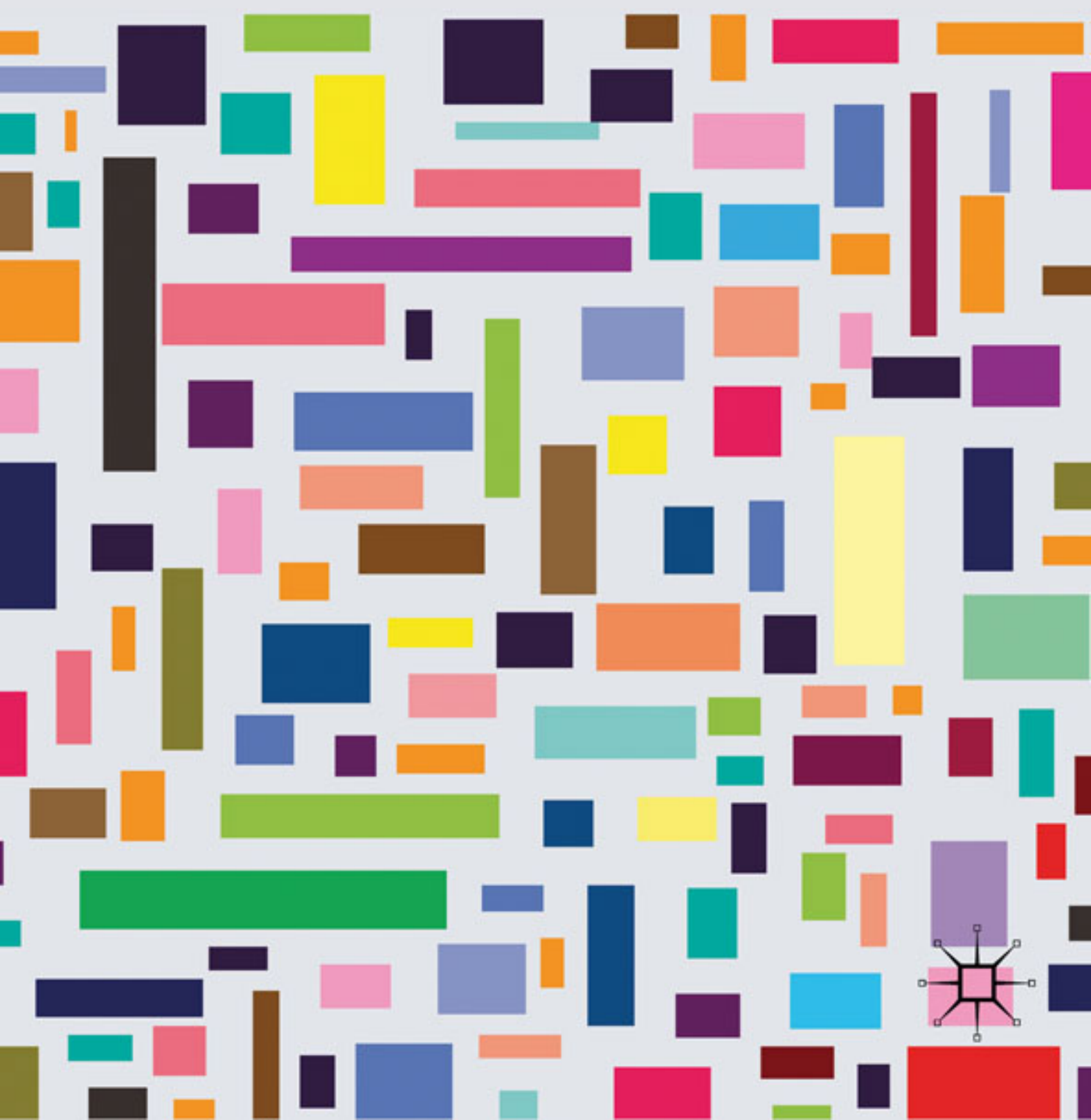


Political Communication in Postmodern Democracy

Challenging the Primacy of Politics

Edited by Kees Brants and Katrin Voltmer



Political Communication in Postmodern Democracy

Also by Kees Brants

THE MEDIA IN QUESTION: Popular Cultures and Public Interests *(co-edited with Joke Hermes & Liesbet van Zoonen)*

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Political Communication in Postmodern Democracy

Challenging the Primacy of Politics

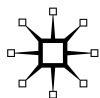
Edited by

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Foreword: In Praise of Holistic Empiricism

Jay G. Blumler

Political communication is an exceptionally rich, complex, fluid and important sub-field among those that populate the overall field of communications studies. Scholarship has not always done suitable justice to those characteristics – either focusing discretely on isolated particulars or striving to comprehend it all in one grand-theoretical go.

Take how it has changed over time. Since the end of World War II, the prime medium of political communication has been first the press, next network television, next multi-channel television and soon, perhaps, an Internet–television hybrid. Other major changes – for communicators, media content, audience/citizens and for political institutions themselves – have followed in train. We need frameworks that can capture such developments, identifying and pursuing the research questions they highlight.

Take complexity. As Jack McLeod and his colleagues (McLeod, Kosicki & McLeod, 2010) have often stressed, political communication is eminently a multi-level field. At its simplest, it links political culture, political actors, media organizations, including the roles played by political journalists within them, and bodies of increasingly heterogeneous and varyingly involved citizens. We need frameworks that can help us to understand how these relationships work, how they evolve, how they feed on each other and in what ways they matter. For matter they do, since political communication is inescapably a normative domain, intimately involved in the realization (or failure to realize) of collectively self-determining processes of citizenship and democracy. Of course people's political and communication values will differ, and nobody of empirical evidence can definitively determine which among them are superior. Nevertheless we do need frameworks and research that can shed light on the ideas and information that are made available to citizens by existing and prospective communication arrangements and on the models of democracy that they do or do not make possible.

Readers interested in grasping political communication in all the above respects will get a great deal out of this book. It conceptualizes the role of political communication in what the editors call a 'post-modern democracy', shaped by formative, ongoing, incomplete and tension-ridden processes along two over-arching dimensions.

Along a horizontal dimension, political institutions and media institutions – politicians and journalists – face each other and interact, collaborate and struggle, read each other and adapt – in what is ultimately a joint production of political messages. Following Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999), the authors identify the process of ‘mediatization’ as central here, whereby political actors increasingly adapt to media demands, media logics and media perspectives on politics itself. As the authors interpret it, however, this is a variable and uneven process (it may be more advanced and take different forms in different polities), and attempts to reverse the tide cannot be ruled out, whether by news management or ‘disintermediation’ (circumventing mainstream news media via channels of more direct access to voters, such as the Internet).

Along a vertical dimension – that which links political and media elites with audience members and citizens – a lot, confusingly, seems to be going on: new relationships, new roles, new voices, as well as new challenges, problems and frustrations. The authors sum this up in terms of a process of ‘decentralization’. Previously positioned chiefly as communication receivers, more audience members are now or may become more active communicators themselves. There are now plenty of citizen journalists, bloggers, tweeters and e-mailers. Consequently some politicians and journalists have felt compelled to insert themselves into this *mêlée*. As the authors interpret it, however, this is an incomplete process with diverse facets, eddies and possible ramifications (including the polarization of political stances and a strengthening of populist movements). Of course, much of this is itself horizontally directed. How far it has, or will have – and in what ways – a vertical momentum, reaching elites from the bottom up, as it were, remains to be seen.

The book stems from a fruitful mode of collaboration, being the joint product of leading political communication scholars based in Leeds in the United Kingdom and in Amsterdam in the Netherlands. This adds value to their work and illustrates three advantages of cross-national research. One is the pooling and adjustment of ideas from different but compatible academic settings. Another is the possibility of establishing that a phenomenon found in one national system is also manifest in another – thereby taking a step toward broader generalization. But yet another is the possibility of identifying how cross-nationally different macro-level characteristics of political communication systems (as a case in point, comparing Holland’s traditionally consensual political culture with Britain’s more adversarial one) may impinge on the organization, conduct or content of political communication at other levels.

The authors have adopted all three approaches with profit, although I happen to consider that the third represents comparative political communication analysis at its most revealing best.

Finally, what might this tell us about norms of citizenship and democracy? Different readers will no doubt interpret the book's findings in diverse ways. From my own point of view, two concerns emerge. One is reflected in the book's sub-title. The Primacy of Politics is certainly being challenged by developments on both dimensions of political communication – by mediatization horizontally and audience turbulence vertically. But is all that entirely healthy? When leaders have continually to look ahead to news media predilections while looking over their shoulders at disagreements, complaints and disaffection on the ground, how much space is left for them to tackle the issues of the day on their own complex terms? My other concern is about the kind of democracy that we may be inhabiting. The emerging political communication system that Brants, Voltmer and their colleagues portray seems more fragmented than in the past, more centrifugal than centripetal, shot through with multiple communication outlets, multiple voices and multiple issue agendas, all cycled (thanks especially to the ever-changing role of news values) and scene-shifted swiftly from one short time period to the next. For me, this conjures up an image more of a 'hit-and-run' democracy than, say, a deliberative one.

The excellence of this book reminds me, nostalgically, of how 33 years ago the late Michael Gurevitch (my dear long-standing collaborator and friend) and I argued that 'the study of political communication could be enriched by adoption of a systems outlook'. We itemized its advantages as follows:

First, it links diverse bodies of evidence in broader analytical perspectives. Second, there would be antidotes against the tendency to under- or over-emphasize any single element of the political communication system. Third, by drawing attention to system factors which might have macro-level consequences that could be measured and compared, cross-national investigations would be facilitated.

(Gurevitch & Blumler, 1977, p. 271)

These benefits are amply demonstrated in this book, and so, in the words of the rousing spiritual, I urge other scholars to:

Get on board, li'll chillun!

Get on board, li'll chillun!

Get on board li'll chillun!
There's room for many a more!

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1

Introduction: Mediatization and De-centralization of Political Communication

Kees Brants and Katrin Voltmer

Introduction

Over the past couple of decades, political communication has undergone dramatic changes, which are believed to have far-reaching consequences for the way in which democratic politics works. Never before have politicians put as much effort, resources and sophistication into communicating with citizens as today. But this seems to only further fuel public mistrust in the authority and honesty of political leaders. The traditional mass media – broadcasting and the printed press – are equally confronted with a shrinking and increasingly fragmented audience, whose volatile tastes and interests make it ever more difficult for the media to secure their survival. The young, in particular, no longer regard the information provided by professional journalism as relevant to their own lives and have instead turned to the wide and diffuse spaces of the Internet to satisfy their needs for entertainment and information. So, is political communication turning into a Babel in which new communication technologies, which exceed everything mankind has previously known, or even dreamed of, produce nothing more but grey noise of meaningless and disjointed messages nobody is listening to? What does it mean for modern democracy when those in power lose their ability to communicate with those they are supposed to represent? And what does it mean for journalism when the recognized language of professional news reporting is undermined by a growing chorus – some would call it cacophony – of divergent and alternative voices that have rarely been heard before in public? And, finally, where is the space for citizenship when there is no longer a central space, or modern ‘agora’, within which views and opinions can be expressed and challenged, and perhaps consensus achieved?

2 Introduction

This book sets out to address these questions. It aims to advance our understanding of the multiple and rapidly changing faces of political communication in contemporary democracy, a democracy both suffering from and challenged by the uncertainty of post-modernity: uncertainty about the content, process and location of politics; about the reliability and claims of truth and trust by both politicians and journalists; about the enduring value and role of grand narratives and ideologies; about the uneasy challenges coming from the implosion of the boundaries between high and popular culture; from the innovative and empowering possibilities of new technologies and from a public that can be optimistically demanding as well as negatively cynical. Some authors in this book may be more at ease with these characteristics of post-modernity and are inspired by its challenges; others feel more uncomfortable and either try to come to terms with what they find or point out the adverse effects.

The essays that are collected in this volume provide fresh insights, combined with new empirical evidence, into the dynamics of the public representation of politics that is now more media-centred and more demand-driven than ever before. The central hypothesis, which is addressed by all contributors to this volume from different angles and perspectives, assumes that political actors, such as governments, political parties and other elites of established political institutions, are losing control over the way in which politics is communicated and interpreted in the public sphere. Together the findings suggest a complex, often contradicting, dynamic process of centrifugal forces that pull political communication towards 'media logic', popular culture and consumerism. At the same time, political communication elites have been quick to develop new strategies of communication in the hope of maintaining, or regaining, their defining primacy and dominance in the public arena. Central to these processes of adaptation and innovation is an awareness of, and coming to terms with, an ever-shifting and ambiguous public that can be distrustful as well as involved, turning its back on media frenzy and spin while celebrating popular culture and embracing the opportunities that new communication technologies offer to them to express themselves and participate in public life.

Political communication scholars have tried to come to terms with these changes, and a large body of literature has been accumulated that is both rich and limited in scope: rich because of the broad range of concepts and empirical evidence it offers; limited because the majority of this research is confined to elections and the American context (see Bennett & Entman, 2001; Kaid, 2004). In this book we build on this work, but aim to expand

the perspective by discussing the changes in political communication from a comparative point of view with a focus on the United Kingdom and the Netherlands – although references to more global trends in political communication will be made throughout to keep in mind the wider context in which these two cases are embedded. Furthermore, we suggest an analytical framework that will enable us to understand the interconnectedness of different developments that are presently occurring simultaneously. In the following section we elaborate on how this model can be utilized to understand the fundamental changes that are taking place in contemporary political communication. This will be complemented by a discussion of the rationale for the two-country comparison of this book, followed by a brief overview of individual contributions.

Towards an analytical framework

The changes in contemporary political communication can be understood as taking place in two distinct, albeit closely interrelated dimensions. The horizontal dimension describes the relationship between politicians and the media – that is, the political communication elites who together, but also in competition with each other, are creating and disseminating political messages for mass consumption. The vertical dimension denotes the interaction between the two sets of political communication elites on the one hand, and the citizens as the ultimate addressee of these messages on the other. Together these two dimensions of change encompass the triangular relationship between political actors, the media and the audience that has previously been described within the social and institutional space of political communication (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995). Figure 1.1 presents this argument graphically.

It has to be noted that the arrows in the model refer to assumed developments rather than directions of influence, as is usually expressed by arrows. We conceptualize the main development on the horizontal dimension as ‘mediatization’, and that on the vertical as ‘de-centralization’. These bold arrows represent the central hypothesis of this book, stipulating a loss of control of politicians and political institutions over the public debate. The arrows in reverse direction denote counter-strategies and contradicting developments that strengthen the central role of the political vis-à-vis the growing dominance of ‘media logic’ and new forms of citizenship.

Mediatization: The horizontal dimension

The relationship between politicians and journalists has always been characterized by a high degree of ambivalence that shifts between

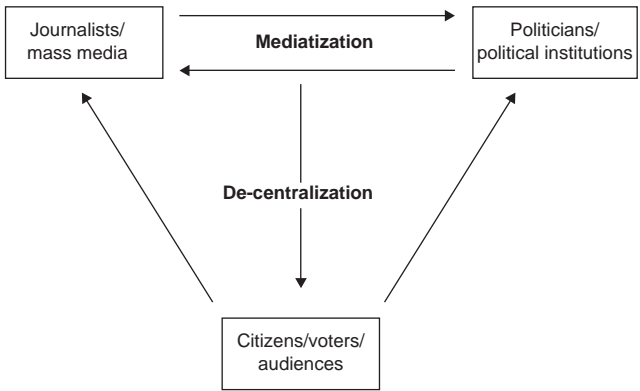


Figure 1.1 Changes in political communication

complicity and open power struggle. As Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) have pointed out, these two sets of actors are constantly involved in negotiations over the political agenda that is publicly communicated, the frames in which contested issues and political realities are defined, and the visibility and image of its players. Since both actors depend on each other's resources to achieve their own goals – politicians need the media for publicity, journalists need politicians as authoritative sources of information – the authors assume an overall balanced power relationship between these actors.

Recent literature has challenged this view, arguing that the power balance is increasingly shifting towards a situation where the media have the ultimate control over the public agenda (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008; see also Stamper & Brants and Voltmer & Brants, in this volume). The notion of subsequent 'ages' of political communication put forward by some of these authors implies a more or less linear development from the media being subordinate to political actors who are able to instrumentalize them for their own purposes, through a balanced relationship as described in Blumler and Gurevitch's approach, to a media-centred political process that is dominated by the media's logic of presenting political matters. In contrast, Bennett (1990) comes to very different conclusions when analysing the influences that shape the public agenda. According to his theory of 'indexing', rather than challenging the dominant elite discourse, the media mainly follow the way in which the government defines the salience and framing of political problems.

These contradictory views indicate that changes in the relationship between political actors and the media are unlikely to follow a uni-directional pattern, and that the degree of control each side is able to exert varies according to various factors, such as the issue at hand, events that might favour or damage the authority and credibility of one of the actors involved, shifts in public opinion, institutional changes, the introduction of new communication technologies and – last but not least – the particular cultural and political context in which political communication takes place.

A key concept for describing the coming of the ‘third age’ of political communication is the notion of mediatization. Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999) distinguish between ‘mediation’ and ‘mediatization’ to identify this change. While the former refers to a simple transmission of messages through media technologies or media organizations, the latter goes much further, describing a situation ‘where political institutions [are] increasingly ... dependent and shaped by mass media’ (p. 247). Meyer’s (2002) notion of ‘mediacracy’, where the political process is ‘colonized’ by the imperatives of the media game, points in a similar direction. However, both Mazzoleni and Schulz, and Meyer emphasize that mediatization does not mean that politics is taken over by the media, since political institutions retain their ability to function according to their own rules and objectives. Nevertheless, it remains an open question as to what extent dependence on the media and adaptation to their logic of operation does indeed gradually affect the process and institutional structure of politics, and even the policy outcomes of political decision making (Koch-Baumgarten & Voltmer, 2010).

News management and political marketing can be seen as an attempt by political actors to regain the upper hand in the communication process. This is particularly evident during election campaigns. Political parties around the world have made great efforts to professionalize their campaign strategies in order to win an increasingly volatile electorate (Lees-Marshment 2004; Negrine, Mancini & Holtz-Bacha, 2007; Swanson & Mancini, 1996; see also Brown in this volume). A key element of the professionalization of campaign communication is its adaptation to the media’s values and operational logic of presenting political matters. As a consequence, election campaigns – and political communications in general – have become more candidate-centred, image-driven, polarized and spectacular, and less organized around issues and ideologies (Patterson, 1993).

However, mediatization comes at a price, because the struggle for control forces political actors to accept the terms and conditions of

'media logic'. Even if one does not agree with Meyer's (2002) claim of a 'colonization' of politics by the media, the rise of strategic news management has far-reaching effects. First, mediatization has changed the way in which political parties organize and select their top personnel. Party leaders are more likely to be chosen because of their ability to deal with the media rather than their skills of building alliances across social groups and factions. The shift towards media campaigns has also led to a centralization of party hierarchies and the growing influence of 'spin doctors' on the decision-making process while local activists and grass-root canvassing have become marginalized (Bennett & Manheim, 2001; Wring, 2005).

Second, professional news management has eventually undermined the foundations of cooperation between journalists and politicians. As political actors become more sophisticated at playing the media game journalists feel increasingly instrumentalized and threatened in their independence. This has resulted in a 'spiral of mistrust' between these two groups, characterized by an evolving culture of disrespect and mutual contempt (Brants et al., 2010). For example, in Britain the rising power of 'spin doctors' turned the initial 'honeymoon' between journalists and the Labour party's charismatic leader Tony Blair into an atmosphere of growing hostility and suspicion. In the 2001 general election the media made 'spin' a dominant issue by disdaining whatever message the Labour Party brought to the public agenda. Eventually, after a series of dramatic confrontations, especially with the BBC, the government came to appreciate the adverse effects of excessive control (Jones, 1999; McNair, 2004).

Third, rather than winning the hearts and minds of citizens, strategic communication is believed to have contributed further to undermining public trust not only in politicians, but – more worryingly – in democratic institutions. As readers, listeners and viewers learn to recognize the manufactured nature of news, cynicism and disillusionment with politics grows and with it a dramatic erosion of trust and political engagement (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; see also De Vreese & Elenbaas in this volume).

So far, our discussion of mediatization has focused on political actors and their strategies to control the public representation of politics. Turning to the media, journalism has undergone equally fundamental changes. Following extensive commercialization and the subsequent segmentation of audiences, journalists have taken on more varied roles. First, the increasing competition in the media landscape has forced journalists to respond to the logic of the market and to take the needs

and interests of their audiences more seriously into account when covering political issues. While the disappearance of journalistic paternalism should be welcomed, the consequence of market-driven journalism is frequently translated into the widely observed de-politicization of political coverage, with hard news becoming marginalized to give way to a style of political reporting that is guided by political personae and celebrity culture (see, for conflicting data, Vliegthart, Boomgaarden & Boumans in this volume). New hybrid formats have emerged that mix political information and entertainment, such as infotainment, politainment, political talk shows and reality television. Meanwhile, political reporting is increasingly characterized by tabloidization. No longer are human interest stories, sensationalism and colloquial language confined to the tabloid press. The quality press and public service news programmes are employing similar formats to attract new audiences, or at least to prevent a further erosion of circulation rates (Brants, 1998; Franklin, 1997; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000). While many observers have expressed concerns about these trends as a 'dumbing down' of news quality, others have found that the new formats of presenting politics have the potential to attract the interest of audiences that would otherwise stay away from political information (Baum, 2002; see also Van Zoonen, Coleman & Kuik in this volume).

Second, journalists have largely abandoned their traditional mix of sacerdotal, subservient yet at the same time investigative orientation towards political authorities and institutions to take on a more pro-active and adversarial role in the political communication process. Political coverage has adopted more interpretative framing, focusing on the strategy behind political decisions and the ulterior motives of politicians, on conflicts between parties and politicians and on where politics has failed, while what has been achieved seems to have less of a news value. In some instances media have even launched campaigns for particular issues (for example, the 'naming and shaming' of paedophiles in the UK and miscarriages of justice in the Netherlands). This development seems to indicate, in some instances, a more populist, anti-establishment and moral crusader style of empathic journalism; in others, a politicization of journalism, which, however, is driven by commercial interests and sensationalism rather than the watchdog ethos or conventional partisanship that have traditionally inspired critical reporting (Allan, 1999; McNair, 1999).

To sum up, while the relationship between political actors and the media is a highly ambiguous one and involves contradictory developments that have taken place simultaneously, mediatization has made

'media logic' an integral part of day-to-day politics. Furthermore, new journalistic roles and the new trend of adversarial and interpretative journalism are posing a fundamental threat to politicians' traditional role as shapers of political news and leaders of public opinion. Even so, the assumption of a uni-linear trend towards ever more mediatization, which seems to underlie the notion of successive 'ages' of political communication, appears questionable, as politicians begin to recognize the limitations and trade-offs of strategic communication. It also seems to ignore the existence of an active public and the potential of the Internet to counter the assumed linearity, which will be discussed in the next section.

De-centralization: The vertical dimension

The vertical dimension of our model refers to the relationship between political communication elites – media and political officials – on the one hand, and ordinary people in their role as citizens, voters or audiences, on the other. Changes in this dimension can be described as de-centralization. As citizens increasingly challenge the legitimacy and credibility of institutionalized politics as well as traditional media institutions, they are turning away from 'high politics' towards alternative or simply non-political spheres of communication.

One important driving force that challenges the primacy of politics in the vertical dimension is the partial disappearance of the citizen, at least as we know him or her from textbooks of liberal democracy. Participation in elections has declined dramatically, as has membership of and engagement in traditional political organizations, such as political parties and trade unions. Meanwhile, large parts of the citizenry have opted out from following political information as conveyed by news and current affairs programmes. It is particularly the younger generation of citizens who show such alarming signs of disengagement from mainstream political communication.

However, this does not necessarily mean that people have withdrawn from politics altogether. Instead, new forums of public debate have been created at the fringes of the governmental political process that attract specific segments of the population. By employing new styles of communication and focusing on a different range of issues, these alternative public spheres provide information that people experience as more relevant to their daily lives than mainstream news. While political parties are losing their followers and failing to recruit new ones, large numbers of citizens, especially of the younger generation, engage in issue-specific political action, ranging from local concerns to

anti-globalization movements (Norris, 2002). Another emerging form of political engagement is political consumerism. It describes a shift in citizens' orientations away from established ideologies that present values and policies as coherent packages and towards single issues and pragmatic solutions. In this view, political parties are seen as service providers who offer health care, education, public transport and so on, but no longer attract long-lasting loyalties or passions. Instead, daily activities like buying certain products and rejecting others, patterns of consumption and lifestyle choices are used as manifestations of political preferences that cut across the established lines of partisan politics (Bennett, 2003; Lewis, Inthorn & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005; see also Ward in this volume).

The Internet has emerged as the major communication space where these developments are taking place. It provides a forum where people can express and share their views within virtual communities that crystallize around a broad range of people, topics, tastes and concerns. The Internet has also become a powerful tool of mobilization, through which political action – from electronic sit-ins, to spontaneous mobs to highly organized international demonstrations – may be initiated within a very short period of time and across national boundaries. With its openness, interactive structure and flexibility, the Internet has fundamentally changed the position of the public from simply being at the consuming end of political communication to active, creative and vocal citizenship. With regard to the shifts in power indicated by the vertical dimension, it can be hypothesized that online communication may further exacerbate the marginalization of institutionalized politics. By allowing for many-to-many exchange of ideas, the Internet has created opportunities for bottom-up communication, for the expression of the public's worries and desires, for participation in interactive policy making, and for the citizen consumer to politicize consumption and press for companies' corporate social responsibility (Scammell, 2000; see also Graham and, for a less optimistic view, Coleman, Morrison & Yates in this volume).

The Internet has also created opportunities for countering the traditional top-down communication of existing mass media, through the activist online journalism of alternative watchdog sites like Indymedia, DotJournalism (UK) and Extra! (Netherlands), and through the citizen journalists who use weblogs, digital cameras and mobile phones to communicate news and opinions and often distance themselves from the values of their professional counterparts. These developments have the potential to pose a serious threat to professional journalism and

might ultimately change the nature of political news (for a critical discussion of this see Bakker & Paterson in this volume).

Even though forms of de-centred politics provide new opportunities for political debate and participation, it remains an open question as to whether they have actually engaged otherwise detached and passive citizens. It might well be that they have simply provided already politically active members of the public with additional options to complement their already effective repertoire of participation, thereby further widening the gap between those who have a say and those who remain in oblivion. Another concern about de-centred politics is the potential of a multiplicity of public spheres to increase fragmentation and even 'balkanization' (Sunstein, 2001), in which separate communicative communities breed their own narrow world views, if not prejudices, without taking into account the views of other people, or indeed society as a whole.

Another consequence of the de-centralization of politics is that it introduces what has traditionally been regarded the non-political sphere into the political realm. The commercialization of the media has made popular culture a multi-billion dollar industry and a dominant part of everyday life that shapes the lifestyle and identity of citizens, and in turn what they expect from politics and politicians. As Corner and Pels (2003, p. 2) argue, by trying to adopt features of a culture industry, politics is 'blurring the boundaries and levelling the hierarchy between "high" political representation and "low" popular entertainment' (but see, for a more open position on this issue, Van Zoonen, Coleman & Kuik in this volume). Party conventions have been turned into showbiz events, and political conflicts into serialized soap operas. For example, in Britain the relationship between ex-Prime Minister Tony Blair and his successor Gordon Brown has been portrayed as a drama of friendship, rivalry, betrayal, victories and defeats. Conversely, when immersing themselves into the world of entertainment and fantasy people do not enter a 'politics-free zone'. As Street (2001, p. 60–79) argues, entertainment – films, comedy, soap operas, popular music, and so on – communicates a view of politics through the stories it tells, the personalities of its heroes and villains and the values it promotes, even though politics is not explicitly mentioned (see also Cardo in this volume).

Both journalists and politicians have responded to the shift of power away from the centres of institutionalized politics in various ways, ranging between desperation and genuine attempts to reinvigorate public debate and bring citizens back in. Realising that an elite-driven, top-down style of communication is one of the major impediments for a

viable relationship with their constituencies, politicians have embarked on strategies to meet people where they are. Populism is probably the most significant development that has successfully merged media logic with anti-elitist politics (Mazzoleni, Stewart & Horsfield, 2003). So far, populist politics has mainly been employed by outsider candidates whose radical rhetoric, emotional appeals and charismatic personalities have secured them extensive media coverage, as their style conveniently fits the requirements of a more market-driven and empathic journalism. The rise (and death) of Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands provides an example of the symbiotic relationship between populist leaders and the media. The considerable popularity and electoral success of populist leaders has forced established parties to adopt both stylistic and content-related elements of their populist rivals.

Like the ongoing changes on the horizontal dimension of political communication the dynamics in the relationship between political communication elites and citizens is ambiguous and complex. Both hypotheses – mediatization and de-centralization – imply a process whereby established political communication elites are losing their ability to control the public debate and the way in which political issues are framed. However, politicization of the periphery and de-politicization of the common ground of day-to-day politics are occurring simultaneously, leading to entirely new patterns of political communication. Meanwhile, political actors and the media alike are learning to adapt to the challenges – and unprecedented opportunities – of a demand-driven communication environment that opens up new avenues of direct communication with consumers and voters. A striking example of this process of adopting new formats of communication for traditional politics is Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, in which his effective use of new communication technologies ignited an enthusiasm for 'old' politics that many observers believed had been lost forever.

Mediatization and de-centralization in comparative perspective

The discussion in the previous section has been conducted at a rather abstract and generalized level. However, the degree and forms of changes in political communication are to a large extent determined by the cultural and political context in which they take place and thus cannot be assumed to be universal. This book therefore takes a comparative perspective by including analyses of political communication in two countries whose political institutions and media systems differ

in significant ways: the Netherlands and the UK. According to Hallin and Mancini's (2004) conceptual framework of comparative political communication research, the two countries fall into different ideal-typical models, with the Netherlands categorized as 'democratic corporatist' and the UK falling into the north-Atlantic 'liberal' model.

While both countries are parliamentary systems, the British parliament is elected through a majoritarian, first-past-the-post system, resulting in the dominance of two main political parties that have alternated in forming the government. (However, the 2010 election seems to have upset this regularity, with a third party, the Liberal Democrats, challenging both the hegemony of the established two-party system and the electoral system that so much favours it.) In contrast, the Dutch political system uses proportional voting that always leads to multi-party government coalitions. It can be assumed that these institutional differences are reflected in a particular political communication culture (Pfetsch, 2004), with a more confrontational relationship between politicians and the media in the UK and a more consensus-orientated communication culture in the Netherlands. Previous research has also shown that strategic news management is less advanced in more consensus-oriented countries like the Netherlands, while the fight for the median voter in a two-party system encourages professional news management and spin (Brants & Van Praag, 2006; see also Brown in this volume).

The two countries also differ with regard to their respective media systems. For example, in the Netherlands tabloid newspapers have been largely unknown, whereas public service broadcasting was for a long time highly politicized along the established 'pillars' of political cleavages, although the significance of this is now fading, and the interactions between media organizations and political parties are changing. On the other hand, the British press has been, and still is, characterized by sharp ideological divisions and a strong and highly competitive tabloid market, while a strong public service broadcasting sector, led by the BBC, provides a national forum of balanced reporting. The segmentation of the British media into high- and low-quality and opposing partisanship alongside a strong marketization is assumed to result in a stronger pull towards 'media logic' that does not stop at the gates of public service broadcasting.

Finally, both societies have seen large numbers of immigrants over the past decades and have subscribed to the ideals of a multi-cultural society. While people have historically shown a great deal of tolerance (or quiet indifference) towards the diversity of cultures and lifestyles, this has recently come under threat on both sides of the Channel.

However, it is only in the Netherlands that populist leaders with a strong anti-immigration agenda have gained wide-spread popular support (see Van Praag & Adriaansen in this volume). This is not to say that the British press, in particular its tabloid papers, have not adopted populist rhetoric: on the contrary. But it seems that so far the political elites in Britain have largely resisted the populist temptation, and that the majoritarian voting system has proven an effective bulwark against the rise of populist parties.

Most of chapters in this book present a direct comparison between the two countries (Bakker & Paterson; Brown; de Vreese & Elenbaas; Stamper & Brants; Van Zoonen, Coleman & Kuik; Voltmer & Brants; Vliegthart, Boomgaarden & Boumans; Ward). Where, due to the lack of available data, this did not prove feasible, topics were ideally covered by complementary chapters that explore the issue from the perspective of each of the countries. Comparing a broad range of developments and aspects of political communication in such diverse political cultures as the UK and the Netherlands within a coherent theoretical framework as outlined in this introductory chapter provides a unique opportunity to challenge established assumptions and to expand our understanding of continuity and change in political communication. The comparative perspective can lead to surprising discoveries as to where differences and similarities lie, and force us to posit explanations as to the underlying forces that bring about these patterns. Thus, comparative research reduces the trap of national idiosyncrasies, whereby a single case can reflect an unexpected and unknown exception instead of presuming that it applies everywhere. It reduces the US (and sometimes UK) focus that dominates most political communication research, where it has sometimes led to biased, even mistaken assumptions about the nature of the relationship between politics and the media. And, finally, although in this case only two countries are covered, comparison invites a reflection on the possibility of broader generalizations.

The overall structure of this book follows the theoretical framework that aims to unpack the divergent and interrelated developments of mediatization and de-centralization and the counter-movements this may trigger.

Part I brings together two theoretical essays that present innovative conceptual approaches to the understanding of political communication in contemporary democracy. De Beus, focusing on the horizontal dimension, draws on, and further elaborates, the notion of audience democracy, whereas Coleman, looking more at the vertical dimension,

reflects on the changing nature of representation as a performative and mediated act.

Part II is devoted to the horizontal relationship between political actors and the media and the struggles and strategies this involves. Two chapters in this section (Brown; De Vreese & Elenbaas) zoom in on the politics of spin, with the former providing an institutional explanation for different levels of the professional use of spin in different national contexts, and the latter investigating the effects of 'metacoverage' of spin doctors on public perceptions. In their chapter, Vliegthart, Boomgaarden and Boumans trace the changing patterns of political coverage over time, and challenge the assumptions of a general trend towards personalization, conflict and negativity. Stamper and Brants then explore the changes in political journalism through the eyes of those involved – journalists and politicians – and how these actors explain and evaluate such trends. The study by Voltmer and Brants uses political broadcast interviews to analyse how politicians and journalists negotiate control over the political agenda of the day in front of an 'overhearing audience'. Finally, Van Zoonen, Coleman and Kuik look into the experiences of politicians who have chosen to leave the 'safe' and established realms of political news programmes and appear on comedy shows, which may provide them with opportunities to show their authenticity, humour and 'normality'. Together the chapters of this part demonstrate (and sometimes challenge) the assumed mediatization of politics, the increasing tensions between political and media actors, their mutual perceptions and the strategies they employ as ways to maintain their autonomy and to emphasize their professionalism.

Part III turns to the vertical dimension of political communication by linking the changing relationship between politicians and journalists with the tendency towards de-centralization, which is presumed to strengthen the position of the general public in the face of the political and media elites. The first two chapters of this part investigate the growing distance between citizens and their elected representatives. Coleman, Morrison and Yates use focus group discussions to explore the reasons why people in the UK feel increasingly disconnected from political life and party politics. Van Praag and Adriaansen discuss the erosion of traditional party alliances and the emergence of populist politics in the Netherlands. Ward's study looks at the scope and forms of political consumerism and questions its effectiveness as political participation. Bakker and Paterson take a similarly sceptical view when analysing the impact of citizen journalism on established professional journalism. The two final chapters then explore the political

in the world of entertainment and popular culture: Graham discovers lively political discussions on the Internet discussion forums linked to the reality television shows *Big Brother* and *Wife Swap*, while Cardo analyses how the format of *Big Brother* imitates political forms of participation.

A summary discussion of the findings of the book and a broader outlook on their implication is finally provided by Corner's Afterword, which identifies overarching themes and issues, and points at new lines of enquiry for future research.

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Part I

New Approaches to Political Communication

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2

Audience Democracy: An Emerging Pattern in Postmodern Political Communication

Jos de Beus

Introduction

Mediacracy, government by spectacle, plebiscitary democracy, spectator democracy, telecracy, informational politics, public relations democracy, mobocracy, drama democracy, fan democracy, blockbuster democracy, media democracy, monitory democracy: the lack of a fixed technical term for political communication in postmodern Western societies is revealing. Accounts splinter off in all directions and are often moralizing and adversarial.¹ What they generally share is a concern over what was once apparently a symbiotic relationship, a reasonable and comfortable living-apart-together. The relationship between politicians and journalists, between party and press, was considered a *marriage de raison* in which one more or less depended on the other: journalists needed politicians for news about government and for information about what took place in the policy process; politicians needed journalists for news about society and for media exposure – to be seen to be acting responsibly and in the public's interest. It is as if the partners have since filed for a divorce and the marital quarrels are fought out openly.

Not to add to the confusion, but on the basis of its theoretical relevance and heuristic value in understanding the political behaviour of journalists and media, I want to focus on yet another concept, the model of *démocratie du public* or audience democracy, developed by the French-American political theorist Bernard Manin (1997). It starts with the liberal principles of democracy, namely: free elections, independence for elected politicians, freedom of expression for voters and free debate about public decisions. It explores the transformation of such principles in a historical sequence: the turn from parliamentarianism after the bourgeois revolutions in the United States, the Netherlands

and France to audience democracy in the West since the end of the Cold War and the 'third wave' of democratization, via a long interlude of 'parties' democracy'. Furthermore, the model of audience democracy focuses on the public sphere and the laborious transition from politics with a core of party conferences, characterized by social cleavages, inclusive (and overlapping) membership and deferential news media, to a politics with a core of television programmes, characterized by public troubles, campaign parties and assertive news media.

In this chapter, I will briefly outline the main features of audience democracy, with Manin's view given first. Then, on the basis of a number of propositions, I will elaborate the interplay between public politicians and political journalists. Next, I will examine the role of campaign parties in conflict resolution and leadership – and the way in which they adapt the obsolete mass-membership party to the new world of multimedia networks without neglecting the need for public policy innovation and restoration of ties between the citizen and the state. I will conclude with a discussion of the resilience of the freedom of professional politicians and journalists.

A theory in four features

While not doing full justice to Manin's theory of audience democracy one could summarize it as conceptualizing the development, in the 20 years since 1990, from traditional parties' democracy – where the political party was the dominant actor in the field of politics, the party programme the leading principle and competence the virtue for which politicians strived and with which they legitimized their politics – to audience democracy – in which personalities are favoured over the party, performance over the programme and authenticity over competence. Audience democracy resonates with Edelman's (1967) notion of symbolic politics. He claimed, 30 years before Manin, that the instrumental dimension of politics was gradually being replaced by a dramaturgical one and by spectacle, while political actors employed symbols and rituals for public consumption via the media.

In terms of real world trends or testable hypotheses, Manin's audience democracy boils down to liberal politics meeting the world of communication (Manin, 1997, p. 235). The first two features of his theory reflect the decline of cleavage and ideology in nation states (see Gallagher, Laver & Mair, 2005). The latter two reflect the beginning of strategies of going public by both outsiders/losers and insiders/winners on competing media markets (see Kernell, 1986).²

First, the election of those who govern becomes an interplay between trustful voters who pay attention to the personal qualities of candidates, and the candidates who frame their trustworthy qualities in the public sphere with the help of media experts. This can be labelled the *personalization of support of politics* (particularly parties).

Second, the relative independence of politicians from the desires of the electorate is constituted by an increasing degree of political vagueness in image-based campaign commitments. Policy statements, personal promises and think-tank concepts — under the guise of formal deals with the people — crowd-out party principles, party manifestos and subcultures of the rank and file. This feature is the *loosening of party mandate* and, possibly, of *political consent* and *the social contract*.

Third, freedom to have opinions published is increasingly realised by media owners, professional journalists and Internet reporters who are assertive, competitive and independent of the party political system. The frequency of opinion polls illustrates this. Media-based accounts of the impact of public policy on people's lives and preferences provide special restrictions and incentives for politicians in rewarding the public through policy benefits and controlling the public's reception of policy proposals. This is the feature of *growth and differentiation of publicity, media criticism, and constant surveillance of party government by social forces in the public sphere*.

Finally, it is increasingly common for politicians to meet assertive journalists, experts, ordinary citizens, leaders of interest groups and the like. The audience that is watching, listening, reading and talking includes a growing segment of heterogeneous and floating voters who are 'well-informed, interested in politics, and fairly educated' (Manin, 1997, p. 232). This is the feature of *perpetual and horizontal campaigning by authorities themselves and by those who oppose authorities* (in which both sides are often party-based). It is perpetual because political parties continue their (costly) pursuit of popular support after elections. It is horizontal because no single authority can maintain a privileged position in media discourse.

In an audience democracy citizens reason retrospectively (what did politicians do for us since the last election; did they keep their promise?), while leaders reason prospectively (how will voters assess our record in the next election; will they reward our effort?) – see Fiorina (1981). The preferences of citizens and their aggregate demand for public goods are not fixed. They are the strategic outcomes of enterprising politicians who set the terms of public choice by means of persuasion and discussion. Citizens seem less sovereign as voters than as consumers.

Since the analogy between political competition and market competition breaks down here, Manin proposes to replace Schumpeter's market metaphor of democratic elitism (Schumpeter, 1942) with the metaphor of the theatre. Representatives are performers making and selling policies and policy proposals, constituencies are spectators, while journalists are reviewers (Manin, 1997, p. 226).³ Manin's theory of the public politician is, however, as elitist as Schumpeter's in its empirical assumptions about the decline of powerful cadre members, the erosion of partisan loyalties in the electorate and the surge of non-institutionalized mass participation.⁴

Reformulating Manin: The interplay between public politicians ...

Realising its shortcomings, I will reformulate audience theory in terms of the following propositions, testable assumptions about the ways and means politicians employ to control, improve and (re)direct their position of power and their visible performance in the political process. I have numbered the propositions that relate to politicians P1–P7.

Empirical proof for this theory of the behaviour of politicians and parties will not be presented. The claims made, however, seem sufficiently strong and stable, and other chapters in this book will provide the necessary 'pudding', if not necessarily for all propositions or all of the proof.

Proposition P1. Political leaders, that is, party leaders, parliamentary leaders and leaders of government, tend to see and present themselves as autonomous and central, rather than as subordinate to other powerful and authoritative leaders in democratic society (such as corporate managers and shareholders, the higher clergy, policy experts, famous public intellectuals) who determine access to parliament and government. The constraints and incentives of audience democracy make it impossible for politicians to become credible leaders if they give the impression to their public that they are reading from a fixed script written by someone else, or improvising according to the assumed taste of the audience. In brief: politicians here and now reject some higher power beyond politics as well as a secondary place within politics.⁵

Proposition P2. Citizens who have rhetorical competence and radiate power on screen – those who possess aura or 'spray-on charisma' – will gain access to a predominantly national network of representation (Rieff, 2007, pp. 3–13). They will become winners and leaders after entry, and will survive contests with other strong politicians. If, at some point, they lose dramatically and are expelled, they may return to the party

system by creating and using a voice in the media system (publishing books or writing columns, appearing on popular talk shows, elaborating contacts with high-ranking journalists). Citizens without such media qualities will not achieve these political goods, unless they run special campaigns that stress the advantages of a lack of acting and aura, as, for example, an indication of self-sacrificing and quiet problem-solving. Nevertheless, performance in the public sphere – particularly that of the television screen – has become so important that politicians without such skills are likely to lose in the short run and become extinct in the long run.

Proposition P3. New generations of politicians will no longer be selected from old professions like the military, the civil service, judiciary, economics or newspaper journalism. They will be selected from new professions in the service economy, such as marketing, acting, popular TV-journalism, mass media ownership, popular arts (such as pop music) and popular sports, or from among the ‘stars’ of old professions (celebrity lawyers, scholars, entrepreneurs). Thus, younger politicians will be less rooted in a tradition of stratification (establishment, high culture, pecking order) than older ones.

Proposition P4. Politicians consider their front-stage appearance ‘in the full light of television cameras’ to be crucial for constructing and reaching target publics, without necessarily engaging face-to-face with them. They improve their appearance continuously by means of special knowledge and skills that they achieve through media training, media monitoring, the use of focus groups and other electoral research. They try to shape their own public relations in order to create and maintain power and authority, and perform in ways leaders are supposed to, such as defining a situation, embodying unity and changing arguably obsolete laws. They surround themselves with teams of media experts who are able to spin the news, their desired image and that of their rivals. In brief: television matters to the success of politicians and their party factions, ministries and constituencies.

Proposition P5. Political leaders are becoming stage directors, engaged in the making of credible representations of personalities, issues, divisions in society and politics, and in presenting the way out of the quagmire. They command a small army of loyal and experienced electoral experts, media experts and public policy experts, and experts in recruitment, finance, external relations and in canvassing volunteers. They mould their parties, parliamentary groups, government coalitions and ministries (in the case of incumbent leaders) into smooth parts of a permanent campaigning machine. Both the assignment of personnel

(elected politicians as members of the party team, civil servants as political assistants, appointed managers in the public sector as friends of the leader) and the selection of issues (manifestos, strategies, policies) are biased from the point of view of popular public representation: does the right party message reach the right public (Blumenthal, 1982)?⁶ In short, and like a characteristic soundbite: the campaign ain't over as long as the show goes on.

Proposition P6. Political parties will try to influence and control journalism by what is termed news management or, more pejoratively, 'news manipulation'. The media may be managed through direct contacts with owners, editors and reporters, off-the-record briefings and embedding of journalists. Information may be managed through controlled assignment or leaking of items and messages to privileged journalists, and the framing of issues, bypassing established media and dreaded interviewers, and twisting and spinning the news. Image may be managed through advertisements, appearances on popular TV shows that may be a-political or even anti-political and the provision of human-interest stories to highlight the friendly face of parties and their candidates. Finally, the internal relations of the party may be managed to show unity, enthusiasm and decisiveness, and to keep political opponents and independent or hostile journalists from exploiting division and pessimism within the party. In brief: politicians have defensive and offensive goods to invest in the management of political news.

Proposition P7. Politicians who control or make public policy are increasingly dependent on the news cycle and the information revealed by investigative journalism, rather than on party sources (members, local branches, interest groups with party ties), state sources (civil service) and scientific sources (free). The media have become the most important source of information about the everyday lives and common views of ordinary citizens, voters and clients of public policy. The most difficult case of this, from the point of view of self-interested politicians, involves news hypes and political scandals, in which party political news management becomes suspect. In brief: politicians have to come to terms with informational dependency and a tension between such dependency and a quasi-narcissistic self-image of political leaders.

... and political journalists

Manin's formulation of the model of audience democracy does not contain a block of coherent and testable propositions about the political behaviour of journalists and media on a par with such blocks

on politicians and parties. I will try to build that block by bringing in the literature on media logic.

This literature reflects particularly upon the contemporary transformation of media technology, inter-media competition, professional journalism, popular culture, news and infotainment. It claims that democratic societies have moved from a party or partisan logic of communication – in which politicians were the dominant actors and journalists mere lap dogs – to a media logic, in which the media system dominates the party system. Through mediatization politicians have to buy into and live up to the ‘laws’ of media selection and production in order to get journalistic attention and exposure. Between those two logics – via a brief parenthesis in ‘the long 1960s’, when the media performed more in the public interest than what the public or the party was interested in – political communication was characterized by a public logic during which journalists performed as watchdogs, a role-perception that is still strong within their professional culture. I will formulate my understanding of media logic as a set of propositions in Manin’s conceptual framework (see Altheide & Snow; Brants & van Praag, 2006), which I have numbered J1 (Journalists 1) to J7.

Proposition J1. Journalists and other agents in the media system (owners, managers, editors) tend to see and present themselves as autonomous and central, rather than as subordinate to politicians and other holders of power in democratic societies. There is nothing new here, but there is a shift of priorities. The constraints and incentives of audience democracy, combined with a competitive media market, make it unattractive if not impossible for journalists to reach publics as consumers by acting as an additional instrument of the state (lapdog). In brief: journalism is emancipated, accepted and entrenched in the mainstream culture of society and politics.⁷

Proposition J2. Journalists and other agents in the media system tend to see and present themselves as a distinct power *versus* the branches of government and other powers that be (bureaucracy, big business). In that perception they watch over such political powers on behalf of sovereign citizens and as such constitute a countervailing power against state tyranny as well as a stabilizing force in the public interest. Journalists hold the belief that, without media criticism, democracy becomes dysfunctional and drives towards basic illegitimacy. They also believe that material freedom of press, broadcasting and the Internet is part and parcel of the ideology or conventional wisdom of democratic society. In brief: both commercial and non-profit journalism concerning public affairs have a political dimension.

Proposition J3. Commercially successful and explicitly politically involved journalists and other agents in the media system tend to see and present themselves as spokespersons of the people. They believe that they (i) compete with members of parliament and government as well as non-elected members of civil associations that claim popular representation, attention and confidence of the public, (ii) complement traditional representatives or replace them and (iii) are in some cases superior in the art of representing the latent demands and opinions of ordinary people, particularly those who are worst off. In brief: journalism is an integral part of a general shift of the politics of representation and participation from the state sphere to the public sphere of civil society.

Proposition J4. Journalists and other agents in the media system are increasingly engaged in a mix of interpreting (sense-making), investigating (fact-finding) and entertaining (fun-making). With regard to the first function, this goes much further than the classical paternalist editorial. Journalists apply general frames (mental maps and accounts) more or less deliberately and strategically, in order to make sense of politics and clarify it for an audience of watchers, readers or listeners. With regard to investigation and entertainment, the system provides a more market-driven interpretation of what the public wants and thus what sells. In brief: without an interpretative/infotainment mix, journalism and media cannot survive competition, while politics tends to become complex and obscure, and citizens tend to become overloaded, ignorant and (not) amused.

Proposition J5. Journalists and other agents in the media system (try to) influence (weak J5) or determine (strong J5) the selection of politicians. The (televised) publicity platform has become a new arena for struggle and survival among politicians with a large impact on the old arenas (sessions of parliament, party conferences). In the hierarchy of decision-making regarding who will be interviewed and who will not, who will sit at the table of the popular talk show and who will not, and who will have to share the table with a soap celebrity and who will not, TV-programme makers, interviewers and talk show hosts come first in the negotiations, with ministers and party leaders good seconds. Second-order politicians lose out, even to second-order journalists. In particular, successful and committed journalism – see J3 – tries to make and break the pattern of losers and winners in democratic politics. In short: in the negotiations for a place on the (televised) publicity platform, journalists hold the winning hand.

Proposition J6. Journalists and other agents in the media system (try to) influence (weak J6) or determine (strong J6) the selection of issues.

They decide what topics are being discussed and what issues do not enter the sphere of publicized opinion. In so setting the media agenda, they influence the public's agenda of urgency – the issues that the public deems important and in need of a solution – and possibly the political agenda of non-decision-making or the issues that policymakers might prefer not to be discussed. Successful and involved journalism tries to penetrate the political process of agenda setting and debate, and to control its outcome. In short: in the negotiations on what will be discussed on the (televised) publicity platform, journalists hold the winning hand.

Proposition J7. Dominant frames of politics are strongly biased towards negativism. They stress struggle rather than compromise, division rather than unity, individuals and motives rather than issues and causes, power rather than ideals, politics rather than policy, meta-politics (matters of partisan strategy and tactics) rather than core politics (substantive public decisions), moral points of view rather than constitutional points of view, sentiment rather than argument, the entertaining rather than the serious or difficult, soft news rather than hard news, simplicity rather than complexity, the short-term rather than the long run, drama rather than routine, popular perspectives rather than elitist perspectives, and, last but not least, in performance, the negatives (costs, defeats, failures, dangers, crises) rather than the positives (benefits, triumphs, success stories, opportunities, solutions). In brief: dominant media frames are negative and conducive to the disintegration of democratic politics, other things being equal.

J7 is a statement of a specific theory – that of ‘media malaise’ – while Manin’s framework is general. The theory claims a causal connection between the negative portrayal of politics and politicians and negative political campaigning on the one hand, and the political cynicism of the public on the other. It does not tell us, however, why, as consumers of news, voters appreciate negativism and why competing politicians choose negativism as a dominant strategy. Nor does it explain why this journalism and its dominant frames must be conducive to populist politicians and the *vox populi*. The media malaise approach also neglects phenomena that reduce negativism, namely, informational dependency of journalists on powerful politicians and regular career moves of individual journalists from media to politics (on the payrolls of parties and ministries).⁸ Manin rightly suggests the perspective of open interplay between politicians and journalists in front of an educated audience. Such interplay may very well have neutral outcomes in an ongoing race between negativist and positivist voices, or even favourable outcomes

that enrich government and citizenship. So J7 should be restated as *Proposition J7**: The market shares of media and the frames of journalists are highly contested, while negativism has become a selling option.

Again, I do not examine the available evidence for this theory of the behaviour of media and journalists in audience democracy. My impression – and several of the following chapters may prove me right or wrong – is that the theory of political journalism, particularly the argument about its political power, is only ambivalently substantiated. As such it is more controversial than the theory of public party politics, even among practitioners themselves.

One cheer for audience democracy

In order to assess audience democracy as a mature and durable system of politics and political communication, we need, of course, an additional set of propositions about voters and media consumers as spectators. However, this chapter focuses on the horizontal dimension and the structural changes and tensions between politics and media. For that reason, I would like to turn to Montesquieu and Tocqueville, two of the early theorists on the role of public spheres (political associations, news media and public opinion leaders) in civil and democratic societies.⁹ Montesquieu's hope and Tocqueville's sorrow in this respect concerned the mediocrity of democratic competition in comparison with the excellence of aristocratic competition.

In the present case, the claim of mediocrity holds that, as a replacement for parties' democracy, audience democracy creates a system for the new century wherein the mass of middle-class voters is represented by moderate politicians and journalists whose rivalry promotes a standard of public policy that is satisfactory yet neither excellent nor miserable. (Higher-class voters were better off under nineteenth-century parliamentarianism; lower-class voters were better off under twentieth-century parties' democracy.) Such a claim is quite radical in the ongoing academic debate concerning the quality of postmodern political communication, where there is an abundance of strong statements about the general gains and losses of a transition from parties' democracy to audience democracy: a minority of optimists foresees progress in the intelligence of the public and the sensitivity of the government to the well-informed preferences of the public; a majority of pessimists foresees a backlash into ignorance of the many and insensitive government.¹⁰

The context of this claim of mediocrity is also interesting. Its first element is the current crisis of globalization in the West, on a par with

the crisis of the welfare state in the 1970s and the crisis of liberalism in the 1930s. Globalization has brought in its wake a plethora of anxieties and problems, ranging from the loss of Western geopolitical hegemony, the dramatic decline of economic sectors, the disappearance of landmarks of national industry (such as KLM in the Netherlands and Jaguar in the UK) and the changed composition of urban areas with what are sometimes perceived as 'no-go' ghettos, to trans-national organized crime (trafficking in human beings, in drugs) and the changed location of decision-making in supranational bodies. A second element is the unexpected sense of political dissatisfaction and distrust in the electorates of Western democracies since 1989, as seen in the 'low pressure' data of the Eurobarometer. Trust in government, political parties and politicians seems to be at an all time low, while cynicism – lack of trust in their integrity and their problem-solving ability – is growing. The third element is the return of populism and protests against alleged failure of state protection and treason by self-serving state elites, leaders of vested political parties included. While conspicuously absent in some countries, anti-establishment populism has been loud and present in France with Le Pen, in Belgium with De Winter, in Austria with Haider, in Italy with Berlusconi and Bossi, in Switzerland with Blocher and in the Netherlands with no fewer than three examples: Fortuyn, Verdonk and Wilders.

Within this context, I will now discuss and illustrate two elements of the mediocrity vis-à-vis excellence, and their proponents and antagonists: political issues and political personalities in audience democracy. The question of what is decided by whom remains one of the most important (dual) performance tests in politics.

Political issues: Conflict resolution

In the pessimistic view of the reality and future of audience democracy, the quality of conflict resolution and problem-solving will decrease, both absolutely and in comparison to the worst record of parties' democracy. Pessimists spell out scenarios of state collapse that repeat the history of fragile bourgeois government in Germany and Italy since 1918 and the history of overloaded progressive government in the West since the oil crises of the 1970s. State collapse will result from: (i) stagnation and failure of public policies due to the poor managerial skills of campaign politicians, (ii) the call of misinformed citizens for instant gratification by transparent policymakers, (iii) the excessive influence of media owners and journalists on the agenda and success of parties, parliaments and

governments, (iv) the obsession of political leaders and managers of the public sector with daily popular support and short-term interests of the public and (v) needless continuation or introduction of flawed designs, programmes and projects by the communicative state.

A survey of issues filling the agenda of contemporary campaign parties includes spectacular cases of state failure and sub-optimal policies: home-grown terror campaigns instigated by immigrants, the decline of competitiveness in the European regime of capitalism, the unsustainability of pension systems, and the occupation of Iraq. Nevertheless, Western audience democracies advance in societies that are still leading or at least satisfactory in terms of state capacity (such as the subsystems of taxation and poverty relief), moral integrity of public officials, peaceful conflict resolution and a number of indicators of performance (including reform legislation) and outcome such as economic growth, competitiveness, creativity, human development, economic liberty and happiness (see, for example, Putnam, 1993, pp. 63–82; Przeworski *et al.*, 2000; Dahl, 2006, p. 112).

In the optimistic view of audience democracy, the quality of conflict resolution and problem-solving will increase; rather than remain sufficient yet average (Oakeshott, 1975, p. 248; Urbinati, 2006, p. 158).¹¹ Politics, government and public administration will get better, both absolutely and relative to the best record of parties' democracy. Optimists spell out a scenario of excellent government, based on a movement of well-informed citizens, the countervailing power of journalists and interactive leadership and representation. This will install a public mode of legislation and policy-making (public relations, public discussion, public bargaining) and public feedback as a mechanism of the state (protest, review, reversal, correction).

A survey of potential outcomes would encompass the integration of immigrants in plural national states, the integration of such states in supranational regimes (so-called authority transfer, in particular European unification), welfare state reform (both of public expenditure and taxation), the waging of wars of choice on moral grounds (cosmopolitan humanitarianism, democratic imperialism) and an increased ability to cope with past injustices and/or national traumas (see De Beus, forthcoming). Although concise and global, the survey does include some success stories and satisfactory performances and outcomes – but it does not provide cases of excellent government in audience democracy to date.

Montesquieu saw intermediate talent and wealth of citizens as a feature of moderate government in a flourishing and well-ordered

republic, while Tocqueville complained about the mediocrity of parliamentary democracies. I observe such mediocrity in the pattern of resolution of issues in audience democracies when politicians and policymakers face electoral and institutional crises of globalism. I see mediocrity in the sense of an intermediate and volatile quality of politics and government as a modest compliment rather than an alarming charge. Campaign parties today do not have the same grip on media and public opinion held by yesterday's mass-membership parties. Still, they hold primary responsibility for managing the state and social order in difficult times: they create a tie between the impersonal system of government and the personal life of ordinary citizens, and they promote their own conception of the public interest against the conceptions of media outlets in the public sphere.

Political personalities: Leadership

Pioneers of audience democracy include the German chancellor Gerhard Schröder, the Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi and the Dutch parliamentary candidate Pim Fortuyn (all of whom were active in multi-party settings) and, in the two-party settings of the UK and US, Prime Minister Tony Blair, President Bill Clinton, presidential candidate Ross Perot and Arnold Schwarzenegger, Governor of California (see De Beus, forthcoming). All of these leaders seem to have moved from mass-party leadership (based on procedural authority, insider standing, trustee view, paternalist bias and linkage to old professions in the industrial economy) to campaign-party leadership (with charismatic authority, outsider status, delegate view, marketing bias and linkage to new professions in the informational economy).

Prominent campaign politicians see themselves as overwhelmingly human. They also reach for a higher level of complacency by hiring media experts to tell their respective audiences that they are statesmen in the tradition of Bismarck and Lincoln 'who, through their exemplary performance and leadership in their office, manifest strength, wisdom, and courage ... [and] guide their people in turbulent and dangerous times' (Rawls, 1999, p. 97). However, such claims are monstrous in the eyes of impartial spectators, jealous opponents and disgruntled voters.

Their argument runs as follows: campaign politicians not only fake leadership but also create dictatorship in the plebiscitary settings of audience democracy. Thus, Berlusconi is the most corrupt and criminal leader in post-war Italy, together with his political father Craxi (Davigo & Mannozi, 2007; Tinti, 2007); Schwarzenegger is the most narcissist and

infantilizing governor of California, also according to local standards (Barber, 2007, p. 182); Fortuyn was the most amateurish and subversive challenger of consensus in the Netherlands, with a scenario of Weimar Republic decline as his main legacy; Clinton is the most degenerated president in the twentieth century in terms of Christian, constitutional and liberal morality (and George W. Bush is his successor in degeneration); Blair is the most authoritarian and misleading prime minister of Britain in domestic peacetime; Schröder is the most opportunistic and proletarian chancellor since the creation of liberal democracy in Germany in 1949; and Perot is the most sophisticated lobbyist among American businessmen and the least effective champion of left-wing populism in American history as a result of his refusal to break the ranks of the establishment. Furthermore, all these specimens of leadership in audience democracy are pious, trained and organized liars.

This may all sound convincing; I beg to differ. The seven leaders in my sample are neither statesmen nor media dictators, but plain politicians who dare to fight de-politicization with a modicum of populism. They are part of largely middle-class regimes of audience democracy that are replacing the predominantly upper-class regimes of parliamentary democracy and the lower-class regime of parties' democracy. According to recent studies, the 'nitwit' image of US president Ronald Reagan, founding father of audience democracy, needs revision. He is now seen as a statesman who ended the decline of the New Deal and the Cold War (Baker, 2007). It is too early to tell whether one of the seven figures in my analysis will draw close to Reagan in terms of greatness. Blair is the most obvious candidate, but even this claim to statesmanship is contested because of his debt to Margaret Thatcher, the quagmire of Iraq after Saddam, the thin line between 'third way' ambivalence and the deception of civil servants and voters, and the hollowing-out of political life in his decade (Seldon, 2007).

The claim to media dictatorship is much easier to refute than the claim to (real or virtual) statesmanship. Theoretically, such dictatorship is conceptually impossible in audience democracy since the old state monopoly of policy information has collapsed under the pressure of the commercialization, internationalization and innovation of politically active and relevant news media. Empirically, the theory of media dictatorship can be tested by comparing the style of representation, the power over news media and the public administration of political leaders in the golden age of parties' democracy (1945–75) and of political leaders in the present stage of development of audience democracy.

Berlusconi's corruption needs to be compared with clientelism by prime ministers such as the Christian Democrats De Gasperi, Fanfani, Andreotti and Moro. Schwarzenegger needs to spar with Warren, Knight, Brown and Reagan in a hypothetical gymnasium for historians of popular political culture. Fortuyn is last in a line of 1968 rebels in the Netherlands: the 'angry farmer' Koekoek, the social liberal Van Mierlo, the neoconservative Wiegel and the New Left politicians of the social democratic party. Clinton's sins must be compared with the flaws of presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and Ford. Blair's dramatization of the political centre must be linked with the aristocratic or managerial styles of political communication of Attlee, Churchill, Eden, Macmillan, Douglas-Home, Wilson, Heath and Thatcher. Schröder's *Chefsache* must be assessed in terms of the compromise and crisis management of Adenauer, Erhard, Kiesinger, Brandt and Schmidt. Finally, Perot must be placed in the parade of populists such as Goldwater and Wallace.

Such a comparative project moves beyond the scope of this chapter. Yet it seems safe to state that cynical underestimation of leadership in the past 'pitiful' 35 years is as irrational, from the point of view of political science, as nostalgic overestimation of leadership in the first 'glorious' 30 years after the Second World War.

Conclusion

According to mainstream formulations of the ethics of political communication, well-governed parties are supposed to mobilize ordinary citizens, recruit competent candidates for parliament and government, and aggregate many interests and points of view into one single and coherent public policy. At the same time, well-governed media are supposed to provide a platform for all actual and more or less legitimate voices of citizens, control the power of politicians – in particular elected politicians – and enlighten the people with respect to the often complex and mysterious decisions and policies of public officials. According to this ethical doctrine, the twin agents of the public sphere in civil society – party and press – do not create a separate branch of government but allow the real branches of government to flourish by reflecting, indeed countervailing, each other's power.

However, during the final quarter of the twentieth century the space of collective action and gathering of news in Western societies has changed in a basic sense. Mass-membership parties became campaign parties in which entrepreneurial party leaders try to win elections by

shaping teams of loyal politicians, sponsors, volunteers, policy experts and spin doctors. After victory, these teams continue to function and influence public policy since, in an era in which the support of the people has become unstable and contested, campaigning has become permanent. Mass media became professional and commercial organizations in segmented markets, joining an army of non-elected actors in a fragmented public sphere that make and influence politics beyond the reach of parties. They try to exploit the news value – if any – of politics by adapting journalistic standards to the taste of audiences that are increasingly diverse, critical and sensitive to entertainment and information. In such an erratic climate of electoral and public opinion, some party leaders try to set the agenda of the media, while some media (owners) try to set the agenda of political parties.

Perhaps the most striking advantage of the new public sphere of political action and communication is the focus of all participants – even the most powerful – on the ongoing concerns of the public and the vital interests of citizens. This will tend to promote the efficiency of government and the legitimacy of the democratic order. Yet the actual debate among political scientists and communication scholars concerns a basic liability: party failure and media failure in the representation of citizens as the main cause of a specific malaise in Western politics since the late 1980s. The upshot of my argument is that scholars should steer clear from idealization of parties' democracy in the Cold War era, observe audience democracy as a stable but still immature system, and focus on the evidence of the average performance of such a system of political communication to date, rather than romanticizing future scenarios such as 'digital politics'.

Notes

1. See Abramson et al. (1988), Castells (1997, pp. 309–53), Davis (2002), Elchardus (2002), Franklin (1994; 2nd edition 2004, p. 24 on media democracy), Keane (2009), Matthews (2006), Meyer (2001), Phillips (1975), Robinson (2002), Schwartzberg (1977), Van Zoonen (2005), Wasserman (1989) – thus, Kevin Phillips came first in predicting audience democracy.
2. See, on the example of mixing lobby (private) and campaigning (public) by the American concern Walmart, Reich (2007).
3. The lack of analogy between autonomous consumers and heteronomous voters did not bother Schumpeter in *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (1942). His evolutionary or Austrian view of competition does not require sovereignty, independence, rationality and adequate knowledge on the demand side (while the neoclassical view does so with a vengeance). In this sense, the rational choice theory of democracy of Downs, Ordeshook, Riker,

Roemer and Shepsle does not have a Schumpeterian pedigree; see Medearis (2001). The metaphor of the political theatre is common in anthropological studies of political rituals; see Geertz (1980).

4. See Manin's special introduction to the German translation (Manin, 2007).
5. The representative agent in politics is neither an instrument of others nor a master without bounds; see Pitkin (1967).
6. Struggles about hegemony within parties can be seen accordingly as struggles between several directors about the monopoly right to make a movie (play, television programme). I do not spell out propositions about the balance of power and compromise between several party leaders (Blair and Brown in British socialism, Chirac and Sarkozy in French Gaullism, Merkel and Stoiber in German Christian Democracy). Likewise, fights about hegemony within government coalitions of parties in European consensual democracies and in the European Council of heads of state can be seen as modes of conflict and cooperation between several directors.
7. Compared with, say, 1919, the year in which Max Weber gave his famous lecture on politicians and journalists in party democracy (*Politik als Beruf*). P1 does not exclude the possibility of internal ranking of modes of journalism as to social acceptability and economic viability. Please note that many famous politicians in the history of Western democracy have a background in journalism (Churchill, Mitterrand, Mussolini).
8. Bob Woodward, the uncrowned king of American political journalism from Watergate to Iraq, is a nice test case. He could never have attained and maintained this position by either cheap negativism or equal positivism. The quality of his mixture of sophisticated negativism and positivism in his trilogy on the so-called war against terror seems a good predictor of the success of Woodward's work. Perhaps supporters of J4 are prepared to argue that media market leaders who thrive on negativism of aggregate demand by media consumers (Rupert Murdoch?) buy politicians who thrive on a negativist climate of electoral opinion, while such politicians (Blair? George W. Bush?) rewrite the rules of antitrust to protect media conglomerates. This type of argument is far-fetched. Berlusconi, Italy's prime minister in 1994, from May 2001 to May 2006 (the longest incumbent in Italy since the Second World War), and again since 2008 is the best illustration I can think of. But Berlusconi exploited selective negativism and positivism. See, for media malaise, Patterson (1993). See, for a recent empirical refutation, Jamieson, Hardy & Romer (2007).
9. See Kant's *Zum ewigen Frieden* (1795), Hegel's *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts oder Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft im Grundrisse* (1820), Bentham's *Constitutional Code* (1830) and Tocqueville's *De la démocratie en Amérique* (1835, 1840). Modern classics include Dicey (1981), Bentley (1908), Cole (1920), Lippmann (1920/1965), Tönnies (1922/2006), Dewey (1927/1954), Elias (1936/1980), Blumer (1939/1951), Lasswell (1941), Latham (1952), Habermas (1962), Key, Jr. (1963), and Olson (1971). Recent surveys are Hardt (1979), Cohen & Arato (1992), Splichal (1999) and Warren (2000).
10. Compare the optimism of Fung (2004) and Jones & Baumgartner (2005) with the pessimism of Maier (2006, pp. 10–12, 293–4) and Dworkin (2006).
11. A rough comparison between parties' democracy and audience democracy suggests that politics is more aggregated and orderly in parties' democracy,

owing to the primacy of parties as multi-issue groups that are related to cleavages in society as well as a proliferation of non-party one-issue groups and disappearance of cleavages (de-alignment) in audience democracy. In parties' democracy parties are central. News media are indexing political elite agreements; respectable neutral media are an integral part of the state-bearing forces. Citizens are loyal voters and users of media; active citizens are party members and users of party media.

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3

Representation and Mediated Politics: Representing Representation in an Age of Irony

Stephen Coleman

Introduction

To speak of political representation is to evoke an array of images, narratives, memories, expectations and frustrations. Experiences of being spoken *for, as, to* or *about*; of being taken for granted or taken on board; of feeling looked after or looked beyond; of subjective engagement or objective manipulation and of inspired anticipation or despondent resignation forge fine-grained feelings of what it means to be represented or misrepresented, acknowledged or ignored. It is from this affective perspective that the mediation of representation will be reflected upon in this chapter. The aim here is not to ignore or downplay the instrumental dimension of representation, but to give due attention to its too frequently neglected visceral qualities.

Let me begin by attempting to clarify the central concept. To represent is to ventriloquize; to re-present the absent as if it were present; to give voice to the silent; to conjure into being an aggregation of public interests, preferences and values; to afford univocality to the circulating noise of public aspiration, fear and confusion. Political representation is always doomed to fail if it is conceived as a simple act of communicative correspondence. That is to say, if we imagine that their task is to reproduce mimetically that which is being represented, we will always be frustrated by the failure of representatives. For representatives, however sincere, committed or energetic, can never hope to embody the represented; the public, by definition, is disembodied and can only hope to be made known through acts of creative mediation. As Ernesto Laclau (1996, p. 87) has rightly observed, '... it is the essence of the process of representation that the representative contributes to the identity of what is represented'. This is true whether

the representative is an artist producing a realistic depiction of a forest, a novelist trying to describe a familiar scene or a politician claiming to speak for constituents. The represented are never independent of the representation. And representations always partly determine the nature of what they represent.

Rather than reflecting the stable demands of the public, the function of political representatives is to arouse and subdue the desires and expectations of the represented (Edelman, 1985). In this sense, we might describe representation as an aesthetic act (Ankersmit, 1997, 2002). It is creative, in the sense that it cannot avoid contributing to the conception and constitution of the public in whose name it takes place. Claude Lefort (1986, p. 110) puts this very well when he states that ‘... power belongs to the individual or individuals who ... speak in the name of the people and give them their name’. For Lefort, democracy is famously an empty space, to be filled in – and then revised, erased and revised again by countless acts of representative creativity.

In what I have to say in this chapter, the tension between the claims of the represented to become present on their own terms and the claims of politicians – and other, less accountable mediators – to know and speak for the public will be a central and recurring theme. My contention is that this tension has reached a critical point. What Blumler and Kavanagh described in 1999 as an emergent ‘third age of political communication’, characterized by centrifugal diversification and changes in the way that people receive politics, has evolved into a radical reconfiguration of traditional techniques, technologies and aesthetics of representation. This is perhaps best illustrated by examining some recent examples of the representative relationship breaking down: episodes in which claims to represent suddenly seem to be broken, implausible, embarrassing and even fraudulent.

I am encouraged in this perspective by Foucault’s (1977, p. 81) advice to scholars to ‘identify the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us’. In short, my analysis in this chapter follows the well-trodden path of searching for normality by interrogating the pathological; of exploring what appears to be – but may not in fact be – deviation with a view to understanding what it is that it deviates from. Before reflecting in greater detail upon the changes that are taking place in the norms and practices of mediated representation, a brief excursion into political pathology will be illuminating.

Power failures

Let us consider three types of case in which egregious deficiencies in representatives' claims to be speaking for the people are exposed and shattered. I call these *power failures* because they are attempts to perform the rites of representative power that break down in unexpected, disconcerting and unmanageable ways. In the first example, claims of democratic legitimacy are shown to be somehow fraudulent – at the very least, unconvincing and contestable. In the second example tensions between cultivated impressions and disclosed actuality lead to political representatives facing charges of apparent duplicity. In the third example, the hollowness of a proclaimed contract between representatives and the represented culminates in a critical loss of trust. These examples are presented as impressionistic accounts of moments of political pathology in which representation, by not seeming to take place, casts light on what might be expected when representation does look and feel genuine.

Making things visible

The function of a democratic election is to express the political will of the public and confer legitimacy upon a chosen government. When there is doubt about the relationship between the will expressed by voters through the ballot box and the declared outcome of an election, such results, far from legitimizing government, undermine the claim of 'elected representatives' to speak for the people. In countries as politically different as the United States (2000), Ukraine (2004), Zimbabwe (2008) and Iran (2008), widespread perceptions that the 'winning' candidate or party claimed victory on the basis of less electoral support than the defeated rival have led to periods of administrative turbulence and popular protest.

Let us consider the Kenyan election of 2007. According to the official results, Mr Kibaki's Party of National Unity (PNU) won by a small margin of 230,000 votes out of a total cast of some ten million. There were several reasons for Kenyans and international observers to be suspicious about the official results: the head of the election commission admitted that turnout in more than one constituency was 115 per cent; results in some constituencies were different when announced nationally to when they had previously been announced locally; in the simultaneous parliamentary race, Mr Odinga's ODM won twice as many seats as Mr Kibaki's PNU, but Mr Kibaki still claimed a majority mandate in the presidential election. The European Union Election Observation Mission stated in its preliminary report (2008) that 'the elections were

competitive and generally well administered prior to tabulation', but 'they were marred by a lack of transparency in the processing and tallying of the presidential results, which raises concerns about the accuracy of the final result of this election'.

This was clearly a very dubious election, but, quite aside from the allegations of fraud that have been made by almost everyone except the Kenyan government, I am interested in how these seemingly corrupt practices became apparent. What happened in this historical instance that led to power failure? On what basis did claims to be representing the Kenyan electorate come to culminate in such embarrassing public incredulity? What were the criteria that these representative claims failed to meet?

The failure of representative claims in this instance was intimately related to the availability of new forms of mediation, which made visible aspects of the electoral process that had hitherto been less open to scrutiny. Firstly, the Kenyan media had changed radically in the years leading up to the 2007 election. Until 1996, the government-controlled Kenyan Broadcasting Corporation monopolized the radio airwaves. In 2000 the first non-government-controlled radio station to broadcast in a local language (other than English or Swahili) was established and since the 2004 legislation that liberalized the airwaves there had been a flourishing of such stations, attracting over one in four of the Kenyan radio audience. Local-language stations introduced new interactive formats, inviting Kenyans who for decades had been excluded from the airwaves to discuss political issues on phone-in talk shows. 'Suddenly, and largely accidentally, these talks shows had become an outlet for a public debate and an expression of voice that had been suppressed for decades' (Ismail & Deane, 2008, p. 322).

Secondly,

Kenya has as lively a blog culture as is likely to be seen anywhere. Many of these, such as Mashada.com, form online communities connecting people within the country with diasporic communities; they provide a key form of public debate and a source of investigation at a time when investigative journalism is under threat in the country. As such, blogs provide a growing form of democratic expression and accountability, and fresh opportunities for dialogue and debate across cultures and communities.

(Ismail & Deane, 2008, p. 11)

Mashada.com was receiving 5000 messages a day from Kenyans during the height of the electoral crisis.

Thirdly, there are seven million cell phone users in Kenya, and when the government attempted to ban broadcast reports about electoral corruption, people turned to their phones to share experiences, rumours and observations. Where messages can circulate freely and rapidly, the invisibility of authoritarian power is undermined. Claims to be the legitimate representatives of the people become contestable. The fact that Kibaki was inaugurated within one hour of 'winning' the election suggests that the political elite were aware that they could lose control of the situation at any point. So, through increased media pluralism and means of interpersonal communication, representation failed to be represented as a foregone conclusion. Legitimacy claims had to be negotiated in new spaces and in unprecedented ways.

Inauthentic performances

The Hungarian election of 2006 was, by all accounts, fairly conducted. Nobody ever suggested that it was rigged. The Prime Minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány, was re-elected and after the election, in a private meeting with his cabinet colleagues, he spoke candidly about how he had persuaded Hungarians to vote for him. This was a classical Goffmanesque backstage moment: the chef in the kitchen confiding to the waiters that the delights on offer on the menu should not be sniffed too closely:

There is not much choice ... because we have screwed up. Not a little, but a lot. No country in Europe has screwed up as much as we have. It can be explained. We have obviously lied throughout the past 18 to 24 months. It was perfectly clear that what we were saying was not true ... If I am honest with you, I can say that we are full of doubts. That torment and anguish are behind our self-assurance.

(BBC News website, 2006)

Unfortunately for the Hungarian Prime Minister, his candid comments were tape recorded and leaked to the media. A candid backstage moment became front-stage news. On his blog, the hapless politician owned up to the comments, stating that 'in a closed meeting a person speaks differently than in front of the cameras'. Forty thousand Hungarians took to the streets of Budapest, a vote of confidence in Gyurcsány's government was debated in the Hungarian Parliament for over a week and trust levels in Hungarian politicians plummeted to an all time low.

Consider another inauthentic performance. Eager to exhibit his 'green' credentials, David Cameron, the leader of the British Conservative Party, made great play of the fact that he travelled from his home to

parliament on a bicycle. Unfortunately for Cameron, the tabloid *Daily Mirror* caught him riding his bike while being followed by a chauffeur-driven car in which his officials kept his papers and a change of clothes. The newspaper's exposé was damning:

The Tory leader, desperate to hijack the green vote at next Thursday's local elections, has spent weeks trumpeting the fact that he pedals the five traffic-clogged miles from his home to Westminster ... But after a few minutes his official car, a high-powered Lexus GS450-H, pulled up and the driver was handed a briefcase, a shirt and a pair of highly-polished shoes.

(*Daily Mirror*, 28 April 2006)

When representation goes wrong, as it did in different ways for Cameron and Gyurcsány, technologies of mediation (the hidden tape recorder; the surprise snapshot) work against the cultivation of appearances, subverting contrived authenticity and quite literally exposing the inconsistency between private and public self-representations. As the singular personae of these political representatives were rendered unstable, and their claims to be this or that kind of person weakened, Gyurcsány and Cameron became vulnerable to the criticisms one would make against a bad ventriloquist who is clearly moving his own mouth every time he claims to be conversing with his dummy. What we are witnessing here is a crude battle over the authenticity of representations, fought with sophisticated weapons of mediation. Increasingly, it is this kind of contestation – rather than more familiar ideological conflict – that dominates politics. In an era of accelerated risk, in which trust in the veracity of the political persona tends to be as important as the credibility of policy manifestoes, 'performance, involving varying degrees of self-consciousness and calculated deceit' becomes a 'constituent factor' of political communication (Corner & Pels, 2000, p. 68; see also De Beus, in this volume).

Broken contracts

For decades *Blue Peter*, the BBC's flagship programme for young people, has addressed its audience with demonstrations of how to make things out of plastic containers, accounts of admirable attempts to break point-less records and heartwarming stories of youngsters doing good for their communities. The programme embodies all that is virtuous and occasionally self-righteous in the BBC's tone. As the fashion for 'interactive' formats swept across the mass media, compelling every producer to find ways of incorporating email comments from active viewers and phone

votes on editorial decisions, *Blue Peter* asked its viewers to vote on a name for its new studio cat. The name chosen by a majority of callers to the special BBC phone line was Cookie. But the name announced on the next programme as the viewers' choice was Socks. This was discovered in the course of a series of investigations into rigged phone votes organized by British broadcasters, and led to headlines in the press to the effect that if even *Blue Peter* cannot be trusted to keep its word to viewers, what else is sacred? The BBC took this very seriously: there was a cringing on-air apology to viewers and senior producers were subsequently fired.

The 'loss of innocence' evoked by this seemingly trivial betrayal raises important questions about the increasingly audacious claims of the media to represent the public in ways that elected representatives cannot. Media claims to 'know the public' better than politicians do start to seem hollow when these new agents prove to be as cynically heedless as the old.

In his response to a review of how the various phone-vote scandals happened, Michael Grade, the then head of ITV, observed that while broadcasters 'saw interactivity as attractive to viewers, and premium-rate service revenues as valuable additional revenue', they failed to recognize that 'with it came obligations as well as opportunities. It was not understood that when the audience is invited to make choices within programmes, the producer is effectively ceding part of his/her sovereignty over editorial decisions'. The price of offering viewers (or citizens) 'a say' and then not honouring their input is a loss of trust of a kind that diminishes all future attempts to engage the public. Sending such a message to children, who in many cases will have voted for the first time ever in the *Blue Peter* plebiscite, is a guaranteed way to assure them of their inefficacy before they have even had a chance to be betrayed by a politician's false promise.

Each of these very different examples of power failure point to the ways in which representation is inherently an act of mediation. Only through mediation can representatives circulate their claims to speak for the public. Only through mediation can the public determine whether such claims are justified. The failures we have considered here all have something to do with *how* representative claims were mediated. As an act of mediation, representation needs to meet three criteria:

- Visibility: how far can representatives be seen to represent us?
- Authenticity: to what extent are representatives the same people when they are representing us as when they ask us to let them represent us?
- Efficacy: how easily can we influence representatives to say and do the right things, or punish them if they don't?

The remainder of this chapter explores how these three criteria of mediated representation are in a process of radical reconfiguration in the early twenty-first century. My aim is *not* to argue that representative democracy is somehow collapsing or morphing into something else; on the contrary, I want to suggest that we are at a turning point for representation that has profound consequences for the future of political communication. If we fail to recognize the significance of this critical juncture, we are in danger of becoming over-absorbed by the increasingly failing strategies of twentieth-century political communication – rather like twentieth-century economists refusing to see beyond the system of factory production. If, however, we can make sense of the changing ecology of mediated representation, we shall not only be empirically better placed to describe what is going on around us, but also normatively better placed to think about how what is happening might reinvigorate or enervate representative democracy.

Visible representation

Visibility is a weapon of the witness. To see the exercise of power is the first step towards holding it to account. The visibility of political representation has passed through three broad historical stages. In pre-democratic societies, power was exercised in secret, but displayed, with great theatrical pomp and ceremony, in grand episodes of managed visibility. The Royal Parade, the Opening of Parliament, the Victory March and the Grand Petition were profoundly aesthetic episodes, designed to manage the gap between the representatives and the represented. Visibility, in this context, was a stylistic manoeuvre, managed dramaturgically with a view to revealing the symbolism of power while concealing its practice.

With the rise of representative democracies (in the sense of majority enfranchisement and other rights of indirect public input to government) came the principle of accountability. Representatives had to be *seen* to be doing their job and the vast machinery of the fourth estate emerged with a view to holding power to public account. For the media within liberal democracies, the aim of making representation visible in despatialized and simultaneous forms became an obsessive pursuit. Technologies designed to pick up, catch out, make known and get behind are central to a vast journalistic industry dedicated to eradicating invisibility, which has come to be equated with evasion and suspect conduct.

In response to the relentless gaze of the media, political representatives have devised elaborate strategies for the management of their own

visibility – sometimes referred to as ‘impression management’ or ‘spin’. Key to the success of these strategies have been:

- (i) The creation of staged political events, intended to manage visibility within controlled spaces and scripted interactions;
- (ii) Strong claims for a division between public and private life, creating strictly off-limits areas in which invisibility is sanctioned; and
- (iii) Increasing risk-aversion, with politicians retreating into ideologically neutral banality and management-speak in order to avoid any danger of making visible potentially vote-losing principles.

These strategies have served politicians well, certainly from the early 1960s until quite recently. But in the current, third stage of political visibility, impression management has become vulnerable to a number of new factors:

- (i) A shift from industrially-centralized to post-industrially distributed media technologies. That is to say, where once politicians had to manage their visibility before a relatively small number of known media organizations, innovations in cheaply available, simple-to-use communication technologies, such as mobile phone cameras, webcams, blogs, Twitter and YouTube, have vastly widened the field of potential visibility. The public are no longer only voters to be seduced, but are also potential witnesses to be managed.
- (ii) A capacity to re-order political content, so that data can be seen in the personalized context of the viewer. In the age of the digital mash-up, the originality of the created image is constantly susceptible to the re-creativity of viral circulation.
- (iii) An emphasis upon the use of surveillance technologies that do not respect distance or cultural distinctions between private and public spaces. The public has become accustomed to being watched, apparently for its own good, but are now turning to watching one another in endless fly-on-the-wall formats. (Reality television can be seen as a quasi-democratic aestheticization of the surveillant gaze.) Spotlights are increasingly shone upon the hitherto discrete activities of authorities (such as police, prison guards in Iraq and politicians) in the name of democratic vigilance – or *sousveillance* (Mann, Nolan and Wellman, 2003).
- (iv) A frustration with staged or scripted performances and a desire to ‘get behind’ politicians’ approved and rehearsed claims. This has led to a journalistic interest in landing the knock-out interview

question on an unprepared victim; the recruitment of celebrities, including politicians, to make fools of themselves on entertainment shows; and a fascination with bloopers, slips and body language – the mass media as Freudian interrogators of the subliminal.

The media scholar who has most vividly captured this change in the nature of political publicness is John Thompson, who has argued that politics is now played out within a new frame of visibility:

Whether they like it or not, political leaders today are more visible to more people and more closely scrutinized than they ever were in the past; and at the same time, they are more exposed to the risk that their actions and utterances, and the actions and utterances of others, may be disclosed in ways that conflict with the images they wish to project. Hence the visibility created by the media can become the source of a new and distinctive kind of *fragility*. However much political leaders may seek to manage their visibility, they cannot completely control it. Mediated visibility can slip out of their grasp and can, on occasion, work against them.

(Thompson, 2005, p. 42)

This new visibility is not fully explicable in terms of technological affordance. It relates more deeply to a post-realist aesthetic that calls into question the veracity of appearances. Rejecting the claim that reality or truth are there to be uncovered, and preferring to regard these as being constituted through mediation, in this third age of ubiquitous visibility, political representation is increasingly regarded as a trope: a mediatory device employed with a view to contesting rather than finally describing political reality. To develop this point, I need to move on to the second criterion of effective representation: authenticity.

Authentic representation

Of course, visibility has never been enough to make representation effective. Simply seeing what political representatives are saying or doing does not answer three crucial questions:

- (i) Are they telling the truth?
- (ii) Are they telling the same story to everyone, or one story to some and another to others?
- (iii) Are they 'being themselves'?

This third question is about personal integrity and has become much more important in an age when politicians have become more like managers than ideological crusaders. Managerial competence is largely a matter of trust in the integrity of the character of the office-holder.

Authenticating political performance is much easier if one believes in a metaphysical or essentialist notion of truth and reality. As Richard Rorty puts it, '... metaphysicians believe that there are, out there in the world, real essences which it is our duty to discover' and that they employ a 'final vocabulary' in order to describe these realities (Rorty, 1989).

Modernist media practices have tended to revolve around these two metaphysical articles of faith: that there is a reality to be discovered and that it can be reported in terms that finally describe it. This is a comforting belief that makes the search for authenticity largely a question of evidence-gathering: one assembles the 'facts of the matter' and one represents them with veracity. According to this way of thinking about political authenticity, making political representation meaningful entails demonstrating that appearance, description and actuality are mutually consistent.

What has happened in recent years has amounted to a crisis in confidence in the absoluteness of any finally descriptive vocabulary or metaphysical representation of reality. The media have come to adopt what Rorty refers to as an ironic disposition: one that regards reality, truth and finality as elusive and even illusory notions. For ironists, epistemological foundationalism and the pursuit of closure are abandoned in favour of a pragmatic approach to the contingency of history. Their aim is not to capture and finally define history, but to describe and redescribe it. Ironists are characterized by an openness to the use of a broad range of expressive tropes intended to (re)describe social reality metaphorically and ludically, as well as via the traditional discourses of linear rationality. This is to suggest that mediated reality is socio-culturally constructed and negotiated rather than to subscribe to the excesses of ontological relativism, which seems unable to distinguish between data and fantasy.

Irony is a far less comfortable or comforting approach to apprehending authenticity than the metaphysical approach, because it never seems to offer a final version. Ironic representations are always historically incomplete and ongoing. They are more like soap operas than well-made plays: the final act is rarely reached – and, if it is, the dramatic culmination is nearly always one of tantalising moral ambiguity.

This shift in the terms of authenticity has had profound effects upon the work of political representatives. Where in the past they had to

come across as being effective representatives of interests, policies and ideologies, they are now forced to expose the most intimate details of their personalities so that they may be judged not simply as representatives of the public but as representatives of themselves. Politicians have always had an uneasy relationship with personal intimacy and have traditionally felt a need to patrol and control the border between private and public. Whereas talk for most people tends to be spontaneous and conversational, political speech (which usually takes the form of *speech-making*) tends to be scripted and well-rehearsed, with off-the-cuff utterances regarded as risky paths to self-exposure. While the subject of most people's talk is personal and experiential, politicians tend to speak impersonally and abstractly, steering the focus away from specific references to personal experience. But now, increasingly, authenticity claims are mediated through the lens of affectivity, with reputations dependent upon broader and deeper criteria of representation than was hitherto the case.

Some old-school political scientists are understandably uneasy about all of this. They regard contemporary interest in dramaturgical narratives (Merelman, 1969; Jameson, 1983; Bennett & Edelman, 1985; Hajer, 2005), affective attachments (Elshtain, 1981; Fraser, 1990; Hall, 2005; Dahlgren, 2009) and neuropolitical responses (Connolly, 2002; Thrift, 2007) as unfortunate distractions from the real business of systemic logic, rational choice and the authoritative allocation of values. Mainstream political-science scholarship has tended to be oblivious to the ways in which politics is moving inside: spatially, to the observed private sphere in which duplicity cannot be sustained for long, and psychologically, towards an unprecedented public interest in the inner strengths, struggles and frailties of those who claim to represent others. But this turn towards the authenticating properties of personality is not unique to the political sphere. As Richard Sennett (1978, p. 5) has convincingly argued, 'In Western societies ... confusion has arisen between public and intimate life; people are working out in terms of personal feelings public matters which properly can be dealt with only through codes of impersonal meaning'. Political representatives have become increasingly interested in utilizing personalizing techniques designed to give humane substance to hitherto impersonal and abstract relationships.

The use by politicians of personal blogs, as a way of addressing everyone as if they were someone (to use Paddy Scannell's evocative notion), is an example of the ways in which some representatives are trying to re-invent themselves within a personal register (Coleman & Moss, 2008). The impression given by most of these political blogs is of an

invitation to encounter representation as a tangible relationship. The plausibility of a politician's blog is not determined by how much they show of themselves, but by whether readers feel that they are witnessing an authentic self with which they can engage as themselves.

Coming to terms with political representation in this new situation raises formidable challenges for representatives:

- (i) Their traditional practice of giving different messages to different people at different times is incompatible with the need to present a coherent self. The maintenance of a singularly authentic political persona undermines conventions of rhetorical duplicity.
- (ii) Being seen as both genuine and inspirational entails appearing to be not only someone who is extraordinary enough to represent others, but also ordinary enough to be representative of others. In short, politicians must come across as being both captains and team members at the same time.
- (iii) Representatives are increasingly called upon not only to mediate between the conflicting political interests, preferences and values of one group and another, but between the inconsistent and contradictory values *within* represented individuals. The citizen who wants a greener environment *and* quicker ways of getting to work looks to the politician as a therapist who can disentangle and authenticate their values for them. Politicians are often blamed when they reflect the public's inconsistency and resented when they betray it.

For citizens also, ironically-described reality is destabilizing. Making sense of how the empty space of democracy comes to be occupied by a range of ironic, metaphorical and ludic representations might be a fascinating pursuit for students of 'the postmodern condition', but it is merely discouraging to those who already feel remote and estranged from the choreography of political claims and emotions. All of this contributes to a weakening of the most vital element of political democracy: a sense of efficacy.

Efficacious representation

To experience a sense of political efficacy is to believe that a communicative relationship exists between oneself and the people and institutions that govern society. As Easton and Dennis (1967, p. 27) nicely put it, to be efficacious an individual must be able 'to construct a psychic map of the political world with strong lines of force running from himself

to the places of officialdom'. And here we encounter an interesting paradox. While we seem to be witnessing a third age of political communication in which representatives are more visible and reachable than they were in the past – there are greater opportunities than ever before to scrutinize and test the claims of political leaders; citizens have access to an abundance of mediated and less mediated-than-before information; ubiquitous technologies of peer-to-peer communication make it easier for citizens to connect with one another; countless government-initiated projects have been set up with a view to consulting citizens and engaging them in a variety of deliberative activities and there seems to be wide cultural acknowledgement of a broader conception of the political, taking in many of the mundane encounters with power that constitute people's everyday experiences – there is little evidence to suggest that any of these new factors have led to a significant increase in citizens' feelings that they really do have some purchase upon the system of representative democracy. On the contrary, over a number of years political scientists have charted a global trend pointing towards public disenchantment with and disengagement from the institutions, actors and processes of formal representative politics (Norris, 1999; Pattie, Seyd & Whiteley, 2003; Jennings & Stoker, 2004; Newton, 2007). How can we explain this paradox between what seems to be a more pluralized and popularly accessible notion of representation and the persistence of public belief that the represented are somehow locked out from the citadels of political power?

I want to suggest that this troubling and persistent paradox is a consequence of two antithetical approaches to political representation operating simultaneously, often within the same governments, parties and media systems. The first approach is essentially Schumpeterian. It regards politics as a competition between elites in which the represented have an occasional and untaxing role to play as voters and spectators. This approach remains preoccupied by the management of visibility, constructions of metaphysically grounded authenticity and an instrumentalist psychology geared towards satisfying fixed and rationally apprehensible needs. It is an approach to representation that often works well, but is increasingly prone to power failures, as modes of self-representation are outstripped by techniques of mediation. As these breakdowns seem to be happening more frequently, there are signs that the Schumpeterian approach to representation is under strain. Like industrial production as an economic model, there are strong indications that its time has passed and new ways of expressing and circulating representative effects and affects are needed.

The second approach to representation, which one might characterize as an accelerated version of Blumler and Kavanagh's 'third age of political communication', assumes that mediated visibility is increasingly ubiquitous, authenticity can only ever be contingent and ironic, and representing others efficaciously entails a relationship that cannot be entirely instrumental or rationally calculable. This approach to representation relates in a number of ways that cannot be explored here to current moves towards co-governance, networked decision-making and the democratization of citizenship, with their common emphasis upon the significance of answerability as a democratic norm.

But one cannot operate both models of representative democracy at the same time without each damaging the credibility of the other. In the words of Mustapha Mond in Aldous Huxley's 1932 novel, *Brave New World*, 'You can't play Electro-magnetic Golf according to the rules of Centrifugal Bumble Puppy'. Referring in this delightful phrase to the impossibility of combining the rules of two quite different recreational games, Huxley underscored the risk involved in blurring the lines between habitual practice and contingent exigency. To mix metaphors and references, I want to argue that you can't successfully mediate political representation within 'the third age of political communication' according to the rules of the second age, without exposing oneself to the kind of dangers that seem to have become a routine part of the contemporary political communication system.

But this is precisely how most politicians and political journalists – and, dare I say it, political communication scholars – are currently and ambivalently placed. Powerful repertoires describing the command mechanisms of modernist politics compete uneasily with a new language of democracy. Between these two antipathetic approaches stands a somewhat bewildered citizenry, not quite sure whether they are still consumers or becoming something more; whether they are being invited centre stage or exploited as extras; whether the signals they receive from the media are part of the code or part of the decoding; whether they should join in or walk away (Coleman, Anthony & Morrison, 2009).

The re-presentation of representation

Ambivalence and uncertainty are the defining motifs of contemporary political communication. For scholars, this ambivalence provides a space for exploration, allowing us to go beyond our traditional preoccupations and ask some new and hard questions about what it means to *feel* represented, to *speak for* others and to establish *norms* of democratic

representation that amount to more than depreciated variants of an Athenian ideal. Much could be gained from the generation of a research agenda that focuses upon the rich, and often discrete, textual layers of visibility, authenticity and efficacy as they affect contemporary political communication. In relation to visibility, political communication scholars need to think more about the relationship between technology and performance. What happens to the drama of political representation when its enactment is continuously witnessed? Where, within the ubiquity of democratic surveillance, can political practices hitherto confined to the back room be conducted? Thus far, too much emphasis has been placed upon how traditional institutions and actors can utilize new forms of digital mediation. There is rather more interesting research to be conducted on how these new communicative tools, platforms and contexts redefine what constitutes a political act and open up spaces for forms of Arendtian 'appearances' out of which publics can be formed. Research on political authenticity needs to move beyond the rather crude ethical position-taking regarding the integrity of political actors that has tended to characterize some studies (and most political journalism). Instead, an emphasis upon the 'choreographed mixtures of word, gesture, image, sound, rhythm, smell and touch that help to define the sensibility in which your perception, thinking, identity, beliefs, and judgment are set' (Connolly, 2002, p. 20) could help to enrich the study of political communication by relating it to the ways in which affects are mobilized and circulated, often by design, with a view to aestheticizing emerging or unstable relationships of power. And new approaches to the definition and analysis of efficacy need to be developed, which seek to locate political confidence within people's own constructions of the political world and their place in it, rather than measuring the extent to which citizens conform to and believe in political scientists' rather parsimonious notions of political behaviour. In short, we who seek to explain the nature of political representation need to be prepared to learn more than we have cared to in the past about the barely visible paths and flows of connectivity and disjuncture that turn the acts of representing and being represented from abstract claims into felt experiences.

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Part II

Mediatization: The Changing Power Game between Politics and the Media

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4

Mediatization and News Management in Comparative Institutional Perspective

Robin Brown

Introduction

The practice of news management sits at the centre of the discussion of mediatization. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, governments and political parties have developed new institutions and techniques to cope with a changing media. These changes in the political-media environment have both horizontal and vertical dimensions. Horizontally, political journalism has become more challenging and the volume of coverage has increased. Vertically, new media forms enable a decentralization of the political communications process. We can find evidence of these developments in many countries, but there are also significant differences between countries. This chapter argues that in order to explain these differences and continuities it is necessary to give greater attention to the ways in which the structure of political competition interacts with the media marketplace to shape the political communications process.

At the core of this chapter is a comparison of the role of news management in British and Dutch politics. British politics throughout most of the twentieth century has been marked by intense efforts to shape its presentation in the media. In contrast, elements of the Dutch system have tended to minimize the importance of news management and, although such techniques have become more widespread since the 1980s, significant differences between the two countries remain. The argument developed here is that this pattern of similarity and difference can only be explained by reference to the shape of the political and media institutions rather than by a generalized process of mediatization.

The chapter falls into five sections. The first explores the meaning of news management. The second argues that the centrality of news

management in the United Kingdom lies in the conjuncture of a two-party political system and a relatively competitive media system. This produces a situation that closely approximates the situation theorized by Anthony Downs (1957), in which two parties struggle over the median voter. The third section of the chapter uses the pillarized Dutch political system as an example of a political media that operated to reduce the impact of news management strategies within the polity, and goes on to consider more recent developments in the country's political and media systems. Section four discusses recent studies that point to the role of the media in producing greater partisanship in American politics. Taken together, the Dutch and American cases suggest that there are multiple mechanisms that can produce partisan media that will limit the impact of political news management strategies. The implication is that, rather than being the inevitable next stage in political communications, the centrality of spin in British politics can be seen as a possibly temporary national peculiarity. The final section explores the conclusions that we can draw from this analysis.

What is news management?

News management is an element of the broader process of professionalization of political communications. It is concerned with the efforts of political actors to shape the way in which media organizations report politics. While politicians' attempts to influence the media are probably as old as the media itself, the development of institutional press offices and the creation of the press officer as a distinct political role appeared during the first half of the twentieth century (for example, see Ponder, 1999). As the media became a more prominent part of political life, political actors paid greater attention to their content and developed new techniques and strategies to influence them.

These developments have been most extensively studied in the United States and the UK. From these examples we see an expansion in the scope of news management from simply dealing with enquiries from the press to a way of thinking about the nature of politics in a mediated environment. A key point in this development was Richard Nixon's embrace of the 'permanent campaign', where governing became a tool to ensure re-election. Its institutional expression was the White House Office of Communications: while the Press Office organized routine activities to feed the Washington press corps, the Office of Communications sought actively and strategically to shape media coverage to support the political objectives of the presidency. The Office aimed to ensure that

all of the president's activities were organized to maximize favourable news coverage, for instance by using local media to bypass what was regarded as a hostile Washington media (Maltese, 1994). The contribution of Bill Clinton and his 'War Room' was to accelerate and systematize news management to deal with the challenges of a 24-hour media environment (Matalin & Carville, 1995).

While news management has a long history in British politics, the level of professionalization found in US presidential policies was slower to arrive. During the 1980s Bernard Ingham, Margaret Thatcher's press secretary, took steps towards creating the more centralized government communications organization that he felt was necessary to cope with a more challenging media environment (Ingham, 1991). However it was not until the 1990s that the Labour party made significant movement towards the American model. In opposition, 'New Labour' adopted the Clintonian approach, with systematic media monitoring and rapid rebuttal (Gould, 2001). Once in government they made further efforts to centralize government communications, and 10 Downing Street gained a new Strategic Communication Unit that seemed to have many of the same functions as the White House Office of Communications (House of Commons, 1999).

The New Labour embrace of news management grew out of a conviction that, while their election defeats were due to a continued embrace of obsolete socialist positions, their inability to influence their media coverage had played a significant role in the disaster. Thus for New Labour shaping the media representation of politics was a requirement for success in a mediatized political environment. If the Labour party did not shape its own image, the media would shape it in a way that fitted their own requirements (Gould, 2001; Osborne, 2004, p. 101). Labour's instruments for achieving this were the systematic coordination of communications activities across party and government to produce clear-cut messages of the day or week. The corollary of this was the discipline to avoid conflicting messages. The communication of these messages was facilitated by the systematic development of relations with the news media to allow the deployment of positive (privileged access to information) and negative (denial of access, bullying, systematic complaints) sanctions to encourage positive coverage (Jones, 1996, 1999). The result was that 'spin' became a signature of New Labour.

The impact on British politics became an object of fascination for observers, although they could not agree whether the rise of spin was a defensible response to a 'feral' media or a sign of the degeneration of British politics (Osborne, 2005; Blair, 2007). For many, the invasion of

Iraq was both facilitated by the deployment of news management and, at the same time, the sign of its ultimate failure. The state of the government communications organization was the subject of successive Civil Service and Parliamentary investigation (Cabinet Office, 1997; House of Commons, 1999; Phillis, 2004; House of Lords, 2008).

Spin in Britain: An institutional perspective

The role of news management in British politics can either be seen as an anomaly – a peculiarity growing out of the experience of the Labour party – or it can be seen as a basic consequence of the mediatization of politics (Hargreaves, 2001). The consequence of the latter position is that we should expect the rise of similar phenomena in other countries. While there is evidence of professionalization in many political communications systems, this chapter will argue that the political significance of news management is greater in particular types of political–media systems than others (Negrine et al., 2007). In particular the model of ‘objective’ journalism found in the Anglo-Saxon countries creates very strong incentives for political actors actively to shape the news. The nature of the British political–media system takes these incentives to the extreme.

If we confine ourselves to elections to the Westminster Parliament, British politics provides a good approximation of the model of two-party politics described by Downs in 1957. Despite the increasing representation of other parties, notably the Liberal Democrats, Labour and the Conservatives mostly act as if they inhabit a two-party world. Downs argues that in a political system where political preferences resemble a normal distribution (that is most voters have centrist political views), the tendency is for the two parties to blur their differences and migrate towards the centre of the distribution. This produces a situation in which perceptions of competence and personality become central issues since there are so few substantive policy differences between the parties (Downs, 1957, pp. 135–6). Assuming that some voters will switch between parties, the result of the election will be determined by the preferences of this small minority of switchers, who generally have a limited interest in politics (Downs, 1957, pp. 243–5). The two parties are forced into direct competition for the same voters, which translates into vague promises and direct attacks on the other party. In a situation like this, the ability to shape media coverage of politics is central to political success because it offers a chance to reach and potentially influence those low-interest voters.

At the same time, the British political system rewards the winners of parliamentary elections by granting them sole control of a relatively centralized state organization. The promise of government jobs provides the party leader with a tool to maintain discipline in the party. Single-party government offers opportunities for the government to turn state communications resources to party political purposes. For this reason arguments about the politicization of the Civil Service communications apparatus frequently recur in British politics (for example Ingham, 1991; House of Commons, 1999; Phillis, 2004).

The Downsian analysis offers a clue as to why political actors will be so strongly motivated to influence media coverage: this is a route by which they may reach low-interest voters who have little or no party identification. However, this argument contains a hidden assumption about the media – that it is actually possible to influence the coverage. The British press is normally considered to be partisan – or to exhibit a significant degree of political parallelism (see, for example, Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 210–11). A strongly partisan media would always provide favourable coverage to the party it supports and negative coverage to the party that it opposes, making news management unnecessary or pointless. However, in British political journalism partisanship is moderated at the micro level of exchanges between journalists and their sources and at the macro level of media organizations.

At the micro level, relationships between journalists and politicians are governed by a set of expectations around sources, lying and fairness. Firstly, journalists are expected to have sources for their stories – that is, it should be possible to back up their claims with references to the specific individuals or organizations that supplied the information (Palmer, 2000, p. 4). Thus, political actors can influence the news by supplying particular types of information and denying access to others (Gandy, 1982). Journalists might have information about a particular event but in the absence of sources are limited in how they can use this information. Secondly, the rules of the game prohibit lying but accept that it is legitimate for politicians and their spin doctors to present information in a partial and misleading way, while at the same time it is understood that journalists may present that information in a similarly selective way (Ingham, 2003, pp. 68–71). Thirdly, spin doctors deploy a notion of fairness to constrain the way that reporters operate. Journalists who are seen to go beyond the bounds of acceptable selectivity in their reporting will find themselves denied access to information and subject to informal and formal complaints (Ingham, 1991). Because political reporters are expected to cover the major parties there are limits as to

how far they can go in simply rejecting opposing views. Taken together these rules of the game create opportunities to influence media content. This is not to say that the rules are always followed, but they do impose some limits on partisan reporting. It can be argued that, because of legal requirements for impartial reporting, broadcast journalists are even more vulnerable to the influences that follow from these rules.

At the macro level of news organizations there is another set of constraints on partisanship. Firstly, there is the commitment to 'a good story' as a way of attracting an audience. A British newspaper in possession of embarrassing information about the party that it nominally supports is unlikely to hesitate for long before it publishes it, not least for fear that a competitor will get the story and gain any commercial advantage (see, for example, Campbell, 2007, p. 225). Secondly, the impact of partisanship is further limited by the willingness of newspaper owners and editors to shift or moderate their allegiance to a particular party. The best known case of this occurred when newspapers controlled by Rupert Murdoch switched from the Conservatives to Labour before the 1997 election and back to the Conservatives in 2009 but this is not unique; for instance in the 2001 General Election even the normally staunchly pro-Conservative *Daily Express* backed Labour. This flexibility creates stronger incentives to try to influence alignment. Finally, news organizations may support viewpoints that are more extreme than those held by some members of the political party that they appear to support – while *The Daily Telegraph* has not wavered from its endorsement of the Conservative party for much of the period between 1990 and 2010, it has taken positions to the right of those supported by the Conservative leadership, with the result that it has operated as a factor in factional conflict within the party. Similarly, *The Daily Mirror* tended to support the Gordon Brown faction in its conflict with the Blairites within the Labour Party. Thus party leaderships are forced to expend effort in influencing the content of news outlets that might be expected to provide unquestioning support.

The central point is that while the press does demonstrate a degree of partisan alignment, it is often quite flexible and open to influence. This creates an opportunity for politicians to attempt to shape reporting. The corollary of the opportunity is that parties cannot assume that their supposedly aligned media will not wander 'off message' in pursuit of a good story. Thus in the British case it appears that the emergence of spin is not simply a matter of mediatization but of the structure of the political and media markets. Because sections of the media are politically neutral or only flexibly partisan, it is possible for the spin doctor to sell

them a good story. Because the media are assumed to reach the 'swing voters' who determine the outcome of elections, the parties have little choice but to struggle to shape favourable media coverage.

This analysis suggests that the British political-media configuration seems almost designed to maximize the importance of news management. Howard Becker (1998, p. 85–8) argues that in building theory it is important to examine the full range of variation in a phenomenon; we may gain a better understanding by looking at the extreme cases than the typical ones. Indeed our understanding of normal may be changed by looking at the full range of cases. If the UK offers an example of a political communication system that seems optimized to maximize the importance of news management the system of political communications under pillarization in the Netherlands is the opposite.

Anti-spin: Pillarized political communications in the Netherlands

The previous section argued that the importance of news management in Britain arises from the coincidence of a competitive party system with a flexibly partisan media. The pillarized socio-political regime that existed in the Netherlands for a large part of the twentieth century provides an extreme counter-case of a political communications system that seems almost purposefully designed to limit the importance of news management. Pillarization is an interesting case in itself but in some respects what is most interesting is the light it casts on the functioning of political communication in societies that have deep-seated social and political divisions.

Pillarization was a social order that developed out of the religious and class conflicts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its essential feature was a division of Dutch society into four segments (Catholic, Protestant, socialist, liberal). Each had its own media, political parties and social organizations (Lijphart, 1975). Thus at a social level there was a tendency to separation. These separate 'pillars' were joined at the top by a system of coalition government and an elite political culture that pursued consensus and conflict management. The history of pillarization continues to be a subject of considerable debate. It is argued that Lijphart's influential account overstates the significance of pillarization. For instance: did it really reflect popular tensions or was it a strategy to empower elites (Andeweg & Irwin, 2009, pp. 38–41; Wijfjes, 2009, pp. 5–7)? The rapid erosion of pillarization in the late 1960s also remains puzzling. There is debate over the degree to which

society and politics retain continuities with the era of high pillarization. It is argued that, even if pillarization has now disappeared in social terms, the practices of Dutch politics retain much of the form of the earlier era (Andeweg & Irwin, 2009, pp. 41–4, 49–51). However, pillarization demonstrated a number of political communication features that are very different from those in the UK model, all of which tended to reduce the centrality of news management as a political strategy.

The starting point for this analysis is the place of the media within the system. Under pillarization newspapers were aligned with the pillars. This was not simply a matter of business strategy but could take the form of representatives of particular pillar organizations on their boards (Lijphart, 1975, pp. 59–60). As Wijffjes puts it, the results ‘were newspapers that wrote only about their own group activity and expressed their own culture’ (2006, p. 2). Coverage of politics was aligned with the interests of the pillar and its political representatives, to the extent that journalists would attend closed meetings of the Members of Parliament of their pillar (Brants & Van Praag, 2006, p. 29). It was normal for members of the public to read the newspapers of their own pillar and rare for them to read the newspapers of other pillars (Lijphart, 1975, pp. 40–50). Indeed there were social pressures not to consume media from other pillars (Andeweg & Irwin, 2009, pp. 29, 30). Thus the pillars sought to limit the channels of communication that individual members used to those that were strongly aligned with the pillar. Although the Netherlands developed a system where broadcasting time was divided among organizations that represented the different pillars (Van Der Eijk, 2000, p. 306), it is possible to overstate the degree of closure. For instance *De Telegraaf*, the largest circulation newspaper, was generally right-leaning but independent of the pillars, and there is argument over whether the liberal pillar really was sufficiently organized to be considered as such (Andeweg & Irwin, 2009, p. 32). Despite these reservations even critics of the pillarization construct recognize that it captures an important element of twentieth-century Dutch politics and media structure (Wijffjes, 2006, p. 5).

Pillarization also had consequences for how journalism developed in the Netherlands. While Dutch journalists were aware of, and sought to learn from, innovations in journalistic style in other countries, they had to innovate within the context of pillarization (Wijffjes, 2006, 2007), undergoing what Wijffjes terms ‘controlled modernization’ (2006). While there was broad agreement across the pillars on the tenets of professional journalism and the occupation never developed a full set of pillarized professional organizations, there were important constraints

on the opportunities open to journalists. Most journalists operated under the necessity of demonstrating their loyalty to their pillar (Wijffjes, 2006, p. 9). Finally, the normative conception of journalism was closely aligned with the elite conception of pillarization as a way of managing conflict and preserving order (Lijphart, 1975, pp. 122–38). The Netherlands was understood as a small country with serious social conflicts and subject to external pressures, such as had occurred during the two World Wars: this required journalism to be ‘responsible’. One aspect of this was a respect for the rules of the political game. In *The Politics of Accommodation* (1975), Lijphart identified seven rules of the game of Dutch politics; three of these – secrecy, proportionality and depoliticization – are particularly significant for making sense of the role of the media. Proportionality and depoliticization related to the management of conflict in ways that tended to minimize the level of escalation. Secrecy applied both to the determination of elites to keep the process of politics out of public view and the willingness of the media to allow them to do so. The understanding of ‘responsibility’ in Dutch journalism included a sense of what could not be published (Wijffjes, 2006).

At the root of the pillarized system was the inability of any of the four pillars to achieve dominance over the others. The different groups were locked into a balance of power arrangement that forced them to cohabit. The distribution of support necessitated coalition politics. As Downs (1957) argues, this creates different political logic from the two-party model. In the two-party model the emphasis is on the marginal voter who is likely to switch from the ideologically adjacent party. In a political system with many parties the rational strategy is to emphasize how your party differs from other parties in order to mobilize a support base (Downs, 1957, pp. 126–7). As a working government has to be put together through coalition negotiations the relationship between voting and governing is quite distant (Downs, 1957, pp. 142–63). The need to build a coalition places a limit on the degree to which parties can attack each other (Van Der Eijk, 2000, p. 322).

If spin is understood to mean a competition to influence the content of autonomous media, almost every aspect of the pillarized system seemed custom-designed to minimize the political potential of news management activities. The practice of Dutch politics under pillarization was consistent with Downs’s predictions: election campaigns focused on mobilizing core support within the pillar, which they could do not only through party and affiliated organizations but also through strongly partisan, rigidly aligned media. News media responded to the leadership of the pillar (Andeweg & Irwin, 2002, p. 85).

If British politics is marked by the significant role of news management, the pillarized system suggests that strongly partisan media systems will limit the impact of news management strategies. This would lead to the proposition that decreasing levels of media partisanship will lead to the increasing significance of the media for politics. The trajectory of Dutch politics after 1967 offers an opportunity to test this proposition.

Dutch political communications in transition

At the end of the 1960s the social structure of pillarization crumbled. The breakdown happened rapidly. As in other Western European countries the Netherlands in the second half of the twentieth century saw rapid economic growth accompanied by the emergence of the service economy, secularization and increasing levels of education (Blom & Lamberts, 1998, p. 457; Andeweg & Irwin, 2009, pp. 41–4). It has been argued that television played a role in undermining suspicions between the various pillars. Viewers could see the programming of the other pillars and were reassured by what they saw. At the same time new non-pillarized broadcasting organizations emerged, further undermining the social bases of the pillars (Van Der Eijk, 2000, pp. 308–11).

The consequences for political communication were consistent with the account of the transformation of political communications in the mediatization thesis (Mazzoleni & Shulz, 1999). The ability of what Andeweg and Irwin term the 'structured model' of voting, where religious or class positions predict electoral behaviour, has declined and the willingness of Dutch voters to switch parties has increased (2009, p. 113). Indeed the electorate has become unusually volatile by the standards of Western European politics. In a more fluid electoral environment parties have placed greater emphasis on leaders and presentation and become more aggressive in their attacks on each other (*ibid.*, p. 87). These changes in the political system have been paralleled in the media environment. With the end of pillarization newspapers severed the formal links with pillar organizations and sought to reposition themselves within a larger commercial marketplace (Van Der Eijk, 2000, p. 312). Over the period since the late 1960s journalism has become more critical of the political elite (Brants & Van Kempen, 2002; Brants & Van Praag, 2006). Thus the media has become a more important battleground in Dutch politics, supporting the proposition that a less partisan media offers politicians a greater incentive to try to achieve their objectives through the media.

However, the same analysts who point to a distinct movement within Dutch political communications practices also point to the limits of these changes, particularly in comparison with Anglo-American models

(Brants & Van Kempen, 2002; Brants & Van Praag, 2006). At least four factors operate to limit the degree of change in the Dutch system. Firstly, Downs argues that the ultimate determinant of democratic political systems is the distribution of preferences in the electorate. The structure of the Dutch political system already reflected the cross-cutting of religious and class divisions; to these new lines of cleavage have been added, creating a complex pattern of political support. Furthermore the nature of the highly proportional Dutch electoral system poses few obstacles to these complexities being expressed (Anderweg & Irwin, 2009, pp. 118–19). This means that the constraints of coalition politics will continue to operate. Given the proportionality of the electoral system the incentives for parties to attack each other remain weak compared with those in a two-party system. Secondly, the consequence of the electoral system is a routine reliance on coalition government and, despite the occasional adoption of a more conflictual mode by some parties, many of the rules of the elite political game identified by Lijphart continue to hold (Anderweg & Irwin, 2009, p. 50). Thirdly, Brants and Van Praag (2006) emphasize resource limitation as a constraint on the development of professionalized communications practices by parties. It can be suggested that, other things being equal, a multiparty system will place more constraints on party resources than a two-party system. Fourthly, there are continuities in the style and culture of Dutch journalism that give some degree of protection against the pressures routinely exerted against British journalists – for instance editorial statutes that limit the ability of owners to interfere in the editorial process (Van Der Eijk, 2000, pp. 315–16).

The examination of the British and the Dutch cases suggests that segmented political systems demonstrate numerous features that will limit the significance of active news management. This is not to say that party and government communication activities will not become more professionalized but that the structure of the political–media environment will limit their impact.

The end of spin? Partisanship in the US

As we have seen, the Dutch case suggests numerous ways in which aspects of the political and media configuration will limit the impact of news management practices. However, it could be argued that the limits on the impact of news management are a legacy of the past, and that the increasing levels of mediatization will make the role of news management more central. Recent studies in the US suggest that the impact of change

in the media environment will have the opposite effect and reduce the role of news management. Growing diversity in the media environment is increasing polarization in the electorate and reducing the impact of presidential communications.

In *Post Broadcast Democracy* (2007), Prior argues that the dominance of network television in the 1960s and 1970s exposed large sections of the electorate with limited interest in politics to political information and stimulated them to vote. The emergence of cable television has allowed the audience to express their basic preferences for news or entertainment. Those with low interest in politics opt for entertainment and as a result avoid political news and become less likely to vote. In contrast, those with an interest in news consume more. As is consistent with previous research on public participation (for example Zaller, 1992), this preference for news is associated with higher levels of partisanship. The result, according to Prior, is a growing degree of information inequality where people with low interest in politics, who tend to be less partisan, opt out of the political system, creating a situation in which the composition of the electorate is more strongly influenced by the partisan remainder (Prior, 2007, p. 228).

In *The Presidency in the Era of 24 Hour News* (2008), Cohen points to a trend since the Second World War for news about the president to become increasingly negative. At the same time the connection between that news and presidential approval ratings has become weaker. He locates the answer to this puzzle in the changing nature of the media environment and a declining level of trust in the news media. The rise of cable television is strongly associated with these developments. One factor is that the increasing space available for news gives more space to critics of the president. Cable television is again associated with rising levels of partisanship so that the impact of negative news has less of an effect on public opinion – that is, the people who watch cable news already have well-established opinions and aren't easily influenced. Cohen links the changes in the media environment to a change in the nature of presidential leadership. The media environment makes it harder for the president to communicate a message to all Americans and as a result presidential communication has become more partisan. Rather than 'going public' as national leaders, recent presidents have sought to mobilize partisan support. These differences are visible in the agenda, language and venues of presidential communications (Cohen, 2008, pp. 205–7).

Prior makes the point that the changes he identifies can be seen as a return to the situation that existed prior to the television era. Television was an aberration in its ability to reach people with low levels of

interest in politics (2007, p. 90). While Cohen and Prior identify effects driven by the general features of media innovation these shifts have also affected the strategies of media organizations. This is particularly noticeable in the case of cable news television stations. The main US stations have taken on distinct partisan positions, with MSNBC to the left and Fox to the right. These positions can be seen as aspects of corporate strategy. This is particularly clear in the case of MSNBC, which during the first decade of the twenty-first century has repositioned itself from an unabashed supporter of the invasion of Iraq to a partisan supporter of Barack Obama (Calderone 2009).

Hallin and Mancini (2004, p. 286) argue that competitive media markets are associated with greater partisanship in media organizations. This can be seen in terms of a Downsian spatial theory of competition. Larger markets can support a larger number of media outlets. Within these larger markets an attempt to appeal to an excessively large market segment will create an opportunity for competitors to develop products that are more appealing to narrower segments of the market. Thus, partisan alignment is a rational business strategy in a market large enough to support multiple competitors – and there is some evidence that the US cable news channel that has been least partisan (CNN) has been the least successful in maintaining audience share (Calderone, 2009). While the pillarized Dutch media sought the opportunities of a larger market by breaking out of the constraints imposed on them, media in a larger market may move in the opposite direction by taking on a more partisan colouration. Ironically, it now appears that for some in the Dutch media partisanship is making a return with the approval of two new broadcasting organizations, backed by *De Telegraaf*, and with a self-proclaimed mission to challenge the leftward bias of the existing media (DutchNews.nl, 2009).

The key point is that strongly partisan media neutralize news management. Instead, political leaderships may turn to alternative strategies: rather than trying to spin the cable channel Fox News, the Obama Administration has tried to discredit Fox by not treating it as a serious news organization (Gerstein & Allen, 2009; Stelter, 2009).

Cohen and Prior draw their conclusions based on the rise of cable television, but we can hypothesize that further development of digital communications technologies will accentuate the tendency to polarization. Firstly, the more that citizens can control the information that they receive the more they will tend to focus on non-political news or select news that is consistent with their existing political views. This development has two components: the propensity of individuals to

select their own media mix and the development of a media environment that allows them to do so. The Internet offers a growing selection of specialist and or partisan media sources and the tools to select in or out those sources. Secondly, the decline of the newspapers – one of the parts of the media that is most strongly associated with the objective journalism model in the US – will remove a channel that is susceptible to spin. The impact of these developments will be a situation in which the structural impact of news management will decline. This does not mean that political actors will not try to influence how they are presented, but that the payoffs of these efforts will decline.

Conclusions

This comparative review of mediatization and news management leads to the conclusion that if the British are obsessed with spin it is because they have developed a political–media system that maximizes the incentive to use news management. The analysis suggests, however, that rather than being the wave of the future, the centrality of news management may be a temporary aberration as the evolution of the media environment encourages a return to a higher level of partisanship.

A second conclusion is that in understanding the development of political communications processes we should pay greater attention to the way in which the structure of political and media institutions create incentives for particular types of behaviour. Mediatization is not a process that operates in isolation from the rest of the political environment and, as this analysis has demonstrated, institutional factors play a major role in shaping its impact.

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5

Spin and Political Publicity: Effects on News Coverage and Public Opinion

Claes H. de Vreese and Matthijs Elenbaas

Introduction

Contemporary coverage of political affairs is, according to both frequent assertion and a large amount of empirical data, increasingly framed in terms of strategy. Rather than policies and political substance, strategic news emphasizes the tactics that politicians use in pursuing political goals, as well as their performances, styles of campaigning and the battle they fight in the political arena, whether in office, opposition or during elections. The strategy frame has become a leading angle in political coverage of both political campaigns and policy battles, usually at the expense of news about concrete differences in, and the potential resolution of, issue positions between candidates or policymakers (see, for example, Jamieson, 1992; Kerbel, 1997; Lawrence, 2000; Patterson, 2002).

In addition, more recent observations suggest that political journalism increasingly exposes the news media's and communication professionals' *own* role in the process of politics. This type of news reporting, referred to as *metacoverage*, emphasizes the interdependent yet strained relations between politics and the press, and the media strategies that politicians and their 'spin doctors' employ in order to generate publicity, boost their images and manage the news. Previous studies have shown that journalists commonly apply a strategy frame in metacoverage (Esser & D'Angelo, 2006) – a type of frame that communicates and cultivates cynicism about politics (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

However, two important questions remain unanswered. First, to what extent have spin doctors, the very group of strategic communication actors commonly associated with the mediatization of politics, become an explicit part of the story? Second, how does metacoverage affect public perceptions of these actors? We still know little to nothing

about the effects of metacoverage on the public's view of the political communication profession itself. Yet in the light of previous research (such as Cappella & Jamieson, 1997) there is good reason to assert that coverage of spin and political publicity can result in cynicism and resentment among the public, not just towards political public relations but ultimately also towards politics in general. In sum, citizens' attitudes towards political publicity are bound to have direct or indirect ramifications for citizens' confidence in political actors and the democratic health of the political process.

In the current chapter, we bring these questions into focus through analyses of the effects of strategic political communication in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, the two main countries under study in this book. In doing so, we consider *both* of the dimensions that structure the overall framework of the book. We first consider the reinforcing dynamics between the mediatization of politics, on the one hand, and the media's spotlighting of mediatization, on the other. Subsequently, we assess the extent to which the news media in the UK and the Netherlands focus on spin doctors as part of the political coverage. Accordingly, this part of the chapter ties into the book's *horizontal* dimension.

In the second part of the chapter, we test the effects of strategy-based metacoverage on perceptions of political communication professionals by presenting evidence from two experiments. Drawing on items tapping into public perceptions of political communication professionals' motivations and credibility, we demonstrate that politicians may not be the only losers from metacoverage, but that, once political publicity becomes the story, their employment of communication professionals also tends to have negative effects on public attitudes towards the communication profession itself. Our second set of analyses thus examines an important process affecting the relationship between political communication elites and citizens in the *vertical* dimension.

Mediatization of politics versus political metacoverage

Studies of political news have documented significant changes in how the news media have come to cover political affairs and campaigns. Drawing on the work of Patterson (1993) and Kerbel (1999), Esser and his colleagues distinguished three developmental stages of political journalism (Esser, Reinemann & Fan, 2001). Whereas postwar news stories about politics were originally dominated by a descriptive style of reporting on issues, substance and politicians' public statements, this coverage of substantive issues has gradually become interspersed with

and contextualized by journalists' observations, interpretations and analyses of the horse race as well as the motivations and tactics behind politicians' moves. Captured in a *strategy frame*, these news reports 'focus the reader on strategic intent' and discuss the issues accordingly (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, p. 111). Drawing on a sample of three decades-worth of front-page articles in *The New York Times*, Patterson (1993) showed that the dominant mode of campaign coverage had shifted from an issue-based perspective in the early 1960s to a horse race and 'game schema' in the 1990s, a development that was recently corroborated by Farnsworth and Lichter (2003) in their extensive analyses of US network coverage of presidential elections from 1988 to 2000.

Metacoverage, which according to Esser et al. represents a distinctive 'third stage of political journalism' (2001, p. 17), reflects a more recent tendency among journalists to cover not only the issues and political scheming, but also the role of *communications* in politics. As such, meta-coverage is the journalistic response to the mediatization of politics: a modernized and professionalized mode of governing, policy making and campaigning tailored to the logic of the media system. Mediatized politics draws on professional advisors and spin doctors for strategic communication to set the agenda, frame debates on policy and generate or (continuously) consolidate public support (Mancini & Swanson, 1996; Zaller, 1999; Esser & Spanier, 2005). This development affirms the widespread notion that the media are now the most important actor in politics and campaigns. 'The most impressive evidence ... on the news media as a political institution', Cook argued, 'comes not from what journalists and their organizations do, but instead from the increasing attention that political actors in other institutions give to news making as a central part of their own job' (1998, p. 165).

Rather than evolving in a vacuum, the professionalization of politics has thus gone hand in hand with changes in political journalism. The paradoxical effect of the mediatization of politics, according to Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999, pp. 251–2), is that the more the political system adapts to the logic of the media system, the more it feeds and reinforces these dynamics.

Strategic framing of press and publicity news

Metacoverage is a broad concept that potentially comprises an array of media-related themes and latent meanings. In the most elaborate theoretical account in the literature thus far, Esser and D'Angelo (2003) distinguish two analytically separate types of meta-propositions that do

not displace but arise alongside other story topics such as issues, personal character of politicians and public opinion. Whereas *press* metacoverage spotlights the role(s) of the press in political affairs (including press presence, behaviours and influence), *publicity* metacoverage draws attention to the publicity efforts of political actors toward the media (such as political advertising, media appearances and spin doctors), but without overt reference to press roles. According to Esser and D'Angelo, journalists may additionally overlay both press and publicity stories by (i) a conduit frame, which merely consists of cross-referencing among media, (ii) a strategy frame, reflecting the coarse and adversarial side of mediatized politics or (iii) an accountability frame, which exposes press and publicity moves in the light of democratic norms and values.

We are concerned with the *strategy* frame, which, content analytical studies on both sides of the Atlantic have shown, is a leading frame embedded in the meta-reporting of politics and campaigns (for the US case, see Kerbel, 1994, 1997, 1999; Esser & D'Angelo, 2003; for the UK and German case, see Esser & D'Angelo, 2006; for the Dutch case, see Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008). Based on the aforementioned typology, the strategy angle in metacoverage may either take the form of *strategic press* coverage, in which journalists self-referentially focus on the antagonistic relationship between press and politics and the news media's significant role in the strategic game of politics, or *strategic publicity* coverage, which emphasizes political strategists' calculated and at times manipulative publicity and public relations efforts in relation to the mass media, yet without explicitly self-referring to the media's position in these processes per se. 'In both cases', Esser and D'Angelo (2003) state: 'a strategy script communicates that the news media or other communications media are enmeshed in the tactical aspects of campaign reality. It is a cynical frame of reference about media politics for it locates press and publicity behaviours within the clashing goals of candidates and the media' (p. 633).

In sum, strategic metacoverage frames politicians as strategy-oriented actors purposely seeking or eschewing media attention, or granting or blocking access to the media, in order to achieve particular political objectives. It follows that the actors closely associated with the behind-the-scenes strategies and techniques of news management in politics are often part of such coverage. To what extent has the emergence of political spin, a product of the professionalization of politics, attracted the interest and attention of the media? As politicians have increasingly surrounded themselves with political communication professionals, have news media, in their turn, increasingly turned the spotlight on this set of actors?

Spin doctors in the news

Drawing on data acquired from LexisNexis, we conducted a longitudinal media content analysis tracking news coverage of political communication professionals over the decades at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first in both the UK and the Netherlands. We counted the total number of articles in major national newspapers that included explicit mentions of 'spin doctors' (in either singular or plural form) for each year between 1985 and 2009. We deliberately restricted our selection of search terms to 'spin doctor' because more generic alternatives (such as spokesman, strategist, consultant, press secretary or director of communications) are easily applicable beyond the context of politics, which is our context of interest. Our test therefore arguably provides a rather conservative estimation of the salience of political communication professionals in the news. We content analysed *The Guardian* (including its sister Sunday newspaper *The Observer*) and *The Independent* from the UK, and *de Volkskrant* and *NRC Handelsblad* from the Netherlands. We selected these newspapers because they are major national quality dailies in each country. Furthermore, the time period for which the archives of these newspapers are available for analysis through LexisNexis is relatively extended.

The results are displayed in Figure 5.1. Looking first at the British newspapers over time, we see that the earliest references to spin doctors in the news were made around the late 1980s.¹ By the US presidential election year of 1992, the term had become established in media discourse. The following years saw a rapid and rather astonishing increase in the number of references, reaching boiling point during the early Blair years of the late 1990s. In 1998, a non-election year, *The Guardian* published no fewer than 511 news stories that referred to spin doctors. The number has since dropped again significantly, with occasional and more modest peaks during subsequent election years (2001, 2005) and the aftermath of the scandal about the British government's 'sexed up' dossier on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, which was intended to bolster support for the invasion of Iraq (2003). The recent rise in the frequency of mentions, leading up to the 2010 elections, might be an early indication of another election year peak.

Press coverage of spin doctors in the Netherlands shows quite a different picture. Our data suggest that the term first appeared in the news in 1992, but it was not until the late 1990s that journalists adopted such a reference with any regularity. Since then, the number of media mentions of spin doctors has gradually increased.

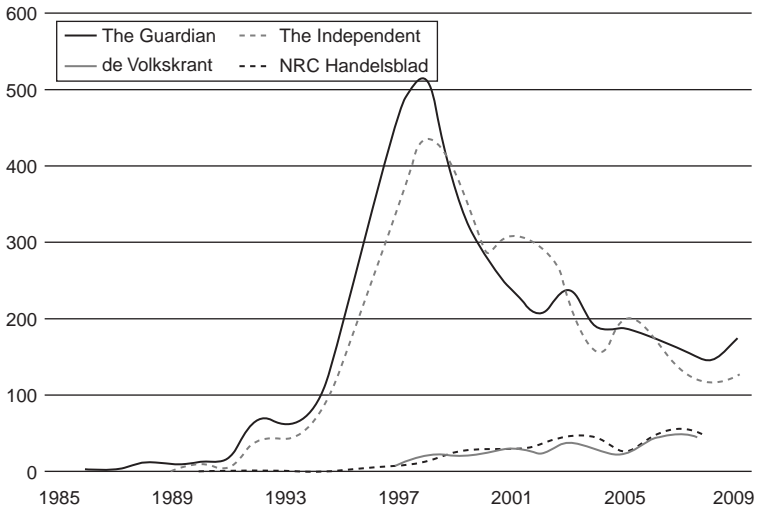


Figure 5.1 Media mentions of 'spin doctors' in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, in absolute counts per year

Overall, however, the volume of that coverage in the Netherlands has been a great deal lower than in Britain. Indeed, the contrast between the two countries is striking. At the same time, the strong parallel between both pairs of trend-lines per country suggests strong uniformity in the news environment *within* each country. Taken together, these results suggest that strong variation in the amount of media attention devoted to spin doctors can be largely accounted for by context-bound factors. Some of these are unique to the UK case, where specific prominent events and individuals have been driving forces of metacoverage. Spin has never been as pervasive in the Dutch press as it has been in the British, which has been so gripped by a spin culture that it often made prominent spin doctors such as Peter Mandelson, Charlie Whelan and Alastair Campbell the very object of reporting. More generally, we assume that the observed inter-country differences are also reflective of differences in the culture of political communication, which is more antagonistic and professionalized in the UK than in the Netherlands (Pfetsch, 2004; Brants & Van Praag, 2006).

Finally our results indicate that, despite a cooling down period in the British coverage of recent years, the terminology has prevailed in news of politics, even beyond the context of elections. We relate this finding

to the emergence and institutionalization of mediatized politics and permanent campaigning.

Audience reactions towards political publicity

In theory, media attention to political communication professionals could have broad implications. An important and persistent question in the literature is whether exposure to this type of news story is likely to cultivate public cynicism about politicians and political affairs. Most notably, Kerbel (1994, 1997, 1999) has advocated the notion that the media's 'cynical' depiction of the mediatization of politics could indeed prove contagious to those consuming the news. Judging from a considerable body of previous research on *generic* strategy news effects,² there is good reason to believe that, in line with Kerbel's argument, the impact of strategic meta-news exposure is more likely than not to be associated with higher levels of cynicism relative to issue-based news exposure (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008; De Vreese & Semetko, 2002). However, we still have virtually no knowledge about the effects of strategic news framing on the public's view of the political communication profession itself, which, by virtue of metacoverage, has become an intrinsic part of the political story (Esser & Spanier, 2005). It would follow that citizens' feelings about seemingly influential spin doctors may directly or indirectly affect citizens' confidence in the democratic health of the political process.

In two experiments, we examine how exposure to generic, press and publicity strategies influence cynicism about political public relations when compared with exposure to issue-framed news. In doing so, we not only compare the effects of issue-based versus strategy-based news stories, but also among strategic news stories with diverging foci of strategy. We concentrate on the Dutch case in the experiments, since we are interested in a general psychological reaction to the manipulation. Both experiments included four conditions, an immediate post-test and a between-subjects design.³ The stimuli embodied multiple versions of two fictitious newspaper stories in which a reporter describes a public official's speech announcing a new policy proposal on two respective issues: liberalization of the health care sector and security measures in air travel.⁴ We produced four versions of each article, framing the story in terms of issue substance, generic strategy, press strategy or publicity strategy. In both experiments, the three strategically-framed story versions represented the three experimental conditions, while the issue condition represented the control group.

In each version of each story, the core story parts, consisting of the second, third, fifth and sixth paragraphs, were identical, and expressed an issue topic by providing factual background information about the policy proposal. The experimental manipulation, then, consisted of the headline, lead part (first paragraph), and middle part (fourth paragraph). The issue version of each story most closely resembled the four paragraphs of the article's core body, with only the addition of a headline and lead part that had been manipulated to create an issue focus (basically a description of the bottom line of the policy proposal). The *generic strategy* version of each story emphasized the performance, style and perceptions of the politician, analysed his manoeuvres in the light of calculated underlying rationales, used war and sports language, and referred to public opinion polls (Jamieson, 1992; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). The *press strategy* version of each news story highlighted the adversarial relationship between politics and the press and specifically accentuated the news media's role as an influential actor in the game of politics that forces politicians to adjust their tactics to press coverage. Finally the *publicity strategy* version of the articles focused on the politician's strategic uses of media and public relations, analysed tactical considerations behind the publicity move and referred to image and presentational style, yet without explicitly reflecting on the media's own role in the process (Esser & D'Angelo, 2003, 2006).⁵

We drew on six items to tap *political PR cynicism*, which we characterize as public distrust regarding the motivations and credibility of political public relations professionals. Our measure of political PR cynicism is evidently different from measures of political cynicism in that the items explicitly concern the motivations and credibility of *communication officials*, as opposed to politicians. The items were the following:

- 1 Spin doctors, press officers and PR professionals are honest with the press and the public;
- 2 Spin doctors, press officers and PR professionals lose touch with life in the real world after a while;
- 3 I'm frustrated with the way spin doctors, press officers and PR professionals try to sell politics;
- 4 Spin doctors, press officers and PR professionals help solve social problems;
- 5 Spin doctors, press officers, PR professionals and politicians look out for their own interests before they look out for the interests of the public; and
- 6 Spin doctors, press officers and PR professionals are dangerous for democracy.⁶

Testing the effects

Our first expectation was that exposure to news framed in terms of generic, press and publicity strategies would generate higher levels of political PR cynicism relative to exposure to issue-based news. Strategic coverage, after all, frames politics as a fierce battle between politicians and journalists over interpretive dominance, with strategy-oriented political actors seeking to achieve their political goals. In doing so, strategy frames might be expected to promote or reinforce a cynical public mindset (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), not just about politics, but quite conceivably also about strategic communication and news management in politics. Second, we expected to observe the *most* negative attitude shift when political publicity – the tactical rationales behind public relations efforts with respect to the news media – indeed becomes an *explicit* part of the strategic news story. Thus, the level of cynicism should be highest among participants in the publicity strategy treatment group.

For each condition, Tables 5.1 and 5.2 display the means of political PR cynicism in the immediate post-test of the health care and air security

Table 5.1 Political public relations cynicism by experimental condition, health care experiment

Strategy			
Issue (<i>n</i> = 121)	Generic (<i>n</i> = 92)	Press (<i>n</i> = 103)	Publicity (<i>n</i> = 98)
4.46 _a (0.81)	4.53 _{ab} (0.87)	4.55 _{ab} (0.82)	4.78 _b (1.04)

Note: Data entries are means and standard deviations (in parentheses). Different subscripts indicate significant between-condition differences: $ab\ p < .05$.

Table 5.2 Political public relations cynicism by experimental condition, air security experiment

Strategy			
Issue (<i>n</i> = 115)	Generic (<i>n</i> = 112)	Press (<i>n</i> = 109)	Publicity (<i>n</i> = 113)
4.48 _{ax} (0.89)	4.66 _{ay} (0.96)	4.31 _x (0.91)	4.81 _y (0.97)

Note: Data entries are means and standard deviations (in parentheses). Different subscripts indicate significant between-condition differences: $ab, xy\ p < .05$.

experiments, respectively. Both experiments yielded fairly similar results. Mean cynicism levels of participants in the generic strategy conditions were found to be somewhat, but not significantly, higher than those among participants in the issue conditions (4.53 versus 4.46 for the health care story and 4.66 versus 4.48 for the air security story). Much like the subjects in both generic strategy groups, participants exposed to the press strategy frame showed marginally higher cynicism levels in the health care experiment ($M = 4.55$), but the mean difference was, again, not significant. Moreover, this finding was not replicated in the air security experiment, where we found cynicism levels to be even lower ($M = 4.31$) than those of the issue group participants. Finally, participants in the publicity strategy conditions did show significantly higher levels of cynicism towards political public relations in comparison with participants in the issue conditions (health care $M = 4.78$, air security $M = 4.81$).

In sum, these results provide only partial support for our first hypothesis. In most cases, strategic news framing proved to shift attitudes towards political communication officials into a more negative direction compared with issue-based news, yet the generic and press strategy news frames fell short of fuelling negative attitudes towards political communication professionals to a degree that was statistically significant. In line with our second expectation, effects were most pronounced for 'spin spotlighting' publicity news. Although the mean differences between participants in the publicity groups and the two other strategy conditions did not reach significance in most instances, participants in the publicity group consistently showed considerably higher levels of political PR cynicism relative to participants in the other treatment groups.

We also examined the main effects of the strategy frames while controlling for other potential predictors of cynicism in a multivariate analysis.⁷ Table 5.3 shows the regression model examining political PR cynicism as the criterion variable. We found that, in both experiments, above and beyond the controls, exposure to the publicity strategy frame exposure yielded strongly positive associations with political PR cynicism (health care, $\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.001$; air security, $\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$). Generic and press strategy framing proved insignificant cynicism predictors. The established main effects of strategic publicity news exposure in both regression models reconfirm our initial findings about the cynical impact of the publicity strategy frame.

Furthermore, political knowledge, political interest and education yielded strongly positive associations with distrust of political public

Table 5.3 Effects on political public relations cynicism by experimental condition: regression model examining political PR cynicism as the criterion variable

	Health care		Air security	
	β	(SE)	β	(SE)
Age	0.06	(0.05)	0.11*	(0.05)
Gender (male)	0.08#	(0.05)	0.07	(0.05)
Education	0.17**	(0.05)	0.19***	(0.05)
Political knowledge	0.15**	(0.05)	-0.03	(0.05)
Political interest	-0.01	(0.06)	0.22***	(0.07)
Political efficacy	-0.10#	(0.05)	-0.08	(0.06)
Trust in government	-0.28***	(0.05)	-0.27***	(0.05)
Support for policy proposal	-0.21***	(0.04)	-0.12**	(0.05)
Exposure to generic strategy frame	0.03	(0.03)	0.07	(0.03)
Exposure to press strategy frame	0.03	(0.03)	-0.04	(0.03)
Exposure to publicity strategy frame	0.18***	(0.03)	0.15**	(0.03)
Adjusted R^2	0.20		0.20	
N	414		449	

Note: Ordinary Least Square Regressions.

$p < 0.10$. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

relations, so that relatively well-informed, attentive and educated participants expressed higher levels of mistrust than those with lower political awareness and education. Specifically, education was found to be a solid predictor of cynicism in both experiments, while the effects of political knowledge and political interest only attained significance in the health care and air travel experiments, respectively. Conversely, trust in government and support for the policy proposal, as featured in the experimental stimuli, showed robust negative effects. In other words, participants who were most distrustful of government and most opposed to health care market reforms or anti-terrorism measures were more inclined to adopt a cynical attitude. In the health care experiment, we additionally found a marginally significant negative effect of political efficacy.

Spotlighting spin in postmodern democracy

In this chapter we set out to do two things: first, to analyse the presence of spin doctors in the news over a 25-year period in the Netherlands and the UK and second to assess the effects of strategic political communication. In doing so, we considered *both* dimensions that structure the

overall framework of this volume. Looking first at the news coverage, we found that the volume of metacoverage in the Netherlands has been a great deal lower than in Britain. Looking at two newspapers in each country we found strong parallels between the two pairs of trend-lines per country, suggesting a strong similarity in the news coverage *within* each country. In the UK spin has been institutionalized to an unprecedented degree and it was not until a large-scale public debate had taken place that the centrality of spin declined. Spin has never been as pervasive in the Dutch press as it has been in the British and such differences are important antidotes to sweeping generalizations about the presence and dominance of spin and metacoverage.

Turning secondly to our assessment of the effects of metacoverage, a key finding is that citizens adopt a more negative view of strategic political communication as soon as its practices and practitioners become part of the political news story. This finding ties in with the current book's vertical dimension, and it invites the question of whether, and if so to what extent, cynicism about political public relations is likely to spill routinely over to cynicism about politics more generally. There is indeed evidence to support such an augmenting effect. In a recent set of experiments, De Vreese and Elenbaas (2008) not only corroborated previous studies in finding a relationship between generic strategy coverage and political cynicism, but also demonstrated that strategic *publicity* coverage cultivates public cynicism about politics in very similar ways. In fact, in a multivariate analysis it was found that the publicity strategy frame consistently exerted the strongest positive effect on political cynicism, even compared with the generic strategy frame. Conceivably, citizens see no reason to distinguish between the professional goals of communication strategists, on the one hand, and the political goals of politicians on the other. In line with normative stipulations, this would suggest that the responsibility for any perceived mistreatment of political publicity ultimately falls on the shoulders of the politician.

In view of declining levels of public trust and engagement in politics (as documented in some but not all Western democracies – see, for example, Dalton, 2002), spin doctors have been a typical scapegoat. The media, for their part, have received their own share of the blame. Particularly in the UK, where coverage of spin has been most pervasive, political journalism has been criticized for its obsession with exposing the techniques of mediatized politics. Such coverage, according to critics, has displaced important substantive information about and scrutiny of the 'real' issues in politics, and has become too negative, intrusive or even disruptive of the political process (for example Lloyd, 2004; see also

Kerbel, 1999). Indeed, much of the published metacoverage reflects an overtly strategic conception of political publicity (Esser & D'Angelo, 2006), and the available evidence indeed suggests there is reason to be concerned that a diet of strategic information fuels negative sentiments about politics (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

It is questionable, however, whether the picture is ultimately as bleak as scholars and media critics often assert (see Perloff, 2003). In a recent study, for example, we found that exposure to strategic publicity evoked cynicism particularly among politically sophisticated individuals (De Vreese & Elenbaas, 2008). The present study, furthermore, showed that politically aware and more highly educated participants were more inclined to express distrust towards political public relations than the less involved and those with lower levels of formal education, regardless of exposure. Cynicism, as conceived in this line of research, might thus at least in part be reflective of an interested and critical public stance towards political publicity, which can arguably be seen as rather healthy for a democracy. This latter, more optimistic, assertion is nonetheless a tentative one, especially in its longitudinal perspective. Therefore, future research must address the question of whether, and under what conditions, the effects of continual and extensive doses of exposure to strategic news of politics and publicity might still produce a cumulative 'sleeper effect' on political disaffection and alienation in the long run (see Kleinnijenhuis, Van Hoof & Oegema, 2006).

This research, primarily conducted in the political context of public governance and policy, offers new insight into the issues of credibility and trustworthiness that surround the strategic communications profession. Echoing Callison (2001), the best advice may be for political communication professionals 'simply to stay out of the spotlight' (p. 233). However, most professionals already position themselves in the shade of politics-media interaction anyway, and only very few of them seem close enough – and powerful enough – to have a significant influence on elite politicians in the first place. Still, that does not debunk the notion that the 'non-transparent position in the policy-making process' of unelected and invisible actors 'conflicts with normative democratic theory' (Esser & Tenscher, 2005, p. 18). In part, this secrecy and lack of transparency is precisely what attracts the attention of the media. Accordingly, an important merit of metacoverage, several scholars have argued, is that it prompts politicians toward democratically desirable principles and practices of communication and electioneering (McNair, 2000; 2004; Esser & D'Angelo, 2006).

Above all, however, metacoverage mirrors both a journalistic defence strategy – an underlining of journalists’ autonomy and control over the contents of the news – and a professional norm – the journalistic view that modern political life, campaigning and policy making represent ‘a composite reality that cannot be covered fully and accurately unless news stories at times consider how the respective behaviour of news media and political publicity intersect with each other’ (Esser & Spanier, 2005, p. 30; see also Zaller, 1999). In fact, one could even contend that covering issues of press and publicity helps to inform the average citizen about the complex situations within which the media and political elites must interact in shaping political reality, which arguably provides a more adequate picture of the modern process of politics. But in today’s highly competitive and commercialized media environment, part of the reason why meta-stories exist probably also lies in the fact that they are relatively easy to produce and arguably quite appealing to consume (see Esser & Spanier, 2005).

As the media have become an integral part of politics, political communication has become – and will continue to be – an intrinsic part of the political story; not just in coverage of election campaigns but also in coverage of governance and policy making. The degree of metacoverage and strategy framing is subject to considerable variation, across time as well as across political and media systems and cultures. Regardless of those differences, public relations professionals operating in the wings of the political arena will continue to find themselves in the spotlight of political journalism. Our study shows that this reporting style has ramifications not only for citizens’ attitudes towards politics and the media, but also for the political communication profession itself.

Notes

1. The data suggest that the term spin doctors was first introduced in *The Guardian* on 6 November 1986, in a commentary article about the aftermath of the US mid-term elections of that year:

Even as the final returns from across the country were coming in late on Tuesday night showing a strong Democratic renaissance in the South and the West ... the White House ‘spin doctors’ were at work seeking as it were to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

As the world discovered in the aftermath of the Reykjavik debacle, when the President’s handlers put him on the public relations offensive, he can change perceptions as if by magic. The accords which never were in Geneva became ‘agreements’ and suddenly the American people, who had always

harboured doubts about the feasibility of 'Star Wars' became overwhelming supporters according to the polls.

It was in similar style that the 'spin doctors', those aides responsible for showing the President in the best light by telling opinion makers what really happened, began their work ... The important thing was to show that it will go on. After the ferocious and vitriolic personal attacks he adopted on the campaign trail Mr Reagan stood statesmanlike yesterday and called for bipartisanship on foreign policy and defence, the Strategic Defence Initiative and the Contras, welfare and tax reform.

(Brumer, 1986)

2. We have introduced the term 'generic strategy frame' elsewhere (De Vreese & Elenbaas, 2008). The word 'generic' implies a hierarchical order of conceptualization, so that the generic strategy frame forms a general category, and the press and publicity strategy frames are subtypes of this general category. However, the term is introduced here not so much to imply such a conceptual hierarchy but merely rather as a convenient way nominally to distinguish this frame from the press and publicity strategy frames. See De Vreese and Elenbaas (2008, p. 299) for a discussion.
3. Each of our subjects took part in one experiment only. A total of 414 subjects participated in the experiment on health care liberalization (49.3 per cent male, aged 18 to 66 years [$M = 43.4$ years, $SD = 12.9$ years]), whereas a total of 449 subjects participated in the experiment on air travel security (44.5 per cent male, aged 18 to 66 years [$M = 42.3$ years, $SD = 12.8$ years]). The two experiments were conducted between 6 and 13 April 2007. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions, and there were no significant differences of important demographics and control variables among these conditions.
4. We selected these topics because they were present on the political agenda but only modestly salient on the media agenda in the period during which the experiments were conducted. Our stimuli would thus be representative of real issues but not easy to discredit by our subjects, given that they had only limited opportunity to learn about the exact details (for example progress) of the decision-making process on these issues from the mass media. The full texts of the stimulus material can be obtained from the authors.
5. Prior to conducting the actual study, we conducted a pilot study to assess the robustness of the experimental manipulation. Participants taking part in the pilot study were students in various study disciplines pursuing bachelor's or master's degrees from the University of Amsterdam (health care $n = 78$, air travel $n = 79$). The pilot study's manipulation check included ten items tapping subjects' level of agreement with an equal number of statements on a seven-point agree-disagree scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Detailed results can be obtained from the authors but, taken together, the results of the pilot study revealed a successful manipulation.
6. All items were coded on a seven-point agree-disagree scale. After reversely coding responses to propositions 1 and 4, all items were averaged to form a scale of political PR cynicism ranging from 1 to 7 (health care $M = 4.57$, $SD = 0.89$, $\alpha = 0.79$; air security $M = 4.57$, $SD = 0.95$, $\alpha = 0.83$).
7. Descriptive statistics of all control variables and wording of associated items can be obtained from the authors.

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6

Changes in Political News Coverage: Personalization, Conflict and Negativity in British and Dutch Newspapers

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Introduction

Political news coverage has – allegedly – undergone profound changes in the past decades. A professionalization of both politics and journalism, increasing market pressures and technological developments (Negrine & Lilleker, 2002) have led to a new quality in the link between political actors and institutions and the mass media, but are also claimed to have greatly affected the way politics is covered in the media. Such changes include overall decreasing amounts of political news coverage, an increasing focus on political strategy and the horse-race in politics, increasing negativity towards political actors and politics in general, conflict as a central theme of the news and an increasing focus on political leaders and personalities (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995). It is thought that these processes are taking place at the expense of coverage of substantial political issues. In sum, political news coverage now supposedly looks very different from what it did some decades ago.

These developments in media coverage are at the heart of the broader changes that the relationship between political elites and mass media is argued to have undergone. Describing the influence of journalism and the mass media, the mediatization approach claims that political actors increasingly depend upon and that their behaviour is now largely shaped by the mass media (for example Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). To capture the current situation scholars have coined different phases of political communication, referring to the third age of political communication (Blumler, 2001; Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999) or a period of media logic (Brants & Van Praag, 2006).

In scholarly and societal debates, the above described deterministic trends and developments are often taken for granted. Empirical evidence

is, however, relatively scarce. This chapter deals with aspects of change in political news coverage over time and empirically tests some of the assumptions that are being made about the profound changes that it is argued to have undergone. It focuses on the way journalists report about politics and thus on the horizontal dimension of political communication, and looks more specifically at the personalization of political news, and negativity and conflict in the coverage of political actors. Political journalists are accused of being (too) obsessed with leaders and candidates, with their personality and character, and at the same time beginning to ignore parties and party programmes, policies and substantial issue coverage. Additionally, an increased focus on ‘who criticizes who?’ and negative evaluations of politicians and the political process are argued to have further undermined the contribution media can make to a healthy democracy.

In this chapter, we consider the evidence that Dutch and British news coverage has become more focused on individuals, conflict and negativity. This study adds to our knowledge of these three elements by utilizing a unique database of political actors in newspaper coverage stretching over a period of 18 years. We can thereby assess to what degree newspaper coverage has an over-time tendency to become more personalized, negative and conflict-focused, both within and outside election periods. Furthermore, the data allow for a systematic comparison of trends across the two countries and across different outlets.

The study draws on a ‘most different systems’ design and compares newspaper coverage in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, countries that differ substantially in terms of their political and media systems. This makes a comparison of trends in political news coverage in these two contexts and a consideration of possible differences and similarities particularly relevant. If we find similar developments in the two countries, they are unlikely to be due to country-specific characteristics and are likely to be found elsewhere in the Western world as well. Thus we believe that considering trends in political news coverage in these two different political and media systems can be indicative of broader trends above and beyond the two countries under study here.

Personalization of political news coverage

Definitions of the concept of personalization are contested and are – arguably – at the basis of differential findings when it comes to identifying over-time trends in the mediated personalization of politics (see also Rahat & Sheafer, 2007). Van Santen and Van Zoonen (2009)

offer an insightful overview of the use of personalization in recent political communication research. They distinguish seven different ways in which the term is used, ranging from a focus on politicians instead of parties to a more qualitative shift towards paying more attention to the private life of the politician.

The most straightforward and commonly used conceptualization of personalization relates to the (increasing) amount of political actor coverage focusing on political people and candidates compared with the attention devoted to political parties (Wattenberg, 1994). Even relying on such a straightforward definition of personalization provides mixed evidence regarding the increasing personalization of political news. Wattenberg (1994) finds a growth of personalization in press coverage in the United States between 1952 and 1980, while Vliegenthart et al. (2007) find a high and increased share of personalized news in the 2002 Dutch elections compared with previous elections. In contrast, Wilke and Reinemann (2001), incorporating evaluative references towards candidates and candidate photos in the press, find no traces of increasing personalization in German election news coverage between 1948 and 1998. Kaase (1994), who takes into account the importance of personalities as well as press coverage for electoral behaviour, also finds little evidence for personalization during the 1990 German election. Sigelman and Bullock (1991), in an attempt to capture dynamics over a long time period, identify personalization by means of references to candidate traits and find no increase in this type of personalization in the US press between 1888 and 1988.

Only a few studies have tried to define and measure different conceptualizations – or elements – of personalization. In an attempt to deconstruct the concept, Langer suggested the distinction of three categories: ‘presidentialization of power’ (a shift in the distribution of power towards leaders and an associated increase in mediated visibility), ‘leadership focus’ (an increased emphasis on personality traits related to the function of politicians) and ‘politicization of private persona’ (the emphasis on personal characteristics that are irrelevant to the job) (Langer, 2007, p. 373). She found evidence of all three aspects of personalization increasing over the period from 1945 to 1999 in the British newspaper *The Times*. These findings, however, need to be treated with some reservation. By ignoring the visibility of individuals in comparison to parties and looking solely at the sheer amount of attention individuals receive, Langer’s conceptualization fails to understand personalization in the context of other media coverage. Furthermore, her focus is limited to a single office, that of the Prime Minister, offering little information about trends in personalization more general.

A more thorough attempt to conceptualize personalization has been made by Rahat and Shafer (2007). In their both theoretically and empirically comprehensive study of personalization in the Israeli press since 1949, the authors distinguish between (i) institutional personalization, (ii) media personalization and (iii) behavioural personalization. The first relates to the institutional arrangements in a country that attribute more power to individual politicians, while the last one deals with the personal attempts of politicians to increase their profile as individuals rather than as part of a political party. The second one is most relevant in the context of this study. A distinction is furthermore made between media personalization and media privatization. Media personalization on the one hand refers to 'a heightened focus on individual politics and a diminished focus on parties', with attention paid to the *political characteristics and activities* of individual politicians (Rahat & Shefer, 2007, p. 67). Media privatization on the other hand 'refers to a media focus on the *personal characteristics and personal life* of individual candidates' (p. 68). Contextualizing this approach in terms of other literature, media personalization appears to resemble Wattenberg's (1994) approach, while media privatization is similar to Sigelman and Bullock's (1991) approach to personalization and to Langer's (2007) 'politicisation of private persona'.

The operational definition at the basis of the empirical part of this study draws on Wattenberg (1994) and refers to media personalization as understood by Rahat and Shefer (2007). We define personalization as the relative share of coverage of individual politicians versus political parties. In that way, we can consider whether the share of personalization increases over time, as advocates of new ages of political communication would have us believe. Also, we are able to compare different news outlets and their levels of personalization. Furthermore, we consider what Langer (2007) called presidentialization. Here, we empirically translate this into an increasing focus on the political leadership at the expense of *other* political individuals. We understand this as one particular exemplification of personalization. Following the strand of literature on changes in political communication, we expect to find increasing levels of both personalization and presidentialization over the past two decades.

Negativity and conflict

Conflict and negativity feature prominently in the debate of changes in the nature of political communication. Both are considered important news

values (Galtung & Ruge, 1965) and have therefore always been a part of political news reporting. Indeed studies have shown that conflict forms a substantial part of general news reporting (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992) and that complicated arguments are reduced to simplified conflicts, for instance during US presidential election campaigns (e.g. Patterson, 1993). Several authors have argued that political news coverage is increasingly focusing on conflict (e.g. Patterson, 1993; Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Patterson attributes this increased focus on political conflict to journalists' changing perceptions of their role perceptions, which are closely related to the change from a political logic to a media logic as described by, for example, Brants and Van Praag (2006). According to Patterson, journalists' attitudes towards politics have become increasingly cynical and they actively search for opposition and conflict, without caring much about the extent to which the criticism is justified. It is argued that the resulting conflict and horse-race coverage appeals to a larger audience (Iyengar, Norpoth & Hahn, 2004). In a competitive media market, as also exists in Europe, an increased focus on those elements of political news coverage is to be expected. However, empirical research only partly supports this hypothesized trend: in the Dutch context, Kleinnijenhuis and colleagues find an increasing presence of news on 'support and criticism' throughout the 1990s, but this trend is reversed after 2002 (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2007, p. 63). In Germany, Schulz and Zeh (2005) find an increased use of the 'game schema' that includes news on conflicts in television coverage over four election campaigns in the period 1990–2002. Overall, we might thus expect a moderate increase in conflict news across the research period that we consider in this chapter.

Closely connected to the focus on conflict in media coverage is the negativity of the news. It can be considered as yet another consequence of increased cynicism among journalists. Those that are cynical and disengaged will consider politicians and political actors in negative terms and this might well be reflected in an increasing negative tone in their coverage. Due to increasing market pressure both negativity and conflict are argued to have become more present in news coverage. Empirical research does indeed seem to point to increased negativity. For instance it is found that US television networks put a strong and increasing focus on negativity in US election news coverage (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2006). Similarly, election coverage in the German *Bild* becomes increasingly negative from 1990 to 2002 (Semetko & Schoenbach, 2003). In the Dutch context, Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2007) find that, following a similar trend to conflict news, the tone of election campaign coverage

became increasingly negative throughout the 1990s and was at its highest in the 2002 and 2003 election campaigns, after which it became significantly more positive in the 2006 election campaign. These empirical findings lead us to expect an overall increase in negativity of political news coverage over the past decades.

Country, outlet and period differences

Based on the differences in the political and media systems of the UK and the Netherlands, we expect that differences across the two countries will exist in terms of their absolute levels of personalization, conflict and negativity. We assume that media coverage will, to a considerable extent, reflect the political power constellation in a country, and that more powerful actors will receive more attention (Bennett, 1990). Both the electoral system and the media system lead us to expect higher levels of all three characteristics in the UK than the Netherlands. The first-past-the-post principle, whereby politicians are chosen on a personal mandate rather than representing the party on a national, closed list, makes them likely to be more prominent in the political realm compared to political parties, which is likely to be reflected in media coverage as well. The majoritarian system and the power this gives to the British Prime Minister, compared with the Dutch equivalent, makes it likely that the levels of presidentialization are higher in this country as well.

The media system also differs between the two countries. Hallin and Mancini (2004) consider the UK to be a clear-cut example of the liberal system, where commercialization of the media market was stronger and took place earlier. In contrast, the Netherlands is considered to belong to the democratic-corporatist model. Traditionally, newspapers in liberal countries are more focused on revenues from sales and advertisements. How this translates in coverage is far from evident, but one could anticipate that outlets are more driven by news values such as conflict and negativity, since those might attract a larger audience and generate more revenues. This expectation is also in line with Brants and Van Praag's (2006) assertion that the professionalization of communication as identified by Hallin and Mancini is present in the Netherlands, but to a lesser extent and with a context-specific realization, most notably the political culture of a consensus democracy that counters too strong trends in negative and cynical reporting.

In addition to country differences we consider differences in type of medium. Our sample of newspapers includes both quality broadsheet

papers and sensationalistic tabloid papers. From prior research we know that tabloid newspapers are more focused on personalities and conflict, and might take a more sceptical attitude towards politics (Norris, 2000). Therefore we expect that all three phenomena will occur to a stronger degree in such papers than in broadsheets.

Finally we consider differences between election and non-election periods. A great number of previous investigations have focussed on analysing trends in personalization, negativity and conflict news in election periods. Few studies specifically address both election and routine news periods. This is a clear weakness of previous research, because both media–politics dynamics (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006) and the resulting characteristics of media coverage (Van Aelst & De Swert, 2009) differ substantially between those periods. Intuitively, one expects coverage during elections to be more personalized than in routine times, since these are the moments that candidates try to profile themselves in order to get elected. However, the limited empirical research that compares different periods in the electoral cycle offers evidence for the opposite. Van Aelst and De Swert (2009) find more attention for parties in election times compared with routine times and explain this by pointing to the fact that during election times politicians function more strongly as spokespersons for their parties, while in routine times more attention is devoted to individuals with a political function, such as ministers. Furthermore, the increased attention to opinion polls, which report how well parties are doing, might account for this difference. In line with these findings, we expect news to be less personalized during election periods. Additionally, one would expect that conflicts become more manifest in election times, when differences and oppositions are emphasized by political actors in order to profile themselves and appear favourable in the eyes of the electorate.

Methods

We draw on a computer-assisted content analysis of British and Dutch newspapers over the period 1991–2007 (UK) and 1990–2007 (Netherlands). From the digital archive LexisNexis we collected all articles from three national newspapers for each country that referred to one of the political parties that was currently represented in parliament. For the UK, we limited our search to the three large parties (Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat), all cabinet members, as well as the leaders of the opposition parties for the period they were in office. For the Netherlands, we did the same for ministers, junior ministers, party

chairpersons in parliament and first candidates during parliamentary election campaigns. We included 81¹ politicians for the UK and 167 for the Netherlands. Not all newspapers are available digitally for the whole research period. For the Netherlands, the following newspapers were taken into account: *NRC Handelsblad* (a centre-right quality newspaper, available for the whole study period), *de Volkskrant* (a centre-left quality newspaper, available 1995–2007) and *De Telegraaf* (a right-leaning, tabloid-style newspaper, available 1999–2007). For the UK we include *The Guardian* (a centre-left quality newspaper) and *The Times* (a centre-right quality newspaper), both of which were available for the whole study period, and *The Sun* (a tabloid, sensationalist daily), which was available from 2006 to 2007. In total we collected 202,421 British articles and 212,890 Dutch articles.

We operationalized our variables as follows:

- 1 *Personalization*: the percentage of total attention for political actors (politicians and parties) that was devoted to politicians. Attention scores were calculated at an article level, using the formula: $1 + \ln(\text{number of mentions})$. This formula is based on the idea that overall visibility is sublinearly dependent upon the total number of mentions. Furthermore, mentions in the headline are counted twice.
- 2 *Presidentialization*: the percentage of the total attention devoted to politicians that is devoted to the Prime Minister.
- 3 *Conflict and cooperation news*: in line with Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2007), we consider news that falls within the broad categories of ‘conflict’ and ‘cooperation’ – or in their terms ‘criticism’ and ‘support’ – to indicate the level of conflict news. Both types, indicating news coverage that deals with questions about who likes and dislikes whom, can be considered antipodal to news that deals with substantial policy – or ‘issue news’ as Kleinnijenhuis et al. label it. We use the percentage of articles that contained a reference to conflict or cooperation. For each article, we searched for verbs and declinations that indicated conflict or cooperation within the headline of the article or within three words of the mention of a political actor – a so-called ‘keyword in context’ approach. Word lists were based on categorizations in *Roget’s Thesaurus* (Roget, 1911) and its Dutch equivalent, *Het Juiste Woord* (Brouwers & Claes, 1997). A list of words that indicate cooperation or conflict was manually checked and frequently occurring words with ambiguous meanings were deleted. We ended up with 593 (UK) and 443 (Netherlands) verbs that indicated cooperation and 936 (UK) and 857 (Netherlands) that indicated conflict.

4 *Negativity*: the mean score of tone is determined based on the following distinction: articles that contain no conflict and no cooperation words or contain both are assigned a 0; articles that contain cooperation words, but no conflict words are assigned a score of +1; articles that contain conflict words, but no cooperation words are assigned a score of -1. Thus, the higher the overall score, the more positive the coverage; the lower, or more negative the score, the more negative the coverage.

Scores are aggregated for each media outlet. To compare over-time trends, we do this at a monthly level and look at trends that exist for separate newspapers. We do not look at trends for *The Sun*, as it is only included for the last two years of the analysis. To compare election times with routine times, we compare the coverage in the month before all national elections that took place during the research period with coverage in the other months.

Results

We start by comparing the shares of news identified as personalized, presidentialized and conflict- and cooperation-focused and the levels of negativity found in the different news outlets in the two countries. We do so for the years 2006 and 2007 only – these are the years for which all outlets are included (see Table 6.1). Here we specifically consider country and outlet differences. We find considerable evidence for the anticipated differences across countries and outlets that clearly reflect differences in political and media systems. First of all, we find that British news coverage is overall more personalized, more focused on the Prime Minister and more conflict-oriented. While the level of personalization in the Dutch newspapers is around 50 per cent, the British newspapers have a clearly higher score, ranging from just above 60 per cent (*The Times*) to more than 80 per cent (*The Sun*) – even though considerably fewer British than Dutch politicians are included in the analysis. The differences across newspapers are also as expected: in both countries the level of personalization is highest in the tabloid newspaper. The difference between *The Sun* and the other British newspapers is bigger than that between *De Telegraaf* and the other Dutch newspapers. This is not surprising, since *The Sun* is a considerably more sensationalistic newspaper than *De Telegraaf*. This is also reflected in the fact that *The Sun* focuses much of its political coverage on the Prime Minister: more than 40 per cent of its attention on politicians is devoted to this single

Table 6.1 Comparison of coverage in the years 2006 and 2007 in British and Dutch newspapers

Newspaper	Characteristic				Articles (<i>n</i>)
	Personalization (%)	Presidentiali- zation (%)	Conflict and cooperation focus (%)	Tone*	
<i>The Guardian</i>	65.22	37.24	83.00	0.025	15,131
<i>The Times</i>	60.39	29.91	67.00	0.090	12,519
<i>The Sun</i>	81.27	41.83	64.00	-0.043	8,227
<i>De Volkskrant</i>	49.48	13.47	56.95	0.108	13,171
<i>NRC</i>	48.91	12.40	55.71	0.104	13,018
<i>Handelsblad</i>					
<i>De Telegraaf</i>	53.12	12.66	56.22	0.102	11,520

*The higher the score, the more positive the coverage; the lower, or more negative the score, the more negative the coverage.

person. The Dutch outlets, by contrast, do not differ much in terms of their leader focus. Overall, again, the Prime Minister in the UK receives considerable more attention than the Dutch Prime Minister.

When it comes to the level of conflict and cooperation news, that is coverage that focuses on allies and opponents in the political arena, we again find higher levels in British than Dutch newspapers – with *The Guardian* reaching levels higher than 80 per cent. In this case, the tabloid newspapers score lower. This might well be an artefact of the data: the articles of the tabloid-style newspapers are considerably shorter and consequently the chance of finding one of the words indicating cooperation or conflict is smaller. Finally, with regard to negativity, our expectations are also largely confirmed. The British newspapers are more negative in tone than the Dutch ones, and the sensationalist *Sun* stands out especially as it is the only newspaper that has a larger focus on conflict than on cooperation. The difference between *De Telegraaf* and the other Dutch newspapers is as expected, although small: *De Telegraaf* is slightly more negative. Again, however, the results confirm that this newspaper is less sensationalist than *The Sun* and more similar to broadsheet papers.

Are personalization, conflict and negativity increasingly part of political news coverage? We now consider results of the content analysis in an over-time perspective for each newspaper that was analysed. We use the monthly values for the different characteristics of coverage and draw the best fitting linear trend line for each. In all instances, these

trend lines do not fit very well in statistical terms and never exceed an explained variance of 15 per cent. Substantially, this means that only limited variation in the different characteristics of political news coverage can be attributed to the progression of time and thus, that no strong linear trends are found. Personalization does not uniformly increase over the past two decades, as illustrated in Figure 6.1. Considering the strong inter-media differences, we deem it necessary not to show overall trends. Whereas *The Guardian* and to a lesser degree *De Telegraaf* show some increase in the level of personalization, this is clearly not the case for other newspapers: *de Volkskrant* shows decreasing amounts of personalization. Over-time developments, however, show strong variation not only between but also within newspapers, with values ranging from below 40 per cent to more than 70 per cent for Dutch newspapers, and even reaching more than 80 per cent in British newspapers. Levels of personalization seem to be driven by specific events, such as changes in government (high values in 1997 for the British newspapers) or scandals in otherwise politically calm times (for example the resignation of junior minister of education Annette Nijs in July 2004). We conclude

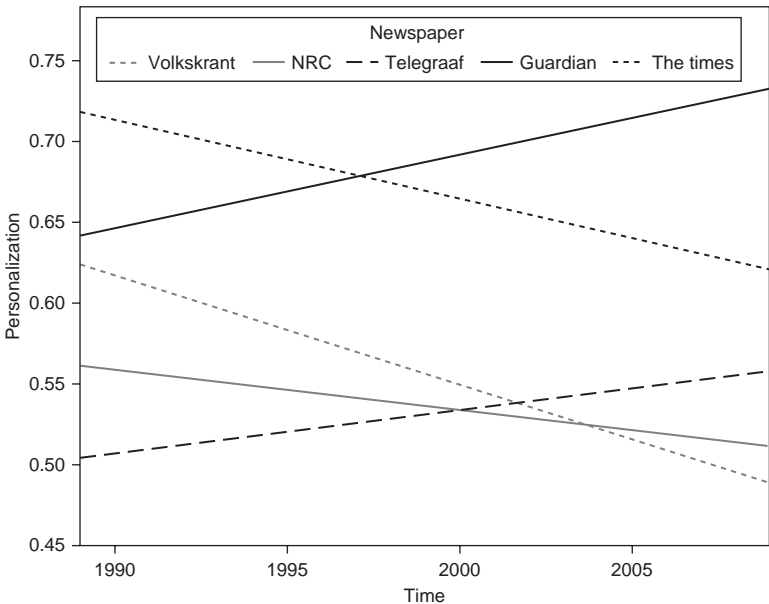


Figure 6.1 Trends in personalization in Dutch and British newspapers between 1990 and 2007

from these data that there are no clear and uniform trends towards personalization in the newspapers that we analysed and that claims of an omnipresent increase in attention for politicians at the expense of parties cannot be grounded empirically.

Presidentialization as an additional perspective on personalization yields a very similar mixed picture, as shown in Figure 6.2. Again we see somewhat increasing levels of presidentialization in *The Guardian* and *De Telegraaf*, whereas presidentialization was decreasing in *The Times* and *de Volkskrant* and remained rather stable in *NRC Handelsblad*. Again, differences within newspapers can be attributed to specific political events. The focus on the British Prime Minister, for example, was exceptionally high in the last months of our research period, due to the much-discussed replacement of Tony Blair by Gordon Brown.

Next, we turn towards trends in conflict news. Again the analysis shows a very diverse picture, with considerable outlet differences, as illustrated in Figure 6.3. Against expectations, for all the Dutch outlets we see a decline in levels of this type of news coverage, with this change most

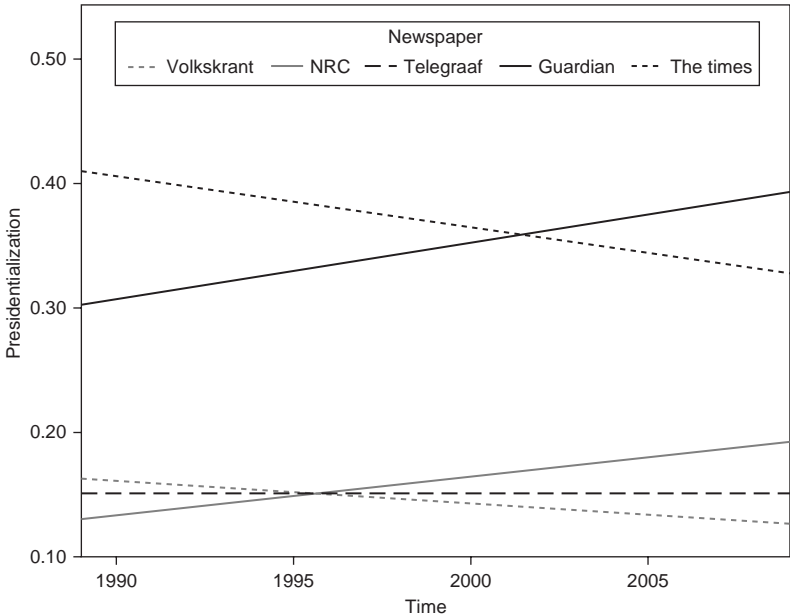


Figure 6.2 Trends in presidentialization in Dutch and British newspapers between 1990 and 2007

pronounced in *De Telegraaf* and less so in the other two newspapers. This difference might well be explained by the shorter time frame for analysis of *De Telegraaf* (starting only in 1999), which has the turbulent and conflictuous period 2001–2002 at the beginning of the time series. The British outlets do not show a uniform trend, with *The Guardian* increasing its share of conflict news and *The Times* decreasing its conflict focus over time. Again, however, the relative weakness of the trends needs to be emphasized.

Finally, when it comes to negativity, we find a similar trend in all five outlets. However, this trend is opposite to the one expected from the professionalization of political communication literature: a positive tone increased in all outlets between the early 1990s and 2007, but to strongly varying degrees, as shown in Figure 6.4. Remarkably, the Dutch popular outlet *De Telegraaf* showed the strongest trend towards a positive tone. *The Guardian*, *de Volkskrant* and *NRC Handelsblad* also had increasing levels of positivity in their coverage, but the rise was considerably less steep. The levels of negativity for *The Times* remained almost stable. Again, we find considerable variation that cannot be attributed to the time of observation.

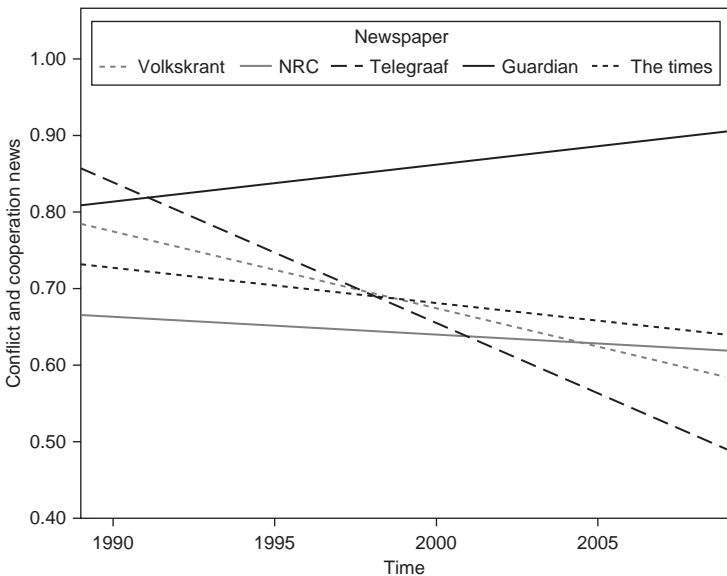


Figure 6.3 Trends in conflict and cooperation news in Dutch and British newspapers between 1990 and 2007

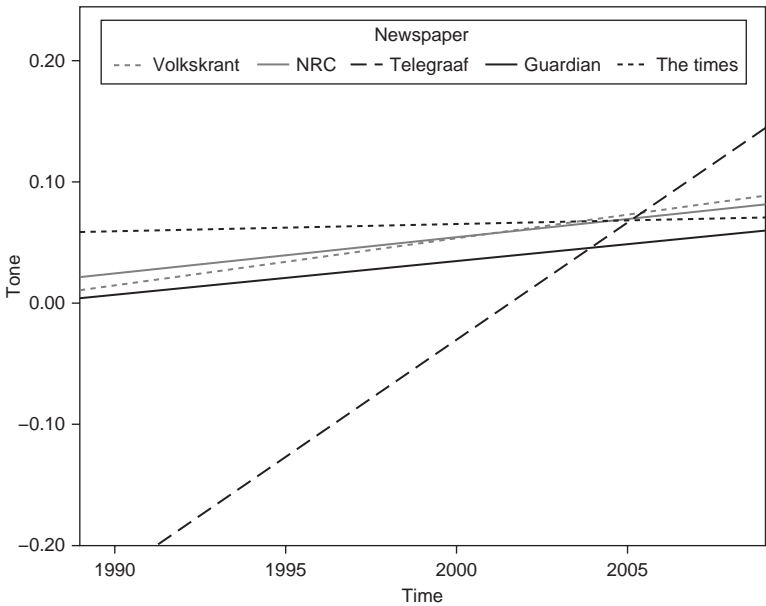


Figure 6.4 Trends in negativity in Dutch and British newspapers between 1990 and 2007

The remaining analyses compare election and non-election periods. The comparison between those periods, as presented in Table 6.2, confirms our expectations with regard to the levels of personalization. For all election periods in both the UK and the Netherlands, we find a stronger primacy for political parties than in routine times, with two exceptions. The first one is during the Dutch 2002 elections, when coverage was, by Dutch standards, extremely personalized (see also Vliegthart et al., 2007), particularly because of the involvement of new politician Pim Fortuyn, who had created a party around his personality and attracted large amounts of attention, even before his death. Second, we also see that the 2006 election campaign in *De Telegraaf* was more personalized than coverage in routine periods. This might well be a consequence of the initially tight race between the Dutch Christian Democrats and the Labour party and the related question of who would become the next Prime Minister of the Netherlands.

Relating to the other characteristics of coverage, we find that conflict and cooperation news is indeed found more at election times than in routine periods, although not for every election. The tone during

Table 6.2 Comparison of coverage during election periods and at routine times in British and Dutch newspapers between 1990 and 2007

Newspaper	Characteristic	Routine times	Election period				
			I	II	III	IV	V
UK			1992	1997	2001	2005	
<i>The Guardian</i>	Personalization	63.09%	43.55%	42.09%	51.00%	53.42%	
	Conflict and cooperation	78.35%	79.97%	83.79%	83.65%	81.65%	
	Tone*	0.033	0.026	0.073	0.392	0.339	
<i>The Times</i>	Personalization	60.06%	44.80%	38.78%	40.39%	48.30%	
	Conflict and cooperation	67.31%	73.24%	80.60%	72.95%	66.93%	
	Tone	0.071	0.090	0.022	0.088	0.073	
The Netherlands			1994	1998	2002	2003	2006
<i>De Volkskrant</i>	Personalization	53.93%		52.68%	60.66%	42.14%	47.30%
	Conflict and cooperation	65.68%		76.65%	76.89%	76.39%	61.09%
	Tone	0.066		0.112	-0.004	0.108	0.164
<i>NRC Handelsblad</i>	Personalization	52.92%	48.88%	46.67%	55.98%	44.18%	52.01%
	Conflict and cooperation	64.12%	76.18%	77.31%	81.57%	73.62%	60.78%
	Tone	0.059	0.082	0.127	-0.040	0.130	0.082
<i>De Telegraaf</i>	Personalization	55.07%			55.87%	44.90%	60.69%
	Conflict and cooperation	58.18%			74.19%	73.87%	63.55%
	Tone	0.053			-0.067	0.030	0.118

*The higher the score, the more positive the coverage; the lower, or more negative the score, the more negative the coverage.

the election campaigns fluctuates and seems campaign-specific as well. Especially striking is the positive tone in *The Guardian* during the elections of 1997 and, especially, 2001 and 2005. This may be a consequence of its political leaning to the left – since these were the elections that Labour gained or kept its majority in the House of Commons. Furthermore, the results confirm the trends in tone and conflict news that were found in previous Dutch election campaign research. As Kleinnijenhuis et al. found, 2002 was an extraordinary campaign: not only strongly personalized, but also very conflict-focused and negative in tone. The coverage of subsequent campaigns was less negative and conflict-focused. In general, again, when election periods are considered alone there are few if any linear trends in coverage characteristics.

Conclusion and discussion

This chapter's aim was to address empirically some assumptions in the literature on changes in political news coverage. It is widely assumed that over the past decades news has become more personalized, more negative and gained a stronger focus on conflict. Our findings suggest such trends to be hardly present: in many instances, there are considerable fluctuations, but these are to be explained by virtue of specific events and actors, rather than regarded as structural changes over time. A structural, linear approach to over-time developments in media coverage of politics and politicians results in little understanding and may lead to conclusions that are simplified and plain wrong. In many respects our findings are in line with previous ones that have also offered only limited and mixed evidence for increased personalization and conflict focus. Additionally, we do not find evidence for increasing negativity. Several authors have found such trends, but they focused on a different country, a shorter research period or solely on a limited period of time before the elections. In general, the results presented in this chapter offer little backing for those who argue that trends in professionalization and competition have a detrimental influence on political news coverage. With personalization being a key component of the notion of audience democracy, as described by Jos de Beus elsewhere in this book, these results do not offer clear-cut support for a transition towards such a democracy in the UK and the Netherlands. The results show that country differences do exist, and that those are actually in many respects in line with what one would expect based on, for example, Hallin and Mancini's (2004) classification of media systems. In addition, we demonstrated that tabloid papers offer more personalized and more

negative political news coverage, which is also in line with previous studies in several Western countries.

This all being said, the research in this chapter is not without shortcomings. First, our conceptualization and operationalization of the core concepts was straightforward and in many respects simplified. As we know from the literature, personalization is a multi-faceted phenomenon and we have only captured a small part of it. Future research should address the question of whether other forms of personalization did change – or are changing – in structural ways. Our longitudinal approach might be a useful methodological starting point to conduct such studies. Second, we focused on newspaper coverage and tried to obtain a sample that resembled the variation that is present in the two countries. The choice for this type of outlet, however, might be one for the ‘least likely’ case. After all, the written press might be the one that is least influenced by the trends that are causing the alleged changes in political communication. In other words, we might not be looking in the right place – ideally, the study should be extended to for example television news and new media. Third, due to practical constraints, our research period started only at the beginning of the 1990s and it can be argued that many of the fundamental changes occurred earlier on. Still, many of the structural arguments that are made within the field of political communication hold that ongoing processes move media content characteristics continuously in a certain direction. If this were true, one would expect to find that things have changed in a systematic way during our considerable time period. That did not turn out to be the case.

Notes

We would like to thank Jan Kleinnijenhuis for putting the English and Dutch thesauri lists for conflict and cooperation at our disposal.

1. One could argue that the selection of British politicians is rather limited, since it does not include the top politicians from the various districts. This means that the levels of personalization found in the empirical analysis are an underrepresentation of the actual ones.

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7

A Changing Culture of Political Television Journalism

Judith Stamper and Kees Brants

Introduction

Fifteen days before he left office, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, speaking in London at the Reuters press agency, told his audience that 'coping with the media, its sheer scale, weight and constant hyperactivity' was a 'vast aspect' of his job (Blair, 2007). For a purportedly reflective lecture, it was remarkably accusatory. After noting the 'cynicism about politics in public life', he concluded that 'today's media, more than ever before, hunts in a pack. In these modes it is like a feral beast, just tearing people and reputations to bits'.

British politicians are not unique in their criticisms of journalists. Dutch minister Piet Hein Donner (2005) similarly moaned about what he called the 'soap-ification' of the media debate about government: 'Constantly public authorities are described as inefficient and blundering, mistakes are said to be made but never acknowledged'. We should not be surprised, he added 'when one day citizens do not trust anything anymore, including the media'.

Scholars, particularly in the Anglo-American academy, tend to support the testimonies of these politicians, suggesting that there has been substantial change in the nature of political communication since the 1960s: in the methods and style of discourse between the main political actors in the public sphere; in the way economic and technological change has helped to frame that discourse and in the manner in which audiences have evolved from passive receptors of information to active participants. Recently this has been summarized as a complete *transformation* of political communication (Negrine, 2009). Some scholars and commentators have gone so far as to suggest that the current state of political communication is in danger of undermining the democratic

process itself (Jones, 2001; Franklin, 2004; Lloyd, 2004; Breedveld, 2005; Oosterbaan & Wansink, 2008).

Our aims are rather more narrow and specific in that we are confining ourselves to the medium of television and the profession of political journalism in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. We want to establish to what extent and why there is an apparent anxiety amongst significant numbers of politicians and journalists at the moment and whether the symbiosis between these actors has turned sour. We set out to ask whether perhaps we are not so much witnessing a change in the content of political television journalism, but one more in its culture and in the interactions of its participants. Was there ever, for example, an ideal state or golden age of political reporting and, if so, what characterized it? Then, what caused the transition or, as Negrine would have it, *transformation*?

In search of answers to these questions, we focus on the perception of political journalism as held by those directly involved in the communication process: television journalists and political practitioners. In the last months of 2009 we interviewed 20 politicians and journalists – first, from a selection of main political parties, politicians of differing ages and political experience in each of the two countries; second, a mix of young and experienced reporters and editors, plus the veterans of political journalism in the UK and the Netherlands. We asked them whether they perceived political journalism to have changed and, if so, what had changed both negatively and positively, and why; how much that had affected them and their interaction; and how they assessed those changes in relation to what they see as the ideal typical role of political journalists. All of the interviews – each took between 40 minutes and 2 hours and was conducted by one of us and audio-taped – provided detailed information on the above questions, which we assembled and structured in a data-matrix for intra- and inter-actor analysis¹.

The context: The culture of political journalism in the UK and the Netherlands

Hanitzsch (2007, p. 369) describes the culture of television journalism as that ‘particular set of ideas and practices by which journalists, consciously and unconsciously, legitimate their role in society and render their work meaningful for themselves and others’. It is also the ‘arena in which diverse professional ideologies struggle over the dominant interpretation of journalism’s social function and identity’ (p. 370) and, we would add, in which the different actors involved in the

news-making process struggle over the interpretation of what their professional practice should be like, how their professional norms and values are 'operationalized' in the form, style and methods of their journalistic practice.

The specific culture of political television journalism we define as the ideas and practices that guide the interaction between television journalists and politicians; the possible tensions that exist between the actors involved concerning the interpretation of these practices; and how these actors evaluate the political. In particular, such a specific interpretation of journalistic culture raises a number of questions: (i) what journalists and politicians perceive to be the ideal role of political journalism in democratic society, (ii) what written and unwritten rules of engagement guide the interaction between journalists and politicians, (iii) what characterizes the professional practice of political journalism and (iv) how politicians and journalists assess the resulting quality of the content.

Inevitably, journalistic culture is shaped as much by external factors as by internal rationale: the institutional environment within which journalists operate, market competition, legal constraints and particular political climates may be considered the predominant external influences. In parallel, sweeping technological development has changed the *modus operandi* of journalists across the world; at each stage, news production has become faster, easier to access and more prolific. All of this is reflected in the development of specific cultures of political journalism in the UK and the Netherlands.

Initially, political journalism in the UK was controlled and hampered by mechanisms such as the 14-day rule, whereby journalists could not publish political information or discuss political issues within 14 days of a parliamentary debate on the matter. Indeed, the first BBC television broadcasts in the 1950s were very staid affairs: news bulletins were short and delivered by news readers with plummy accents who did not appear in vision for fear that their facial expressions might betray their views and undermine the BBC's impartiality (BBC, 2004) and early television interviews with politicians were remarkable only for the obsequiousness of the interviewers who routinely thanked the politicians on air before the interview.

The catalyst for change was the arrival of commercial television and the breaking of the BBC's monopoly on broadcasting in 1955. The ITV network was commercial in attitude and ethos; from its inception it engaged audiences with political discourse in a much more robust and populist way (Fraser, 1990). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s journalists

began their protracted departure from what Blumler (1969) referred to as the 'sacerdotal' style of reporting, encompassing 'approaches that regard certain political institutions or events as intrinsically important, entitling them to substantial coverage as of right'. At the same time, more abrasive interviewers and presenters dared to challenge politicians in substantive and rigorous debate on both television channels, demonstrating that deference was something politicians could no longer expect. The antidote from the politicians' perspective was the application of market forces in the political arena, epitomized by the administration of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. Adopting American techniques, the Conservatives marketed their leader like a commodity and used commercial advertising for the first time in election campaigns. Thatcher's advisers groomed her image for television and ushered her into chat-show studios, where she was interviewed alongside singers and entertainers.

The proliferation of media outlets in the 1990s, rolling 24-hour news and the use of media techniques by the Labour party not only in campaigning but also in the business of governing, introduced a new phase in political journalism. Intense market competition between news outlets coincided with an administration under Tony Blair whose new influx of eponymous political spin doctors were accused of manipulating data, politicizing the civil service and blackmailing journalists by offering them access for favourable coverage (Jones, 2001). The countervailing power has been the changing role of what we used to call the audience, now individuals emerging as political actors in their own right, using new media as a means of expression. Alongside them is a new breed of young journalists who believe their job is constantly to harness and interpret the plethora of unorganized information, rather than simply to follow the agenda of the politicians.

Political journalism in the Netherlands until the mid-1960s was heavily influenced by *pillarization* (see the Introduction and the chapter by Brown in this volume) and the parallelism of media and politics: journalists functioned as the mouthpiece of the political parties to which they were linked. Television news, like the news at the BBC in the early days, was staid and impersonal; the rather more lively and interpretative version of political reality came from the current affairs programmes of the different pillars. Journalists would translate the party line and communicate to their followers what, and what not, to think and believe. Because of the sclerotic political communication system, journalistic self-consciousness was undeveloped.

This neat arrangement came to an end in the middle of the 1960s, when politics began to 'de-confessionalize' and 'de-ideologize'; the electorate

started to float and the media severed their ideological and religious ties. Interaction between politicians and journalists changed after Nieuwspoor, the journalists' parliamentary café and restaurant, which had opened in 1962, was steadily transformed into an informal meeting place of the two professions. More formal was the weekly television interview with the prime minister, introduced in 1970 and a regular feature ever since.

Following the coming of commercial television in 1989 and internet journalism more recently, there has been an increase in media competition, resulting in a rise in the number of political journalists in The Hague (from 31 in 1965, to more than 300 in 2009), challenging each other in their form and style of reporting. Political journalism on television has shifted somewhat from news and current affairs programmes to talk shows, which range from the genuinely informative to the spuriously entertaining, while blogs like *GeenStijl* have introduced a style of communication that combines anti-professional journalism with crude comedy that is seen as anti-intellectual and anti-establishment. At the same time, politicians are required to adapt to these new journalistic demands (Brants & Van Praag, 2006). Unsurprisingly they have responded with more refined news management techniques as a defence mechanism, although these are perhaps not as overt as those practised in the UK.

An anxiety of change

In an attempt to gauge the essence of any change in the journalism culture of both countries, we were interested to find out whether journalists and politicians had their own notions of ideal political journalism and whether that ideal was manifest now, or had been in the past. While our interviewees were in clear agreement that the job of political journalists is to inform their audiences as fully and accurately as possible and to analyse political developments critically without political interference, the majority felt this had never been fully realised and is not practiced now. The exceptions it seems are Dutch journalists who told us there was a period, in the 1970s and 1980s, when this ideal culture and practice was generally observed; they also felt that they continue to practice it even if most of their colleagues do not.

In trying to establish from our interviewees what has changed for better or worse, some predominant narratives emerge: the move towards a *popularization* of content in political journalism; a *cynicism* that exists between journalists and politicians that extends at times to their attitude towards audiences; a perception of *decline* in the *quality* of political

journalism and yet, despite this, a sense of *new opportunity*, especially among younger journalists, derived from the spread of new media, which is liberating their efforts to communicate with the politicians, on the one hand, and to interact with viewers more effectively, on the other.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the politicians viewed any changes in a more negative light than the journalists. Although British and Dutch politicians are similarly direct in their criticism of current political journalism, they differ slightly in what they see as the dominant problem: the journalists identify similar generic changes but from different cultural and stylistic perspectives.

The Westminster Members of Parliament are disappointed, even angry with what they see as the increasing aggression from journalists, who one of them said were 'more determined to expose politicians because we must all be lying scoundrels' and that this 'creates a disillusion and cynicism in the public mood'. A senior political editor agreed, but put the blame on the politicians accusing them of sticking to a political line or soundbite 'regardless of the truth of it'.

For the Dutch interviewees the popularization of political journalism is a more significant change, embodied most obviously in the shift from the news and current affairs arena into the talk-show studio. Some politicians lament disapprovingly that 'chat' has somehow become a legitimate discourse. Of the journalists, some reporters see entertainment as an inappropriate vehicle for political coverage, while others like the relaxed atmosphere and the relative time and space they get in talk shows to explain and elaborate points, compared with the hectic character of the television news format. For the majority, though, the cynical style of these programmes is the greatest worry. 'It is not to inform', one said, 'but to score'. They have a similar ambivalence towards online bloggers and the emergence of 'ambush journalism'. In the streets and the corridors of parliament, bloggers like *GeenStijl* catch politicians unawares, thrusting hand-held cameras in their faces and asking rude, cynical questions. This set the trend for some public and commercial television programmes to adopt a cynical style too, their ultimate goal seeming simply to satirize a politician; first to portray him as a celebrity and then to 'chop his head off' as one older politician complained. Nevertheless a younger, female politician was somewhat more enthusiastic about what these bloggers had achieved. 'They have kicked the establishment's ass, and that of the journalists; their self-referentiality; self aggrandisement and their arrogance. And that is good'.

Decline in the *quality* of political journalism is another major concern that the British and Dutch interviewees share. Where a sense of

engagement in substantive discourse used to be an automatic expectation in the reporting of political process and policy making, UK politicians think there now seems to be a general feeling of absence of political information and debate, despite the plethora of media channels and outlets. 'The long, thoughtful stuff is no longer in vogue, is it?' queried a politician who had been in the House for over 40 years. There was a clear concern that young journalists in particular knew little of the subject matter. The same MP explained that junior journalists would ring him up to get the facts and then choose someone else to go onto the programme, 'They're learning the subject from me but they're not going to have me on, because I take a reasonable view. They're going to look for ... extremes to battle it out like Punch and Judy'. Another MP told us that young journalists have no time to grasp the details of a story, because 'they are running around from one story to another and almost have to stop and ask you at the beginning what the story is about ... the journalist is almost having to say to you "Well, what shall I ask you?" That's happened'.

Dutch politicians noted a plethora of quality changes: fewer in-depth interviews and less investigative reporting; the ascendancy of one-liners and the dominance of pictures; the sources that remain unchecked; the lack of historical context and the power to set the political agenda drifting from the elected MP to the unelected journalist. For the Dutch journalists, any diminution in the quality of political journalism can in part be explained by the growth in the sheer number of journalists in The Hague, particularly young journalists not socialized in the values of the profession. As one journalist put it 'with twice as many reporters as MPs, there is more demand for news than supply', and this encourages a desire to translate issue politics into personal crises; a craving for the salubrious story and the reluctance to check facts. There is a temptation even to create dramatic situations in the hyper-competitive environment of 24-hour news.

It is interesting that the older journalists in Britain are disdainful of what they term 'Look at me!' journalism where their colleagues want recognition for themselves over and above an explanation for the audience. One senior journalist admitted 'I have not liked the drift towards increasing the role of the television journalist as a personality in their own right', adding in a later comment that 'the danger is that they put themselves between the electorate and the politicians rather than acting as an intermediary'.

The younger journalists see the process of gathering and disseminating information as too fast and too pressurized. They admit these

drawbacks also disadvantage the audience. One British political reporter told us ‘there’s a desire to squeeze more out of the individual’ and described working long hours, multi-tasking ‘across all platforms and all media’. A young political editor commented, ‘So much of the political debate is kind of white noise now’. She felt the speed of the news cycle was such that ‘things just happen so much faster and our patience and our attention spans have got shorter’. This high-speed chase for political news can often leave the viewer behind as news editors update stories before the audience has seen or heard the first version, ‘because the caravan has moved on’.

Despite this, all of the UK journalists we spoke to were undoubtedly more positive than the politicians about many of the changes and innovations that have embedded themselves into Westminster journalism. They enjoyed the increased informality of their interactions with politicians, who are apparently contactable by mobile phone and text message these days, even in the evenings and at weekends. Dutch journalists mentioned commercial television – for politicians, often the root of all evil – as a catalyst for healthy competition and an incentive for quality and diversity since there are more platforms for politics, and producers want to prove they can do things well and do them differently. ‘Competition keeps you on the ball’, a former anchor said. Some of his colleagues also see a qualitative improvement because there is more explanation and interpretation of what the news means, why it is important and how it should be ‘read’.

The politicians agree today’s more informal approach is a welcome move; most feel new technology has empowered people, though they all had caveats about it, some preferring the dialogue with voters on the internet to the intrusive presence of 24-hour television news cameras and the ubiquitous junior journalist in tow who seems a constant irritant. Journalists on the other hand, especially the British, regard the birth of rolling news in the 1990s as a new dawn of accessible information for all. Despite the unstructured nature of the new journalistic landscape with its teeming outlets and fragmented audiences, they believe there is little excuse for not finding what you want. Some commented upon the end of the ‘sacerdotal approach’ to political journalism and they did not appear to mourn its passing; as one said, ‘I think political reporting is not, should not be, about merely reporting a sort of televised parliamentary page, in which we say “this is what happened in the institutions today” ... news should be about news. It should be about what’s different; it should not be just about saying it’s our duty to bring you two, two and a half minutes from the House of Commons’.

Finally, several of our Dutch interviewees pointed out that stylistic changes, such as faster montages, music and dramatization, have made political issues, in all their complexity and potential dullness, more attractive to a larger and often politically less interested audience. They opined that the inclusion of revealed emotions ('as long as they are related to the content') enhanced political appreciation. 'This is not a question of dumbing down', a senior reporter insisted, 'it is, at best, simplifying the complexities to reach a larger audience, and taking them seriously'.

A sense of why

The reasons given by the politicians and journalists we interviewed to explain the changes they describe fall into roughly four contextual areas: economic pressure, technological innovation, political uncertainty and public disengagement. The actors in each country place different emphases, however, on each instigator of change.

Economic pressure stems from financial cuts and demands on human resources in the UK and from increasing competition and commercialization in the Netherlands. The UK politicians were clearly concerned about the cutbacks in politics coverage by commercial television, especially the abandonment of regional news programmes and specialist political programmes on the ITV network, which several politicians look back on with sheer nostalgia since ITV pioneered both genres. Then, competition between rolling news channels at BSkyB and the BBC caused the latter to devote a lot of capital and resources to rolling news, often at the expense of other programmes; meanwhile companies dependent on advertising like ITV and Channel 4 have seen income plummet because of a downturn in advertising revenue. The arrival of pay-TV packages, offered by the cable companies and by Sky, has brought literally hundreds of channels into British living rooms but there isn't a comparable flow of money; so 'multi-tasking' is the order of the day, leading to a commensurate squeeze on each individual journalist. One journalist we spoke to told us 'The key driver of change it seems to me is a multi-channel world and 24/7 media'.

The main economic anxiety in the Netherlands, however, is about competition. Where in the UK commercial television was introduced as long ago as 1955, profit-seeking and entertainment-focused television in the Netherlands is relatively new. In 1989 Luxembourg-based (but German-owned) RTL broke the public monopoly, after the then government gave up years of resistance to commercial entrepreneurs.

Scandinavian- (and partly US-) owned SBS followed shortly afterwards; the Dutch-language television landscape now contains three public and six commercial channels, plus a number of local, regional and special-interest stations. The subsequent competition in order to deliver viewers to advertisers has led to what one journalist referred to as 'the law of audience statistics'. Editorial, scheduling and purchasing decisions are increasingly based on market forces. 'There is a permanent pressure on channels and journalists to come up with something new', a young politician declared. Indeed politicians emphasized this point more than the journalists, some of whom had expected benefits – 'less laziness and more professionalization' – but after a few years observed a 'mediocre levelling'.

These commercial developments are exacerbated by *technological innovation*, seen as an important catalyst of change in working practices by journalists and politicians in the UK and as a 'dubious' form of competition in the Netherlands. In Britain the arrival of rolling news channels galvanized political journalists to deliver fresh news stories throughout the day. Websites from political bloggers, social networkers, aggregators and political parties spilled out of cyberspace into the public sphere. It is a similar picture in the Netherlands, but whereas the British journalists appear almost slaves to it, the Dutch journalists appear relatively untouched. Both groups work in political news centres geographically removed from the main television news centres in White City and Hilversum respectively; the British in Millbank across the road from parliament at Westminster and the Dutch in Nieuwspoor in The Hague. While the febrile atmosphere in the 'Westminster village' makes the Millbank journalists even more frenetic than their news peers in White City, the opposite is the case for the Nieuwspoor journalists, who seem oblivious to pressure. The British give the impression of intense stress and a kind of dog-eat-dog mentality, driven by technological imperative. One journalist described 'the unquenchable thirst for new output' derived from the feeling that 'journalism is a very fluid trade' that 'changes every 18 months or so to accommodate the integration of new technology; and when technology changes, working methods change'.

Two particular developments in electronic news dissemination have alarmed journalists and politicians in the two countries: in the Netherlands it is weblogs and bloggers; in Britain it is social media sites. Bloggers in the Netherlands have more or less the same access to the houses of parliament as professional journalists but are regarded as amateur and populist; their work was described by one television anchor

as 'journalistic urinating'. Dutch politicians are constantly aware of what they regard as the ulterior motives of bloggers, while Dutch journalists (who feel the bloggers have few, if any, professional standards), say they are being forced into competition for exclusives that often have more to do with scandal and gossip than news. Journalists told us they fear the public is beginning to take the bloggers seriously and there are signs the politicians think the same. The UK interviewees are rather more worried about the effects of social networking, where the reputations of politicians can be elevated or destroyed out of all proportion and rumours can become viral in seconds. The concern is that they polarize opinion and don't allow challenge; as one young editor explained 'online you find people gravitate to other people who think the same things as them', which irks Westminster journalists because 'I suppose we used to be the sort of gatekeeper, but now the gate's off the hinges'.

The sense of politicians and journalists finding it hard to catch up with an increasingly active public politics online is inextricably linked to the *political uncertainty* they infer has emerged as a result of changes in the relationship between politicians and journalists, and to *public disengagement* from politics, which they point to as a sign of a palpable cultural shift amongst the electorate.

In the UK the interaction between politicians and journalists appears to be more volatile. The word 'corrosive' often crops up in conversations, where their narratives describe a vicious cycle of attack and counter attack. They blame each other for this descent but the common denominator is the strength of feeling; this vehemence is much more pronounced in our British interviewees than in their Dutch counterparts. One of the MPs who arrived at Westminster for the first time in 2005 felt that television interviewers 'look at how they can trap a politician into admitting something' to make him appear weak and incompetent, and as a result politicians cease to tell the truth. The journalists, on the other hand, think the corrosion in the relationship began with politicians delivering soundbites and mantras, saying what they were told to say by party apparatchiks, and this 'produced a reaction amongst broadcasters which is to be more sceptical, more cynical, more challenging'. Certainly the younger journalists appear to have become inured to it; one of them told us that 'this is something that repeats on a constant, cyclical basis and I don't assume that the next parliament will be the parliament that changes history. I imagine we're locked in a cycle in that sense'.

In the Netherlands mistrust has arisen between the two groups as well but largely because of the emergence of a populism which has infected

both politics and journalism, created to some extent, according to our interviewees by the populist politician Pim Fortuyn, whose electoral success on the back of an anti-immigration and anti-establishment rhetoric upset the party-political elite. After his murder in 2002 and the victory for his even more radical successor Geert Wilders in 2010, the mainstream media and indeed more establishment politicians began to reflect public opinion much more closely. 'Fortuyn's murder opened the public domain for the underbelly of the *vox populi*', a senior reporter sighed. It became legitimate to adopt a populism they would have rejected hitherto. Some of the politicians we spoke to admitted with regret 'falling for the media', creating stories and hyping others to enhance their media profiles and to appease public taste. Dutch journalists agreed, adding that a definite informality had crept into their interaction with politicians and whereas in the early stages they had seen it as a positive development, as did the British interviewees, they now saw it as grounds for mistrust.

These attempts at capturing a populist agenda by politicians or using populist rhetoric by journalists have done little to arrest the *public disengagement* detected by both groups. A journalist we spoke to told us 'not many people say that they are interested in politics' and 'you can't force feed people All Bran when they really don't want to eat it'. The majority of Dutch and British interviewees were keenly aware of a developing individualism that rejected communal co-operation in favour of individual activity. The Dutch argued that substantial sections of the public have turned their backs on politics while others behave more like consumers in their approach, with the commensurate self-gratifying attitude. As a journalist from the commercial RTL news put it, 'it's nothing, if there is nothing in it for them'. MPs from the UK are of the same opinion. A younger politician from the 2005 intake said 'what has developed is a reduction in social capital, you know, less willingness to be involved in voluntary organizations and to do things where you don't get immediate gratification or payment'. Another veteran MP felt that 'the most educated aren't bothered about getting involved with politics. I think they've been diverted into thinking a good, civilized life is a personal thing, not a community thing'.

Journalists in the two countries are adamant about finding new ways to engage with these volatile and fragmented voters and viewers but, in the Netherlands, the more responsive they become, the more uncertain they seem about whom they are addressing and to what effect. British journalists are much more phlegmatic: several are welcoming of these changes in public attitudes, clearly tapping into the *zeitgeist* and

harnessing the public on their own terms; chasing and involving the fragmented audiences. Yet for both politicians and journalists in the Netherlands, the mix of active public populism alongside passive disengagement leaves them in a permanent state of ambiguity. 'We need the public, we are there for the public and we are accountable to the public' exclaimed one politician in near despair. Then, after a long silence: 'but by God, the *vox populi*, they only represent themselves'.

Conclusion

This chapter has been about perceptions; the perceptions of politicians and journalists about changes in political reporting and what might have brought about those changes. Primarily, our interviewees agree that there is an increasingly confrontational relationship between them, breeding a culture of mutual antagonism, mistrust and disdain. They also agree that there has been a decline in the quality of political journalism, although there is rather less consensus about its origin. The politicians source the problem to a competition-driven news media that focus on the trivial and attempt to control the political agenda, while the journalists blame the manipulative behaviour of the politicians, who they accuse of having a fixation with media exposure. Yet both groups seem appreciative of the less deferential culture that has emerged from the more informal approach to political communication and they are supportive of journalistic independence and critique.

Most of the politicians and journalists we interviewed referred to developments in four categories that can explain the above changes: (i) the economic pressure on editorial performance from increased competition and budget cuts, (ii) technological innovation, notably the digitization of television and the arrival of Web 2.0 – the first of these leading to internal work pressure to 'catch up' with the pace of the medium, the latter to the emergence of the news blogger and the viral political messages of social networking sites, (iii) political uncertainty arising from an increasing popularization of political journalism and from the corrosion of the relationship between politicians and journalists and (iv) a socio-cultural shift and fragmentation, referred to by all and manifested in a disinclination for political involvement among the public at large and their declining interest in political news, but a new desire among a growing number to register individual opinions and demands almost as voter-consumers. Politicians and journalists differed in their assessment of the significance of these reasons; none of them denied their causal role.

This chapter has also been about generations, about the difference in opinions and evaluations between younger journalists and politicians and their more experienced and established counterparts. The interviews indicate to us that both politicians and journalists at the younger end of the spectrum take the changes for granted. They are not without their own concerns and anxieties but broadly they see the process as more of a game, one that encompasses entertainment-led political communication; whereas older politicians and journalists have serious concerns about the lack of accuracy, knowledge base or historical context in the work of some younger journalists.

Our study has also underlined national historical and cultural differences. Commercial television appeared in the UK in the 1950s and in the Netherlands at the end of the 1980s. The party system (three parties *versus* multi-party); and the electoral system (first past the post *versus* proportional representation) are substantively different. The political and historical culture of the two nations (class allegiance and adversarialism *versus* pillarization and consensus) has resulted in alternative political development. Current media practices and formats (talk shows, increasingly dominant in the Netherlands, died out as prime-time entertainment at the end of the 1980s in Britain where they were never a significant political platform) influence the public perception of political discourse.

Our interviewees have a different degree of concern about the changes they observe. Where they agree about the damaged relationship between journalists and politicians, those in the UK are more anxious about changes in the quality of political journalism, while those in the Netherlands indicate a more socio-political concern about populism. Next, the two countries place different emphases within the four causal categories. Where the actors in the UK point invariably at technological change as the catalyst (rolling news, multi-tasking, multi-platform, Web 2.0), their counterparts in the Netherlands identify a mix of different economic pressures (competition) and politico-cultural developments (Fortuyn and populism).

In the end, our study has reflected uncertainty. It is expressed in relation to all of our questions concerning political journalism culture, outlined near the beginning of this chapter, namely: *process and structure*, since notions of ideal roles have changed, our interviewees no longer know what to expect; *rules of engagement*, since there is now some ambiguity over the way the two actors – journalist and politician – should engage with each other; *professional practice*, since there is an ongoing debate about quality and a lack of clarity about the best way to respond to the rapid changes in technological advancement; the *symbiotic relationship*

between the two principal actors has clearly soured and brought to the surface fresh questions about the legitimacy of this relationship in its current form; and, finally, the relationship between the socio-political elite and the public they seek to address, where voters and audiences have found a more strident voice and communicate as political actors themselves on unmediated platforms.

In spite of an increasing lack of deference with respect to politicians, the culture of political journalism on television is in flux. As such it may reflect the changes and uncertainties in party politics, governmental legitimacy, or of political culture per se. Of course we are dealing here with the perceptions of a small selection of journalists and politicians but, as the sociologist W. I. Thomas observed a hundred years ago, 'if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences'.

Note

1. To get more open and informative interviews, anonymity was agreed, also where individuals might be quoted. It was not the individual opinion of the politician or the journalist that we were interested in, but the aggregate picture that emerges after several interviews.

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8

A Question of Control: Journalists and Politicians in Political Broadcast Interviews

Katrin Voltmer and Kees Brants

Introduction

Famous, even notorious, also beyond British waters, is the 1997 television interview in which the BBC's Jeremy Paxman hounded down then Home Secretary Michael Howard of the Conservative government like a hyena after its prey. Howard was questioned about a meeting between himself and the Director General of the Prison Service in which he was said to have forced the latter to sack the Governor of Parkhurst prison. 'Did you threaten to overrule him?', Paxman asked, and when the minister gave an evasive answer he repeated the question. Again Howard ducked the issue. Paxman, clearly determined that the minister should not get away with this, stood his ground and asked again, albeit in a slightly louder voice: 'Did you threaten to overrule him?' In total, Paxman asked the same question 14 times, and each time it was followed by a qualified or evasive answer.

This memorable occasion has become emblematic for the watchdog role of journalism. Media correspondent Janine Gibson of *The Guardian* called it a 'watershed in political interviews' (Gibson, 1999). After a year in which the exchange became a prominent news feature, and was as often hailed as it was seized upon, Paxman was named Interviewer of the Year by the Royal Television Society. Since it was exploited to good effect by Howard's political rivals, the exchange also helped reduce his chances of succeeding John Major as party leader later that year (Clayman & Heritage, 2002, p. 4). The encounter thus not only showed the tenacity of a critical journalist determined to get at the truth, but also the power such a journalist can exert in making and breaking an interviewee. Yet the legend exemplifies more than that. It highlights the interactional character of the political broadcast interview as a live

encounter between a journalist and a politician, the communicative styles and guises used when asking a question or giving an answer and the strategies employed by the participants to pursue their goals.

The Paxman–Howard clash raises the question of whether television interviewers have become the masters in their own domain, as Scannell (1991, p. 2) suggests. Or is the interaction more complex: a power play of give and take, of gaining and losing control, the outcome of which is as uncertain as what the public will make of it? It is this question – of who controls the political interview – that we want to address in this chapter. Unlike most other forms of political communication, the broadcast interview provides a public arena in which journalists and politicians meet face-to-face in front of a wider audience. It therefore allows us to observe directly how these two players enact their relationship and the confrontational or collaborative positions they may take in shaping the course of their conversation.

Until recently, political communication scholars paid surprisingly little attention to the political interview, even though it has been recognized as one of the main sources of information in news production and has become an increasingly popular format of live interaction on screen that can be used to break up an otherwise monotonous and top-down presentation of political information. While there exist historical and more descriptive observations of the political interview (see for the British case McNair, 2000, pp. 84–104), empirical research on the media's representation of politics has almost entirely relied on news, commentary and current affairs, all of which are monological texts that provide little insight into the interactive nature of their production processes.

Most of what we know about the structure and practices of political interviews so far stems from sociolinguistics and discourse analysis that sets out to understand the 'machinery of conversational turn taking' (Hutchby, 2005, p. 211) between interviewer and interviewee. This field of research looks in great detail at the syntactic pattern of speech and conversational practices of talk (Fairclough, 2001; Clayman & Heritage, 2002; Tolson, 2006), but there have been only few quantitative attempts to generate more generalizable data that would allow for systematic comparisons across time and contexts. A rare exception is Clayman & Heritage's comparison of journalistic adversarialism in the United States in presidential press conferences called by Eisenhower and by Reagan (Clayman & Heritage, 2006). However, this study captures only one part of the interaction in an interview since it does not consider the response of the politicians and the strategies they use to counter the interrogation.

Our study aims to fill some of the existing gaps in the literature. We propose a content-analytical scheme that covers the entire exchange between journalists and politicians in political broadcast interviews. Even though the available data do not allow us to trace the changing nature of political interviews over time, we are in a position to compare the communicative strategies of journalists and their counterparts across two different cultures – the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. The study is as yet explorative both with regard to the data employed and the scope of operationalization. Nevertheless, the results shed some light on how journalists and politicians negotiate control over the outcome of the interview and how this is shaped by the political and cultural context of which they are part.

The political broadcast interview as a public face-to-face encounter

On the face of it, the political broadcast interview appears like a conversation between two – sometimes more – participants who are engaged in discussing the political issues of the day. However, it follows a set of rules and norms that sets it apart from any other form of interpersonal exchange where people talk about political (or any other) matters.

First, since the political interview is a media event that has been set up by a media organization, the rules of the game follow the principles of ‘media logic’ – rather than a ‘political logic’ (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999) – in determining the choice of topic, the selection of interviewees and the dramaturgy of the encounter. The rules of the interview are also shaped by the particular constraints of news production, in particular strict time limitations, the technical requirements of the television studio and the genre conventions of the programme of which it is part. For the politician who has agreed to be interviewed, the place where the interview takes place and its rules are likely to be foreign territory. Unless the politician is very experienced, this will make it harder to perform with confidence and remain focused on the intended objectives.

Second, the political interview is characterized, and thus immediately recognizable as a distinct conversational form, by clear and invariable role allocations and specific rules that shape the performance of these distinct roles (Hutchby, 2005). In political interviews it is the journalist who asks the questions and the interviewee, usually a political official or expert, who gives the answers, whereas in everyday encounters these roles are flexible and interchangeable between participants. Challenging these role allocations would be regarded as a violation of the underlying

rules that structure the political interview – for example if the interviewee fell silent or began asking about the journalist's opinions. Further, the style and content of the political interview, especially journalistic interrogation, often violates the rules of politeness that govern conversational interactions in everyday life (Clayman & Heritage, 2006). Questioning the accuracy and honesty of a response, pressing for more information than the other participant is willing to give and even using expressions of dismissal and accusation – all of which are part and parcel of journalistic interviewing technique – would be regarded as unacceptable verbal behaviour in other conversational circumstances.

Third, even though the exchange of question and answer takes place between the participants in the studio, the ultimate addressee is absent from the actual event. According to Heritage (1985), the broadcast interview is enacted for the benefit of an 'overhearing audience' whose imagined expectations shape what is being said and how. But who exactly is this 'overhearing audience'? Undoubtedly, when performing in an interview, both journalist and politician will have the general audience in mind, either as consumers of their programme or as potential voters. However, there is another audience that might be even more important for the combatants in an interview: their respective peers in the media organization or political party to which they belong. Approval of professional peers is essential for one's standing within an organization, and success or failure in an interview performance can – as the example of the Paxman–Howard interview shows – determine the future career of one or both of the participants. It may be that in many cases the evaluative standards of the general audience and relevant peers differ significantly. For example, Paxman's aggressive style of questioning might be greeted positively by his journalist peers as a manifestation of journalistic independence and assertiveness, but it might put off audiences who side more with the 'victim' because they cannot see the point of asking the same question 14 times. Conversely, politicians are usually tied to the official party line or acting under cabinet discipline and hence might be unable to give a clear answer without risking their position. For the audience, this apparent lack of honesty and authenticity only confirms widespread suspicions about the political class and their unwillingness to tell the truth.

Fourth, political interviews are staged performances and hence vulnerable to the tensions between the rules and norms that govern on-air and off-air interaction. Goffman's (1969) notion of backstage and front-stage performance indicates the contradictions between what is expected when acting in public in front of an audience, and what may

be said in the informal environment outside the limelight where personal or incoherent views can be expressed without being sanctioned. Another reason for the tension between front-stage and backstage roles are the regular contacts between journalists and politicians that arise from the daily routines of politics and political reporting, which may lead to respectful, even friendly relationships. Expressions like ‘the Westminster village’ or ‘The Hague’s glass dome’ indicate the ‘small world’ of senior journalists and politicians whose closed circle is largely detached from the outside world (Davis, 2007). To safeguard their professional integrity and their ability to perform in their formal roles both sets of players need to constantly readjust their position in the complex web of interrelationships and to redefine the boundaries between intimacy and distance.

Political interviews in context: The British and Dutch experience

While these organizational and normative features apply to political interviews and their conduct in Western democracies in general, their style and dynamics seem to differ across both time and political cultures. Over time, political interviews can be assumed to have been affected by changes in political communication that, in the literature, have been described as a growing mediatization that is paving the way for a third, or even fourth, age of political communication (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008). This resonates in changing journalistic practices and styles, whereby traditional news gathering meets with more infotainment styles, alongside interpretative framing of politics and politicians with a focus on conflicts, strategies and scandals (Corner & Pels, 2003; McNair, Hibberd and Schlesinger, 2003). As the relationship between political actors and the media becomes more and more ambiguous, the traditional symbiosis begins to degenerate into mutual distrust (Lloyd, 2004; Brants et al., 2010). As a consequence, the interview has probably become much more the locus of power and struggle, with at least one actor trying to exercise power over the other, against the latter’s will and resistance.

As political cultures, the UK and the Netherlands provide an ideal comparative pair to advance understanding of how cultural and political differences affect the way in which politicians and journalists perform and interact in front of a mass audience, since their political and media systems differ in many significant ways (see the introductory chapter of this volume). At its inception BBC television had a rather conservative

approach to news presentation. There was a statutory obligation to maintain balance and impartiality, little political discussion and debate, and generally a rather passive, information-oriented, approach to news reporting. This changed with the arrival of the commercial ITV network in 1955.

Broadcasters began to try to present news and current affairs in a lively, investigative and entertaining manner. News interviews became more adversarial and the BBC's practice of submitting lists of questions in advance to ministers was abandoned. In response, the politicians learned, with the help of media advisors, how to deal with interviewers.

The history of the interview in the Netherlands reflects the phenomenon of 'pillarization', that arrangement of peaceful co-existence between disparate groups within a vertically segmented society, living apart together in potentially conflictual 'pillars' based on religion or ideology (Lijphart, 1968; see also Brown in this volume). To accommodate a consensual political culture, difference had to be appeased. Reporters and interviewers were part of the game – they felt responsible for the part played by 'their' pillar in the workings of a rational political system – and interviews took place in an atmosphere of distanced politeness and subservience (Wijffjes, 2002). With de-pillarization in the 1960s, the media severed their direct links with political parties and were emancipated to form an independent and critical profession. Professionalism was shown no longer in their respect for, but in their autonomy from and criticism of, authorities. The interview – notably the American-style weekly *Conversation with the Prime Minister* that was introduced in the 1970s – became a new tool to show autonomy, even though the toughness and style of questioning was still embedded in a sense of co-responsibility for the public interest (Brants & Van Praag, 2006).

Conceptualizing and measuring political interviews

In our content analysis of British and Dutch political broadcast interviews we understand the political interview as one of the most visible arenas where the relationship between journalists and politicians is laid out and presented visually. The political interview is therefore an indicator of the degree to which the primacy of politics and the authority and legitimacy of its official representatives are challenged by journalists who have abandoned their deferential attitudes towards political power to adopt a more adversarial stance. This change of journalistic role perception is likely to be reflected in a different style of broadcast interviewing, with an increasing emphasis on holding officials to account for

their policies and actions rather than simply eliciting facts from them. The more adversarial or challenging the interviewer, the more likely it is that the political interview will turn into a battleground, where interviewer and interviewee pursue diverging objectives and where the ultimate goal is to win the battle. We therefore focus our analysis on the extent to which each of the players succeeds in controlling the two key resources that are at stake in an interview: time and content.

However, it has to be kept in mind that neither the journalist nor the politician would be able to achieve their objectives without the willingness of both sides to accept the rules of the game and to understand the verbal expressions of the other side. In other words, the conversational encounter of an interview is based on cooperation combined with a variable degree of conflict over the control of time and content. Our assumption is that the surrounding political culture – a more consensual orientation in the Netherlands and a more antagonistic one in the UK – affects the balance between cooperation and conflict that is played out in political interviews. But there are other factors too. High-status journalists might be more confident in exerting pressure on their counterpart than junior journalists with less experience and knowledge. Similarly, the status of the politician could be expected to have an impact on the ability of the journalist to control the course of the interview. However, depending on whether the journalistic culture is more deferential or more adversarial, status might protect a politician from rigorous questioning or, on the contrary, invite a more confrontational interrogation. Further, it might make a difference whether an interviewee is member of the current government or the opposition. A strong commitment to the watchdog role would imply more investigative pressure by the journalist when interviewing a member of the government than somebody from the opposition who might already be considered part of the system of checks and balances.

In the following we briefly outline the content-analytical indicators we have used to explore the degree of control over time and content.

Control over time

Given the scarcity of time in broadcast programming, the allocation of this resource is highly contested. Thus, a great deal of the politician's efforts in an interview will be aimed at expanding their allocated time to convey their views to the electorate without journalistic mediation. As long as they are talking, they are in control of the content, even if they want to avoid an issue that is potentially harmful. Conversely, interviewers aim to restrict the time taken up by their interviewees to prevent

them from dominating the floor and – in their view – manipulating the interpretation of the political issue at hand. We measure control over time by means of two indicators: (i) the length of time for answer, measured by a simple account of absolute seconds, and (ii) the mode of turn-taking.

The mode of turn-taking is the main mechanism through which the exchange between interviewer and interviewee is organized. Turn-taking can take place either naturally, with each speaker taking over after their counterpart has finished their utterance, or through interruption – that is, enforced turn-taking that interferes with the speech of the conversation partner and prevents him or her from bringing the argument to a close. Interruptions are one of the key means of control in an interview. They are usually ascribed to the interviewer: an interviewee interrupting the questioner is regarded as a violation of the interactional conventions of a broadcast interview.

In our coding we distinguish between successful and unsuccessful interruptions. Successful interruptions result in the intervening speaker taking over – either at the first attempt, indicating an uncontested interruption, or after a contest with both participants speaking at the same time for a certain length of time. In contrast, an unsuccessful interruption fails to bring the original speaker to a halt, who in spite of the intervention is able to finish his or her point. We applied a rather conservative coding rule that confined coded interruptions to upfront utterances that cut into an ongoing flow of speech with the obvious aim of cutting it off. The category did not include vague signs of listening (such as ‘hmm’ and ‘right’), or unspecified sounds used to remind the interviewee that time is up, especially towards the end of a lengthy utterance.

Control over content

This dimension of controlling the interview entails the power of the journalist or the politician of imposing their own agenda, their preferred framing and evaluations of the matters covered. We measure control over content through the following indicators: (i) the type of question and the corresponding type of answer, and (ii) the response to the answer or question.

The type of question determines the degree of freedom the interviewee is given to construct the response and to choose the aspects and arguments to support the answer. Open questions allow for a maximum of discretion and effectively hand the control over content over to the interviewee. Typical examples are ‘What do you think about X?’. In contrast, closed questions radically limit the range of possible answers, often

to two clear-cut alternatives. (Paxman's question 'Did you threaten to overrule him?' was a closed question – since the accepted answer to this type of question can only be yes or no – and he was willing to ask it 14 times in an attempt to force his interviewee to choose one of these options.) Another variant of the closed question, 'Do you prefer X or Y?', equally limits the range of responses to distinct options. Somewhere between the closed question with its binary answer alternatives and the unrestricted space of the open question is a type of question that provides more freedom, but still exerts limitations on the choices the interviewees can make to construct their own narrative. Examples of these are enquiries about 'how much?', 'how long?', 'when?' or 'why?'.

Each of these types of questions can be linked to different perceptions of the journalistic role. The interrogative nature of closed questions is a vivid expression of the watchdog role, with the journalist setting out to dig out the hidden truth. Questions with limited choices are best suited to providing the audience with information because they provide space for elaboration while maintaining focus on a particular problem. Finally, by handing over control to the politician, open questions seem to reflect an understanding of a subservient role.

Corresponding to the type of question, answers can be either open or closed. Most politicians will be more than pleased to hear an open question as it allows them to present their own view of the problem in an open answer without much constraint. In contrast, when confronted with a closed question interviewees have to make a quick decision as to how best to pursue their own objectives within a very restricted range of options. While they can respond as requested and produce the required information, in many cases and for various reasons, they may prefer not to answer the question in the expected way and will try to circumvent the imposed constraint. All these strategies are, however, part of a dynamic process of mutual adaptation, and, as Greatbatch (1986) points out, with the development of the adversarial interview, interviewers have learnt to resist and sanction interviewees' agenda-shifting manoeuvres.

The second indicator for control over content draws on how the journalist reacts to the answer and, conversely, how the politician reacts to the question. Each can accept or reject what they have received from their counterpart. Due to the neutrality norm, journalists tend not to show overt approval of the answer they are given, but even without explicit expression of satisfaction, moving on to another question or simply an absence of rejection can be counted as acceptance. Similarly, acceptance of the question by the interviewee is indicated by providing an answer without commenting on or challenging it. However, on occasion a

politician may demonstrate explicit approval by saying 'That's a good question'. This can be a subtle way of undermining the authority of the journalist as a watchdog: after all, if the politician likes the question, it cannot be sufficiently probing and challenging; it might even have been pre-arranged.

Rejection of the answer can be indicated by expressing doubt as to the accuracy, honesty or validity of the information provided by the interviewee. Repeating the same question or asking variants of it are additional ways of rejecting an answer and attempting to extract the desired information. Again, interviewees are freer than the journalist to express their rejection of the question. They can openly dismiss it, redefine it, repeat the answer they have already given to indicate that the insistence of the journalist is unreasonable, or simply refuse to answer (for example 'I am not the person to whom you should ask this question').

Finally, we considered who in the end 'won' the interview: whether it was a balanced give and take or whether one party – the journalist or the politician – was able to dominate the interview and to control its timing and content.

The interviews

For our analysis we sampled 10 Dutch and 14 British interviews during the time period between September and December 2009. (A larger number of British interviews was needed to achieve a comparable number of units of analysis in the two countries.) The interviews were coded on two levels. At the interview level we coded variables that describe the encounter as a whole, such as programme, status and position of interviewer and interviewee, total time and overall control. Then, at a lower level, we coded the exchange – that is, the immediate sequence of question and answer – including variables such as mode of turn-taking, type of question and answer and reaction to utterance of counterpart. Choosing the exchange as unit of analysis – rather than the individual utterance of the journalist or politician – allows us to capture the interactional nature of the interview. Since corresponding variables, such as turn-taking and reaction to utterance, are coded for both participants within one coding unit, we are in a position to identify communicative strategies as an immediate response to the other side rather than an aggregate feature of each of the individuals involved. Overall, we coded 281 exchanges (question and answer pairs): 127 from the UK sample and 154 from the Netherlands. Since

in the present analysis we are interested in the interaction between journalist and politician we focused on one-to-one interviews only or, in cases of debate-style formats with multiple interviewees, on identifiable strings of exchanges between the hosting journalist and one politician.

In the UK our sample was drawn from a daily news programme (*Channel 4 News* at 7 pm), a daily current affairs programme (*Newsnight* at 10.30 pm on BBC2) and the weekly *Andrew Marr Show* (BBC1, Sunday 9 am). Unfortunately, standard news programmes like BBC1's 6 pm broadcast do not usually include political interviews. Because of the small number of programmes our sample focused on relatively few journalists, including figures such as Jeremy Paxman (*Newsnight*) and Jon Snow (Channel 4) who, due to their combination of outstanding experience and knowledge, and an interrogative interview style, have achieved almost iconic status in British journalism today, something that is unparalleled in the Netherlands. The Dutch part of our sample includes a somewhat wider range of interviewers and programmes, but – as in the UK sample – not the main news broadcasts, which only use clips from pre-recorded interviews, which would not allow us to analyse the whole dynamics of control during an interview encounter. Unlike the UK, in the Netherlands political talk shows have become a very popular format of political coverage and debate. Hence, the sample includes both daily current affairs programmes and political talk shows, such as *Gesprek met Minister President* (weekly) and *EenVandaag* and *Pauw & Witteman* (several times a week).

Control over time

With a total average of about 5 minutes (303 seconds in the UK, 328 seconds in the Netherlands), interviews in the two countries are of roughly the same length, ranging from as little as 2 ½ to about 16 minutes. However, the two countries differ in how this time is organized. In Dutch interviews there are much more frequent turn-takings, with an average of 15.4 exchanges per interview compared with 9.1 in the UK. As a result, Dutch politicians have to squeeze what they have to say into utterances of 16.4 seconds, whereas their British counterparts are granted 26.2 seconds for an average answer. Again, the variation is huge, ranging from 1-second snippets to lengthy elaborations of more than 1 minute.

The impression of a more dynamic and possibly more combative interview style in the Netherlands changes fundamentally when we

consider the mode of turn-taking – whether it takes place after an utterance of the politician reaches a natural end or whether the interviewer interrupts the speech of the interviewee. Less than one-third of turn-takings in UK interviews (30.5 per cent) occur without being forced by the interviewer, while in the Netherlands politicians can usually finish their point (59 per cent of turn-taking is natural). Given the overall shorter time Dutch politicians have to formulate their response, it seems that journalists and politicians in the Netherlands operate on a shared understanding of how time is allocated in these encounters. In contrast, British politicians have to be constantly aware of a journalist watching out for an opportunity to jump in, so they hold on to their turn as if it was the last chance to communicate their view to the wider audience. This is hardly related to a pressing scarcity of time. For example, in a 16-minute interview with George Osborne, the then Shadow Chancellor (Conservative), Andrew Marr interrupts almost every one of his interviewee's utterances. It is worth mentioning that politicians rarely interrupt the interviewer (9.5 per cent in the UK, 14.3 per cent in the Netherlands), indicating that for most of the time they accept the rule of the game that says it is the role of the interviewer to intervene in the time structure of the interview.

A closer look at the type of interruptions corroborates the picture of British interviews being a battleground between two warriors (see Table 8.1). Only about half (52.1 per cent) of the interruptions by journalists lead to an immediate halt of the speech of the interviewee, and more than one-third (35.6 per cent) of their attempts to interrupt remain unsuccessful, usually after a long sequence of contestation where both sides are trying to take over. In Dutch interviews some kind of 'interruption by agreement' seems to dominate the turn-taking (81.4 per cent of interruptions are immediately effective), and there are far fewer cases (11.9 per cent) in which the politician fights for the 'right of word' and eventually wins.

Table 8.1 also shows the determinants of journalists' inclination to interrupt their interviewees. The normative expectation of a more interrogative stance of the journalist in relation to power holders that corresponds with the watchdog role of the media can only be found in the UK, where high-status politicians (members of the government or party leaders) are significantly more often constrained by the interviewer than low- and middle-level politicians. In the Netherlands it is generally the middle-level politicians who face the greatest resistance from the side of the interviewer. Interestingly enough, in neither country does it

Table 8.1 Frequency and determinants of interruptions of politicians by journalists (% of turn-taking resulting from interruption)

	UK	Netherlands
Frequency of interruption	69.5	41.0
Outcome (% of interruptions)		
• Immediately successful	52.1	81.4
• Contested	12.3	6.8
• Unsuccessful	35.6	11.9
Determinants of interruption		
Status of journalist		
• Low	75.0	57.1
• Middle	—	52.4
• High	68.8	26.9
Status of politician		
• Low	64.3	38.5
• Middle	55.6	51.9
• High	76.6	38.5
Position of politician		
• Government	68.9	41.0
• Opposition	70.0	40.0

N = 250 (UK: 106; NL: 144; unit: exchange). Missing cases: opening statements at the beginning of interview or at return to main interviewee after group debate.

make any difference whether a politician is a member of the government or the opposition.

Control over content

The results in Table 8.2 show markedly different patterns of journalistic questioning style in our two countries. In the UK, closed questions that aim to extract a clear positioning of the interviewee for or against a given alternative are the predominant type of interrogation, making up about two-thirds (65.8 per cent) of all questions. This is followed by open questions (26.0 per cent). Assuming that question styles are related to journalistic role perceptions, UK journalists see themselves primarily as watchdogs, which corresponds with the findings on forced turn-taking presented in the previous section. The large proportion of open questions does not seem to fit into this picture, however. In many cases these open questions were statements, often rather long-winded, that did not lead to a clearly formulated request for an answer.

Table 8.2 Types of question asked by journalists and subsequent response from politicians (%)

	UK			Total	Netherlands			Total
	Type of question				Type of question			
	Closed	Limited choice	Open		Closed	Limited choice	Open	
Type of answer								
Provides information	69.5	60.0	–	52.4	93.8	92.3	–	92.8
Evades answer	30.5	40.0	–	23.0	6.2	7.7	–	6.5
Open answer	–	–	100.0	24.8	–	–	100.0	0.7
Total	65.8	7.9	26.2	100.0	31.6	59.9	8.6	100.0

N = 277; unit: exchange. Missing cases: 4 (uncodable).

Often a short hesitation on the side of the interviewee indicated that they needed a moment to pick the bit that suited their purposes best before they launched into an equally hazy answer. In contrast, the Dutch journalists prefer questions with limited choices (59.9 per cent) that lie between the closed and the open type, followed by a fair proportion of closed questions (31.6 per cent). This indicates a professional orientation towards the role of the information-seeker combined with strong elements of the watchdog role. With this approach, Dutch journalists seem to be extremely successful in controlling the content of the interview. The overwhelming majority of the responses (92.8 per cent) deliver the required information. This is much less the case in the UK: about one-quarter of the responses of British politicians evade a clear answer. So a high degree of questions that aim to tighten control is countered by a strategy that maintains control over the content by refusing to comply.

How do journalists and politicians react to each other's contributions? Do journalists accept what is offered to them, or do they further push for the answer they want to obtain? And do politicians accept the constraints imposed on them by the questions? Again, Table 8.3 reveals very different patterns in the two countries. In the Netherlands neither the journalist nor the politician make significant attempts to challenge the utterance – question or answer – of their counterpart. Only 4.9 per cent of the journalists' responses express dissatisfaction with the answer given by the politician, while politicians show a somewhat higher level of dissatisfaction with the questions they have to deal with (in 16.9 per cent of cases they challenge the question in some way). This is in stark

Table 8.3 Reaction to questions and answers (%)

	UK	Netherlands
Journalist		
• Accept answer	58.7	95.1
• Challenge answer	41.3	4.9
Politician		
• Accept question	66.7	83.1
• Challenge question, of which	33.3	16.9
Refuse to answer	0	7.7
Repetition of previous answer	21.4	26.9
Change/re-define topic	35.7	49.9
Dismissal of question	42.9	15.4

N = 280 (unit: exchange).

contrast to the UK where a large proportion of the questions aim to probe further what has been provided by repeating or re-defining the previous questions. This corresponds with a similarly confrontational behaviour on the part of the interviewees: one-third of the answers (33.3 per cent) challenge the question that has been put to them. In both countries politicians' challenges to journalistic enquiry frequently take the form of an attempt to change or re-define the problem – a rather indirect and less aggressive way of maintaining or regaining control over the content of the interview (49.9 per cent of challenges in the Netherlands and 35.7 per cent of those in the UK are of this type). However, while this is the strategy that Dutch politicians use most frequently, British politicians are even more likely to dismiss an unfavourable question head-on, thereby further fuelling a highly confrontational interactional style'.

Winners and losers

So, who controls the interview, and why? We use a 5-point scale to measure which of the two players – the journalist or the politician – eventually keeps the upper hand in the interview as a whole (see Table 8.4).

Table 8.4 Determinants for controlling the interview (means)

	Control*
Country	
• UK	3.14
• Netherlands	3.30
Status of journalist	
• Low	3.67
• Middle	3.00
• High	3.18
Status of politician:	
• Low	2.83
• Middle	3.25
• High	3.40
Position of politician:	
• Government	3.21
• Opposition	3.20
Total	3.21

N = 24 (unit: interview).

*5-point scale: 1 = interviewer in full control, 3 = balanced, 5 = politician in full control.

This global measure of control considers which of the two sides was better able to achieve its objectives. From the perspective of the journalist this entails extracting the desired information and holding political officials to account. From the perspective of the politician, being in control means being able to convey their view on the issue at hand and to fend off any journalistic attacks. Overall, exactly half of the interviews revealed a fair balance between the two protagonists, but for the remaining half there are more cases in which the politician held the upper hand (33.4 per cent versus 16.7 per cent where the interviewer dominated the conversation). It has to be noted that a balance of control does not necessarily mean lack of confrontation since it can be as much the result of a cooperative interaction as of a fierce battle between equals.

Given the highly professionalized and adversarial journalistic culture in the UK it comes as no surprise that in this context politicians are less able to dominate the encounter. But it certainly helps to hold a high political office and to be interviewed by a junior journalist. As with journalistic interruptions (see Table 8.1), whether an interviewee is a member of the government or the opposition does not make any difference. The observation that political status gives interviewees more leeway might, from a normative point of view, cause some unease. However, several factors might contribute to this result, which our data do not allow us to explore in more detail. Journalists might indeed be a bit more reluctant to take on a 'heavyweight'. But equally, if not more, important is probably the enormous experience high-status politicians bring in to the interview situation. They have been in this situation countless times and have learnt – often with the help of professional advisors – how to counter journalistic attacks in a most effective way.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the changing relationship between journalists and politicians through the looking glass of the political interview. Our findings confirm the notion of a mediatization of political communication whereby the media are increasingly able to apply and sometimes impose their own professional rules and standards on the public appearance of political officials. Even though we lack long-term observations and have to rely on more anecdotal accounts of the history of journalism (Chalaby, 1998; Allan, 1999) it is safe to say that the political interview has become a place of tough interrogation, a minefield that for the politician bears considerable risks – often with severe

consequences. However, mediatization is a dynamic process, with each side constantly adapting to the changing conditions of political communication. As our analysis shows, in spite of the pressure exerted by increasingly professional and adversarial journalists, politicians manage quite successfully to maintain control over the content and interaction in political interviews.

While this seems to be a general trend, context still matters. The comparison between communication styles in British and Dutch political interviews shows that these developments are embedded in the specific values, practices and institutional conditions of the political culture in which these encounters take place. The traditionally consensus-oriented political culture in the Netherlands seems still to be at work and has restrained the emergence of journalistic adversarialism. At the same time the growth of 'soft' journalistic formats, like talk shows and discussion panels, provide a more relaxed and amicable environment for politicians in which charm and wit count as much as the display of power and superiority. These different, albeit interconnected, trends are clearly reflected in the communication style in Dutch political interviews, which leave politicians a fair amount of leeway to make their point. In contrast, the more antagonistic political culture in Britain also shapes the way in which politicians and journalists interact in their public encounters. The 'winner-takes-all' principle makes winning – the election, the exchanges of prime minister's question time, an interview – a prime objective of political communication, leaving consensus and compromise to appear as defeat. Accordingly, the political interviews we analysed in this study are extremely contested encounters, resembling battlefields of verbal attacks and counter-attacks. The domination of a few highly charismatic 'star journalists' who have made adversarial journalism their trademark might have further contributed to this pattern. They serve as influential role models for up-and-coming young journalists who may feel that they have to adopt this style in order to gain professional recognition among their peers.

In our analysis we only looked at the 'front-stage' of political interviews. However, equally important is what happens on the 'backstage', behind the scenes where politicians and journalists can negotiate their relationship outside the public limelight. For example, we learnt from personal conversation with one of the leading Dutch interviewers that the prime minister usually makes it quite clear before the interview which topics can be discussed and which must remain excluded. This might be the price to be paid for securing

the appearance of high-ranking politicians on a programme. Future research on political interviews therefore has to include both front-stage and backstage communication; informal agreements as well as the public ritual of questions and answers.

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9

The Elephant Trap: Politicians Performing in Television Comedy

Liesbet van Zoonen, Stephen Coleman and Anke Kuik

Introduction

Contemporary politicians face immense rhetorical and communicative challenges. Performing on the intertwined stages of politics, media (including the Internet) and everyday life, they need to master diverse and contrasting repertoires of talk. Nowhere is this challenge more pertinent than in the many genres of infotainment that popular television offers. The combination of entertainment and information that defines talk shows, satire and comedy requires a much wider range of communicative styles than a public speech, a journalistic interview or an intervention in parliament. Performing a convincing political persona in these contexts requires continuous and effortless shifts from anecdote to analysis, emotion to reason, polemic to moderation, personal to political, serious to humorous and back again.

While a whole industry of spin doctors and media trainers continuously coach politicians for these sheer, insurmountable trials, political communication scholars have been slow to examine systematically if, how and under what circumstances politicians recognize these requirements and manage to meet them. Studies on infotainment have focused on questions about its alleged ubiquity (for example Brants, 1998) or its possible effects (for example Baum, 2003); studies on the articulation of politics and popular culture have mostly addressed its democratic potential (for example Coleman, 2003), and its meaning for citizens (Van Zoonen, 2005). Some analyses of political television talk have taken place in the field of linguistic pragmatics yet, at present, these do not add up to a coherent body of knowledge (see, for example, Lauerbach, 2007). As a result of these research agendas, current scholarship has little to offer on what can be considered the most pressing need

of politicians today: the ability to communicate effectively in a range of mediated contexts through a diversity of appropriate and effective styles. While one might argue that political communication scholarship does not exist in order to advise politicians how to become more culturally relevant, there are also more pressing academic reasons for analysing the experience of politicians as media-performers. The increased convergence of politics and media has been referred to as 'media logic', which, according to many scholars and critics, leads political actors, parties and institutions to neglect structural political and policy issues and focus instead on short-term, individual media success. A study of the performance of politicians in the media therefore directly addresses whether and how such media logic is indeed experienced as an inescapable force that hinders the discussion of politics. Moreover, the changing communicative environment raises more general issues about the nature of 'representation', in its meaning as delegation on behalf of citizens and in its meaning as a mimetic reflection of citizens, especially with respect to the question of whether a different kind of representation is enforced by media logic.

We address these issues in this chapter by analysing and comparing the participation of politicians in the British satirical television show *Have I Got News for You* and its Dutch adaptation *Dit was het Nieuws*.¹ The research articulates, in the first instance, an example of changes in political communication taking place on the horizontal dimension identified by the editors of this book. It concerns the changing media environment and the way politics and politicians accommodate and appropriate this. Yet, as we will see on the basis of our data, this has repercussions for the relation between politicians and citizens (the vertical dimension) as well, especially with respect to the desire of politicians to reach their constituency through a variety of communicative means.

Pleasure and danger

Have I Got News for You (*Hignfy*) is a satirical BBC television show that has run twice a year since 1990 and will be entering its 39th season in 2010. The format consists of a host and two teams comprising a captain and a different guest each week, all of them sitting behind a news desk and discussing current affairs in ironic and satirical ways. The show is recorded live before a studio audience, then edited. *Hignfy* has been the subject of public controversies in the UK, the most notable of which occurred when its original host was 'outed' by the press for visiting prostitutes and using drugs (ever since, there has been a different guest

presenter each week). Other debates occurred over hosts making insulting and allegedly libellous remarks about public figures.

The format has seen a number of international adaptations, for instance in all of the Scandinavian countries, Germany and the Netherlands. The Dutch version is a direct copy of the original *Hignfy*, and ran successfully from 1996 until 2009, under the title *Dit was het Nieuws* (*Dwhn*, 'This was the News') on one of the public channels. The hosts and the editorial teams have been mostly recruited from a Dutch stand-up comedian group with its own venue in Amsterdam. Because of its nature as a satirical current affairs programme, politicians, journalists and artists are the most likely guests on both versions of the programme. Famous politicians have appeared on the show, for instance Charles Kennedy, Ken Livingstone, Edwina Currie and Neil Kinnock in the UK, and Mark Rutte, Geert Wilders and Wouter Bos in the Netherlands (see Appendix 9.1).

Figure 9.1 shows how many politicians appeared each year in the British and Dutch programmes. Thus, we see that the UK version has a fairly stable number of around four politicians per year appearing as guests. In the most recent 5 years the number of political guests has declined, but this is also the period in which the host has changed for each episode, and at least once a year the role has been taken up by a politician. In addition, it is striking that some UK politicians have become 'regulars' on the programme: Charles Kennedy, the former leader of the Liberal Democrats and Ken Livingstone, controversial

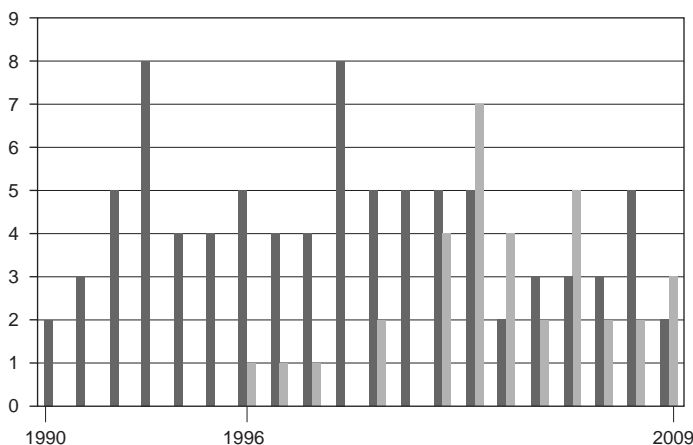


Figure 9.1 Number of politicians who appeared in *Have I Got News for You* (black bars) and *Dit was het Nieuws* (grey bars)

Labour party member and former Mayor of London, each made eight appearances. Boris Johnson was on the show seven times – four of these as the host. Other habitués during the years are Bob Marshall-Andrews (Labour, five appearances), Lembit Öpik (Liberal Democrats, five appearances) and Alan Duncan (Conservative, four appearances). The Dutch programme has a much more variable number of politicians appearing over the years, with peaks in 2003 and 2006, both of which were election years. In 2003 elections were called after difficulties within the Pim Fortuyn List (LPF) resulted in cabinet collapse: Fortuyn had become immensely popular and was predicted to win the 2002 elections but was assassinated a week before election day. In contrast, 2006 was a much less charged election year with both Dutch producers and politicians apparently willing for politicians to appear on the show. The regular appearances seen in the UK are completely absent in the Dutch shows where each guest appears only once. Geert Wilders, the media-genic leader of the Dutch Freedom Party with the banning of Islam and the Quran as its main issue is the only one to have ‘appeared’ twice: once when he did not turn up for the recording and was made present in the form of an empty chair that was ridiculed by the team of presenters, and the second, real one a year later.

Looking at the candidates a bit more closely, it seems likely that the political guests are primarily invited on the basis of their exceptionality in the overall community of politicians. Hence, political mavericks like George Galloway, Boris Johnson or Edwina Curry in the UK, or Edith Mastenbroek and Jelleke Veenendaal in the Netherlands are popular invitees. And, the few well-known politicians from a Dutch–Moroccan–Muslim background (Dibi, Elatik, Aboutaleb, Marcouch) have all been on the programme. Others, both in the UK and the Netherlands, were obviously invited for their reputation to raise a laugh or stir up problems (e.g. Livingstone in the UK; Annemarie Jorritsma in the Netherlands).

Very little is known about the motives and experiences of the politicians who have appeared on the shows, although the peak in participation in election years in the Netherlands suggests that strategic political considerations are foremost among them. In addition, the regular return of some UK politicians suggests they have enjoyed themselves. While Baum (2005) discusses various reasons that political candidates might choose to appear on talk and comedy shows, his argument is based on general considerations about campaigning rather than on direct questioning of politicians featured in these programmes. More generally, how politicians reflect on their own performances in the media has hardly been the subject of any research. Some studies have focused on the experience

of female politicians with journalists and media, but they have been articulated mainly within the theme of gender and politics, and much less in connection with political communication and performance (for example Sreberny & Van Zoonen, 2000). In an era typified by personalized and celebrity politics, the question of how politicians fail or succeed in managing their media performance and public persona is of paramount relevance to practitioners and academics alike.

Complicating the matter is the fact that politicians need to perform a consistent and coherent public persona on different public stages that require command of widely dissimilar and often contrasting communicative styles. As Van Zoonen (2005, p. 75) notes, the repertoires of talk that the media stage requires are immensely heterogeneous, ranging from online chat, blogging, television debates, sound bites and rational analysis, to personal anecdotes, emotional sharing and witty participation. Political comedies like *The Daily Show* in the United States or the programmes that are the subject of our present analysis – *Hignfy* and *Dwhn* – offer an additional challenge because of their indistinct generic boundaries, which thwart a preset definition of appropriate communicative behaviour and produce an unpredictable oscillation within the programme between the serious and the amusing. Appearing on such shows therefore contains definite political risks, as the unfortunate performance on *Dwhn* of the Dutch social democrat leader, Wouter Bos, demonstrated. Bos couldn't help laughing when one of the team captains made a profoundly inappropriate joke about the circumcision of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the Somalian-born member of parliament for the Dutch liberal party, and passionate anti-Islamic intellectual. The next day, a leading national newspaper scorned him for lacking the guts to stand up to the joke and criticize the team captain. To this day the party leader does not want to be reminded of his participation in *Dwhn*.² English Conservative MP Rupert Allason sued the BBC when a book about the 1997 run of *Hignfy* repeated the host's introduction of him: 'Indeed, given Mr Allason's fondness for pursuing libel actions, there are also excellent legal reasons for not referring to him as a conniving little shit'.³ A third example of risk can be seen in one of Boris Johnson's early appearances on *Hignfy* when he still was a journalist and not yet an MP. After a round of questions about audio-tapes of conversation that caused political damage, the following conversation between the team captain Ian Hislop, host Angus Deayton and Johnson develops:

Hislop: 'Boris was caught on tape as well'

Johnson: 'Ha ha ha, richly comic ... Good point'

- Deayton: 'What were you recorded saying'?
- Johnson: 'Honestly, I don't remember'
- Hislop: 'I do!' (Audience laughter)
- Johnson: 'I don't want this ditched up here'
- Hislop: 'What you want, or don't want ... (audience laughter)
(...)
- Hislop: 'One of the things that went wrong is ringing you up on tape and suggesting that you help him beat up a journalist who was looking into him'
- Johnson: 'That did come up, I won't deny that did come up' (audience laughter)
- (...)
- Johnson: 'I am well out of my depth here, I am totally stitched up here, I want it on the record that I walked straight into a massive elephant trap. (Audience laughter)

The exchange was completely in line with Johnson's eccentric and controversial reputation, but would have been highly damaging to a standard politician. Johnson, however, lightheartedly took the punches and reappeared five more times in the programme as a team member and as a host, for which he received a nomination for a British Academy of Film and Television Arts award in 2004.

Motives, experiences, reflections

The risks and annoyance notwithstanding, politicians have appeared in political comedy shows, some of them eagerly, others reluctantly, but participating nonetheless. This prompts several questions that we have discussed with a selection of politicians who appeared in the two shows:

- 1 Why do politicians and candidates appear in *Hignfy* and *Dwhn* (motives)?
- 2 How do they fare in the actual recording and broadcast (experiences)?
- 3 How do they look back on their participation and – more generally – on the changing communicative landscape of politics (reflection)?

We approached 19 possible Dutch interviewees (13 men, 6 women) by email or phone. One of the politicians apparently doubted the relevance of the project given his email response: 'Is this a joke?' The leader of the social democrats refused because of his negative experience with the programme. In the end, a total of seven Dutch MPs were interviewed.

In Britain, 14 politicians who had appeared on *Hignfy* were contacted (ten men, four women). One refused to participate on the grounds that she did not 'consider the subject worthy of academic research' and two were unable to be interviewed because of illness or other commitments. Seven British MPs were interviewed.⁴

The interviews were semi-structured and focused on politicians' reasons for accepting the invitation to participate in the programme, their assessment of potential risks, the emergence of effects after participating and how they looked back on their performance.⁵

Motives

Almost all politicians interviewed argued in different wordings that participating in *Hignfy* and *Dwhn* increased their visibility; there is no difference between the British and Dutch MPs in this respect:

You make a great speech in the Commons and you find that no one's bothered about it, no one's heard it and no one's thought about it. You do a thing like *Hignfy* and everyone seems to have watched it (British MP).

A second reason for participating in the shows concerned the possibility of enhancing one's political impact:

I was able to propagate some political things; about another party, and I managed to insert our campaign slogan a couple of times (Dutch MP).

However, not all politicians from the UK and the Netherlands saw this as a valid argument:

I don't think I've been able to address any specific issues on the programme itself. All you can do on that programme is project yourself, more than any political philosophy (British MP).

Thirdly, some politicians mentioned the importance of providing the public with a more multi-sided image of politicians:

Voters also want to see what kind of man or woman the politician is. And if you don't know your bird, it becomes a bit difficult to vote for that person (Dutch MP).

Finally, some MPs basically consider the programme good fun, and claimed to participate mainly for their own pleasure:

Parliament's a rather boring, dull place, but it gives you a chance to go to exciting places. And the one thing about *Hignfy*, it was exciting (British MP).

Experiences

When asked how they felt when invited to join the programme, a number of politicians expressed serious nervousness:

You have to trust that they broadcast the good things and that they don't fool you. And when you are in the show, you have to pay attention, you have to be aware that if you make an inappropriate joke, it will be taped and it can be used (Dutch MP).

The actual experience of doing the show must have disappointed some politicians who were surprised with the level of detailed preparation for the recordings:

They go through all the pictures. They show you which is the odd one out and blah blah blah. And you say vaguely funny things as they come up. And then you go in a room with press cuttings and the comedians make up one-liners. And people like me get very bored. And that's my point: it's rehearsed. And I think most people don't know that ... It's a bit of a con (British MP).

For most of the politicians, the audience response after the show was amazing and a ratification of their initial motive to participate for wider visibility. A Dutch MP, however, said he did not believe in such an effect, nor had he experienced it:

When nobody knows you, being on *Dwhn* will not have an effect. And it won't result in suddenly being a celebrated politician the next day (Dutch MP).

Reflections

Both the British and the Dutch politicians articulated their presence in *Hignfy* and *Dwhn* with the changing political culture in their countries.

The media logic of contemporary politics was an obvious part of these considerations:

It's more important in politics now generally to go on television and to look good on television. That demands youth, it demands intellectual quickness, it demands a good sense of humour. A personable politician ... Most politicians, and I include myself, are fairly dull, old or middle-aged, overweight individuals who aren't naturally funny (British MP).

Not coincidentally, given the above quote, one of the younger female participants in *Dwhn* said she feels more at ease in light-hearted, entertaining programmes:

My style is unconventional. I have difficulties with debates in *NOVA*, for instance, where it is all about conventional politics and style. And then I think: Guys, be normal, you know, chill. I am often one of the youngest, I am with all these old persons who think it has to be like that. I have more difficulty with that, than with funny settings, I do feel more comfortable there (Dutch local MP).

A clear difference between the British and Dutch MPs emerged when talking about the wider media landscape in which politicians have to perform. One British MP connected his appearance on *Hignfy* with the sorry state of British television journalism:

The problem is that that's the only kind of programme that's available. More straightforward political programmes in which we argue with each other, arguably more seriously ... they've been cut back and cut back to very little. And interviews, in which we can expound our truth ... these are now very brief ... you're never allowed to say what you want to say at appropriate length. It might be that we talk for too long (British MP).

That problem was framed differently in the Netherlands. The interviewed politicians did not complain about a lack of news and debate programmes, but rather about the lack of people watching them. Such reflections demonstrate that media logic may take different forms in different countries, and – as the quote from the young politician showed – presents different challenges for politicians. Occasionally, both the British and the Dutch respondents would point at the political

logic behind their appearance in *Hignfy* and *Dwhn*. Some British participants expressed aversion to developments in British political culture that necessitated their participation in *Hignfy*. Two of them said that parliamentary mores and language had deteriorated so much that their seeking of another platform was inevitable. A Dutch MP, on the other hand, argued that appearance in programmes like *Dwhn* was necessary because of the disappearance of substantial political differences in Dutch politics:

The political parties resemble each other, and increasingly you have to distinguish on the basis of personalities. And voting is more and more about the feelings you have about a person. If you know that a political programme will be dated after a year you need to be able to trust that the person you voted for will react more or less the same when new issues come up (Dutch MP).

Another area of reflections considered the possible risks of participating in *Hignfy* and *Dwhn*, and similar infotainment programs. Here it seemed also that clear national differences emerged from the interviews. The British respondents discussed risks mainly in terms of potential individual reputational damage, with some identifying possible dangers of not being taken seriously, or coming across as boring. Other British MPs, however, were less concerned:

I think that even if they take the piss out of MPs, it might not do them any harm. It still humanizes people. Get the sympathy vote (British MP).

While reflections on the (lack of) danger for individual reputation risk did emerge in the Dutch interviews, their emphasis was a little different. Most of the politicians claimed that such risks were as big in the serious programmes. More pressing than individual reputational damage, in the Dutch interviews, was a notion of the dignity of political office:

It only works if you are capable of meeting the expectations of such a programme, if you can keep your political dignity and if you manage to remain yourself (Dutch MP).

The Dutch interviews abounded with anecdotes of fellow politicians who failed to maintain their dignity (a former Minister performing on

Who Wants to be a Pop Star, for instance), and examples of the limits the politicians drew for their and others' participation in entertainment programmes. A first limit mentioned had to do with overexposure, while a second boundary the concerned the question of whether one was possible to address political issues:

I wouldn't participate in *Dancing on Ice*, for two reasons: I can't get a political message across and I can't skate at all. I don't want to expose myself to such physical things and I think most politicians should not appear in their bathing suits either. (Dutch MP)

Yet opinions were divided on the latter issue, with politicians also going on *Hignfy* and *Dwhn*, and other entertainment shows for fun and their own pleasure (as discussed in the section on motives).

Repertoires

Each individual interview with the politicians who participated in *Hignfy* and *Dwhn* produced a coherent narrative about their motives, experiences and reflections. These narratives were not completely idiosyncratic but appeared to draw from three distinct but overlapping repertoires: the strategic repertoire, the indulgent repertoire and the anti-elitist.

Strategic repertoire

It became clear from our interviews that both British and Dutch politicians are well versed in the idea of self-marketing with a view to being a successful politician. Most of our respondents drew from a strategic repertoire to express their ideas on their participation in the two shows. Typical motives that fit in the strategic repertoire are the desire to enhance one's personal visibility for a wider audience – 'it probably increased my recognition levels in the country' (British MP) – and to thereby increase one's political effectiveness. For some, it does not really matter whether that results in a positive or negative visibility, since visibility in itself is considered necessary: 'a negative reputation is always better than no reputation at all, the worst thing that can happen is that nobody knows you' (Dutch MP).

A more controversial strategic motive concerned the desire to put political messages across in popular contexts. Both the necessity and the possibility of such endeavours were contested. In looking back on their performance, politicians using the strategic repertoire discussed

whether they had been able to insert some politics in the show, including often an assessment of the editorial team as well ('you are at the mercy of the editors', British MP). In the strategic repertoire, the number of viewers and their feedback to the politicians are crucial measures of success. Media logic is accepted as the inevitable cultural context for contemporary politics and it is seen as being better to adjust to its rules than fight or lament it. Reflections on this repertoire are basically pragmatic, addressing the potential and risk of *Hignfy* and *Dwhn* for personal reputation, and the question how to devise a strategically wise mix of media appearances.

Indulgent repertoire

Some of our respondents consider their participation in *Hignfy* and *Dwhn* mainly as a matter of good fun: a nice change from day-to-day politics. They see their participation as one of the pleasant by-products of being a well-known politician, but don't expect or need any direct political benefits from it. There are some strategic motives of personal visibility involved here, but these are absent for the well-established politicians. The respondents talking about *Hignfy* and *Dwhn* in this way were mainly senior politicians with considerable political track records who could afford to abstain from efforts to include political messages in their performance. Experiences on the recording day are framed basically in terms of having had a nice day or not, and having managed to evoke a laugh from the presenters and the audience ('I was delighted when they asked me back'). As long as there is a relevant political or social context to a programme, much is allowed:

The *Sound Mix* show was for charity, that is an interesting case ... different from simple commercial purposes. Everybody said, you should not have done that, but it was nice! (Dutch MP).

Such appearances are the object of criticism as well ('there are some politicians who try to turn themselves into show people ... well it's better to be noticed than not noticed', British MP), but the main limits that the politicians involved in this repertoire draw concern their individual dignity and the dignity of politics, with the latter being mainly a Dutch frame.

Anti-elitist repertoire

In this repertoire parliamentary politics and the media responsible for covering it are presented as institutions crowded by elites possessing

their own language, style and in-groups that are more or less alienated from their constituencies and the public at large. The politicians drawing from this repertoire see it as their responsibility to perform differently and show that politicians are also ordinary human beings, with their ups and downs, their flaws and imperfections. They participate in *Hignfy*, *Dhwn* and similar programmes to show such a diverse picture of politicians. Typical quotes are therefore: '[the programme] shows politicians as Humans', or '[it] shows that you can do politics with a smile'.

Almost inevitably their actual experiences while being in the studio were somewhat disheartening, because of the lack of spontaneity and the manufacturing of discussions and jokes beforehand. As a British MP said: 'what is the point of doing *Hignfy* if it is all a bit of a fiddle and they sometimes turn on people?' In their reflections, the politicians who use this repertoire point at the supposedly devastating effects of both media logic and political logic, both of them corrupting the possibility of politicians to converse directly with the people. In this repertoire, infotainment, comedy and other genres of popular culture of which *Hignfy* and *Dwhn* are part, offer sincere and appropriate ways to communicate with the people:

People don't realise the extent to which parliamentary government has gone down and the extent to which broadcasts like *Hignfy* keeps its good name. I'm not being silly about this ... The politicians' standing has gone right down. The interest of the public in politics has gone right down. Whereas *Hignfy* has kept up its high standards (British MP).

While traces of this repertoire were found in the interviews with Dutch politicians (see for instance the quote from the young Dutch local MP about her problems with the traditional style of politics) and, while anti-elitism is not uncommon in Dutch politics, we found mainly British politicians using this repertoire.

Conclusion

Politicians appear on a regular basis on both programmes, especially those who are expected to make an interesting, surprising and witty contribution to the programme. While there are obvious examples of the reputational risks politicians take with their appearances on the programmes, many politicians nevertheless eagerly await an invitation to participate. Our interviews suggest that there are three 'repertoires' or ways of talking about participation in the programmes, which

Table 9.1 Themes and repertoires of politicians talking about *Have I Got News for You* and *Dit was het Nieuws*

		Strategic	Indulgent	Anti-elitist
Motives	Visibility	++		+
	Political influence	+		+
	Different image of politician			++
	Pleasure		++	
Experiences	Nerves		+	
	Recording day		++	
	Audience response	++		++
Reflections	Media logic	++	+	+
	Political logic			++
	Risks – reputation	++		
	Risks – dignity		++	
	Limits	+	+	

entail particular motifs, experiences and reflections, as summarized in Table 9.1.

All ways of talk have their distinct key entries: visibility and reputational risk in the strategic repertoire, pleasure and dignity in the indulgent repertoire, and countering the image of politicians and resisting current political logic in the anti-elitist repertoire. The combination of themes and repertoires suggests that three types of political guests appear on *Hignfy* and *Dwhm*. Firstly, there are those who have adjusted to the current rules of the game, so to speak: they accept the present media logic and think mainly in terms of individual and political strategic gains and losses. We find these both among the British and the Dutch respondents. A second group consists of established politicians who legitimate their participation in terms of more or less warranted individual pleasures that serve little political purpose. Having mostly acquired a solid reputation for themselves, the only risk that these politicians take seriously is the loss of dignity of public office. This group also includes both British and Dutch politicians, although the concept of dignity seems to be specifically Dutch. In fact, our inventory of the content of the programmes suggests that there is small category of politicians who already have a controversial reputation and for whom participating in the programme is part and parcel of that status: we found this category only among the British politicians. Finally, there is a small group of outspoken anti-elitist politicians who seem to detest current political logic and its formal bureaucratic procedures and styles. They seek ways of presenting politicians

as ordinary human beings and want to connect to apolitical, lay citizens. They have little fear of loss of reputation or dignity.

While the strategic repertoire resonates clearly with research that identifies an inescapable need to succumb to media logic, the indulgent and the anti-elitist repertoires sit uneasily with this perspective. The anti-elitist repertoire is clearly cast in the classic terms of representation and the need to represent and communicate with 'ordinary' citizens who are not part of the political elite. Performing in *Hignfy* and *Dwhn* is thus constructed as part of a traditional self-conception as a people's representative. The repertoire of enjoyment, on the other hand, is neither related to perspectives about media logic, nor to ideas of representation. In fact, the finding that politicians also simply derived pleasure from participating in *Hignfy* and *Dwhn* is hard to articulate within common frames of political science and political communication, and seems to be more easily explained in terms of biographical or psychological profiling of political candidates and leaders.

While our study was based on the identification of a significant gap in the research literature, the outcomes point towards new and pressing issues. Political communication research at present has little to say about some of the main themes that politicians raise in explaining their decision to participate in *Hignfy* and *Dwhn*: what exactly does visibility achieve for individual politicians? Is it possible to insert an effective political message in an entertainment context? Does one really broaden and soften the image of politicians by appearing on popular programmes? What kind of reputational gains and risks are involved? And how might such appearances endanger the dignity of public office? These are questions of both practical and academic relevance that are in urgent need of more research.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this chapter was published as Coleman, S., Kuik, A. & Van Zoonen, L. (2009) 'Laughter and Liability: The Politics of Dutch and British Television Satire'. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 11, 652–65.
2. Wouter Bos declined our invitation to be interviewed for this research project and said he wanted to talk to us about his media performance in all other news and infotainment programmes, but not about *Dit was het Nieuws*.
3. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/49430.stm, accessed 14 December 2009.
4. With thanks to Scott Anthony for his contribution to the UK interviews.
5. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data analysis through constant comparison took place with computer software for the analysis of qualitative data, MaxQda.

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Appendix 9.1 Politicians who have appeared on *Have I Got News for You* and *Dit was het Nieuws*

	Have I Got News for You	Dit was het Nieuws
1990 (8)	Ken Livingstone (L) Tony Banks (L)	
1991 (11)	Tony Banks (L) Claire Short (L) Edwina Currie (C)	
1992 (21)	Election special Charles Kenney (LD) Ken Livingstone (L) Norman Willis (Trades Union Congress) Cecil Parkinson (C) Jerry Hayes (C)	
1993 (17)	Charles Kennedy (LD) Ken Livingstone (L) Neil Kinnick (L) David Steel (LD) Roy Hattersley (L), virtual Edwina Currie (C) Roy Hattersley (L) Gerald Kauffman (L)	
1994 (17)	Neil Kinnock (L) Rhodes Boyson (C) Teddy Taylor (C) Glenda Jackson (L)	

(continued)

Appendix 9.1 Continued

	Have I Got News for You	Dit was het Nieuws
1995 (17)	Dianne Abbot (L) Alex Salmond (SNP) Teresa Gorman (C) Ken Livingstone (L)	
1996 (18)	Charles Kennedy (LD) Rupert Allason (C) Ken Livingstone (L) Austin Mitchell (L) Nigel Lawson (C)	Rick van der Ploeg (PvdA)
1997 (17)	Ken Livingstone (L) Alex Salmond (SNP) Election special Matthew Parris (C) Neil Hamilton (C)	Wim Mateman (CDA)
1998 (17)	Boris Johnson (not MP yet) Oona King (L) Charles Kennedy (LD) Bob Marshall Andrews (L)	Felix Rottenberg (PvdA)
1999 (18)	Dianne Abbot (L) Lembit Öpik (LD) Glenda Jackson (L) Alex Salmond (SNP) Charlie Whelan (L) Boris Johnson (not MP yet) Bill Deedes (C) Michael Onslow (C)	
2000 (17)	David Steel (LD) Peter Kilfoye (L) Robert Reed (C) Michael Brown (C) Sion Simon (L)	Edith Mastenbroek (PvdA) Robin Linschoten (VVD)
2001	Charles Kennedy (LD) Lembit Öpik (LD) Derek Draper (L) Andrew MacKinlay (L) Boris Johnson (C)	
2002	Bil Deedes (C) Ken Livingstone (L) Boris Johnson (C), host Charles Kennedy (LD), host Robert Winston (L) Gerald Kaufmann (L) Mo Mowlam (L)	Bram Peper (PvdA) Wouter Bos (PvdA) Fatima Elatik (PvdA) Annemarie Jorritsma (VVD)

(continued)

Appendix 9.1 Continued

	Have I Got News for You	Dit was het Nieuws
2003	William Hague (C), host Glenda Jackson (L) Lembit Opik (LD) Boris Johnson (C), host Michael Onslow (C) Jonathan Aitken (C) George Galloway (L)	Jan Marijnissen, (SP) Lousewies van der Laan (D66) Boris Dittrich (D66) Hans Dijkstal (VVD) Geert Dales (VVD) Rob Oudkerk (PvdA) Pieter Winsemius (VVD)
2004	William Hague (C), host Robert Kilroy Silk (UKIP) Stanley Johnson (C) Robin Cook, (L), host Neil Kinnock, (L), host	Frank de Grave (VVD) Relus ter Beek (PvdA) Geert Wilders (PVV, virtual) Doekle Terpstra (Union)
2005	Boris Johnson (C), host Alan Duncan (C) William Hague (C), host Stephen Pound (L) Bob Marshall Andrews (L)	Laetitia Griffith (VVD) Geert Wilders (PVV)
2006	Lembit Opik (LD) Anne Widdecombe (C), host Boris Johnson (C), host Alan Duncan, (C)	Joost Eerdmans (LPF) Alexander Pechtold (D66) Jelke Veenendaal (VVD) Mei Li Vos (PvdA) Bert Bakker (D66)
2007	Lembit Opik (LD) Bob Marshall Andrews (L) Bob Marshall Andrews (L) Ann Widdecombe (C), host	Ahmed Aboutaleb (PvdA) Tofik Dibi (Groen Links)
2008	Bob Marshall Andrews (L) Alex Duncan (C) Vince Cable (LD) Ken Livingstone Charles Kennedy (LD)	Ahmed Marcouch (PvdA) Sabine Uitslag (CDA)
2009	Alan Duncan (C) Bob Crow (Trade union leader)	Ed Anker (CDA) Jeltje van Nieuwenhoven (PvdA) Agnes Jongerius (Union)

C: Conservative; L: Labour; LD: Liberal Democrat; SNP: Scottish National Party; UKIP: United Kingdom Independence Party

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Part III

De-Centralization: New Forms of Citizenship and Political Communication

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10

Political Consumerism as Political Participation?

Janelle Ward

Introduction

Political participation has traditionally been considered an important indicator of democratic citizenship: think voting or being knowledgeable about relevant issues. But in an environment of declining participation, particularly among youth (Miller & Shanks, 1996), new ideas about citizenship are emerging. Inglehart claims that 'elite-challenging forms of participation are becoming more widespread' (1999, p. 236) and Dahlgren (2003) asks us to consider redefining what is political in order to examine new forms of engagement and participation. The focus has turned to single issues and lifestyle politics (Giddens, 1991), shaping 'a society characterized by the rise of networks, issue associations, and lifestyle coalitions' (Bennett, 1998, p. 745). Citizens are usually juxtaposed with consumers: the former are seen as being more conscious and active and the latter politically disinterested and passive. However, the idea that consumption can be political is growing in relevance. Some argue that consumers are purchasing goods as *citizens* and point to the political nature of certain products (Stolle, Hooghe & Micheletti, 2005; Ward, 2008).

The phenomenon of political consumerism is not without historical reference. For example, Ralph Nader's Modern Consumer Movement, first active in the 1960s, was based on this very idea. In today's world, globalization has impacted on our consumption practices; it 'makes corporate power explicit ... by drawing attention to their capacity to escape state regulation ... [corporations] politicize consumption' (Scammell, 2000, p. 353). Passive consumerism is being replaced by 'prosumers', individuals who demand a say in what is sold to them and how it is marketed (Salzman, 2000). Citizen-consumers can be identified

as those that operate within 'a model of citizenship, with some of the classical republican dimensions of civic duty, public-spiritedness, and self-education' (Scammell, 2000, p. 352). Political consumption, then, is 'consumer choice of producers and products based on political or ethical considerations, or both' (Stolle et al., 2005, p. 246, citing Micheletti, Follesdal & Stolle, 2003).

This chapter investigates the prevalence of a particular strain of political consumerism called *socially conscious consumption*. It examines the relationship between socially conscious consumption and political participation via data from an online survey of young people in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. As detailed in the Introduction to this book, here the focus is on the vertical tensions, particularly in relation to changes in political communication and the primacy of politics. Political consumerism represents an opportunity for a new form of participation to replace, or complement, conventional participation. If political consumerism can indeed be identified as a form of participation complementary to more traditional activities, then the debate becomes whether such changes legitimize or delegitimize existing political power relations. In other words: do political consumers provide existing power elites with a new direction in which to pursue often-disinterested citizens? Or does such an activity send these young people further into a non-conventional arena of political participation, far removed from traditional politics? In this chapter and in order to address these issues, I concentrate on evidence of a trend towards socially conscious consumption among young people. Before presenting the methodology and results, I turn to a more detailed theoretical discussion of political consumerism and in particular the notion of socially conscious consumption.

The historical and contemporary basis for political consumerism

Political consumerism represents a blurring of the citizen and consumer aspects of people's lives. The idea of combining these aspects is not new: individuals have in the past turned to the realm of consumerism to voice discontent with a political life from which they were excluded (Granovetter, 1985; Swedberg, 1997). For example, in the early 1920s, Mahatma Gandhi urged the people of India to stay away from British educational and legal institutions, to refuse employment by the government, but also to boycott British products. Gandhi's concept of non-cooperation meant that, instead of violently protesting against what

many perceived as British injustice, he encouraged Indians to find other ways to make their voices heard. Numerous other historical examples of political consumerism also exist.¹ Consumer protests of this type still happen today, but the nature of political consumerism has changed and now often finds its aim in making a statement where national governments cannot or will not take action. In other words, it may be seen as an alternative form of citizenship.

The current environment of political consumerism is driven by a number of factors, including parallel changes in the corporate world. The business corporation – that is, an artificial entity with legal rights and duties – is generally and primarily concerned with profit and, with that, how its image or brand is publicly portrayed. Youth also plays an important role in this process: ‘Indeed, today youth is a consumable item, in that the superficial trappings of youth are now part of the consumer market’ (Wyn & White, 1997, p. 87). Corporations are primarily responsible to their shareholders while, on the other hand, democratic governments are responsible to their citizens. It may therefore seem counterintuitive to claim that consumer behaviour is increasingly being tied to knowledge, attitudes and behaviour found within the realm of citizenship. However, this link can be demonstrated through the rise, for example, in socially conscious business practices. Corporate social responsibility is a term that has existed since the 1950s, although since that time it has undergone complex definitional change (Carroll, 1999). Simply put, corporate social responsibility is how a corporation operates within a business model to produce a positive influence within society. Some say this trend is a reaction to changing consumer behaviour, as consumers are increasingly using their spending power to assert their values as citizens in a democratic society (Roddick, 2001).

One way that political consumerism manifests itself is through purchasing certain types of products, a topic for the next section. First, however, it is apparent that such purchasing behaviour is increasingly relevant. The farming of organic food (both crops and livestock) in the UK is now worth £2 billion (McVeigh, 2009), increasing from just over £100 million in 1993/94 to £1.21 billion in 2004 (an 11 per cent increase on 2003).² However, despite years of double-digit growth, sales have recently slowed (Cripps, 2009), although this may be a temporary issue related to the financial situation, as organic food is quite expensive in comparison to its non-organic counterpart. This issue is particularly relevant to youth, who often have less disposable income available to make such purchasing decisions. Charitable organizations are similarly experiencing an economic downturn. For example, Oxfam suffered a

15 per cent fall in the amount of goods (such as clothes, books, toys and crockery) donated to its shops in 2010, although sales of these goods have actually risen during the same period (Burridge, 2010).

Understanding political consumerism

Explanations abound as to why political consumerism is becoming more relevant to citizens. Beck (2000) refers to sub-politics: corporations have access to global labour markets and are no longer restricted by laws put forth by governments. Because of this loss of government control, consumers feel a responsibility to purchase as citizens and are increasingly concerned with issues that were previously consumer realms. Some go 'so far as to consider consumers the primary agents of democracy in the world today' in analyzing 'how citizens, and particularly young people, attempt to balance promotion of their personal identity and lifestyle through consumer choice with their commitment to global ethical issues' (Micheletti et al., 2003, p. xiii). Stolle and Micheletti (2005) find that political consumers are resourceful, highly educated and affluent, and demonstrate high rates of political interest and participation. In a student sample, Stolle et al. (2005) show that political consumers demonstrate more trust in fellow citizens and have high rates of political efficacy.

Theoretically, political consumerism is often seen as a blanket term that encompasses individual and collective action (Stolle et al., 2005), and that has a connection to political activism (Roddick, 2001). Others argue that political consumerism encompasses all those who have boycotted or 'buycotted' products (chosen products that meet certain standards) for political, ethical or environmental reasons (Stolle & Micheletti, 2005). I have recently sought to typologize political consumerism into consumption-oriented and more critical, political-oriented strains (Ward, 2010). To expand, this typology sees the *socially conscious consumer* as explicitly involved in the consumption of products (detailed below) but also identifies the *critical citizen-consumer*, who purchases socially conscious products but is also more critical of marketing techniques that address him or her in this way. Such a citizen-consumer goes beyond consumption behaviour and embraces a more traditionally political identity through participating in corporate-critical organizations. Within the broader arena of political consumerism and in order to draw out the political connection to consumption behaviour, the current chapter focuses explicitly on the notion of socially conscious consumption, detailed next.

Introducing socially conscious consumption

Imagine a consumer who purchases fair-trade products or items made from recycled materials. Such a person can be described as a socially conscious consumer: 'a consumer who takes into account the public consequences of his or her private consumption or who attempts to use his or her purchasing power to bring about social change' (Webster, 1975, p. 188). Scammell sees this consumer as a 'cool citizen', one who feels empowered by her purchasing decisions and who enjoys 'the choice and pleasures of consumer society but [does] not want to support the bully over the little guy' (2000, p. 353). The socially conscious consumer considers certain brands or products to be a large part of their identity and thus feels compelled to identify with the product's reported image.

It is of course debatable how much this consumption behaviour falls into the realm of citizenship, since this consumer restricts the exercise of social consciousness to his or her wallet, and this process is primarily solitary and internal, to satisfy a personal desire to (presumably) meet a moral standard of citizenship. On the other hand, such political consumerism can also be seen as a communicative act, in which particularly the Internet could provide a platform to express a stand as well as a link to like-minded people. Because of the scepticism sometimes voiced regarding the political nature of consumption, this chapter will examine the connection between socially conscious consumption and other forms of more established political participation, both online and offline. That said, this chapter aims to explore socially conscious consumption by looking at reported behaviours of youths in the UK and the Netherlands.

The online political connection

Contemporary political consumerism must take into account changes in technology, particularly how these changes have influenced youth political participation. In essence, political consumerism can be examined in the offline world, and it is also interesting to link this trend to online participation. Socially conscious consumers can use the Internet to seek information about chosen products and can purchase these products online, but here I am primarily interested to see whether such consumption behaviour can be linked to online forms of political participation.

A large number of scholars have connected the above-described changes in citizenship practice to new communication technologies, both in terms of addressing disengagement from traditional politics

(Ward, Gibson & Lusoli, 2003) and enhancing new forms of citizenship (Henn, Weinstein & Wring, 2002). More generally, research has shown that young people are confident about seeking information online (Rainie & Horrigan, 2005) and also forming networks around issues of importance (Smith, Kearns & Fine, 2005). Livingstone, Bober & Helsper (2005) argue that online political participation is akin to its offline counterpart, for example by comparing participation in an offline electoral meeting and an online forum.

Political elites have been shown to respond to changing views of citizenship, particularly via the Web. For example, scholars have analyzed the content of political websites, both in general but also focused on youth (Bennett & Xenos, 2004; Ward, 2005). One study, after examining 400 youth engagement websites in the US, describes a youth civic culture, found on websites that deal with traditional political issues but also that focus on global issues and activism (Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles & Larson, 2004). However, little has been done to investigate whether socially conscious consumers are drawn to such online political action, providing justification for including a look at young people's reported online participation.

Method of analysis

This chapter presents analysis of a user survey conducted in the UK and the Netherlands, focusing on the saliency of socially conscious consumption and its relationship to political attitudes and participation.

The analysis looks at how prevalent socially conscious consumption is among young people and how this consumption can be seen in relation to other forms of online and offline participation. The survey was conducted via a European-wide project called CIVICWEB, which focused on the production and the nature and characteristics of civic and political websites and the uses and interpretations of these sites by young people.³ The link to the survey URL was active on the MTV website in each country for 3 weeks in October 2007. Due to the self-selective nature of respondents (it was not possible to generate a random sample with this type of web survey), it is statistically impossible to generalize about young people in the countries of interest. Because of this methodological weakness, I have refrained from formulating hypotheses and instead present the analysis in an exploratory manner.

A variety of questions were included on the CIVICWEB survey in relation to political consumerism. These questions were formulated through consultation with a number of sources, including the 2000 DDB

Life Style Study, CSR/MORI and CIRCLE research funded by Pew Charity Trusts.⁴ Questions relevant to socially conscious consumption were taken from the 2000 DDB Life Style Study.

Respondents were included in the analysis if their reported age was between 15 and 25, resulting in 663 respondents in the UK and 689 in the Netherlands. Of these respondents, the reported mean age was 18.8 years in the UK and 19.0 years in the Netherlands. Females made up 67.1 per cent of all respondents in the UK and 47.2 per cent in the Netherlands.

It is important to note the exploratory nature of the CIVICWEB survey. It was made available online and although this strategy resulted in a high number of respondents, little can be concluded about the target population as respondents were self-selected. It is possible to argue that respondents are already demonstrating a preference for online entertainment rather than socially conscious consumption or political action due to their presence on the MTV website. This is speculation, but reflects on the larger need to acknowledge that survey results should be regarded as exploratory. In order to explore the prevalence of socially conscious consumption in greater depth, future studies should make use of a random sample of participants to provide more inferentially sound results.

How widespread is socially conscious consumption?

Turning to the results, it is relevant to look at how salient socially conscious consumption is in each country. For the first analysis, I identified socially conscious consumers as those respondents who reported purchasing socially conscious products 'often' or 'very often' (a mean score equal to or greater than 4). This included 31 per cent of all respondents in the UK and 10 per cent of all respondents in the Netherlands. It is also relevant to see whether young people in the two countries differed on each query used to measure socially conscious consumption. The concept was operationalized using three items: (i) I try to buy products that use recycled packaging, (ii) I try to buy products that don't harm animals or the environment and (iii) I try to buy from companies that support charitable causes. These items were measured on a five-point scale, ranging from 'never' to 'very often'. A *t*-test was used to test for significant differences between the two national contexts (see Table 10.1).

Generally speaking, socially conscious consumption was more salient among UK respondents. In comparison to Dutch respondents,

Table 10.1 Socially conscious consumption in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands: Mean scores of responses on a five-point scale from never (1) to very often (5)

	Mean score	
	UK	Netherlands
Statements about socially conscious consumption		
I try to buy products that use recycled packaging	3.16**	2.57**
I try to buy products that don't harm animals and the environment	3.50	2.95
I try to buy products from companies that support charitable causes	3.33*	2.68*
Socially conscious consumption (3 items)	3.33**	2.73**

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$. A *t*-test compared the means of respondents in the UK and the Netherlands. For simplicity, only the mean scores are reported.

those in the UK were more likely to buy products that use recycled packaging as well as more likely to buy products from companies that support charitable causes. There was no significant difference between the countries in relation to the purchase of products that don't harm animals or the environment.

The three items used to measure socially conscious consumption form a reliable scale (for the UK and the Dutch sample, $\alpha = 0.86$). After combining these three queries, a *t*-test showed a significant difference between the UK and the Netherlands for socially conscious consumption. That is, UK respondents reported significantly higher levels of socially conscious consumption. Potential explanatory factors as to why this practice is more common in the UK than in the Netherlands will be addressed in the Discussion below. Perhaps the notion of buying products in support of a charitable cause is more widespread in the UK; this may also hold true for recycled packaging.

Before turning to the regression analysis, it is relevant to mention a number of general comparative findings. These results are not included in a table for reasons of space. Females from both countries were more often classified as socially conscious consumers than males. This gender difference has been established elsewhere, both in international research and findings particular to Sweden (e.g., Petersson et al., 1998; Stolle & Hooghe, 2003; Ferrer-Fons, 2004). Confidence in using the Internet was quite high in both countries and in line with previous research (Rainie & Horrigan, 2005). Almost 70 per cent of all young people in the Netherlands reported high levels of online confidence. This was

lower in the UK, and comfort online was slightly higher among socially conscious consumers (61.1 per cent) than among those who did not practice socially active consumption (51.5 per cent).

Turning to more politically related matters, attitudes towards civic participation were higher for socially conscious consumers both in the UK (60.2 per cent versus 41.9 per cent) and the Netherlands (66.2 per cent versus 46.1 per cent). This measure asked whether it was important, for example, to vote in elections, be active in voluntary organizations, or be informed about what is going on in the world. This finding demonstrates that those with a more established view of what citizenship entails also participate more often in this form of political consumerism. But do these attitudes translate into action? As noted earlier, Livingstone et al. (2005) argue that online and offline political participation is comparable. This finding is also apparent in the current data, although online participation was slightly higher in both country contexts. Although rates of online and offline participation were low among all respondents in the UK and the Netherlands, there is a striking difference between those active in socially conscious consumption and those not. For example, 17.5 per cent of socially conscious consumers in the UK participated politically online (by, for example, sending emails to politicians or signing an online petition), while only 4.4 per cent of non-socially conscious consumers did the same. Offline political participation (such as working for a voluntary or charitable organization or wearing a campaign button) was below 5 per cent for all Dutch respondents and 'other' UK respondents, although socially conscious consumers in the UK reported activity in offline political participation 13.5 per cent of the time. Next, I turn to a more specific look at how socially conscious consumers perform as citizens.

Are socially conscious consumers also active as citizens?

In order to take a more in-depth look at the relationship between political consumerism (in this case, socially conscious consumption) and other forms of political participation, regression analysis is employed. Variables included in the analysis were confidence using the Internet, queried with five questions that form a reliable scale⁵ (NL, alpha = 0.79; UK, alpha = 0.80), and attitudes towards civic participation, measured using seven items that form a reliable scale (NL, alpha = 0.71; UK, alpha = 0.85). Also included was a measure of online political participation, measured with five items (NL, alpha = 0.76; UK, alpha = 0.83)

and offline political participation (nine items, NL, $\alpha = 0.79$; UK, $\alpha = 0.86$). Recall that the key independent variable, socially conscious consumption, consists of three items measured on a five-point scale: (i) I try to buy products that use recycled packaging, (ii) I try to buy products that don't harm animals or the environment and (iii) I try to buy from companies that support charitable causes. Control variables comprise age (in UK: mean = 18.8, SD = 2.9; in the Netherlands: mean = 19.0, SD = 2.7) gender (in UK 67.1 per cent female; in the Netherlands 47.2 per cent female), and a measure of economic independence.

The regression analyses shown in Tables 10.2 and 10.3 demonstrate the relationship between the previously mentioned variables and online and offline participation. Specifically for the UK and the Netherlands it presents two models: one using online participation as the dependent variable and one aiming to predict offline participation.

Starting with the UK (Table 10.2), socially conscious consumption showed a positive and significant relationship with both online participation and offline participation. In other words, those reporting higher levels of socially conscious consumption are also more likely to participate politically, both online and offline. Table 10.2 also shows a significant relationship between online and offline participation, with

Table 10.2 Examining the relationship between socially conscious consumption and political participation in the United Kingdom

	Political participation			
	Online		Offline	
	β	SE	β	SE
Controls				
Age	0.012	0.009	-0.025**	0.008
Gender	-0.064	0.049	0.025	0.047
Economic independence	-0.035	0.022	0.003	0.022
Confidence in using Internet	0.071*	0.031	-0.009	0.030
Attitudes to civic participation	0.082**	0.029	0.024	0.029
Political participation				
Online	-	-	0.621***	0.031
Offline	0.665***	0.033	-	-
Socially conscious consumption	0.076**	0.025	0.067**	0.024
Adj. R ²	0.490		0.474	
(N)	(663)		(663)	

Note: Entries are standardized β coefficients and standard errors.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 10.3 Examining the relationship between socially conscious consumption and political participation in the Netherlands

	Political participation			
	Online		Offline	
	β	SE	β	SE
Controls				
Age	0.007	0.009	-0.008	0.008
Gender	-0.006	0.048	-0.057	0.039
Economic independence	-0.002	0.013	-0.014	0.011
Confidence in using Internet	0.102**	0.034	-0.071*	0.028
Attitudes to civic participation	0.034	0.045	0.098**	0.037
Political participation				
Online	-	-	0.433***	0.029
Offline	0.637***	0.042	-	-
Socially conscious consumption	0.065*	0.026	0.077***	0
Adj. R ²	0.327		0.343	
(N)	(689)		(689)	

Note: Entries are standardized β coefficients and standard errors.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

each predicting the other. Attitudes towards civic participation significantly predicted online participation but not offline participation. This is interesting, as it seems that those who identify with more traditional constructs of citizenship are more likely to participate in the online world but not offline; a potential explanation is the relatively young age of the respondents. Logically, then, confidence in using the Internet was also statistically tied to online participation but not offline. Finally, age was a significant predictor of offline participation. Interestingly this relationship is negative – the younger an individual was the more likely they were to participate offline.

The results for the Netherlands (Table 10.3) are similar in terms of the effects of socially conscious consumption: Dutch respondents who identify as socially conscious consumers also were significantly more likely to be active in online and offline participation. As in the UK, there was also a significant relationship between online and offline participation. However, in contrast to the UK, attitudes towards civic participation significantly predicted *offline* but not online participation, and confidence in using the Internet predicted participation in both realms. All other variables, including age, were non-significant in both models.

Discussion

The general aim of this chapter has been to explore political consumerism and particularly the prevalence of socially conscious consumption. Political consumerism has rarely been the focus of attention in studies examining political participation. As Stolle et al. (2005, p. 249) point out: 'the claim that political consumerism has become part of the political participation repertoire of western populations requires systematic evidence that an individual's choice of purchases can be rightfully seen as a politically motivated and consistent form of behavior'. This chapter attempts to contribute to this body of evidence. This chapter addressed the prevalence of socially conscious consumption and its relationship to political attitudes and participation in UK and Dutch contexts. A brief summary of the findings follows, along with a discussion into potential insights and a note on methodological issues.

The survey results, although exploratory, demonstrate that some respondents show an enthusiasm for ethical spending: respondents in the UK are quite active as socially conscious consumers (31 per cent of all respondents are classified as socially conscious consumers) although this result is quite a bit lower in the Netherlands, at 10 per cent. This is perhaps explained by the fact that, in the UK, there is strong cultural support for this type of behaviour, particularly with reference to buying from companies that support charitable causes. British high streets often boast a number of second-hand shops that are run by charitable organizations, such as Oxfam and Save the Children (not a common phenomenon in the shopping streets of the Netherlands). Those with less money to spend (such as young people) are more likely to visit these shops. Such speculation brings into question the motivation for such spending: is it selfish, and based purely on purchasing power, or does it hold a political component? Reviewing the results of the regression analysis provides support – in both country contexts – that socially conscious consumption can in fact be linked with both online and offline participation. These results demonstrate that this 'new' form of political behaviour does in fact play a role in political participation. Conceivably by engaging in political consumerism, young people are also turning to more traditional types of participation, and socially conscious consumption can claim its role as a stepping-stone towards other forms of political participation. Or perhaps young people are in the process of uncovering an entirely new way to present themselves as citizens. Either way, these results support the argument that it is a distinctive path to citizenship and worthy of further study.

As already stated, the focus here is on the vertical tensions present in political communication. This chapter has shed new light on this dimension by demonstrating the prevalence of political consumerism among young people. But what does this say about citizenship on a more global scale? Young people who participate in socially conscious consumption are demonstrating an affinity for participation that takes place within a new form of citizenship: one that explicitly legitimizes consumerism. Further, results show that these socially conscious consumers are not turning away from more traditional forms of participation, and instead are embracing political consumerism in addition to more established measures. Perhaps, as Micheletti and Follesdal say: 'political consumerism may seem to threaten the legitimacy base of parliamentary politics because its participants refuse to place all responsibility for social and environmental justice in the hands of government' (2007, p. 172). Yet, instead of threatening the legitimacy of the political system, political elites may be heartened to know that youth may simply be demonstrating a growing concern for active citizenship in new realms. The point is that political consumerism does bring about new forms of participation that seem to complement conventional participation, which may actually work to legitimize political power relations. Of course, for some, democracy may be less about political parties, voting and traditional political knowledge, and may be more about embracing new forms of citizenship such as political consumerism. This shift however does not replace old forms of participation or make political institutions irrelevant (Dahlgren, 2003).

How do such findings particularly apply to the online context? Youth organizations seem to recognize the benefits of appeals to lifestyle changes, and have in fact addressed this issue on their websites (Ward, 2008). Future research should explore this connection, and look at how UK and Dutch youth organizations are communicating with socially conscious consumers. As I asked in the Introduction to this chapter: do political consumers provide existing power elites a new direction in which to pursue often-disinterested citizens? Given that results in both countries link socially conscious consumption with online participation, this is of particular value. The Internet holds an important position as a form of alternative communication, both in encouraging bottom-up and top-down action as well as online and offline participatory outlets. Of course, research can also explore socially conscious consumption in particular and its online ties. For example, UK organizations such as Oxfam are already utilizing the internet. Beyond activism, they are the first major charity shop to sell their goods online, and Internet sales

are expected to contribute nearly £2.4 million to the charity in 2010 (BurrIDGE, 2010).

Because of the exploratory nature of the survey, the self-selection of the participants and the possible discrepancy between expressed opinions and reported actions on the one hand, and actual behaviour on the other, it is difficult to further speculate on the role of socially conscious consumerism for the changing nature of democratic citizenship. The results do hint, however, that moral consumer choices are an active and attractive form of expressing political preferences, which not only expand the meaning and scope of the political, but also incorporate a sense of citizenship into everyday life.

Notes

1. Political consumerism as a form of activism is seen in a variety of instances over time. Stolle et al. (2005) provide an extensive summary, including the White Label campaign in the early 1990s that appealed to American women to buy sweatshop free cotton underwear for themselves and their children, the 1960s United Farm Workers campaign, which used consumer boycotts to pressure farmers and landowners in California, and the use of political consumerism by African-Americans in boycotting for the civil rights movement, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott.
2. See Organic Centre Wales: 'Organic statistics – the shape of organic food and farming'. <http://www.organiccentrewales.org.uk>, accessed 8 October 2007.
3. See <http://www.civicweb.eu/> for more details. Participating countries included Sweden, the Netherlands, Hungary, Spain, Slovenia, Turkey and the United Kingdom.
4. For more information, see Keum et al. (2004), which utilized the 2000 DDB Life Style Study; see http://www.csreurope.org/whatwedo/consumerattitudes_page408.aspx for CSR/MORI, and Andolina et al. (2003)
5. All items and full question wording are available by contacting the author.

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11

The New Frontiers of Journalism: Citizen Participation in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands

Tom Bakker and Chris Paterson

Introduction

The pervasiveness of the Internet in society has led to much speculation about its consequences for journalism and, more generally, the political engagement of citizens. While there have been some dramatic changes for journalists and professional news organizations as a result of technological developments, it is the discussion around participation of the non-professional in the journalistic process that has moved to the fore. In this light, Deuze, Bruns and Neuberger contend that 'digital and networked journalism in whatever shape or form must be seen as a praxis that is not exclusively tied to salaried work or professional institutions anymore' (2007, p. 323). As free and easy-to-use online publishing has significantly lowered the threshold for participation in public communication, people without access to printing presses or television networks have started to engage in distributing information in all possible flavours over the Internet. Bloggers are commenting on (and, less commonly, investigating) political issues, citizens are contributing 'user-generated content' to professional news media and media platforms like YouTube and Flickr are flooded with information that may one day have potential news value.

This chapter explores to what extent the phenomena of *citizen journalism* and *participatory journalism* are emerging in the British and Dutch online media landscapes. This helps to evaluate the legitimacy of ever-present claims that the unilateral relationship between political elites (institutional politics and established media) and citizens is eroding and that the role of traditional powerful gatekeepers is being challenged by the rise of an alternative, bottom-up news and discussion environment in which citizens publicly and unrestrictedly share political information and opinion.

Citizen participation on the Internet has developed rapidly in countries and regions with high levels of Internet penetration, like the United States, Western Europe and parts of Asia. Particular attention has been paid to the emergence of *weblogs* (blogs). Particularly after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the 2004 presidential elections, an active network of influential blogs came of age in the US and started to play an important role in the political news and opinion environment (for an overview, see Perlmutter, 2008). While the US is still a front-runner, and English is still the number one language in the blogosphere, blogging has become a popular practice in many other countries worldwide. China, for example, has a rapidly growing blog community that interacts with and influences the country's official journalism (Lagerkvist, 2008). Similarly, in less politically open countries like Iran, Egypt and Cuba, weblogs are becoming an increasingly popular means of political opposition (Loewenstein, 2008). There has been an increasing focus on audiovisual publication platforms – most notably YouTube – that are being used for distributing news-related content. The considerable political and journalistic value of YouTube became clear during the 2009 election crisis in Iran, when thousands of mobile phone-originated video clips were uploaded, revealing tense and violent situations during numerous demonstrations that the international news media had been excluded from.

Participation *within* or *in concert with* professional news media has also become commonplace. Virtually every newspaper website or current affairs programme offers possibilities for audience participation, like sending e-mails to the editor, posting comments under articles, uploading photos or expressing opinions using online polls. As we shall see later, professional media are still playing a pivotal role and are striving to manage increasing citizen participation in ways that augment, but do not replace, their journalism.

It is noteworthy that citizens' contributions are often not oppositional, but may serve instead to amplify mainstream discourse. A powerful conservative blogosphere (network or community of blogs) in the US, for example, worked in symbiosis with conservative mainstream media outlets like Fox News to reinforce support for the Iraq war and other policies of former president George W. Bush even as his popularity nationally dropped to an unprecedented low.¹ Commentators have noted that the vast majority of what appears on blogs is not journalism in the sense of original factual information, but is instead the re-mediation, often with added commentary, of information originally published by a fairly small number of 'mainstream' professional media (Domingo et al., 2008). And as

Paterson (2007) has recorded, much of what passes for international news on the Internet is not originated by the mainstream news outlets that publish it, coming instead from just a few international news agencies.

We will describe the origins of online citizen participation and map out the ongoing ideological struggle between utopians and dystopians, which is mostly concerned with the possible benefits and disadvantages for journalism, politics and, eventually, democracy. Focusing on the developments in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, we provide a typology in order to categorize the myriad forms of citizen participation that have emerged both within and outside the mainstream media.

Origins and promises of citizen participation in the news

The focus on a more active and prominent role of the audience started in the early 1990s with the emergence of *civic* or *public journalism*. This movement appealed to journalists and news organizations to engage citizens actively in the news production process in order to restore the role of journalists as a mouthpiece of the public, and hence to establish a more balanced and democratic process of news production (Rosen & Merritt, 1994). It has been argued that reaching this goal has become much more feasible as a result of the increased application and use of new media technologies in contemporary newsrooms and websites (Nip, 2006).

Although it has been questioned whether the ideals of public journalism have actually materialized on the Web (for an overview of recent discussions, see Rosenberry & St John III, 2010), a definitive shift has taken place within the realm of professional news media, with a much more prominent role for user contributions and interaction with the public. While some organizations use their websites purely to promote and distribute their products and communicate with their audience, others allow visitors to influence news coverage and encourage people to express their personal opinions (comments, online letters-to-editor sections). The use of so-called j-blogs or media blogs (weblogs by professional journalists and editors) has become an integral part of the working routine of many journalists (Singer, 2005; Robinson, 2006). In the Netherlands, the public broadcasting company NOS maintains an extensive network of staff and journalists' blogs, giving their visitors a view of the daily practice of news production, providing extra material that was not broadcast or defending editorial choices that could lead, or already have led, to public indignation. In the UK, there has been a sharp increase in the use of blogs by media professionals (see Hermida & Thurman, 2008), illustrated by the central role they have started to play at the BBC (Hermida, 2009).

In other countries, most notably in the US, news organizations are experimenting vigorously with forms of citizen participation. The Associated Press conducted a large experiment in interactive reporting during the 2008 US Presidential campaign, when their journalists blogged continuously about their reporting and interacted with readers. Another participatory effort by mainstream media is CNN's user-generated-content platform *iReport* (MSNBC followed with *FirstPerson* and Fox with *uReport*). A famous example of such raw material was the eyewitness video that was recorded and uploaded to the website in April 2007, when a student killed more than 30 people at a university campus in Virginia. More recently, many US news organizations have begun to make extensive use of the micro-blogging service Twitter (CNN and *The New York Times* report more than two million followers in 2010) to establish a personal and direct relationship with their visitors, while also using the technology as a means for gathering feedback, leads and suggestions for news stories. Some television stations even allow viewers' *tweets* (Twitter messages) to be displayed directly on air during newscasts.

The emergence of both public and citizen journalism has gone hand in hand with a renewed interest in the configuration of the public sphere. Many have hailed citizen media because of their open, egalitarian and autonomous nature, which could result in positive developments for the general quality and diversity of news (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004). Proponents argue that people outside traditional media can serve a watchdog function by bringing to light incorrect or biased news coverage in mainstream media, as well as providing a platform for 'unheard voices'.

The Internet has eroded traditional forms of gatekeeping and the inherent nature of the Web has forced journalists to loosen their editorial control. Utopian commentators like Bruns (2005) predict the demise of professional journalism as a result. However, many (for example, Lemann, 2006; Keen, 2007; Knapen, 2008) fear that the 'imprudent' participation of people outside traditional journalism poses severe challenges for the roles of traditional journalists as interpreters of public affairs and agenda-setters of the public and political debate. They cast doubts on the alleged capacity of non-traditional journalists to perform 'true' journalism by pointing at the lack of editorial processes and journalistic practices that ensure the publication of news is 'objective', unbiased, ethical and factual.

Although it is uncontested that the audience has a much more prominent role in the political news environment, some important issues are still on the table. Much attention is given to the questions

regarding in what *form* are citizens' outlets emerging and to what extent do they constitute an alternative and healthy deliberative environment as envisioned by supporters of citizen journalism. What extent of journalistic contributions are coming from so-called citizen journalists? How original, substantial and diverse are the information and perspectives provided by these non-professionals? Addressing these questions helps to answer a central question that the emergence of citizen participation in the news has brought forward: are citizens challenging the authority and ability of professional journalists to control the public agenda?

A typology of citizen participation

The ease of creating one's own personal space online is of course not limited to personal homepages and blogs. After the turn of the twenty-first century, the possibilities for the audience to participate, share and collaborate increased dramatically, running the gamut of publication means like YouTube, Wikipedia, podcasts, MySpace, Twitter, collaborative news sites, comment sections, discussion forums, polls and social network sites.

There have been numerous attempts to find the right labels and categorizations for forms of citizen participation and emerging genres of online journalism (for example Deuze, 2003; Domingo & Heinonen, 2008). Despite the hybrid and dynamic nature of most new media technologies, the variety of forms of citizen participation in the realm of news can be categorized along two central dimensions, as represented in Figure 11.1. The general distinction we note here is the difference between the realms of *participatory* and *citizen* journalism, two terms that have been used interchangeably throughout the years.

The vertical axis in our typology indicates the degree of editorial control of professional journalists and citizens in the publication process. There is a central and coordinating role reserved for professional news organizations in the area of 'participatory journalism', a form of journalism that takes an open approach towards its audience and invites and facilitates its audience to contribute content (text, photos, videos) for their news outlets. 'Citizen journalism', on the other hand, refers to 'journalistic' acts that are performed by citizens themselves and where professionals have little or no influence on what gets published. The horizontal axis serves to distinguish between the nature of contributions by citizens, with discussion and opinion on the one side, and more factual contributions on the opposite side. While other categorizations are of course possible, we will use this typology to shed light on the



Figure 11.1 Typology of citizen participation in the news

types of citizen participation that have emerged in the UK and the Netherlands.

Participatory journalism

Participatory journalism assumes that citizens are contributors to *existing* journalistic practices and news coverage processes. Whereas the term ‘journalism’ in citizen journalism refers to the act of the ‘lay’ person publishing content somewhere on the Web, the end product of participatory journalism is decided on by professional journalists who choose to take a more open approach towards their audience and integrate user contributions into their news coverage. While users may want to make themselves heard by leaving comments, uploading eyewitness photos or vote in opinion polls, journalists remain in control of the actual outcome of the content. Although these participatory mechanisms certainly signify a change in the relationship between journalists and the audience, it also remains clear that there is still an important role reserved for the journalist in selecting and publishing what they consider to be the most relevant pieces of information.

User-submitted photos and videos are perhaps among the most welcomed contributions in the realm of participatory journalism. For

example, eyewitnesses with their cellphones created a large part of the visual material that appeared in the mainstream media after the attacks of 9/11, the Indian Ocean tsunami, Hurricane Katrina and the Madrid metro bombings. Similarly, most newspapers encourage readers to leave comments under their news articles, which they may subsequently use in their next article to give an impression of public opinion on the story. Note, however, that commenting is located lower on the 'editorial control axis', as this act usually takes place under the umbrella of professional news organizations, which are ultimately in charge of allowing, moderating and removing comments. In an echo of the public journalism movement, many news organizations actively ask their readers to send e-mails recommending news coverage ideas. Singer and Ashman (2009) found professional journalists in the UK resistant to public influence over their editorial decisions. Despite the many approaches towards participatory journalism in professional media organizations, in many newsrooms most editors and journalists remain wary of relinquishing control. Survey research and interviews among journalists have shown reluctance towards audience participation, as it would drive away time and energy from their core business – making news – and the quality of users' contributions do not comply with journalists' perceptions of what constitutes objectivity, neutrality or other professional norms (for example, see Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Nah & Chung, 2009).

Citizen journalism

In contrast to participatory journalism, we categorize independent or autonomous activities as citizen journalism, which thus can be considered publishing by non-professional journalists (amateurs, lay people, 'citizens') with or without limited editorial control from professionals. Well-known examples are photos and videos that are uploaded to media platforms like YouTube and Flickr, where there is only control with regard to copyright issues and publication of illegal or obscene material. Collaborative news sites, like Wikinews and Indymedia, also exert little or no prior control over what is being published and actively call upon their readers to edit and contribute to stories that have been submitted by users.

Apart from factual contributions, there are many forms of citizen activities that are more or less interactive and interpersonal in nature. While these may have less direct journalistic value, the popularity of the myriad possibilities for public and private discussions on the Web continues to increase, with the spectacular growth in usage of Twitter and Facebook (Solis, 2009; Nielsen Company, 2010). Many news organizations are increasing their presence on networks' sites, forums and

Twitter in order to tap into the buzz and conversations about particular topics and use it as *vox populi* in their news coverage.

Citizen participation in the UK

Given the focus of this volume, it is useful to elaborate somewhat further on the nature of citizen involvement in the journalistic process in both the UK and the Netherlands. Continuing first with the theme of participatory journalism, as Wahl-Jorgensen (2002) found in her study of letters to newspaper editors, journalists still widely perceive 'user comment' as unrepresentative of their audience and indicative of a dangerous fringe opinion that they feel they should not publish. Similarly, in the UK, the head of the BBC's news operations complained that much public comment does not represent the majority of the audience for news, and may need to be edited or rejected for its incivility. In an address at Leeds University, Peter Horrocks asked if citizen journalism is 'for the 1% or the 99%?' (Horrocks, 2008). He argues that only a small minority appear to contribute regular comment to mainstream media user-generated-content sites, and he worries that that comment is often orchestrated by groups or organizations pushing a particular perspective. He offered the example of how, following the assassination of Benazir Bhutto at the end of 2007, the BBC considered shutting down the public comments connected with their online story. He concluded the 'vehemence and the unanimity of these opinions against the Muslim religion were striking'. But he observed that 'buried among' the mass of Islamophobia were insightful and newsworthy reflections from people who had known Bhutto – and so journalists could not ignore the user-generated-content input. Importantly, Horrocks concludes 'I believe that those views were not truly representative of the BBC's audiences at home and abroad' despite what 'citizen' input was telling him.

Considering citizen journalism (as opposed to participatory journalism), the UK has numerous well-publicized cases of citizen outlets taking the lead in public campaigns where traditional media has fallen short. The swing towards widespread leadership from citizen journalism in fulfilling a watchdog function may be more pronounced in the UK than in many other countries with highly developed media systems due to the rapid deterioration of professional local journalism. This trend is well documented by Davies (2008), who collaborated with journalism researchers at Cardiff University in an investigation of news sources. This revealed a startling degree of dependence amongst the major UK newspapers upon both public relations information and wire service text, and very little

traditional journalism, especially at the local and regional level. The Cardiff study found that ‘60 per cent of press articles and 34 per cent of broadcast stories come wholly or mainly from “pre-packaged” sources, such as public relations copy, or news wire services’ (Lewis et al., 2008).

In 2009, the editor of *The Guardian* newspaper, Alan Rusbridger, began supporting a plan floated by the Press Association for a public subsidy to enable more local news coverage. Such coverage had been nearly abandoned, as chronicled by Davies, and Rusbridger warned of an epidemic of corruption in local government given the lack of press examination (Holmwood, 2009). And so at the end of the first decade of the new millennium, the UK is in the worrying position of lagging beyond its European neighbours in the uptake of the Internet and other communications technologies and the prevalence of broadband. It has a vast and highly developed mainstream media, but a journalism sector in crisis. Many look to citizen journalism and, especially, hybrid citizen-professional initiatives, to counter the demise of traditional public affairs information at the local and national level but, to date, there is no widespread indication of that happening.

Prominent examples from the UK are often cited by journalists and scholars, mostly to reinforce their belief in the growing importance of user-generated content, if not in citizen participation generally (Ornebring, 2008). Along with widely published images from the public of the exploding oil storage depot at Buncefield, near London, in 2005, perhaps best known are the photographs, some from camera-phones, taken by the unwitting participants, as well as by bystanders, in the 7 July 2005 public transport bombings in London. These were widely published by UK and international media. The London bombings are often cited as the defining moment when citizen journalism came of age, but Glaser (2005) reports on concerns from prominent commentators that camera-phones turned the public into paparazzi, clambering for dramatic or gruesome images of disaster at the expense of victims and rescuers alike. The concern is that the quest to be a ‘citizen journalist’ – long before any objective assessment can be made of how that might benefit either the individual or society – leads people towards antisocial behaviour, contrary to the very notion of citizenship.

There are some indicators of a lively citizen journalism environment in the UK, although these seem to operate more in the shadow of mainstream media than is the case in the US. An influential example is *orderorder.com*; *The Economist* called it ‘the British equivalent of America’s Drudge Report’ (*The Economist*, 2008). A growth area in citizen journalism in the UK seems to be community-level amateur journalism. This is

logical, given significant cuts in professional reporting at the local and regional level from broadcasters, newspapers and the Press Association. People who want to read about their communities have to produce news themselves. In a 2005 commentary, Kiss (2005) chastises citizen journalism sceptics and provides this early example from Brighton, where there was public concern about a trial of communal rubbish bins: 'There was extremely limited coverage about this in the *Argus* and little room for discussion – so someone started a dedicated web forum and, for the most part, an extremely positive, articulate debate followed – including contributions from the councillor in charge of the trial'.

A number of UK publications continue to experiment with participatory journalism, mostly, it seems, through desires to appear connected to their audience and to leverage public enthusiasm for being involved in the production of news (while maintaining ultimate control of the resulting journalism). When *The Telegraph* newspaper – in a classic case of traditional chequebook journalism – bought documents revealing the abuse of public expense accounts by Members of Parliament, the rival *Guardian* was left with little news of its own to reveal about the story. So they invited readers to sift through thousands of files on members' expenses that later became publicly available, and report their most interesting findings in the paper and on its website. The newspaper claimed that through this 'crowd sourcing' project 20,000 volunteers reviewed 170,000 documents in the first 80 hours (Anderson, 2009).

The Press Association, which Davies critiqued for its failures at the local level, began to show recognition of those failings when it began testing a 'public service reporting project' in some towns. They hoped to get reporters into local authority meetings and other under-covered local news events, and place their reporting online with free access to everyone, including the traditional media who cannot afford to send their own reporters (Oliver, 2009).

Citizen participation in the Netherlands

Just like most other European countries, including the UK, the Netherlands has a lively and active online news environment. Internet penetration is high (> 90 per cent), as well as readership of online and offline news sources. Although Dutch professional journalism has not had to put up with the same level of criticism as in the UK, in the Netherlands too there has been a steady trend towards involving the public in the journalistic process, and numerous websites and initiatives have been launched with the aim of giving citizens 'a voice' on the

Internet, both within and outside professional news media. However, using our typology, we note differences, similar to those described in the UK, in actual successes in the areas of citizen and participatory journalism.

Regarding participatory journalism, we observe a fairly active environment of 'contributing' citizens. Every Dutch mainstream news organization offers some form of audience participation, ranging from complete citizen blog platforms (as offered by national newspapers *de Volkskrant* and *De Telegraaf*) to the enabling of comments under articles.

Commenting is probably the most popular form of audience participation. Numerous 'commentators' gather on a daily basis on Dutch news websites to leave – on occasion – hundreds of short comments for a single article. The famous and popular Dutch political shock blog *GeenStijl* has made commenting one of its key elements, and reports to have more than 145,000 subscribed 'commenters', with the number of comments per article ranging between 200 and 1,000. *De Telegraaf*, the largest Dutch national newspaper, has even hired a specialized company that employs 18 people to moderate the 8,000 to 15,000 daily comments (Maas, 2008). In these discussions, parliament, political parties and political actors come under attack. The right-wing and populist nature of both outlets attracts considerable attention among people who do not feel comfortable with the traditional news media's coverage of the performance of established political parties, and vent their anonymous spleen in the comments section.

The often intemperate and insulting nature of discussions and comments online has led many news organizations to use moderation, IP banning (the automatic blocking of specific Internet Protocol addresses) and prior screening of submissions. Further, it is important to note that, as in the UK, there are serious doubts about the representativeness of user comment. Although the absolute number of comments at most online newspapers and news sites is impressive, it appears that – as we have noted also for the UK – most of the content is produced by only a small percentage of the total users of the website.

Looking at the presence of uploaded photos and videos in mainstream news media it appears that most content falls in the category of soft news (everyday life photos, celebrities, weather photos) and 'accidents'. For example, after a heavy storm in 2007, regional newspaper *Noordhollands Dagblad* received more than 700 photos within 3 hours (Pantti & Bakker, 2009). Although factual contributions were rather modest at most organizations, journalists still considered it important to offer (low-threshold) possibilities for audience participation,

as it could drive traffic to their website. Of course, there are notable examples of valuable user contributions that have reached the front pages of many newspapers, like the photo of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh taken only minutes after he was brutally murdered in 2004 on a crowded street in Amsterdam. However, such examples of citizen participation are exceptional and, as we argued earlier, frequently serve over-enthusiastic but often naive ‘participation believers’ to exert leverage to launch citizen and participatory journalism projects.

Over the last decade, the Dutch political media landscape has witnessed numerous initiatives that aimed to involve ‘the former audience’ (Gillmor, 2004). This trend, however, seems to be stirred largely by the mythic success stories about citizen and participatory journalism from the US, where, allegedly, public debates were being reinvigorated as a result of a reduction in the control exerted by professional news media, or where citizens were finally able to break into the conversations of political communication elites.

Continuing with citizen journalism, we note that its success is mixed, at best. In general, factual and journalistic contributions to the realm of news and politics are limited. There have been numerous attempts to establish independent citizen outlets, like Wikinews (based on the Wikipedia principle), Dorpspleinen (a platform for local citizen web sites in East Netherlands) and user-generated-content platform Skoeps, which was assured of substantial financial support from PCM Publishers and Talpa Media. But most have failed within months. Even Skoeps, which paid citizens when mainstream media published their photos, did not manage to create enough support and elicit newsworthy content.

Regarding another form of citizen journalism – blogging – it has been found that blogs often focus on personal affairs, technology, entertainment or hobby-related content. Most political blogs in the Netherlands – a couple of hundred – are single-authored and offer a mix of personal musings and occasional political opinions (Bakker, Schönbach & De Vreese, 2009). Moreover, most of that content originates from mainstream media. Also, while there is a substantial group of political elite bloggers in the US that often plays an important role in political opinion formation, this is hardly the case in the Netherlands. As an exception, perhaps, microblog service Twitter has regularly proved to be an effective medium for breaking and distributing news from non-professional sources. A striking example in this respect was the publication of pictures of the plane crash near Amsterdam’s Schiphol airport in 2009 through Twitter, only minutes after the crash. However, the microblog is particularly popular as a social medium, and mainly

among journalists, communication professionals, politicians and other people professionally involved with news and politics. Politiek Online (2010), for example, tracked down more than 2,000 (future) local politicians who maintained a Twitter profile in March 2010, shortly before the local elections.

Taking stock of the limited research on journalistic citizen participation in the Netherlands, we will proceed with caution when drawing conclusions. However, it is clearly very hard to get citizen participation in the actual newsgathering process, which corresponds with commentary and empirical findings from the US. Considering acts of political citizen journalism, we note that most citizen outlets have barely come to the surface and only occasionally play a (marginal) role in political journalism. Participatory journalism seems moderately more popular than citizen journalism, as the absolute number of user-submitted photos, videos and commentary indicates. However, the quality of citizen contributions is often substandard or of little relevance: most comments and discussions do not allude to a rational form of deliberation, and the representativeness of its producers has also been called into question. We nevertheless see more audience activity and also more public awareness of citizen participation when it takes place under the umbrella of a mainstream news organization, leaving us to question whether the one can thrive without the other.

Conclusion

Relative to its impact in the US, citizen participation in the UK and the Netherlands is currently playing an important, but still quite limited role. Mainstream media routinely engage with their audience in ways unheard of a decade ago, but most still do so with trepidation and little loss of control of traditional editorial processes. The widespread failure in the UK of mainstream media to thoroughly cover local news has created opportunities for citizen journalists, but to date this is not happening on a wide scale.

Generally, lower-threshold options for public contributions to news making – commenting, sending a non-news photo – seem to be far more popular than substantial contributions to mainstream journalism or independent acts of citizen journalism (such as investigative blogging or working on collaborative news sites). Most content that appears on alternative outlets originates from mainstream media, so contributions are not always very original. Studies of US blogging, in particular, find this a common characteristic (Lee & Jeong, 2007; Messner & Distaso, 2008).

But, as we noted earlier, mainstream journalism itself tends to be increasingly dependent on ever fewer sources. The Internet offers us a vast and increasing swirl of words and opinions, but all are seemingly based on very little original investigation. More entrepreneurial forms of citizen journalism and professional–amateur collaborations may eventually contribute positively to the diversity of factual information on offer, but it seems that at the moment such initiatives are failing to keep pace with the extent of disinvestment in professional public affairs journalism.

Little of what is often characterized as citizen journalism actually meets traditional definitions of journalism, or contributes greatly to political discourse. Moreover, only a small minority publishes the majority of comments, blogs, tweets and other forms of user-generated content.

Scholars of both utopian and dystopian camps will continue to haggle over the nature and impacts of the trends we term citizen and participatory journalism. We will just observe that the Internet and all its options for participation have theoretically opened the gates for everybody (with internet access), instead of only allowing professional journalists and elites to discuss matters of public and political interest. However, to date, there is little indication of citizen journalism supplanting traditional, ‘real’ or factual journalism, although it clearly does serve to amplify and illustrate certain sentiments in society. A clear danger is when that amplification is of racism or xenophobia, as with the BBC editor’s example, or of misinformation, as with the widespread belief in the US prior to the invasion of Iraq that Saddam Hussein was involved in the 9/11 attacks.

Perhaps more importantly, we question how diverse and representative of public opinion are the artefacts of citizens’ contributions, like comments and blogs? Both the sentiment of professional journalists and a good deal of scholarly research suggest that they tend mainly to be opinions from a few, and that they offer little insight into the views of ‘average’ citizens. There have been famous cases where citizens have played a central role in news coverage and influenced support for certain political issues. However, most people do not seem actively to seek to be citizen journalists, and most tend to display the same news consumption patterns as before the Internet era.

Note

1. See, for example, references by CNN’s president to an Internet-based ‘patriotism police’ influencing mainstream news coverage in this period. [Walter Isaacson, interviewed in Moyers, B. (2007) *Buying the War* – television programme, Public

Broadcasting System available at <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/btw/transcript1.html>, accessed 10 March 2010.]

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12

The New Cultural Cleavage: Immigration and the Challenge to Dutch Politics and Media

Philip van Praag and Maud Adriaansen

Introduction

Whether they are called citizens, consumers, publics or audiences, most people have historically tended to be, to a greater or lesser degree, on the receiving end in their relationship with politics and media. Certainly, they could vote out politicians every four or so years and they could stop reading a newspaper or switch off a television channel, but that was usually where their vertical power vis-à-vis decision makers and definers of reality ended. In recent decades, there have been sizable changes in Western Europe in how people relate to political parties and the media. The former were traditionally able to count on most of their constituents' loyalty and there had never been much need for the latter to worry about the sale of their products. In many countries, the frozen party system began to thaw in the 1960s, but only since the 1990s have the dimensions of the political changes and the processes generating them become clearly visible all across Europe. Similarly, for most of the twentieth century, the media market was a closed and not very competitive supply market. In the 1990s it transformed, relatively quickly, into a strongly competitive demand market.

These changes had an enormous impact on how the political parties and media function. They were forced increasingly to take into account people's opinions, preferences and behaviour, and they did not always feel at ease with what they saw and heard. When considerable segments of the population started emphasizing the importance of hitherto disregarded topics, particularly issues like immigration that the political elite had considered politically too sensitive – and thus vertically articulating opinions and demands towards the horizontal power bloc of politics and media – it was a challenge for both these institutions, leaving them

with feelings of ambivalence and anxiety. In this chapter, we examine the changing relationship between expressive publics, the media and political parties, how the latter two have dealt with these new articulations of the former and what it means for the position of the individual citizen. The emphasis is on developments in the Netherlands, but what we find there might well also resonate in other countries.

A changing environment

The landscape formed by the politics–media–public triangle has been affected by at least five, often interrelated, developments. Although not unfamiliar in other parts of Europe, the combination of changes in each of the corners of the triangle is probably specific to the Netherlands.

In the first place, much more than in other European countries, the Netherlands has been ‘hit’ by increasing voter instability and decreasing party loyalty. The period of de-pillarization in the 1960s, when new parties and floating voters appeared and the self-evidence of party preferences began to wane, were a first sign of change. In a more dramatic, second wave, following the considerable losses of the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats in the 1994 elections, the volatility rose from between 5 and 10 per cent to a sudden 21.5 per cent, only to reach an all time high of 31 per cent in the 2002 ‘Fortuyn’ elections. In the top ten of the most volatile elections in Europe between 1950 and 2006, the Netherlands is the only country to be represented three times in recent years (in 1994, 2002 and 2006; see Mair, 2008, p. 239). In the United Kingdom the erosion of partisan attachments has also been observed, as has a certain fragmentation of the party system, but there these developments were more gradual than in the Netherlands, partly because the electoral system in the UK does not allow such large volatility (Kriesi et al., 2008, pp. 1919–20). Indeed, Dutch voters are not totally adrift and roaming aimlessly from left to right; they tend to switch from one party to another within the same ‘electoral space’ (Adriaansen, Van Der Brug & Van Spanje, 2005).

In the second place, we see a decreasing trust in considerable segments of the population in authorities in general – at best the academic expert now has to share the publicity platform of the public domain with the experience expert – and in the reliability and integrity of political authorities in particular. Compared with the UK, political cynicism is still relatively limited and in light of the increasing voter volatility one would have expected more, but an apparent rise can be noted. It is not so much that people are not interested in politics any longer – an

assumption one generally finds when discussing postmodernity – but they are uncertain and often angry as to what to make of it. This ambivalence is combined with a growing cynicism towards the whole subject and process of politics (Aarts, Van Der Kolk & Rosema, 2007).

In the third place, the media market – traditionally characterized by journalists deciding what is good for people to read, watch or listen to – has transformed in a relatively short period from a supply to a demand market (Van Cuilenburg, Neijens & Scholten, 1999, p. 7). With ten nationwide broadcasting organizations, seven commercial and three public channels, 30 daily newspapers and a rapid Internet connection in more than 70 per cent of households, the Netherlands has an extremely competitive media market. It is characterized by a heated battle for market share and advertising income, forcing media to devote ample attention to the wishes and needs of impatient and easily distracted consumers. From providing what they considered to be in the public interest, the media have increasingly to take stock of what the public is interested in. To hold their attention is already difficult for an entertainment programme, to interest them in politically relevant information is a near-Sisyphean labour.

In the fourth place, like many other countries, the Netherlands is witnessing an increasing media logic (Mazzoleni, 1987; Brants & Van Praag, 2006). Under such logic media are guided much more by their own interest, defined in terms of market shares, ratings and circulation; they have developed from what Hallin (2000) has called a citizen-centric model of news to a market-oriented model. Journalists concentrate more on what they think the audience is interested in or entertained by, resulting in less descriptive, traditional coverage of Parliament and more focus on scoops, scandals, the personal and the *vox populi*, the man in the street. Characteristic of a media logic is that political parties and politicians have to adhere to the production routines, styles and formats of, particularly, television. In the Netherlands this means that, rather than news and current affairs programmes, politicians appear in talk shows, sharing the platform of publicity with soap stars and soccer players.

Finally, and basically as part of a media logic, we notice a fundamental transformation affecting the system of representative democracy in Western Europe. The social developments that have radically altered the media market have also changed the relations between people and politics. The traditional mass party that emerged around the traditional cleavages in nineteenth-century society continued to dominate political life throughout a large part of the twentieth century. Manin (1997) refers

in this context to a party democracy in which the political parties ruled the public debate, set the agenda and had a great deal of authority. This party democracy is now in a transitional stage to an *audience democracy* in which parties become an instrument in the hands of a political leader (see also De Beus in this volume). Personalization and performance are essential features of this new form of democracy; authenticity and empathy of and trust in politicians are important electoral trump cards – and that is exactly where many traditional parties and politicians seem to have failed. They are no longer trusted to take seriously, let alone solve, the issues many perceive as most pressing.

A new political dividing line

Within this changing environment a new, even more dramatic, transformation is emerging, a sixth change, which has come from the public and challenges both politics and the media. Since the late 1990s there has been considerable public concern in the Netherlands about immigration and integration. For decades the Dutch had been considered a role model of tolerance and successful multiculturalism – with the integration of Indonesians in the 1940s and 1950s put forth as a point in case. It now appears that over a very short period the country switched to strongly anti-immigrant views. In many other countries in Europe there is comparable concern and new parties that politicize these themes are becoming more successful. Kriesi et al. (2006, 2008) argue that this societal concern has been caused by the emergence of a new social dividing line or cleavage between the winners and losers in this new global village. Disgust and anxiety are often generated by the effects of the sweeping changes and these authors explain the recent electoral trends on the basis of the resulting discontent. They hold that the two-dimensional electoral space in the Netherlands now consists of an economic and a cultural dimension, both of which run from an open attitude and integration to a closed attitude and demarcation.

The European party systems emerged at the end of the nineteenth century on the basis of various cleavages. In the Netherlands the important ones were the class and the religious cleavage, in the UK the class cleavage. The mass parties around these cleavages were the breeding grounds for the modern parliamentary democracy. Many were able to recruit and keep the firm support of large groups of citizens and thus dominate the political arena up until the last quarter of the twentieth century. De-pillarization in the 1960s had first rocked the steady boat of party alignment but Pim Fortuyn, the populist politician shot dead

shortly before the 2002 elections (in which he won 17 per cent of the votes, even in his absence), was instrumental in the political changes we see today. He succeeded in legitimately linking a discourse about immigration and Islam, which hitherto had been more or less considered politically incorrect to play out in the public domain, with populist anti-establishment sentiments. He was a media hit – in spite of the fact that he blamed journalists with the same anti-establishment arguments that he used for parties in power – and his success paved the way for Geert Wilders, who is even more radical in his opinions. In general, Fortuyn created a climate that saw the rise of a strong radical right-wing populist party, the recognition of a new and loud *vox populi* and a new line of conflict that has transformed the Dutch party system abruptly (see Pellikaan, De Lange & Van Der Meer, 2007).

The old economic and new cultural dimensions cover various topics in the electoral space. The *economic dimension* includes the role of the government in the economy and the desired extent of the welfare state. This entails choices, for example, high or low benefits, trade restrictions or free trade, open or closed borders and a minimal or maximal range of collective goods. Kriesi et al. (2008) see the protectionist national market as diametrically opposed to the neoliberal free market with open borders. In addition, in many countries the importance of the economic dimension has diminished. The *cultural dimension* entails a multicultural or cosmopolitan view as opposed to a culture-protectionist and isolationist one. The important issues on the cultural dimension are whether or not to restrict immigration, assimilation versus multiculturalism and whether or not to expand the European Union. In Kriesi's opinion, the losers in the new global village, including many small entrepreneurs along with unskilled as well as skilled workers, can be placed on the demarcation side on both dimensions whereas the winners belong to the integration side as supporters of an open economy and cultural tolerance. This distinction between a closed and an open situation is now increasingly significant.

For the past few years, many established parties have been witnessing a process of adaptation to altered voter preferences. This process is going slowly in the established parties because these changes evoke internal tension and resistance. In the Netherlands, there are various indications that some parties are making adjustments. Many parties have recently started to present a clearer image of themselves on the cultural dimension. The left-wing Socialist Party assumes a demarcative stance on immigration and European integration and the tougher Labour Party (PvdA) stance on integration has led to heated debates

within the party. However, a new party like Geert Wilders' demarcative Party for Freedom (PVV) sometimes assumes a left-wing stance on socio-economic issues. Some feel that has simply been a response to measured voter preferences.

In the Netherlands and perhaps other countries as well, the various political parties slowly seem to be repositioning themselves on both the dimensions. Kriesi et al. (2008) hold that the cultural dimension is exerting more and more influence on voting conduct. However, whether the cultural dimension will have as much influence as the economic one still remains to be seen. It is true though that in the Netherlands, an increased polarization has been in evidence ever since 2002 among various parties as well as among groups of individuals. New parties, and even in some cases old parties, that present themselves clearly on the cultural dimension, are doing well electorally. As a result of the electoral system, this development is not as strong in majoritarian systems such as the UK, although it is definitely in evidence: the Labour Party had immigration control as one of its 2010 election pledges. There is a segment of the population that needs parties with a clear and recognizable standpoint on immigration and further European integration. Most certainly, in the coming ten years, cultural topics will remain the subject of heated political debates in the Netherlands and many other European countries.

New political dividing lines and the media

The rapid rise of Pim Fortuyn in 2002 made it clear that certain topics that the established political parties had been sidestepping, or trying to sidestep, really mattered to many voters. In other European countries, these typical topics of the new cultural dimension had been on the political agenda for some time. Particularly in a demand market, the media can be expected to feel that they need to respond to the wishes of the audience and more specifically their own target group. Particularly?

Two Dutch studies show a clear increase in the amount of attention devoted by Dutch newspapers to subjects that are part of the new dimension. Boomgaarden (2007, pp. 111–12) notes an increase in the number of newspaper items on immigration and prejudice about ethnic minorities in the period from 1991 to 2005 (Figure 12.1). No comparable figures are available for television coverage. In a similar analysis of Dutch newspapers, Vliegenthart (2007, pp. 39–40) observes a steady rise in the number of items on immigration and integration between 1995 and 2004. Both authors note an increase starting in 2001, but also

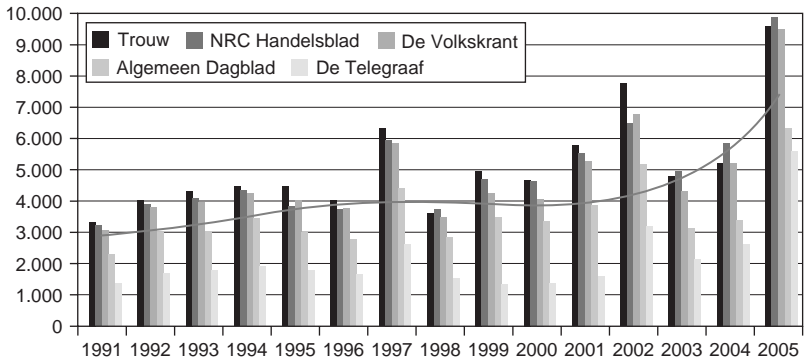


Figure 12.1 Newspaper coverage about ethnic minorities from 1991 to 2005
 Source: Boomgaarden (2007: pp. 111–12)

observe strong fluctuations in the coverage of cultural subjects. The peak in 2001–2 was in response to the attacks in New York and the rise of Pim Fortuyn, and the peak in 2005 was in response to the murder of Theo van Gogh in November 2004. Unlike that of Fortuyn, the killing of the Dutch film-maker was seen to be and was portrayed as connected to Islam: his killer was a young Muslim.

In general, the media focus more on the cultural dimension. There are, however, considerable differences between the newspapers (Adriaansen & Van Praag, forthcoming by 2010). There were far more items in the three top quality papers *Trouw* ($n = 5168$), *NRC Handelsblad* ($n = 5000$) and *De Volkskrant* ($n = 4783$) than in the more popular *Algemeen Dagblad* ($n = 3578$) and *De Telegraaf* ($n = 2154$). There are, however, always many more items in the first three newspapers about political and social developments. It is striking that the ratios of the attention in the various newspapers are quite stable; they were no different in 2005 than in 1991.

The way the media frame news items is not always neutral. Boomgaarden (2007, pp. 111–12) calculates the extent to which ethnic minorities are viewed in a *threat frame* or a *benefit frame*. The threat frame can be seen as a culturally demarcative approach and the benefit frame as a culturally integrative one. As regards the values of the frames, the more items approached this way, the higher the value. It should be noted, however, that the number of observations on television news is limited.

There are sizable media differences as regards the culturally demarcative or integrative approaches. In the news coverage at the public

broadcasting organization *NOS-Journaal* and the top quality newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, ethnic minorities are just as often depicted as a benefit as they are as a threat. The other media however far more frequently depict ethnic minorities as a threat than a benefit. The difference is greatest on commercial *RTL-Nieuws*, where there is 29 times as much culturally demarcative as culturally integrative coverage (Boomgaarden, 2007; Adriaansen & Van Praag, forthcoming by 2010). *De Telegraaf* and *Algemeen Dagblad* also write far more frequently in terms of a threat. Although these three media cover ethnic minorities less in absolute terms, they often cover them in a culturally demarcative fashion. In the absence of real tabloid media in the Netherlands, it is risky to compare *RTL-nieuws*, *De Telegraaf* and *Algemeen Dagblad*, on the one hand, with *NOS-Journaal* and *NRC Handelsblad* on the other. It is striking, however, that the more popular- and even populist-oriented three seem to reflect the opinion climate in the land more than the other two.

It should be noted that Boomgaarden studied the period of 4 weeks in November and December 2004 just after Theo van Gogh was murdered. As a result of this event, there were probably more items about ethnic minorities and they were probably approached as more of a threat than in other periods. In his study on the approaches to immigration and integration from 1995 to 2004, Vliegenthart (2007, pp. 39–40) cites two culturally demarcative approaches: ‘Islam as a threat’ and ‘restriction of immigration’. Unfortunately, no ratios between demarcative and integrative approaches can be calculated on the basis of his study. The data show that demarcative approaches were three times as common in the period after 2001 as in 1995–2000.

The increased media focus on topics in the cultural dimension means parties and actors with an explicit standpoint on these topics are given ample space in all the media. This can be favourable for new parties with a demarcative stance and means the media frequently confront the established parties with topics related to immigration and integration, particularly if they can be interpreted as policy failures or indications of high-level differences of opinion.

The cultural dimension of media use

Some media would thus seem to select a position on the cultural dimension. The question is whether these media do indeed reach the audience they could and would like to attract with this news coverage. To answer this question, we have examined the background features and media use of people with various positions on the cultural dimension. Using two

questions from the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study on immigration and integration,¹ the respondents were divided into three groups: integrative (an average of two or less), intermediary (average higher than two and lower than five) and demarcative (average six or higher). Based on this classification, 4 per cent of the respondents can be referred to as culturally integrative, 66 per cent as culturally intermediary and 31 per cent as culturally demarcative.

Table 12.1 shows the educational levels, political interest and political cynicism of the culturally demarcative as compared with the culturally integrative or intermediary. It should be noted that only very few people are culturally integrative. On average, the culturally demarcative have a much lower educational level than the other two groups: 39 per cent have a low educational level. This is in keeping with the findings of Kriesi et al., who note that the higher the educational level, the more common the culturally integrative stance. They state that, since education makes people more culturally tolerant and people with greater language skills tend to have more contact with other cultures, education has a culturally liberalizing effect (see also Bovens & Wille, 2009). It is also true that the culturally demarcative are more often not politically

Table 12.1 Educational levels, political interest and political cynicism of the three groups (%)

	Group			All (n = 2728)
	Cultural integrative (n = 97)	Cultural middle (n = 1795)	Cultural demarcative (n = 836)	
Education level (highest completed)				
• Low	12	18	39	24
• Middle	51	52	50	52
• High	37	30	11	25
Political interest level				
• None	11	17	30	21
• Fair	56	71	61	67
• High	33	13	9	12
Political cynicism*				
• Non-cynical	55	49	35	45
• Cynical	45	51	65	55

Source: Dutch Parliamentary Election Study, 2006.

*The political cynicism scale is based on the three standard items in the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study. Those who gave two out of three cynical responses are considered cynical.

interested (30 per cent) than the two other groups, and much more likely to be politically cynical (65 per cent).

The media use of the culturally demarcative deviates from that of the others. The group often watches the news on television (92 per cent): the public *NOS-Journaal* (64 per cent) as well as the commercial *RTL-Nieuws* (40 per cent; Table 12.2). It is striking, but may be not surprising, that the culturally demarcative watch *RTL-Nieuws* far more than the other two groups, bearing in mind that the commercial broadcaster tends to depict ethnic minorities in a threat frame. A large majority of the culturally demarcative also read newspapers (71 per cent), although they mainly read regional dailies (40 per cent) and the more right-wing *De Telegraaf* (24 per cent). The nationwide top quality newspapers *NRC Handelsblad* (liberal), *De Volkskrant* (progressive) and *Trouw* (Protestant) are barely read by them, if at all. This group also uses the Internet less for political information (5 per cent) than the other groups. Although the culturally demarcative read nationwide newspapers and use the Internet for news less than average, they do often watch the news on

Table 12.2 Daily media use of the three groups (%)

	Group			All (n = 2728)
	Cultural integrative (n = 97)	Cultural middle (n = 1795)	Cultural demarcative (n = 836)	
Use of all media	95	92	92	92
• Television news	72	68	75	70
◦ <i>NOS-Journaal</i>	68	60	64	61
◦ <i>RTL-Nieuws</i>	25	32	40	34
• Newspapers	72	74	71	73
◦ <i>De Telegraaf</i>	8	16	24	18
◦ <i>de Volkskrant</i>	22	10	2	8
◦ <i>Trouw</i>	5	3	1	2
◦ <i>NRC Handelsblad</i> , <i>nrc.next</i>	11	8	4	7
◦ <i>Algemeen Dagblad</i>	7	12	10	11
◦ <i>Het Parool</i>	6	2	0	2
◦ <i>Metro</i>	13	9	8	9
◦ <i>Spits</i>	14	10	8	10
◦ <i>A regional newspaper</i>	32	38	40	39
◦ <i>Other newspapers</i>	3	3	2	3
• Internet news	13	9	5	8

Source: Dutch Parliamentary Election Study, 2006.

television, even slightly more than average. The large majority of this group is informed of the news every day via television, newspapers or the Internet (92 per cent), which is comparable to the other two groups. So the culturally demarcative group does not use the media less frequently for the news, it just uses different media.

The link between the media and the audience

In a demand market dominated by media logic, the media can only survive by devoting ample attention to subjects a lot of people are interested in. Moreover, news related to immigration and integration issues is always accompanied by heated conflicts and emotions – excellent ingredients for entertaining stories and broadcasts that appeal to large segments of the audience. There is often no need for the media to offer any justification for the changing emphases. They can simply make a reference to plurality to account for their presentation of opposing standpoints and often do so without explicitly stating their own views. For the established political parties, this is much more difficult. Not only do they need to devote attention to the subjects, but they are also expected by the audience to express a clear point of view, to be consistent in their attitudes and to show how problems can be solved. Some media do seem to have adopted a clear position on these issues. In the past they were criticized for mainly covering the news in a culturally integrative fashion, but now some media organizations have adopted a demarcative approach by viewing immigration primarily as a threat. Faced with the success of Pim Fortuyn and his party, the List Pim Fortuyn (LPF), many Dutch media became aware of their failure sufficiently to acknowledge certain trends in society. In 2002 a policy document by the editor in chief of *NOS-Journaal* asked for the news to refocus ‘from the state to the street’ (*NOS-Journaal*, 2002) – and he was not the only one. Ever since that fateful year 2002, the media have been much more focused on providing a platform for whatever is brewing in society. No matter what the subject, if there is any social relevance at all there will be someone having a say, often in street interviews or rapidly conducted opinion polls.

Standpoints are usually not openly adhered to, but are often clear from the extent of attention devoted to culturally demarcative subjects, and particularly from the use of certain frames. It is clear that on the cultural dimension many media do manage to connect with their target group. The culturally demarcative often watch *RTL-Nieuws*, a programme that presents numerous news items within a culturally demarcative frame.

In addition, they read *De Telegraaf* and to a lesser degree *Algemeen Dagblad*, two newspapers with many culturally demarcative standpoints. Perhaps these media want to present these culturally demarcative standpoints, perhaps it is an enlightened commercial interest, but the fact remains that there are media where these people feel at home on the cultural dimension.

Despite considerable changes in the intermediary role of the media, it is still just as important as ever. This has, however, been at the expense of the political parties' position in society. In view of the mandate parties get from their voters at election time, they are traditionally expected to formulate the ideas popular in society and, if so desired, translate them into concrete demands, the *articulation function* of political parties. Ever since the 1970s, this articulation function has been increasingly served by the media. Nowadays people are more apt to turn to the media than to political parties with their complaints and problems. The present-day dominance of media logic, the emergence of new social problems, and the priority the media now grant to their platform function have all reinforced this trend.

Conclusion

Ever since the start of the new millennium, political parties and media alike have been confronted with a number of important new social problems. In the Netherlands and many other European countries, in addition to traditional differences between the political left and right, there is now a new cultural dimension where people articulate a multicultural integrative outlook diametrically opposed to those with a culture-protectionist demarcative one. As the voice of the *vox populi* is much more in the open these days and taken more seriously, the division can develop into a societal rift that upsets the country: instead of creating cohesion through openness it widens the cleavage. For the media and political realms alike, the challenge is how to respond to this.

The media were much quicker to adjust to the new situation than the political parties. To put it bluntly: up to a point it came as a blessing in disguise for the media, enabling them to connect with the public and their anxieties. All of them began to devote more attention to the typical topics of the new cultural dimension – immigration and integration. Moreover, some media have selected a more culturally demarcative position and others an integrative position. Thus the media can report on a controversial and politicized theme much more easily and non-committally than political parties, which are always expected to have

a standpoint and propose a solution. The established parties, which often bear political responsibility, have an especially hard time with this. For any number of reasons it is, however, attractive for the media to devote a great deal of attention to problems related to immigration and integration. They are topics that fit in nicely with the demands of media logic – emotionally charged and appealing to a wide audience, and thus always appropriate subjects for pithy comments – and give rise to numerous conflicts within as well as between the parties. With a definite eagerness, the media expose and magnify these problems. Regardless of whether they take a stance themselves, these subjects enable the old players on the media market to demonstrate that, unlike the established political parties, they have not lost contact with the rank and file. The new players, particularly the Internet bloggers, want to demonstrate that they function better on these points than the traditional media. There are fluctuations in the attention focused on these subjects, but as long as they remain strongly polarized subjects with which a segment of the political parties are grappling, the media cannot be expected to lose interest in them. Thus, the rise of the new cultural cleavage has come as a blessing for the old and new media alike.

These developments also mean the people have achieved more power. Their convictions, priorities and emotions have come to have an enormous impact on the media agenda as well as the political agenda. Uncertainty among journalists and politicians alike about what the rank and file are thinking, and concerns about their own positions on the highly dynamic media market and extremely volatile electoral market, can lead to a disproportional focus on relatively new issues – in the past decade these have been mainly culturally demarcative ones. In the long run, developments in the media market and diametrically opposed ideas on the cultural dimension can create another problem as well. Due to media market fragmentation, people have ever-growing opportunities to avoid political information altogether. For the time being, few people seem to be taking advantage of these opportunities, even in the culturally demarcative group, although they are less politically interested and more cynical than average. If a segment of the population starts avoiding the news, which is increasingly easy to do, this could have repercussions for the functioning of Dutch politics.

To compromise and give and take have traditionally been characteristic of the consensual politics in the Netherlands. This entails a political game where contestants sometimes win and sometimes lose and no one always gets what they want. Understanding the game requires certain knowledge that people can get from the media. If a specific group of

people increasingly ignores a media that devotes so much attention to political and social developments, this can lead to growing incomprehension regarding the arguments taken into consideration in the policy process and subsequently to frustration and an aversion to politics. In addition, it can lead to polarization between various groups in society now that the cultural dimension is so important to people. To the extent that groups of voters who increasingly close themselves off to the regular news flows are sensitive to the politicization of this subject, in the long run reaching these groups is an enormous challenge to the world of politics.

Note

1. Both questions tracked agreement on a seven-point scale. The question about integration of present immigrants was: immigrants should (1) keep their own culture or (7) fully adapt to our culture. The question about new immigrants was: asylum seekers should (1) be admitted more often or (7) be sent back more often.

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13

The Mediation of Political Disconnection

Stephen Coleman, David E. Morrison and Simeon Yates

Introduction

The term 'disconnection' in the title of our chapter refers to a disjuncture between individuals and officialdom. According to Easton and Dennis (1967, p. 26), a politically efficacious person is able 'to construct a psychic map of the political world with strong lines of force running from himself to the place of officialdom'. In this sense, we present a study of the relationship between Internet use and political efficacy, people's belief that a relationship exists between themselves and the institutions that govern society.

Importantly, political efficacy involves external factors – belief that government can and will respond to citizens – and internal factors – such as the citizens' knowledge of how to act politically and their motivation to do so. Given the rapid development of digital media over the past decade, and the experience of citizens readily interacting both with each other and with institutions, contemporary accounts of political efficacy have to take this interactive connectedness into account. More importantly, accounts must address experiences of disconnectedness from political institutions that contrast strongly with citizens' interactive connectedness in other spheres of life. In this sense we believe that understanding contemporary political efficacy is a problem in the context of digital media. This is not to deny the role of other forms of practical action in influencing government decisions – for example through interest organizations. Rather, we wish to explore the extent to which, in a citizen's eyes, digital media can succeed or fail as a medium for political action with regard to formal government institutions.

Various studies have reported that those who feel that they can bring about political change, individually or in concert with others, are more

likely to be actively involved in politics (Campbell, Gurin & Miller, 1954, p. 194; Sullivan & Riedel, 2004). In survey research, this empirical conjunction has proven strong enough for political efficacy to be a relatively effective predictor of political participation. Milbrath (1965, p. 56), on the basis of a synthesis of existing survey research, found that 'persons who feel efficacious politically are more likely to become actively involved in politics' (see also Verba & Nie, 1972; Chavis & Wandersman, 1990).

Since the 1960s, much has been made of the role of survey and experimental analysis in convincingly locating chains of cause and effect between exposure to broadcast material and an individual's sense of political efficacy. Such connections have not, however, always resulted in positive conclusions. Robinson, for example, concluded that watching television news serves to 'frustrate subjects, forcing them to turn inward and doubt their own ability to comprehend and cope with politics' (Robinson, 1976, p. 417). This is consistent with a tradition initiated by Kurt and Gladys Lang (Lang & Lang, 1953) and pursued in later years by other scholars (for example Putnam, 2000). Others, however, have found a positive relationship between some forms of media use, particularly for news consumption and political efficacy (see Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; McLeod et al., 1996; Norris, 2001; Scheufele, 2002; Moy et al., 2005).

This tradition of enquiry, focusing on television and radio, has continued with the emergence of the Internet, but has resulted in diverse and ambivalent speculation about the implications of the new medium for democracy in general and political participation in particular. Scheufele and Nisbet's (2002) study, based upon a survey carried out in the United States, found the 'role of the Internet in promoting active and informed citizenship is minimal'. Lee (2006), on the other hand, has reported that exposure to online news sites and the use of the Internet for sending or posting political messages were relatively significant predictors of internal political efficacy (see also Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006).

The ubiquitous presence of the Internet in all areas of citizens' lives – from work to home, to entertainment events, to health care and so on – creates a general understanding of media whereby two key experiences hold. First, that interaction with institutions is individualized and interactive, with rapid personal or group responses. For example, interacting with local city councils, utility providers or banks online can quickly resolve payment, tax or complaint issues. Alternatively voting on a television show via the Internet or mobile phone provides an experience of influencing media outcomes. Second, users have become used to undertaking a whole range of social actions – shopping, completing

work tasks, even starting and ending relationships – through digital media. Therefore for most people using digital media, such as the Internet, is about real material social and communicative acts – even if they might not express it in this way.

This sets up expectations of, and opportunities for, digital media to offer these experiences in the political domain. An absence of this, and the connectedness that it implies, impacts upon both the external and internal aspects of contemporary political efficacy. In exploring these issues, confusion arises for both citizens and political scientists from the potential affordances of the technology and the actual articulation of these in actual everyday use. We shall argue that some of this confusion as to the place of the Internet in political life arises from a failure to disentangle the technological from the social.

Drawing on our research, which included seven focus groups, and a nationally representative questionnaire survey ($n = 2687$), we show how people evaluate the Internet in terms of judgements they make about their own lives and about political performances. Overall, we document this disjunction between actual and perceived affordances of the Internet within the political domain and wider social beliefs about the responsiveness of government to citizens. Before discussing the consequences of the Internet for political efficacy, it is worth noting how those in our focus groups discussed some everyday issues, most notably experiences of their neighbourhoods and the ways in which the penetration of values from beyond their communities structured relationships with authority and beliefs about political influence.

Connection and disconnection

Most of the participants in our groups inhabited a world of settled expectations. They were born and had lived all their lives in Leeds, as, in most cases, had their parents. They liked the area; indeed, many of them appeared to have an enormous affection for it to the point of protection. The reference to feeling confident due to the feeling of security given by knowing people is particularly interesting from a social network perspective. Most participants were involved in various local networks, the most important of which tended to revolve around their children's school.

The impression gained was of a fairly friendly and socially cohesive neighbourhood. Of course one cannot, in any strict methodological sense, generalize from focus group findings to the population as a whole (Morrison, 1998), but at this stage in the project we were looking for the

operation of social processes that might lead to wider understandings of the role of communications in the formation of efficacy. Thus, what became interesting was that, even though participants felt ‘at home’ in their neighbourhoods, and enjoyed being within networks of associations formed through everyday living, this confidence faltered when efforts were made to influence authority. For example, although the school played a central part in the generation of association between people, and provided a focus for communal exchange of information, when it came to having a say in how the school was run, parents felt decidedly excluded from influence. Indeed, as soon as the conversation in the groups moved from a discussion of school as a communal gathering site to school as an official institution, the language of sociability turned into a discourse of suspicion, dominated by a ‘them’ and ‘us’ attitude. Participants in several of the groups raised the issue of bullying at school, but school authorities were perceived as unable or unwilling to deal with this situation:

I don’t think you do get the support in incidents ... there is too much PC (political correctness) going on and there’s a lot of kids that should be kicked out of school (Group 1).

Another participant was involved in a campaign to keep her local school open, but she felt that forces above and beyond the locality in which she lived were involved:

At the end of the day, you are only on this earth once, and you want to make sure that you maximize every opportunity and everything goes as well as it can, and when your life is in other people’s hands, then you cannot feel empowered. At the end of the day, decisions like this school building, you are powerless because it is local government subject to central government’s mandate that will decide the future of your children (Group 6).

These feelings of powerlessness emerged as parents decided to intervene in educational governance. In other words, had they remained passive witnesses to events and happenings, such feelings would not have arisen. The prospect arises, therefore, of a liberal democratic ideology that encourages, even desires, its citizens to be involved in governance by expressing views on the conduct of political and civic life, but that generates feeling of powerlessness because those in authority fail to listen to public voices. The most pessimistic conclusion here is that those

who take on the role of democratic actors are the most likely to feel the disappointment of failure and inefficacy.

There is no need to pursue this line of thought other than to register that everyday experiences of authority are likely to determine conclusions about the nature of political authority in general, and that modes of communication such as the Internet count for little if the belief exists that no one will listen or act on messages transmitted to authority through such 'open' avenues. Returning to Di Gennaro and Dutton's speculation that those who think that 'governments are not responsive to citizens concerns' might benefit from online communication, we would respond that connectivity without response runs the risk of increasing feelings of inefficacy.

Most of the participants in our focus groups articulated a clear link between their sense of local belonging and their sense of estrangement from what they saw as the 'political world', which did not seem to respond to their language, values and experiences. This non-recognition of the political world as their own indicated a profound dislocation between their 'common sense' understanding of the rules governing everyday life, social exchange and appropriate expression and the official construction of such rules, which were regarded as somehow alien and unsettling. Emerging from an inaccessible distance and disrupting deep-rooted patterns of local culture, the idiomatic code of politics felt rather like an imposed foreign language. Time and again we were given examples of cultural impositions on behaviour (usually referred to disparagingly as 'political correctness') that indicated to us a disconnection between the local lives of participants and the wider political world.

It might be considered that the disconnection discovered in our focus groups was peculiar to our sample and not common to the wider population. This would not appear to be the case: our survey returns showed a remarkably similar pattern of response toward authority. This is, perhaps, not surprising in that, although our population was local, the factors they were responding to were not. Common complaints about 'political correctness', seen to stand over and against vernacular meanings, were widespread within our population sample, half of whom 'strongly agreed' that 'because of political correctness you have to be careful what you say these days', with a further quarter 'agreeing'.

It became clear from both the focus groups and the national survey that the interconnectedness of modern society has facilitated the penetration of values from some groups on to others. Such penetration of sentiments is illustrative of the fact that life cannot be totally localized in terms of its meanings. This observation raises the important question of whether

e-communication facilitates meaningful connection between citizens, authorities and political figures and, moreover, whether it promotes voices that are not within traditional arrangements and discourses of power. In short, can e-communication expand not only the space, but the expressive mode, of the political?

Communicating with others and broken promises

The information gathered from the focus groups showed ambivalence with respect to the benefit of e-communication. This stemmed from learnt distrust of authority, but was also a consequence of the perceived superiority of direct personal communication:

I've always preferred to talk to people because I think it's very easy to delete an email (Group 3).

If you do send an email to your MP, how are you to know it's going to actually be him that replies to it? It might be his secretary that sends a generic email to everyone who sends him an email. So it's the old 'if you can't see who you are talking to, it can be positive or it can be negative' (Group 2).

You send an email and you can say what you want, but the response you get back doesn't match what you are saying. But if you were talking to someone and if you can get a name and you can say, 'When are you going to get back to me?' And if you say, 'If you don't get back to me, I'm gonna ring you back', it seems more immediate and taken more seriously (Group 3).

The above quotations are by no means evidence of technophobia, but rather a cultural distrust of officialdom. There is an assumption of the non-responsiveness of authorities, which gives rise to a suspicion of any form of communication that allows officials to hide. The preference for the use of direct personal communication has nothing to do with the perceived limitations of digital communication technology as a conduit of information, but suggests an awareness that the easier it is for officialdom not to respond to claims for attention, the more likely it is that citizen input will be ignored. It is piquant, therefore, that a technology that offers ready communication and connection between citizens and authorities should by the very same token limit communication by the ease of avoidance it affords for recognizing the other.

The peculiarity of the Internet in comparison with all preceding modes of communications is that the interactivity it affords raises

claims of connectivity and, at the same time, allows the testing of such claims by those who wish to engage with political authorities. There was evidence in the focus groups of a feeling that there was little excuse for government departments and politicians not to explain to the public decisions made and actions followed. In order to see how far this was a general sentiment, the following question was placed in our national survey: 'With the developments that have been made in communications technology, such as the Internet, there is no excuse for the public not to be sent detailed information about government policy explaining the reasons behind policy decisions'. Of the total sample, 39 per cent 'strongly agreed' with the statement, with a further 34 per cent 'agreeing somewhat'. The next step was to establish whether people wished to receive such information. They did. In total, 86 per cent of our national sample (strongly) agreed that they would like to know more about how decisions are made by government.

One of the criticisms made of politicians who use the Internet as a public communication medium is that they fail to understand its 'grammar' and instead use it to relay information rather than to receive messages back or incorporate them into a conversational loop (Coleman & Moss, 2008). It is quite clear from our survey that the general public wishes to exploit the full interactive possibilities afforded by the Internet. For example, to the statement, 'If it was available, I would use an Internet service to give my views on issues to Government ministers', three-quarters of our sample (strongly) agreed that they would wish to do so. There is, therefore, an apparent belief that, because of developments in communications technologies, there is no excuse for the public not to be sent detailed information about government policy and engaged with government policy-making by offering views to ministers via the Internet. Leaving aside for the moment the difficulties and risks faced by politicians in moving from non-interactive modes of communication and becoming fully competent Internet users, what is quite clear is that there is both scope for online dialogue between government and public and a demand by the public to engage in interactive political communication. The question of whether politicians are willing to listen to the opinions of ordinary citizens remains central to whether or not e-communication fulfils its political promise, thereby enhancing feelings of connectivity and efficacy.

Democratic deficit

Modernity is configured on communications. Indeed, each communication advance throughout history has tended to be read as signalling

a new era of political and social exchange. The development and subsequent spread of the Internet is no exception. Indeed it has been heralded in some quarters as offering a transformation in political association, practice and expression (Morris, 2000; Trippi, 2004). At the very least, it is seen to offer the hope of a restoration of democratic vibrancy through the connection of individual citizens to points of political decision making, thereby closing the gap between the electors and the elected, and government and the governed.

All of this points to a potential for increasing political efficacy, but it must be understood that connection without social engagement is technological circuitry rather than political reciprocity. Indeed, when we turn to beliefs about whether or not politicians and others holding positions of power *will* listen and take effective notice of online communicators, the picture is less encouraging. Underpinning all political exchange, whatever its form, must be a belief in the willingness of the other genuinely to listen – and, moreover, genuinely to be interested in what the initiator of the exchange has to say. The following remarks capture a prevalent sense that exchange between governments and the governed will count for little without the existence of the necessary attitudes that can transform connection into communication:

I think that's what the government like to say – because they've got a flashy website that says you can contact us at any time ...

They used to encourage people to look at it. That website may exist but they need to be saying to people. 'Look, if you've got a problem come here'.

You need to be made aware.

Yes, but if you were made aware you might complain and they don't really want you do to that (Group 3).

The above demonstrates a common belief that communication with politicians, however facilitated, cannot generally be trusted. This result is replicated in a significant body of survey research (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Pharr & Putnam, 2000; Christensen & Laegreid, 2005; Hay, 2007). Such attitudes are a fundamental block to the communicative possibilities offered by the Internet.

The returns from our national survey revealed a deep cynicism regarding politicians' motives in using the Internet to communicate with citizens. For example, 70 per cent agreed with the statement: 'It's alright for politicians to say that they like to hear the views of the public, but they don't really listen'. And 83 per cent assume that politicians have

blogs merely 'to give the impression that they are interested in talking and listening to you'.

The fact that our participants consider the use of the Internet by politicians to be duplicitous is a damning indictment of the state of public confidence in political responsiveness. It is also a firm warning that forms of communication cannot overcome that which is social: namely, a lack of trust in the responsiveness of political institutions. Expressed differently, the technical is the technical and the social is the social, and, while the technical has the capacity to better assist the social, it cannot deliver that which it is not designed to deliver – in this case, the willingness of government to listen to, and take into consideration, the public's expression of views on issues.

Protest and communication

In the course of the focus groups the issue of the invasion of Iraq emerged naturally – that is, unprompted – to illustrate points that participants wished to make about the non-responsiveness of government to public sentiment. We therefore took this issue as a theme for exploration in the national survey. Our aim was to follow the action that people had taken to register their feelings towards the government's actions. In response to our initial question: 'When the Government decided to commit British troops to an invasion of Iraq in 2003, opinion in Britain appeared to be divided over whether troops should be sent or not. At the time, did you agree to sending the troops?', 37 per cent agreed to the invasion and 46 per cent did not.

Having established the distribution of attitudes towards the war, those opposed were given 18 possible ways of registering how they had reacted to the government's decision to send troops to Iraq. These reactions ranged from going on a demonstration to sending an email to a local radio station. Of those who disagreed with sending troops, 30 per cent had used one of the 18 methods offered. Signing a petition was by far the most common means of expressing a view (18 per cent) and 15 per cent stated that they had 'signed an electronic petition protesting against the invasion'. It is interesting to note that the virtual circulation of calls to sign an e-petition were not significantly less successful than the direct, face-to-face approach usually involved in persuading someone to sign a paper petition.

Being active in one mode of protest was a good predictor of being active in another mode. Those who participated in offline activities in opposition to the war were most likely to do so online, and vice versa.

We might conclude, therefore, that it is not so much the communicative form that increases the likelihood of engagement as the belief that registering an opinion would have some kind of an effect. In other words, those who were likely to express themselves through traditional forms, such as signing a paper petition, were likely to seize on whatever opportunity was presented for registering their voice.

The petition was the most commonly used form of protest among those who objected to the war. Only one in 20 of the objectors had taken part in a national protest rally, and the same percentage had taken part in a local rally. Only 3 per cent had expressed their opposition to the war by writing a letter to their Member of Parliament, while 4 per cent had emailed their MP. Quite clearly, the possibilities of online protest have not yet transformed the political communicative landscape. However, matters are not quite so clear if one thinks in terms of connectivity broader than the linear or vertical model of political association, and considers instead the symbolic and emotional support afforded by citizen-to-citizen lateral or horizontal Internet connection. Indeed, in terms of political efficacy, it makes greater sense to consider connectivity across publics rather than between publics and officialdom.

In the survey, we asked two questions about the effectiveness of the protest actions undertaken by opponents of the war. The first concerned respondents' *hope* for the effectiveness of their protest at the time that they made it and the second asked about what respondents considered to be the actual *impact* of their protest. 'Thinking about your actions in expressing your opposition to the war', 80 per cent had not much hope or no hope at all 'that the action of yourself and others who similarly protested would have an effect on Government Policy on the war'. Not a single respondent considered that their protest, or the protest of others, had a 'large effect' on Government policy, while almost two-thirds considered that their protests had 'no effect at all'.

Interestingly, when asked, 'if a similar situation arose again where you disagreed with government policy, how likely would you be to do the same again and express your disagreement?', when 'very likely' and 'fairly likely' were combined, over half (55 per cent) said that they *would* do so again. All of this suggests that the experience of trying to influence political authority resulted in the undermining of efficacy for a high proportion of people. However, if one moves from a linear or vertical conception of citizen-to-government influence to a lateral or horizontal (citizen-to-citizen) dimension, the picture changes dramatically, and with it the consequences for political efficacy, although not necessarily

of a kind that fits the definitions of Campbell, Dennis, Easton, Milbrath and the other founders of efficacy research.

One of the most striking findings from the focus groups was the degree of deep sociability afforded by the Internet. One man, for example, said, when talking about going on holiday and entrusting his neighbours with his house keys: 'I wouldn't trust anybody around here with my house keys. We live next door to an 80-year-old bloke, and I don't think I'd even trust him with my keys'. Yet, the same man informed us that 'I've met people on music forums and we've met up at different places in the country and we've stayed at their house ... we were discussing music and I said ... why don't you come up and see us' (Group 2). Association in this instance resulted from shared interests across space rather than physical proximity. In terms of political association, opportunities for sociability sometimes turned into bases for collective action. One participant, for example, having expressed some despair as to the possibility of exerting any influence upon the political system, felt encouraged by the possibility that 'You could start a protest now on a message board and I reckon we could probably get 150 hits for it by the end of the week' (Group 2). Several participants in the focus groups provided examples of how they had participated in demonstrations, not just in person, but virtually, and how such actions had then led to an increase in their political confidence. The Live8 rally in Edinburgh in July 2005 was regarded as an example of how the Internet could be used to promote effective collective action:

They did an appeal on the Internet to tell you where you go in and sign like a digital petition. So you go on the Oxfam website and sign this petition it was sent off to various leaders in the world. It got sent off to the G8 Conference – Bob Geldof delivered it in person. A printed booklet of everybody's names. So that showed – that made an effect ... It gave ... a social presence ... it created a visual demonstration ... I think there was 275,000 people signed the petition in the first 48 hours. You couldn't get 275,000 up to Gleneagles in Scotland, but at the end of the day it was a show of strength (Group 2).

This ability to contact those with similar political beliefs in an instant, nationally and internationally, was perceived to have made a difference to the political process. As the above participant noted, confidence came from 'strength in numbers more than anything else'. Indeed, if we now turn to our national survey, there is a clear case for viewing one of the main contributions of the Internet to feelings of political efficacy

as arising not from the access it affords to centres of power, but the connection it allows between like-minded citizens. For example, there is a dramatic contrast between responses to questions about influencing public opinion and those to questions about influencing government. Thus, while 45 per cent had some to a high hope that their opposition to that war, in combination with others who similarly protested, would have an effect on public opinion, only 11 per cent had any hope that they would influence *government*. This striking difference in respondents' expectations – their perceived chances of influencing government and public opinion – was also seen in their perceptions of the extent to which they actually affected government and public opinion. Asked if they thought their actions had influenced *public opinion*, 36 per cent believed they had 'little effect', while 12 per cent thought the effect had been 'large'. This 48 per cent compares with the 5 per cent who believed that their actions had any effect upon *government* policy.

Conclusion

This chapter has not focused on individuals, groups or organizations for whom the Internet and related media have provided a medium for political action that challenges the legitimacy and credibility of traditional institutionalized politics. Nor have we sought to question the role of the Internet in creating new networks of knowledge and experience for many users. Rather we have sought to show how this potential, and users' experience of it, sets up 'trouble points' for formal political institutions – especially when linked with broader beliefs about the disconnectedness of politicians.

The discrepancy between people's beliefs about the effectiveness of their protest actions upon government policy and upon public opinion is important in explaining the relationship between political efficacy and technologies of political connection. We have suggested that the connection to government officials afforded by the Internet does not produce increased feelings of efficacy, mainly because of deep-seated suspicions that politicians are unwilling to listen to public voices, no matter what the form of communication. Four out of five of those in our sample who opposed the war had little or no hope that their protest actions, or those of others, would influence the government, and 90 per cent concluded that such actions had no actual impact. On the other hand, we have shown how connecting to other citizens via the Internet can arouse strong political confidence, inspired by the symbolic and affective energy generated by collectively organized affinities. By moving beyond a narrow conception of political efficacy as a subjective account of relationships

between citizens and governments, and expanding the term to include confidence in being heard and acknowledged by one's fellow citizens, our findings indicate that online political expression and debate might be expected to have a positive effect upon such redefined political efficacy. Indeed, one might argue that the Internet contributes to a democratization of efficacy, insofar as it enables the demos to assume a political role without having to be dependent for its realization upon the willingness of authorities (such as governments, parties, politicians) to take it seriously.

As our data demonstrate, people feel that the Internet has at least the potential to strengthen their connectedness and therefore their interpersonal efficacy. At the same time this directly contrasts with their current experience of the Internet as a medium for political action and engagement with the formal institutions of government. This feeling of comparative disconnection decreases their political efficacy. It could be argued that it reinforces their awareness of their distance from political officialdom. Importantly it is not our argument that this outcome is an inherent implication of digital media use. Rather the current configuration of technologies and systems of formal representation engenders such contrasts and responses. We are not arguing that technologies, which can support new opportunities for political debate and participation among citizens, end up engendering detached and passive citizens. On the contrary, this is not a product of the medium, but of a contrast between experiences with the medium in different domains of political engagement.

Our findings therefore suggest that contemporary political democracy faces a formidable problem of imbalance. If citizens experience potentially high levels of efficacy as a result of ever-more opportune ways of communicating with one another, without being able to act upon these feelings within the official political realm, there is a danger that a skewed model of democracy might emerge. This could produce strong effects within horizontal peer-to-peer networks that cannot be translated into vertical links within the official policy process. The consequence of a democracy that flourishes around and beyond representative institutions, while operating lethargically and disconnectedly within them, is that public voice and official policy become politically decoupled.

As active spectators and protesters, seeking to shape public opinion, citizens experience the kind of confidence that is normatively desirable in a representative democracy, but if, at the same time, they lack much hope of being heard by authorities as voters, constituents and lobbyists, there is every likelihood that their political energies will bypass the institutional pathways of constitutional representation.

The consequence of such lopsided efficacy would be a hazardous chasm between two kinds of political representation: the informal self-representation of publics speaking of and to themselves and the institutional representation of publics by those speaking for, but not as or with, the citizens they claim to represent.

This political asymmetry is, however, by no means an inevitable outcome of the new communication technologies. The failure of representative institutions, ranging from parties to parliaments, to engage authentically with citizens on the interactive terms of the Internet reflects a cultural rather than a technical ethos. Importantly, this failure is made visible, as the technologies afford new niches within the broader political ecology where citizens' experiences of peer-to-peer interaction appear more efficacious than their interactions with the formal political system. As a result, while political communication practitioners have been quick to adopt e-technologies – often pouring vast resources into applications and projects that have not worked, even on their own terms – they have been slow to acknowledge the new ecology of representation in which they find themselves. Tensions between speaking for (as if the represented were remote subjects) and speaking with (on a basis of dialogical reciprocity), between official language and vernacular interaction, between hidden agendas and transparent information, and between capital-P politics and the mundane workings of everyday power are likely to dominate both the practice and study of political communication for the foreseeable future. Thinking about those tensions according to the traditional, linear and vertical conception of political efficacy is only ever going to reveal half the story.

Linkages between popular volition and public policy are rarely achieved either by accident or as technological effects. The politics of democratic connection entails a focus upon policies that: firstly, create trusted public space within which government decisions can be formulated, discussed and revised in an inclusive and collaborative fashion; secondly, expand the political agenda – and, indeed, definitions of the political – to reflect the range of experiences, interests, values and idiomatic articulations that citizens bring to the public sphere and, thirdly, weaken the policy stranglehold that party fixers and government officials have long sustained, and invite citizens into the deliberative loop. The lateral networks that are being nurtured through the Internet could support each of these objectives, but this will only happen if and when there is a policy commitment to accept the risks that democratic connection might pose to entrenched hierarchies and

habits of exclusion. The prudence and prospect of such an outcome is a matter for normative debate – one that will only be sidetracked by technologically-determinist conjectures.

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14

'Voting is easy, just press the red button': Communicating Politics in the Age of *Big Brother*

Valentina Cardo

Introduction

In 2002, Peter Bazalgette (the then chair of Endemol UK, the company that brought *Big Brother* to the United Kingdom) was invited by the British Conservative Party to join a newly created 'Commission for Democracy', aimed at reengaging young people with politics. The reason for choosing Bazalgette, Theresa May (the then Conservative Party Chairwoman) explained, was that 'more people vote in *Big Brother* than in many elections. Why? Well, perhaps it's because when you vote in *Big Brother* you think it will affect the outcome' (in Grice, 2002). Bazalgette reportedly echoed: 'young people are not idiots; it's just that they are not turned on by politics because they feel they are being sold a lie. ... There is an equation between voting for *Big Brother* and voting in an election. Both are popularity contests' (in Smurthwaite, 2005). Bazalgette was not only claiming that there are similarities between politics and *Big Brother*. He also seems to suggest that the former should be more like the latter, because *Big Brother* provides a better alternative to politics. Bazalgette claims that the programme succeeds where parliamentary politics fails. While the latter treats young people like 'idiots', *Big Brother* 'asks' them what they want; it gives them the right to make a decision about 'personalities'; it does not sell them 'a lie', as politics does. Young people are 'turned on' by *Big Brother* and this is why they engage with and participate in it.

This chapter reflects upon the suggestion that *Big Brother* is like politics. It uses some of the events that took place during *Celebrity Big Brother 2007* (CBB07) as a case study to illustrate how *Big Brother*, ostensibly a piece of popular culture that has nothing to do with politics, communicates ideas of what it means to participate meaningfully in the running of a virtual

community. As such, *Big Brother* should be seen as a forum in which vertical political communication takes place. Implicit in my analysis are two types of challenges. The first has to do with political science's hostility towards television entertainment, typically seen as an 'unnatural' site for 'politics' (Postman, 1986). The second challenge is borne out of the idea that politics is about governments and political parties, so this should be the focus of political communication. These challenges are of course related and rest on the assumption, typical of a liberal perspective, that active citizenship can be measured through such indicators as voting turnout, interest in and knowledge of political matters and perceived levels of political efficacy (Norris, 2000). According to this perspective, citizens participate politically when they attempt to exert some level of influence over political institutions (Parry, Moyser & Day, 1992) – hence the idea that politics is being de-centralized, that the citizen is either partially disappearing (Brants & Voltmer, this volume) or being transformed into a mere consumer (Lewis, Wahl-Jorgensen & Inthorn, 2004), that 'alternative public spheres' are being created (Dahlgren, 1996) and that populism is a direct consequence of these trends (Mazzoleni, Steward & Horsfield, 2003).

This chapter engages with some of these ideas and asks whether the citizen (not just the consumer) is actually still present in some forms of television entertainment. It questions whether, rather than seeking to create alternative public spheres, programmes like *Big Brother* effectively adopt and mimic some of the processes and practices of conventional politics. Finally, it problematizes the thought that popular television entertainment *should* be ignored by political communication scholars. The underlying argument is that an analysis of the content and format of *Big Brother* will be telling not just of the logic that brings programmes like this into existence; it will also reveal how traditional indicators of citizenship are articulated (Hall, 1986) in a piece of television entertainment.¹

Communicating participation: The case of *Celebrity Big Brother 2007*

The first UK series of the reality television programme *Big Brother* was aired on Channel 4 in 2000, but the show originated in the Netherlands in 1999. Since then it has featured between 11 and 23 contestants, confined in a purpose-built house for a period of up to 3 months. The housemates are filmed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and forbidden all contact with the outside world: newspapers, television and mobile phones are strictly prohibited. They are assigned weekly tasks by the

disembodied voice of 'Big Brother' (the producing and editing team). Contestants are encouraged to use the Diary Room, a soundproof space that provides direct access to Big Brother. Nominations of usually two housemates take place there and the person with the highest number of nominations is 'up for eviction'. Viewers vote for or against the housemate they wish to leave the house, during a live Friday night show.

The fifth UK series of *Celebrity Big Brother* (CBB07) was broadcast on Channel 4 in January 2007. It featured 15 celebrity contestants, who spent 26 days in the house. Between 15 and 19 January 2007 Jade Goody (a contestant who had become famous by featuring in *Big Brother 2002*), Jo O'Meara (an ex-member of pop band *S Club 7*) and Danielle Lloyd (a model) – 'the girls', as they were referred to in the house – made a number of comments about the Bollywood actress, Shilpa Shetty. These appeared to be both class-based and racially motivated. They articulated a 'vague [...] sense of Shilpa's "difference" from the vocal dominance of the white, working-class women in the house, but comments quickly took on both racial undertones and overtones' (Holmes, 2009, p. 2). Without wanting to downplay the seriousness of the incident, the clash developed around seemingly mundane concerns, mainly food-related (Redmond, 2009): 'the girls' remarked that 'all Indians are thin' because they eat undercooked and contaminated food, which makes them 'sick all the time'; they argued with Shilpa over the appropriate use of Oxo chicken stock-cubes and advised 'Shilpa Poppadom' to 'fuck off home'. Ofcom, the UK independent regulator for communications, received over 44,500 complaints (Ofcom, 2007), the highest number ever received. It seemed that viewers were reacting to what they had viewed as unacceptable behaviour.

The press shorthand for the events became the 'race row' and its emphasis rivalled that usually reserved for events of national importance. *Big Brother* was accused of promoting racism and the role of Channel 4 as a public service broadcaster was questioned. UK journalists and commentators throughout the spectrum reacted to the events:

[T]elevision viewers all over Britain – presumably from all ethnic backgrounds – have protested that purposefully mispronouncing the actress name or implying that Indians are unhygienic is unacceptable. (Lentin, 2007)

Boorish Britain is the reality. [...] Jade is not the exception, she is the norm. [...] *Big Brother* has just turned a mirror onto the country and the image that has come back is ugly.

(Cotton, 2007)

The behaviour of the housemates reflects widespread bigotry in British society. [...] This is a racist country; to the vast majority of couch potatoes out there, Shilpa is a 'Paki' bird.

(Greer, 2007)

Politicians united in their condemnation of the programme and feared a diplomatic incident. One journalist pointed out that

there has been something of a feeling of despair in Westminster that this programme has erupted onto the political, and now diplomatic, stage and might even threaten to damage Britain's reputation abroad.

(Assinder, 2007)

One newspaper reported that 'Keith Vaz, the Labour MP, has even tabled an Early Day Motion on the subject in the House of Commons'. The then Culture Secretary, Tessa Jowell, commented on the BBC 'I think it is disgusting. My personal view is that this has caused enormous offence not only abroad but to the Indian community here' (BBC News, 2007). Finally, Lord Puttnam, Deputy Chairman of Channel 4, told a newspaper: 'I am not proud of the *Big Brother* row – I am not even proud of *Big Brother*' (quoted in Pfanner, 2007).

As a consequence of viewers' complaints, Ofcom ruled that 'Channel 4 failed to appropriately handle the material so as to adequately protect members of the public from offensive material' (Ofcom, 2007). This ruling seemed to suggest that Channel 4 was in breach of its public service broadcasting obligations. It seemed that *Big Brother* was being used, by the public, the press and politicians to establish a causal relationship between what happened on the programme, the state of British society and the world of international politics.

To understand the nature of these comments, we need to briefly turn to the ways in which the *Big Brother* producers have succeeded in grounding the programme in the public service broadcasting ethos. In 2007, they suggested that the programme encouraged the active participation of viewers in a matter of moral relevance for the nation. Bazalgette stated:

[CBB07] generated more than 400 million hits on *Big Brother* websites, 2.5 million video downloads, a record 50,000 complaints to the television regulator, a private audience for the winner with the current Prime Minister, a plea to vote for the winner from the next

Prime Minister, a national debate on racism and a rolling story across the world.

(Bazalgette, 2007)

The thought seemed to be that, by informing the public and representing viewers, *CBB07* had facilitated the engagement of those who would otherwise never be interested in deliberating about issues of race. Because *CBB07* had informed them about these debates, viewers participated by deliberating about politically meaningful matters.

My suggestion is that during the *CBB07* 'race row' viewers were not only encouraged to participate by exercising their right to deliberate. They were also being asked to participate through public action, which they were encouraged to exercise by making moral judgements about the housemates' behaviour. Such judgements were advocated via three types of information: the factual information provided by the 'experts'; the information about personality that 24-hour coverage provided; and the information about beliefs and values that viewers obtained when housemates went to the Diary Room. The thought was that through all these different sources of information viewers were able to form an opinion and judge contestants. It was thanks to the fact that *CBB07* provided factual information about contestants' personalities, beliefs and values that 'you decide'. The fact that 'your vote counts' warranted that both evictees and the winner were those that 'you have chosen'. In other words, by facilitating the communication of contestants' views and values through different forms of information, *Big Brother* provoked judgements that opened up spaces for participation.²

Experts as political commentators

The first way in which participation is communicated in *Big Brother* is through the thought that, thanks to the factual/semi-scientific information that 'experts' provide,³ viewers are engaged in politically significant ways. 'Experts' are framed as trusted officials, whose role is both to perform as 'experience based experts' (Brants, 1998, p. 332) and to make sense of issues by sharing 'their wisdom and learning' with 'us' (McNair, 2003, p. 89). For instance, academic titles are used, which seems to suggest two things: first, that their expertise is grounded not only in their cultural capital, but also in their impartiality; and, second, that they have no interest in the political economy of the programme. They are only linked to *Big Brother* in the sense that they aid an understanding of it, but are not invested in boosting viewing figures or advertising

deals. As trusted officials, 'experts' are framed in *Big Brother* as supplying factual and unbiased information. Their explanation of the events is framed as a human digest, a summary that spells out what the images convey on the screen. What the 'experts' provide is not a judgement: their contribution is constructed as an explanation that will allow viewers to form an opinion about the housemates and then vote for or against them. The professional assessment that *Big Brother* experts provide is not just constructed as necessary to uncover the 'truth' behind housemates' behaviour. It also plays a key role in exposing contestants' 'authenticity' (a key aspect in evaluating their representativeness).

While 'traditional' *Big Brother* series included experts and commentators in the daily slots, *CBB07* relegated their appearance to the spin-off programmes.⁴ The *Channel 4 Review of Celebrity Big Brother January 2007* (a review of *Big Brother* undertaken at the same time as the Ofcom investigation, in order 'to understand what lessons could be learnt for the future') produced an analysis of viewer responses sent to Ofcom after the 'racist row'. It reported that

[viewers were worried because] Channel 4 appeared to be somehow condoning the behaviour of some of the Housemates [...]. While the sister shows [...] provided some context for the difficult issues raised by the series, Channel 4's contribution to the debate was not widely acknowledged.

(Channel 4, 2007)

This statement seems to suggest that experts and commentators, regularly invited to the spin-off shows, acted as commentators on the events that took place between Day 13 and Day 17. For instance, in an episode of *Celebrity Big Brother Little Brother* (Day 16) Derek Laud, a black gay member of the Conservative party (who, after appearing on *Big Brother 2005* had announced his intention to run for Parliament) was asked by the programme's presenter, Dermot O'Leary, to comment on the incident. Derek argued that the 'race row' became a 'global issue' because Prime Minister Gordon Brown was then in India. He went on to say that, even if 'it shocks people who live on Downing St [...], I do think that up and down the country' people are familiar with the type of abuse that Shilpa was subjected to. This interview suggested that Derek's authority in matters of race and politics was grounded in his ethnic origin as well as his experience in the political arena. His statements acquired even more value because he was once a *Big Brother* housemate. He says: 'here is where [...] we must congratulate *Big Brother*: because it does actually have educational

content. [...] We are now conducting a national debate [...]. Millions of people are engaged in this'. Derek's statement was reinforced by the emphatic nodding of his co-guest, who also added: 'Over twenty thousand people think that it is a race issue, so that in itself makes it a race issue'. What these 'experts' were suggesting was that, since *Big Brother* provides a 'mirror to society' and since viewers witnessed the *CBB07* events, they must unite and act against the 'abuse'. This example suggests that the 'experts' held the key to decode the facts that took place between Day 13 and Day 17. They related the information in a factual and unbiased manner: the incident was racist not because they said so, but because it happened and, as a consequence, 'millions of people' complained about it.

By providing a human digest of the unfolding events, *CBB07* 'experts' revealed the 'authenticity' and 'accountability' of the housemates. The *Big Brother* 'experts' justify the programme's rhetoric of 'reality'; that is, the thought that what takes place in the house is 'real' because it is about 'ordinary' people. *Big Brother* experts serve the specific purpose, in the rhetoric of the programme, to appear as the equivalent of political commentators. Their role is to observe and analyse events and report them to the audience in understandable ways. Theirs are not opinions; they report 'facts'. Experts are not there to judge contestants, but to enable viewers to evaluate the available options. They are there to guide viewers' judgements of the contestants. Their commentary is framed as fostering 'transparency'. It is to reveal what 'really' happens in the *Big Brother* community. The factual information that they provide is to facilitate the informed judgement that viewers will make when they vote for or against *Big Brother* contestants. In other words, experts serve the purpose of encouraging the process of vertical political communication between elites and citizens.

These examples suggest that the form of participation promoted by this type of information is political because it allows citizens/viewers to perform a rational activity (Parry et al., 1992) and give their consent and active approval to the political system. This political system, it is suggested, is legitimated by this form of participation, because free and informed individuals have chosen it by voting for their representatives. That is, the type of factual information provided by *Big Brother* experts encourages a direct type of participation.

24-hour coverage as personality politics

Big Brother viewers are not only encouraged to make rational choices between available options on the basis of factual information that

experts provide: they are also invited to participate by making moral judgements about housemates. This is the second way in which participation is communicated through *Big Brother*. The producers claim that *Big Brother* viewers become engaged with the programme because of the emotions that it provokes. In the programme, emotion is constructed as public action (Pantti & Van Zoonen, 2006). This type of participation is encouraged through the moral judgement of housemates' behaviour. Emotional engagement (Besley, 2006; Maras, 2006) and moral judgement in *Big Brother* are facilitated by the type of information provided through the 24-hour coverage of the programme.

The *Big Brother Rules* state that 'Housemates are filmed 24 hours a day and must wear personal microphones at all times' (Channel 4, 2003). This rule draws the attention to the communication between contestants, as key to understanding what they are 'really' like. It is suggested that, rather than being a censor, *Big Brother* has a responsibility towards the audience to guarantee that viewers have access to this type of information. Moreover, since they have to wear microphones 'at all times', housemates are being held responsible for their actions and are answerable to the public. The penalty for not taking this responsibility seriously is 'expulsion' from the house. Thanks to the constant recording of conversation, viewers are able to hold housemates to account for what they say. Finally, because of the transparency of communication that microphones allow for, viewers are able not just to judge contestants for their personal views: they can also make a moral judgement about a contestant's private self (as opposed to the public persona that they see during group interactions). This judgement is facilitated by the fact that, at the beginning of each daily slot, the voice-over announces that what the viewer is about to witness are the 'highlights from the most talked-about House' or the 'highlights from the past 24 hours'. Clearly this is an edited version that only lasts 60 minutes and in which the narrator's voice takes the viewer through the events that occurred on the previous day. But it details the emotional journey of the housemates, their private discussions, their arguments, the dramas and the emotions that the housemates experience every day. What viewers watch daily on television are indeed 'highlights'. But, the programme suggests, this is an accurate account of the events that has been captured by the '5 manned TV cameras, 13 fixed surveillance cameras, 50 km of cable, 40 microphones plus radio microphones on housemates, TV control room with 50 monitors' (Rohrer, 2002). In other words, this is 'the most talked-about house', because of the type of coverage that this technology is able to provide.

For instance, on Day 13 in *CBB07*, the microphones and cameras recorded a private conversation between Jo and Danielle. Jo said: 'You know what aggravates me about Shilpa? It's that she fingers your food off of your plate'. To which Danielle replied: 'Do they do that in India? Eat with their hands? Or is that in China? [...] I don't know where her fingers have been!' The clip briefly juxtaposed the image of a seemingly deserted bedroom, only to move, a few seconds later, to Shilpa sitting by herself. The images seemed to suggest that, by witnessing the events as they 'actually' took place, from all angles and points of view, viewers should form an in-depth opinion about housemates' 'real' personalities. The moral judgement that 'we' were being asked to make about Jo and Danielle was directly related to what they were saying, but the content of the conversation was given extra weight by the images. It seemed that Shilpa was being unfairly sidelined by other housemates.

Moreover, the secrecy surrounding Jo and Danielle's conversation (the fact that they had separated themselves from everybody) and their whispering (their voices needed to be amplified over the other sounds in order to make them audible) suggested some form of conspiracy. Viewers were being asked to evaluate the range of emotions that such a scene provoked, as well as being invited to judge the different value systems. It appeared that this type of information, conveyed through 24-hour coverage, allowed the audience to fully evaluate the housemates' 'real' selves. The type of judgement that viewers were encouraged to make was based on the emotions that different moral stances stirred in them. The programme seemed to suggest that emotional engagement was key to viewers' participation, not only to morally judge housemates, but also to stimulate public action – in which 'we' were all invited to partake, in order to safeguard the interests of the community.

In *Big Brother*, the information about housemates' personalities provided through 24-coverage is framed as shaping the way in which viewers vote. It is constructed as a means through which viewers are able to evaluate the housemates' public persona (Corner, 2000) in relation to their private self. By providing in-depth, personal knowledge of the contestants, *Big Brother* suggests that viewers are able to become emotionally engaged with the housemates' belief system and make a moral judgement about their ability to represent the audience. Through the technological devices made available, viewers are encouraged to get an insight into the personal lives of contestants. The programme suggests that the close-ups and intimate tone, private conversations, melodrama and anecdotes provide additional tools with which to judge contestants. Personality is also

a key element of a housemate's popularity (Street, 2004) – one that allows viewers to judge the political persona that *Big Brother* creates. The type of judgement that *Big Brother* encourages is constructed as political because it is shaped as a moral evaluation of housemates' system of beliefs. Morality, in other words, is essential in *Big Brother* for 'having your say'.

The idea conveyed through the programme is that emotionally engaging with personality makes participating easier both to perform and understand. Moral judgements about personality count as meaningful participation because, *Big Brother* suggests, voting is not just about making a rational choice between available options. Participation through voting is also meaningful when aesthetic, affective and moral judgements are made. These judgements are shaped in *Big Brother* by the level of scrutiny that 24-hour coverage allows for. It is through 24-hour coverage that contestants' 'representativeness' can be placed under careful 'public scrutiny'.

The Diary Room as political campaigning

In order to judge contestants, *Big Brother* viewers are given the opportunity to engage with their views and values. The third way in which information is conveyed to the audience is through the details that housemates provide about themselves and their view of others. This information is delivered to viewers from the Diary Room and is constructed as a direct form of address from the contestants to the audience.

The *Big Brother Rules* state that visits to the Diary Room are compulsory and that

the Diary Room is a place where housemates make their private nominations and where they can vent their frustrations or share their concerns and feelings, safe in the knowledge that other housemates will not overhear them. Big Brother will never share any information given in the Diary Room with other housemates.

(Channel 4, 2003)

There are two suggestions made in these statements. Firstly, the compulsory nature of Diary Room visits is mitigated by the use of terms like 'frustrations', 'concerns' and 'feelings'. Housemates have a duty to visit the Diary Room, but should not see this as a diktat, more as a responsibility. Secondly, the fact that other housemates cannot 'overhear' and that Big Brother 'will never share' this information with other

housemates implies that the conversations that take place in the Diary Room are for somebody else's benefit. The suggestion is that the audience will benefit from these visits, since the information will be shared with them. Housemates can not only feel free to directly communicate 'frustrations', 'concerns' and 'feelings' to the viewers without the risk of being 'overheard', they are also granted equal access to the public and visibility.

The Diary Room is also a space in which contestants can self-promote. In this sense, the Diary Room provides contestants with a way of revealing their political strategy, by showing viewers what they stand for. Such disclosure is constructed as a form of political campaigning that does not aim at influencing the viewers' vote (Verba & Nie, 1972, p. 46). On the contrary, this type of information allows viewers to engage with opposing views and make an informed judgement. For instance, on Day 17, Ian Watkins (an ex-member of the British pop-group *Steps*) went to the Diary Room. He described the protagonists of the 'race row' as follows: 'Danielle said some really nasty things to Shilpa and just expects Shilpa to forget them. [...] I just think that she is being influenced by Jade. [...] Jade is a lovely girl [...], but I really think that Jade is not playing fair to Shilpa [...] She really should not be saying [what she said to Shilpa]'. The fact that Ian's visit to the Diary Room was the only housemate's intervention in the 'race row' to be aired seems to suggest that his was a fair, informative and impartial view of the events.

Ian continued: 'there is a lot of name calling and petty things [...]. It is clearly school ground behaviour and I feel really bad for Shilpa. [...] It's almost like bullying. [...] Jade is very outspoken and she is a strong girl. [...] She is from a completely different world from Shilpa. [...] In Jade's eyes, she is doing nothing wrong whatsoever. But to onlookers, especially myself, I really think she should watch what she says and think a little before she speaks'. As Ian made his statement, the camera switched from 'the girls' laughing on one of the sofas, to Shilpa playing table tennis with Dirk Benedict (the American actor best known for his role as 'Face' in the *A-Team*) and back to 'the girls'. This editorial choice seemed to use visual evidence not only to strengthen Ian's statement emotionally (through the emphasis on the closeness and connection between 'the girls' vis-à-vis Shilpa's isolation), but also to suggest that Ian was relating facts, which viewers could use to morally judge contestants' value system as well as their behaviour.

Ian concluded: 'every time I try to say something to stay neutral they just bite my head off and start slagging Shilpa off. And I just don't want to be part of it anymore. So the best thing for me to do is just extract

myself from the situation [...]. I am just going to stay neutral'. The camera then followed a clearly upset Ian trying to hide from view.

Ian's strategy was revealed in this last statement. His speech in the Diary Room was framed as an appeal to the public. His choice to withdraw and not take sides was constructed as less important than his summary of the events. His attempt to avoid endorsing either of the parties involved was constructed as an invitation to morally judge them. In particular, it appealed for viewers' support for the party that was being sidelined, which, it was suggested, was the 'right' thing to do. And Ian's decision to step aside indicated that it was the audience who decided 'who goes', not the producers or the housemates.

Campaigning in the Diary Room is constructed as one of the different ways in which *Big Brother* provides information to its viewers to enable them to participate. It is suggested that viewers should use this information to participate in the politics of the *Big Brother* community by engaging with different views. The way in which the programme facilitates this engagement is by offering all housemates access to the public and the visibility that they need to promote their political strategy.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have suggested that *CBB07* can be used as a case study to investigate the vertical dimension of political communication. An analysis of the content of this series suggests that *CBB07* promoted a type of participation that counted as political. This is not because *CBB07* empowered its viewers, but because it drew on the same language and procedures as politics. The example of Ian Watkins suggests that *CBB07* encouraged viewers to confront value-laden choices and opinions, and invited them to use the information they received through 'experts', 24-hour coverage and the Diary Room in their voting decisions. First, *CBB07* stimulated deliberation (Van Zoonen, 2005), by providing a platform to discuss racism in the UK. Second, it invited viewers to judge morally the contestants' ability to represent the audience (Coleman, 2003). Finally, it appealed to the viewers' sense of political efficacy (Coleman, 2006), by adopting a rhetoric that encouraged participation as the audience's right to complain about racist behaviour. Participation in *Big Brother* is articulated through the thought that viewers can *vote* for or against a contestant. It is structured as an *action* (Parry et al., 1992), by which viewers/citizens can influence the outcome. Such action is constructed as deriving from the political *judgement* that viewers make

about the contestants' system of beliefs and values, in relation to how 'real', 'genuine' and 'representative' they are (Coleman, 2003). This judgement is framed as both rational and emotional (Street, 2001). Participation in *Big Brother* is facilitated by the information that viewers receive. It is the thought that viewers/voters need factual information conveyed by trusted officials, in order to be able to make an informed judgement. Moreover, in-depth, personal knowledge of the candidates/contestants allows viewers/voters to make a judgement (hence vote) for or against them. Finally, contestants/candidates need a site to advertise themselves and their political strategy publicly. Through these different types of information, the public is encouraged to judge contestants according to their personalities, values and beliefs and willingness to contribute to the wellbeing of the community. Participation is framed in *Big Brother* as a periodic consultation immediately followed by an election, in which viewers are encouraged to express their opinion about who, amongst housemates, is a good citizen and makes a trustworthy representative.

A word of caution: to say, as I have done in this chapter, that *Big Brother* is a vehicle for communicating ideas of political participation does not mean to say that 'participation' in *Big Brother* is analogous to its political equivalent. In the introduction of this chapter I asked whether voting in *Big Brother* is 'like' voting in politics. The answer is very clearly negative. However, the content, logic and format of the programme articulate a different thought. They suggest that the citizen has not disappeared, that 'ordinary' people *should* represent us and that participating means engaging with specific issues that are relevant to 'us' and allow 'us' to exercise our decision-making power. Participation in *Big Brother* is framed as a public act that viewers are invited to perform and that translates to the larger world as an exercise in everyday decision-making. In this sense, *CBB07* constructs participation as political because it encourages viewers/citizens to have a say in what happens in their community.

By intervening late in the dispute, the producers of *Big Brother* suggested that viewers had the right to hold *Big Brother* (as the decision-maker) and Channel 4 (as the provider of information about power holders) to account. More to the point, they actually suggested that *Big Brother* and Channel 4 were effectively being accountable. Although the police found no evidence of racism, Ofcom asked Channel 4 to apologise to the public. Presenter Davina McCall opened one of the daily slots saying 'this series of *Celebrity Big Brother* has divided the nation like never before and we genuinely regret any offence this has caused some'.

The case of *CBB07* provides an example of how citizenship is articulated through television entertainment and communicated to a young and allegedly disengaged audience, without ever explicitly mentioning the word 'politics' (Street, 2001). On the one hand, it reflects the classic populist argument that programmes like *Big Brother* represent and translate popular views into action (Cardo & Street, 2007). The large number of complaints sent to the regulator 'count' as an act of political participation because *Big Brother* viewers are made to feel that it is their right to complain through the particular framing of the events.

But this rhetoric suggested something more. By inviting viewers to feel part of the *Big Brother* community as citizens and by asking them to make a value judgement about its contestants/representatives, programme producers seem to encourage viewers to engage with the politics of *Big Brother*. It is suggested that viewers can act as citizens not just by watching the news, but also by participating in the running of the *Big Brother* community. This emphasis on civic culture suggests that *Big Brother* articulates a communitarian (Etzioni, 1993) idea of citizenship: one that promotes community, rather than individual values, that favours equality over hierarchy, and that emphasizes the importance of taking responsibility. It also means that television entertainment should not be dismissed as merely promoting values that are both detrimental to social capital and that take time away from the community (Putnam, 2000). Instead, *Big Brother* should be thought about as partly constructing ideas of what citizenship is and what it entails. Undoubtedly the type of citizenship that *Big Brother* makes available to the viewer represents a populist alternative to political citizenship. Nevertheless, programmes like *Big Brother* play a role in communicating politics by telling viewers that 'voting is easy'. In this sense, scholars of political communication need to take television entertainment seriously as a means through which the politics of everyday life is communicated to citizens.

Notes

1. A cautionary note here: adopting such methodology of course has consequences for the type of questions that this chapter is able to address. To claim that *Big Brother* constructs ideas of citizenship in this chapter is neither the same as attributing ideological intentionality to producers, nor does it imply that audiences will decode the text according to the discursive themes that I have devised in the chapter.
2. Although this chapter takes the *CBB07* 'race row' as a case study, many of the claims that I make here can be generalized to *Big Brother* as a whole. For a fuller discussion on this, see Cardo (2009).

3. The *Big Brother* experts are both 'ordinary' people and specialists, qualified to elaborate on issues relating to events taking place in the house as well as behavioural rules. So expertise is used as a form of credible and authoritative (however loosely defined) information that viewers can use to vote.
4. The spin-off programmes were: *Celebrity Big Brother's Little Brother*, *Celebrity Big Brother's Big Mouth*, *Celebrity Big Brother's Big Brain* and *Diary Room Uncut*. *Celebrity Big Brother's Little Brother*, hosted by Dermot O'Leary and the celebrity equivalent of *Big Brother's Little Brother* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0288918/>, accessed 12 January 2007) was a digest of house news and interviews with evicted housemates and their friends and family. In *Celebrity Big Brother's Big Mouth*, the celebrity equivalent of *Big Brother's Big Mouth* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0413541/>, accessed 25 January 2007), celebrities and members of the public discussed the show. In *Celebrity Big Brother's Big Brain*, the celebrity equivalent of *Big Brother's Big Brain* (<http://www.tv.com/big-brothers-big-brain/show/76152/summary.html>, accessed 12 January 2007), which was broadcast only in 2006–7 and then replaced by *Big Brother: On the Couch*, psychologists joined O'Leary to discuss the effect the show was having on the housemates and offer a professional interpretation of their behaviour and relationships.

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15

What's Reality Television Got to Do with it? Talking Politics in the Net-Based Public Sphere

Todd Graham

Introduction

There has been much debate concerning the Internet's ability to enhance the public sphere. While traditional broadcasting and print media disseminate top-down information, the Internet is supposedly about bottom-up public communication. It holds the potential to turn viewers and readers into active citizens who engage, for example, in debates in online forums, and in storytelling and reporting via blogging and twittering. Its ability to enhance the public sphere lies in these many-to-many modes of communication and in the networks of distribution offered by an increasing number of user-friendly social media, thus reducing the threshold for audiences to become active citizens.

Indeed, we have seen an increase in the popularity of social media such as discussion forums, weblogs and wikis, and in social media applications and services such as MySpace, YouTube and Facebook, along with the proliferation of open publishing initiatives and social news websites. This vibrant upsurge of participatory values and practices has led some commentators to suggest that we are witnessing the emergence of a new digital media culture (Deuze, 2006; Jenkins, 2006). Audiences are no longer passive receivers but rather are actively engaged in (re)creating, questioning and/or personalizing news media, thus challenging traditional relationships between the media and political elites on the one hand and everyday people in their role as citizens and audiences on the other. Consequently, there has been an increase in the number of research projects that utilize public sphere ideals as a means of evaluating online spaces (see Dahlberg, 2001; Jensen, 2003; Strandberg, 2008).

Researchers have studied these spaces in a variety of ways. However, most have focused solely on *political* communicative spaces attached to

institutional politics and/or 'hard' news, thereby neglecting a range of other genres. Such exclusivity is problematic because politics today has become more pervasive. Due to complex social, political and economic changes, brought on largely by globalization, new relationships and uncertainties between citizens and traditional structures have created a new domain of politics – what some have called life politics or lifestyle politics (Giddens, 1991; Bennett, 1998). Today, political communication is going through a period of decentralization whereby citizens increasingly challenge the legitimacy of institutionalized politics and traditional media institutions, exhibited for example in declining voter turnout and increased public cynicism and distrust. Citizens are turning away from 'high' politics and are increasingly organizing social and political meaning around their lifestyle values and the personal narratives that express them.

The aim of this chapter is to explore this shift in politics. The best way to do that is to move beyond the communicative spaces tied to traditional politics. Thus, in addition to traditional political spaces, I investigate political talk in discussion forums dedicated to reality television. Such spaces are abundant online, hosting a multitude of participants and discussions, and initial research suggests that they trigger political talk (Graham, 2009). Moreover, the reality television format is about publicizing the private, making its communicative spaces in some ways ideal for investigating such a shift.

The focus is on political talk. By *political* talk, I am referring to a public-spirited way of talking, whereby participants make connections from individual experiences, issues and so on to society. By *political talk*, I am referring to everyday political conversation carried out freely between participants, which is often spontaneous and lacks any purpose outside the purpose of talk for talk's sake, representing the practical communicative form of communicative action (Habermas, 1984, p. 327). It is through this type of political talk that citizens achieve mutual understanding about the self and each other, representing the fundamental ingredient of the public sphere.

The aim is to see whether these forums, which have been traditionally disregarded as 'chat', provide a communicative space, content and style for politics that extends the public sphere while moving beyond a conventional notion of politics. The underlying question is whether these forums fulfil the requirements of rationality and 'decent' deliberation. However, I move beyond a formal notion of deliberation by examining the use of expressive speech acts. The driving question here is what role such 'expressives' play within online political talk and in relation to the conditions of deliberation. Moreover, comparing these spaces with a space dedicated to high politics

allows us to see whether, as critics would expect, deliberative talk is taking place in the one and emotional and irrational talk in the other.

The normative conditions

Assessing the democratic value of political talk requires normative criteria of the public sphere. Researchers into the net-based public sphere have been heavily influenced by the work of Habermas. Although some have constructed different aspects of his theory of communicative rationality and the public sphere, a thorough specification is required. Thus, I offer here a comprehensive set of public sphere criteria: the normative conditions of the process of deliberation.

Habermas envisions a strong democracy via a public sphere of informal citizen deliberation oriented towards achieving mutual understanding, which critically guides the political system. The public sphere, and the web of everyday political conversations that constitutes it, becomes the key venue for deliberation. Through his pragmatic analysis of everyday conversation, he argues that when participants take up communicative rationality here they must refer to several idealizing presuppositions. Drawing from Habermas's publications (1984, 1987, 1996), nine conditions are distinguished: rational-critical debate, coherence, continuity, reciprocity, reflexivity, empathy, discursive equality and discursive freedom.¹

Together these provide the necessary conditions for achieving understanding during the course of political talk and create a communicative environment based in and on fairness by placing both structural and dispositional requirements on the communicative form, process and participant. In other words, when the conditions are combined they form the ideal speech situation. Ideally, then, all nine conditions are equally important. However, given the diversity of online forum forms, types, genres and contexts, some of the conditions may appear more relevant than others. That said, for our purpose I treat all nine conditions equally.

Rational-critical debate requires that participants provide reasoned claims, which are critically reflected upon. Such an exchange requires a sufficient level of *coherence* and *continuity*; participants should stay on the topic of discussion until understanding or some form of agreement is achieved as opposed to withdrawing. Such a process demands three dispositional requirements; three levels of achieving mutual understanding. *Reciprocity* represents the first level. It requires that participants listen and respond to each other's questions and arguments. However, reciprocity on its own does not satisfy the process: *reflexivity* is required.

Reflexivity is the internal process of reflecting another participant's position against one's own. *Empathy* represents the final level of understanding. The process of deliberation requires an empathic perspective in which we seek not only to understand intellectually the position of the other, but also to conceptualize empathically, both cognitively and *affectively*,² how other participants would be affected by the issues under discussion.

Discursive equality consists of a set of procedures aimed at ensuring equality among participants. First, it requires that the rules that coordinate and maintain the process cannot privilege one individual or group of individuals over another. Second, it requires that participants respect each other as having equal standing. Third, it requires an equal distribution of voice. In the deliberative process, one individual or group of individuals should not dominate the conversation. Finally, the process must maintain an adequate level of respect, thereby prohibiting abusive language.

Discursive freedom requires that participants are able freely to share information, opinions and arguments with only one force permitted: the force of a better argument. Every participant has the right to express an opinion or criticize another, to raise issues of common concern or challenge the appropriateness of issues under discussion, and to challenge the rules and guidelines that govern the process.

Finally, *sincerity* as a condition implies that all strive to make all information relevant to the discussion known to other participants, which includes their intentions, motives, desires, needs and interests. Moreover, it requires that all information provided during the process be truthful.

Expressives and deliberation

If our focus is on everyday political talk, we need to reconsider what we mean by deliberation. Privileging reason by means of argumentation as the only relevant communicative form ignores the realities of everyday political conversation. In particular, it ignores its expressive nature.

I use the term 'expressives' to refer to humour, emotional comments and acknowledgements. Humour represents complex emotional speech acts that excite and amuse, for instance jokes and wisecracks. Emotional comments are speech acts that express one's feelings or attitude, while acknowledgements represent speech acts that acknowledge the presence, departure or conversational action of another person, such as greeting and complementing.

Expressives are inherent to deliberation. When people talk politics, they draw not only from their cognitive and rational capacities, but

also on their emotions. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine people becoming interested or actively engaging in political talk if their emotions were not there to provoke them to do so. Expressives are also an important ingredient of deliberation. They can play a crucial role in facilitating constructive political talk, which might not otherwise occur. For example, humour and acknowledgements can be very effective in creating a communicative atmosphere conducive to achieving mutual understanding.

Politics has always been emotional and this discussion is not a new one. However, political communication scholars still have tended to neglect the role of expressives in political communication, particularly within deliberation. Neglecting expressives is not an option if our aim is to provide a better understanding of how people talk politics in a time of decentralization – or to assess the democratic value of such talk. Thus, the use of expressives is investigated with particular attention focused on their role in relation to the normative conditions.

Methods

One forum dedicated to traditional politics (*The Guardian*) and two to reality television (*Celebrity Big Brother* and *Wife Swap*) were selected for the analysis. *The Guardian* represents a 'quality' British newspaper, and research has suggested that its forums host deliberative political talk (Graham & Witschge, 2003). The *Celebrity Big Brother* forum is hosted by *bbfans.com*, a website dedicated to the fans of *Big Brother UK*. What makes *Celebrity Big Brother* particularly interesting is that, in 2006, one of the housemates was the British Member of Parliament George Galloway. Thus, it offered a unique communicative space: a nonpolitical forum influenced by a political personality. Finally, the *Wife Swap* forum, hosted by Channel 4's online fan community, represents the nonpolitical forum.

The data consisted of the individual postings and the threads in which they were situated. For *The Guardian*, the initial sample contained 37 threads consisting of 1271 postings,³ while for *Big Brother* it was 345 threads consisting of 6803 postings⁴ and for *Wife Swap* 79 threads consisting of 892 postings.⁵ These samples were first coded for *political* talk. The goal here was to allow also for a more individualized, lifestyle-based approach to politics. Thus, two criteria for identifying when a discussion turns political within a text were utilized. All those threads that contained a posting where (i) a participant made a connection from a particular experience, interest, issue or topic in general to society and

that (ii) stimulated reflection and a response by at least one other participant, were considered political threads.⁶

Once the political threads were identified, they were then subjected to three progressive phases of coding. The coding scheme was developed as a means of systematically describing and assessing how participants talked politics. Normatively speaking, it provided the tools for a thorough evaluation of the quality of debate by operationalizing the nine conditions into empirical indicators. The analysis moved beyond a formal notion of deliberation and coded for the use of humour, emotions and acknowledgements. Additional in-depth textual analyses were conducted on the use of expressives. A more detailed account of the research design is available in Graham (2009).

Talking politics online

The Guardian

Thirty threads containing 1215 postings, representing 96 per cent of the initial sample, were coded as political threads. Almost all of these discussions were on conventional political topics, with the bulk centred on Tony Blair and Labour policies. In other words, lifestyle-based political topics were rarely discussed, with only one line of discussion on the issue of bullying and moral codes of conduct occurring.

Regarding the quality of debate, the discussions were often deliberative. The levels of rationality, critical reflection, coherence, reciprocity, reflexivity, substantial equality and discursive freedom were moderately high to high.⁷ However, *The Guardian* did not fair well for several conditions. First, although the level of extended debate (continuity) was high, representing nearly three-quarters of all claims (arguments and assertions), it rarely led to an act of convergence. Second, although the level of reflexivity was moderately high, participants rarely made the next step and empathized with others. Third, although acts of flaming and degrading were rare, the rate and distribution of postings and popularity indicated that the discussions were often a product of a small group of popular participants who frequently spoke to one another. Finally, although the act of questioning another participant's sincerity was infrequent, when it did occur it often was personal, leading to a breakdown in political talk.

Expressives appeared in more than one-third of the postings. Humour was the most common expressive used, accounting for nearly half. It had both favourable and unfavourable consequences. Regarding the former, it seemed to foster a friendly and playful communicative environment

and was used relatively frequently in support of rational-critical debate. In particular, humour was used deliberately as a means of expressing and supporting arguments in the form of rational humour, which represented slightly more than one-third of humorous comments.

Humour did not, however, always contribute constructively to political talk. In particular, humour invited more humour in the form of 'humour fests'. When a participant posted a joke, for example, it usually ignited a string of jokes. In these cases, humour acted more as a distraction by leading discussions off the topic, which represented more than one-third of humorous comments. Furthermore, when flaming and degrading did occur, humour played a substantial role in fostering it.

Regarding emotional comments, which account for slightly less than one-third of expressives, participants were not too happy, particularly with the Labour government. When they expressed emotions, anger tended to be the emotion of choice, representing more than three-quarters of emotional comments. Although 65 per cent of emotional comments were expressed via arguments, given the intense anger expressed overall there was a tendency for these types of arguments to be abrasive and crude. Moreover, anger tended to invite more anger in the form of 'rant sessions', representing one-third of emotional comments. Here participants would vent together their anger with little or no reciprocal-critical exchange. Anger too on occasion fostered aggressive communicative practices. In short, emotional comments tended to impede political talk.

Finally, acknowledgements represented slightly more than one-quarter of expressives, with complimenting, greeting, thanking and apologizing being used most frequently. Acknowledgements, compliments in particular, presented political talk with a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they tended to create and foster a cordial communicative environment between those on the same side of an argument while, on the other hand, they tended to foster polarization – that is, participants rarely complimented across argumentative lines. Consequently, they did more to impede political talk.

Big Brother

Thirty-eight threads containing 1479 postings, 22 per cent of the initial sample, were coded as political threads. The topics discussed touched upon a variety of contemporary political issues, which dealt with everything from parliamentary politics to health and the body. Although a majority of the discussions were on conventional political topics, 42 per cent of the issues frequently touched upon a more lifestyle-based

form such as bullying, sexuality and animal rights. One noticeable trend here was the emergence of narratives and storytelling. Though these occasionally appeared in *The Guardian* it was here that they became more prominent.

Big Brother fared relatively well for a number of the conditions. The levels of coherence, reciprocity, discursive freedom, substantial equality and sincerity were moderately high to high, while the levels of rationality, critical reflection and extended debate were moderate. However, the *Big Brother* forum did not fair well for several conditions. First, as with *The Guardian*, participants rarely achieved an act of convergence. Second, providing reflexive arguments or communicating empathetic considerations was infrequent. Finally, the rate and distribution of postings and popularity again indicated that the discussions tended to be a product of a small group of popular participants who frequently spoke to each other.

Although *Big Brother* was not exceptionally deliberative, it did seem to foster a civil, friendly and welcoming communicative environment, thanks partly to the use of expressives. Expressives represented 41 per cent of the postings, with humour accounting for nearly half of this. Humour was rarely used aggressively towards other participants but, rather, it frequently acted as a form of social bonding. Participants would engage in lively, playful and flirtatious forms of banter, which would later act as common memories that they would allude back to. Slightly more than half of humorous comments were involved in this type of exchange. However, banter tended to lead discussions off the topic with more than half involved in humour fests. Finally, the use of rational humour was rare.

Emotional comments accounted for just under one-third of expressives. Although anger was still the emotion of choice, representing 66 per cent, it was rarely directed towards another participant. However, anger often again appeared in rant sessions. These types of exchanges were often raw and vulgar, accounting for 43 per cent of emotional comments. Emotions were also often expressed via arguments. However, given the level of anger expressed overall, there was a tendency for these types of arguments to be abrasive, thus contributing little constructively.

Finally, acknowledgements account for one-quarter of expressives. The most frequently used were complimenting, apologizing, greeting and thanking. They seemed to foster a more cordial communicative environment across argumentative lines whereby complimenting a competing argument was not unheard of. Moreover, when apologizing, participants had a tendency to apologize in advance when posting a possible offence: pre-emptive apologies were the norm.

Wife Swap

Political talk was no stranger to the *Wife Swap* forum. Nine threads containing 288 postings, representing 32 per cent of the initial sample, were coded as political threads. However, the diversity of topics discussed was limited: a majority of the discussions focused on the issues of parenting and family. Thus, political talk here embodied a more lifestyle-based, personal form of politics. Even when conventional political topics were discussed, they were often driven by the life experiences of participants. The use of narratives became common practice as these topics touched upon a more personal side.

The topics and style of political talk did nothing in way of hampering the deliberativeness of the discussions. In fact, *Wife Swap* was a forum where the exchange of claims was frequently practiced, representing nearly three-quarters of the postings, and the quality of those exchanges was usually high. The levels of rationality, coherence, reciprocity, the use of supporting evidence, discursive equality, discursive freedom and perceived sincerity were all moderately high to high, while the levels of critical reflection, extended debate and reflexivity were moderate. There were three notable findings, which were in contrast to those from the other two forums. First, the level of convergence was moderately high; almost all lines of discussion ended in some form of agreement. Second, participants engaged in communicative empathy. Finally, the results indicated that the rate and distribution of voice was egalitarian.

Expressives were a common feature of political talk, appearing in more than half of the postings. Emotional comments represented 62 per cent of expressives, with anger accounting for more than half of this. However, *Wife Swap* participants fairly often expressed other types of emotions, which included love, joy, sadness and fear. Emotional comments again tended to fuel rant sessions with slightly more than half engaged in a rant. Although rants were not as raw and intense as above, they tended to lack reciprocal-critical exchange. Emotions were again frequently expressed via arguments, representing nearly three-quarters of emotional comments. However, unlike the other forums, they tended to be constructive to the political debates in question. For example, when participants provided experiences as supporting evidence, they would often lace their stories with emotions, which seemed to provide authenticity to their claims.

Humour accounted for just under one-quarter of expressives. However, in contrast to the other two forums, humour played less of a role. It was mostly used to entertain and rarely contributed constructively to the topics of discussion. Humour did invite more humour; however, it had

little influence on coherence. Moreover, humour was rarely involved in degrading exchanges.

Finally, acknowledgements accounted for only 15 per cent of expressives. There were four types identified: thanking, complimenting, apologizing and congratulating. When they were used, acknowledgements seemed to enhance political talk. In particular, complimenting and thanking tended to foster a supportive and encouraging communicative environment, particularly across argumentative lines.

Discussion

Political talk has no boundaries. That said, as we might have expected, the topics of debate within *The Guardian* forum primarily focused on traditional politics. While in the reality television forums, a more lifestyle-based form of politics also emerged. Furthermore, it was not just in *The Guardian*, the 'quality' political forum, that we saw deliberative discussions but, rather, in all three forums, the quality was often moderate to high. Indeed, it was in the *Wife Swap* forum, a place that one might not traditionally expect to host not so serious talk, that the conditions of deliberation were most frequently met. We also saw that expressives were a common feature of political talk, which both facilitated and impeded it at times.

Regarding the normative analysis, the overall assessment is presented in Table 15.1. The table serves two functions. It indicates whether the forums satisfied the various conditions, and it provides comparative quality scores, which are meant to determine how the forums performed in relation to one another. All three forums fared relatively well, with *Wife Swap* appearing the strongest by satisfying all the conditions and *Big Brother* the weakest by failing to satisfy four of the (sub) conditions. Specifically, the level of rational-critical debate, coherence, reciprocity, discursive freedom and sincerity within all three was often high. However, there were several conditions where the performance differed between the forums.

First, continuity was assessed via the level of extended debate and convergence. Regarding the former, all three maintained an adequate level. These findings suggest that during the course of online debate participants developed a sense of commitment. Regarding the latter, acts of convergence were rare in the *Guardian* and *Big Brother* forums. However, in the *Wife Swap* forum, nearly all lines of discussion ended in some form of agreement, thus satisfying the condition. One explanation may have had something to do with the nature of the *Wife Swap*

Table 15.1 The normative analysis

Conditions	Forum					
	The Guardian		Big Brother		Wife Swap	
	Quality score	Fulfilment	Quality score	Fulfilment	Quality score	Fulfilment
<i>Rational–critical debate</i>	1.7		1		1.7	
Exchange of claims		√		√		+
Rationality		+		√		+
Critical reflection		+		√		√
<i>Coherence</i>	2		2		2	
Coherent discussions		+		+		+
<i>Continuity</i>	1		0.5		1.5	
Extended debate		+		√		√
Convergence		–		–		+
<i>Reciprocity</i>	2		2		2	
Web of reciprocity		+		+		+
<i>Reflexivity</i>	2		0		1	
Reflexive arguments		+		–		√
<i>Empathy</i>	0		0		1	
Communicative empathy		–		–		√
<i>Discursive equality</i>	1		1		1.7	
Distribution of voice		–		–		+
Neglected arguments		√		√		√
Degrading		+		+		+
<i>Discursive freedom</i>	1.5		2		1.5	
Diversity of opinions and topics		√		+		√
Acts of curbing		+		+		+
<i>Sincerity</i>	1		2		2	
Questionable		√		+		+
Sincerity						
Quality score total	12.2		10.5		14.4	

forum. *Wife Swap* tended to display affirming, supportive, empathetic and personal communicative practices. Such an environment seemed to have placed more emphasis on understanding, making acts of convergence easier to obtain.

Regarding reflexivity, the first indicator was the level of evidence use. The findings revealed that all three forums maintained a substantial level of evidence use. However, there were some distinctions. First, the level of evidence in *Wife Swap* was significantly higher than in the other two, which maintained a similar level. Second, the composition of evidence also varied. Whereas in both *Big Brother* and *The Guardian* experiences were the least common type of evidence, in *Wife Swap* they accounted for more than one-quarter. One explanation here is the topics discussed. In *Wife Swap*, a majority of the issues were connected with parenting and the family. Many of the participants spoke as a parent themselves, offering their life stories as testimony in support of their arguments; examples and experiences accounted for more than three-quarters of supporting evidence. This could also explain why the level of evidence was significantly higher in *Wife Swap* because experiences and examples on the issues were more readily available to these participants, given their first-hand knowledge as parents. In contrast, the issues discussed in the *Guardian* and to a lesser degree the *Big Brother* forum were not as personal and were more oriented around conventional political topics.

The second indicator was the level of reflexive arguments. The findings from both *The Guardian* and *Wife Swap* revealed substantial levels. However, *Big Brother* did not satisfy the condition. One explanation might have been related to the level of extended debate. Nearly all reflexive exchanges occurred during the course of extended debate, suggesting the importance of continuity in fostering reflexivity. It seems that the longer participants engaged in critical debate the more likely they were to take up a reflexive mindset. Although the level of extended debate in *Big Brother* was adequate, it was lower than in the other two forums, which might have had something to do with the level of reflexivity.

Regarding empathy, the findings from both *The Guardian* and *Big Brother* indicate that acts of communicative empathy were rare. However, in *Wife Swap*, these acts were more common, thus satisfying the condition. Again, this seems to have had something to do with the communicative atmosphere along with the topics discussed. The issues dealt mostly with parenting and family, touching upon a personal form of politics. Moreover, the communicative practices tended to be supportive, affirming and encouraging. As was the case for convergence, it seems likely that

this type of environment was more conducive to achieving deeper levels of agreement and understanding.

Finally, discursive equality requires an equal distribution of voice and substantial equality between participants. Regarding the latter, both active and passive acts of inequality for all three forums were infrequent. Regarding the former, the findings from both *Big Brother* and *The Guardian* fell well short. However, voice and popularity within *Wife Swap* was evenly distributed, thus satisfying the condition. One explanation could again be the issues discussed. Having a family and being parents themselves might have created a space where participants were on an equal footing: they all had something to contribute. This combined with the supportive and encouraging nature of the forum might have persuaded them to voice that something.

Overall, the *Guardian* forum seemed to foster a competitive communicative environment, which revolved around providing the best arguments and reviewing competing ones. Although the levels were low, when *Guardian* participants did degrade, curb and/or question another participant's sincerity, they tended to be personal and aggressive, adding to the competitive atmosphere. Based on these findings, *The Guardian* seemed to represent a communicative environment centred on winning. Ironically, the discussions rarely ended in an act of convergence or achieved deeper levels of understanding. *Wife Swap* on the other hand, satisfied all the conditions. The personal nature of the topics discussed, alongside supportive and encouraging communicative practices, which these topics seemed to have instilled, tended to foster discussions oriented towards achieving understanding and agreement. Finally, *Big Brother* tended to resemble *The Guardian*, although scoring lower for most of the conditions. However, it hosted the most diverse discussions regarding both opinions and topics discussed. Moreover, unlike *Guardian* participants, participants in the *Big Brother* forum rarely engaged in aggressive communicative practices.

In all three forums, expressives were commonplace. As Table 15.2 suggests, except for *Wife Swap*, they played a mixed role in relation to the normative conditions. Humour was the most common expressive used in all but the *Wife Swap* forum. In *The Guardian*, it acted as a social lubricant, while in *Big Brother* it was also used as a form of social bonding. Moreover, in *The Guardian*, and to a lesser degree in *Big Brother*, humour was used to enhance rational-critical debate. However, in *The Guardian*, humour was used occasionally to express hostility towards fellow participants, igniting degrading exchanges. Although humour was friendlier in *Big Brother*, humour fests were more prevalent, which often lead to incoherent political talk.

Table 15.2 The use of expressives in relation to political talk

Expressive	Forum		
	The Guardian	Big Brother	Wife Swap
Humour	Mixed	Mixed	Neither*
Emotional comments	Impeded	Impeded	Facilitated
Acknowledgements	Impeded	Facilitated	Facilitated
Overall	Impeded	Mixed	Facilitated

*Humour was a non-factor.

Regarding emotional comments, one possible explanation for the different role that emotions played between the two sides may have had something to do with the topics discussed and the context within which they were set. In both *The Guardian* and *Big Brother*, nearly half of the topics discussed dealt with the Labour government and/or Galloway's politics. This, combined with the political climate at the time, which saw increasing public dissatisfaction with Labour, offers one explanation as to why anger was so prevalent. These factors combined with the above findings, which suggest that the *Guardian* forum was a competitive communicative space, may explain why anger was directed towards fellow participants more often in a more aggressive manner. In *Wife Swap*, on the other hand, the topics discussed were more personal. Participants spoke for example about parenting as a parent while frequently providing life stories, which were typically laced with emotions in support of their arguments in a constructive way. Participants also communicated empathic considerations to others thereby sharing these emotions. This combined with the above findings, which suggest that these sorts of topics fostered a more supportive and encouraging communicative atmosphere, offer another explanation as to why emotions tended to facilitate political talk.

Regarding acknowledgements, whereas in the *Guardian* forum they fostered polarization between different sides of an argument, in the other two forums they encouraged a civil, cordial and encouraging communicative atmosphere. One explanation here may have something to do with the communicative environment. Again, the findings suggest that *The Guardian* was a forum centred on winning. This competitive nature may explain why participants avoided complimenting across argumentative lines. While in the other two forums, this seemed to be less of an issue.

Overall, it appears that forums in which participants come to talk about conventional politics, which tend to foster a competitive communicative environment, may foster the use of expressives in a more

impeding fashion. In contrast, in non-politically oriented forums, where, in the course of talking about a favourite television show, the political emerges, the discussion tends to be more personal and lifestyle-oriented, fostering a more supportive and encouraging communicative atmosphere. Participants in the latter type of forum seem to use expressives in a more facilitating manner in relation to conditions of deliberation.

Conclusion

The rise of social media and the new digital media culture that has emerged in its wake holds much promise for democracy. Citizens and audiences today are actively engaging in bottom-up communication through an increasing number of social media that are creating alternative communicative spheres, and thus challenging the traditional top-down model of political communication. In response, both traditional media institutions and the political elite have begun tapping into this bottom-up culture by increasingly adopting participatory approaches. For example, today among mainstream media the concept of user-generated content is in vogue. Scholars in communications have also increasingly begun investigating this phenomenon and assessing its contributions to the public sphere. That said, much of the focus here has been placed on *political* communicative spaces, which tend to be confined by a traditional notion of politics. However, as the findings above reveal, politics – more specifically, political talk – is not bound to traditional communicative spaces or to party politics. From reality television to numerous other forum genres, people are talking politics online, which also touches upon issues and concerns of *their* interest.

The discussions that emerge in these spaces are important not only because they contribute to the web of informal conversations that constitute the public sphere, but also because they also offer us insight into what matters to everyday citizens. They tap into a public sphere that is driven by citizens' everyday life knowledge, identities and experiences and offer us insight into when the personal becomes political. What this means for the primacy of politics, normatively speaking, is inclusivity. We need to be more inclusive about not only where we look for politics, but also, and more importantly, about what constitutes it. The beauty of such spaces lies in the fact that those who participate in them are not there to talk politics, and when the political does emerge, they may not believe *political* talk is taking place, allowing them to avoid in some ways the negative connotations that are typically associated with talking conventional politics today, and thus provide a more fruitful

experience. Moreover, such spaces allow us access to what matters to people who tend to be less politically engaged in conventional politics. Thus, these alternative spaces offer political communications an opportunity to reconnect party politics on one side with everyday people's interests and concerns on the other.

Finally, the findings from this study regarding expressives have theoretical implications. In all three forums, expressives were a common ingredient of political talk. Neglecting expressives is not an option if our aim is to provide a better understanding of how people talk politics or if it is to assess its democratic value. Expressives seem both to impede and facilitate political discussions. Although it is difficult to prescribe what role they should play, more research is needed since it seems that when the topics of discussion touch upon a more lifestyle-based form within a non-politically oriented context, expressives play a more prominent role, enhancing political talk rather than impeding it. We as researchers can no longer dismiss such communicative forms as irrational. In fact, based on the *Wife Swap* case, one could make a strong argument that expressives play a crucial role in facilitating political talk and thus should be included in any normative account.

Notes

1. Structural equality and autonomy were excluded due to the scope of this analysis. See Graham (2009) for a complete account.
2. Habermas focuses on the cognitive process of what he calls 'ideal role taking', while paying little attention to its affective side (1996, pp. 228–30).
3. The data were taken from all those threads originating in May 2006 within the sub-forum *Inside Britain*. The data were retrieved in July 2006 from <http://politicstalk.guardian.co.uk/WebX/Politics%20talk/Inside%20Britain/?14@720.RvROjr1wpXs@>
4. The data were taken from all those threads originating in January 2006 within the sub-forum *Celebrity Big Brother*. The data were retrieved in March 2006 from <http://www.bbfans.co.uk/viewforum.php?f=27>
5. The data were taken from all those threads originating between January and March 2005 within the sub-forum *Wife Swap*. The data were retrieved in November 2005 from <http://community.channel4.com/groupee/forums/a/cfrm/f/31060416>
6. For a demonstration of the use of these criteria, see Graham (2008).
7. For a discussion of the evaluation criteria, see Graham (2009).

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Afterword

John Corner

The writer of an 'afterword' does well to keep in mind two risks. First of all, the risk of it being regarded by readers as an irritating pre-emption of their own right to decide on the various interconnections of the material they have read and to come to their own judgements about its qualities and suggestiveness. Unlike a monograph, an edited collection can have no fully coherent conclusion, indeed part of its intellectual attractiveness lies in its very diversity. Secondly, the risk of slipping into repetition. While it is useful for textbooks to 'tell you what they have told you', this becomes tiresome in a research-oriented volume and it is an approach that may lead to something close to the replication of sections of the Introduction. I am going to try to reduce these risks by keeping my account short, keeping my references to the minimum and by attempting to increase rather than reduce the scope for the reader's own critical engagement with the chapters.

Clearly this is an intellectually lively time for study of how the media figure in the analysis of politics and I would want to say first of all how productive I have found it to read through a sequence of contributions that so engagingly keep that liveliness going, supplying fresh arguments and evidence.

Four key strands of change

With some simplification, it is perhaps possible to identify four key strands of change at work in political culture, all of which, together with others, are variously discussed in the preceding pages. I want to expand a little on each of these strands and then to pursue selectively some points for further connection and development that seem to me to arise from them.

These strands are

- 1 The reconfiguration of the general character of media-political relations, a process consequent upon fundamental changes in media systems and political systems separately and then in the complex forms of their interconnection. Some commentators have found it useful to classify what has been happening here as part of 'postmodernity', although in my view use of this sweeping term is in danger of assuming too much about the scale and character of specific changes and therefore of not giving enough attention to continuity or to the full diversity of the factors at work.
- 2 The transformation of the character of (and perhaps definition of) 'political communication' as a professional practice carried out both by 'politics-side' and 'media-side' groupings, in various relationships of cooperation, indifference or hostility and in the context of different configurations of media system subject to varying norms of practice. The underlying conditions, economic, technological and social, of the practices grouped as 'journalism', and then the specific kinds of role required of 'political journalism' within this broader profile (working with what level of independence? With what

guiding values? To what ends? With what kinds of accountability to citizens?) are clearly of major importance here.

- 3 An emerging pattern both of new connections and new types of disjunction and asymmetry within the sphere of the 'civic'. At the centre of this are changes in the allocated and perceived role of 'citizen', regarded as a person in a self-conscious political relationship both (laterally) with other citizens and (vertically) with representative persons and bodies 'higher up' in the political system. It can be argued that differences in evidence and argument about the precise character and scale of the emerging 'connection/disjunction' pattern are currently at the core of political communications research. They are certainly a recurrent and sometimes troublesome feature of the work assembled here.
- 4 An expansion of the terms of the 'political' to cover a much wider range of social and cultural practices than was formally the case. As well as retaining many aspects of its 'formal' character, the political has become 'colloquial' in quite new ways, which has been regarded as a disturbing sign by some (a thinning, a diminution, perhaps a debasement) and welcomed by others (an extension, an overdue phase of genuine popularization). Questions about the language of politics and the appropriate 'civic' terms for engaging with political themes have been raised here with particular force, although they have also been relevant to the three previous strands. As I noted in point 2, just what is taken into account and what is not in 'political communications' research is undergoing revision in relation to this expansion and we may confidently expect this trend to continue.

Across all these areas of change, matters of technology and its application have been significant. The steady growth in the use of what is still called, with increasing inaccuracy, 'new media', has clearly been an important focus in research on media-political relations. With some exceptions, work here has displayed an optimism about the consequences for democratic culture (ranging from the cautious to the utopian) that has yet to receive adequate empirical confirmation, although it is abundantly clear that the older patterns of political information flow have not simply been 'added to' by the new developments but have started to be significantly changed. Sometimes it almost seems as if an established pessimism about the political consequences and likely future direction of mainstream media structures and practices (as outlined classically in Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch's thesis (1995) about the 'crisis of public communication') has not been substantially revised but has, instead, been *offset* by a positive reading of what the new channels of information flow and of debate might usher in. This apparent disjunction, between the mainstream and the 'new' is something to which I want to return below. In a recent, strikingly original, commentary on models of 'publicness', Daniel Dayan (2009) has examined the varied roles – as resource, agency of repetition and critical respondent – that the new media play in relation to mainstream accounts. These roles, he argues, have reconfigured the idea of 'centre and periphery' as the relationship between elements so identified is played out in respect of specific issues within the public sphere. Clearly, in a variety of ways, some involving combinations with 'old' media, new media are radically modifying the cultural settings and the flows of information and opinion by which 'politics' is sustained, sometimes precariously, as the exercising of

legitimized power over civic space. It is no longer possible to engage with any questions of political communication without recognizing their impact, as the chapters in this volume variously and provocatively do.

One other general point I think it is worth making in relation to the strands is the extent to which a vigorous exchange on normative questions runs alongside the descriptive and analytic challenges of conducting research. Nearly all the chapters work with their own criteria for judgement, some broadly compatible and some clearly in relationships of contrast if not of conflict. How bad, and in what ways, is the present state of 'political communication' and what are the implications more generally for the state of politics? How likely is it that things will get worse? Conversely, what positive developments can be discerned? What are the possibilities for their growth? To put matters like this is to be deliberately simplistic, yet the dynamics and tensions of evaluation run through most of work in the book. In some chapters, a clear emphasis is placed on either a positive or negative reading, in others there is an internal dialogue running alongside the analysis and discussion of data (which may point in rather different directions). It is likely that as inquiry into political culture develops, 'grand narratives' of either despair or celebration will give way more markedly to complicated 'balance sheets' in which the significance of change for ideas of democratic development will be both mixed and frequently ambiguous.

I want to develop this commentary by connecting with selected themes from the profile suggested above in a little more detail, noting where I think future work could supplement or support the cumulative agenda of questions emerging from the chapters.

The continuing research agenda: Selected issues

The re-definition of the political

What connects many of the chapters together is a sense, referred to earlier, that the very terms for defining 'politicality', for identifying that which is 'political' or that which carries political meanings and significance, are under revision. Clearly, some researchers believe that only an expanded idea of what counts as political, an idea that goes well beyond established, conventional boundaries, will allow an accurate mapping of how people are variously positioned in relation to ideas of the civic order. Here, it is useful to note the difference between using 'politics' to identify a specific space of social action, one in which engagement with the central institutions and processes of a political system occurs, and using 'politics' to indicate a dimension of everyday life, sometimes recognized as such, sometimes not and nearly always caught up in a complicated manner with other elements. In many societies, an explicit and sustained concern with 'the political', displaying both affirming and critical elements, forms a core around which there is an extensive periphery shading off into levels of partial, occasional and often only implicit concern. Assessing how awareness of politics variously features across the social landscape, active at different depths and in relation to different co-ordinates for guiding perceptions and actions (including use of the media), offers research into the culture of politics a very important objective, one that has provided a focus for some of the work gathered here. What is the extent and variety of 'the political' within 'the social', 'the cultural' and 'the personal'? How is politics

experienced as a factor within, and a constituent of, the self-consciousness of citizens? Formidably general though they may be, these questions are ones that we have to continue to try to answer. The term 'political culture' most often refers to the working values and practices of the institutions in which active, often professional, engagement with politics takes place (it is the culture of what is often referred to as 'the political class' and its administrative support). How, and in what modes, elements of this core political culture extend into everyday life, into 'popular culture' as a field of public representation and portrayal and 'civic culture' as the field of both individualized and cooperative feelings of 'membership', has become a key research issue.

Those working with an inclusive sense of 'politicality' often use it to support a more positive reading of the current situation than the application of narrower, more formal, criteria would encourage. Peter Dahlgren, in writing primarily about the impact and potential of the Web upon civic consciousness and behaviour, has used the terms 'pre-political' and 'proto-political' (Dahlgren, 2009) to describe types of social networking activity that precede engagement with core politics but that are supportive of a movement towards participation within the more central areas of political space.

However, an inclusive sense of the political – an expansive sense of its reach – carries the risk of ignoring the real extent of the distance between core political activities and the everyday frameworks of most citizens and thereby works to inhibit an analysis of the reasons for this distance. There is a tendency in some writing on the issue to privilege the researcher's perception of the 'political' character of particular activities and attitudes and to give reduced attention to the fact these may not be seen as 'political' by those involved. This perspective can be observed in some writing about popular television, where political aspects and orientations, sometimes perceived as 'progressive' ones, are identified by the researcher but seemingly not generally registered as such by the majority of the audience. As in the old inclusivist slogan 'the personal is political' the important question of precisely how many people regard it as such remains relevant.

The 'integrity' of political communication

If I could put a slightly stronger emphasis on an issue emerging from these chapters, I would point first of all to questions about the levels of communicative integrity at work in different parts both of the political sphere and of the media system. A deficit in integrity, variously, if often only loosely, identified by notions of 'spin' and 'propaganda', has often been seen to follow from some of the changes that have so transformed the organization of media-political relations in ways that contributors have discussed in detail. Dominant here is the manner in which political publicity within intensified terms of mediation has more directly aligned itself with commercial practices of branding and advertising, adopting often strikingly similar approaches towards the language within which it makes its claims.

The practices of political deception have, of course, a long, indeed ancient, history, both as strategies to secure advantage (even if only short-term) within the political world itself and as strategies for making positive connections between this world and the larger public world, either through the media or directly – Corner (2010) reviews some recurring features of this. Some of these practices have become 'naturalized' into expected behaviour, just as, for many people, the exaggerations and relentless positives of advertising no longer seem

'deviant' but just the way in which this type of public communication works. The distortions, being expected, are allowed for and 'discounted', it can be claimed, and we can go on living quite happily in a world dominated by advertising without any great fear of being the victims of serious deception.

However, political claims-making, particularly that occurring outside of the competitive context of electoral campaigns, is only aligned with the claims of advertising and commercial publicity by reducing its status as civic expression, perhaps to dangerously low levels. To use a term recently given a new emphasis by Nick Couldry (2009) there is a reduction in the quality and range of political 'voice', one that has important and broad consequences for the character of governance. Just by what different criteria of communicative integrity current political practice is guided (in, for instance, press releases, press conferences and interviews) and then by what criteria public assessment of that practice is made are two, related, topics that perhaps deserve more research attention than they have currently received. We know that 'cynicism' is an attitude widely identified and debated in political communication studies; some of this cynicism is relatively resigned, some of it is angry. One cause of it would appear to be a lack of trust in the 'truthfulness' of politicians, an unwillingness to 'take them at their word'.

Of course, wariness about the honesty of politicians is as old as politics itself, but it would seem that, along with the continuities, there is something relatively new about the dynamics of distrust currently apparent in many national systems. This is a dynamic to which the media have been seen as significant contributors through the manner in which they have 'covered' politics, while many media professionals regard the activities of the political class itself as almost entirely responsible for the credibility gap that has now opened up. What is clear, and it comes through strongly in some of the chapters, is that the conditions of *visibility of the political* are changing (the discussion of this theme in Thompson (2000) remains suggestive). Citizens are getting to 'see' a lot more than they saw before of the political 'backstage'. This 'seeing' is often mediated in forms which can best be called 'gossip', not thereby to dismiss their possible truth content but to signal their emphasis on personality, personal interaction and the established cultural pleasures of speculation on the basis of rumour. But other more serious kinds of 'seeing' are occurring too, as is shown for example by the running story of the Members of Parliament's expenses scandal in Britain across 2009–10.¹

Such extended risks of having business intended to be private and hidden made visible (the connotations of the term 'exposure' are appropriate here), risks to which new media have greatly contributed, have required new approaches to managing visibility. This has meant revised strategies for attracting attention in order to secure publicity gains while deflecting or diverting attention from that which could be harmful. In these intensified and less predictable conditions, techniques of 'damage limitation' that can be implemented once a 'bad' story has broken have become an even more crucial aspect of professional political communication skills. Over the next decade we are going to see fascinating and important research on these aspects of change.

The importance of history

In addition to the emphasis on integrity (and its frequent absence) I would want to add, too, a remark about the importance of approaching many of these issues within a framework that retains a strong awareness of political and social history.

Internationally, far too much media studies research has displayed a tendency to work with an overbearing sense of the contemporary, against which the past is placed in soft focus when it is visible at all. This has allowed currents of nostalgia to distort a proper assessment of the challenges and risks presented by current change. Versions of the 'good past', often in contradiction of the historical record, have reinforced assessments of decline and of deficit both within the sphere of politics and of mainstream media. There is doubtless much cause for anxiety emerging from our studies of contemporary political communication but we should always keep in mind the history, particularly that over the last century, in relation to which useful judgements can alone be made. A fashion for using 'what might have been' rather than 'what was' as the datum point for assessment of present circumstances should be resisted.

Going beyond journalism

Again, following some leads contained in the previous pages, I want to note the benefits of extending political communication analysis well beyond the conventional concern with news and current affairs coverage, important though this remains. More work on the generic variety of the ways in which the political becomes articulated through the media, including through comic and dramatic formats and a range of routes for expressing political affirmation, disagreement, anger and even fantasy, would add considerably to our sense of the overall pattern.²

'Mediatization'

Finally, although it has been the subject of extensive debate, including earlier in this volume, it might be worth commenting very briefly on how the idea of 'mediatization' seems to figure in relation to the work offered here. Although there have been many commentaries on the use of this term, Sonia Livingstone has recently provided a useful synoptic account (Livingstone, 2009). Unlike 'mediation', with which it is sometimes used interchangeably, 'mediatization' in many usages carries the sense of a *changed condition* within the institutions, structures and processes that have become subject to the activities of the media upon, within and around them. The consequences of this include changed forms of relationship with people, perhaps in their identity as citizens, perhaps as consumers, as well as with media professionals. The steady growth of 'public relations' is one indication of this shift to more reified and routinely professional modes of address.

Immediately, of course, questions of scale and rate of change are raised and therefore statements about 'mediatization' almost always require further qualification in relation to these. It has necessarily been a word caught up within the dispute, extending now across much of the humanities and social sciences, about how far and in what ways the media have impacted upon the core institutions and structures of society. This is a dispute that is regularly played-off from polarized positions between those who see the impact as routinely underestimated and those who regard overestimation as the dominant feature. It is sometimes conducted between those working from bases in traditional disciplines, where for a long time the impact of the media on a range of political, social and cultural conditions and practices was not given the attention it deserved (and in some

cases, is still not) and those in media, communication and cultural studies, where a strongly and sometimes excessively media-centric view has tended to prevail. Certainly, the dangers are clear of assuming such a dominance of 'media logic' over (and within) political institutions that they are seen to lack *any* significant independent control over their activities or to operate with any policy perspectives that do not have media outcomes as a primary point of reference. I think it is also interesting how, apart from being questionable in its own terms, such a view of a thoroughly mediatized politics contrasts with the model of a thoroughly politicized media, which also has its place in the history of media-political research, usually in respect of states where the capacity to exert direct and extensive control over media activities at the level of fundamental economic and policy structures shows itself more strongly than in the United States and most of Europe. The apparently conflicting dynamics of 'politicization' and 'mediatization' – dynamics which may be open, in certain conditions, to forms of alignment and combination – are perhaps another productive topic for further inquiry and argument.

However, no matter what the assumptions and hypotheses informing research, we can perhaps all agree with Livingstone when she points out:

In short, establishing the degree, nature and consequences of the mediatization of anything and everything – politics, education, family, religion, self – is an empirical task still largely ahead of us.

(Livingstone, 2009, p. 7)

In good measure, the contributors here have made that 'empirical task', in relation to politics, the focus for rewarding and significant scholarship.

Notes

1. This issue, alluded to by some of the contributors, has been seen to have lowered public trust in the British political class to new levels, creating in the process something of a crisis of political representation. It remains to be seen how deeply, and for how long, the circumstances of 'excessive' expenditure being claimed against public money for Members of Parliament's living costs and household and personal items will impact upon political culture.
2. Among the initiatives here is an AHRC-funded project at Liverpool University 'Media Genre and Political Culture: Beyond the News', in which a team comprising Kay Richardson, Katy Parry and myself is involved in auditing the extent and character of political mediations across a range of broadcast, print and web output in what are often highly diverse generic formats (see Corner et al., 2011).

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