private sphere, finally, is shaped by the private family and social realm, but also by the direct contacts with citizens and party members. Emotional relations and empathic abilities are the building blocks of this sphere. Politicians, in particular front-benchers, have to create a consistent and credible political persona from their performances on these three stages, in order to be a convincing embodiment of their own opinions, their parties, or a broader ideology. For the questions concerning the personalization of political communication, mainly the public and popular sphere is important, which coincides with row one, four, five and six of table 2.3: (a) an increased focus on party leaders at the expense of parties; (b) an increased attention for individual political competencies; (c) an increased attention for the private lives of politicians; and (d) an increasing attention for politicians’ personal narratives and emotions.

However, I already established that the minimal definition of personalization as an increased attention for leaders offers little insight into the content of that attention nor into whether or not it significantly influences politics and democracy. For my purpose the attention for competences, private lives and private narratives are thus of particular importance. For clarification I label these three types of personalization individualization (focus on traits and skills of politicians), privatization (focus on private persona of politicians), and emotionalization (focus on personal experiences and emotions of politicians). This conceptualization is visualized in figure 2.2.
This chapter presents improved concepts for the study of political journalism by distinguishing between popularization and personalization. With them, I will perform diachronic and synchronic research of the development of popularization and personalization in Dutch political television journalism since the start of TV. The conceptualizations are modeled on an abstract level, to be operationalized with regard to specific, situated national, historical, medium or genre specific elements. This way, it can for instance be showed that television in the 1960s already had a lot of attention for the private lives of politicians (personalization as privatization), but with different emphases than nowadays.¹⁰

We also tried to define popularization and personalization as neutral as possible, to avoid biased results, caused by a certain tendency inherent to the concepts, when studying the meaning of these concepts in early or contemporary politics. Terms such as video malaise, dumbing down or media logic immediately show the lack of belief of the authors in possible positive results of their studies. But the diversity of articulations of politics, popularization and personalization is too wide to justify such prejudice, on top of which
through the uncritical use of such terms, a necessary scientific
distance is sacrificed.

A final and recurring question for the conceptualization is the
distinction of popularization from personalization; why is the latter
not a subset of the former? From the presented literature analyses it
follows that both concepts refer to different phenomena and
processes, that are, however, often closely related. At the same time,
personalization can very well occur without there being a hint of
popularization, as defined in this chapter. One can for instance think
of the Dutch program Zomergasten, which is completely personalized,
but is not characterized by the topics, narrative nor audiovisual
means or public participation of popularization. The other way
around, popularization can be possible without personalization, for
instance in the various forms of political music and concerts. A
separate, important distinction is between the units of analysis:
popularization of political communication concerns the entire
message or the entire TV-program; personalization concerns the
specific media coverage of individual politicians.
NOTES

1 Originally published in the Dutch national newspaper NRC Handelsblad, 21-06-2008.

2 This conceptualization is the first step in the larger study Popularisering en personalisering in de Nederlandse politiek, funded by NWO (Omstreden Democratie), that contains both historical analyses of occurrences and surveys studying the effects of popularization and personalization. The project is headed by prof. dr. D. Houtman (EUR).

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4 Due to language restrictions only those publications written in Dutch and English were included. Following the steps of literature identification a first reading list was composed. From this list some (sometimes often cited) publications have been removed that did not meet the selection criteria, such as Neil Postman’s Amusing Ourselves to Death.

5 Morris and Clawson (2005) stand apart because they talk about attention for scandal and conflict as features of ‘tabloid sensationalism’. In their research they connect this to personalization, to an increased attention for (scandals involving) individual members of Congress in stead of attention for the Congress as an institution.

6 Largely based on Nisbett & Ross, 1980.


8 Due to language restriction, German authors that belong to this group, like Andreas Dörner, Jörg-Uwe Nieland and Klaus Kamps, were not included.

9 See for a detailed analysis a detailed study on personalization (Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010).

10 This became evident in the discussion of this chapter with colleagues and other scholars at conferences such as the Annual
Conference of the International Communication Association (ICA) 2009 and the Etmaal van de Communicatiewetenschap 2009, where I presented earlier versions of this chapter.