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

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Chapter 4

‘Pop politics’ in Dutch current affairs television
This chapter investigates whether political television journalism has become more ‘popular’ and consequently became irrelevant or even detrimental to public discourse. Media are the key providers of political information. They structure the space of claims and ideas (Gamson, 1998; Olesen, 2008) and it is within this structure that citizens become informed about public affairs, a necessity for democratic systems to work. Over the past decades, various developments in political communication, across many Western democracies have led to a long lasting discussion about the consequences for democracy, with many authors studying these developments. They discuss, for example, trends of increasing emphasis on entertainment, scandals, sensation and private experiences at the expense of serious news and information (Barnett, 1998; Brants & Neijens, 1998; Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005), or identify changes in the media environment such as commercialization and question whether this has led to a decreasing amount of political information and discussion (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Some authors are quite fearful of the detrimental influence of (modern) media, and in particular television, on the quality and viability of democracy and public debate (Elchardus, 2002; Hart, 1994; Postman, 1985). Others, conversely, claim that citizens have more opportunities to learn about public affairs, that news media use is positively associated with political trust and knowledge (Norris, 2000), or that human interest stories can incite readers to reflect, evaluate and better understand public affairs issues (Machin & Papatheoderou, 2002).

But despite academic attention for such developments, there is a lack of conceptual coherence and longitudinal analysis in this field of research. This chapter fills these gaps by providing first a systematic overview of concepts that deal with making politics popular, to analyze, next, whether this process indeed develops over time at the expense of relevant, informative journalism. A study of a Dutch current affairs TV program will be discussed to see if and how this development occurred in the Netherlands. Broadcasts from the show Brandpunt, that was aired between 1960 and 1996, will be analyzed focusing on the topics that were covered. Topics, narratives, the use of vox populi and audiovisual means will be studied in selected
domestic items. These four aspects are derived from a literature review that will be elaborated on in the next section. A conceptualization of ‘popularization’ will be given and some general research expectations formulated.

THEORY

Based on existing literature on the articulation of politics and television, four aspects can be identified in which the process of making politics popular can occur: the topics, the storyline (or narrative), popular participation and audiovisual means (2009). From an extensive literature review of ‘political television studies’ in the broad sense of the word, Van Santen and Van Zoonen (2009) conclude that different fields of research can be identified in which these aspects are discussed, although under different headings and with diverging definitions and operationalizations. As a consequence, scholars studying various forms and formats of ‘politics on TV’ present contradicting results and opposing arguments about the role of television in contemporary democracy. Some studies focus on general phenomena in political journalism, using terms such as tabloidization, sensationalism, human interest and infotainment. Others study mainly election coverage, and dominantly use terms such as media logic, horse race, hoopla, sound bite and interpretative journalism. But also studies about the relationship between popular culture and politics in the broad sense of the word operate in this field of research and question under which circumstances and conditions negative or positive mixtures of politics and entertainment (can) occur.

This study emphasizes the considerable overlaps and communalities between the different wordings, emphases and perspectives to enable a comprehensive analysis of political journalism on television. Most studies in the mentioned research fields refer to a change in journalistic choices with regard to the type and amount of topics that are characterized by sensation, human interest and popularity, and to the use of distinctive narrative and audiovisual means like personal experiences and audiovisual manipulations, and the use of ‘the people’s voice’, when discussing
CHAPTER 4

the implications of changing political communication. Van Santen and Van Zoonen (2009) propose the neutral term popularization to encompass these aspects, and to provide an abstract framework to study the process of popularization.

In the next section, I will briefly discuss and operationalize these four aspects by discussing various publications from the above mentioned research fields, and show how political television journalism needs to be studied through situated analysis, to trace processes of popularization. Following academic and public debate on an entertainization of society, and in particular an increasing popularization of political communication, I generally expect to find more popularized current affairs reportages in recent items than in those from earlier times, visible through the following four aspects.

TOPICS
The first way through which media arguably try to make news more popular, is their increasing attention for entertaining topics. Especially in literature on changes in news media, a concern is voiced about diminishing attention for serious issues. Tabloidization, an often studied phenomenon in this research field, is hard to define, but like Sparks (2000) in his key work on tabloidization, many authors argue that tabloid content devotes little attention to political, economical and social processes and relatively much to sports, scandal, and personal and private lives of people. Barnett (1998) too identifies a process of displacement in which more emphasis is placed on entertainment, scandal, etc. at the expense of more serious material and adds that serious stories are being given progressively less prominence. Uribe and Gunter (2004) in their research note on British tabloids start their operationalization by identifying the range, the waning space devoted to information, foreign affairs and hard news, as a characteristic of tabloidization.

A different but often heard buzzword in this body of literature is the concept of ‘sensationalism’, seen as a sign of tabloidization, or vice versa, but often described as a packaging style, “provoking emotional and sensory stimulation” (Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001; Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, & Beentjes, 2005, 2006; Nuijten, Hendriks Vettehen, Peeters, & Beentjes, 2007). Again, topics are mentioned first as elements that can cause sensational stimulation,
such as crime, accidents, disasters, celebrity news, scandal and sex (Grabe et al., 2001; Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2005, 2006; Nuijten et al., 2007). Infotainment or ‘soft news’, finally, concepts sometimes used in exchange for the term tabloidization, refer to a mix of news and entertainment that can be found both in entertaining and in traditionally informative programs. According to Brants and Neijens (1998) the first criterion to determine its presence is the topic characteristic (information – human interest). Patterson (2000) summarized various descriptions of ‘soft news’, that for instance define news stories that have no clear connection to policy issues as soft, or that point at growing attention for crime and disaster as an indication for softening news.

Other scholars, mostly focusing on election campaigns and election coverage, also interested in changing political communication, study similar processes but use different phrases and concepts. They use terms like media logic, video malaise or postmodern communication to depict a situation that developed from the 1990s onwards and is characterized by powerful, consumer-oriented media (Brants & Van Praag, 2006; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003; Norris, 2000). Although not all authors agree on its effects on democracy, they share a concern about a decreasing amount of substantial, issue-oriented news. Issues covered in the news related to election campaigns are often described as being either substantive (about ideology, party programs, policy proposals, etc.), or horse race- (about polls, the ‘competition’, strategies, etc.) or hoopla- (about the ‘fun’ of campaigning, politicians on the road, handing out flyers, etc.) oriented (Patterson & McClure, 1976; Russonello & Wolf, 1979; Sigelman & Bullock, 1991). This distinction can also be applied to topics (an item can be about a substantive or strategic topic), and the latter two types of topics are then regarded as being more entertaining but less informative.

The choice to cover certain topics is thus understood by many scholars in the field of political communication as a way to entertain an audience and to attract readership or viewers. Popularization can thus be expected to occur through an increasing attention for popular topics such crime, disaster and scandals.
However, entertaining, popular topics do not necessarily have to be reported in a sensational way; they can also be covered in a more serious way. The Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, for example, can be discussed by focusing either on the sexual details of the affair or the personal details of the people involved, but also by explaining the political consequences. In this latter case serious, relevant journalism would probably prevail, but vice versa, serious topics can also be covered from an entertaining angle. The narrative used to discuss a certain topic thus also plays an important role in the possible popularization of journalism.

NARRATIVE MEANS
The narrative refers to the story that is told about a topic by presenting a certain perspective and using a certain angle, voiced by certain actors. Looking at the political field, Van Zoonen (2005) offers a semiotic approach that distinguishes between two levels: that of the syntagmatic structure, which constitutes the story, the narrative; and that of the paradigmatic structure, about the characters that inhabit the story. By studying the convergence of politics and popular culture she analyzes the relevance of entertainment for politics, of making citizenship fun. A narrative, she explains, offers a structure, it helps people make sense of what is going on, and the most basic narratives used in both political journalism and fiction are the quest, conspiracy, bureaucracy and soap. The appearance of (particular) characters in these narratives is what Van Zoonen calls ‘personalization’, and falls outside the scope of this study. Street (1997) also shows how politics and popular culture are intimately linked and argues that popular culture constitutes part of the way we communicate with each other, which explains why politicians find themselves drawn ever closer to the communicative means of popular culture. It helps them telling ‘their’ political story.

In a different way, storytelling techniques are also identified by previously discussed authors such as for instance Brants and Neijens (1998) who, apart from topics, distinguish style characteristics (serious interview – informal, empathetic conversation) to discern information from infotainment and entertainment programs. Uribe and Gunter (2004) too identify style, but as a characteristic of tabloidization, when more space is devoted to stories with a
personalized angle of coverage. Barnett (1998) claims that when serious news does get attention, its nature is debased through various packaging and presentational strategies to make it more populist. A slightly different concern is voiced by Sparks (2000) who sees the rise of ‘normal’ people who act as ‘hands-on’ experts pushing ‘actual’ experts and pundits out of the news as one of the signs of tabloidization.

Hendriks Vettehen, et al. (2001; 2005, 2006; 2007) and Nuijten, et al. (2001; 2005, 2006; 2007) in their studies on television news and current affairs programs, specifically study ‘vivid storytelling’ as a feature of sensationalism. Defining this as concreteness, personalization, layperson speaking and proximity, they approach Sparks and come close to the idea of ‘human interest’ elements or stories. According to Macdonald (1998) human interest coverage can have the form of testimonies of personal experiences, the telling of life stories as personal case studies, or personal investigative journalism, all suitable to engage an audience and offer critical analysis as she concludes in her analysis of British current affairs programs. Patterson (2000) also points at the use of a human example or the choice to put a human face on an issue/problem, when discussing ‘soft news’. Although their definitions vary slightly, a human interest perspective is recognized by several scholars as a storytelling technique. The actual use of lay people will be discussed shortly.

Finally, scholars focusing on media coverage in election time point at yet another narrative structure, of journalists interpreting the facts rather than ‘factually’ reporting them. Patterson (1996) in his key text on this point sees a growing amount of investigative, but more aptly called ‘attack’ journalism because journalists, among other things, have become more cynical and interpret and comment on the facts instead of merely stating them.

Both topics and the way they are discussed in the media could be described as entertaining, sensational or popular. And over time, I expect the narratives to become increasingly popular, through an increasing use of a popular narrative such as the quest or the conspiracy, or a human interest perspective or increasing amounts of attack journalism. However, with the rise of television as the most important information channel in Western democracies the audio-visual aspects that journalists employ are also relevant when
discussing changes in political journalism. Yet, before I discuss these elements, I argue that the use of lay people, briefly mentioned already, needs to be treated as a separate aspect of popularization.

**THE POPULAR VOICE**

As I have showed, many authors discussing storytelling techniques in political journalism refer to a personalized angle, or the use of lay people to tell a story. I argue that these two are not the same. A personalized perspective (Uribe & Gunter, 2004), also referred to as a human interest story (Macdonald, 1998), is not the same as putting appearances or quotes of ‘normal’ people in a program. In the first case, the whole story is told from the perception of ‘the people’, a certain category of people, or a single (or couple of) person(s); in the second case a topic is covered from a more general, ‘objective’ journalistic standpoint, but made more appealing by using normal people’s statements or comments. This latter use is sometimes called ‘vox populi’ (vox pop) and often pointed at in studies of news and current affairs programs. It should be regarded more as a journalistic format-aspect, than as a narrative structure.

For example, in news items journalists incorporate short street-interviews to report on the ‘public’ opinion, whereas various talk shows are designed to let ‘normal’ people talk. In such shows (and other genres) however, program features such as calling or texting with a question or comment can be regarded as a vox pop aspect. The use of public opinion polls is another way to incorporate the people’s voice into a program, without actually telling ‘their’ story, from their perspective. To summarize, when the people’s perspective forms the basis of the story, this is a narrative technique, which could be called a ‘human interest narrative’. When this is not the case, and the people’s voice is represented by short street interviews, quotes, comments or polling data, vox pop elements are used. Popularization would then occur through an increasing use of such vox pop elements, to enhance the items attractiveness.

**AUDIOVISUAL MEANS**

Finally, many authors discuss the format in which stories about topics can be told. The term tabloidization for instance refers to a change in the paper format of newspapers but is also increasingly
used to characterize changes in the content of journalism aimed at attracting a wider audience. Uribe and Gunter (2004) also focus on newspapers and identify form, as in more space devoted to visuals and headlines, as a tabloidization characteristic. Since the term tabloidization is now also used to describe developments in televised journalism, various authors discuss diverse audiovisual techniques. Video maneuvers, audio manipulations, transitional- and non-transitional effects are described as sensational forms by Grabe, et al. (2001; 2005, 2006; 2007), Hendriks Vettehen et al. (2001; 2005, 2006; 2007) and Nuijten, et al. (2001; 2005, 2006; 2007), and Brants and Neijens (1998) distinguish a businesslike setting versus music, participating audiences, etc. as format characteristics to discern information from info- and entertainment.

Patterson (1996) in his description of ‘attack’ journalism also talks of audio manipulations, like seeing a politician while hearing a journalist’s commentary, which means that the direct voice of politicians is lost in what he calls a situation of video malaise. This statement is similar to Hallin’s sound bite argument (1992), that politicians are only present on TV with very short quotes, cut-out by journalists from originally longer, and thus more sensible/informative statements. Bucy and Grabe (2007), however, defend the importance of visual aspects of news coverage, and show in a research on ‘image-bites’ that although politicians may be less present verbally, they are visually more present than journalists; something that should not be underestimated.

In line with technical developments, I expect an increasing use of video maneuvers, audio manipulations (e.g. sound bites) and transitional effects over time to make current affairs television more popular.

From the literature in which one or more of these four aspects are discussed, it becomes clear that processes of tabloidization or sensationalism, developments towards a media logic or converging politics and popular culture, are manifested in different forms, in different types of media, in various genres. In short, popularization can occur in broadly two ways: first, when traditional informative media (e.g. news, current affairs) become more popularized; and second, when entertaining media formats, both fictional (e.g. movies, series) and non-fictional (e.g. talk shows, show business programs,
game shows), engage in politics. If, and how this happens, needs to be studied in particular cases, with a strong focus on developments over time. For this study, I focus on the first form of popularization, and analyze a Dutch current affairs show. This can be considered as a ‘conservative’ case for studying the issues raised in the literature about popularizing politics. If popularization indeed occurs in a current affairs show, a genre generally considered being devoted to providing background and analysis of news stories, it can be expected to also be present in other genres of political television journalism.

Before I continue with the analysis of the (increasing) presence of popular topics, use of popular narrative means, use of vox populi, and use of popular audiovisual means over time (see figure 4.1), the subject of analysis will be briefly introduced.

Figure 4.1 Concept of popularization

| TOPICS (Justice & crime, scandal, disaster, etc.) | NARRATIVES (Negative, interpretative, human interest, etc.) | VOX POPULI (Street interviews, lay person quotes, etc.) | AUDIOVISUAL MEANS (Sound bites, audio effects, music, etc.) |

CASE

To study occurrences of popularization, I look at the Dutch current affairs show Brandpunt, a ‘flagship’ current affairs program in Dutch television journalism history. The current affairs genre exists since the advent of television and thus provides ample material to trace historical developments. As a television genre, current affairs shows have always aimed to provide background information and interpretation of topics in the news. As such, it was and is regarded as a form of serious, informative journalism. But like all TV programs in an increasingly competitive media market, current affairs programs
also needed to struggle for audiences, since its formal nature and often-complicated topics are not attractive or entertaining program features. To address critiques on popularizing journalism and demands for situated analyses, this genre presents an excellent case. Focusing on one particular program from the Netherlands provides the opportunity for an in-depth analysis of almost 40 years of television.

*Brandpunt* was the current affairs show from the Catholic Radio Broadcasting organization (KRO), one of the core public broadcasting companies, which started in 1960 and stopped airing in 1996, when it merged with current affairs shows from other broadcasting organizations into the current affairs show *Netwerk*. *Brandpunt* was known as the most progressive, most talked-about, best rated and most viewed current affairs show of its time, and several of its reportages have won prices. In the first years of its existence *Brandpunt* struggled with its identity and looked more like a television magazine, with many short broadcasts of music performances or clips and superficial items. From 1963 onwards however, a new editor in chief and a team of professional reporters renewed the show and developed a new journalistic style, unique in the Netherlands (Prenger, 1990). In the course of the 1960s and 1970s *Brandpunt*’s controversial, sometimes even anarchistic, innovative and critical but engaged interviews and reportages became the fear of politicians and the audience favorite. Their aim was to be anti-authoritarian, giving a voice to people who weren’t heard otherwise, and to reveal what was happening under the surface of society (Schoonhoven, 2010). With a large budget also for foreign reportages, the reporters presented various topics not eschewing a personal touch and some political drama (Van den Heuvel, 2005).

*Brandpunt* was also the longest existing current affairs show in the Netherlands. And although its quality has been said to have decreased after its heydays of the 1960s and 1970s (Prenger, 1997; Van Liempt, 2002), it is still remembered as the standard for good journalism (Kagie, 2010). As such, its broadcasts over the years provide interesting examples of Dutch journalism and represent ‘the best’ of Dutch current affairs history. *Brandpunt* thus provides an excellent case to study processes of popularization in political journalism. And since *Brandpunt* has influenced both the main news
program in the Netherlands (*Het Journaal*) and other informative shows of its time, I expect the material to be indicative of wider trends, both in current affairs shows, as in other genres of political journalism.

**METHOD**

The analysis was done in two phases. Following the concept of popularization, first, the topic of each separate item, of every episode was coded using an extensive topic codebook that was originally designed for the Comparative Agendas Project\(^1\). Generally, one episode of *Brandpunt* consisted of three or four items on different topics. For every such item one topic was coded from a codebook that consists of roughly 300 sub-topics, categorized in 29 main topics such as ‘health’, ‘education’, ‘governmental affairs’, ‘justice & crime’, ‘environment’, etc. (see appendix C, table C1 for an overview). For instance ‘political scandal’ and ‘cabinet formations’ are separate sub-topics, but are both categorized under ‘governmental affairs’. When an item concerned a foreign country, the relevant country was also coded. When for example an item was about the elections in France, the item was coded in the ‘governmental affairs’ category, and then received ‘France’ as a country code. This way I was able to distinguish between domestic and foreign items later on in the analysis. This coding phase resulted in an overview of topics that were addressed in the show, which will be more extensively discussed in the results section.

In the second phase, the abundance of material was reduced to a practical amount for the qualitative content analysis in four steps. First, a selection of items was made by focusing on two main topics. To see if and how popularization might occur with regard to narrative, vox populi and audiovisual means, both a popular and a non-popular main topic were selected. Based on the previously discussed literature ‘justice & crime’ can be regarded as a popular main topic and ‘governmental affairs’ as a non-popular main topic. These main topics received a lot of attention with regard to the Netherlands throughout the research period, thus providing sufficient material for a historical analysis. Second, only items with a domestic perspective
were selected. Third, a further selection was made by focusing on certain sub-topics that could be particularly susceptible to popularization, but could at same time also be expected to have been covered from a substantial angle. For the popular main topic ‘justice & crime’ the sub-topics ‘prisons’, ‘law enforcement agencies’, ‘drugs’ and some remaining items on specific Dutch issues such as detention under hospital order were selected. For the non-popular main topic ‘governmental affairs’ ‘elections’, ‘cabinet falls, formations and relations with parliament’ and ‘specific events or affairs of political parties’ were selected. Finally, I was mostly interested in the items that were reportages, since these represent the core of the current affairs genre. With these selections in place, there still was sufficient material for a historical analysis. The Netherlands Institute for Sound and Visio has an archive of all Dutch television broadcasts since the advent of TV, but unfortunately some of the actual reels, tapes or cassettes of *Brandpunt* were damaged, incomplete, unavailable, or just not preserved. In total, a collection of 59 actual available reportage items, with a domestic focus, about the selected sub-topics, was analyzed (see appendix C, table C2 and C3).

The qualitative content analysis followed several stages. First, conversation (e.g. text, speaker, interruptions), camera motions (e.g. cuts, zooming), program elements (e.g. poll results, inserts) and audio-/ visual characteristics (e.g. music, manipulations) were literally transcribed and described. Next, these transcripts were coded, identifying narratives, vox populi and the audiovisual characteristics, that emerged from the data. All data were analyzed in original form and Dutch language, using *Atlas.ti*, a software package for qualitative data analysis. In the final phase an interpretative analysis of the programs took place, linking codes with the theoretical concept of popularization.

Coding all items in this way enabled us to make both diachronic (over time) and synchronic (between topics) comparisons. In the next section, the findings are presented, discussing successively the topics, narratives, vox populi elements and audiovisual characteristics of the items. The results will be discussed with an emphasis on historical differences. I will conclude with an overall impression of how the data compare to the theoretical expectations.
CHAPTER 4

GENERAL TRENDS

The results from the topics analysis show that between 1960 and 1996 1733 episodes were broadcasted in which 5238 separate items were covered. To give a general idea of the nature of these items; the amount of broadcasts and items was quite evenly distributed over the decades with a small disadvantage for the 1960s. Overall, the most often discussed main topic is 'governmental affairs' (13%), followed by 'foreign affairs' (11%) and 'justice & crime' (10%). The first two topics are present throughout the years; the latter topic prevails in the 1990s. Topics that could be labeled as truly sensationalist, such as 'weather & natural disasters', 'fires, accidents & calamities' and 'human interest', are only marginally present (together almost 4%).

In total, just over a quarter of all items covered topics in foreign countries (foreign items). In the first decade of the programs existence, 32% of items was devoted to foreign countries. In the 1970s and 1980s this percentage decreased to resp. 24% and 17%, but in the 1990s 38% of the items covered an issue in a foreign country. Taking a closer look at the main topics that were covered in the foreign items, it shows that 20% of these items was on 'governmental affairs', mostly covering elections in various countries around the world. 13% of items was on 'justice & crime', with attention for various specific lawsuits, criminals, kidnappings, etc. Almost 12% of items was about defense and military affairs of foreign countries.

In the domestic items (items about topics related to the Netherlands) there is a somewhat different focus of attention. ‘foreign affairs & development’ receives the most attention, in 12% of the items. These items mainly concerned specific country or regional issues such as the Palestine-Israeli conflict, the Gulf wars, or the Dutch relations with its former colonies Surinam and Indonesia. This shows again that Brandpunt had a serious interest in international issues. Almost 10% deals with 'governmental affairs', and almost 9% with 'justice & crime'. Health issues and sports also appear regularly, in almost 8% of the items. When comparing the relative amount of attention for certain topics, it becomes visible see that ‘foreign affairs & development’ receives most attention in the 1960s (21% of all domestic items), after which the attention decreases in the 1970s and
further in the 1980s to almost 7%, but increases again in the 1990s to 15%. Attention for ‘governmental affairs’ and ‘justice & crime’ shows similar patterns with a rise from resp. 5% and 4% in the 1960s to 9% in 1970s, 8% in the 1980s and resp. 15% and 14% in the 1990s (see figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2 Over-time attention for top 5 domestic topics

During the entire period the program existed, there is an increasing attention for the topic ‘justice & crime’, especially in the 1990s. In the literature this topic is regarded as a sensationalist, popular topic, so the increasing attention could indicate a process of increasing popularization. However, the continuous attention for issues in foreign countries (foreign items) can be regarded as an indicator of quality journalism. When focusing on domestic items only, there is a continuing interest in Dutch foreign affairs and development and in national governmental affairs, topics that are both seen as non-popular topics.

The first results, about the topics, thus show no clear process of popularization. Both popular and non-popular topics receive attention over the years. To see if and how both types of topics are presented to the audience, domestic reportage items on ‘justice &
crime' and ‘governmental affairs’ were analyzed through a qualitative content analysis (see method section). After applying the selection criteria as laid out in the method section to this material, 30 ‘justice & crime’-items were available for further analysis, and 29 ‘governmental affairs’-items (see appendix C, table C2 for an overview). In the next two sections the historical developments in the content of items will be discussed per specific topic.

**JUSTICE & CRIME**

For the qualitative content analysis of the justice and crime items of *Brandpunt*, the sub-topics ‘prisons’ (10% of the j&c-items), ‘law enforcement agencies’ (9%) and ‘drugs’ (5%) and some items on issues that were impossible to categorize but dealt with specific Dutch issues such as detention under hospital order, were analyzed.

What is striking about the narratives of these items is that the reportages really try to tell a story, rather than just report on specific events. The reportage from 1-9-1973 for instance, tries to show the viewer what it is like to live in prison and lets several prisoners tell about their experiences inside. Another example is the reportage from 19-3-1990 in which an electronic house arrest-device is shown and tested, with accounts from the developer of the device, the responsible minister, and a lawyer that is trying it out for a month. On 1-12-1985 *Brandpunt* airs a reportage in which the death of a squatter in a police cell is being investigated. It reconstructs the sequence of events and tells the story of his final moments.

As in this ’85 reportage, in about half of the reportages, the perspective is very critical. The criticized target is often the police, the public prosecution or the judicial machinery, and in a few instances political initiatives or, conversely, a lack thereof are targeted. Yet, this also means that there are quite a lot of ‘neutral’ reportages that just aim to bring a certain issue under attention, such as the heroine traffic in the Netherlands and the increasing Chinese influence on it (1976), or balanced reportages in which both supporters and opponents get a say, such as in the reportage on compulsory identification (1986) or on alternative sentences (1996).

There is also a clear distinction between reportages that reconstruct a sequence of events or argue for a specific case, and descriptive reportages that mainly aim to show how things are done.
or experienced. Often the critical items are the investigative reportages, and the neutral items give general insight, but this is not always the case. In 1992 for instance a reportage about the hemp production in the Netherlands is aired, but although the item investigates why the production is increasing and how come the police can not stop this, no real criticism is expressed towards anyone. On the other hand, a pretty short item on the lack of security for prison guards (1993) shows two very critical guards that get to voice their anger and concerns without any retort or counter perspective present in the reportage.

Remarkably enough, the analysis shows no distinctive changes over time in the narration of justice or crime topics. Both investigative and descriptive, dramatized and neutral, critical and objective reportages appear throughout the years. With regard to the actors that appear in the reportages, experts are only used from the mid-80s and appear every now and then, but the human interest perspective always prevails in these reportages. Both in the seventies as in the 1980s and 1990s, various non-elite persons get a voice to share their experience or professional opinion. There are for instance reportages that use accounts from prisoners to explain what it is like to be in prison (1973), what it is like to be in detention under hospital order (1991), what happens to sexual delinquents in jail (1992) or how it feels to execute an alternative sentence (1996). But also the protester for a prison newspaper (1974), the Surinam cafe owner about the Chinese heroine traffic (1976), the girlfriend of the deceased squatter (1985), the real estate agent complaining about drugs nuisance (1991) or the truck drivers about drug smuggling from Morocco (1993) represent various, specific groups of ‘normal’ people that have a particular stake in the issue at hand. It is their perspective that is used to tell the story; bringing many issues close the homes of audiences.

The vox populi, in the sense that short quotes or statements from civilians are used to show what ‘the people’ think, hardly occurs within the justice and crime items. The only example is in a reportage on compulsory identification (1986) when a random market vendor is asked for his opinion about its introduction. He is against it, but the remaining reportage is actually rather nuanced, with perspectives from both supporters and another opponent. The short statement is
thus not even used as representative for ‘everyone’. Surveys, polls or other public opinion data are also absent.

As said before, the ‘justice & crime’ reportages really establish themselves as mini-documentaries from the mid-80s onwards. Earlier items, such as the one on switchblades or the prison newspaper, are somewhat atypical reportages that come across as respectively fake and chaotic. The other reportages in the 1970s are produced better, and the match between voice-over and what can be seen on screen has always been a good fit. But the reportage on the death of a squatter from 1-12-1985 is really the first sophisticated reportage, in which music, photographs, newspaper articles and textual fragments are shown using fading techniques and audio effects, and are alternated with personal testimonies shot at various locations. From then onwards these techniques are used more and more often, making the reportages resemble short documentaries that are interesting to watch. Congruent with this development, the reporter ‘disappears’ from the screen. Whereas in the reportages in the 1970s and 1980s the reporter is sometimes visible during short interviews or when introducing the issue, in the 1990s they are largely absent. Sometimes one can hear him or her ask a question, but more often voice-overs and fragments of other actors involved are cut in such a way as to tell the story. Music is used as a background effect to accompany visual animations or voice-overs throughout the years, although not in every item.

In short, the analysis of justice and crime reportages shows that they are often told from a human interest perspective, but this does not increase or intensify over time. The use of the vox pop as a journalistic format-aspect is practically absent, but the reportages do become more sophisticated in the 1980s and 1990s.

GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
From the non-popular main topic governmental affairs also some sub-topics were selected for the content analysis. 29 items about ‘elections’ (10% of items), ‘cabinet falls, formations and relations with parliament’ (12%), and specific events or affairs of political parties (24%) were studied to trace processes of popularization.

The narratives of the political items show a variety of substantial, fun or exciting, critical and horse race oriented reportages. Although
all these kind of stories are told throughout the years, there are some historical differences. The fun(ny), more personal reportages are most present in the 1970s, with a report on the party convention of the catholic party KVP (10-11-1970) at which pretty young girls are introduced by a party committee member to ‘lighten up’ the convention, a short campaign-item in which two cabinet members talk to tourists in Amsterdam (20-4-1971), and a reportage for which *Brandpunt* was invited to an election party at the home of social-democratic party leader Den Uyl, were they also interviewed his wife (1-12-1972). This style of reporting reflects *Brandpunt’s* aim to offer innovative journalism with a personal touch, something they were still developing in this time.

In the next years the program becomes more serious and more critical. On 16-9-1982 *Brandpunt* airs a commentary on the first day of Hans Janmaat in parliament, the party leader of the extreme-right party CD. The tone of the story is very critical, which is supported by numerous shots and quotes of protesters outside the parliamentary buildings. More critical reportages are broadcast in the 1980s and 1990s, on for instance the failures of various coalition governments (e.g. 4-7-1987, 10-5-1996) and of particular parties and party leaders (e.g. 29-8-1991, 9-2-1996). Apparent about these critical items, is that they are not only very critical about the social-democratic party, but also about the Christian-democratic party.

Horse race reportages, with attention for the political game, strategies and voting behavior of the electorate, are shown already in the early years of the program, for instance in a reportage about local elections in Spijkenisse where the farmers-party of Boer Braad is in competition with the mayor’s party, but are most present in the 1990s. There is for instance a report on a liberal party meeting which looks more like a staged media-event where some of the top party members discuss if and how to interfere with the coalition negotiations (18-8-1991), and an item in which several social-democratic party members voice their dissatisfaction with the reaction of their party leader on the Christian-democratic election program, and worry about the consequences of their leader’s behavior in terms of votes (29-8-1991).

In terms of how these critical, horse race or more substantial stories are told, the analysis did not show clear linear developments
over time. Sometimes the reportages are mere reports of party conventions, where the journalist is present with a camera and more or less summarizes the events (e.g. 13-6-1987) by showing some shots of the speakers on stage, the audience and some short interviews; but there are also items that are more typical reportages in the sense that a story is constructed by using a voice-over, audiovisual transitions, and inserts from several actors, such as in a reportage about squatters in The Hague (11-8-1970) or the ‘portrait’ of two Christian parties (2-5-1981).

Vox pop elements are present in the political items, although not that much. When they are present, they are often used in the horse race stories that I discussed before. The first time is in the 14-10-1976 reportage about the General Debate in parliament, but the focus of the reportage is much more on the upcoming elections. Several politicians are asked about their expectations of the election outcomes and twice the journalist makes references to polls. The next time a vox pop element occurs in one of the reportages, is in 1-5-1994, in a reportage about volatile voters in the Netherlands and in which many short street interviews are conducted on Queens Day, a national holiday, and a recent poll is quoted. The next two vox pop elements also appear in 1994, the year in which the ‘Purple Coalition’ between social democrats, liberals and the social liberals is formed. Brandpunt conducted their own survey among liberal party-voters, about their opinion on a coalition with the social democrats, the results of which are shown on 5-6-1994. About two months later there is an item about the progress of the coalition formation (7-8-1994) in which a short quote is presented from a man waiting outside of the parliamentary buildings every single day to await the outcome. On 9-2-1996 finally, there is a very critical reportage about the current state of the social-democratic party PvdA and the leadership of then Prime Minister Wim Kok in which brief references are made to bad polling results for the PvdA but good ‘grades’ for Kok.

The audiovisual development of the political items is in line with the other topic and with more general technical developments, in that the reportages become more and more sophisticated from 1987 onwards. The reportage about the PvdA convention in 1965 for instance uses very clumsy close-ups, whereas the investigative item on the Gladio army in 1991 presents music, photographs, textual
fragments and maps using quick shots and transitions, alternated with expert commentary. Although political reportages less often resemble mini-documentaries, the voice-over technique is used frequently and usually matches the images. However, congruent with the technical sophistication, the combinations of sound and image do become more flashy and advanced over time. The use of zoom-techniques and close-ups can be used for dramatic presentation, which happens in four reportages. In 1972, the wife of the social democrats party leader Den Uyl is interviewed at a party at home about life with a politician as husband and father. She is visible in close-up the whole time. In a long item in which a Christian democratic minister is followed on a campaign-day (2-5-1981), there is one noticeable close-up when he is asked about his expectations regarding the election outcome. Two reportages, the review of the cabinet and Prime Minister Lubbers in a reportage in 1987 and the evaluation of the social democratic party PvdA and the leadership of Wim Kok in 1996, actually show visual framing: while discussing these men, their pictures, images or camera captures are shown in sometimes extreme close-ups, to enhance the drama of the story.

Music is used as a background effect increasingly over the years, and in every item in the 1990s. Journalists are visible infrequently when conducting interviews, but mostly, in line with the genre, one only hears them. The use of sound bites has occurred once in the analysis, in the 25-8-1991 reportage about the political crisis about the (un)linking of wages and benefits. Only Christian-democratic party leader Brinkman gets to explain the political argument between the Christian-democrats and social democrats elaborately. Although he is very critical about the position of the social democrats on this issue, he will not voice harsh or threatening statements. It seems as if the journalist is disappointed with this and tries to build up tension in the reportage by inserting the same dramatic quote of social democratic party leader Kok three times, in which he states that he can not live with a decision to unlink.

In sum, the analysis of the ‘governmental affairs’ reportages shows that they are often critical or strategically oriented, but mainly from the 1980s onwards. The use of vox pop elements as a journalistic format-aspect happens a few times, dominantly in the 1990s. The
audiovisual sophistication starts near the end of the 1980s but does not lead to a more dramatic use of for instance close-ups over time.

**COMPARING THE TOPICS**
Whereas this chapter focuses on the historical developments within the attention for the specific topics, some remarkable differences and similarities between the two topics also became visible through the analysis. The items on both topics have in common that overall journalists are only rarely visible, which corresponds with the genre. The reportages become more technically sophisticated from the mid-80s onwards. In the first two decades producers of the reportages on both topics seem to be searching for the right storytelling techniques: audiovisual transitions and the use of close-ups and various camera-angles seem clumsy, and a certain smoothness to combine the told story with the audiovisual ‘styling’ of a reportage is lacking. The oldest reportage analyzed, from 5-3-1964 about the legal selling of switchblades especially stands out in this respect, since it very much looks like a staged play. The reportage shows two female customers informing about various switchblades in a weapons shop, and the salesman patiently explaining and showing them. In the middle of this, a journalist ‘walks in’ and asks the characters to comment on the use of switchblades and the announced prohibiting of them. After some answers, the journalist disappears again and the ‘play’ continues.

This example is on the other hand indicative for the main difference between the reportages on both topics, since justice & crime reportages in general much better represent the genre of documentary-style reporting. The issues at stake within this topic lend themselves much better for mini-documentaries in which various actors voice their perspectives, brought together by the use of a voice-over in a pre-structured narrative. The analyzed items on governmental affairs are more often reports on the scene or accounts of party conventions.

The other remarkable difference between the handling of the two topics is the lack of vox pop, but strong presence of a human interest-angle in many ‘justice & crime’ reportages, and the dominance of politicians in ‘governmental affairs’ items combined with a (limited) use of vox pop elements in the second half of the 1990s. Again, one
could argue this is in line with the nature of the two topics, because governmental affairs ask for a political perspective, and justice and crime issues are easier to narrate, but the overall lack of a political perspective on justice and crime issues is remarkable for a current affairs show. Instead of referring to the political cause or focusing on the political implications of for example drug problems or judicial failings, Brandpunt often chooses to show the ‘other side’ of the story, that of the prisoners, guards, police officers, etc. This is in line with their development of a new journalistic style, trying to voice the concerns of the people at the workplace, instead of that of known authorities.

To sum up, the genre ‘matures’ over time, which is in line with developments of the television medium itself: professionalization leads to more sophisticated reportages. Journalists are hardly visible, and the use of vox pop elements is also not frequent, although there is a slight increase in the 1990s political items. The main difference between the reportages on popular and non-popular topics lies in the style of reporting. Different uses of narrative, a human interest narrative for justice and crime stories and a political perspective for governmental affairs, and a different use of audiovisual means, respectively documentary style versus on the spot, result in very distinguishable items.

**DISCUSSION**

In this chapter I investigated the question whether political television journalism in particular has become more ‘popular’ and consequently became irrelevant or even detrimental to public discourse. For this purpose a Dutch current affairs show, Brandpunt, was examined, and I expected to find more popularized reportages in recent items than in those from earlier times. More specifically, I expected to find increasing attention for popular topics and an increasing use of popular narratives, the vox populi and sensationalizing audiovisual effects over time.

The topics analysis shows that there is no linear increase in attention for national events, which corresponds with the programs’ aim to bring the unknown foreign world closer to people’s homes.
Topics such as ‘weather & natural disasters’, ‘fires, accidents & calamities’ and ‘human interest’ are only marginally present, also contradicting a process of popularization. On the other hand, there is an increasing attention for the topic ‘justice & crime’, which would point at popularization. However, even at its highest point, the total amount of attention for justice and crime topics is not more than 14%, and a process of popularization would likely have led to a much higher percentage. This number, by contrast, indicates that the coverage of topics is very diverse. In the domestic items there is also a continuing interest in the Netherlands’ foreign affairs and in Dutch governmental affairs, both non-popular topics. The topics analysis thus gives no reason to suspect ‘unhealthy’ popularization taking place in the Dutch current affairs show Brandpunt.

The qualitative content analysis on the other hand showed more mixed results. With regard to the narrative means, the justice and crime reportages showed to be often told from a human interest perspective. Although the human interest perspective as such could point at a popular style of journalism, the lack of any over time increase or intensification means that an actual process of popularization is absent. Moreover, the use of a human interest perspective is an indication of Brandpunt’s new and controversial style of journalism. As I explained in the description of the case, both the journalists and the editor of the program aimed to produce anti-authoritarian and innovative coverage by giving a voice to people who weren’t otherwise heard. This was a clear, political-journalistic decision, executed by presenting alternative perspectives and not just short quotes as popularizing trick, and can therefore not be bluntly ascribed to a process of popularization.

The analysis of the ‘governmental affairs’ reportages does show some more signs of popularization, mainly in the increasing amount of critical or strategically oriented reportages and in the use of vox pop elements as a journalistic format-aspect in the 1990s. However, journalists, and especially news and current affairs reporters, are expected to be both critical and analytical about political issues, since they preferably act as watchdogs of our democracy. Reportages in which elections are portrayed as horse races or in which political actors were almost burnt down, however, did occur.
Overall, the current affairs genre ‘matures’ over time, which is in line with developments of the television medium itself, but making the reportages in general more ‘comfortable’ to watch. Yet, this technological progress cannot just be labeled as audiovisual popularization. It actually shows the professionalization of television journalism, and the development of documentary-style reporting in current affairs journalism, a style often valued and applauded.

This study has shown that both popular and non-popular topics can and sometimes are presented in a popular way. This is however not done consistently or increasingly throughout the years, and popularization has consequently not been found. However, this study focused on only one particular current affairs show, which stopped in 1996. Many of the critiques on developments in political television journalism argue that even the most serious forms of journalism have become more sensational and entertaining, and less informative. Although the specific results presented here cannot be generalized to other current affairs programs or political television programs, it does show that this critique does not hold for one of the best Dutch journalistic programs. And the programs good viewer ratings and evaluations prove that popularization is not always necessary for a program to become popular.

The literature that was discussed earlier, about tabloidization, media logic and the influence of popular culture on political communication, is thus too general and pessimistic when discussing developments in political television journalism. There are serious programs that popularized over time, and there also occurred entertaining and infotaining programs on TV mixing politics with popular culture, but in order to evaluate these programs, and be able to judge their value for democratic processes, situated analyses are needed, that offer in-depth knowledge of television content in its context. Unfortunately this study ends in the 1990s, but many of the criticisms from the literature also originate in the 1990s. And the longitudinal analysis of almost 40 years of serious TV journalism did prove that a general fear for a popularization of serious journalism is not justified.
NOTES

1 The Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) brings together scholars from various countries across the world, developing systematic indicators of issue attention. They classify events (e.g. bills, parliamentary questions, media stories) for topic, making it possible to study the frequency of such events. The major topics of the taxonomy and the subtopics are comprehensive and consistent across time. The topic system is similar in all participating countries, but adjusted and extended to fit the nations specific contexts (see for more information http://www.comparativeagendas.org). For this study of a Dutch current affairs TV program I used the Flemish codebook that was developed specifically to analyze media.

2 An item about for instance elections in France would thus be excluded from the selection, but an item on local elections somewhere in the Netherlands included.