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The 1998 Campaign: An Interaction Approach

Philip van Praag jr. & Kees Brants

Abstract

In this article an interaction approach of election campaigns is elaborated: form and content of the campaign depend largely on the intense interaction between campaigning actors and the media. Form and dynamics of this process can differ from one country to the next and are determined in part by contextual factors such as the political and media culture. In the 1998 election campaign Dutch parties succeeded better than in 1994 in controlling news about themselves and their party leaders. Contrary to 1994, the TV news did not play an agenda-setting role. However, the new commercial station channel SBS6 introduced a remarkable style of campaign coverage: a focus on news close to the people and no attention to the actual party campaigns. In their turn, parties put little emphasis on traditional forms of controlled publicity such as folders and printed advertisements, and have discovered the advantage of having their own website. On a modest scale they used the new opportunities for broadcasting party spots on both commercial and public, national and local TV channels.

1 Introduction

Election campaigns are changing, not only in the us or the Netherlands, but in almost all countries with free elections. Various comparative studies on this topic have been published in recent years and one thing all authors have in common is their emphasis on the modernization or, as it is sometimes referred to, the 'Americanization' of election campaigns. Their studies differ, however, in approach. Some research is done from the perspective of the political parties and the politicians running the campaign; others look more at structural changes in society.

The (political) actor perspective focuses on organizational changes in the actual campaigning: costs, target groups, and the introduction of new electoral research and marketing techniques. This perspective is usually applied by political scientists. Those interested in the long-term effects that structural social factors are having on the form and content of the campaign – a perspective popular among communication scientists – accentuate the changing role

and growing power of the media.

In this article we will elaborate a third perspective and analyse the Dutch campaign of 1998 on the basis of an interaction approach, namely that the form and content of the campaign depend largely on the intense interaction between campaigning actors and the media.

2 Two perspectives

2.1 Actor

Although different concepts are used, there is, nevertheless, a central theme in the actor perspective: the development from a traditional to a modern campaign (Nimmo 1970; Penniman 1981; Bowler & Farrell 1992; Newman, 1994). Butler and Ranney (1992: 5) cite five apparent features of the traditional campaign: printed matter like pamphlets and folders are the most important campaign material; door-to-door canvassing is a central activity, as are large events and parades; billboards and newspaper advertisements serve to reinforce the message; and, on election day people knock on supporters' doors to remind them to vote.

Internally, the traditional campaign was characterized by a decentralized organization and a strong influence of the party activists on form and content of the campaign. Campaigns could only operate this way with the input of numerous active members and they can thus be described as 'labour-intensive' (Farrell 1996; van Praag 1998). As a result of the decline of the traditional mass party this kind of labour-intensive campaign has largely ceased to exist.

A modern campaign, of which we see several traits in the Netherlands, is characterized by a central organization, extensive research, and campaign and communication techniques derived from the fields of advertising and marketing. The party presents itself with a few basic issues or central themes and, even in political systems with a tradition of party-centered campaigns, the central focus is on the top candidate and his/her communicating skills (Vos 1978; Brants et al. 1982; Koole 1992; Kavanagh 1995; Anker 1998). The increasingly professionalized campaigns of the last decade are sometimes described as 'high-tech' (Butler & Ranney 1992) or 'capital-intensive' campaigns (Farrell 1996). Voters perceive only the external changes. The important and continuous process of organizational change largely takes place behind-the-scenes.

In this actor perspective, the struggle between politicians and between parties determines the course of the campaign and as such the approach is in keeping with the traditional division of labour between political actors and the media. Political parties and politicians run a campaign and the media report on it extensively and daily. The structural approach seriously questions the relevance of this division of labour.

2.2 Structural

In this perspective there is a fundamental process of social change, a continuing modernization of societies, that leads to the adoption of new campaign techniques and strategies. Swanson and Mancini (1996) see as the basis and far-reaching attribute of this modernization process the increasing social complexity of societies and a growing functional differentiation in all social spheres. This process leads to an increasing number of subsystems specialized in satisfying the demands of particular sectors of society and groups of citizens. At the political level this is manifest in a growing number of structures that act as intermediaries between citizens and the political system.

This structural analysis can provide an explanation for the changed relation between electorate and politicians, the redistribution of political functions at the expense of political parties, the altered role of the media in the political process, the fragmentation of media outlets, and the rise in the number of floating voters. It also shows that the professionalization of the campaigns themselves is a general and inevitable phenomenon. In this structural perspective the media, and television in particular, are studied as independent and powerful actors in the electoral process; actors that shape the form and content of the campaign to a large extent. The power of the media can manifest itself in a variety of ways in the course of a campaign; the day-to-day selection of items and events is not the only important aspect. The agenda-setting role of what will and will not be emphasized, how to write about and frame specific issues, parties and candidates, and their news angle in highlighting certain aspects in background analyses and investigative reports, all play a crucial role in the media portrayal of the campaign.

These changes in the position of the media are not only the result of technological advances such as the rise of television, but also of the sharply altered conception political reporters (in the US as well as in other liberal democracies) have of their role ever since the 1960s. In this media-centered democracy, journalists no longer view their main task to be the supply of in-depth information which can help voters to make their choices, a role perception not limited to the tabloid media. Political parties in various countries have complained that their 'substantial campaign speeches' have been largely ignored by the media or written off as 'old news', even though what was said could have been of interest to the voters. Moreover, if and when the actual issues are ever addressed, a conflict frame is often selected in which only one aspect of the issue is described without devoting any attention to the wider context (Kerbel & Ross 1998).

News values and interpretive frames that are thought to attract and hold an audience in a competitive media environment are dominant in the campaign coverage. With respect to television news, this means less of a focus on the content of the campaign and more on opinion polls and the intra- and inter-

party struggle ('horse race reporting'), or focusing on the kind of atmosphere within which the campaign rituals are taking place ('hoopla reporting') (Patterson 1980; Joslyn 1984). In the Dutch multi-party context questions concerning who is going to govern with whom after the elections and who will be prime minister, are an important part of horse race reporting. Patterson blames the length of the campaign in the United States for this development, but examples from Germany and the Netherlands point to a more cross-national development (Patterson 1993; Semetko 1996; Kleinnijenhuis et al. 1998; van Praag & van der Eijk 1998).

This fundamental change in the role of journalists and the way they cover the campaign is often denoted as the development from a party logic to a media logic (Mazzoleni 1987; Swanson & Mancini 1996: 251). Media performing on the basis of party logic are accepting the division of labour between politics and media: political parties set the campaign agenda, the media cover the campaign activities of the parties extensively and are reticent in commenting and interpreting the campaign. Media working on the basis of their own logic emphasize professional news values in deciding what and what not to cover in the campaign; their independence from political parties; keeping the audience interested and thus covering what they believe is of interest to the public. In combination, this usually means that the campaign is primarily viewed as a power struggle between the candidates and often defined in terms of 'horse race' and 'hoopla'.

The way media cover a campaign is historically determined and changes only slowly. The structural perspective points out that the national context determines in what way and at what rate. It is certainly not uni-linear, whereby, sooner or later, every country utilizes the same techniques and goes through the same stages in modernizing its campaign. To speak of a process of 'Americanization' is thus confusing, to say the least. Although most modern campaign techniques did indeed originate in the United States, the transatlantic traffic is not necessarily a one-way street. Knowledge of new campaign practices and techniques is disseminated constantly across borders and in some instances – politicians appearing in infotainment programmes, for example – the United States seems well behind some European countries. Political parties in Europe borrow from the US as well as from each other (Blumler et al. 1996: 57). In general, in the process of modernization in most countries there is only a selective adoption of new techniques (van Praag 1995; Swanson & Mancini 1996).

3 An interaction approach

A third perspective can be derived from the structural analysis of campaigns, i.e., one pertaining to the interaction between the media and political parties.

This approach takes the structural long-term changes as given and examines the factors that are of decisive short-term importance to the course of specific election campaigns. The extremely intensive interaction between campaigners and the media determines the coverage of the campaign and thus shapes what the electorate sees, hears and reads.

Far more than the interplay of attack and counter-attack between the campaigning parties, the interaction between media and the political parties and politicians is responsible for the dynamics of the campaign. What is at stake in this permanent interaction is that political parties or candidates are engaged in a constant battle with the media to retain control over which issues the media portray and how issues and images are portrayed. Norris (1998: 6) notes, in what she refers to as the "post-modern campaign" that, "candidates and mainstream journalists seem to be struggling ever harder to retain control over their message through the traditional channels."

The central point of departure in this approach is that, to a varying extent, political parties are increasingly aware of this trend and have accepted the existence of a media logic. This does not necessarily mean they are totally passive in their acceptance of the dominant role of the media, particularly the television, or to the role of political reporters. On the contrary, the challenge to political parties is to effectively turn this media logic to their own advantage. This ongoing battle with the media is part of the day-to-day reality of modern campaigns. There is no question of generalizing or fixating the power relation between media and politics. Inherent in this interaction approach is that no one actor accepts the dominance of the other: each evaluates every campaign with the aim of being stronger in the next.

An adequate, modern election campaign requires parties to have sophisticated media strategies. This involves an orchestration of the communication activities and conscious decisions about through which media the party wants to convey which message. But, at least as important is steering how the media in question report about the party and its political leader. Many of the innovations on the part of political parties entail media-centered campaign techniques. The role of 'spin doctors' and the introduction of the 'war room', where every effort is made to keep up with and react to the latest media news, are good examples. The 'bypass strategy' Bush introduced in 1988 and Clinton perfected in 1992, which focuses on 'soft' news programmes like talk shows and breakfast television, and on local and regional television stations, is also in keeping with politicians trying to win back control over their own message and image (Rosenstiel 1993: 86). More traditional uses of media logic entail the creation of media events by political parties, walkabouts with photo opportunities, and so on.

The process of interaction and mutual dependence is accompanied by a spiral of distrust on both sides. The efforts of political parties to control

message and image are largely directed towards monitoring and steering the free publicity. The use and growing role of media and communication experts has led to an increasing distrust on the part of journalists. The fear of being manipulated by campaign professionals prompts reporters to opt for horse race and hoopla items, for a conflict frame, and human interest stories.

According to Patterson, the media in the United States have gone totally overboard in this respect. He reproaches them for having had an 'anti-politics bias' since the 1970s, as a result of which the majority (80 to 90%) of news items about parties, candidates, Congress and the federal government have a negative slant (Patterson 1993: 18-19). Certainly in the US, although the same is true in other countries as well, this leads political parties to rethink their publicity strategy in future campaigns.

3.1 Context and control

The importance of the interaction between media and parties can vary depending on the political system. The form and dynamics of this process can differ from one country to the next, and are determined in part by contextual factors such as the political and media culture. In a consociational democracy like the Netherlands, the demands for post-election coalition negotiations force parties to constrain themselves during the campaign. The lack of a real electoral struggle strengthens the importance of the interaction between media and parties, as the former are looking for news that the latter might well want to play down.

In a majoritarian (adversary) democracy one can expect the newsworthy mutual attacks of the parties to determine for a large part the media portrayal of the campaign. But, also in a country like the UK, the parties need to keep an optimal grip as the campaign develops. It is no wonder that in the 1997 election campaign the aim to control the free publicity was an essential part of the effective media strategy of New Labour in the United Kingdom (cf. Kavanagh 1997).

The historically-shaped role of free and controlled publicity in a campaign plays an important role in this connection. Free publicity includes all forms of publicity produced by independent journalists; in controlled publicity, the intermediary role of journalists is eliminated. Of the latter, two forms can be distinguished. In the first place, campaign material such as posters, leaflets or direct mail distributed by the political parties themselves. Party websites are a modern version of the traditional poster or pamphlet. In the second place, all kinds of paid publicity such as radio and television commercials and printed advertisements. These campaign statements have in common that parties are using media of communication not edited under their responsibility. In

general, parties have to pay for the use of these media. Party political broadcasts in most West European countries form a special group, as they are usually government-sponsored, self-controlled and communicated freely via public broadcasting stations.

The media strategy of a party or candidate, especially the mixture of free and controlled publicity, is shaped by contextual factors that influence the interaction process. In a political system where campaigners have numerous opportunities for paid publicity, particularly on television, they are less dependent on a strategy of free publicity. In a political system where political parties do not have the option of purchasing broadcasting time, and public broadcasting networks have traditionally been dominant, a media strategy for free publicity is of supreme importance. This might explain why, since the 1970s, Dutch politicians have appeared regularly on talk shows and family programmes, as well as participated in quiz and game shows.

On the part of both media and political parties, the preparations for a campaign consist of evaluating the previous one – particularly the behaviour of the opponent – and thinking about new ways to maintain control over the campaign. Media aims might differ from those of the politicians, but both of them are out to put their stamp on the campaign. There are various choices political parties have to make: how to deal with free publicity; what forms to opt for and how to try and steer this publicity; what role to give to controlled and especially paid publicity. The media, and television in particular, are faced with questions which might differ according to the type or genre of the programme: how much time and energy should be devoted to the elections; to what extent should they report on the contents of a campaign or emphasize opinion polls and hoopla elements; should other genres, such as talk shows and entertainment programmes pay attention to the elections?

4 The Dutch case

It is our contention that the general features of this interaction approach are also applicable to the Netherlands, although a number of specifically Dutch conditions play a role as well. For one, it is the Dutch tradition of accommodation and coalition governments that tend to result in consensual politics and a careful approach towards opponents in election campaigns, as one might well have to negotiate with these same players after the results are in. It is also important to note that campaigns in the Netherlands have traditionally been extremely inexpensive (Koole 1992). Although costs have risen, this was still true in 1994 and 1998. Political parties largely finance their campaign with contributions paid by their members. Using external financial campaign resources is generally considered not done in Dutch political culture. Finally, it is claimed that with

the decline of ideology, parties – and the pvdA and D66 in particular – aim for the political centre (Pennings & Keman 1994). Partly as a consequence of this, the emphasis in party campaigning is not so much cognitive persuasion as stressing the qualities of politicians' and parties' images.

Looking at the media, Dutch campaigns primarily take place via free publicity. In part this is because it had been impossible for political parties to purchase broadcasting time on national radio and television stations. In the past ten years, however, the television landscape in the Netherlands has changed dramatically with the launch of several commercial channels: RTL4 in 1989, RTL5 in 1993, SBS6 and Veronica in 1995. During the post-war pillarized system, the public broadcasting stations more or less functioned as mouthpieces for the political parties in communicating with the ideological or religious streams in society that the parties represented. When this closed political communication system began to crumble in the mid 1960s, the mass media also broke their ties with political parties. The partisan link between parties and media has now been replaced by a more independent, competitive broadcasting system of public and private channels, with a growing number of entertainment programmes, a mix of informational genres and a prevalence of talk shows and reality TV, and an audience fragmentation over about ten national and local, commercial and public channels, and another 15 foreign channels.

Political parties in the Netherlands have had to play along with and at the same time react to the emerging media logic, and thus develop a strategy *vis à vis* the arenas of free publicity, notably TV news, but also other genres where they could possibly set their own agendas and 'polish' their image more easily. The 1994 elections were the first confrontation with the changed landscape of political communication. Both the media and the parties learned from that campaign. 1998 saw the maturing of the interaction in free publicity and an intensification of the confrontation, as well as attempts to overcome a media logic via controlled publicity.

4.1 Free publicity

TV News – First of all, political parties have responded to the emerging media logic and changed surroundings by distancing themselves from an important traditional media-platform: the television news. It is no longer a matter of course that political parties are responsive to political reporters or engage, live, in debates with opponents. Though from a comparative perspective unique, such interactions were more or less self-evident in the Netherlands until the 1989 elections. The CDA candidate would make a statement or raise an issue somewhere on the campaign trail to which the leader of the pvdA, enabled by a satellite connection, would respond immediately and more or less auto-

matically. This gave the public NOS TV News an advantage over the other media in that it could regularly broadcast the latest statements by the party leaders.

In 1994, this practice came to an end when the major parties refused to cooperate any longer (Meurs et al. 1995). Not only could they play NOS against the new RTL news, they apparently felt it was no longer wise to expose political leaders to this double risk. A live interview always implies certain risks and combined with a spontaneous, on camera debate this could result in embarrassing setbacks. In addition, inspired by the 1992 Clinton campaign, the Labour Party deliberately opted for ample coverage on local and regional television, in an attempt to gain greater control over the coverage in the free publicity sector, especially with respect to the image of its political leader. As one of the party's spin doctors was to put it later:

Growing media competition is giving politicians new opportunities. They are no longer dependent on only one news programme (. . .) A political party does not have to cooperate with everything. Many political campaigns here and abroad already bypass the established media. In the near future, an interview with [a critical political journalist] will no longer be a must. (Monasch 1996, our translation).

This tendency continued in the 1998 elections, with other parties now also 'using' local media. Moreover, to get a head start in the free publicity, the vvd introduced daily press conferences, a phenomenon well known in the UK. For a short while, this caught the attention of the media, enabling the vvd to put certain issues on that day's media agenda. The question is whether political parties have managed to reclaim land lost in the transfer from party to media logic with these and other strategies. To answer this question, we conducted observation studies in the news rooms in both 1994 and 1998, analyzing how the daily news offering was selected and constructed.¹

In 1994, the attitude of NOS TV News was relatively reactive with politicians mostly 'making' the campaign. This was not only due to the active strategy of some political parties, but also a consequence of the traditional upgrading of the importance of their political reporters in the campaign weeks, the presentation of a daily campaign segment in the news and lowering the news threshold for election items.² On the other hand, NOS did limited analysis of what the campaign was about: only 36% of campaign news was substantive, 35% was of the hoopla kind and 30% horse race (van Praag jr. & van der Eijk 1998). On the last point, the commercial RTL News did not differ markedly, though campaign news was less salient (15% of the total news time versus 22% for NOS), less substantive (28%) and it broadcast more hoopla news (42%). To make political news both more understandable and recognizable for their audience, RTL followed a floating voter for several weeks who was struggling with his choice of party. On the other hand, the political staff of the commercial station were not given a privileged position, there was no fixed allotment to the campaign

nor a lowering of the threshold for campaign news, and the editors aimed for an autonomous, agenda-shaping role. A lack of expertise in their first election coverage and insufficient staff explains why they failed in this aim.

The first observation in 1998 was that both NOS and RTL News had seen the results of our 1994 study and were determined to do it differently this time. The outcome, however, points to a further convergence of the two organizations' approaches. The NOS did not want an automatic daily campaign news block, desired less horse race reporting and reporting of opinion polls, wanted more emphasis on news values and interpretation, and more agenda shaping. As the assistant editor-in-chief described the aims in a pre-election, internal memorandum: "... neither let the parties set our agenda nor present the campaign without its content." But NOS News only partly succeeded, because it stuck to its fixed campaign allotment and to putting special reporters on a 'party-beat' which by definition means lowering the news threshold.

Although they had intended to shape the agenda, spin doctoring by the major parties and their reluctance to follow news angles defined by the political reporters prompted a more docile approach by the NOS. Our observation study shows that most items were party-initiated; an extremely high 87% according to a content analysis (Brukx & de Vreese 1998: 20). Certainly the coalition parties knew how to get on TV. An extreme example was PvdA minister Melkert, whose telephone call to the NOS news desk demonstrating his willingness to react to VVD minister Zalm was enough to get prime news coverage. However, parties did not always succeed in setting the agenda. PvdA leader Wim Kok went on a trip to the south of the Netherlands intending to gain attention and was very annoyed when the NOS reporter was only interested in a quote about the appointment of the new (Dutch) president of the European Bank while the visit was not covered. The agenda-setting power of journalists seems to lie more in denying access and in forcing politicians to react on issues than in actually initiating them.

As intended, less time was indeed devoted to opinion polls, but almost half the items were either about inter-party conflicts or framed in such terms (Brukx & de Vreese 1998: 21). A substantial part of the NOS campaign coverage was devoted to Wim Kok and Frits Bolkestein (VVD) and this was interpreted as a fight between the PvdA and VVD leaders, even when the polls (which NOS TV did not show) pointed to a clear lead for the former. The major opposition party, CDA, was virtually invisible in the final weeks, not only in the NOS news but also in the RTL news (Kleinnijenhuis et al. 1998: 95).

RTL news surprisingly lowered its threshold for campaign news with the introduction of a fixed allotment to the election, which also prompted an easing of news values when selecting items for these five to six minutes. The editors also wanted to be more informative in their reporting with less hoopla. In order to achieve this they had their own daily election survey, the results of

which often opened the evening news. This enabled them to set the campaign agenda with the issues they raised in the survey – more so at least than NOS – but at the same time it often meant emphasizing the horse race character of the campaign. RTL's 'success' is reflected in the Dutch newspapers. A content analysis of five national dailies shows that RTL was quoted as source fifteen times and NOS only five. Less so than NOS but also substantially, RTL focused on the Kok-Bolkestein theme which was presented very much in conflict terms. Apart from that, a feature was planned every day, not about a topic or a theme but about the atmosphere and the hoopla in the campaign. As one of the editors put it to us, it had to be "fun to watch".

Political communication in the 1998 Dutch elections saw a new development with the appearance of another commercial channel: sbs6.³ This station focuses on news which is close to the people and is thus oriented much more to a local and human interest level. In its mission statement (www.hartvan.nl) the channel claims to break with the tradition that only foreign news is real news, and if from the Netherlands then only from The Hague (the political capital), implying that this is the news angle of the other stations. "We look for and find the news with the people to whom it occurs. We treat it in a journalistic and fair way (...), but do not feel obliged to hear the authority's view" (our translation). In the news casts of this channel – one with a local orientation, one aimed at the young – there was a general disinterest in party politics right from the start, and they did not decide how they would report on the campaign until shortly before the elections. This reflected their scepticism *vis à vis* politics.

With sbs6 we found an extreme form of negating the political parties' campaign agendas: it chose the issues it assumed its viewers would be interested in (crime and violence in the streets, the environment), confronting politicians through a Jerry Springer-like 'people's voice' by filming and interviewing politicians between and with the help of the audience. And, all of this was topped with a sauce of entertainment by getting vested politicians to guess the meaning of words and expressions drawn from a youth magazine. The resulting infotainment mix, however, had no horse race but substantial hoopla. On the other hand, it certainly emphasized the issues in the campaign, though not necessarily the issues the politicians wanted to put forward.

Television news was less successful than in 1994 in putting its mark on the course of the campaign, but other TV genres and the press were no more successful. Only one issue, a revelation by a weekly magazine, reached agenda status and affected the campaign: the assumed right-extremist past of the VVD campaign manager Van Baalen. As a consequence he was forced to resign five weeks before polling day.

Infotainment – If political parties have difficulties 'reclaiming land' lost in the battle over the media logic, one would expect them to appear more often than

before in the kind of television programmes where they can set the tone more easily: talk shows and entertainment focused programmes. Since the 1970s, it has not been uncommon for politicians to appear in these infotainment genres, but with the electorate now fragmented over a vast array of channels the politicians may well perceive it necessary to use the whole range of programmes television has to offer – an information-entertainment scale from the traditional informative genres of news and current affairs, via the talk shows and daytime magazines, to the game and entertainment shows (see Figure 1 for the sixfold classification). Aware of the dominant media logic in the first three genres (news, heavy information and current affairs), a focus on programme genres on the right hand side of the continuum could be expected.

In order to put these assumptions to the test we have analysed all TV programmes of the three public (Nederland 1, 2 and 3) and four Dutch language commercial channels (RTL 4 and 5, Veronica and SBS6) in the run-up to the 1998 elections.⁴ In a six week, round the clock content analysis we simply registered for how long politicians from which party appeared in which programmes and on which channels. As we did the same during the 1994 elections, we can compare the two sets of data and thus look at potential trends and differences (Brants & Neijens 1998). Moreover, such a relatively longitudinal analysis could give some insight into whether the electoral communication developments in a country under change are proof of and symptomatic for what is sometimes considered the 'infotaining' of political communication in liberal democracies (Brants 1998).

In the six weeks analysed, politicians had an exposure of 97 hours (Table 1). Systematic comparison with 1994 – when this figure was considerably lower with 67 hours – is difficult, because then there were only two commercial channels and no night time repeats of programmes. The majority of electoral communication is still to be found on the public channels: 72% of the politicians' exposure was on Nederland 1, 2 and 3. In 1994 the ratio was 76% on the three public channels and 24% on the two commercial channels. The increase from 16 to 27 hours on the commercial channels in 1998 can only partly be ascribed to the new channels; Veronica does not seem to be interested in politics at all.

The increase in air time is particularly striking with the three public channels: from 51.5 hours in 1994 to 69.5 hours in 1998 (Table 2), with the biggest increase on Nederland 3 (from almost 23 hours in 1994 to 31 hours in 1998). Taking into account the varying audience attention per programme, politicians also reach a relatively larger audience on the public channels – their 'market share' of the viewing time is in fact 84% – and commercial channels attract relatively smaller audiences when their programmes concern politicians.

Contrary to what one might expect, politicians appear most frequently in informational programmes where they can expect a critical journalistic

approach: news, background and current affairs (see Table 1) and less in the kind of programmes where it is easier to set the tone and avoid the journalistic distrust and conflict framing. More than three quarters (77%) of the time politicians appeared on television was in the three informational categories. That is even more than in 1994, when the figure was 67%. When party political broadcasts are taken into account this even rises to 80% in 1998. These informative genres also attract the highest number of viewers watching politicians; relatively more in current affairs programmes than news (probably due to SBS6 nightly news repeats) and other informative genres.

Table 1 Airtime politicians per genre 1994 and 1998, commercial and public channels

	1994		1998	
	min.	%	min.	%
News	845	20.9	1411	24.3
Information	1179	29.2	1908	32.9
Current affairs	685	16.9	1132	19.5
Talk shows	595	14.7	755	13.0
Variety shows	64	1.6	190	3.3
Entertainment	242	6.0	223	3.8
Others	431	10.7	185	3.2
Total	4040		5804	

Politicians appeared relatively little in infotainment programmes: in total just over 20% (22% in 1994). The majority of this time was in talk shows: 13% (15% in 1994), while an increase in the number of breakfast, coffee and afternoon shows is also reflected in the appearance of politicians in this type of programme: 3.3% in 1998 compared to 1.6% in 1994. Politicians performing in entertainment shows diminished from 6% of their total air time in 1994 to just under 4% in 1998. However, these programmes do attract a relatively large audience: almost 8%. On the whole the programmes on the entertainment side of this infotainment scale accounted for around one fifth of politicians' exposure and a quarter of the viewing time.

A closer look at the public channels shows that the rise in attention to politicians in 1998 is not to be found in the news (see Table 2). On the contrary, the commercial stations and SBS6 in particular, accounted for the greater part of the increase, while the public news showed politicians 1.5 hours less than in 1994. Apart from a campaign with relatively few incidents (fewer than in 1994 when the party leader of the CDA was the permanent centre of internal strife,

external scandal and comments by his colleagues), this could be the result of changes in journalistic performance: anchorman and reporters seem to take more and more prominence over the politician.

The rise in television attention is particularly in other informative programmes of the public channels. The remarkable doubling from 14.5 to 28 (40%) of the number of hours politicians appeared in documentaries, background and discussion type programmes can be explained by the increase in the number of programmes of this kind (partly because of the wider introduction of daytime television) and their interest in politics and politicians. But also the share of current affairs programmes (from 22 to 25.5%) and talk shows (from 13.5 to 16.5%) rose; it seems that politicians are still worthwhile guests in these shows, especially when shown on the public channels. What we see is a rather paradoxical development: whereas informative programmes give politicians more opportunities to express their views, public television news, as the most obvious informative genre, does not.

Although the data show little evidence for a party political 'infotainment strategy' or *by pass* strategy, there are differences between parties and politicians. In 1994 for instance, the labour party leader Wim Kok, who at the time suffered from a 'cold' and not very social image, consciously appeared in many talk shows. In fact, almost 40% of his TV appearances were in this genre. By 1998 he had led, for four years, an economically very successful government and merely had to 'cash in' on his position as the political 'father of the nation'. He did so mainly in the informative programmes, and was less manifestly present in talk shows. Like the leaders of the other parties, Kok hardly appeared in entertainment programmes. In view of the authority he wielded and his immense popularity, he did not expect to gain much from live debates and therefore kept them, compared to 1989 and 1994, down to a minimum.

Table 2 Airtime politicians per genre, public channels 1994 and 1998.

	1994		1998	
	min.	%	min.	%
News	455	14.7	362	8.7
Information	873	28.3	1683	40.4
Current affairs	685	22.2	1061	25.5
Talk shows	419	13.6	691	16.6
Variety shows	60	2	75	1.8
Entertainment	164	5.3	120	2.9
Others	431	14	176	4.2
Total	3087		4168	

The new party leaders of the CDA and D66 had to work hard at polishing up their images and therefore (also) appeared on talk shows and in magazines. The leader of the CDA, however, refused to appear in a talk show presented by Dutch comedian Paul de Leeuw as the campaign team was convinced he would not be able to 'be himself' on a programme he had so little regard for. This seems to indicate that, generally speaking, political parties consciously apply their campaign strategy to the changing television landscape and 'use' certain programme genres much more on the basis of their own research and evaluations.

4.2 Controlled publicity

Party campaign materials – The distribution of folders and pamphlets has traditionally been an important election campaign instrument. Even after the advent of television as the dominant campaign instrument, printed matter continued to play a role. In 1981, the pvda, the vvd and the CDA still distributed 15 million, 5 million and 4.4 million printed items respectively, which was an average of four or five to each household (Brants et al. 1982: 92). This traditional instrument is now decreasing in importance. In the 1998 campaign, the pvda distributed only 2 million printed items, and the CDA and vvd a few million. Only the Socialist Party, small but with a very active and relatively substantial membership, stuck to the traditional method by distributing 6.5 million printed items. The reduction by the other parties was not solely based on a strategic decision, it was also a matter of necessity, since hardly any active members are willing to distribute folders door to door, or to display party posters in their windows.

In 1998, the political parties did consciously opt for a modern form of controlled publicity. Each of them had their own campaign web site where voters could find a wide range of information about recent speeches, the list of candidates and the party leader, the campaign activities, and so forth. It was possible to become a party member via e-mail. There were differences in the size and extent of interactivity. Some of the parties set up their websites with the help of volunteers, thus limiting the cost (Green Left only spent Dfl. 5,000). Others, the vvd and the pvda, for example, hired specialists or a professional agency to design the web site. The pvda spent a total of Dfl. 155,000 on its web site.

The reach of these sites is still limited. The CDA note that 21,000 voters of a potential electorate of 12 million visited its website in the month preceding the elections. Green Left claims the same number over a period twice as long. The pvda counted 74,000 visitors over a period of approximately three months.

Advertising and party spots – Within the limited budget political parties in the Netherlands generally have available for paid publicity, printed advertisements have always occupied an important position. In 1981, the four large parties spent a total of 2.1 million guilders on advertisements, which was then 40% of their campaign budget.⁵ There was a striking change in 1998 (see Table 3).

Table 3 Paid publicity in the 1998 campaign

	ads (full page)	ads (last day)	com. tv-spots (nat.) ¹	com. tv-spots (loc.) ¹	com. radio-spots (nat.) ¹	com. radio-spots (loc.) ²	com. billboard	teletext pages	website
PvdA	-	-	-	-	yes	-	yes	-	yes
VVD	-	yes	-	-	-	-	-	-	yes
CDA	-	-	-	-	yes	yes	yes ³	yes	yes
D66	yes ³	-	yes	-	-	-	-	-	yes
GL	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	yes
SP	-	-	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes ⁴	yes

1. Excl. party political broadcasts, distributed freely via the public channels.

2. Excl. spots under responsibility of local branches.

3. In the pre-campaign phase, late 1997.

4. The SP made extensive use of local cable papers.

The full-page newspaper advertisements, including the last day ads the large political parties had been using frequently until 1994, had virtually disappeared. Only D66 and the VVD still used them. D66 opted for an advertisement in the pre-campaign period, in December 1997, and the VVD placed a last day full-page advertisement in the largest Dutch daily *De Telegraaf*. On a modest scale, parties did advertise in other ways. Green Left had small ads in various newspapers with a photograph of its party leader, Paul Rosenmöller. There were also advertisements in weeklies, a feminist monthly and in publications of the environmental movement. The PvdA also advertised its activities in some newspapers.

The Dutch political parties have traditionally had limited free time for party political broadcasts on the public channels. In 1998, they each had six broadcasts of three minutes on Nederland 1, 2 and 3 at specific times decided, in a lottery, by the independent Media Commission. Until that year, it was not possible for political parties to purchase advertising time on the national television stations. In 1994, a number of local and regional stations had sold advertising time to political parties and the pros and cons of party spots on the national channels had been discussed vehemently.

In the autumn of 1997, SBS6 announced that it was willing to sell broadcasting time to political parties. In January 1998 STER, the advertising agency for the public channels, announced that the rule prohibiting the sale of broadcasting time to political organizations had been rescinded. So, quite unexpectedly and rather late in the day, the political parties now had new ways of reaching a large audience with paid publicity on television. Only the SP, which had elicited the STER decision, and D66 grasped the opportunity. D66's party funds were insufficient to use this commercial space to the full, but their decision generated some free publicity. The other parties either preferred to adopt a wait-and-see policy or had already spent their scanty funding in other ways. Towards the end of the campaign, however, the Labour Party decided to broadcast radio commercials on the public radio stations.

In the last three weeks, the CDA had radio spots on Classic FM and on the most popular station, commercial Sky Radio. They also went for another unusual communication platform: the teletext pages of the commercial television station RTL. The CDA were not very successful at keeping the pages updated, and as yet they are not convinced it is such a useful campaign medium.⁶ The SP, which went as far as advertising on cable newspapers, was both the most inventive party and took the most advantage of the new outlets for paid publicity on television and radio.

5 Assessing the interaction

So, what lessons can be drawn from the Dutch election campaign of 1998 with regard to notions of modernization and a media-politics interaction? In the first place, it should be noted that, as in the 1994 campaign, a spiral of mistrust between parties and media was clearly present – the former using spin doctors to steer the media agenda, the latter anxiously trying to overcome the parties' hold by emphasizing horse race elements in the campaign and presenting differences of opinion in conflict terms.

In the second place, the political parties succeeded remarkably well in controlling news about themselves and their party leaders. In 1994, only the CDA, suffering from internal struggle, and Green Left failed to do so. In 1998, the parties were only very rarely forced to address an unwanted campaign theme by the media. The VVD had to react to the allegations of extreme right-wing sympathies of its campaign manager; when it did so, after some hesitation, the issue disappeared from the campaign agenda. The media (and the VVD) haunted the PvdA for a few days about its ambivalent position on whether or not to drop the popular tax deduction of interest on home mortgages. However, after guaranteeing its prolongation, party leader Wim Kok was able to get that issue off the agenda as well.

From the parties' perspective, this campaign showed their effective strategy *vis à vis* free publicity. Only the CDA might have had reason to be dissatisfied. In the last couple of weeks particularly, the party and its leader were given little attention in the television news. On the one hand this was due to the media expecting the party to end up in opposition again, on the other it might have been the result of its prudent campaign strategy. Fearing internal strife (the trauma of 1994), the party was careful not to be too extreme on issues like healthcare and asylum seekers. Combined with a new and not very convincing party leader this played into the hands of the media logic of the TV news.

In the third place, RTL and NOS, on the basis of their own ambitions, have less reason to be satisfied. They did not succeed in playing a dominating role. Contrary to 1994, they could not counter the communication strategy of the parties. In spite of occasional successes – RTL in its polls, and by focusing on specific issues – TV news did not play an agenda-setting role.

In the fourth place, SBS6 introduced a remarkable style of campaign coverage. Surprisingly, the new broadcasting organization brought issues and liveliness to the campaign but, not surprisingly, covered it in a sauce of infotainment which might well have increased or confirmed cynical feelings among its viewers. A second variant of media logic seems to have developed during this campaign. In the old one, politics is held in respect, but journalists have exchanged their educational role – which is part of a cultural-pedagogic idea of public broadcasting – for a more professional role. Drama and conflict have a high news value, the daily and routine campaign activities are largely ignored. The aim of the media is to play an important agenda-setting role in the campaign. We see this approach up to a point with both NOS and RTL news, though not in exactly the same way. Some cultural-pedagogic philosophy oozes through in RTL's taking into account the question whether 'our viewers understand'.

With SBS6 we see a new kind of media logic, more distanced from, disinterested in and sceptical about politics. It focuses on news which is close to the people and thus more local and human interest oriented. No attention is paid to the actual campaign of the political parties. At the same time it turned out to be more substantial in its coverage than NOS and RTL. Clearly, the parties had not anticipated this variant of the media logic. This new form of interaction between practitioners of this programme format and the political campaigners might well return in the next election.

In the fifth place, in spite of a fragmentation of audiences over a growing number of competitive and often commercial television stations, and the mutual distrust between political journalists and politicians, the latter did not increase their focus on infotainment. Politicians still appear mostly in the traditional informative programmes like news, current affairs and TV debates. So, paradoxically, distrust in media logic is not followed by a turning away

from the genres that adhere to it. On the other hand, politicians appeared less on the news. The increasing attention they get in current affairs and other informative programmes, makes them less dependent on the soundbite culture of the television news.

Finally, political parties laid little emphasis on the traditional forms of controlled publicity, such as folders and printed advertisements in newspapers. For the first time, they choose various forms of audio-visual paid publicity, including websites and party spots on both commercial and public, national and local television channels. This development is still in its infancy in the Netherlands, but it offers campaigners opportunities to satisfy the increasingly felt need to control the image of party and leader as much as possible and minimize risks. However, we have to reiterate that campaigns in the Netherlands are still relatively cheap; we can not speak of capital-intensive campaigns. To use paid publicity to the full, parties will need extra financial resources forcing them to look for external funds. With high-tech elements such as the use of websites and advanced marketing techniques, we could label the 1998 Dutch campaign as 'low cost professionalism'.

Notes

1. The results of a content analysis are not yet available but will – together with data on newspapers, TV debates, and the role of tabloids – be published in a forthcoming book. The present data on TV news content is taken from other research.

2. Traditional news values, like conflict, negativity, unexpectedness and the involvement of elite persons, usually determine what news events are selected for publication and in this way form a threshold.

3. Veronica, another new commercial channel, has neither a news show nor a current affairs programme and also presented very little politics in talk shows.

4. The coding was done with the assistance of Polling Buro Intomart who also provided the data of the so-called People Meter. This allowed a linking of the appearances of politicians in specific programmes with data on audience reach and air time. The analysis was carried out by Kees Brants in collaboration with Edger Cabri and Peter Neijens.

5. In 1981, the Liberal Party (VVD) spent 60% (700,000 guilders), the Labour Party 40% (900,000 guilders), the Progressive Liberal Party (D66) 31% (160,000 guilders) and the Christian Democrats 23% (339,000 guilders) of their campaign budgets on press advertising (Brants et al. 1982: 97).

6. *Nieuwe wegen in aanleg. Rapportage van de werkgroep logistieke en technische aspecten CDA-campagnes 1998*, June 1998, p. 20.

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