

PERSONALISATION IN DUTCH AND GERMAN POLITICS: THE CASE OF TALK SHOW

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Abstract

Personal qualities of politicians play an ever more important role in present-day politics. This trend is usually defined as “personalisation,” which we take in this study to consist of a complex interplay between personal characteristics of politicians and their mediation through various institutional practices, such as campaign strategies and media coverage, from which voters will build their perceptions of politicians. In this study the personal performance of Dutch and German politicians in talk shows was analysed, distinguishing four kinds of discourse that politicians could use: political discourse, personalised political discourse, personal discourse, and objectified discourse. It appeared that the genre conventions of talk shows favour personal discourse and personalised political discourse; nevertheless, politicians still are able to use political discourse. This depends, however, on the communicative capacities of politicians who must be able to switch from the personal discourse favoured in talk shows, through personalised political discourse to the political discourse more common to the political domain. The main difference found in the study was not between The Netherlands and Germany, but between the different kinds of talk shows.

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Introduction

Personal qualities of politicians have always been important to politics in The Netherlands and Germany. In an extensive overview of public debate and academic research on the role of politicians in the Dutch electoral process, Van Holsteyn and Irwin (1998) show that from the 1950s onwards, political commentators have ascribed ever more influence to the personal qualities of political leaders on electoral results. The introduction of television in the late fifties and its first use in the German national campaign of 1957 and in the Dutch national campaign of 1963 is usually said to be one of the factors that have contributed to the focus on individual politicians (e.g. Brants, Kok and Van Praag 1982; Kaase 1994; Lass 1995), together with an increasing number of floating voters and a weakening of party ties. The introduction of commercial television in The Netherlands and Germany in the late eighties has exacerbated such personalisation, firstly because of its frequent programming of infotainment genres in which human-interest stories and interviews with ordinary people and celebrities about their private lives and emotions are core ingredients. Secondly, because informative programs of public broadcasters have adjusted to the genre conventions of infotainment under the pressure of the competition from the commercial channels (Brants 1998; Krüger 1996). An example of the impact of the competition on political communication can be seen in the German case where public broadcasters had long ago agreed not to let politicians appear in entertainment programs during the last week of the campaign. The new commercial stations did not abide by this agreement and in the 1998 campaign politicians appeared in commercial talk shows right up to Election Day.

Personalisation has thus become a common component of present-day politics and it is often considered — in general terms — to cover: “the increased, systematic and instrumental focus on personal characteristics, qualities and capacities of political leaders in the political process” (Toonen 1992, 6); “creating and using the prominence of leaders” (Schoenbach 1996, 4); “the closest association of political programs and aims with central political actors and their reduction to them, and therefore, in the long run ... the reduction of politics to the actors” (Kaase 1986, 365).

Behind such general understandings lie a wide variety of phenomena, as one can see when comparing different research projects in this area. A first category of research looks at individual characteristics of politicians: studies of physical traits and appearances would fall in this category (e.g. Enzlin 1998; de Landtsheer et al. 1999) as would research on the psychological features and profiles of politicians (Van Ginneken en Kouijzer 1986). A second category of research pertains to the way politicians as human beings are constructed through various mediations such as campaign strategies and material (e.g. Brants and Van Praag 1995) and the appearance of politicians in diverse popular media such as talk shows and gossip magazines (Kurt 1998; Holtz-Bacha 1999; Van Zoonen 1998a; 1999). A third type of study looks at voters’ perceptions of personal qualities of politicians and levels of sympathy or antipathy for various politicians, as, for instance, have been measured in successive Dutch election studies (Anker 1992; see for a summary Van Holsteyn and Irwin 1998) or in German research (Kepplinger et al. 1993; 1994; Schulz and Kindelmann 1993). A final type of approach concerns assessments of personalisation usually discussing the impact of personalisation on the political process in moral terms, however, rarely using systematic empiri-

cal information to underpin these discussion (Brants 1998 and Van Zoonen 1998b are exceptions).

Many of the studies mentioned focus on one element of personalisation. Elements that have been combined with some frequency are public perceptions and personal characteristics, for instance in the studies of how voters evaluate the physical appearance of politicians. However, in the contemporary media saturated Dutch and German political culture, personalisation should be seen as a complex interplay between personal characteristics of politicians and their mediation through various institutional practices such as campaign strategies and media coverage from which voters will build their perceptions of politicians. Such articulations of character, mediation and perception will vary for different politicians, and can take on different forms in different times and will thus produce specific, historical and contextualised assessments of personalisation. The purpose of this chapter is to provide such a specific analysis of personalisation by tentatively comparing the performance of Dutch and German politicians in a limited number of talk shows during the respective last election campaigns of 1998. The question is how politicians combine political and personal positions and modes of speech and what forms of personalisation these different combinations produce.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of “political persona” is helpful to understand the idea of personalisation being anchored in interplays between character, mediation and perception of individual politicians. The term “persona” is known in theatre and literature as indicating particular role one plays and which is temporary. In the more general sense we will use here, persona is “an aspect of the personality shown to or perceived by others” (Corner 2000). Translated to the three elements of personalisation we can think of the personas of politicians as the result of publicly revealed aspects of personal characteristics (“an aspect of the personality shown to others”) as well as the product of perceptions by the public (“an aspect of the personality perceived by others”). However, since very few people encounter politicians in real life, mediation plays a crucial role and in particular mediated talk. Following Goffman’s (1959) seminal work on the presentation of self, Malone (1997, 1) argues that “talk is the principal way for others to know who we are.” Television talk offers most people the only way to see and hear who politicians are and to interact with them, be it in the parasocial way that television allows for (Horton and Wohl 1956). Talk shows in particular offer this opportunity. North American research has shown that politicians get to speak much longer in talk shows than the soundbites allowed to them in regular news and current affairs programs (Just et al. 1996; Patterson 1993). American voters mention talk shows second after debates when asked what influenced their voting decision (Just et al. 1996, 148).

Distinctive for the talk show genre is the centrality of people and their everyday experiences. Research on Dutch talk shows (Leurdijk 1999) has shown that two third of the guests in talk shows consist of ordinary people, whereas less than ten percent of the guests come from the realms of politics and government. Talk show producers were shown to dislike politicians and public officials because of their detached and rational style of conversation, whereas most talk shows revolve around personal experience and emotional commitment. Politicians appearing in talk shows thus operate in a distrusting if not hostile environment. A discussion of substantial campaign

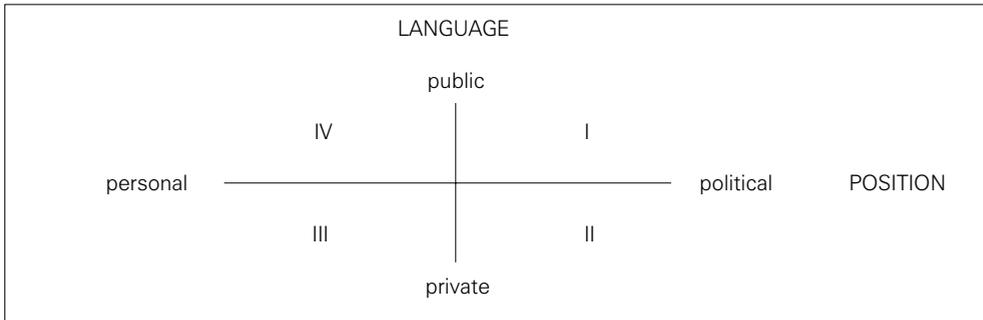
issues seems out of order within the rules of the genre and politicians will be forced to adjust to the reign of personal experience and emotional involvement. Such a personal, emotional emphasis may undermine the possibility of relevant political discussions and for that reason a political commentator has criticised the genre and the appearance of politicians in it (cf. Van Zoonen, forthcoming). The talk show, however, is a much more complicated means of political communication than such arguments suggest. The genre requires a type of performance that is not at all easy to produce, especially not for politicians who are used to other, more detached and abstract communication patterns. Secondly, such arguments suggest that the personal and the political, the rational and the emotional are and should be contradictory to each other. However, even a brief and superficial look at the performance of politicians in different communicative settings shows the personal and the political, the emotional and the rational, the involved and detached may merge and combine in a variety of discourses that together construct a hybrid political persona in whom these elements are integrated. As the term “personalisation” itself suggests, distinctive for contemporary politics is in fact that these boundaries have blurred and that the successful politician is able to cross them (cf. Corner 2000; Van Zoonen 1998). To analyse the personal political hybrids arising out of these transgressions, Van Zoonen (1999, 2000, forthcoming) suggests to focus on two dimensions of politicians’ discourse: one is the kind of language politicians use and the other one is the particular position they speak from.

Politicians’ language can be examined by using a distinction made by Kress (1986) between public language and private language. Public language, according to Kress is characterised by an emphasis on relatively abstract social, political and economic forces, and of people acting as social agents rather than as individual person. It is a form of language often expressed in written forms although it is also considered the language of political institutions and processes. By contrast, private language is considered the language of the private domain, speaking in terms of private lives and experiences, and explaining social forces as the result of individual acts. It is an oral form of language although it is also found as the main form in popular media. Although it is often claimed that the oral nature of television privileges talk that is bend towards the personal, emotional and intimate, the public language of the political process is also an inherent part of television and encountered in genres like news, current affairs or political broadcasting.

Talk as a mode of interaction and presentation of self, however, is not only characterised by its public or private style, but also by the way its source, the speaker, positions itself. Politicians appearing on television can talk from different social locations, for instance from the purely political position of the party leader, the candidate, the house representative or the cabinet minister, but also from a personal position as parent, as spouse, as child, as someone with a particular hobby, or as someone with interesting childhood memories. On television, politicians have appeared in all of these roles with — contrary to the idea that television is a main source of personalisation — the political roles dominating in the 1994 and 1998 election coverage of Dutch television (Brants, Van Meurs and Neijens 1995; Kleinnijenhuis et al. 1998).

Projected onto each other, the two dimensions along which personalisation can be analysed produce a heuristic device that covers four kinds of political discourse in which different forms and degrees of personalisation are expressed:

Figure 1: Forms and Degrees of Personalisation



Each of these quadrants represents a specific discourse, i.e. a typical personalised performance, which arises from the combination of the position from which the politician talks and the type of language he or she uses.

In the first case (I) of *political discourse* a politician is seen to speak from a political position, for instance, as a candidate for public office, using the language of the public domain. Personalisation takes the form of political issues being put into more or less formal words by individuals.

In the second case of *personalised political discourse* (II) a politician speaks from a political position but in the language of the private sphere, for instance, by presenting a particular piece of legislation as the sole result of hew own initiatives.

The third case (III) of personal discourse is all out personalisation: the politicians speaks as a private person in the language of the private sphere, about — for instance — his family life or hobbies.

In the fourth case of personal objectified discourse (IV) a politician speaks from a private position as a spouse or parent, but speaks about her or himself in the abstractions that go with public language. It produces a rather awkward form of personalisation, for instance when politicians speak about themselves in the third person.

With this heuristic device different forms and degrees of personalisation as they took place in the Dutch and German election campaign of 1998 have been assessed.

Methodology

Two Dutch and one German talk show provide the data for this study. The first Dutch talk show analysed was *Koffietijd* (Coffee time) which is a daily morning talk show on RTL4, the leading commercial channel in the Netherlands. The program is presented by a male and female host, has a magazine format and contains conversations with one main guest interrupted by a variety of items on cooking, clothing, faits divers and an occasional performance of a singer or band. In the weeks leading up to the elections of 1998, political candidates and leaders of four major parties appeared in *Koffietijd*. The conversations with the politicians all had a similar structure: by way of opening they were confronted with factual questions on issues pertaining to the policies of their parties; thus the leader of the greens was asked about the prices for public transport tickets (environment) and the Christian-Democrat leader was asked about the average age on which women get their first child (family policies). After an interruption by another item, the male host interviewed them. The third part of the

conversation consisted of a confrontation with the results of an audience survey on them and the conversation closes with the guest politician reacting to questions that the audience could phone in during the program. The second talk show used for this analysis was a series produced especially for the elections on TV2, one of the three Dutch public channels. *De grote vier* (the big four), as the series was called, consisted of two parts: one in which the political leader of one of the parties was interviewed by a well known Dutch talk show host on his or her personal history and private situation in a round table discussion with three celebrities from different fields. The second part had the format of a straightforward political interview conducted by a reputed television journalist and was not used in the analysis. Public and private positions of politicians were deliberately separated in this format, the idea of the producers being that audiences not very interested in politics would get a different, more human picture of the main opponents in the elections. In four consecutive days before the election, the leaders of the four biggest parties in parliament appeared.

For Germany, the country's only late night show provided the basis for the analysis. It is named *Harald Schmidt-Show* after its host Harald Schmidt and follows the well-known U.S. models of David Letterman or Jay Leno. After an introductory comedy part delivered by the host himself, the show usually features two guests, appearing one after the other for a seven to eight minute chat with Harald Schmidt. The show is broadcast four days a week on the commercial television station SAT.1, according to its market share ranking fourth among German national television stations. The show itself has an overall market share of almost 12%, standing for somewhat more than a million viewers per show (van Eimeren and Gerhard 1998, 606). The show is of special interest here because its usual guests are stars and starlets of the international show business such as actors, singers or television entertainers, while politicians usually are not among the guests of the show. However, in the last months of the campaign several high-ranking politicians made their appearance on the show. During the five months before election day on September 27, interrupted by a six-week summer break, altogether twelve politicians were counted among the guests. The last politician appeared four days before the election. Among the talk show guests were the then president of the Bundestag, two ministers of the federal government and one prime minister of one of the German states. Another four became ministers of the new government after the election. In comparison: During the five months after Election Day no politician was seen on the show.

The core methodology to analyse the performance of the politicians in these talk shows was developed by Van Zoonen (1999; forthcoming) and consists of a four step analysis of ascending complexity in which the politicians are the units of analysis and the words they utter the counting units:

1. A count of the total of words politicians uttered in the program, and of the number of "speech turns," i.e. the uninterrupted flow of words between the questions or comments of the host.

2. A count of the number of words spoken from three different positions: political position (party leader, candidate, minister, representative, ideologist, opponent, issue defender, etc.); personal position (spouse, parent, child, youth, hobbies, emotions, feelings, etc.); a mix of both (occurring mainly in talk about the interaction between family life and political career, personal feelings about campaigning, assessment of one's own political style).

3. A count of the number of words spoken in two rhetorical styles: public language (characterised by the use of “we” and “us,” by reference to abstract processes and institutions, by objectified and distanced linguistic constructions like “one should think of,” etc.); private language (characterised by the use of I, a focus on everyday experiences, and an evocation of common sense).

4. The construction of scores on each theoretical dimension by subtracting:

- the percentage of words spoken from a private and mixed position from the percentage of words spoken from a political position;
- the percentage of words spoken in private language from the number of words spoken in public language.

Whereas the German analysis followed the same coding categories, the choice of coding units and the measurement of the data were simplified: speech units (marked by the change of speakers) and topics were taken as coding units. Moreover, the political discourse politicians operated in was coded directly on the basis of a combined measurement of position and language producing results about the kind of discourse politicians used. In the Dutch analysis separate measurements of position and language were used producing not only results about the kind of discourse politicians used but also about the varying intensities of these discourses. Therefore the comparisons given here are not complete and should be taken as tentative rather than decisive.

Positions Politicians Speak from

Politicians who appear in talk shows can speak from different positions, ranging from a political position as candidate or party leader to a personal position as parent or spouse. A mixture of the two appears when politicians speak about their emotions in political life, or about the way politics interferes with their family life (a popular question in Dutch politics). The Dutch data suggest that the particular position a politician can take up, depends on the codes and conventions of individual talk shows. In the Dutch morning talk show *Koffietijd* the political position appears to be the more common one, whereas in the Dutch prime time show *De Grote Vier* most of the conversation is conducted from a private position (table 1).

Table 1.: Positions Politicians Talk from in Dutch Talk Shows

| | Political position | Personal position | Mixture | Total |
|----------------------|--------------------|-------------------|------------|-------|
| Koffietijd | | | | |
| Adelmund | 68.6 (1666) | 23.9 (581) | 7.5 (183) | 2430 |
| Rosenmüller | 71.8 (1823) | 8.6 (218) | 19.6 (498) | 2539 |
| De Hoop Scheffer | 55.5 (1039) | 29.0 (544) | 15.5 (290) | 1873 |
| De Graaf | 57.2 (921) | 11.9 (191) | 30.9 (497) | 1609 |
| De Grote Vier | | | | |
| Kok | 24.7 (356) | 54.7 (790) | 20.6 (298) | 1444 |
| Bolkestein | 45.4 (799) | 48.9 (859) | 5.7 (100) | 1758 |
| Borst | 36.2 (448) | 57.3 (709) | 6.5 (80) | 1237 |
| De Hoop Scheffer | 43.1 (639) | 22.7 (336) | 34.2 (507) | 1482 |

Adelmund: Social Democrats; Rosenmüller: Greens; De Hoop Scheffer: Christian-Democrats; De Graaf: Liberal Democrats; Kok: Social Democrats; Bolkestein: Liberals; Borst: Liberal Democrats.

Given the particular character of the talk show genre it is something of an achievement that politicians managed to perform as politicians as often as they did. The hostile attitude towards politics that we discussed earlier was found most explicitly in the Dutch talk show *De Grote Vier*. The host of the program killed off many attempts to talk as a politician, as for instance in the following confrontation between the Christian-Democrat leader and a young writer who talked about the lack of political interest among the youth:

Politician: I don't give up that generation, they are not all the same. You just talked about Christian values, didn't you? Family, caring about each other...

Writer: [interrupts] O no, you are not going to start now, are you?

Host: Yes the CD has been turned on, indeed!

Similar exchanges were found in the German Harald Schmidt Show, who is known for his cynicism and irony. Most of the guests seemed to be on guard and anxious not to become the victim of his ridicule although their reactions to the host differed. Rita Süßmuth, for example, the then president of parliament, explained the importance of the election in a very sincere but somewhat tense way. In contrast, several others from the start tried to adjust to the ironic style of the host and made fun of themselves. One woman, the youngest minister of the former cabinet, agreed to sing a song in front of the camera. In general, the female politicians were under extra pressure in the Harald Schmidt Show because the host is also infamous for his sexist jokes.

The Language that Politicians Use in Talk Shows

Public and private languages are modes of communication that we find across various media. However, as Kress (1986) has argued, speech is essentially a private mode of language, whereas writing is basically a public mode. As a result, "we might then suggest that in a spectrum ranging from public to private, the 'media of speech' are ranged closer to the private, and 'the media of writing' closer to the public end of that spectrum" (p. 406). Talk shows, therefore, can be characterised by language patterns that are primarily private, i.e. individualised, concrete and direct. Nevertheless, in the Dutch talk shows one does find some cases which would fit the pure public forms of speech characterised by abstractions, formalities and institutions, for instance, when Green leader Paul Rosenmöller answered a telephone question of a woman whose brother is in prison in Morocco. She wanted to know whether the Greens could do something about the degrading treatment of prisoners in Morocco Rosenmöller answers: "That is of course a Moroccan issue. On the other hand there are international agreements and rules for prisons and if there is a systematic violation of human rights it would be best to put pressure on the Moroccan regime in a European collaboration."

Such clear forms of public language are almost absent from the talk shows, because they do not fit the requirements of the genre. However, there are differences possible in the talk show between a purely private language and a more collective language, which leans towards public language as Kress described it; in the latter there is an emphasis on a "we" (of the party, or of government, for instance) instead of an "I"; a construction of an abstract self like "one acts as," "you should not...," instead of the concrete "I"; constructing indisputable truth like "the situation is...," "it is the case that" etc. Understanding public language in the talk shows as such, still the majority of language spoken in the talk shows is in a private style. Still, there are considerable differences between the talk shows. In the Dutch morning talk show *Koffietijd* there

is a fifty-fifty balance between public and private language, while in the Dutch evening show the vast majority of words spoken is in private terms (table 2).

Table 2. Language Used by Politicians in the Dutch Talk shows

| | Public language | Private language | Total |
|------------------|-----------------|------------------|-------|
| Koffietijd | | | |
| Adelmund | 58.1 (1413) | 41.9 (1017) | 2430 |
| Rosenmüller | 56.9 (1445) | 43.1 (1094) | 2539 |
| De Hoop Scheffer | 54.8 (1027) | 45.2 (846) | 1873 |
| De Graaf | 43.0 (692) | 57.0 (917) | 1609 |
| De Grote Vier | | | |
| Kok | 30.8 (445) | 69.2 (999) | 1444 |
| Bolkestein | 26.0 (457) | 74.0 (1301) | 1758 |
| Borst | 21.9 (270) | 78.1 (967) | 1237 |
| De Hoop Scheffer | 24.4 (362) | 75.6 (1120) | 1482 |

Note: For this part of the analysis, German data were not available.

Political Discourse in Talk Shows

In the concrete interview situations of the talk shows, the positions politicians speak from and the language they use, produce an integrated discourse which is more or less personalised. With the Dutch data, the degrees and forms of personalisation for the individual performances of the politicians were assessed by crossing the position from which they speak with the kind of language they use.

Figure 2. Empirical Forms of Personalisation in Dutch Talk Shows

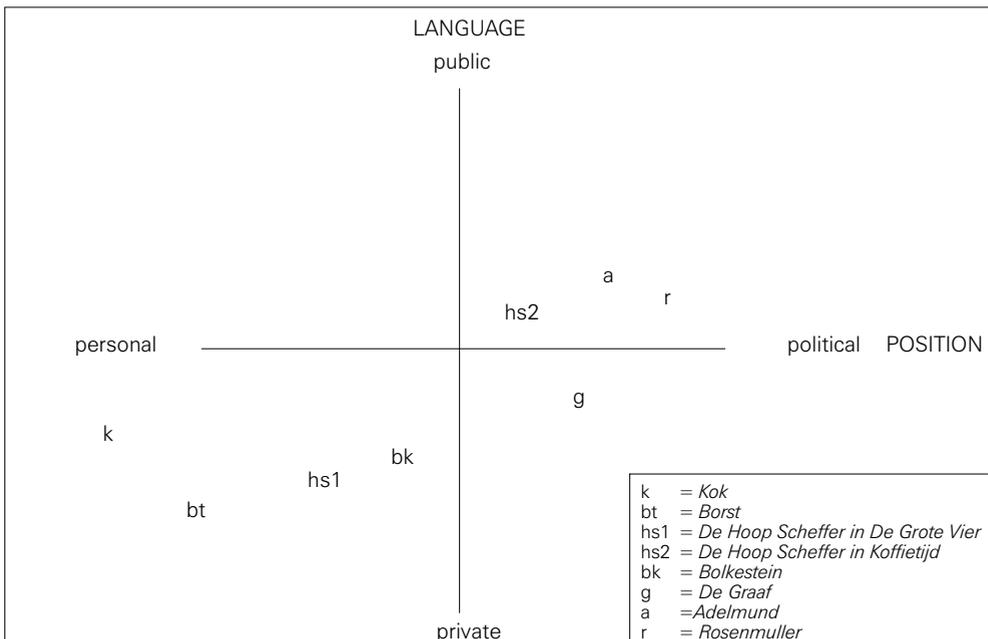


Figure 2 shows that the politicians appearing in *Koffietijd* have used “political discourse” mainly: they speak from political positions in public language mainly with the exception of liberal democrat De Graaf who uses personalised political discourse mainly. That does not mean we do not find highly personalised exchanges between host and politicians in this talk show, but the main tendency is towards political discourse. The Dutch evening talk show, in contrast, is dominated by personal discourse: politicians speaking from personal positions in the language of the private sphere. Dutch prime minister Kok appeared to be most extreme in his use of personal discourse, while opposition leader Bolkestein came closest to personalised political discourse. As was expected, none of the politicians overall appearance could be characterised as personal objectified discourse; although there are examples of it in the interviews they never dominate the conversation.

The results from the analysis of the German Harald Schmidt Show indicate that in more than 70 % of the cases, the discussion took place in terms of political discourse: speaking from a political position in the language of the public sphere. Nevertheless, almost one fifth (19 %) of the topics were dealt with in personalised political discourse, from the perspective of a political position but in terms of personal efforts. In some 10 % of the cases politicians spoke from a personal position in the language of the private sphere (personal discourse). The concentration of the results show that politicians overwhelmingly speak from their political position, but sometimes do so in a more private language by which political discourse is personalised.

Discussion

Different talk shows offer politicians different opportunities to communicate with their voters and to construct an appealing political persona. The nature of the genre as a format for exchanging personal experience and empathising with others seems to work against any substantial political opportunity that politicians want to get out of talk shows. In addition, as one of the Dutch and the German example showed, talk show hosts may have particularly cynical or ironical attitudes towards politics which prevents substantial political discussions. Nevertheless, the analysis showed that both Dutch and German politicians were to a certain extent able to perform as politicians. Contrary to a common expectation that the genre itself would draw politicians into personalised political discourse, the findings here suggest that political discourse is an even likely mode of performance, at least in the German Harald Schmidt Show and the Dutch *Koffietijd*. The Dutch evening talk show was characterised by personal discourse mainly.

These differences stem from the different formats of the shows and from the particular personality of the host. Harald Schmidt’s style may have been ironic, his questions pertained mostly to the political realm allowing politicians to use political discourse. The *Koffietijd* host is known for his agreeable manner, enabling his guests to talk in their own way rather than imposing a specific style on them. The Dutch politicians appearing on this show could thus stick to their own preferences, apparently framed in political discourse. The Dutch evening show invited personal discourse mainly, due to the cynical attitude of the host and the particular format of the program in which all political issues were relegated to a later interview with a political reporter. In addition, the individual capacities of politicians should be taken into account when explaining the different discourses found in talk shows. Some politicians

appear to have great difficulties adjusting to the codes and conventions of the talk show: in her meeting with Harald Schmid, for instance, Rita Süßmuth, for instance, could not comply to the informal and relaxed style necessary in talk shows. Several of the Dutch politicians failed to come up with interesting personal anecdotes when guided in those directions.

Those critics that condemn the appearance of politicians on talk shows often claim that talk shows give politicians ample opportunity to present themselves without the interference of professional journalists. Talk show hosts usually do not have a background in politics or journalism and thus politicians do not have to fear difficult or unwelcome questions (cf. Holtz-Bacha 1999). However, our analysis and examples suggest that — contrary to such beliefs — it may not be so easy for politicians to perform successfully in talk shows. In the episodes of the talk shows we examined, there are many examples of politicians completely missing the point of what is asked of them: failing to give a personal anecdote and therewith appearing impersonal and cold, reacting very seriously to jokes and therewith appearing stiff and tense, etceteras. Politicians need to be able to operate smoothly in personal discourse in order to construct themselves as likeable individuals which is a necessary part of the political persona. It is, however, not a sufficient part. The political persona should obviously contain some politics and thus another difficulty politicians have to master for a successful talk show performance is the ability to escape within the conversation from personal discourse and move to personalised political discourse or even political discourse per se. The transgression of the boundaries between the public and the private that is characteristic of talk shows, presents politicians with new demands and new difficulties in constructing their political persona, to which — as our analysis shows — not many can yet comply.

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