Popularization and personalization: a historical and cultural analysis of 50 years of Dutch political television journalism
van Santen, R.A.

Citation for published version (APA):
Chapter 5

The personal in political television biographies

INTRODUCTION

Personal narratives in political discourse take on many forms, but among the most visible and controversial are the personal narratives of politicians in office or campaigning for office. For decades, observers of political cultures have claimed that the ‘personalization’s of politics detracts from the substantial attention voters might otherwise give to political issues and policy decisions (for an extensive discussion of these debates, see Van Zoonen, 2005). Recent elections indeed show that the main contenders insert personal narratives in their campaigns through various, sometimes unexpected, means. Not only have Internet weblogs of personal experiences become indispensable campaign instruments, auto/biographical books have also returned as key carriers of personal stories about candidates (consider Barack Obama’s *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* or * Dit land kan zoveel beter* by Dutch Social-Democrat party leader Wouter Bos). Controversies around these various biographical genres notwithstanding, the intention in this chapter is not to assess or even discuss the impact of personal narratives on the quality of politics and democracy. Such a general aim is bound to fail, given the diversity of personal narratives, the different contexts in which they are told, and the myriad ways in which they are appreciated by distinct groups of citizens. Instead, I want to investigate critics’ claims that these personal narratives have become ever more dominant, and to analyze their different themes and styles so as to ground a more detailed and empirically informed understanding. To do so, I will examine a particular genre in which personal narratives of and about politicians have appeared regularly over the past 50 years: the televised portraits of politicians that have been broadcast in the Netherlands from television’s early days in the 1960s through the election of 2006.

We approach these broadcasts with a number of general expectations based in academic and public discussions about political biography and the personalization of politics, and derived from developments in the contemporary histories of television, politics and culture. I will elaborate on these expectations in the following section.
CONTROVERSIES AND RESEARCH EXPECTATIONS

The written auto/biography has long been the standard form politicians used to tell their personal stories: “Generations of leaders from nearly every age and culture have attempted to transmit to the future an account of their lives and achievements”, Egerton (1992, p. 221) argues, with their narratives providing an understanding of politics in terms of the dramas of political leadership that appeal to both political and popular audiences (Egerton). Such auto/biographies have been and still are the subject of controversy, focusing for instance on the following questions: whether the private lives and personal considerations of politicians hinder or facilitate a more substantial understanding of historical processes (Bolton, 2006); whether biographical accounts tend to ‘neaten things up’ and rewrite history (Egerton); whether personalized accounts open up the field of politics to wider audiences (Nethercote, Arklay, & Wanna, 2006), and so on. The compromise in these contentions could be, as Selth (2006) argues, that ‘good’ auto/biographies do not distinguish between the subject’s public and private life, presenting them as an integrated whole. But what ‘good’ biographies are, and when and how private issues devalue or enrich political biography, depends on particular situated contexts and political cultures, and cannot be addressed in general terms (cf. Thompson, 2000).

These tensions between public and private aspects of personal narratives of politicians have not only appeared in the context of biographical writing, but emerge whenever such narratives are found in public settings, regardless of whether they are produced by professional communicators in the traditional genres of journalism, film and television, or by politicians themselves in the newer platforms that the internet provides. Political and media actors continue to distinguish between public and private spheres, but time and again, contentions revolve around which themes and styles of personal stories are relevant to political ideals and discussions, as well as around questions of who is to blame for stories that are too personal, intimate or emotional (see for a more elaborate discussion Corner, 2000; Van Zoonen, 2005). As I claimed with respect to written biography, the boundaries between too personal and properly personal depend on the diachronic and synchronic particularities of
specific political cultures, and are also subject to multiple ethical considerations. The quintessence of such discussions can be found in the political, media and popular debates about the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, with questions ranging from whether the topic was at all relevant to assessing Clinton’s presidency, to whether he himself, the media or “a vast right-wing conspiracy” was to blame for the scandal (Lawrence & Bennett, 2001). Less sensational personal narratives have also been subject to similar discussions, such as the birth of Tony Blair’s fourth child while Blair was in office as British Prime Minister, or Angela Merkel’s makeover from dull “Ossie” (former East German) to glamorous “Wessie” in the German national elections of 2005 (Van Zoonen, 2006).

An additional issue in such discussions is whether personal narratives are authentic (i.e. ‘real’ or ‘true’) or a strategic means to reach new constituencies. Levasseur (2000), for instance, warns that cinematographic political documentaries, ever more popular as campaign material, need to be understood in the context of the subject’s access to and control over audiovisual material and narrative, and the balance of power between producer and participating subject. Traditionally, documentaries celebrated the accomplishments of a subject in a chronological order using photographic stills, film footage, accounts of contemporaries or experts, and a voiceover, but nowadays popular auto/biographical documentaries are produced in collaboration with living subjects appearing semi-live on the screen. Complicating this collaboration, Levasseur notes, is that the subject’s sense of celebrity can both authorize and influence biographical projects, as every subject has both a performing identity and a social identity, and directors can be tempted to simplify the narrative or objectify the subject to be more competitive in the market place (for an extensive discussion of these debates, see Levasseur, 2000).

Such controversies project structural oppositions between public and private, and authentic and strategic, that emerge in particular forms whenever a new medium arises for personal narration of and about politicians. Traditional auto/biography and cinematographic biography have been subject to these controversies, but recently politicians’ weblogs and social network sites have also been criticized and acclaimed (Park, 2009; Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu, &
Landreville, 2006). Television has received the most critical comments in this respect, from both academics and journalists. The classic text of the video malaise thesis, as it is generally called, is Postman’s (1985) *Amusing ourselves to death*, in which he extensively argues that the television medium is unsuitable for serious, rational debate, and consequently public and political discourse becomes ‘shriveled and absurd’.

Hart (1994) presents a more sophisticated critique of television as a medium whose visual nature limits it to personal relations and intimate feelings, whether those of characters, sports heroes, ordinary people or politicians. Television genres therefore uphold the personal, the emotional and the psychological at the expense of the factual, the rational and the analytical. When it comes to politics, then, television can, will, and arguably must, only focus on politicians, instead of parties and issues (Langer, 2007; Rahat & Sheafer, 2007). It is thus unable to produce quality political journalism (Newton, 2006). While these academic commentators ally themselves with politicians and journalists in their emphasis on necessary boundaries between public and private, increasingly other researchers claim that politics and personal narratives are intimately linked, and should be analyzed in concrete situations to assess whether they have a positive, negative or irrelevant impact on citizenship and politics (for instance Coleman, 2003, 2006; Street, 1997; Van Zoonen, 2000b).

Conceptual vagueness characterizes all these discussions. There is very little empirically or historically grounded analysis of what exactly the themes and styles of politicians’ personal narratives comprise, or whether they have expanded or changed over time, or whether the narrator, the medium, the genre or the topic at hand wields the greatest influence. In fact, different researchers and disciplines define ‘personal narratives’, or ‘personalization’ in politics, in very different ways. The author’s own systematic analysis of the academic literature revealed seven definitions of personalization in politics, three of which directly referred to personal narratives told by politicians themselves or by others (Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2009): stories about the individual competence of politicians; stories about the private lives of politicians; and emotional accounts or reflections of political events and experiences. In addition to the conceptual vagueness in the existing debates, there is little sense of the impact of cultural and
historical specificities. Personalization is often approached as a recent development driven by competitive forces in print and television journalism, by the influence of American style campaigning, or by the imperatives of television (Brants, 1998; Newton, 2006). An academically sound analysis of personal narratives of politicians thus needs to define clearly what ‘personal narrative’ is, and how it is articulated within specific historical, political and cultural contexts.

To begin this work, I look at television portraits of politicians, the genre *par excellence* of personal narration produced and circulated in national politics. The genre itself aims to provide a combined picture of politicians’ public and private personas. Existing since the advent of television, the genre offers enough material to trace historical developments. As a television genre, the portrait offers politicians ample opportunity to present strategically their personal identity and stories. But the portrait also enables the discussion of political issues, and thus is useful for assessing whether and how personal narratives can contain politically relevant information.

Our analysis of the television portraits of Dutch politicians from the beginning of television to the last general elections in 2006 uses a threefold understanding of personal narratives, which I developed from the literature. As summarized in figure 5.1, I will look at stories about individual competence (e.g. Langer, 2007), private lives (e.g. Van Zoonen, 2000b, 2006) and emotional reflections (e.g. Pantti, 2005).

Figure 5.1 Visual Reproduction of Personalization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P E R S O N A L I Z A T I O N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional qualities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private persona</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privatization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotionalization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We approach the television portrait with this understanding of personal narratives, along with additional concerns derived from the specificities of Dutch television, Dutch political and cultural history, and ongoing public and scholarly debates about the pros and cons of personalization. This approach resulted in two sets of general expectations about the development of personal narratives in television portraits of politicians. First, following academic and public critique of the growth of personalization in politics, I expect to find more personal narratives in recent television portraits than in those from earlier times. I also expect these narratives to cover more – and more intimate – dimensions of personal lives. In particular, as I will elaborate below, I expect to find a movement from narratives of individual competence towards stories about private lives, and more recently, towards reflections on emotional experiences in politics.

Second, I expect these changes to be contingent on the way the medium of television has intersected with political and cultural developments in the Netherlands. To begin with, television itself changed significantly, from basing its programs on existing literary and theatrical traditions, to producing its own typical genres. I thus expect television portraits in the early years to reflect the codes of auto/biographical writing, but to become generically hybrid and ‘televisual’ in later years. Specifically for the Netherlands, these developments were exacerbated when commercial television was introduced in 1989. Criticism about the demise of Dutch broadcasting values subsequently increased, especially over the incorporation of popular and personal conventions in informative programs.

The most important developments for Dutch politics during our research period concern depillarization and dealignment, processes that identify respectively the loss of stable and easy connections within particular religious and ideological groups (‘pillars’), and the transformation of the media from ‘lap dogs’ or mouthpieces to critical, independent watchdogs; and declining confessional and ideological politics resulting in a diminishing identification with political parties – the growth of a ‘floating’ electorate (Brants & Van Praag, 2006). As a result, parties and politicians have had to develop more elaborate and diverse ways to convince citizens of their worth. Through the years, one strategy has been the promotion of the individual party-leader, a
process that reached its zenith with the campaign and massive success of right-wing liberal Pim Fortuyn in 2002. In this context, I expect the television portrait to gain ground, and to gradually become more individualistic. I particularly expect that current portraits will contain less information about the subject’s religious and/or party allegiances. Finally, I expect to see in the television portraits visible impact of the 1960s movements in Dutch culture (and broader, Western societies), which have been identified as ‘informalization’ and ‘democratization’, referring to respectively to public casualness, informal behavior, and open discussion of emotions, and to the desired participation of citizens in different societal arenas, including the debate about the boundaries of public and personal lives. These cultural changes should be visible specifically in the politicians’ appearances and conversational styles, and in their interaction with the interviewer or host, and studio or home audiences.

METHOD

For this study I conducted a qualitative content analysis of 23 portraits of Dutch politicians, broadcast during the last five decades on public television channels in the Netherlands. For the longitudinal approach, I selected a variety of different broadcasts that aimed to ‘paint a portrait’ of an individual, broadcasts in which the guest him or herself was present, in which the guest was a (former) politician, and in which an interviewer or host was present (see appendix D). Portraits were selected from the archives of The Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision4, and for the 2006 election, from the TV program websites. Unfortunately, the institute’s collection lacks programs of commercial channels; and programs from the public channels were sometimes damaged, incomplete, unavailable, or not preserved at all. This meant that only four programs from the 1960s could be analyzed; from every other decade I also analyzed four to five programs.

In line with the expectations, from 2000 onwards the number of TV portraits I could choose from increased significantly. I therefore had to select more strictly, basing the decisions on the need to cover the different available formats, hosts, broadcasters, politicians, and
parties. I thus tried not to include politicians or portrait series more than once. The final selection of portraits (see appendix D) consists of politicians at the national political level or higher, who belonged to various political parties, and who were interviewed by a wide range of journalists, in a diversity of programs, broadcast by different networks. I cannot claim this selection as a representative sample. Some programs, especially those from the commercial networks, are absent, and female politicians are only marginally present. Nonetheless, the selection criteria provided for variety in the material; and as I will discuss in the following sections, the results show enough parallels and continuities between the programs to expect that the material is indicative of wider trends.

The content analysis involved several stages. Initially, conversation, camera motions, program elements and audio/visual characteristics were literally transcribed and described. I then coded these transcripts by identifying topics, themes and technical characteristics. All data were analyzed in their original forms and in the Dutch language, using Atlas.ti, a software package for qualitative data analysis. In the next phase, the interpretative analysis of the programs, I linked codes to the theoretical concepts of individualization, privatization, and emotionalization, according to the model presented in figure 5.1. An example of the coding is shown in table 5.1. An excerpt from a portrait of the leader of the Dutch Social-Democrats in 2006 shows that the main theme of conversation is the war in Iraq. I coded the personal narrative that occurs in lines 8 and 9 as individualization, because it concerned the competence of the politician to withstand pressure. I also coded the camera movement from filming the general setting with both men visible, toward individual framing of both the interviewer and the politician.

Coding all programs in this way enabled us to make both diachronic and synchronic comparisons; that is, both between time periods and between politicians and programs. In this chapter, I will focus primarily on the diachronic comparisons, beginning with an overall impression of how the data compare to the theoretical expectations, and then linking the findings to the concepts of individualization, privatization, and emotionalization. Representative quotations, translated English, will give these concepts depth and meaning, with an emphasis on historical differences. For this reason,
CHAPTER 5

I will disregard details about the various politicians, and use the year of the broadcast and the politician’s name as indicators.

Table 5.1 Coding Example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FRAGMENT</th>
<th>TOPIC</th>
<th>PERSONALIZATION</th>
<th>VISUAL</th>
<th>AUDIO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Note from coder: They walk outside. They stand there for a while chatting. Visible from the chest up, with 10 Downing Street visible in the background.</td>
<td>'War in Iraq' 'Political belief'</td>
<td>Setting: on location</td>
<td>Both visible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Journalist: ‘Have you spoken with Blair about Iraq?’</td>
<td>Competence Individualization</td>
<td>Camera on politician</td>
<td>Background: street noises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bos: “Well, yes, a little bit. But more in the context of North-Korea and Iran.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Journalist: ‘If you had become prime-minister in 2003, would you not have given support to the war in Iraq?’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Bos: “No, I wouldn’t have.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Journalist: ‘So you would have been in the Schröder/Chirac-camp?’</td>
<td>Competence Individualization</td>
<td>Camera on journalist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Bos: “Yes.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Journalist: ‘But are you sure you would have been able to withstand the enormous pressure that would have been put on you, to keep saying ‘no’?’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Bos: “Yes. And that has to do with the fact that you wouldn’t have been alone in that at that moment. Because indeed mainly the French and Germans and some other countries, were prepared to say at that moment ‘we need to continue with the UN because there is a chance this can work without a war.’”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Paul Rosenmöller and... Wouter Bos (15-11-2006)

GENERAL TRENDS

Remarkably, in the context of video malaise theses, personal narratives were never taboo in television portraits of politicians; I found individual, private and emotional stories already in the very first television portraits. The 1963 portrait of then minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Luns, for instance, contained accounts of his father, his family life, and how he felt about certain issues, as did most other portraits of the 1960s and 1970s. What is striking, however, is that most politicians portrayed in those times were no longer central to their respective parties, or had retired from office. The portraits were designed to look back on their careers, just as traditional written auto/biographies do. It seems as if the person behind the politician thus only became known to the public after he or she was out of the public eye and had a well-founded political reputation. When in office, politicians apparently kept personal and political narratives separate.
In material from the early 1990s, I found the first portraits of active politicians. By this time, commercial television had been introduced in the Netherlands, depillarization had been completed, and party dealignment was underway. The portraits from this decade cover ministers, members of parliament, and electoral contenders. Especially in the portraits of the latter, political and personal narratives come together, resulting in conversations between interviewer and guest about political ideologies and concrete issues, but also about the politician’s upbringing and his or her feelings about politics and the election campaign. The conversations in these portraits thus offer the contending politicians an opportunity to construct strategically an appealing persona that combines relevant political ideals and competent behavior with personal narratives that represent the politician’s political position as well as appeals to the electorate he or she wants to mobilize. The expectations about the increase of personal narratives in television portraits are thus both challenged and supported: challenged because personal narratives in their individual, private, and emotional dimensions were already present in the early television period, and because political narratives are still present in current television portraits; supported because these personal narratives became part of active political careers and activities only in the early 1990s.

With respect to the second set of expectations about the articulation of television, political and cultural histories in the portraits, I find similarly complex patterns of continuity and change. Comparing the first and the last portrait in the selections (1961 with 2006), you see how the genre itself has changed dramatically, as expected, due to the development of the medium. The 1961 interview consists of a black-and-white one-on-one interview in a studio setting, with some inserted stills explained in a voiceover. The program is static, resembling mostly visual radio. The 2006 portraits are filmed on different locations, with the interview taking place during walks and visits to places that have been relevant to the politicians’ biographies. The technological maturity of the medium allows for dynamic visuals that contribute to the understanding of the politician portrayed and his or her political convictions. These politicians were at the time also electoral contenders, and programs such as Andries and Paul Rosenmöller and... position their subject in
social and geographic spaces connected to their personal political ideology. For instance Wouter Bos, leader of the Dutch Social-Democratic party, is interviewed in London, where he talks about how his former employment at Shell influenced his ideas about the role of industries in society and their reappearance in his parties’ election program.

And yet, the 1961 ‘talking heads’ form is still present in the recent material, and filming on location already occurred in 1973. The usage of stills and film footage occurs throughout the research period. It seems appropriate to typify this pattern of change and continuity as a diversification of the genre, meaning that old patterns do not disappear, but are complemented with new ones that reflect changes in the medium’s technological and cultural possibilities. In the 1980s, the TV portrait also appeared in the form of a big studio show with live audiences and performances. *In the lead* (In de Hoofdrol), a popular 1980s program based on the US format *This is your life*, invites friends and family to the studio to comment on the featured politician, who in his or her turn talks about them (private narratives) and how important they are for him/her (emotional narratives). The innovation here comes from the setting, but the core of the genre – the conversation between an interviewer/host and a politician – remains the same.

In addition to diversification, a significant change concerns the role of the interviewer, who becomes ever more present in the television portraits. In the early portraits, he (there were few female broadcasters in that period) is invisible and hardly ever audible. Gradually, starting in the 1970s, the interviewer’s questions are more often heard and seen being asked. In the most recent shows, the interviewer becomes more like a host, and is almost as visible and as important as the guest, speaking and interrupting much more. This coauthor role of the interviewer makes the portraits more similar to intimate conversations than to a formal interviews or entertaining shows, and increases the chances of personal reflection – although politicians have become very skilled in spinning personal matters into politically relevant topics. Not all interviewers, however, are equally kind. Despite depillarization, Dutch public broadcasting still has clear political roots, and thus there are friendly and not-so friendly broadcasters for specific political parties and candidates.
The conversational style of the interviews has also become more informal over time, with host and guest joking and laughing at times, and with both dressed and behaving more casually. In the most recent portraits, style and informalization have become conversational topics in their own right. This is not, however, an entirely new phenomenon: throughout the years, brief remarks were made about politicians’ looks, personal styles, and body language (“impeccably dressed man” (1963); “I would want it a bit more neatly creased” (1988); “Erica always wears these beautiful blouses” (1992)). In the past decade, however, personal style has become a topic of recurrent and intense conversation, as shows in the following excerpt from a 2006 portrait (Pechtold, 2006):

**Interviewer:** ‘Back to my question. Alexander, the man of cosmetics, of the silver... The man, in politics also, of cosmetics, the show, the auction, the theater. “Here I stand, Alexander Pechtold...”.’

**Pechtold:** “No, no, I do not recognize myself in that. But I know people have that image, also of me. I live my life and political career the way I see fit. And some people like that and others hate it.”

Similarly, in a 2001 portrait of the current Dutch Prime Minister, who was then only leader of the Christian Democrats (Balkenende, 2001):

**Interviewer:** ‘But you do know that these days it is all about the chaps who articulate policy? You are the packaging of the party message. Maybe people used to be uninterested in the private life of Colijn, but times have changed.’

**Balkenende:** “Yes, that is true. On the other hand I believe it should be about content in politics. [...] I realize that the image of a politician is often about how interesting he is as a person. I noticed that when I took office. Immediately it was all about appearances, image, and things like that.”

Despite these more deeply personalized topics in the most recent TV portraits, contrary to the expectations, the political party and the societal alliances of the politicians remain important conversation topics. Especially in election times, party politics and the competence
to lead one’s party are regularly invoked, since the party’s message needs to be communicated as well. In addition, and in contrast to the socio-cultural trends of depillarization and secularization, the religious affiliations of politicians remained a stable topic of the portraits I investigated. I expected this to be the case at the height of pillarization in the early 1960s, but religion remained vividly present in many portraits from the 1970s and 1980s. Though it briefly disappears in the 1990s, currently religion is once again prominent in politicians’ personal narratives. This might be due to the fact that one of the leading evangelical TV hosts, Andries Knevel, produced a series of portraits in the 2006 campaign period, titled Andries. In light of current developments in the Netherlands, the renewed popularity of faith and spirituality, and debate about religion, cultural values and political ideologies with regard to integration and Islam, the resurgence of this topic is also no surprise.

In sum, the general developments in politicians’ personal narratives found in television portraits in the Netherlands are typified by complex patterns of change and continuity. First, although from the early 1960s, individual, private, and emotional stories were found in television portraits, interview subjects from the 1960s and 1970s were often retired, recognized authorities, who could spend the interviews largely looking back on their careers and lives. The active politicians portrayed in later times were strategically seeking to construct appealing political-private personas that would highlight their competence. Second, as a genre, the television portrait has developed significantly, including more diverse settings, additional speakers, photo/video footage, and entertainment elements. The politician’s political and personal stories, however, remain the core of the portrait. New formats thus complement older ones. A third significant change involves the expanding presence of the interviewer, and the increasing informality of the conversation between host and guest. Compared to earlier portraits, recent interviews appear more casual and democratic, as the politician is placed on an equal and relaxing footing with the host and audience. The interview subjects are also encouraged to reflect on their own positions, behavior and personalities. Again this seems partly related to the fact that earlier shows were more a platforms for politicians themselves to look back from and give a historical accounts, while more recent portraits are
often employed in the context of an election campaign. Continuity is visible mainly in how party and religious affiliations have remained important, and in the continued presence of original interview formats and the coexistence of political and individual, private and emotional narratives. In the next section, I will examine these narratives in more detail, assessing changes in the topics and styles of these individual, private and emotional narratives.

**SPECIFIC DEVELOPMENTS**

**INDIVIDUALIZATION**
I defined individualization in the theoretical model as involving stories about the individual competence of politicians. Such stories appeared as a stable ingredient of the television portraits, with only minor variations through the decades. Whether or not a portrayed politician is still in office evidently makes little difference in the way in which competence is depicted. However, from the early 1960s to the late 1980s, the subjects were often retired. Their reflections contributed to their images as wise political leaders. Without exception, the hosts praised the competence of these politicians, and treated them with respect. In a 1961 portrait, a guest politician who had recently taken up a position with NATO notes that he had already acquired much experience with different issues as a representative of the Dutch government in international delegations (Stikker, 1961). His formal tone and comments contrast sharply with a 2006 portrait of a relatively young and inexperienced party leader. This campaigning politician could not rely on long-term experience, but he strategically conceals this in a personal reflection on how he feels as a party leader, while addressing the interviewer informally, by first name:

“I’m starting to get it. [...] And that is also a matter of experience, Andries, I notice. You have to do it for a while and then gradually you notice that it’s becoming easier.” (Rutte 2006)

Overall, I found that the most prominent qualities highlighted in most portraits concern the rhetorical skills, eloquence, and popularity of the guest politician. Experience, honesty, integrity, and being in control are also often mentioned as elements of individual competence, sometimes in inserts and comments from colleagues or
friends, sometimes by the interviewer. The host of a 1963 portrait of the minister of Foreign Affairs mentions an opinion poll that declared him the most popular minister in the Netherlands; a former state secretary is complimented by his interviewer for having been an “honorable” politician (Luns, 1963); a respected member of the Senate receives compliments from fellow politicians (Algra, 1973); a well-known mayor and member of parliament is shown videos of people commending his political qualities (Schakel, 1988): “He understood the voice of the people and responded to that very well.”, “The most fantastic speaker, lots of expertise.”, “What I noticed in his work in the party, is that he gave powerful statements in a pleasant way.” When complimented in this way, the politician usually responded with appropriate modesty and matter-of-factness.

In the portraits I analyzed, interviewers rarely asked critical, challenging, or ‘tough’ questions, though instances do occur in all decades. In an exceptional moment in a 1967 portrait of a former party leader and member of the Senate, the interviewer comments that the guest never became a “great” politician because he was controlled by his emotions. The politician, of course, disagrees with the idea that he chose the wrong career, and argues that emotional people are very useful in politics. Despite the growing importance of the interviewer throughout the years, however, such exchanges do not seem to have become more common. Challenges in television portraits seem to come more often in the form of video clips of other people, rather than directly from the host. In a 1986 portrait, for example, the leader of the Dutch communist party, and the audience, are shown a video of a historian critiquing the leader’s handling of party dissent: “He speaks about remorse, but that is not the point. It is about gaining insight into actions of those days and into how enemies were infamously destroyed” (Bakker, 1986). Such inserts enable the interviewer to maintain the informal and convivial atmosphere of the conversation, while nonetheless complying with a journalistic demand to be critical and inquisitive. Following depillarization, Dutch journalists have developed a more professional sense of their occupation, but breaking ideological and religious ties was not always easy or profound (Brants and Van Praag).

Over time, politicians’ modesty about their achievements disappears, and we see them increasingly grab the opportunity to talk
about their own competence, while strategically reflecting on their positive qualities. In a 1984 portrait of one of the few leading female politicians of the 1960s and 1970s, Marga Klompé notes that when people asked her how someone who studied chemistry ended up in politics, she would reply: “That is where I learned analysis and synthesis. And to distinguish between main and side issues. Those are all things I needed in politics.” In the 2006 portraits, which were broadcast in the middle of the national election campaign, similar reflections were inserted in evidently strategic ways. The Social-Democrat leader, for instance, used the then salient issue of failed multiculturalism to articulate his personal qualities:

“There has always been a lack of understanding between different cultures. Should you say ‘Oh, I’d better not have any ideals at all to change that?’ No! Precisely in those cases a progressive politician will say ‘I’m going to keep fighting because I believe it can be improved.’ And, well, every single person for whom I, in that respect, can make a difference, is a reward.” (Bos 2006)

Our analysis of politicians’ individual personal narratives shows that competence is a central feature, comprising eloquence, experience, and integrity. Lack of competence is rarely discussed in these programs, and when it does occur, it generally takes the form of inserts from outside commentators. Over time, politicians have begun to foreground their own specific competences for strategic reasons, rather than as a reflection of personal qualities.

PRIVATIZATION
The second kind of personal narrative I distinguished in the theoretical model involves the private lives and pursuits of politicians. With the exception of two portraits (Stikker, 1961; Van Mierlo, 1970), private lives and pursuits appear as all-time favorite topics of conversation, along with childhood and parental influences (mostly that of the father), spouses, children, and hobbies. Consider the similarities between two excerpts from radically different times about the influence of a politician’s father:

“He was artistically very talented, he had enormous erudition, he was moreover an exceptionally kind man, and an ideal-type father. So I still think back on my father with a sort of worship. Literally.
And because of his wide political interest he did bring that in to me, I believe.” (Luns 1963)

“My parents passed on some things very strongly. The most important is from my father, who unfortunately is not with us any more, that he said, like, you are not just here for yourself. You also walk around on earth to do some good for someone else if you are good at something.” (Rutte 2006)

Current family life is also featured in the portraits, both from the early period and in recent years. A 1963 portrait of a Christian former state secretary contains the following conversation:

Interviewer: ‘Excellency, a more personal question in between: do you allow your children to partake in visiting the theatre, ballet, cinema?’

Roolvink: “I have in that respect always been of quite liberal opinion. But it has always been my custom to come along myself. When my children went to the cinema for the first time, I said ‘we will go together’. And we will talk about the movie too. And that still happens occasionally. But I hardly ever get round to it.”

Interviewer: ‘You do not have time for it?’
Roolvink: “Very little.” (Roolvink 1963)

Similar conversations appear in portraits from every decade in the study. A 2001 interview with the then Finance Minister reads:

Interviewer: ‘Do you have as much time for them [your children] as your image leads us to suspect?’
Zalm: “No.”
Interviewer: ‘Not the ideal father as depicted in the media?’
Zalm: “No. I try. But as good as some people think I am is not correct.”

Interviewer: ‘And do you regret that?’
Zalm: “Well, yes, one must also enjoy work, hm? Or you are not a good father again. You have to give and take a little.” (Zalm 2003)

The ability of politicians to balance their work and private life is even discussed with a party leader who is single and has no children (Rutte, 2006).
Our study has shown that the stories politicians are asked about remain remarkably similar through time: the influence of upbringing and parents, and the problems of combining a political career with a private life, especially with being a good parent to your children. Previous research supports the claim that family life and the problems of combining it with a political career are regular topics of conversation, but ones that provide men with the opportunity to show their human qualities, while challenging women to explain their odd choice of public life, against the common expectations of feminine behavior (Van Zoonen, 2000a). The study shows that the issue of private lives and pursuits is raised with male and female politicians alike. In the portraits I have examined, both male and female campaigning politicians discuss this challenge, but are equally reluctant to talk about their actual family lives. Spouses are relatively absent in these stories, and a number of Dutch politicians are well known for deliberately keeping their families out of sight (Bos, 2006).

EMOTIONALIZATION

Although increasing in recent decades, emotions were still the most rare dimension of personal stories, much less common than individual and private accounts. Typically the interviewer is the one who asks about emotions and feelings, through questions like “Do you like to be popular?”, “What do you think is the most pleasant aspect of being a minister?”, “But how do you feel when you stand in front of such a room?” Politicians across the sampling have never volunteered this information, and the degree to which they feel at ease with these kinds of questions seems to differ more between politicians than between time periods. Just after he was elected party leader, for instance, current Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende was asked whether party leadership falls short of or exceeds expectations; his brief reply was “exceeds” (2001). And when asked how he felt about the then widespread satire about him (he was regularly compared to Harry Potter), he only replied “funny.” In his 1963 portrait, however, Minister of Foreign Affairs Luns easily answers how he felt about his career, concluding “It undoubtedly gives satisfaction when one can accomplish something useful and necessary every now and then.” His particular choice of words suggests that Luns nevertheless creates some distance between
himself and his emotions by using such formal discourse as “when one can accomplish something” and similar distancing mechanisms continue until the recent period. While this style fits with the more general grandiloquent mode of expression of 1960s and 1970s politicians, in the current period “one” has been replaced by “you”, as seen in the 2006 portrait of the Socialist Party leader:

Interviewer: ‘We were in Assisi a few weeks ago and among other things we talked about your health then. After that it has been in the papers that you had a heart attack. Is it bothersome to talk about that?’

Marijnissen: “Yes, hahaha, yes. Well, bothersome. It is just, it supposedly comes with the job. But you want to talk about the elections of course. As party leader you want to talk about what you stand for of course.” (Marijnissen, 2006)

How persistent and probing interviewers are also does not seem to differ across time, but to depend on the interviewer. The host is not very persistent with Balkenende in 2001, while a journalist in a 1963 portrait keeps trying to evoke some emotions from a politician who keeps giving diplomatic, work-related answers. The contrast between two series of portraits from 2006 reinforces how differences between interviewers may explain more than differences in time period. One series, hosted by Paul Rosenmöller, a former and respected politician, was made as a deliberate effort to uncover politicians’ feelings about their work, while Andries Knevel, the TV presenter of another series, seems to be less interested in ‘deep reads’ and more in having fun with his guests.

The legitimacy of emotions in politics is a persistent topic in these portraits, with responses differing more between politicians than across time. In answer to one of the first questions in a 1967 interview, the guest remarks that a political choice is an affective matter. Yet, in an insert in the same portrait, a former colleague criticizes him for being an emotional man:

“He has many qualities, but he does not rouse a great sense of sympathy, more of antipathy. Maybe that is very irrational, it has to do with emotions. But it is because he acts too much like the psychiatrist of Dutch politicians.” (Van Riel 1967)
The few female politicians in the portrait sample also differ more greatly among each other than across time with respect to their opinions of the role of emotions in politics. In a 1984 portrait, a former female minister explicitly clarifies that the portrait is not to be about her and her feelings, but about her ideas:

“But it wasn’t the goal to make a portrait of me. That is what we agreed upon, hm, that we don’t do that, that we are going to have a conversation about visions I have, about policy I have…” (Klompé 1984).

Another prominent female politician, and former minister of transport, on the contrary, does not shy away at all from the issue of emotions in politics (Jorritsma, 1997), and a current female political leader openly talks about the predicaments of being a woman in politics, especially when it comes to emotions:

Halsema:  “Let’s see, your voice rises, becomes higher, it is visible, and it usually leads to a negative judgment. Emotions of man often lead, I mean, talking about stereotypes, I am aware that I express some prejudice, but they often lead to greater integrity of a man. Look, he has emotions. While for women it often leads to ‘look, she can not control herself. She is unfit for politics.’”

Interviewer: ‘Negative.’

Halsema:  “One can also see that women who have been judged favorably during their political career are women who have great control over their emotions. I mention Margaret Thatcher. Although, in the end…” (Halsema 2003)

Contrary to the expectations, emotions were already part and parcel of the early television portraits, and reflections on them continued to the present as well. As with the general trends, here too it seems that the way emotions are included in the portraits has diversified over time, rather than changed fundamentally.
CONCLUSION

Our analysis of personal narratives of politicians portrayed in television portrait programs has produced a complex picture of change and continuity that contradicts much contemporary work on the increase of personalization in politics, as well as many of the initial expectations:

- personal narratives were present as early as 1961, when the first television portrait of a Dutch politician was found, and cannot be considered a mere product of contemporary commercial television culture;
- personal narratives always comprised individual and private stories, with emotional accounts only slightly increasing in the recent period, but still not strongly present; and
- personal narratives—whether individual, private, or emotional—are always primarily articulated through the political ideas, activities, and goals of the guest politicians, and are embedded in the political and societal affiliations of the politician.

One could argue that the mere increase of portrait programs that I found in the last decades is in itself a conclusive sign of increased personalization, but the amount of television hours has also increased dramatically, with the Dutch receiving two general national channels in late 1988, and about ten in 2006 (excluding theme and pay channels), with airtime expanding from evening only to the whole day. Further investigation is needed to determine whether the percentage of televised portraits of politicians has increased in relation to total airtime and total number of political programs.

The continuity in the television portraits is as striking as the changes. Both the topics and the core of the genre remain very similar over time: an interviewer and a politician talk about the guest’s political beliefs, individual competence, upbringing and family life, and how he or she feels about all of that. The interviewer can be more or less probing, and the politician can feel more or less at ease with the personal narratives. However, the genre also reflects changes in television, politics, and culture, resulting in a diversification of styles. The big, studio show-style of the TV portrait and the focus on active, rather than retired, politicians occurred only after the advent of commercial television in 1989. Despite the question of whether
there is a relative or an absolute increase in the number of portrait programs, the impact of the Fortuyn elections, which put the individual candidate center-stage in election campaigns, does seem to have increased the number of television portrait programs during the 2006 campaign. It remains to be seen, however, whether this trend will continue. Finally, the informalization of Dutch culture is reflected in conversations becoming more informal through time, and hosts taking a more active and equal role in the programs.

Our analysis also showed that it is useful to distinguish between different foci of personal narratives, because they have different relevance for the political content of the television portraits. Individual narratives focused on politicians’ competence, such as rhetorical capacity, leadership, and experience, which are relevant for the political performance of politicians. Private narratives often included how the politician’s upbringing informed his or her political motives and behavior, thus adding a sense of historical continuity to his or her performance. Finally, though relatively rare in these portraits, emotional narratives were not only included, but were topics of reflection, thus adding to the controversy, rather than making emotions acceptable in current political culture. Again, this reflection on the legitimacy of personal narratives in politics seems to reflect a historical continuity in Dutch television portraits, rather than the effect of the alleged contemporary video malaise.

The same seems to be true for the Internet. In the theoretical outline, I briefly touched upon how controversies over the opposition between public and private recur whenever new media arrive, with the Internet as the most recent example. Discussion of the impact of the growing use of email and websites, and more recently weblogs and social network sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and the Dutch equivalent Hyves, is omnipresent. Research suggests that both US and UK politicians employ time and resources in using websites for self-presentation (Stanyer, 2008), and that blogging, both by citizens and candidates, has taken off, especially in the US since the 2004 presidential campaign (Stanyer, 2006), with the most frequently discussed topic in US blogs being the candidates’ characteristics (Stanyer, 2006). The increasing number of politicians using these communication instruments too could be seen as a sign of increasing personalization, since these instruments are designed to facilitate a
direct link between sender (politician) and receiver (citizen), and vice versa. In the Netherlands, party websites have existed since 1994, but personal websites from politicians appeared for the first time during the 2002 election campaign (Voerman & Boogers, 2005). Although this trend is often referred to as personalization, most of the content on these sites had and still has a dominantly political character (Van Santen, 2009; Voerman & Boogers, 2005). Websites and weblogs are mainly used as campaign tools (Trammell et al., 2006), as Van Zoonen has shown for the online presence of German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Finnish President Tarja Halonen (2006). A quick scan of Dutch political tweets and Hyves-blogs reveals that privatization and emotionalization do indeed occur, mostly in the context of a political comment, statement, or evaluation. A thorough analysis of Dutch political tweeting and blogging is not yet available, but I expect the continuities and changes with regard to television to apply to the Internet as well, thus giving no need for renewed concerns about video malaise.
NOTES

1 In 1998 the news of US President Bill Clinton’s extra-marital affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky eventually led to the impeachment of President Bill Clinton by the House of Representatives and his subsequent acquittal on all charges in a Senate impeachment trial. This affair has since then been called the ‘Clinton-Lewinsky scandal’.

2 In 2000 Tony and Cherie Blair had their fourth child. Not only was Blair the first British Prime Minister in 150 years to father a child while in office, his wife was aged 45 at the time.

3 Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel was born and raised in East Germany. She became politically active after the fall of the Berlin Wall and joined the CDU. Then-chancellor Helmut Kohl adopted her politically, resulting in her nickname ‘Kohl’s girl’. In 2000 she became CDU’s chairwoman, and their main candidate for the elections in 2005.

4 The Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision looks after 70% of the Dutch audio-visual heritage and is one of the largest audio-visual archives in Europe (http://zoeken.beeldengeluid.nl).