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

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ENGLISH SUMMARY

Politicians, journalists and scholars in the Netherlands and abroad regularly express their concern about the negative influence of television journalism on the quality of public debate and political trust. The concern usually focuses on an alleged popularization and personalization of political television journalism. This dissertation shows that their concern is unjustified. To the extent they occur, popularization and personalization have not impoverished political television journalism. Rather, the concerns and criticism itself should be examined, which may be related to other social or civil trends, instead of journalistic developments.

The factual role of popularization and personalization in political television journalism is contentious, just as their historical roots and cultural circumstances. Systematic and longitudinal research of a popularization of political journalism and personalization of politics is lacking, especially within the context of a mainland-European country. This dissertation therefore investigates 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 chapter 2, a systematic comparison of publications from various academic fields is presented, distinguishing between processes of making politics popular (i.e. ‘popularization’) and processes focusing on personal rather than political issues (i.e. ‘personalization’). This results in clear conceptualizations that are used in the subsequent studies. Popularization pertains to topical, narrative, audiovisual and participatory features of political television programs. Of personalization, seven forms are identified, three of which can be 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 these aspects of popularization and personalization developed in Dutch political television journalism, chapter 3 presents a quantitative analysis of the available
space for political television journalism on Dutch TV. For one can only arrive at a solid conclusion about an understanding of, for instance, a change in popularization and personalization, if one knows the wider context in which these developments took place. Through a historically grounded analysis of television broadcast time in the Netherlands, using archived print television guides and digital broadcasting data, the time spent on the broad categories of information, infotainment and entertainment on all national channels is examined from 1957 to 2006. The results show that throughout the years television offers more and more time to political television journalism. Over time, both public and commercial broadcasters spent increasingly more time on informative programs such as news and current affairs shows, but these programs are moved out of prime time. The overall time spent on entertainment has decreased, while time dedicated to infotainment programs, such as talk shows, has increased. More qualitative changes in styles and content of political television journalism are discussed in more detailed studies of an information and an infotainment program.

In chapter 4 a study on the occurrence of popularization is presented through a qualitative content analysis of the long running Dutch current affairs program Brandpunt. The topics covered, the narrative, the use of vox populi and the audiovisual means employed in items from 1960 to 1996 are studied. Popular topics such as disasters, calamities and human interest are only marginally present through time and there is no increase in attention for national news. The increasing attention for justice & crime issues could point at a process of popularization, but the content analysis of these items shows no over-time increase or intensifying use of popular narrative, vox populi elements or audiovisual means. Items about governmental affairs show more signs of popularization, especially in the increasing use of critical and strategically oriented reportages. However, critical journalism from political journalists, the ‘watchdogs of democracy’, is not necessarily a sign of popularization. Thus, 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 is found in the study presented in chapter 5. A selection of televised portraits of Dutch politicians broadcast between 1961 and 2006 is studied through qualitative content analysis. The results 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 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 makes clear that personal narratives in these portraits are always primarily articulated with the political ideas, activities and goals of the featured politicians, and are embedded in their political and societal affiliations. The conclusion thus is 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 offers an analysis of the views and opinions of politicians, journalists and experts, in order to validate the outcomes of the research. They 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 shows 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 between the concepts, particularly in their evaluations, by approaching popularization as a consequence of contemporary media cultures, characterized by haste and shallowness, while personalization is seen as a logical consequence of the attention for party leaders that has always existed. Almost all respondents agree that political television journalism in the Netherlands on the whole is of good quality: there is a wide enough variety of informative and serious journalistic programs, and professionalization has improved journalistic content rather than diminished it over time.

In chapter 7 it is concluded that the persistently strong public broadcasting service has enabled the growth of the space for informative programs in the Netherlands, and limited and formed
processes of popularization and personalization. The 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 are also somewhat related to developments in Dutch media and politics, but seem, on the whole, a historical continuity in Dutch television portraits. Politicians and journalists themselves feel at ease with contemporary political television journalism, and have naturally adapted to televised forms of personal attention. These outcomes lead to the conclusions that there is no reason to worry about the scope and quality of public debate, that the often discussed style of American TV has not completely Americanized Dutch journalism, and that popularization and personalization have not impoverished political television journalism.

From a democratic perspective on society this is good news, 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. Nevertheless, many concerns remain about the current state and future of political television journalism and public debate.

To them I can say that their concerns, when voiced in terms of unsubstantial, easy, and emotional political television, are too broad and too vague. This dissertation shows that many of the concerns refer to a popularization and personalization of television journalism – and that these processes are not the problem. More research into the nature, role and objects of existing concerns is thus needed. It would be helpful to know if these concerns are related to social or civil issues such as a general vulgarization of manners, a coarsening of language or political polarization. Future research can then also question 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.