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

van Santen, R.A.

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Talking about the *good* old days?

Expert reflections on popularization and personalization
INTRODUCTION

The studies reported in the previous chapters focused on ‘texts’ of political television journalism to see if processes of popularization and personalization are more present on television and to see how they are present in current affairs television and television portraits. In chapter 3 the study on television programming has shown that over time both public and commercial broadcasters have dedicated more time to information programming, but that these programs have moved out of prime time, especially on commercial channels. Overall, time spent on entertainment has decreased, while broadcast time for infotainment programs has increased.

The analysis of the topics, the narrative, the use of vox populi and the audiovisual means employed in the current affairs show Brandpunt in chapter 4 has shown that there is no popularization taking place in terms of increasing attention for popular topics. The justice and crime reportages are consistently presented from a human interest perspective, but no over-time increase or intensifying use of popular narrative, vox populi elements or audiovisual means were found. The non-popular governmental affairs reportages show some signs of popularization in an increasing amount of critical and strategically oriented reportages and a use of vox pop elements in the 1990s, but since political journalists act as ‘watchdogs of democracy’, strategic analyses are sometimes warranted and not necessarily signs of popularization. In all, the study showed 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, so to conclude that a process of popularization is taking place is inordinate.

In chapter 5 the examination of the televised portraying of politicians in the Netherlands shows that developments in the personalization of politicians are typified by complex patterns of change and continuity, but cannot be considered a mere product of contemporary television culture. The results also show that the personal narratives have always comprised of reflections on individual competencies (individualization) and private stories (privatization), with emotional accounts (emotionalization) only slightly increasing in the most recent period. Finally, the analysis
made clear that personal narratives in these portraits were always primarily articulated with the political ideas, activities and goals of the featured politicians, and embedded in their political and societal affiliations. The idea that a process of personalization takes place over time is not supported.

These summarized outcomes conflict with existing and dominating beliefs about developments in modern political journalism. As shown in chapter 2, concerns about the influence of popular media, and in particular television, on the quality of public debate exist among politicians and journalists, and to a lesser extent academics, and they are remarkably united in their rejection of television as potential source of information and discussion. This contradiction, between research outcomes presented in this dissertation and many studies and opinions already published, has urged the researcher to talk to (former) practitioners in the field of political communication in the Netherlands about their visions on, and experiences with political television journalism. The outcomes of these reflections are presented here.

The first goal of this final study is to validate the outcomes of the studies reported in this dissertation (briefly summarized above), and to gain a deeper insight in the results. Discussing the meaning of the key concepts, the historical developments in the Netherlands in the field of (television) journalism and the occurrence of popularization and personalization, and finally ‘the quality’ of contemporary television journalism with practitioners, the goal is to ‘field-test’ and verify previously presented conclusions and address the contradiction between public video malaise opinions and more optimistic but less prominent accounts. Second, by linking practitioners’ accounts with the literature on parliamentary journalism and the politician-journalist relationship, this study contributes to both public and academic debates on the performance of political journalism.

In this field of political journalism, research suggests that the relationship between politicians and political journalists has always been a difficult one (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1981; Brants, De Vreese, Möller, & Van Praag, 2010; Hemels, 1998; Kaiser, 1985). Their mutually dependent role, within the dynamics of a representative-democratic system that relies heavily on means of mass communication, creates tensions that ideally push both journalists
and politicians to great accomplishments, but more often are said to result in conflict, mistrust and cynicism (Brants et al., 2010). This negative relationship, leading to a spiral of cynicism, then has a negative effect on the public and consequently on democracy, as contended in the video malaise thesis. Some authors object to this line of reasoning and find contradicting evidence (Newton, 2006; Norris, 2000). This debate is discussed in more detail in chapter 2. What is important for this study is the scarceness of empirical research about the relationship between journalists and politicians and how this relationship affects their own individual performances and the perceptions they have of each other.

In Belgium, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries some interview and survey studies have been published on this issue (e.g. Kaiser, 1985; Larsson, 2002; Van Aelst et al., 2008; Van Aelst, Sehata, & Van Dalen, 2010; Walgrave, 2008). They conclude that both politicians and journalists are very cynical towards each other, but also about themselves. Results from the Netherlands (gathered just before and just after the 2006 national elections) show that about 70% of Dutch MP’s feel that the mass media can make and break politicians, that the mass media have too much political power (Van Aelst et al., 2008), that media coverage is too event driven, and that journalists are too cynical, interpret too much and pay too little attention to content (Brants et al., 2010). Roughly half of the journalists agree that they can ‘make or break’, and are too event driven and too little focused on content. Journalists also feel that Dutch politicians will do anything to get media coverage, and that it is more important to get media coverage than to work hard, and again about 60% of the politicians agrees with this. This media salacity of politicians causes the mutual cynicism (Brants et al., 2010). But a study by Van Aelst et al. (2010) shows that a politicians’ standing strengthens his or her position towards the media, meaning that journalistic attention comes with political power. For many, especially experienced politicians with a prominent position, their media salacity is thus unnecessary, although politicians who generate a great deal of positive publicity probably do have a better chance to obtain important positions within their party (Van Aelst et al., 2010).

Both journalists and politicians, as well as their communication advisors, spin doctors and spokespersons struggle with this ongoing
‘conflict’. Although this study is not a repetition of the earlier discussed studies, the interviews that were held to validate the outcomes of the previous studies in this dissertation, also shed light on the positions and views politicians, journalists and ‘experts’ have with regard to their relationship.

In the following sections of this chapter it will be discussed, first, which politicians, journalists and experts exactly were interviewed, and how the semi-structured interviews were carried out and subsequently analyzed. Next, following the outline of this dissertation, results will be presented on conceptual issues, historical developments and the evaluations of popularization and personalization. Finally, practitioners’ views on quality and the future of political television journalism will be discussed in light of academic research and public perceptions.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

To study the contradiction between previously presented research outcomes and publicly voiced concerns about political television journalism, semi-structured interviews were held by the author with elites and experts from the (historical) Dutch political communication field, between April and September 2011. The selected interviewees represent the political and journalistic perspective but also that of the advisers and strategists that operate behind the scenes. The historical character of the research at hand is continued in this study by talking to actors that work(ed) in the academic, political and/or journalistic field from the 1960s till today.

The selection of interviewees was purposive, and a heterogeneous sampling approach was followed to ensure that respondents vary widely from each other (Ricthie, Lewis, & Elam, 2007). This way central themes can be identified that cut across the variety of practitioners. A list of 30 desired interviewees was drawn up to create a comprehensive body of actors representing the 50 years of the national political communication field in the Netherlands. A provisional list was based on the portraits of the personalization study (chapter 4), which was complemented with other national party leaders, well-known TV-journalists and experts from various political
parties, journalistic and commercial and public broadcasting organizations who were selected based on their experiences with television journalism. These actors were then approached via email for an interview. A short summary (400 words and some visuals) of previous research results from the author was sent with this email, to inform them about the research topic, explain the intentions of the interview and to spike the memory.

Not all identified actors were able or willing to cooperate. Especially female politicians, journalists and experts, already a minority in this area, were hard to find. In total 21 actors were interviewed, two of which are woman. The seven politicians represent five different political parties and were or are active politicians at the government or parliamentary level, dating back to the 1960s. The six interviewed journalists represent both public and commercial broadcasting, and within the first category also various public broadcasting companies. All have worked or still work for television, but some also have experiences with press journalism. The eight experts that were interviewed represent academic researchers in this area, television producers, and political advisors that in some cases also work(ed) as politicians and/or journalists (see table 6.1 for an overview).

The interviews were held by the author, in the offices or at the homes of the respondents, and sometimes in a public place. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours. The interviews were semi-structured meaning that a topic list functioned as a conversation guide (Arthur & Nazroo, 2003). To break the ice and for respondents to get at ease with the interviewer and the subject, the interview usually began with some factual questions about the respondents’ background and current position. This was followed by a discussion of the two main topics, first personalization and then popularization, concluding with a discussion of the quality of television journalism and the interviewee’s perspective on the future of political journalism. To ensure a natural flow, the interviews had a conversational character and the order of the discussed topics sometimes varied (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). To encourage spontaneity and stimulate respondents to express their knowledge and opinion on the topics, the interviewer asked how they would
## Table 6.1 Overview interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Former) Politicians</th>
<th>Date of interview</th>
<th>Interview length in minutes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>P1</strong></td>
<td>Party leader - Christian democrats</td>
<td>23-06-2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P2</strong></td>
<td>Party leader; Minister; Senator; Royal commissioner - Liberal democrats</td>
<td>27-06-2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P3</strong></td>
<td>Party leader; Minister; Senator; Royal commissioner - Liberals</td>
<td>16-05-2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P4</strong></td>
<td>(Prime) minister - Social democrats</td>
<td>19-08-2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P5</strong></td>
<td>Mayor, Minister; City council member - Liberals</td>
<td>20-07-2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P6</strong></td>
<td>Member of Parliament (MP) - Liberal democrats</td>
<td>13-05-2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P7</strong></td>
<td>Party leader; MP - Communist/Green-Left</td>
<td>22-07-2011</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Former) Journalists</th>
<th>Date of interview</th>
<th>Interview length in minutes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>J1</strong></td>
<td>Journalist - public broadcasting/ newspapers</td>
<td>09-06-2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>J2</strong></td>
<td>Journalist - commercial broadcasting; (Former spokesperson)</td>
<td>30-06-2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>J3</strong></td>
<td>Journalist - public broadcasting/ newspapers</td>
<td>05-09-2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>J4</strong></td>
<td>Journalist; Talk show host - public broadcasting</td>
<td>05-07-2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>J5</strong></td>
<td>Journalist; Writer - public broadcasting/newspapers</td>
<td>28-06-2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>J6</strong></td>
<td>Journalist; Talk show host - commercial broadcasting</td>
<td>09-05-2011</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Former) Experts</th>
<th>Date of interview</th>
<th>Interview length in minutes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>E1</strong></td>
<td>Director audio-visual institute</td>
<td>08-06-2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E2</strong></td>
<td>TV producer public/commercial; Writer</td>
<td>14-06-2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E3</strong></td>
<td>Campaign manager/spokesperson - Social democrats</td>
<td>20-05-2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E4</strong></td>
<td>Campaign manager; MP - Christian democrats; Journalist</td>
<td>17-06-2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E5</strong></td>
<td>MP; Campaign manager; Mayor; Secretary of state - Social democrats</td>
<td>26-05-2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E6</strong></td>
<td>Campaign manager; MP; Mayor; Minister - Social democrats</td>
<td>09-05-2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E7</strong></td>
<td>Professor journalism</td>
<td>28-04-2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E8</strong></td>
<td>Professor political communication</td>
<td>27-04-2011</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
define popularization and personalization. More specific follow-up questions and probes were used to help the interviewees when necessary (Bergman & Coxon, 2005), and their own experiences with popularization and personalization were discussed. A discussion of previous research results usually concluded the conversation on a specific topic.

All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed by a professional company. These interview-transcripts were analyzed using the qualitative software Atlas.ti. Reading through the transcripts, excerpts were coded inductively. These codes were then compared, analyzed and grouped thematically, finally resulting in four code-families. The coding was guided by the explicit research goals to validate and gain a deeper insight in the results of the previous studies, and therefore focused on specific remarks about: (1) definitions of personalization and popularization, (2) historical developments, (3) evaluations of personalization and popularization and (4) the quality and future of TV journalism. In a later phase of the analysis statements of the different groups of respondents were compared, to see whether politicians, journalists and experts offer distinct perspectives. Much more topics were touched upon in the interviews, but they fall outside the scope of this chapter.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS
Interviewing as a scientific research method requires the researcher to consider some ethical issues. First, informed consent is important, especially when talking to elite respondents (politicians). This means that the researcher provides the respondents with relevant information for them to make a decision about participation in the study (Silverman, 2001). This was done through an elaborate email including a summary of previous results. In the actual interview, the researcher again explained the goal and intentions of the interview and study, and allowed the respondent to ask questions. Secondly, the issue of anonymity required that it was agreed with all interviewees not to use any names and only mention the function of a quoted respondent in the final text (see table 6.1). Also, it was agreed with the interviewees that they could see and approve of the reproduction of the interviews before any form of publication. Finally, the role of the interviewer is an important aspect of interview
research. Since the interviewer is a relatively young, female researcher, and the respondents were dominantly older, male, and very experienced in the field, it was important for the interviewer to find a balance between a position of ‘neutral and humble listener’ and ‘knowledgeable and empathic conversation partner’. This was done by asking respondents to tell about their perspectives, experiences and opinions, varied by remarks about the interviewers’ previous research results and academic insights. This generally led to engaged and informative conversations.

RESULTS

In this section the results are presented in the same order as they were discussed in the interviews. The first discussed topic was personalization, because it was expected (and proven) to be a more accessible concept than popularization. Respondents were eased into the interview this way. Popularization was the second topic discussed, and by that time some aspects had often already been implicitly commented on. One very pertinent outcome that resulted from the interviews is that personalization and popularization, in the way that they were defined in chapter 2 and the introduction of this chapter, are often ‘mixed up’ and combined by the practitioners. This shows how close these concepts are related to each other, and how difficult it is to have a nuanced discussion about the variety of aspects involved in political television journalism. However, to strengthen the analytical contribution of this study the remaining results are discussed while maintaining the conceptual distinction between the two concepts.

In the next sections, first the two main concepts, personalization and popularization, are discussed through a similar structure. For each concept, the respondents’ definitions and interpretations of the concepts are discussed first, followed by a short comparison to research outcomes presented in chapter 2 for validation. Secondly, the respondents’ reflections on the historical development of the concepts are presented, again followed by a comparison to research outcomes presented in chapter 4 and 5 for validation. Thirdly, the evaluations of the concepts by the respondents are presented, along
with other assessments that were made by the respondents. Finally, the results section will be concluded with a discussion of the third main theme that came out of the analysis: the respondents’ views on the historical development of Dutch political television journalism and the quality thereof.

PERSONALIZATION
THE CONCEPT
The first concept was introduced to the respondents by merely phrasing the word ‘personalization’ [in Dutch ‘personalisering’]. Respondents were asked to tell what this meant to them, what they associated it with, or what the word made them think of. None of the interviewees had any problem answering these questions and vivid replies were sometimes returned. Certainly, personalization is clearly on politicians’, journalists’ and experts’ minds. Although the answers varied widely in the exact words and phrases used to discuss the concept, three broader conceptualizations with regard to personalization were inferred from the interviews.

First, many respondents, both journalists and politicians, talked about the position and dominance of political party leaders, and their visibility towards the electorate. As one of the experts (E6) said about the then leader of the social democrats:

“Well, [personalization] makes me think of ‘Choose the prime minister’, the slogan with which we tried to influence the choice for Den Uyl². [...] And I always say, the personalization of politics also means depersonalization. Because everyone wants number one, and the rest becomes faceless.”

The dominance of leaders is agreed upon by another politician (P5), who said: “Personalization is, how I feel it, that if you look at politics, in recent years the content of the program seems to be less important than the leader.” Political leaders being the ‘face of the party’ can be regarded as the most important interpretation of personalization by the practitioners. Interestingly, most respondents seem to imply that this form of personalization originates with political parties and politicians themselves.

Secondly, many interviewees talked about the attention for the private life of politicians (called ‘privatization’ in the conceptualization of personalization as presented in chapter 2), an issue clearly
EXPERT REFLECTIONS

concerning everyone involved in political journalism. It was sometimes stated in a slightly condemning tone that privatization over the years has become increasingly of interest to both journalists and citizens, but very often respondents also underlined the relevancy of private matters of politicians for the electorate:

Politician (P7): “If you interpret personalization as getting to know a little bit more about the politician as human than I do not object to that. […] If the accent remains strongly on the business side, on the content.”

Expert (E4): “[Personalization] is inevitable. When I vote for people I want to know what they are like. And I do not think that is stupid. If the trend is indeed to vote more on persons as representatives of political directions and ideas, then of course one wants to know, well, what kind of man is it, ‘what makes him tick’, so to speak.”

Even those respondents that were in general quite negative towards the whole notion of personalization, sometimes admitted that ‘privatization’ can help voters make an informed choice:

Journalist (J2): “Of course, politicians operate in the public domain and there is a risk that you will be treated just like the popular singers of this world, and football players. If there is an affair, it will be in the newspapers. I think it is not relevant for political coverage, unless it is very contrary to what someone sells, or when it causes political problems. Then it becomes another story. Or it has political consequences, like with Jack de Vries³. […] But I do think that politicians have a right to a private life. […] As long as it is not relevant to the political process, it is not news to me.”

These two interpretations thus focus on the usefulness of privatization in two different ways: the confidence voters gain from knowing a little about the people they vote for, and the political relevance of certain private incidents.

The third aspect regarding the conceptualization of personalization by the interviewees is the earlier mentioned entanglement of personalization and popularization. The respondents combined elements of the two concepts generally in two ways, which will be illustrated with some examples. These issues will then be further discussed in the section on popularization. The first entanglement relates to personalization and popular programs. A politician (P7) discussed the negative side of personalization pointing out that
“politicians appear in all kinds of programs that have nothing to do with politics and talk about their neighbors, children and innermost feelings.” Several politicians discuss the importance of getting a message across. They argue that a politician might be invited in a talk or game shows because he or she is a well-known, or even popular person, but that a politician’s consideration should always be the political relevance of his or her appearance. The second way in which the interviewees entangled personalization and popularization has to do with the narrative techniques that are used in programs. A current affairs journalist (J5) talked at length about his attempt to introduce human interest reportages to his superiors by arguing that “you have to convey a story, and by making it personal you can explain relevant matters”. These accounts have a clear link with personalization, but are further discussed under the heading of popularization later on, because the issue of politics in popular programs and the type of stories told (human interest or not) are aspects of this second concept.

Validation
In light of the definition of personalization presented in chapter 2 of this dissertation, only one aspect corresponds, that of privatization. The other two aspects that are defined, individualization and emotionalization, are hardly present in the interviews. Even when respondents were probed to think about personalization in terms of attention for competencies or emotions and feelings, conversations quickly returned to discussing one of the above mentioned issues. The role of emotions and feelings is only briefly touched upon in two different interviews. A female politician (P7) remembers that when she used to be interviewed journalists would ask her how she felt and how she experienced things, while her male colleagues were never asked those things. One of the experts (E2) casually mentioned that emotions make for better television than party program explanations, referring to the days after the death of politician Fortuyn.

CONTINUOUS EXPANSION
All respondents were asked to reflect on the presence of personalization in television journalism and often its historical development was brought up spontaneously. Although a few
outspoken critics believe that personalization is a product of the contemporary superficial, hype-driven journalistic culture, most interviewees claim the opposite. Again three aspects were mentioned regularly, that very much relate to the three conceptualizations brought forward by the respondents.

First of all, most respondents said, often unprompted, sometimes when asked, something similar to this journalists’ (J3) statement:

“The first thing I think of, is yes, they have always had that. I mean, I am from the cabinet of Den Uyl. Well, so Den Uyl, Van Agt and Wiegel, were they not persons?”

Others refer even further back, to Colijn and Drees, but also to Kuiper and Troelstra, 19th century Dutch political leaders. The understanding of personalization as political leaders being the face of the party makes the interviewees think back to some of the famous Dutch politicians from the past, and claim that this attention for, or even focus on political leaders is nothing new. And they are probably right.

However, when further discussing the concept and its development, a number of politicians point at the mid-90s as a turning point. Although political leaders have always been important as the face of the party, these respondents argue that the “search for the person behind the politician” (P4) has come up in the 1990s, probably as a result of (the increasing) media attention for party leaders. They say that personalization is a negative outcome of current media practices, that political party communication and campaign techniques professionalized from the 90ies onward causing the increased attention for the (private aspects of) political leaders.

A third important aspect in the development of personalization that is mentioned by the respondents from all three categories is the behavior of voters. As a consequence of secularization and individualization, citizens have arguably changed their voting strategies and incorporated ‘personalized voting’:

E2: “Look, I think that we can state that, when television arrived 60 years ago, we of course also had political personalities, let’s be true. [...] But at the same time the party was more important than the people. And the whole phenomenon that we have increasingly been voting for persons, yes, well, maybe Van Mierlo has been important in that regard.”
Respondents explained that the electorate casts votes based on personal preferences for specific persons, a process that can be described as ‘personalization in voting behavior’. This argument is mainly voiced by experts, among which campaign managers, which seems to indicate that whether it is true or not, it might have given a reason for incorporating personalization as a communication strategy, as hinted upon before.

Validation
These results on the development of personalization partly correspond with previous research findings of the author. Many of the respondents agree that personalization is not necessarily something new, and point out famous party leaders from the past. However, in previous research (chapter 2) it has been argued that this form of personalization (‘politician who present themselves as face of the party) should not be regarded as an aspect of political television journalism. In accordance with the practitioners’ views, the study presented in chapter 5 showed a continuous development referring to politicians’ performance on television, in talk and interview shows, but the practitioners refer to a political (marketing) strategy. Most respondents do believe that privatization is something of the last two decades, a conclusion that is in contradiction with the outcomes of the study presented in chapter 5. This analysis of portraits shows that private issues were already a very often discussed topic in the early days of television, although often with retired politicians.

EVALUATION
Apart from the conceptual and historical dimensions of personalization, the interviewees also brought up evaluations of personalization and some other characteristics and consequences.

First, congruent with findings from the analysis of TV portraits (chapter 5), two female politicians both mentioned the difficulty for women to deal with personalization, and especially privatization. They are more often approached with questions regarding their feelings, but also their looks and relationships are discussed much more than those of male politicians. As one of them (P5) says:

“And still they are very quick to comment on female members of parliaments’ beautiful dress, or untidy looks. And you never see
that about men, no matter how untidy they look, or how good they look.”

Secondly, two respondents (E2, J1) contend that the notion of personalization is also applicable to journalists. The moment the topic was introduced, both spontaneously argued that journalists, mainly TV hosts and presenters, have become more important, well-known people (BNers). As a journalist (J1) explains:

“To my taste, there is personalization, but mainly on one side, that of the presentation. Informative programs have been heavily personalized. The figure of the presenter has become substantially more important.”

The expert bringing up this issue (E2) explains that he has “two images [of personalization]. On the one side the personalization of the people that bring the news, on the other side the personalization of the people that carry the news.”

He argues that both processes developed parallel to each other, but that the

“battle to make journalism fulfilling, had everything to do with the personalization on both sides. But it were the ones doing the interview, that needed to prove themselves. [...] But the one being interviewed also came up, you could see that from the popularity of for instance Luns⁶.”

Remarkably enough, this argument, or the idea that journalists, interviewers and hosts have become more present and visible, is heard more often in public debates on journalistic performance and was also found in the personalization study, but was not mentioned in the other interviews.

What was, finally, discussed in most interviews, was the evaluation of personalization. About one third of the respondents (four politicians, two journalists) was markedly negative. They felt that personalization occurs at the expense of attention for serious matters.

P3: “No, it is the subject that matters, and Mister X or Madame Y has this or that opinion on it, but it is about the substantive issues. That is what matters. Not whether someone’s hair has a nice curl or wears a funny pair of glasses.”

Surprisingly though, two of these critics, the journalists (J1, J6), also stated later on in the conversation that in the Netherlands it is really
not so bad when it comes to political personalization. This was also stated by a politician (P4) and another journalist (J5); although they evaluate the notion differently. This politician feels that politicians in general are still treated with much respect in the Netherlands, and argues that regardless what you think of it, personalization is here to stay, so one better learns to deal with it. The journalist is even more positive and claims that in the Netherlands even more personalization, meaning privatization, should occur; we should take England as an example. An expert (E4) is also very positive about personalization because it will increase confidence: “Trust needs a face. Personalization means giving a face to anonymous institutions. So what it is about is trust, trust in what keeps this country going, this democracy.” Others are less outspokenly favorable of personalization, but the analysis showed that the overall evaluation is not a very critical one, but one that points to the benefits of personalization for voters and the fact that it occurs.

POPULARIZATION
THE CONCEPT
The concept of popularization proved to be a much more complex and diffuse phenomenon for the respondents, both to describe and to evaluate. Reflections and considerations varied more widely than with the term personalization, but, when explicitly confronted with the actual word ‘popularization’ ['popularisering’ in Dutch] by the interviewer, two closely related aspects were mentioned regularly by the respondents.

First, about one third of the interviewees, both politicians and journalists as well as some experts define popularization, or relate to it, as a process or act of making politics accessible and comprehensible, bringing it closer to audiences. As one politician (P4) said:

“My definition would be to say that popularization has got to do with bringing it, a by itself complicated matter, closer to the public. So you really want to break down barriers, to enhance the accessibility of information for instance.”

Others emphasize the aspect of closeness more physically:

P3: “Television caused politicians to enter the living room.”
E4: “Because of something like television, it not only comes closer but it also becomes literally visible. [...] They come closer, you can
hear them talk. [...] The medium brings them so nearby, that they are literally sitting in the living room so to speak.”

Second, the regular conflation of popularization and personalization becomes clear when about half of the respondents refer to the visual appearance of politicians and their need to be visible, to be well-known, and to be or become popular. This is arguably why they take part in popular programs such as quizzes, entertainment and talk shows. As one campaign manager (E6) explains when referring to a Dutch party leader appearing in a cabaret show:

“The most famous example was that Den Uyl performed in the André van Duin-show7. In cold sweat, by the way. [...] Well, and that contributed to his popularity.”

A journalist (J2) is less enthusiastic:

“What you see, apart from the news programs, are the talk shows, even apart from the quizzes and so forth. The prime minister acting as guest editor of RTL Boulevard. I think politicians should be careful with that, because it is gnawing their authority away. In an attempt to get closer to the people, to close the alleged gap, they start doing all kinds of crazy things.”

Again this last quote illustrates the finding that practitioners relate personalization with popularization, and it illustrates the link between popularization as bringing politics close to the people and popularization as making politicians (the persons) popular. This is why these issues were sometimes discussed when talking mainly about personalization. A politician can try to become known and popular by disclosing personal information, by showing the audience more about him or herself, and by allowing the people to get to know ‘the person behind the politician’. This personalization is usually done by appearances in popular programs. A politician (P4) aptly puts it like this:

“The quest to know more about the person behind the politician has accelerated. [...] Some do this spontaneously, they want to gain popularity that way. Others do not, but feel that that it is necessary. [Through games, talk and amusement programs] it becomes a certain popularization of the quest for the person, the personal motives. [...] And you need that to increase the accessibility to yourself, by participating every now and then in semi-amusement
programs. And you need that to get more attention for your substantive message. And it works.”

The word popularization, when brought up in the conversation, very probable made the respondents talk explicitly of popularity and the people, and on few occasions even of populism (E2, E4, E8). Two experts (E4, E8) talk of (media) populism in the sense that contemporary media are focused on delivering what the people want and what pleases them, instead of catering for the public good. Words as ‘popular’, ‘populus’ and ‘populism’ are very much related according to them, and also refer to a certain language and style that is supposedly appreciated by the mass audience. Again the link with bringing politics to the people and becoming popular is clear.

Validation

The concept of popularization was often related to personalization and interpreted in terms of becoming popular (known and liked), and bringing politics closer to people. These interpretations mainly point at why popularization occurs, at the reasons behind the ‘willingness’ to popularize (both by politicians and journalists), and explain the goals that actors in the political communication field have. The conceptualization of popularization as presented in chapter 2, focused much more on how popularization (can) occur(s), which was rarely discussed in the interviews.

The aspects of popularization as conceptualized in previous research, popular topics, narratives, participatory and audiovisual means, were often introduced by the interviewer, but nevertheless only substantially discussed on very few occasions. Most times the respondents quickly returned to the issue of why popularization occurs, but two experts and a journalist voiced opposing comments about the attention for certain topics. Whereas one expert (E1) was very certain of the fact that there is nowadays much more attention for national news and alarmingly less for foreign news (which can be seen as a sign of popularization), especially domestic crime issues, another expert (E6) and a journalist (J3) said that there is still much attention for foreign news, but increasingly less space devoted to national political news. The content analysis of the current affairs program Brandpunt (chapter 4) showed that neither is true. Narratives were never discussed as such, but one journalist (J5)
talked extensively about his attempts to bring human interest reportages. The journalist reported on foreign affairs from a human, personal experience-perspective to make the topics more interesting and better appreciated by viewers. He calls this personalization, but is in this dissertation regarded as a popular narrative. Also, three experts (E2, E3, E8) and a journalist (J3) talked about the ways in which political statements, stories and opinions are being presented on television. They referred to the need for politicians to communicate in clear and understandable terms. If popularization demands this simple communicative style, then that is a good thing, some argued. This is similar to the earlier reference to a populist style that, according to those experts, also means simple and understandable communication.

The use of the participatory features such as quotes from lay persons (‘vox populi’) in news and current affairs journalism, did not come up in all interviews, but when it was probed, it was absolutely condemned (mainly by journalists). It is regarded a cheap trick, unworthy for ‘real’ journalists, and useless to the public. The death of Pim Fortuyn, and the following public critique on journalists having lost touch with society, is mentioned in this regard a few times, but the use of vox pop is not applauded as the solution. Audiovisual means for popularization are only mentioned by one journalist (J4), who feels that the images have been “sped up” and “sensationalized”; that “when someone cries they zoom-in more expressly and hold that position a while.” This is a phenomenon that was not found in the content analysis in chapter 4.

CONTEMPORARY MEDIA CULTURE
Without exception all interviewees talked about popularization as a development consequential to contemporary media culture. Some respondents did use phrases such as “more and more”, “more than used to” and “ever more”, implicitly indicating that popularization did occur earlier, but has now reached its (temporary) zenith. Some respondents also explicitly argued that popularization is caused by a process that has been going on for quite some years now. As one journalist (J1) states:

"The function of television has in the past 30 to 40 years shifted from an informative medium to an entertainment-product [...] and
television journalism has very much become entertainment journalism.”

A politician (P4) and an expert (E4) explain the intensifying popularization as caused by developments both within TV journalism, as well as within a broader context of political communication wherein journalists and politicians alike professionalized their communication. But many other respondents also mentioned the wider context of the hurried pace of modern life, “the rush factor” (E6), and the increased speed at which people nowadays communicate with each other, in relation to the popularization of politics.

Validation

These comments, about the contemporary nature of popularization, originate from the idea that politics and politicians need to be known and be familiar to the electorate. Over the years this has become more important since processes like secularization and individualization have caused an increasingly volatile public. The study of the forms and aspects of popularization in a current affairs program (chapter 4) has shown less clear-cut linear developments, although some indications of an increasing amount of strategically oriented reportages and use of vox pop elements in the 1990s were found. Popular topics, narratives and audiovisual means have not been used consistently throughout the years, but in line with the interviewees remarks, the study on popularization in chapter 4 also concluded that a professionalization of television journalism led to a more mature genre.

EVALUATION

Before discussing the evaluation of popularization, an interesting contrast between the respondents emerged from the analysis: different interviewees associated different types of programs with popularization. Most politicians and some experts mainly referred to game shows and amusement programs, whereas most journalists talked about the rise and growing popularity, both among the public and among politicians, of talk shows. Interestingly, this seems to indicate that politicians do not feel that the(ir) appearance in talk shows is a form of popularization; they seem to regard it as a regular or at least an accustomed forum to spread their message. Quizzes,
game shows and amusement programs however are seen as extraordinary ‘stages’ that need to be considered very carefully, and also ask for specific performances. As shown with the results on personalization, in these type of programs it is hard(er) to get a message across. As one expert puts it (E6):

“So you will also get a different type of politician. Apparently, in the present age, you mainly need politicians that fit into that formula [of infotainment programs].”

Journalists on the other hand refer to talk shows as the most extreme form of popularization, as they don’t even consider games and amusement shows as forms of (political television) journalism. They sometimes even doubt if talk shows can be considered that:

J1: “Television journalism has become amusement journalism. And that manifests itself, after the American model, in the overwhelming rise on Dutch television of the talk show.”

Although many journalists do recognize the range these shows have.

Finally, it seems as though popularization is in general evaluated negatively, and certainly more so than personalization. Judgments such as “superficial”, “simplistic”, “incomplete” and “incidental”, and the unfortunate dominance of viewing ratings were voiced often. To become popular means “to conform to the presumed, but diffuse, ‘taste of the people’” as put most negatively by a journalists (J1). This does not mean that all respondents were completely or solely negative; the fact that popularized politics could get people more involved was regularly stated as a positive outcome. However, many did point at the risks of popularization. For instance the risk that, because both members of parliament as well as members of the cabinet have a certain status to uphold, participating in popular shows (e.g. quizzes, game shows) detracts from that status. Respondents voicing this argument (P5, J2) believe that the people don’t want ‘ordinary’ politicians, and that their attempt to be so, enhances the gap between politicians and the people instead of closing it. They think it better for politicians to “put themselves on a pedestal”, and that “to be known does not automatically means to be popular” (J2). Another risk of popularization as voiced by the respondents, is that of wearing out (P2, P3, P5). The more visible you are, the quicker you will wear out, which is why politicians should make themselves (more) scarce on TV (P5).
HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS AND THE DEBATE ON JOURNALISTIC QUALITY

Besides personalization and popularization, the quality of political television journalism and its history and future prospects were also discussed in the interviews, because this is the main concern of video malaise authors and other critics of popularization and personalization. Although the discussion of the quality and future of political TV journalism received less attention in the conversations, some appreciable and similar remarks were made by the respondents. First, the rise of the Internet is mentioned regularly, in particular social media, to illustrate the claim that the current media landscape is changing considerably. This brings up the second point, that many respondents, discussing various developments, commented on a changing spirit of age and the fact that society always evolves over time. As a politician (P4) argues:

“Television journalism is partly a product, besides intrinsic developments within television journalism itself, a product of an increasingly hectic time.”

He explains that it has become increasingly difficult for politicians to explain themselves, a trend that accelerates “with an increasing tendency to fragmentize and focus on incidents”, which is not only caused by the internet, but also by “the general pace at which we become informed and communicate with each other.” An expert (E4) also refers to this development and argues in favor of television:

“Television is nothing more than a means that at the right moment made use of certain developments. It fits with a broader trend, of depillarization, individualization, you can even call it emancipation [...] But the Netherlands changes, the Netherlands from the 1970s is not the same as the Netherlands of the 1950s.”

Two journalists also talk about changes in society, claiming that the process of change makes the public angry (J5) and that society has become so open that it has lost all sense of shame, resulting in increasing personalization (J1). These critical remarks are in line with the remark of a politician who believes that our society is increasingly becoming more superficial (P2).

Although it is argued that this changeable character of societies is both undeniable and a little worrying, when asked point blank about the quality of journalism, almost all respondents say that political
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journalism in the Netherlands is overall of good quality. Of course critical remarks are made, but many point at the professionalization of journalism over the years, and the increasing quality as a result. They agree that there still are enough informative programs on television, and there still are enough good journalists as well. The current affairs program *Buitenhof*, and female journalist Clairy Polak are mentioned often in this regard.

This contradiction, between concerns about current and future trends in journalism and the praise of contemporary journalistic quality, did not only occur to me, but also to many respondents. However, when explicitly confronted with it and asked for an explanation, they referred back to probable insecurities because of changing circumstances. Only one expert (E7) had a more convincing argument: that the quality of specific programs has increased, but the amount of people that watch these programs has decreased. And this is what actually hurts or worries those people who voice concerns. As a result of the media abundance of today, the public has more choice and moves away from serious, informative programs, including programs such as *Buitenhof*. The expert further argues that those people who complain about the quality of political journalism focus too much on the programs they dislike themselves but are very popular, and become so agitated as a result, that they condemn journalism all together. Concerns about and critiques on the quality of journalism are as old journalism itself, he argues.

**DISCUSSION**

The interviews with politicians, journalists and experts on (historical) processes of personalization and popularization and the quality of political television journalism proved to be a rich source of information offering sometimes similar but also regularly different views compared to the other studies in this dissertation. The first and most pertinent result from the interviews was the observation that the distinction between personalization and popularization is not clear-cut for practitioners. On the one hand this shows the close relationship between the concepts, but on the other hand it also proves the difficulty of having a nuanced discussion of both the
qualities and flaws of political television journalism. Different respondents praised and condemned various aspects and used a wide range of words, phrases and examples to illustrate their arguments. In the end, however, most interviewees agreed that the interest in, communication of, and attention for private matters of politicians rose during the last two decades, and is not to be criticized on too much. It is a logical consequence of the dominance of party leaders since the 19th century, and of their increasing visibility due to the rise of modern means of mass communication in the 20th century.

Popularization is much more associated with contemporary (media) culture and the alleged widening gap between politics and politicians on the one side, and the electorate, or ‘the people’ on the other side. The reasons behind processes of popularization are thus explained, and also understood, by many respondents, but at the same time also evaluated more negatively than personalization. This is also closely related to more general remarks by the respondents about broader changes in society. The pace of life and the speed at which we communicate has increased immensely over the last two decades, and television journalism as we know it today is (just) a product of those developments. Political television journalists work under high pressure for good viewing ratings and at high speed to meet the requirements of 24-hour TV on multiple channels, and at the same time have to deal with developments such as personalization, popularization, and professionalization of party communicators. Society is asking a lot of them, their professional standards are tested continuously and their work followed more closely and more critical than ever before, also because of the increased transparency through the internet.

As a result, various television formats and programs are developed in which political issues as well as politicians themselves receive attention in different ways. Some are popular and highly appreciated, both by the public, as well as by politicians, while others are not. However, in the end almost all respondents agree that political television in the Netherlands is of overall good quality, that there is a wide enough variety of informative and/or serious journalistic programs and that quality has increased rather than diminished over time. This is in line with earlier conclusions presented in this dissertation, that popularization and personalization are neither
necessarily new nor bad in themselves, and there is no evidence for a
video malaise in the Netherlands. Reviewing this result, finally, in
light of the studies discussed in the introduction of this chapter, this
positive evaluation of the quality of political television journalism
contradicts the mutual cynicism among journalists and politicians
found in other studies (e.g. Brants et al., 2010; Van Aelst et al.,
2010). More research is thus needed on this specific topic, but the
outcomes presented here give some hope that the spiral of cynicism
might be breached.
NOTES

1 Share Us. http://www.share-us.nl/
2 Joop Den Uyl was the political leader of the Dutch labour party (PvdA) from 1967 to 1986, and from 1973 to 1977 he was the prime minister of the Netherlands.
3 Jack de Vries was a politician of the Christian democratic party (CDA). He served as state secretary for defense and resigned after admitting to an extra-marital affair with his personal aide.
4 Dries van Agt was a prominent leader of the Catholic party (KVP/CDA), and the prime minister of the Netherlands from 1977 to 1982. Hans Wiegel was a prominent leader of the liberal party (VVD).
5 Hans van Mierlo was the founder and long-time prominent leader of the Liberal democratic party (D66).
6 Joseph Luns was a member of the Catholic party and a ‘striking’ minister of foreign affairs from 1956 to 1971.
7 The André van Duin-show was a Dutch amusement show from 1972, of the famous comedian André van Duin.
8 Pim Fortuyn was the founder of the political party LPF (List Pim Fortuyn). He is regarded a populist politician with a flamboyant personality, amongst other things known for his unconventional way of debating and communicating. He was assassinated in May 2002, nine days before a predicted major victory of the LPF in the national elections. His murder caused much controversy and led to a wide discussion about freedom of speech and the performance of political journalism in the Netherlands.