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

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Chapter 7

General discussion
In this historical and cultural analysis of 50 years of Dutch political television journalism, criticism on the functioning and influence of television on the quality of public debate and democracy, labeled as the video malaise thesis, is addressed. I analyzed, successively, how popularization and personalization in political television journalism have been conceptualized in academic literature, whether and how the available space on television for political journalism has changed over the years, whether and how the presence of popularization and personalization in political television journalism has become stronger, and how political actors and journalists understand and evaluate these changes. In this final chapter I will bring the results of these analyses together, thereby answering the outlined research question(s) and interpreting the conclusions in light of current debates on political television journalism. The chapter starts with a summary of the results of the studies presented in chapter 2 till 6. I will then rephrase these results in the form of answers to the research questions. Finally, I will discuss the implications of my outcomes for further research and public debate.

**SUMMARY OF RESULTS**

I conducted five studies to examine processes of popularization and personalization in Dutch political television journalism. First, in chapter 2 a comprehensive review of the literature was presented. Distinguishing between processes of making politics popular (i.e. ‘popularization’) and those focusing on personal rather than political issues (i.e. ‘personalization’), a systematic inventory of publications from various academic fields was made in order to produce clear conceptualizations that could be used in the rest of the research. I defined popularization as pertaining to topical, narrative, audiovisual and participatory features of political television programs. These four aspects (or equivalents thereof) were found in literature about journalistic developments, media logic and election studies, and studies on politics in and through popular culture. I identified personalization as a separate process for two reasons: first, whereas aspects of popularization of political journalism concern the entire message or the entire TV-program, personalization concerns the
specific media coverage of individual politicians. Second, popularization and personalization need to be treated and studied as separate processes because the one can each very well occur without the other being present. In the literature, seven forms of personalization were identified, three of which were directly linked to television journalism: individualization (attention for individual competencies and qualities), privatization (attention for the private lives and issues of individual politicians) and emotionalization (attention for the emotions and feelings of individual politicians).

Before analyzing whether and how popularization and personalization developed in Dutch political television journalism, I analyzed how much space has been available for political television journalism on Dutch television from its beginning (chapter 3); for one can only arrive at a solid conclusion about an understanding of, for instance, an increase or a change in forms of popularization and personalization if one knows the wider context in which these developments took place. Through a historically grounded inventory of television broadcast time in the Netherlands, the time spent on the broad categories of information, infotainment and entertainment on all national channels were examined from 1957 to 2006, it became possible to assess the changes in the so-called political information environment. The results show that the quantity of potential broadcast time for political television journalism has not decreased, as many casual observers have argued (see chapter 3). On the contrary, over time both public and commercial broadcasters have spent increasingly more time on informative programs such as news and current affairs shows, but these programs have moved out of prime time. The overall time spent on entertainment has gone down, while time dedicated to infotainment programs, such as talk shows, has gone up. The results thus demonstrate that throughout the years television has offered more and more time to political television journalism. What this part of the research did not reveal, however, was whether and how the styles and content of political journalism in the broad program categories of information and infotainment changed themselves. To analyze these more qualitative changes with respect to popularization and personalization I focused in more detail on an information and an infotainment program.
In chapter 4 a study on the occurrence of popularization was presented through an analysis of a serious, informative program: the long running Dutch current affairs program *Brandpunt*. Studying the topics covered, the narrative, the use of vox populi and the audiovisual means employed in items from 1960 to 1996, I found no linear trends that indicate that political television journalism in *Brandpunt* has popularized over time. Popular topics such as disasters, calamities and human interest have only been marginally present through time and there is no increase in attention for national topics. Only the increasing attention for justice & crime issues could point at a process of popularization, but the content analysis of these items showed no over-time increase or intensifying use of popular narrative, vox populi elements or audiovisual means. Items about governmental affairs were also studied through a qualitative content analysis. They showed more signs of popularization, especially in the increasing use of popular narrative means, critical and strategically oriented reportages, and in the use of vox-pop elements. However, critical journalism is expected of political journalists since they act as ‘watchdogs of democracy’, sometimes warranting strategic analyses and these are not necessarily signs of popularization. Overall, the program ‘matures’ over time, in line with developments of the television medium itself, which shows the professionalization of political television journalism, and the development of documentary-style reporting in current affairs journalism; a style often valued and applauded. This study has shown that both popular and non-popular topics can and sometimes are presented in a popular way. This is however not done consistently or increasingly throughout the years, so to conclude that a process of popularization is taking place is inordinate.

A similar outcome concerning personalization was found in the study presented in chapter 5. A selection of televised portraits of Dutch politicians broadcast between 1961 and 2006 was analyzed. Results from this study show that personalization was present as early as 1961, and cannot be considered a mere product of contemporary television culture. The results also show that these 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 years. 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 conclusion thus seems twofold: personalization is a historical continuity in Dutch TV portraits, and personalization has never been detrimental to the attention for political information.

Finally, chapter 6 offered an analysis of the views and opinions of different actors in the field of political communication, in order to validate the outcomes of the research. Politicians, journalists and experts were interviewed about their experiences with and ideas on political television journalism in the Netherlands throughout the years, and particularly about processes of popularization and personalization. Comparing their views with the research outcomes showed, first, that the analytic distinction between popularization and personalization is not easily maintained in everyday professional talk about political television journalism. Nevertheless, the interviewees did reflect on differences, particularly in their evaluations, by approaching popularization as a consequence of contemporary media cultures, characterized by haste and shallowness, while personalization was seen as a logical consequence of the position of and attention for party leaders that has always existed. Providing some openness about personal matters gives voters the idea that they know the person they vote for, offering them an extra dimension of political knowledge (how does this politician deal with certain political issues privately) and increasing voters’ confidence and trust.

Second, the results of the interviews by and large underlined the outcomes of the personalization study presented in chapter 5. Respondents agree that personalization is not necessarily something new, and concurred with the idea that privatization, attention for the private life of politicians, can disclose politically relevant information and help voters to make informed choices. Third, the interviewees did present a different understanding of popularization than used in this project, by largely focusing on the appearance of politicians in entertainment programs. They categorically denounced the involvement of politicians in entertainment shows, quizzes and (some of them) even talk shows. As a consequence, their evaluation of
popularization was much more negative than the outcomes of the Brandpunt analysis, focusing on popularization in information programs, would warrant.

That said, almost all respondents agreed that political television journalism on the whole is of good quality in the Netherlands. They believe there is a wide enough variety of informative and more, or a bit less, serious journalistic programs. Journalistic professionnalization has improved its content rather than diminished it over time, according to the practitioners.

CONCLUSION AND RESEARCH ANSWERS

The outcomes of the five studies make it possible to answer the research question what forms of popularization and personalization of politics can be identified since Dutch television journalism’s inception in 1956 and to what features of political and media culture can they be attributed?, in more detail. To do that, in chapter 1 I have split up the research question and outlined the following sub-questions:
1. Which processes of popularization and personalization can be identified?
2. Are increasingly less informative programs being aired on TV?
3. How are processes of popularization and personalization related to developments in the media and political landscape?
4. How have political and journalistic actors adapted to these processes of popularization and personalization and how has their adjustment altered their communication with audiences in their role as political citizens?

These questions will be answered consecutively, starting with the first sub-question that was studied, first, in chapter 2. In this chapter a comprehensive literature overview was presented, conceptualizing the two distinct processes of popularization and personalization. This study showed that processes of popularization can be identified through studying four elements: the presence and development of popular topics, narrative, participatory and audiovisual aspects of TV programs. Processes of personalization in political television journalism can be identified through analyzing increasing attention for individual competencies (i.e.
‘individualization’), the private life of politicians (i.e. ‘privatization’) and the feelings and emotions of politicians (i.e. ‘emotionalization’).

Second, in chapter 4 and 5 the processes of popularization and personalization were studied in situ, through content analyses of specific TV programs, to study the scale and character of these processes and to validate the conceptualizations. In both studies the abstract concepts described above proved very useful, being easy to operationalize while at the same time providing a comprehensive instrument to analyze the various qualities of political television journalism. Concerning popularization, the analysis showed that the four aspects each showed variation over time, but not always at the same time, nor in the same, popularizing, direction. The distinction between them thus helped identify and interpret processes of popularization, and will be useful in further research. With regard to personalization, the analysis showed it is useful to distinguish between different forms of personalization because they have different relevance for the political content of the studied portraits. The conceptualization thus provides a refined tool to study the occurrence, role and functioning of personalization in political television journalism.

The second sub-question was studied through analyzing an inventory of available space for political television journalism, presented in chapter 3. The guiding question whether increasingly less informative programs are being aired on TV is answered negatively, contradicting many existing beliefs. Since both the number and length of informative programs has increased, the most obvious space in which popularization and personalization could occur has, in relative terms, not become larger over time.

The third sub-question asked how processes of popularization and personalization are related to developments in the media and political landscape, referring to the cultural and historical context in which political television journalism takes place. The cultural history of the Netherlands with regard to television is characterized by processes of secularization and commercialization, and a development into a more liberal media model from the nineties onward, characterized by a dual broadcasting system but a persistently strong public broadcasting service. This ‘tradition’ especially has enabled growth of the space for informative programs, and limited and formed processes of
popularization and personalization in TV programs. Studying the current affairs show Brandpunt, which was a public broadcaster’s program, showed very few signs of popularization. In fact, during times of secularization and political uproar in the 60ies and 70ies, Brandpunt developed a critical and innovative style of reporting, where it has often been applauded for. The slightly increasing use of critical and strategically oriented reportages and vox-pop elements were identified as signs of popularization, and seen a bit more frequently in the reportages of the 1980s and 1990s. This use of some popular means coincides partly, but not solely, with a time of strong media commercialization and competition, but also with a time of high-educated, media-wise audiences and sophisticating audiovisual techniques.

Processes of personalization, individualization, privatization and emotionalization, are seen throughout the research period, but some changes were identified when studying the portraits that seem to relate to media and political developments. Over time, a diversification of portraying styles occurs, but the big, studio show-style of the portrait and the focus on active, rather than retired, politicians occurred only after the introduction of commercial television. Also the impact of the 2002 elections, just after the rise and assassination of Pim Fortuyn, which put the individual candidate center-stage in election campaigns, seems to have increased the number of television portrait programs during the 2006 campaign. However, although some processes of personalization in TV portraits seem related to developments in Dutch media and politics, on the whole, personalization seems a historical continuity in Dutch television portraits, as shown in chapter 5.

Finally, the fourth sub-question, how have political and journalistic actors adapted to these processes of popularization and personalization and how has their adjustment altered their communication with audiences in their role as political citizens, can be answered with the results presented in chapter 6. Politicians and journalists themselves feel at ease with the quality of political television journalism, and have naturally adapted to televised forms of personal attention. Popularization however, particularly in the form of amusement programs engaging in politics, is experienced as more
problematic, and politicians are still searching for proper modes to address the various audiences of these programs. In all, these outcomes lead to the conclusion that there is no evidence for a video malaise in the Netherlands. This dissertation shows there is no reason to worry about the scope and quality of public debate, that the often discussed style of American political television has not completely taken over nor Americanized Dutch political TV, and has shown that popularization and personalization have not impoverished political television journalism. From a democratic perspective on society this is good, since it means that television audiences in their role as citizens are still provided with substantial, relevant political information, necessary for their participation in the political process. But it leaves the researcher, and probably also the reader, stuck with one big ‘but’: why the feeling of discontent regarding politics and television, or rather politics on television, remains so intense and keeps (re)surfacing? This final issue will be addressed in the next section.

**DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

This study has given answers to important research questions and has provided helpful conceptualizations to study popularization and personalization in political television journalism. But this study has also led to new ideas and questions about issues related to, but outside the scope of this dissertation. In the remainder of this final section I will suggest three directions for further research that resulted from this study.

In the first place, the concepts of popularization and personalization as presented in chapter 2, proved to be useful instruments to study developments in political television journalism. This dissertation presented analyses of popularization and personalization in two types of programs, but the conceptualizations can and should be used as instruments to study popularization and personalization in more and other forms television programs. I studied popularization in a current affairs show, but it would also be interesting and instructive to analyze the occurrence and development of the use of popular topics, narratives, audiovisual and
CHAPTER 7

participatory means in other informative programs such as newscasts and political party broadcasts, or in the infotainment genre. How, when and why do infotainment programs such as talk shows, magazines and showbiz programs engage with politics in a popular(izing) way? The same is true for personalization. I found TV portraits of politicians to be very political in content, but is personalization also very political in nature when occurring in other programs and program genres? To get an even better understanding of the relevance of personalization for politics, it would be valuable to learn if and how processes of individualization, privatization and emotionalization can be identified in for instance political programs such as the weekly interview with the prime-minister, or at the other end in amusement shows, game shows or even in fiction, like series or movies.

Since both popularization and personalization are seen as processes, that change or develop over time, and discussions about video malaise and the quality of journalism focus on contemporary media content versus ‘the good old days’ of serious journalism, whenever that might have been, a longitudinal approach such as presented in this dissertation is imperative to study such over-time trends and to contribute to existing knowledge and debate. Fortunately, the archives of television programs both in the Netherlands and in other European countries are becoming easier and wider available through digital databases¹, facilitating both longitudinal and cross-country research approaches.

A second area for research that has not been treaded on in this dissertation is the audience’s response to popularization and personalization, or their effects on particular groups of audiences, or citizens. I have identified and studied specific aspects and occurrences of popularization and personalization, but it remains to be seen how these specific processes affect citizens’ perceptions of politicians and whether and how they affect citizens’ political trust and opinions. I have shown that there is no proof for the video malaise argument that popularization and personalization have come to dominate political journalism at the costs of attention for serious issues, but video malaise authors also argue that citizens become less informed and apathetic because of television. Although the findings of this dissertation largely contradict the first and founding argument of
the video malaise thesis, whether and under which circumstances specific occurrences of popularization and personalization affect individuals’ sympathy for particular politicians and their opinions about particular issues, can and should be studied in further research.²

Finally, the third suggestion for future research concerns the response of one particular group of citizens: the politicians and journalists that react particularly strong to processes of popularization and personalization and the debate thereof. They are quite critical and also concerned about the direction in which current political television journalism is heading. In chapter 6 I presented the outcomes of elite and expert interviews, one of which was the overall contentment with the quality of political television journalism in the Netherlands. However, especially when discussing aspects of popularization, it became obvious in many interviews that most respondents are nevertheless concerned about the current state and future of political television journalism and public debate.

This type of concern about a particular medium is not a new phenomenon, even though many concerned do feel that we have now reached a critical point. Quite the contrary, ‘media concerns’ seem to come and go with the introduction of new media types (there was widespread concern about the radio when it was first introduced, and much more recently the rise of the Internet has led to vehement debate), and also with the tide of generations. Each generation has its own problems, and the media are always assigned a role, although each time a different one. Many of these past concerns have been overcome, yet new anxieties rise and gain a strong voice, similar to the survival and dominant position of the video malaise thesis.

Although the empirical accuracy of the video malaise thesis has been questioned from various angles, as in this dissertation, and past experience should give some relief to those so concerned with political journalism, it would be too simple and careless to simply ignore these concerns. Political (television) journalism is a great good, vital in the workings of our democracy, which we should be careful of and keep a critical eye on. Continuous debate about and reflection on the performance of political journalism is thus necessary and we should value those who do so. But the concerns voiced today, in terms of unsubstantial, emotional, popular and personal political television,
are too broad and vague. I have shown in this dissertation that many concerns and critiques can themselves be identified as aspects of popularization and personalization (chapter 2), and also that these processes are not the problem, at least so far. What is left is the question what contemporary criticasters are then exactly worried about. From the interviews I have held, I gather it seems to be a concern about a future development in political television journalism. Concerns voiced in sentences that start like “Current journalism is of good quality, but what if…” or “Good quality journalistic products are still made, but its audiences seem to decrease…”.

I argue that more research into the nature, role and objects of existing concerns is needed. That it would be helpful to know if these concerns are related more to social or civil issues such as a general vulgarization of manners, a coarsening of language or political polarization. By getting a clearer picture of the concern(s), future research can then also address questions about if and how these trends are related to journalistic developments. Some might fear that processes of popularization and personalization in years to come will increase drastically, critically diminishing the amount of political information on television, but the results presented in this dissertation do not justify such a prediction, and do certainly not give reason to be pessimistic today.
NOTES

1 The Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision for instance has started digitalizing (parts of) its collection (www.beeldengeluid.nl/meer-over-het-nederlands-instituut-voor-beeld-en-geluid), but also several European projects that aim to provide access to the television heritage of several European countries have recently started, such as the EUscreen project (http://www.euscreen.eu/) and the BIRTH Television Archive (http://www.birth-of-tv.org/birth/home.do).

2 Within the NWO-funded research project Popularization and Personalization in the Dutch Democracy, of which this study is part, a second study is currently being done at the Erasmus University Rotterdam, to analyze the effects of popularization and personalization on different segments of the electorate through a factorial survey.